

upon a propitious moment during dinner, but none that I could venture to think such presented itself. I waited and waited, dashing in suddenly, in a moment of desparation, at a crisis in the flow of my aunt's discourse which seemed to me somewhat apropos.

"Speaking of orphans, Aunt Tab, I heard to-day that poor Dick Masson is dead in India. You remember Dick, don't you?"

"Remember him? perfectly well, nephew," returned my aunt, in a tone that said as plainly as any words could, "and remember no good of him either." "Ah! dead is he? and has left heaps of children for some one else to provide for, I dare say; men like him always do."

My heart smote me a little when I succumbed to the expediency of passing over this implied attack upon my dead friend's memory, but the uneasy feeling lent what I faintly hoped was impressive dignity to my manner, as I said,

"He has certainly left one child, motherless, not for any one to provide for exactly, but for some one to look after and be kind to, till she gets a home of her own."

"Ah! a girl, of course," answered my indomitable relation. "I could have answered for its being a girl! Well, a pretty responsibility, and care, and bother is going to be put off upon some one who has no right in the world to be troubled with it, most likely, and I'm sorry for them; if it's any one who knew her mother as well as I did, they'll be sorry for themselves, for ten to one the girl takes after her. The specimen's common enough, more's the pity!"

I knew my aunt; I knew all this was only what I had to expect; and yet my heart sank down within me like lead, and I thought of the ward, now on her way to England, with indescribable foreboding.

I pushed my chair back from the table, folded my napkin, and then said doggedly,

"Well then, aunt, I must even console myself with your pity and my own, for I'm the unlucky individual who is to need it."

My aunt laid down her dessert knife and fork, folded her hands, and regarded me stonily, yet with triumph:

"Hah! I guessed as much, nephew. I'm sorry for you!"

"So you were good enough to say,—and, my dear aunt, perhaps I'm sorry for myself; but what can I do?"

"Do! grant me patience!" cried out my aunt. "Is the man demented? Do!—why decline to act, to be sure; you cannot be compelled, I suppose, and the girl has, no doubt, plenty of kin, with more right to be troubled with her and fitter to take charge of her too."

"As to that, poor Dick knew best, I suppose," returned I, a little sulkily.

My aunt regarded me steadily; and at such moments there is a certain fixed grimness about the good lady's sapless physiognomy not pleasing to the eye.

"The conceit of men is fathomless," she was kind enough to remark presently, with much unctious. "And I see, nephew, that you have made up your mind. Well, you must do as you please, and I shall do what I think right, in plainly telling you my opinion. I am at liberty to do so? Of course I am at liberty to do so; and my opinion is, that you are about to make a fool of yourself!"

"Not for the first time, I fear," said I, endeavouring to give a more pleasant turn to the discourse.

"Nor for the last; for some people never learn wisdom," returned Aunt Tabitha. "Guardian to a chit of a girl,—a man of your years! who never saw a child since he was one himself, and is quite old enough to have forgotten that he ever was one,—a man with—"

"If she is a child," said I, breaking in upon the tide of these unsparring truths "why then we can send her to school."

"And if she's not a child, and is too old for school?"

"Then we'll marry her off, as quickly as possible," I answered jocosely.

"Hah! marry her off—all, men think, women were born for, I verily believe.

"Why, my dear aunt, I really fancy the Bible gives some such reason for the creation of Mrs. Eve, doesn't it?"

"It is our privilege to live under another dispensation, nephew," said my aunt, bridling.

"The more's the pity," said I; but I prudently had my hand on the door-handle as I spoke, and bolted the moment I had finished.

The ordeal preliminary was passed. I had duly received my ward at the hands of the friends under whose care she had journeyed to England, had introduced her to my aunt Tabitha, and humbly commended her to the favour of that exemplary woman.

My aunt followed Miss Masson with her eye, as she disappeared from the drawing-room to prepare for dinner, and when the door had fairly closed on her, turned sharply on me.

"Nephew, which is it—a child or a woman?"

"Upon my word aunt," said I, hesitating, and inwardly much confused by the sudden appeal, "if you really ask my opinion, I should say a little of both, or perhaps neither the one nor the other."

"A plain question might be supposed to deserve a plain answer," returned my aunt, severely.

"My dear aunt—I should have said—" I was beginning.

"You know nothing about it, nephew," interrupted my Aunt Tabitha, snappishly, but withal so very truly, that I was involuntarily silent.

No—I didn't know anything about it, that was the very truth; nor, when the evening was ended, had I advanced a bit further towards a conclusion on this point.

Child, or woman? fifteen or twenty? For the very life of me, I could not make up my mind which.

My Aunt Tabitha, as was her custom of an evening, was engaged at the far end of the room, on her various club and subscription books, or in arranging the worldly affairs of her poor fellow-creatures, on model principles, quite to her satisfaction, if not to theirs. I, reclining in my arm-chair near the fire, held a book, which under ordinary circumstances I should have read, but which, under the present extraordinary ones, I was using as a cover, behind which I was intent upon that other book of little Miss Masson opposite me, which, try as I would, I couldn't read. She lay listlessly back in a low chair on the other side of the hearth, a hand-screen held negligently between her face and the fire by a little brown hand, so small, so slight and supple, that it seemed ridiculous to suppose it could belong to a grown woman. The figure matched the hand for slightness, suppleness, and smallness, generally; it was as lithe as a willow-wand, and, to my thinking, as graceful as the same wand when, unstripped of its feathery garniture, it waves above the stream in the summer wind.

