

he was afraid I might meet with an accident; so he followed, and—when I lost the hounds hopelessly, introduced himself, as I said."

"I am very sorry that you should have met him," says Mrs. Lawrence, shortly; "and if you had come home, as you should have done when your horse fell lame, there would have been no need for you to make a very undesirable acquaintance, in a very undesirable manner."

With this she goes her way, full of irritation which it is impossible to express more clearly without the risk of doing harm. She feels instinctively that, by this informal mode of entrance, Frank Tarleton has taken possession of his old, familiar place—a place from which it will be impossible to dislodge him, without a concurrence of action on the part of her husband and children, for which she cannot hope. "Not one of them will look beyond the pleasure of the hour," she thinks; and then she adds, again, "I am sorry that Kate met him."

That young lady retires to her chamber, and proceeds to examine the extent of her injuries. These are, happily, not great. With the exception of a general stiffness and soreness of feeling, which is the usual result of a fall, she only finds a painful bruise on her left shoulder, which received the first force of the shock, and the small cut on her temple, which has been already mentioned.

"How thankful I am that it is no worse!" she thinks. "Suppose I had dislocated my shoulder, or had my face cut to pieces, or my head broken—how dreadful that would be! I feel as if I was deceiving people, by concealing that I was thrown; but what good would it do to tell?" Aunt Margaret would think it was because I went fox-hunting; uncle would not want me ever to mount a decent horse again; and Mr. Proctor would blame himself about the saddle, when, in fact, it was altogether an accident, for which nobody was to blame. What is good for bruises, I wonder! I suppose my shoulder will turn black and blue; but I can wear a thick dress, and hide it. I am very much afraid somebody will notice this cut on my face; but there are numbers of ways in which people can hurt themselves without being thrown from horseback. Shall I put a strip of court-plaster on it? No; that would make it too conspicuous. I had better trust to the hair, as Mr. Tarleton suggested."

The lips curve into a soft smile over the recollection of Mr. Tarleton's suggestion; but their expression changes quickly to a grimace of pain, as the hands which she has lifted to her head drop down again, the left falling to her side, the right clasping her left shoulder.

"Oh," she says, aloud; and in the long-drawn interjection there is consternation as well as pain. "What am I to do now?"

The question is more easily asked than answered. How is a young lady, who cannot lift her hand to arrange her hair, to keep the injury which incapacitates her from the knowledge of the cousins who share her room? Kate is still considering this dilemma, and gazing at herself in the mirror with a rueful countenance, when the door suddenly opens, and Janet enters.

"Are you not dressed yet, Kate?" she asks. "The hunting-party have returned, and luncheon is nearly ready.—Why, what is the matter?"

"The matter is," replies Kate, desperately, "that I have hurt my shoulder, and cannot comb my hair."

"Hurt your shoulder! How did you—Oh, I see! You have been thrown. Don't deny it!"

"I have no idea of denying it," returns Kate. "What would be the good? But please, Janet—dear Janet, don't mention it."

"I can't promise anything till I know whether you are much hurt," says Janet, who is pleased to have discovered what it was not intended that she should know. "How did it happen? I said, down stairs, that I felt sure that you had met with some accident; but Frank Tarleton denied it absolutely."

"That was because he promised me not to tell it," says Kate. "I hope you will be as kind; for I am not hurt at all, seriously, and there is no reason why the matter should be known."

"You have got a badly-bruised shoulder, at any rate—and a cut on your face, I perceive. Here! give me a comb, for luncheon will soon be ready; and now, while I put up your hair, tell me all about it."

Having no alternative, Kate complies with this request, and relates her adventure in full; while Janet combs out the tangled masses of her hair, and listens with a judicial expression.

"Well," she says, when the story is finished, "I suppose there is no reason to mention the matter; but I hope such a narrow escape will be a lesson to you not to ride strange horses on fox-chases, and not to jump fences with any horse. It was a good thing that Frank Tarleton chanced to be at hand. By-the-by, what do you think of him?"

"What can I think, except that he is charming?" Kate answers, readily. "I like him even better than I expected to; and I can't believe anything very bad of him, Janet."

"I dare say not," replies Janet, dryly. "I like him, too—nobody can help liking him; but I don't suppose there is any doubt but that he is a sad scamp, and a dreadful flirt, besides. Take care, Kate; don't let him flirt with you."

"Forewarned is forearmed," says Kate, gayly. "Don't be afraid, dear old Wisdom. If there is any flirting done, I will not be the victim; I promise you that."

