

SUMMER RESORT CONVERSATION.

"I heard it!"
 "Who told you?"
 "Her friend." (B)
 "You don't say!"
 "Tis dreadful!"
 "Yes, awful!"
 "Don't tell it, I pray."

"Good gracious!"
 "Who'd think it?"
 "Well! Well! Well!"
 "Dear me!"
 "I've had my
 Suspicions!"
 "And I, too, you see!"

"Not both them!"
 "Nor could them!"
 "And the wash!"
 "Look right clean!"
 "It get some!"
 "Frank Siddalls!"
 "The name I have seen."

"I'm going!"
 "Do stay, love!"
 "I can't!"
 "I'm forlorn!"
 "Farewell, dear!"
 "Good-bye, sweet!"
 "I'm so glad she's gone!"

BROWN'S WIFE;

OR,

THE COST OF THE CENSUS.

"Two thousand a year, a nice house and garden, and forcing pits that produced the finest pines in England—that's what the last census put one cost me," remarked my friend Brown, as we sat sipping our wine in his hospitable mansion, after the ladies had left us.

When a man makes a remark like the foregoing one, it invariably means that he has some story or anecdote ready, which will explain his apparently ambiguous words, and is hoping he will be asked to repeat it. I was not so unfriendly as to misunderstand the hint, and inquired with due surprise and interest, how the census of 18—came to be such a costly affair to Brown.

"Ah," replied my friend, "that's a long story." (I had thought it would be); "but it's a true one, all the same. But for that blessed census paper, Minnie and I would have stepped into a snug little fortune twenty years ago. You know, I suppose, that I was left an orphan very early in life, and that my old uncle, my only surviving relative, adopted me. You didn't know it? Well, you do now, then. My poor mother was my uncle's only sister; they had been left fairly well off by their parents. My uncle embarked his money in business, and grew rich; my mother married in opposition to his wishes, lived a miserable life for six years, and then was left a penniless widow, with one child—myself. My father, whom I don't remember, lived just long enough to break his wife's heart and gamble away her fortune—she only returned to her brother's house to die. It must be confessed that my uncle's experiences of matrimony, as seen in his sister's case, were not encouraging; perhaps this was the reason of his settling down into the confirmed old bachelor that he did. He loved his sister extremely—there was considerable difference in age between them—and he had been her guardian and protector till the day of her ill-starred marriage. That produced a coolness, but he opened his heart and home to her in her trouble, and accepted the charge of her orphan child. I was brought up in his house, educated at his expense. I believe he was really fond of me after his fashion, but the one great trouble of his life had soured him. He never recovered the loss of his sister; he never forgave the memory of her husband, the man who had stolen her from him.

"Marriage, in the abstract, became abhorrent to him; and it was always with a tone of teary vexation that he spoke of his friends making fools of themselves by entering into the fetters of wedlock. He lived a very quiet life in his snug house at Clapham, and devoted himself year by year more and more exclusively to the task of money-making. He was not a miser; his establishment was comfortable and affluent one, but I believe that, as time went on, his strongest affections began to centre round that money. He always talked of me as his heir; but at the same time I was by no means liberally supplied with resources for extravagance in the present. On my leaving school I was promptly promoted to a clerk's stool in a merchant's house and there I was found about twenty years ago, in the enjoyment of a salary of £120 a year, and no prospect of a further increase. I no longer resided at Clapham. My uncle had retired from business and become more reserved and unsociable in his habits than ever. Now I was getting on in the world, he remarked, I could afford to maintain myself; and I was nothing loth to exchange the dreary dullness of the Clapham mansion for the freedom even of dingy lodgings in London. My uncle paid my rent, and I received an occasional present from him. I was not extravagant, and managed well enough; things were cheaper twenty years ago. I really believe one reason of my uncle's close-fistedness was a dread lest, if I were thought well to do, some matrimonial snare might be laid for me. 'You'll have everything here one day, William,' he would say in moments of rare expansion, 'and I hope you will keep things together as I have done. But remember, don't make a fool of yourself and marry. Look at your poor

mother's lot; why, if she hadn't thrown herself away, she might have been alive and happy now. None but fools, sir, fools or knaves, go and get married.'

