

would never so much as cut down a tree on the estate without consulting his little daughter. And even when, with that fatality which seems sometimes to take possession of old gentlemen, he suddenly brought home a second wife when he was nearly sixty—a person most unsuited to him in every way—he lost no time in making Mrs. Blair number two understand that she was to be but nominal mistress in the house that was eventually to belong to his young daughter.

Mrs. Blair sat for two years at the head of her husband's table, and then the old man died, and the day after the funeral Juliet, who at seventeen was fully conscious of her new dignities, sailed up to the post of honour at the dinner table, and motioned to the step-mother to take the place at the side which she had hitherto occupied herself; a position which Mrs. Blair was far too wise a woman to dispute.

For Juliet was now mistress where she had been but daughter. The house and all the broad lands were hers, and the widow was left with only a modest jointure, to which Juliet at once, in accordance with her father's wishes, added the request that she would make her home at Sotherne Court as long as it should suit them both to live together.

Mrs. Blair accepted the offer, as she herself would have said, "in a right spirit." People said it was an unjust will and hard upon her; but, if she thought so herself, she never said so, nor gave Juliet for a moment to understand that she was otherwise than perfectly satisfied with the arrangement.

A guardian and trustee had been appointed to the young heiress—a certain Colonel Fleming, the son of an old college friend of Mr. Blair's, who held a military appointment at Bombay, where he had been for many years. When Mr. Blair died it was not considered necessary for Colonel Fleming to come home. A great many letters passed between him and Mr. Bruce, the family solicitor; sundry papers and documents were sent out to him, which he duly signed and returned; and he wrote two letters to his young ward, whom he had not seen since she was five years old.

After that, Juliet heard nothing more of her guardian for several years, and privately hoped she might not in any way be troubled with him. But when she was twenty-one there were sundry alterations in rents, and

transfers of leases, an accumulation of voluminous accounts, and so much business of different kinds to be gone through, that Mr. Bruce deemed it advisable to have the advice and presence of Miss Blair's guardian. He therefore wrote to Bombay and urged him to come home.

Colonel Fleming thought Miss Blair and the Sotherne estates an intolerable nuisance. He had lived in India for so many years that he had lost his interest in England, and he had no particular desire to come home. It had always been a puzzle to him why Mr. Blair, who had been very kind to him many years ago, when he was quite a young fellow just joining his regiment, should have chosen him, of all people, to be his daughter's guardian. As long as it entailed no trouble he did not so much object to it; but when it came to going home to look after all these things which he hardly understood—why, it was a nuisance, no doubt.

Still, if Mr. Bruce considered it essential, of course it must be done.

Mr. Bruce did consider it essential, and Colonel Fleming came home.

Colonel Fleming has now been at Sotherne Court a week, and for several hours in the day he and Mr. Bruce, who is also staying in the house, are closeted together over the accounts; after which the keeper is sent in with Miss Blair's compliments to ask whether they would like to shoot, and the two gentlemen go off together after the pheasants.

Perhaps it is the good shooting, or the quiet and peace of the country, or the luxurious ease of the comfortable old house, or perhaps it is all these things together and something more; but Colonel Fleming is inexpressibly charmed and soothed by the life at Sotherne Court, and he begins to hope these accounts and papers which he dreaded so much at first may last for many days longer. Juliet, from her seat under the walnut tree, catches sight of the sportsmen as they come wandering homewards: she puts on her hat and goes to meet them coming up the hill.

Hugh Fleming thinks he never saw a sweeter type of womanhood than this girl who is his ward, and yet almost a stranger to him. Juliet is in black, a rich heavy silk deeply trimmed with lace (she never wears any but the handsomest dresses), a white shady straw hat over her eyes, and a knot of scarlet geraniums in the front of her dress;