"But there must not be any flirting done,"

says Janet, energetically. "Kate, you are a child, if you think you can hold your own with Frank Tarleton, as you do with a stupid lovesick fellow like George Proctor. Besides, he has such a reputation that, if your name is once connected with his, gossips will be certain to say that you have had the worst of it. Forewarned is not always forearmed; people may be too confident."

"I am not," says Kate. "I won't flirt with Mr. Tarleton, and I won't let him flirt with me. Does that satisfy you? Oh! how you are pulling my hair!"

"Am I? I was looking at this end, here. What made you cut one lock so much shorter than the rest?"

"I don't remember having cut any at all," answers Kate, much surprised. "What do you mean?"

Janet flings one of the heavy plaits which she is braiding over her cousin's shoulder, and points to one end from which at least four inches have been cut, in a jagged, irregular manner.

Kate gazes at it in absolute amazement. When she arranged her hair that morning, it was all of an even length; and now a lock has mysteriously grown shorter.

"That is, certainly, the most extraordinary thing!" she says, finding words at last. "I have not cut a strand from my hair for six months, at least; and yet it is plain that somebody has cut it."

Janet looks at her, suspiciously. "I begin to think that you are an accomplished dissembler," she says. "How could anybody cut a lock from your hair, and you not know it?"

"I am sure I can't tell," Kate replies, "unless it was done when I was asleep."

"Mr. Proctor must have bribed somebody to do it, then," says Janet. "There!"—as a bell clangs below—"I have been expecting that. Luncheon is ready, and you are not."

CHAPTER VII.

"Oh, life was sweet and beautiful—
its pretty pleasures all my own!
Oh, life of life was very full,
And every minute lived alone!
And every minute was so strong,
It brought its little new-born bliss.
Sweeping in tender light along,
Or leaving shadows like a kiss."

When Kate and Janet enter the dining-room, some time after luncheon has begun, a clatter of knives and forks and plates is mingled with the cheerful sound of many voices. Men fresh from a fox-hunt of ten or fifteen miles are likely to possess good appetites; and the luncheons at Fairfields, on hunting-days, are well known for their excellence. Money for new toilettes, new furniture, or fashionable expenditures of any kind, is rarely forthcoming, as the girls are well aware; but in the old lavish style of living, the generous, open hospitality, Mr. Lawrence will allow no change. His genial face appears at the end of the well-filled table now, and near it Kate perceives Tarleton's crest of "light and lustrous curls." As she slips into a seat, General Murray, who has a special fancy for her pretty face, at once addresses her.

"Truly sorry we lost you, Miss Kate! I must take you under my charge at the next chase, and then there'll be no chance of your missing the sport. These young fellows are not as reliable as we old ones, after all.—Eh, Lawrence?"

"I shall be delighted to be taken under your charge, General," answers Kate; but you must not think of blaming my escort for my misfortune. Mr. Proctor not only lost the hunt, through his kindness in staying with me, but he gave me his own horse, and brought Diana home."

"For the first we can't allow him much credit," says the General. "To stay behind with you, could scarcely be reckoned a hardship by the most enthusiastic hunter; but the last was undoubtedly an act of unselfishness, and therefore I am sorry that you did not profit by it. We were not going so fast but that, with a good horse, a rider like yourself should have been able to overtake us."

"I don't understand the matter," breaks in Will. "You couldn't have had your wits much about you, Kate, to have lost the hounds when they were so near you."

"They were not near me," says Kate, who feels guilty, but knows that it will not do to betray any tokens of the kind. "After I parted with Mr. Proctor, I only heard them once, and that was faintly."

"Didn't you tell me," says Will, appealing to Proctor, "that she left you where the road turns to Patterson's? The fox had doubled back, and the hounds about that time were beating around the head of Albert's mill-pond; so, in a straight course, we were not farther off than a quarter of a mile."

"But how could I know that?" asks Kate; "and if I had known it, I couldn't have gone to you in a straight course, could I? Mr. Tarleton will tell you that I was doing my best to find the dogs, when he encountered me."

She sends an appealing glance toward Tarleton, who instantly comes to her support.

"I testify emphatically that Miss Lawrence was making every effort to that end that a bold rider could make," he says. "If you have ever lost the hounds yourself, Will—"

"Never did such a thing in my life!" interposes Will.

"Well, I have been less fortunate; I have lost them, and I know that to find them again is sometimes a puzzling matter. Therefore, I

thought your cousin very wise when she determined to turn homeward."