I listened dutifully enough. My temptations to commit the sin of matrimony were small. We had no visitors to Clapham except a business friend or two of my uncle's, generally old bachelors like himself. Mrs. Corbet, the housekeeper, encouraged my uncle in his solitary habits. It would have been a sad misfortune to her had he been converted from his anti-matrimonial views, and led to install a mistress at the Lawn. Mrs. Corbet had a good situation, and she knew it. She lived with my uncle a great many years, and was a handsome, well-preserved woman of fifty or thereabouts, almost a lady in appearance and manners. My uncle had a great opinion of her; I had not. From my childish days I knew she regarded me with jealousy and aversion, although concealed under a studied smoothness of manner. She was a widow with one son, a youth of some years younger than myself. I believe she looked on me as the great obstacle to this boy's fortune. I do not think she could have cherished the idea of ever inducing my uncle to marry her; but I am sure she fancied that if he were quite alone in the world he would be as likely to bequeath his money to his faithful housekeeper as to leave it to the hospitals. Then her darling, her idol, would be a rich man. I will do her the justice to say that it was rather for the sake of her son than herself that she coveted the old man's money. A cold-hearted woman, not too scrupulous in compassing her ends, she yet loved that boy—a somewhat graceless youth—wi an intense devotion. But for me she might have been able to make him rich. Children are keen observers, and Mrs. Corbet's stilled dislike was no secret to me in my boyhood, although I did not think my uncle perceived it. As I grew up she disliked me yet more; it was gall and wormwood to think of me as my uncle's heir. This troubled me little. I knew my uncle was not likely to disinherit me in favour of a stranger, unless we had some dire quarrel, and there was not any likelihood of such an event occurring. Since I had taken up my abode in London I did not see much of my uncle, and infrequent intercourse is often no slight preservative to family concord. When sent for I went to Clapham; but my uncle detested 'droppers in,' and it was an understood thing that my visits were only acceptable when asked for.

"I had plenty of work in Messrs. Hardie's office, and found amusement for my leisure hours. Perhaps a tinge of my uncle's unsociableness ran in the family, for I never thought my rather solitary existence disagreeable. I had no introductions in London; and, although I got on terms of acquaintanceship with some of my fellow-clerks, our intimacy was confined to a walk or a visit to the theatre in company. I never visited at their homes, nor, indeed, cared to do so. I was fond of reading; I sketched a little. I had been accustomed to do without companions all my life; and my life at Islington was at least a far livelier one than my previous existence at Clapham had been.

"But when I was just twenty-five a new era opened in my life. It began in a very commonplace fashion, some new lodgers came into the rooms over mine. I think I should have hardly observed this fact had not their predecessor been a noisy medical student; and the blissful lull that took place after his departure induced me to inquire one day, when I paid my rent, if the upstairs room were now tenanted at all. Yes, they were; a widow lady and her daughter had taken the rooms; I should find them quiet neighbours. 'I suppose so,' I said carelessly, thinking that at least they would not bring home a party of noisy students late at night; and I thought no more of the new lodgers. But after that day I constantly met them on the stairs as I was going to my work, two slender figures in deep mourning, each carrying what looked like a roll of music; whence I inferred they went out giving lessons.

"I suppose it was the monotony of my life that made me observe any trifles that varied it; but I began sometimes to think a little about my fellow-lodgers. I did not even know their names, and of course had never addressed them; but one day, in descending the stair, the young lady had dropped her roll of music, and I picked it up and returned it, receiving a 'thank you,' in what struck me as the sweetest voice I ever heard. After that I ventured to lift my hat when we encountered each other on the staircase, and the ladies would bow in return but there was something in their manner that checked any attempt at further acquaintance. 'Quite the ladies, and hold themselves rather high,' my landlady informed me, 'although they went out teaching. Mrs. Morton was a clergyman's widow, and obligated to do something for herself. Very regular with their rent, like yourself, sir.'

"I cannot trace how that casual meeting with my fellow-lodgers grew to be a feature in my day's engagements; but, although our greeting was a silent one, I should have been sorry somehow had I gone out too early or too late to encounter those black-veiled figures. I was sure they were very poor; neatly as they were always dressed, I could see their garments were well worn and they worked very hard. They often came home later than I did from business, and sometimes when I was returning from the rare dissipation of a visit to the theatre I could see the light still burning in the sitting-room above mine. My garrulous landlady informed

me that the ladies 'did a sight of writing' when they were at home, whence I inferred that they occupied themselves either with copying or some such employment in their leisure time. Thus passed some months; then came a change—only the younger lady went out daily. After observing this I inquired of the landlady if Mrs. Morton was indisposed. Yes, the poor lady was 'queerish,' and miss had persuaded her to keep at home a day or two. Meeting Miss Morton on the stairs next day, I ventured to inquire after her mother, and was answered gently and courteously, but not in a manner that encouraged further advances. My fellow-lodgers were decidedly reserved.

