

"Hit's *halways* the way with that feller," she said furiously, when she had recovered her breath sufficiently to speak. "Such cool *himpidence* I never did be'old! I'm really downright ashamed, Mr. Clive, that you should see my silly daughter so bemean 'erself!"

"Miss Stella is too sweet ever to behave unkindly to any one," he answered quietly. "Pray don't distress yourself. I scarcely see how she could have done other than she did. She is not made up of fighting materials, my friend. It is for her always to yield so prettily."

He spoke, as usual, with something of a foreign accent. Whether affected or not, opinions differed, though the general impression prevailed that Mr. Clive was not quite an Englishman. The slight mystery so created rather added to the interest which Shingleby took in him, an interest not likely to be dissipated by explanations upon his part.

"It's very good of you, I'm sure, Mr. Clive," sighed Mrs. Brookes, without indicating in what direction the goodness was to be found. However, she undoubtedly looked relieved, and as they were by this time in the midst of the guests the subject dropped; more quickly, indeed, than was the case with Stella and Guy.

"There!" the girl exclaimed, with her colour rising, as soon as they were out of earshot. "Now you can see for yourself! Oh, Guy, I'm so glad you didn't give me up to him! That's always the way they are going on now, and it makes me so wretched."

Mr. Ryder had quite grasped the situation by this time, helped thereto by Stella's blush. Enlightenment came indeed as a most unpleasant shock. This was worse, far worse, than anything either Jack or he had imagined.

"You don't mean that she tries to throw you two together? To make you care for that ape?" Not quite polite language, perhaps; but then Guy was naturally annoyed, and this was a matter upon which he was likely to feel very strongly indeed.

Stella nodded and blushed again.

"Oh! Guy, don't think me horrid, but I must speak out," she exclaimed desperately. "You are almost as good as a brother to me"—poor Guy!—"and Mary and Jack are so far away. It isn't only mother. It's Mr. Clive, too, And Helen—she's always chanting his praises, and asking me—oh! all sorts of things.

It's only since Jack went; but that seems about a year. And now that mother is behaving so rudely to you you'll stay away from the house. And—oh, I'm so miserable!"

There were tears in her eyes, tears that made it doubly difficult for him to maintain the *role* of brother, which she had but that moment so innocently and frankly assigned him. But the unselfishness of his nature helped him. Not for the world would he, at such a moment, have frightened or embarrassed her.

"And then there's the money! Those two are always at mother, morning, noon, and night, trying to make her sign a big cheque for the payment of their horrid shares! And when I remember all that Jack said I get quite frightened."

"Frightened and miserable! Poor little woman!" with a cheerfulness that Stella found more reassuring than would have been the case had she been aware that it was all assumed for her benefit. "But we mustn't have that sort of thing continue, you know. I believe, after all, you'd better go and look after Mary and her babies."

The brightness of the glance with which he was rewarded showed how great would be the relief and pleasure. But she shook her head.

"After Jack telling me not to desert the ship? I scarcely think I'll be quite such a coward yet. Only don't you feel like talking to mother? At any rate, about the money, Guy. She won't listen to me in the least. I did try, but I gave it up directly, for she only laughed."

"That's what she'll do when I interfere. However," with an air of heroism, "I'll sacrifice myself, and be jeered at if necessary. Only don't be surprised if I fail."

And failure was indeed the certain result of his mission. For when, upon the following morning, he paid a visit to Kingston Villa, he could think of no better way to broach the subject and warn the intended victim than by attacks against every gold mine, sundry and particular, that ever had been started. To all of which Mrs. Brookes listened with the blandest smile, being for some unknown reason in a specially good humour, after which she herself proceeded to the root of the matter with a directness that he found actually appalling.

"Most kind of you, Mr. Ryder,"—it always used to be "Guy,"—"to take so