

CHAPTER XXIX

THE persistent self-absorption and stunning monotonous clatter of one's fellow-creatures, however execrable it may seem when one wants to predominate over them by the legitimate employment of one's superior gifts—without shouting, you know!—may be not unwelcome when one longs for an excuse for silence, as Challis did after that unsettling interview with Judith—silence, and a little time to think things over before any further speech with the source of his disquiet. The more row other people were making, the better! This feeling was quite consistent with susceptibility to a magnetism which needed some device to veil its nature. He would call it tea, for the nonce, anyhow. He made tea the pretext to escape from his position of arbiter without rights of speech, and left the disputants, promising to return forthwith, and meaning to break his promise.

He made the most of the hundred yards to the tea-camp, nodding remotely to casuals by the way. He looked for an excuse to avoid joining the group at headquarters, who appeared at his distance off to be discoursing brilliantly, interestedly, on absorbing topics, with smiles. He knew they were talking nonsense about nothing particular, and was glad to find his excuse in Athelstan Taylor and his sister-in-law, who had joined the party, bringing with them their own little girls and the small cockney waif in blue, whose aunt was Mrs. Steptoe. That was how our Lizarann presented herself to Mr. Challis.

"I like you better than your aunt," said that gentleman candidly, when Lizarann was introduced.

"So do I," replied Lizarann. But this answer, clear as it's meaning was to all sympathetic souls, was taken exception to by the Rector's sister-in-law.

"What can the unintelligible child mean by that?" said