

A DISGRACE TO HER FAMILY.

(Continued.)

Thus rebuked, Maggie hung her head, and returned to her seat. She was not so stupid as not to be conscious of the mistake she had made, especially when it was thus politely and clearly pointed out to her.

"I—I did not know," she mumbled. "I thought perhaps it might be a telegram."

The conversation was here interrupted by an exclamation of surprise which proceeded from Mrs. Brotherton, and which effectually prevented the sneering reply on the tip of Geraldine's tongue.

"What is it, mamma?" asked Matilda, closing her book, and speaking in the tone of one from whom no secrets must be kept. "You look as if you had received some good news."

"And so I have—at least I think so. The Cottage is let at last."

"Indeed! You don't say so."

"Yes, this is a letter from Messrs. Malton and Slee, informing me of the fact."

"And who has taken it?" said Matilda, whilst Geraldine paused in her work, and the twins forgot all about their game of backgammon.

Quite an animated smile illumined Mrs. Brotherton's usually unanimated countenance. It was pleasing to her to feel herself of so much importance; not that she had any intention of keeping back the news. She looked again at the letter which she still held in her hand.

"If I read rightly, the gentleman's name is Falconer—the Honorable Keith Falconer."

"There is an Honourable Keith Falconer in the Guards. No doubt he is the same person," exclaimed Geraldine, looking critically at her bonnet until her pretty face broke out into smiles. "I wonder if he is a married man?"

"No," said Mrs. Brotherton triumphantly. "I can answer that question. This letter is from Mr. Malton himself, and he writes of Captain Falconer, as a bachelor, wishing to take a small house, with first class stabling in the centre of the 'Ripper' Hunt."

"That's awfully jolly!" exclaimed Lily and Rose simultaneously, "and the odds are he's a good sort."

"Girls, I do wish you would not be so slangy," said Mrs. Brotherton. "It really is detestable to hear young ladies talk in such a fashion. They never did when I was your age, but manners seem to have deteriorated sadly since then."

"Never mind, mother," they responded good-humoredly. "Don't try to improve us just now, but tell us instead how long he has taken the Cottage for."

"Only for a year, certain; but he has the option of taking it on lease after that time."

The Cottage was a charming residence, of the class described by house-agents as "bijou." It had originally been built by the Squire to accommodate an old fellow-sportsman, who, two years ago, had gone the way of all flesh, since when it had remained untenanted.

For a single man, fond of hunting, and not requiring large reception rooms and nurseries, no abode could well be more perfect. It was beautifully fitted up, contained two good sitting, and half-a-dozen bed-rooms, and the stables could accommodate fourteen horses.

Being within a couple of hundred yards of the Manor house, a desirable tenant, who, at the same time, might be accepted as friend and neighbor, was a matter of considerable importance to the owner. The girls, foreseeing this, had begged their mother rather to allow it to stand empty than let it to some dull, non-hunting old fogey. They had so greatly insisted on the point that Mrs. Brotherton had acceded to their desire, and now, here came compensation for two whole years' rent, in the shape of a well-born, fashionable young man of undoubted family and position.

Mrs. Brotherton would scarcely have been feminine, and the mother of a tribe of marriageable daughters, had not some very pleasing notions promptly presented themselves to her brain. The only question was, which of the five, or rather four, girls would he choose?

Matilda was the one she felt most anxious to see married. To begin with, she was the oldest, and secondly, her queer temper and dogmatic opinions rendered her an unpleasant companion. There could be no doubt about it, that she ought to be the first to go off matrimonially, but on the other hand, her younger daughters, especially Geraldine, were much better-looking, and appeared to possess greater powers of fascination for the opposite sex.

Poor woman! she felt that she would be truly thankful, if only this Captain Falconer would take a fancy to any one of them; and perhaps if the spell of ill-luck, which had visited her for so long, were only once broken, something else might turn up. Marriages were contagious. One not infrequently led to another.

"I am trying to remember what I have either heard or read about the Honorable Keith Falconer," she said after a while, puckering up her brow with a puzzled expression. "Somehow or other, the name seems quite familiar to me."

"And well it may be," responded Geraldine, who was an insatiable reader of Society papers. "Captain Falconer was a great admirer of that beautiful Mrs. Thorndyke, who made such a sensation two seasons ago. Too great an admirer, said the ill-natured, for Mr. Thorndyke turned jealous, all of a sudden, and wanted to call him out. Everybody talked of the affair at the time, but H.R.H. interfered, and succeeded, after a good deal of trouble, in getting the quarrel patched up. Captain Falconer was said to be head over ears in love."