"However, having broken the ice, I regularly inquired after the sick lady every time I met the younger one, and was surprised to find how the sweet face, momentarily lifted to mine in reply, dwelt in my memory all day.

"Mrs. Morton did not get better; anxious lines were showing themselves in the daughter's face, and my landlady told me that she thought Miss Morton was working too hard. I was really becoming interested in my neighbours, engaged in fighting the battle of life—so hard to lonely women. I could see it was the old sad story—illness bringing increased expenses, and means failing to meet them, the poor girl working double to supply the mother's failing powers. Strangers as they were to me, I pitied and sympathized with them.

"One evening my musings were interrupted by a tap at my door, and on opening it, to my extreme surprise, I found Miss Morton on the threshold. In brief, agitated words she apologized for her intrusion; but her mother was taken so suddenly worse, the landlady and servant were out, she was afraid to leave the invalid; would I pardon the liberty, and—I will go for the doctor at once, I cried, seizing my hat and hurrying off before the poor girl could stammer out her apologies and thanks; and, being fortunate to find that gentleman at home, we soon returned together. Of course, I did not accompany him upstairs, but, after some interval, he came to my room.

"Are those ladies relatives or friends of yours?" he inquired.

"I explained that they were not.

"I fear the case is a hopeless one," he said gravely.

"If they have friends they should be communicated with at once. The young lady does not realize the danger, but I believe Mrs. Morton is sinking rapidly. It is a case of low fever, not infectious, but a very bad type; I should say greatly induced by over-work of some kind, and probably augmented by insufficient nourishment."

"I hinted that I believed that the ladies were none too well off. 'Probably,' very probably, said the doctor—he was a kind-hearted man, but cases of genteel poverty were so common in his experience that his interest in them was somewhat dulled. 'I will look in again to-morrow; but, I repeat if the ladies have any friends they ought to be communicated with.' I found means of conveying this opinion as gently as possible to Miss Morton shortly afterward, and at the same time requesting her to employ my services in any way they could be of use. She thanked me with the same gentle reserve of manner. I was very good, but there was nothing she required.

"But the weeks went by, and I gradually acquired a slight intimacy with her. Mrs. Morton lingered on, steadily declining. I dared not offer any assistance that looked like pecuniary aid; but I used to bring daily gifts of fruit and flowers for the dying woman—I am afraid I said they were presents to me from the Clapham hot-houses—and I went on errands; and once—the night before poor Mrs. Morton died—I finished some copying that Minnie had promised to send to the publishers that day, and could not quit her mother's pillow to complete.

"Poor, gentle Minnie! those days of trouble brought us much together. I soon learned all her little story. Obligated to leave the pretty country vicarage after her father's death; coming to London, hoping to be able to earn a living with her mother; working hard, living scantily; it is the old, old tale of hundreds of poor women, well-born, well-educated, left alone in the world, without assistance, to fight their way as best they can. The Mortons had no friends in England. Mr. Morton's brother had emigrated years ago and settled in Australia. Minnie had not heard of him for a long time, and did not know his address. Mrs. Morton had been an orphan. A cousin of her father's was the only person Minnie could apply to for either advice or assistance; but he was a hard, cold man, with a large family, very unlikely to do much. Nevertheless, when poor Mrs. Morton died, Minnie did write to him, asking, not for pecuniary help, but for employment; perhaps he could obtain her a situation as governess or companion. His reply came the day of the funeral. I had made the simple arrangements, and now Minnie and the kind-hearted landlady—who had accompanied her on her sad journey—had returned. I went up stairs to see if I could be of any further service. I found Minnie weeping bitterly, and she at last showed me her cousin's letter.