"I have no doubt it was the best thing she could do under the circumstances," says Mr. Lawrence. "But it was a pity you did not come into the chase, Frank; we had a capital run. It would have reminded you of old times."

"I should have enjoyed it, I have no doubt," answers Tarleton; "but I do not need the music of the hounds to waken my recollections of old times. Everything about me does that—my old friends most of all."

"I hope you've come back to live among your old friends," says Wilmer, cordially. "There are many vexations in a planter's life; but, after all, it's the most independent in the world."

"Yes, I think it is," Tarleton answers; but he does not say he has come back to embrace this independent existence."

"I wish you would stay, Frank," says Sophy, who is conscious of a sufficiently preoccupied heart to utter what she likes. "There are a hundred ways in which we could make you useful; you were always more obliging than Will."

"So long as I do stay, I will endeavour to maintain my good character," says Tarleton. "Can't you make some use of me at once? I am at your command."

"Take care!" says Will, warningly. "You don't know what you are about, my good fellow. To give women a carte-blanche of that kind, to fill in at their own discretion, is—"

"Is to be certain that they do not abuse it," interrupts Sophy. "Don't mind anything that he says, Frank; he is fast becoming a regular mis— What do you call it? If you are in earnest about placing yourself at our service, don't you want to go to Oakdale with us, to a croquet-party, this afternoon? The whole family there will be glad to see you."

"I shall be delighted to go," replies Tarleton, readily.

"Even to play croquet?" asks Janet. "I fancied you would despise that amusement as much as most people do who have tasted more intoxicating draughts of pleasure."

"I am a most accommodating person in my tastes," he answers. "They always fit my situation, like a glove."

"In that case they may sometimes be too elastic, may they not?"

"I fear there is little doubt of that," he responds, carelessly; "but just now I feel that I should like a game of croquet very much."

It is with a sense of despairing resignation—a sense as of one who fights vainly against fate—that Mrs. Lawrence listens to this conversation. She feels the utter hopelessness of making any further effort against Tarleton's reinstatement in his old, familiar place, for Mr. Lawrence is plainly determined to ignore her remonstrance, and she cannot blame either Will or the girls, since nothing has been said to them. Neither is she herself insensible to the charm which every one finds in this very attractive black sheep. Impossible to steel her heart against him; impossible to be cold and distant with him, and yet impossible also not to feel a foreboding of harm to come, a certainty of imprudence committed in the present which will yet bear bitter fruit.

Luncheon over, Tarleton finds, or makes—he is an adept in all matters of the kind—an opportunity to speak to Kate, and inquire how she feels after her fall.

"I have been thrown often enough," he says, "to be aware that the worst of such an accident comes after one is off the horse. You have concealed the cut very thoroughly," he adds, glancing at the light tendrils of hair on her temple.

"Janet arranged that," Kate answers. "She found me in a sad plight, for my shoulder received the brunt of the fall, and I could not lift this hand"—she extends the left—"to my head. Nobody knows the convenience of possessing two hands until he or she has lost one; so I was wondering what I could do, when Janet came in. I was obliged to tell her the truth, and, like a dear, good girl, she has promised not to mention it."

"And so your shoulder is disabled?" says Tarleton, in a tone of great concern. "Ought you not to have advice about it? There is really no reason why you should not tell—"

"Hush!" she says, quickly. "Some one may overhear you. My shoulder is not at all seriously hurt; it only inconveniences me a little. You must not break your promise—indeed, you must not!" she goes on earnestly. "Poor Mr. Proctor would never cease to reproach himself, if he heard of my accident."

"Poor Mr. Proctor!" repeats Tarleton, remembering, with a twinge—is it of jealousy?—the scene on the piazza. "Allow me to say that he is happy Mr. Proctor, to be so regarded."

"Surely I should be very ungrateful if I did not regard his feelings, when he gave up the hunt for me," says Kate, meeting his gaze with her candid eyes.

"I am the last person in the world to deny that gratitude is a virtue," he answers; "but, as General Murray remarked, I am not sure that Mr. Proctor's act was one of heroic unselfishness. To give up the hunt for you—one could hardly hesitate over that alternative."

"Couldn't one?" asks Kate, laughing, but blushing, too. "Ah, wait till you are tried! To make protestations, is one thing; to keep them in the field, is quite another. Mr. Proctor—"

"Has done both, I doubt not," says Tarleton, as she pauses. "But I hope you don't

mean to imply that Mr. Proctor is the only man who can keep protestations as well as make them?"

