

like my poor Rosa ; at least they wished their son to have married higher. They may not like me either, and they may naturally feel offended at his choosing his wife's sister to live with him, instead of one of his own."

"He had better have chosen one of his own."

"I think so too, and I told him this ; but he makes no answer, and, therefore, I conclude he has good reasons for not wishing it, and for wishing me instead. Then I shall hold a most responsible position in his household, have much parish work to do, as much as if I were the clergyman's wife."

"He should take a wife as soon as he can."

Hannah winced a moment, "It is only six months since her death ; and yet—and yet—Yes ! I feel with you that the sooner he takes a wife the better ; his need of help, he tells me, is very great ; but in the meantime I must help him all I can."

"I am sure you will ; you are made to help people," said the countess cordially. "But none of these are the difficulties I was foreseeing."

"About my poor little niece, perhaps ? You think an old maid cannot bring up a baby, or manage a house, with a man at the head of it—men being so peculiar ? But Rosa always said her husband was the sweetest temper in the world."

"He looked so. Not gifted with over-much strength, either mentally or bodily ; but of a wonderfully amiable and affectionate nature. At least, so he struck me in the few times I saw him. I only wish I had seen more of him, that I now might judge better."

"On my account ?" said Hannah, half-amused, half-pleased at the unexpected kindliness.

The countess took her hand. "Will you forgive me ? Will you believe that I speak purely out of my interest in you, and my conviction that though you may be a much better woman than I, I am a wiser woman than you—at least, in worldly wisdom. Are you aware, my dear Miss Thelluson, that this is the only country in the world in which a lady of your age and position could take the step you are contemplating ?"

"Why not ?—what possible reason——"

"I am sorry I have put the idea into your head, since it evidently has never come there. No ! I am not sorry. Whatever you do ought to be done with your eyes open. Has it never occurred to you that your brother-in-law is really no brother, no blood relation at all to you ; and that in every country, except England, a man may marry his wife's sister ?"

Hannah drew back ; a faint colour rose in her cheek ; but it soon died out. The idea of her marrying anybody seemed so supremely, ridiculously impossible—of her marrying Rosa's husband painfully so.

"It certainly did not occur to me," she answered gently, "and if it had, it would have made no difference in my decision. Such marriages being unlawful here, of course he is simply my brother, and nothing more,"

"He is not your brother," persisted Lady Dunsmore. "No force of law can make him so, or make you feel as if he were."