But did it pertain to fifteen or twenty? Nothing in my ward's manner, nothing in what she said, helped me forward a bit. She was very quiet,—subdued, if not shy; but that seemed only natural with her deep mourning dress; she said very little, but she could not well say much, when the other lady in the room was deep in accounts and correspondence, and the sole gentleman apparently so in his book.

And so the evening wore away, and bed-time came, and my mind was as far as ever from being made up.

Prayers were over; we all stood up, and, as the servants filed out of the room, Miss Masson went over to Aunt Tabitha, dutifully kissed, and bade her and myself good-night.

How things would have gone the next day, I cannot imagine, but for the, for once, opportune, as well as unexpected, arrival of my nephew Tom Ferrers, of the Plungers. This young gentleman, whose easy custom it is to take Holmdale by storm whenever his inclination or his convenience prompts, suddenly dashed up to the windows of our breakfast-room, which open to the ground, just as we were about to sit down to the matutinal meal, never drawing rein till, as Aunt Tabitha declared, the next moment must infallibly have brought both plungers clattering among the cups and saucers, and at that crisis, pulling up with an imposing display of horsemanship, doubtless, but to the manifest detriment of my newly-laid

gravel sweep; walking in a moment after as cool and fresh as the morning itself.

With what irresistible good humour and heartiness the young dog salutes Aunt Tabitha (if the good lady has a weak part in her composition, be sure Tom has found the way to it); with what an easy grace he bows to little Miss Masson, takes a seat beside her, falls to talking, laughing, and assisting her. And my ward, it appears now, can talk, can smile, can even laugh, with a soft, happy, girlish laugh, such as is strange indeed to Holmdale. But she looks younger than ever when the gravity of her face breaks up into smiles, and the dark eyes brighten and glow at Tom's nonsense. Well, well, since nonsense is decidedly the thing that suits ladies of such tender years, I wish that I had made an attempt in that direction, for somehow it would have pleased me to have called forth one of those shy, pretty smiles, one of those fleeting dark-eyed glances—but, ah me! I was not twenty-four, or a plunger.

After breakfast I lingered a little uncertain what my new duties made incumbent upon me; but I soon saw I was so very little either heeded or needed, that I betook myself to my study, and the resumption of my usual pursuits, not, I will own, altogether with my usual zest, nor quite undisturbed by that intrusive consideration of "fifteen or twenty."

At dinner, though my ward and my nephew considered themselves apparently friends of quite an ancient date, the little lady was much more silent than she had been at breakfast, and but for Tom, the dinner would have gone off almost as heavily as that of the preceding day.

When that young gentleman had duly bowed the ladies out of the room at its conclusion, he came leisurely back to the table, filled his glass, settled himself back in his chair in an attitude of much ease, and remarked appreciatively,

"Upon my word, uncle, Miss Masson is a very pretty little girl!"

"I dare say she will make a pretty woman," I answered, putting on an indulgent parent-and-guardian manner. Either at that, or something else, Tom first stared, and then laughed.

"Are you not afraid of her finding Holmdale a little—quiet, perhaps?" he kindly inquired next.

"Not while you are good enough to take pity on us," I returned; and I verily believe the young puppy detected instantly the secret soreness which prompted the reply; "but seriously," I added, "I dare say a year or two of school—" (you see I felt pretty well decided as to that question of years, by the tone of my nephew's remarks. "Catch him making a mistake on such a subject," I thought). He broke into a laugh.

"Why, uncle, the poor child left school two years ago, when she went out to join her father! She was nineteen last birthday!"

"Oh, indeed?" I said angry and confused, and injured by Tom's superior information concerning my ward and her antecedents.

"She's as fresh, I grant," pursued this well-informed young gentleman, "as if she only left off pinafores yesterday; but then she's seen nothing, for old Masson was always poked away up country somewhere, and the little thing tells me she and the 'old party' never saw a white face for months together, except each other's. So you see she's a complete little Daisy every way."

"A daisy?"

"Well, that's her name, I mean, and don't the poets (I'm sure you're much better up in 'em than I am, sir), don't they signify simplicity and freshness, and—and—you know what I mean—under the name of that flower?"

"Miss Masson's name is Anastasia Lucinda," I began with rebuking dignity.

"Oh! of course, that's the name her god-fathers and god-mothers bestowed on her. Very far left to themselves they must have been at the time, too; but I don't suppose either they, or any one else, ever called her by the same; at any rate, her father didn't, for he shortened it to Daisy, and a very appropriate and becoming name it is, too; and I propose that we fill this glass to about the prettiest little daisy a man would see in a day's journey. After that, uncle, shall we join the ladies?"