That 'wind-waved tulip bed' of swaying, many-tinted dancers, held but one form for Lady Glencross—that of Lord Carthewe.

'How kind it was of him,' she said to herself, 'to single out little Dulcie in this way and show her such marked attention!' How loyal, too, to herself thus to carry out her wishes to the very letter and not distract her by attentions that might retard the answering of the difficult question which, although it had been before her mind all through the week, appeared as far off as ever from being set at rest. Amid all these surrounding distractions it kept its grip upon her mind.

'Shall it be "yes," shall it be "no?"' she found herself whispering to herself; and to her fancy the band in the gallery over-head caught up the words as a sort of refrain and gave it out in the light valse tune which before had seemed to her wordless.

It was a variant on Marguerite's question to the flower-petals: 'he loves me, he loves me not.' Lady Glencross toyed nervously with the orchids in the bosom of her dress, half wondering if she interrogated them what answer they would give.

'Lady Glencross,' said Lord Chenevix's voice at her elbow, 'may I find you a seat? Now I must compliment you on your little cousin's dancing. I have come to the conclusion that she must have learnt it in some other sphere. Anything more graceful and poetic I have never before seen. They say she has been staying with you for some little time; now tell me, how is it I have never before had the pleasure of meeting her?'

Lady Glencross looked her satisfaction. She liked to feel that Dulcie did credit to her blood relationship; that, surrounded as she was by some of the best-bred, best dressed women that England numbered in her aristocracy, she yet shone out as a star among them all. Dulcie, she explained, had been staying with friends in Paris for the past three weeks; had, in fact, only returned on the previous day on purpose for the ball. Yes, she was graceful, and certainly had improved in her good looks during her stay in Paris. She was glad, too, to be able to say that Dulcie had instincts in the art of dress, and the good dresser, like the poet, must be born, not made.

The cotillon came to an end; the dancers in a stream flowed past into the pleasanter atmosphere of corridors and conservatories.

'Isn't it possible to shake your resolve? Will you not give me one valse—one, only one?' said a voice over her shoulder.

Lord Chenevix drew back to make way for Trevor Yorke.

Something in the young man's voice startled her, yet she could scarcely have said what.

She answered a little coldly: 'I dance only by deputy now. You will be fortunate if you can get Dulcie to give you a dance; she is very much in request to-night.' And the thought in her mind as she said this was: 'Now, what a good thing it would be if Dulcie were to take this foolish boy in hand, and make him fall in love with her. He was, in all respects, a good parti, except for a woman of one and-thirty—the very match she would desire for little Dulcie.'

The tide of dancers, inflax and reflux, brought Dulcie to her side, for a brief space, without a partner in her train.

'Rhea,' said the girl suddenly and sharply, as if the words were startled out of her, 'how beautiful you are! I never knew it till to-night! I do not wonder that——' She broke off as abruptly as she had begun.

Rhea was a little surprised. 'It is very good of you to pay me compliments,' she answered. 'I think my dress should have some of the credit of my good looks.'

Those two made 'a picture fair to look on,' as, for a few seconds, they stood side by side; the elder woman tall, queenly in her delicately tinted brocades, and the younger in her soft, floating white draperies, with her rose-leaf complexion and large upturned eyes that seemed, to Rhea's fancy, to have suddenly caught a strangely pathetic expression.

Over their heads hung a life-size portrait of a Glencross ancestress, in early Victorian dress, with hair arranged *à l'Impératrice Eugénie*. The portrait was the work of a notable artist, but the living picture, standing beneath it, so to speak, took all the poetry out of it—modernised it, vulgarised it.

The band commenced; Dulcie was carried off by an eager partner, and Rhea found her attention claimed now by this person, now by that. The music had changed from the smooth, gliding valse to a sprightly gavotte. All the same, however, to Rhea's fancy, it held the old refrain—there was no silencing it, no getting rid of it. It was in vain that she left the ball room and went back to the drawing-rooms, the music seemed to follow and haunt her there, with its perpetual iteration of 'Shall it be "yes"—shall it be "no?"' Beneath the wearisome round of society platitudes, to which she was forced to listen and to reply, she found herself saying to herself vaguely, dreamily: 'What is love? What is love? In the old, foolish, girlish days I knew or I thought I knew. But now——' she broke off, mentally shrugging her shoulders at herself.

