

his arm and conducted her back to the ball-room. He felt much as a man feels who has suddenly received a stunning and unexpected blow between the eyes. Neither of them spoke, and with a ceremonious bow they parted never to meet again, for in six years his Grace drank himself to death, and died of delirium tremens.

When the proposal came to Lady Parkinson's ears, as it did a day or two afterwards, in the most mysterious and unaccountable manner—for Dolly maintained total secrecy on the subject—she was like a mad woman. The girl bore her abuse fairly well for the first few hours, feeling, perhaps, that from her aunt's point of view a certain portion of it was merited; but her very passivity added to the sharpness of Lady Parkinson's tongue, and made her overstep the privileges of kinship. Dolly waited till her ladyship was out shopping—an occupation she frequently indulged in—and then, with tears in her eyes, sought Sir Hector. An end must be put to this hateful existence. She felt that she could endure it no longer. Both her health and temper were breaking down under the strain, and an artificial London life was simply odious to her. She had no desire to struggle into higher circles, and mount the social ladder by discarding old friends for the sake of new ones possessing handles to their names. She saw no good in it, and derived but little satisfaction from the process. According to her unsophisticated way of thinking, the fashionable ladies aye, and the men too, who belonged to Lady Parkinson's set, were infinitely snobbish and infinitely vulgar. They did and said things which, every day, clashed with her notions of true gentility. The result was a moral atmosphere thoroughly uncongenial, made up of ill-natured sayings, bickering, backbiting, flirtations, and personal gossip. In short, the worst school possible for men and women not possessing a sufficient modicum of brains to act as a steadying ballast. Despite her gentle ways and soft feminine attributes, Dolly was no fool. She could see pretty well what all this party-going, dressing-up, and intense craving for excitement and admiration came to; and realised the deteriorating effect it possessed on the majority of people. She longed to return to the country, with its quietude and repose, and to indulge once more in healthier pursuits than standing about on crowded staircases, inhaling a heated

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