"I never felt such a fervent desire to kick a fellow-being as I experienced on reading that letter. What a creature the writer was! It was a long epistle. His surprise at being applied to 'by so distant a connection' took a full page to express itself. Then he had a good deal to say about Mr. Morton's 'sinful imprudence' in not providing for his family after his decease (the

value of his living having been £150 a year); and then came such a jeremiad about 'hard times' and his own heavy expenses, that I began to despair of ever coming to a reply to Minnie's request for advice and aid. At last I got to the real pith of the letter. The cousin, who was a rich man and had been under considerable obligations to Minnie's father, made the orphan girl the following munificent proposal: He quite agreed that she was too young to continue living in lodgings and going out giving daily lessons, as she and her mother had done. He could not see his way to obtain her any employment, and could not support her in idleness ('I never asked such a thing,' broke in poor Minnie, with flushing cheeks), and, therefore, everything considered, it seemed her wisest course to try and track out her uncle in Australia, 'a nearer relative than I, and more bound to assist you.' The writer was willing to advance the sum for a steerage passage to Sydney, and trust to 'your gratitude and sense of honesty to repay me out of your first earnings.' Once arrived at the colony, Minnie would doubtless be able to discover traces of her uncle, or obtain some employment. Anyhow, she would be cheaply off her cousin's hands. 'A steerage passage,' and to arrive friendless in an unknown country—and the man had young daughters of his own! I looked at the fair, delicate girl. Minnie had borne up bravely for a long time, but a sense of utter desolation seemed to fall on her now.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she cried pitiously.

"I took her cold little hand. 'Do not take a steerage passage to Australia. Stay in England and—marry me.'

"Of course, it was a foolish business. I always acknowledge that, though neither of us ever regretted it for a second afterward. It seems like a bad moral to our imprudence that our marriage should have been such an exceptionally happy one; but there—so it was. After all, we had seen a great deal of each other during those weeks of Mrs. Morton's illness, and had grown more intimately acquainted with each other's character and disposition in this intercourse than we could have during a whole London season's parties. It was seeing the deep, unselfish affection that existed between Minnie and her mother that first opened my eyes to the loneliness of my own lot. No one had ever loved me after this manner. My uncle had conferred benefits on me, but I could never recall hearing an encouraging word from his lips, nor observed him to show a symptom of affection for me. Had he done so I might have acted more openly toward him; but he had never cared to win my confidence, and I therefore had less scruple in withholding it.

"We were married quietly about a month after Mrs. Morton's death; Minnie in her deep mourning, our good landlady our only wedding guest. It happened to be the time of my usual annual holiday, and I took my bride to a quiet little watering-place on the Normandy coast, where we spent three weeks of such peaceful happiness that I really think that I forgot all about my uncle and his probable feelings when he heard of my marriage.

"Minnie's tender little conscience was uneasy at the idea of appearing deceitful, but I quieted her by promising to explain everything on our return. 'So much better than writing letters,' she, poor little soul, was ignorant of Uncle John's views of matrimony in general, and had but little fear of consequences. I was too happy to think about them at all.

"On our return I found a letter from Uncle John announcing that he had been ordered to Buxton to drink the waters; Mrs. Corbet was going with him. If he liked the place he might be away a month or two; I need not go to Clapham till I was sent for. This came like a reprieve; of course I must tell him, but

"Let it be done, as Mat doth say;
 'Yes,' quoth the earl, 'but not to-day.'"

"We are all prone to put off a disagreeable task as long as possible.

"Time went by, such a new life of happiness had opened before me, only a man who had led my solitary, unloved existence could truly appreciate the change. The bright face at the threshold to greet me on my return from work; the daily sweet companionship; the home look Minnie's skilful fingers gave to our shabby little rooms; the growing consciousness that I had won a prize far above rubies in my wife—my cup of happiness seemed indeed full. But in this workaday world sordid and commonplace considerations insist on being taken into account; and wonderful housekeeper as Minnie was, she could not succeed in making the income that sufficed for one person prove equally satisfactory for two. At first she had insisted (sorely against my wish) in continuing some portion of her daily tuition, but circumstances now obliged her to give this up entirely. We had been married six months, and there was a prospect of our happiness—and our expenses—being bye-and-bye increased. Minnie was in delicate health, and the idea of our marriage being still a secret one seemed to prey on her mind. We were deceiving my uncle, she persisted; it was not honest; and though my affection for my uncle was not so vivid as to make me equally sensitive on this point, I felt that, with the expected increase in our expenses, I ought to endeavour to earn more. Uncle John might, if he chose to use his influence among his city friends, easily procure me a far better situation than I now held; but, then, would he choose when he knew of the crime I had committed?

"I did not despair; all my life hitherto I had