After a time, the society platitudes began to give place to society adieux—a touch of the finger-tips, or a nod, a smile. The rooms began to get empty; the hall below to become thronged; the roll of departing carriages became prolonged and ceaseless. The music seemed to float into the room in louder, fuller tones now that the hum of intervening voices had ceased; the band had had orders to play so long as there were half-a-dozen couples to stand up on the perfect floor, so Rhea conjectured that the ball room was not as yet deserted. Here, however, in the empty drawing-room, her presence no longer seemed a necessity. In another quarter of an hour, at farthest, she knew that the last of her guests would have departed; and that Lord Carthewe, sure of finding her alone, would be making *his* way to her side to receive his final answer. Now, what was that answer to be? Five minutes alone in perfect quietude, to face her heart, to face herself, she felt was an absolute necessity to her.

Outside, over the green park, she knew day was dawning. The cool air of the morning came flowing in through an open window. That window led into a covered verandah which ran round the side of the house and ended in the ball-room. It was lighted with Chinese lanterns and prettily furnished with lounge seats and big, flowering shrubs. It seemed to suggest to Rhea a cool retreat, where a few minutes of quiet thought could be indulged in.

She took up the thread of her thinking where she had let it go half-an hour previously. 'In the old days,' she said to herself, moving slowly, dreamily, amid the big flower-jars and heavily scented shrubs, 'I knew what love was. It was to me, then, just a blind stretching forth of the hands to grasp and then to hold and keep against all heaven and all earth. But is it in me now thus to grasp, to hold, to keep ' She broke off abruptly, coming to a standstill alike in thought and movement.

Was that not someone or something moving among the shadows at the farthest end of the verandah, where, by a small flight of steps, it led into the ball-room.

A second glance showed her that that someone was Trevor Yorke.

'I have been waiting here for the past two hours, to see and speak to you,' he said, in a low nervous tone, as he advanced rapidly towards her. 'No, no, not in there!' he added, as Rhea made a step forward as if to pass on to the ball-room. 'I must, *must* see you alone to night. I am going away to-morrow to Africa, for years, and perhaps for ever, and I must—I will say my good-bye to you before I go.'

He led her into the conservatory, and both sat down.

'Going away to Africa!' repeated Rhea, blankly. 'Do your people know—do they like the idea?'

'What does it matter to me what they like or don't like,' he answered, almost fiercely. Then he suddenly caught both her hands in his, crying out passionately, 'Rhea, Rhea, look at me—don't turn your face away! Do you not see that I am broken hearted?' The swinging Chinese lantern threw a curious glare of colour on his haggard, boyish face.

Rhea made no effort to release her hands, feeling it was, indeed, a good-bye clasp.

'My poor, poor boy!' was all she said, in a pitying tone.

'Yes, always that,' he said bitterly. 'Always your poor boy—never anything else. You won't give me credit for a man's passion, a man's heart! And when I am gone, you and everyone else will say "the best thing he could have done! He'll come back cured in a year or so!" But I'm not going away to get cured! No! And I'm not going away because you mean to marry Carthewe, and I can't bear the sight of your happiness. I'm going away because —' He broke off abruptly, then added, in a quieter tone, 'Rhea, do you care enough about me to want to know the real reason why I am leaving home, friends, father, mother —perhaps for ever?'

His words had come in a torrent; ended, they left him almost breathless.

Rhea gazed up at him wonderingly. So, then, love might mean something other than a grasping, a holding, and a keeping against all heaven and all earth! Sometimes it might mean a leaving and a letting go.

Her hands clasped together nervously. 'My poor, poor boy,' she began once more.

He gave her no time to finish. He flung himself down on on the ground at her feet, kissing the hem of her dress, his hot tears falling here and there on the silver embroideries.

'Rhea, Rhea,' he cried brokenly, 'kiss me once, just once, on my forehead, and let me go!'

Rhea bent forward, parted his fair curly hair, and lightly touched his forehead with her lips.

The chair on which she sat stood immediately beneath a window of one of the smaller drawing-rooms. From that room, at that moment, there came a sound of movement and of voices, as if some persons had just entered it.

