

THE GIRL'S CHOICE.*

BY E. M. M.

A BRIGHT day and the kindness of friends restored cheerfulness to the heart of our poor heroine, who, after breakfast, joined the ladies round the social work table, while the gentlemen took their guns and strolled out into the fields. Clara read aloud from an interesting book, and the time thus employed, flew so fast that one o'clock chimed to the astonishment of all. A servant at the same moment entered to announce a visitor, Miss Felicia Sykes. Clara cast a playful look of dismay on her mother as the lady came into the room, flounced up to the knees in fashion's extreme, and exclaiming:

"My dear Lady Woodford, I am so happy to see you. Ah! Miss Clara! charming as ever! La, my dear! how do you preserve your color so beautifully? I wish you would tell me."

"Simply by keeping early hours and avoiding heated rooms," replied Lady Woodford, smiling.

"Would that I could do the same," rejoined the maiden; "but, courted as I am, it is impossible. I have five engagements for this week, only think of that, and a dinner party at my own house next week."

"Poor lady, how I pity you," said Lady Woodford, laughing.

"Spare your pity, my dear, for those who need it; I have come with a case to-day which you will say merits your warmest sympathy. A poor family living in the Hilders lane, have been burnt out, consisting of a husband, a wife, and six small children; they are completely destitute, and have no claims on the parish as they are strangers."

"I have heard of them from my son," replied Lady Woodford; "and a most unworthy pair they are; both drunkards, idle, and forever fighting and quarrelling with each other. On the night their cottage was destroyed, they were sitting up playing cards, when some dispute arising, the woman seized a can of spirits, and dashed it on the fire, which caused the disaster. After such an account, I do not feel justified in assisting them; but the unfortunate children being really objects of compassion, we have considered. Sir Henry, at my request, removed them from the evil example of such parents, placing

the two eldest ones at school, and the little ones with an old dame in the village."

"Well, really this is provoking! Who would have imagined they were such wretches?" returned Miss Sykes. "I heard of their distress from my maid, and sent them money and clothes, which no doubt will be sold for drink; but I have still another case, my dear, that probably you are not aware of, though I confess you are always before me in every act of charity."

Miss Sykes drew a paper from her pocket, as she spoke. While she is laying it before the consideration of Lady Woodford, we will introduce her more fully to our readers.

She was the only child of a Lady Sykes, who lived at Bath, and who, conceiving for her daughter the most unnatural aversion, probably because she thought her vulgar, and felt ashamed of her in those circles of folly and fashion to which she herself was devoted, she separated from her mother so soon as she became of age, and set up a handsome establishment of her own; she was certainly a very eccentric person, though not ill disposed. On the contrary, she was charitable to the poor and kind to her servants; her principal peculiarities were a contempt, or a pretended contempt, for the lords of the creation, and a habit of speaking her mind too freely to people, and thereby giving them offence. In person she was more odd-looking than plain, increased probably by her dressing in the extreme of fashion, however *outré* that fashion might be. Notwithstanding these disadvantages, her money had attracted many admirers, whose protestations of love she treated with the utmost scorn. To an Irish fox hunting baronet, who had run out his fortune in riot and dissipation, and who was more importunate than the rest, she replied: "That she felt grateful for his preference, but as she was neither fond of drinking, hunting, nor horse racing, and preferred spending her money to having it spent for her, she begged to decline the honor he intended to confer upon her." To a widower with six children, who generously told her she might retain five thousand pounds in her own hands, if she settled the rest upon him, she said: "That she was obliged to him