"Ah, now you speak of it, I do remember something of the sort," returned Mrs. Brotherton, "though, really, people ought to be ashamed to publish all this society scandal, for young girls like yourself to read. It has a most demoralizing tendency. However, I fancy no great blame attached to Captain Falconer."

"The world is generally lenient to a dashing young guardsman," observed Matilda severely. "An unfortunate woman has nearly always to bear the brunt of the battle, whilst the real offender escapes scot-free. That comes from our having been a suppressed race so long, and even in these days we are subjected to unjust laws."

"Nonsense, Matilda," said Mrs. Brotherton, who, being a very pure and narrow-minded woman, was invariably hard on her own sex. "I don't see that this Mrs. Thorndyke deserves the least sympathy. She had a husband—"

"He may have been a brute, and treated her like one."

"And," continued Mrs. Brotherton, unheeding the interruption, "she ought to have known better than to encourage a good-looking young man to dangle after her. A married woman never gains anything by such goings on, but loss of reputation and a very undesirable notoriety."

"With all due deference to you, mother," rejoined Matilda stubbornly, "I contend that this Captain Falconer is no great saint. You are far too simple for the nineteenth century."

"Well, anyhow," put in Geraldine, "we need not take away the poor man's character before we have even made his acquaintance. There will be time enough to do that afterwards. He is young, and a gentleman, therefore the inference is, he will prove an acquisition."

"And it is much better for the Cottage to be occupied than to stand empty, as it has done these last two seasons," rejoined Mrs. Brotherton. "Nothing ruins a house so much as having no one living in it."

"I wonder if our friend, the Honorable Keith, will arrive in time for the opening meet," said Lily, speculatively.

"Yes, I wonder," chimed in Rose.

"I fancy so," said Maggie, who hitherto had taken no part in the conversation, "for I happened to be walking on the road to the station to-day, and I met a string of eight horses and a hack, clothed from ear to tail, and looking as if they had been travelling. No doubt it was Captain Falconer's stud arriving."

"Of course. Why did you keep this piece of news bottled up until now?" enquired Geraldine tartly.

"It never occurred to me to tell it. Besides, one meets so many horses this time of year."

"Talking of horses, I hope Captain Falconer wants to buy," said Geraldine.

"Why? What difference can it make to you?"

"Only that if he does, I shall do my very best to sell him Paragon."

"Oh, Geraldine!" exclaimed Maggie reprovingly, "You could not possibly do such a thing. You know that since last season he has hopelessly gone in his wind."

"Exactly; that's the very reason I wish to pass him on."

"You will find it difficult."

"Most likely, because Paragon is too well known here, and only the other day, when I rode him, he made such a noise going up-hill, that everybody turned round and stared. My one chance is with a stranger."

"But you would not sell him to Captain Falconer, surely, without telling him the horse is unsound?"

"Now, Maggie, don't you interfere with me. If I sell him, I sell him, and it's no business of yours how I accomplish my ends."

"It is dishonest, Geraldine, to suppress the truth."

"Rubbish! And now I want to tell you something."

"What is it?"

"This. I have seen an animal, whose looks I like immensely, and who I believe I could buy for a mere song. He belongs to Acton."

"Do you mean that showy brown thorough-bred, rather high on the leg, with a white blaze down his face, ridden by Young Acton last Thursday?"

"Yes, that's the animal. He's uncommonly good-looking. Don't you think so, Maggie?"

"I do, most certainly. But he is much too good-looking to belong to Mr. Acton, unless there is a screw loose somewhere."

The individual above referred to was a sporting tailor, who combined horse-letting with coat-cutting. He lived in the town of Foxington, close by, and seldom had less than half-a-dozen hunters in his stable. About once in six or eight years, through some accident of fortune, a decent nag would find its way into his hands.

Geraldine believed she had hit upon a great discovery. The corky brown thoroughbred that she had seen out hunting, had taken her fancy immensely. She liked an animal who arched his neck proudly, champed at his bit, held his tail aloft, and walked with dainty, ambling steps. Such a one showed her off, and looked well at the meets, or when proceeding from covert to covert. The sight of Mr. Acton's horse had quite determined her to part with Paragon, who, besides having gone in his wind, was close upon twenty years of age.

"I say, Maggie," she said, after a slight pause, "will you walk into Foxington, and find out what Mr. Acton asks for the brown?"

"Of course I will," answered Maggie readily, "but," and her honest young face clouded over, "please give up the idea of trying to suck in Captain Falconer with Paragon."

"Suck him, indeed!" cried Geraldine indignantly. "What a brutal way you have of putting things."

"It may be brutal, but it's the truth."