Trevor sprang to his feet. 'God bless you!' he said, in low, tremulous tones. 'Forget me; it is all I have to ask of you now!'

Then, with feet that stumbled as they went, he made his way along the verandah, back to the ball-room once more.

Rhea leaned back in her chair, feeling dazed and stupefied. Here was her question—'What is love?'—answered with a vengeance. She felt as one might feel who, having questioned the oracle, expecting to hear the voice of the priest in reply, hears instead the voice of the god himself.

The heavy, odorous air seemed to stifle her. The clanging of the band had ceased now; the roll of carriages in the street below was getting fainter. The golden-grey of the morning, that filtered in through the interstices of the Venetian shutter, fought with and died hard in the glare of the Chinese lanterns over her head. Lord Carthewe, no doubt, was seeking her now in the deserted rooms, in order to claim her promise of an interview. She felt utterly unfit to face him and the momentous question whose answer might contain in itself the making or marring of two lives.

Again the sound of voices came to her through the window beneath which she was seated. In a vague sort of way, she found herself listening to them, without knowing who they were, nor feeling much interest in what was being

He led her into the conservatory, and both sat down.

Rhea released her hands; her rings seemed almost crushed into her fingers with the tightness of his clasp. She was strangely agitated. She sank into a chair that was half-hidden by two big, branching myrtles.

'You have taken me so by surprise, I can scarcely get my thoughts together,' she said. 'I had no idea that such a thing was in your mind!'

He stood in front of her, with his arms folded on his breast, looking down on her.

'Did you think I should come to you day after day and say "going, going," till someone else said, "gone at last, thank Heaven!"' he asked bitterly.

'But, must it be?' asked Rhea, of set purpose, making her tone as unemotional and matter-of-fact as possible. 'You could keep out of my way without leaving England. You were not compelled to follow me about from house to house as you have been in the habit of doing of late. You need never have crossed my threshold again if to do so gave you pain.'

'Gave me pain! Do you think I am going away in order to save myself pain?' he cried contemptuously. 'Why, I would stand torture—infinite torture in every part of my body just for a five minutes' glimpse of you! Rhea, Rhea! don't you see—can't you understand that I am going away, not for my own sake, but for yours, because I won't have you talked about in an intolerable fashion. I have never asked you to marry me. I never would ask you to marry me; I love you too well to ask you to put yourself in what the world would consider a ridiculous position. Two nights ago my mother came to me and told me certain remarks that had been made about you in consequence of my attentions to you; how that people said—No! I won't repeat the idiotic speeches. When I heard them I said to myself, it is time this was put a stop to; I love her so, I must leave her: I will quit at once and for ever take myself out of her life.'

Rhea's hands fell limply to her side. Her brain was on fire, yet she felt frozen, benumbed, half paralyzed.

'Utterly out of his power to break his chains,' did he say? Oh, then it lay in her power to keep him true to his spoken word; to 'grasp, to hold, to keep him against all heaven said, until suddenly three little words, 'our last valse,' fell upon her ear, in tones that were unmistakably her cousin Dulcie's.

Yet how strangely unlike Dulcie's usual tones they were! The words seemed to be sighed rather than spoken.

Was it possible, Rhea asked herself, that the foolish little maiden had let her heart be taken captive at her very first ball by some possibly ineligible suitor? Now, who could be the person whom she was addressing in such a pathetic voice—a landless younger son, an impecunious German princelet?

Rhea did not have long to wait for an answer to her question. Slow, distinct and charged with passion, came a masculine voice in reply. 'Our last valse! Yes. Life comes to an end for me to night. Oh! my darling, my darling, why did we ever meet thus, only to part?'

'My darling! my darling!' And the voice in which these words were said was that of Reginald, Lord Carthewe!

Rhea put her hand to her forehead. Was she dreaming—what did it all mean? There fell a silence; then Dulcie's voice was heard again.

'It has been all Rhea's doing from first to last,' she said, speaking falteringly and with the sound of tears in her voice. 'She made me go to Paris, and——'

'Yes,' interrupted Lord Carthewe, 'and she forbade me her house for a week, and thus virtually sent me over there to pass the time! Oh, my love, my love! Fate has indeed been cruel to us! I curse these chains of honour, I curse the folly that made me forge them for myself, but it is utterly, utterly beyond my power to break them!'