

We did join the ladies, and the day ended, as it began, by my contemplation of the ease and readiness with which my nephew made himself agreeable, winning smiles and pretty looks, confidence and kindness, where I—but then, I had not fair hair, parted down the middle, nor flowing whiskers, nor a tawny pendent moustache, and I was much nearer fifty than twenty-four, only her father's old friend, and her own elderly, silent guardian.

No wistful, dark-eyed glance into my face thrilled through and through me to-night, when the hour for retiring came; the little lady put her lips to Miss Tabitha's yielded cheekbone as on the previous occasion, shook hands with Tom, bidding him a laughing good-night, and then swept past me with a flowing curtsy, drooping eyelashes, and a little flush on her face.

As long as the Plunger stayed, and he honoured us more persistently than usual, there did not appear any signs of Miss Masson's finding poor old Holmdale dull: the two were generally together, and seemed to find each other sufficient for all needs. But when he was gone, and she was left to choose between Aunt Tabitha's society and mine, the case was plainly altered. I rather think the poor child at first did make an effort to follow in Miss Tabitha's footsteps, but that needed stronger limbs, a stronger mind, perhaps also a harder heart, than nature had vouchsafed to her. She blundered sadly between "cause" and "effect," my aunt complained; she could not be taught that the way to make a model poor was not achieved by relieving poverty; she gave away, as I understood, all her money, rendered her wardrobe a desolation, and incurred, into the bargain, Aunt Tabitha's severest rebukes for encouraging sloth, and ministering to shiftlessness.

So that came to an end, and, though I could almost have descended (if I had known how) to try the Plunger's method of making Holmdale pleasant, I felt that forty-odd must fail where twenty-four might succeed; and so was fain to stand on one side, and note silently how the smiles came fewer and farther between on the face they brightened so prettily; how the light died away from the dark eyes, and the step grew listless; and a little figure glided about the dark old house, that grew more slender day by day.

At last the sight grew so painful to me, that I could bear it no longer. I sought my aunt, and, in my desperation, entreated her counsel.

My aunt kindly withdrew her attention from the voluminous mass of papers before her, and looked up at me with triumph in her eye.

"Hah! nephew, I hope you will own now that I was quite right in what I said when you absurdly undertook this charge. I knew how it would be."

"Of course you were right, my dear lady: when were you ever wrong?" I answered, pettishly. "But what is to be done? that is the question now."

"And I reply by using your own words, Nephew Ferrers,—marry her off—I'll grant you it's all *she's* fit for, poor thing."

My aunt is a most estimable woman, so I don't like to call the smile with which she delivered this opinion, diabolical—but it certainly was not pleasing. I didn't expect any very easy or pleasant solution of my difficulty from her either, perhaps; but this seemed rather too preposterous.

"How, in the name of patience, am I to do that?" I asked, testily. "Can't I make Miss Masson fall in love?"

Miss Tabitha laughed curtly.

"Try," said she.

"I don't know any one worthy of her," I answered, sulkily.

"Well, you men are poor creatures, the best of you; I subscribe to that, nephew," said my aunt, amicably; "but there are women to be found, good-natured enough to put up with the worst of you, more's the pity."

"There's not a single man of my acquaintance to whom I should be willing to give Dick Masson's daughter," I repeated obstinately.

"Then marry her yourself!" said my aunt, and became once more absorbed in her papers.

The ceiling came down to the floor, the walls swayed towards each other, and the floor seemed to upheave beneath my feet, as the tremendous words fell from Miss Tabitha's derisive lips.

"Marry her myself!" Oh Daisy, darling, tender, patient, pining little Daisy! never, never, I swear it, even when my heart had ached and swelled most painfully with the hidden love, and tenderness, and pity, which had grown up there for thee, had such a thought strayed across presumptuous fancy. Marry her myself! How the mocking words whirled and seethed in my brain now, though; and how, in spite of myself, in spite of Aunt Tabitha, visions of love and happiness and beauty, such as the veriest boy might have revelled in; of a new meaning to the words "hearth and home," sprang into life, and gathered round, and made them beautiful. Marry her myself! My forty-odd years were forgotten, and Holmdale, dull, dark, dingy Holmdale, was dull, and dark, and dingy, no more; for, if I may venture to take such a liberty with Mr. Tennyson, "young faces glimmered at the doors, young footsteps trod the upper floors," young voices called me from without—and I was not dreary—no, quite the contrary. But, Gracious Powers! into what domain of fancy was my aunt's advice luring me? I pulled myself up with a mighty effort—I fled into my study with precipitation, dashed at my bookshelves, and took down a volume at random: anything to drown those importunate, derisive, enchanting words!

The book was—I never knew what it was, for even as I opened it, a sheet of paper fluttered from between its leaves, which straightway captured my attention with a vengeance, for I knew the little neat handwriting, which nearly covered it, quite well, though I didn't know the verses it embodied, seeing that in all probability no eyes but the poor little author's had ever beheld them before. I don't mean to give them here—and I beg to assure the reader that he is not sustaining any considerable loss thereby—but I have them now, and I mean them to be laid beside me in my coffin, when I die.

