

"Certainly not; there is nothing to be ashamed of," said Mr. Rivers, colouring. He could not bear in the smallest degree to hurt people's feelings, and had painfully sensitive feelings of his own. Then came an awkward pause, after which conversation flagged to a considerable degree.

Hannah began to think, what in the wide world should she do if she and her brother-in-law had thus to sit opposite to one another, evening after evening, through the long winter's nights, thrown exclusively upon each other's society, bound to be mutually agreeable, or, at any rate, not disagreeable, yet lacking the freedom that exists between husband and wife, or brother or sister who have grown up together, and been used to one another all their lives. It was a position equally difficult and anomalous. She wished she had known Mr. Rivers more intimately during Rosa's lifetime; yet that would have availed her little, for even that intimacy would necessarily have been limited. A reticent woman never, under any circumstances, cares to be very familiar with another woman's husband, even though he be the husband of her own sister. She may like him sincerely, he may be to her a most true affectionate friend, but to have his constant exclusive society, day after day and evening after evening, she would either find extremely irksome—or, if she did not—God help her! Even under the most innocent circumstances such an attraction would be a sad—nay, a fatal thing, to both parties. People talk about open jealousies; but the secret heart-burnings that arise from misunderstood, half-misunderstood, or wholly false positions between men and women, are much worse. It is the unuttered sorrows, the unadmitted, and impossible-to-be-avenged wrongs, which cause the sharpest pangs of existence.

Not that Miss Thelluson thought about these things; indeed, she was too much perplexed and bewildered by her new position to think much about anything beyond the moment, but she felt sufficiently awkward and uncomfortable to make her seize eagerly upon any convenient topic of conversation.

"Are they all well at the Moat-House? I suppose I shall have the pleasure of seeing some of your family to-morrow?"

"If—if you will take the trouble of calling there. I must apologise"—and he looked more apologetic than seemed even necessary—"I believe Lady Rivers ought to call upon you; but she is growing old now. You must make allowance."

His was a tell-tale face. Hannah guessed at once that she would have a difficult part to play between her brother-in-law and his family. But she cared not. She seemed not to care much for anything or anybody now—except that little baby up stairs.

"One always makes allowance for old people," answered she gently.

"And for young people, too," continued Mr. Rivers, with some anxiety, "My sisters are so gay—so careless-hearted—thoughtless, if you will."

Hannah smiled. "I think I shall have too busy a life to be