"I suppose that after you have made them you feel pledged to keep them," she answers; "so it is best not to make them at all."

"The question is, How can one help it?" he asks, looking at the lovely, smiling face.

"The question is, rather, Why should you think it worth while?" she says, while her eyes tell him that his are by no means the first compliments to which she has had the pleasure of listening.

Before he can answer, Sophy approaches, and lays her hand unexpectedly on Kate's shoulder, making that young lady start, and nearly betray the fact of her injury by an exclamation.

"Sorry to interrupt you," says the former, "but it is time we were getting ready for going to Oakdale. I promised Carrie we would come early, because she wants us to meet her friend, Miss Palmer."

"I think," says Janet, "that Kate had better be excused from going. I am sure she must feel the worse for her morning's adventure."

"Janet!" cries Kate. She seizes Janet's arm, and draws her out of the room into the hall. "How could you?" she says, as soon as they are out of hearing. "How could you be so mean? You promised not to tell."

"And have I told?—that you should pinch my arm black and blue?" asks Janet, injuredly. "I only said what is very true, that, after such an accident, you ought to stay at home."

"I don't agree with you at all, and I certainly don't mean to stay at home," says Kate. "What is a fall from horseback, when one is not hurt? Why, nothing at all. But I must go and dress. Janet, what shall I wear?—my black silk and corn-coloured overdress? Yes, I think that is the most becoming toilette I have."

She turns, and is half-way up-stairs before Janet can reply, to approve or demur. As the latter remains where she is left, with a look of perplexity and consideration on her face, he cousin's clear, sweet voice floats back, singing

"Oh, for Friday night,
Friday is the gloomiest;
Oh, for Friday night,
Then my true love's coming!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"We two stood there, with never a third,
But each by each, as each knew well.
The lights we saw and the sounds we heard,
The lights and the shades, made up a spell
Till the trouble grew and ended."

Oakdale is a pleasant country-house, in which the Nortons, the nearest neighbours and oldest friends of the Lawrences, have their abode, and where, like the Lawrences, they remain the year round, through summer's heat and winter's frost. They are agreeable, companionable people, without marked characteristics of any kind; the father a good planter, the mother a gentle lady; the girls fresh and pretty, the sons established in different professions, and doing well. Carrie Norton and Will Lawrence have for some time played at love-making, and, if the play should end in earnest, there would be no objection to anticipate on the side of either family. Whether it will end in earnest or not, cannot yet be determined. Carrie laughs when she is teased about Will, and Will enjoys being rallied about Carrie; and this is the extent to which matters have progressed with them.

Miss Norton at the present time has a visitor—an intimate friend and "old schoolmate," of whom she talked a great deal ever since the remote period (about two years ago) when they left school together. According to her account, no one is so pretty, no one so charming, as Belle Palmer; and it is in honour of this young lady that she has bidden her friends to come and play croquet on the Oakdale lawn, with the prospect of one of Mrs. Norton's admirable suppers and a dance, later.

About four o'clock the company begin to arrive, and the Fairfields carriage is one of the first equipages to put in an appearance.

"Here are the Lawrences," says Grace, the second of the Norton girls, glancing out of the drawing-room window. "Upon my word, they are well escorted! One, two, three gentlemen on horseback, besides one driving the phaeton."

"O, the Lawrences always have escorts and to spare," says a bystander. "They are all popular, and Kate is the belle of the county."

"I have heard so much of Miss Kate Lawrence since I came here, that I am very anxious to see her," says Miss Palmer, with the curiosity which one reputed belle always feels about another, yet with a comfortable sense, too, that she has nothing to fear, and that it is for Miss Kate Lawrence to tremble—if trembling be needed.

Carrie goes out to meet her guests, and there is a chorus of voices on the piazza for several minutes. Then it becomes apparent that some one of more than ordinary importance belongs to the party, for Mrs. Norton is arrested as she is in the act of crossing the hall, and Carrie bids her father come and "welcome an old friend."

"Who can they have with them, I wonder?" says Grace. "I think I shall go and see."

Before she can cross the room, however, the feminine portion of the party enter, and Carrie introduces them to Miss Palmer.

The eyes of the latter at once fasten on Kate, and her mind is not quite so easy as it was before she saw this young lady, whom, in her own mind she has called diabolically, "a country belle." Miss Palmer herself lives in a large town, and is a product of the latest civilization in the matter of dress and appearance. From