They told a tender little tale, even to my uninitiated eyes and ears, which it scarcely needed my nephew's name, scattered idly and lavishly over the reverse side of the paper, to point; and folding them reverently, winding about them a little ribbon she had dropped one day in my study when she came in for a book, I laid them away carefully, and bowing my head, I registered a vow in my heart of hearts, that Daisy Masson should be happy if I could make her so.

So this was your secret, my little ward; and it was for the absent Plunger that your dark eyes had grown dim, and your face so thin and wistful. Well, what more natural? I ought to have thought of it, provided for it, or else have hindered it. But I—what did I know of girls and their ways? Oh! my prophetic aunt! Oh! dear, dead Dick Masson! who bequeathed your little daughter to my care and love; was this all I had done for her?

For Tom was not in a position to marry, even allowing that he had fallen into the preliminary imprudence, a fact of which I was by no means sure, by the way.

"Boys of four-and-twenty don't fall in love nowadays," I reflected, "unless it is convenient and desirable; they leave their uncles of forty and more to make fools of themselves in that way."

But something must be done, and by the memory of Dick Masson, I would do my best. In a few days, the Plunger was our guest once more, specially invited though, this time, somewhat to his own surprise. Well, well, well; it was only what I ought to have expected; but I own I did think she needn't have seemed quite so glad to see him.

On his part, Tom took her undisguised pleasure with the utmost coolness, and quite as a matter of course; while I—there, I almost think I could have lain down at her feet and died, to have called that lovely moistened light into her eyes; but then forty-odd is not twenty-four, and falls in love after another fashion, you see.

Tom talked away over his wine, when we were

alone, with his customary ease; but I own to being a very silent and inattentive listener. I was thinking only of what I had to say, very little of how to say it, so that I came abruptly enough to the point at last.

"Tom, haven't you had enough of soldiering? It's a poor trade in time of peace, I should think?"

"But I was brought up to it, you see, sir; and it's about all I'm good for either," replied Tom, with unwonted modesty.

"What do you say to settling?"

"On what?" inquired Tom, opening his eyes.

"All my father left me wouldn't give me bread and cheese and a pipe a day, and if it wasn't for you now and then, uncle—"

"Have you ever wanted to marry—thought about it, I mean?"

Tom carefully removed the tawny moustache from possible contact with the wine he was raising to his lips, drank with appreciation, set down his glass, and then replied,

"I left off crying for the moon with my pinafores, I hope, sir. Ay, uncle, what an ass you must think me;" he added more earnestly.

Perhaps I did; not for the reason he imagined, though.

"I don't know whether you have ever thought of yourself as my possible heir," I began, waiving that question, "but if you and Miss Masson can—ah! how the words would choke in my throat,—if you are fortunate though to—that is—if you marry my old friend's daughter, I should consider you as my joint heirs, and provide for your marriage at—once."

It was done—over—it was all over now! there only remained Tom's acquiescence; this was longer of coming than I had expected, and when at last I looked up, Tom's face wore a look of perplexity, surprise, and doubt, that was almost comical.

"You've taken me quite by surprise," he said, at length. "I need not say, that I've never thought of Miss Masson in the light you speak of; I admire and like her immensely, of course, but—in fact—"

"Do you mean to say you have any objection to marry my ward?" I cried out. "Why, you young puppy! there's many a better man would—"

"I do mean to say that I have a decided objection to propose marriage to any lady without being quite assured of her preference for me," he interrupted, with a laugh; "but if you will answer for that—look here, uncle, you have made a proposal to me: make it to her, too, for me; and if she agrees, why then I shall, of course, be proud, and honoured, and happy, and will do my best to deserve your kindness and hers."

"Nonsense, my lad," I began.

"Positively, uncle, you must; I shall never have pluck enough to do it for myself, I tell you;" and there the matter ended for the present, leaving me restlessly on the watch for an opportunity to carry the thing to an end.

It came the next day. Daisy was standing alone, before the bookshelves in the library, hunting for something or other, when I came in and found her; I assisted in the search, carried it to a successful termination, and then hurriedly, awkwardly, detaining her when she would have left me, I laid Tom's proposal before her.

She glanced up at me once, and then never lifted her eyes again, but stood quite still, except for a fluttering movement about the bosom of her dress, that I could not but watch.

"Tom would have told all this much better himself, I am sure," I said, in conclusion, feeling acutely that apology was needed for the blundering announcement; "but he trusted it in my hands, and I have tried to do my best. My dear, what do you say?"

She said nothing at all, only turned a little aside, and sat down, dropping her face down upon her hands in a way that went to my heart, somehow.

"Well, well," I said hastily, "perhaps there is no need to say anything. I am very ignorant of all such things; but silence is held to give consent in matters like the present, is it not? Tom will be a happy man, and you will have a brighter home than this grim old house, and