

pal comfort lay in the society of her cousin, Mary Holden, a girl about her own age, who was also a ward of the formidable aunt, Miss Barbara Bousfield.

Both his girls had been placed at the respectable establishment of Mrs. and the Misses Monitor by their guardian while yet children. Here they remained for nearly ten years, happy, with the inalienable joy of youth, despite the frowns of Aunt Bousfield, the monotony of school life, and the absence of future prospects; especially for Mary Holden, whose little all did not afford more than enough to pay for her preparation for more mature years, when she had nothing but her own exertions to look to.

Yet so much more depends on character than circumstance, that Mary Holden, the poorer of the cousins, successfully held her own against the formidable aunt; while both Louisa and Tom Bousfield trembled even at the shadow of her coal-scuttle bonnet.

Mrs. Chutney had scarcely finished one of her notes when the door opened, and a young lady entered in bonnet and shawl—a graceful-looking girl, shorter and slighter than Mrs. Chutney, with large dark grey eyes, shaded by black lashes, and brown, wavy, glossy hair, a pert little nose, and a mouth so red-lipped, so arch, so changeable in expression, and parting to show such radiant teeth, that you readily forgave it for being larger than regulation beauty admits. She wore a delicately-tinted summer dress, and a *barège* shawl draped à la Parisienne. Miss Holden had, by much courage and dexterity, obtained leave to spend the last year in a Parisian "pension," for sundry educational reasons, and that she might, a few months hence, be justified in putting forth "French acquired on the Continent," as one of her recommendations when commencing the real battle of life. She had now settled as a parlour boarder at the old school; which had the advantage of being in the neighbourhood of her cousin Louisa.

Mrs. Chutney's face brightened as she rose to kiss her visitor.

"Oh, Mary dear! I am so glad to see you! How is it that you are so early?"

"Well, Aunt Barbara called for me this morning," replied Miss Holden, "and hurried me along in her usual rapid style; then she stopped suddenly near this, and exclaimed, 'There, I forgot, I took you out too soon! I don't want you—go see your cousin, and say I will call about luncheon-time.'"

"No matter what reason," said Mrs. Chutney, affectionately; "I think it good if it brings you here."

"What is the matter with you, Louisa?" was Mary's not very relevant reply; "you look as if you were in some kind of trouble."

"Oh! nothing particular, only I am always wrong about something or other, and I fear I shall never be right."

"No, you never will be right as long as you think so, Loo, dear. Just believe firmly you are never wrong, and the chances are that two-thirds of the world will agree with you. You are a good soul, worth a dozen of me; but you let every one put you aside. You are always fancying you have staked your last throw. Pooh, love, there is no such thing as a last throw! Life is Fortunatus's purse—while there is life, there is hope."

Mrs. Chutney's reply was interrupted by the colonel's loud voice outside: "No, sir, certainly not! you agreed to fit me, and you have not fitted me. A waistcoat! Nothing of the sort, sir. I say it's a bag—a bag, sir. No alterations for me, O no. A new one, or nothing."

"Oh, Mary!" exclaimed Mrs. Chutney, "I have not finished my notes. Speak to him, dear, when he comes in—keep him engaged."

She had hardly re-seated herself when the colonel entered. "Ah! Mary!" he said, blandly, "booming and bright as ever! Come, Mary! a kiss—you know we are cousins."

"Ah, you wicked man!" returned Mary, offering her cheek, "when will you get rid of your wild soldier ways?"

"Pooh, my dear girl," said the colonel, smoothing his cravat, "I am tamed now—the old pleasant devil is exorcised, and the rover is turned into the slave of the ring—eh, Loo?"

Mrs. Chutney was too busy writing even to pretend to hear.

"There is a large slice of the—a—the gentleman you named—left for all that, colonel," replied Mary. "I saw an old friend of yours, a few days ago—Captain Peake. He came to see a couple of little Indian orphans at Mrs. Monitor's. He had tea in the drawing-room, and," peeping through her fingers, "told such tales of you, colonel."

"What the deuce could he tell?" returned the colonel, feigning to be a little alarmed. "He knew very little of me, and—ah—oh! I remember Peake, he commanded the Hastings in the second China war."

"Did he? I should not have thought him old enough for that. But Mrs. Monitor will never let you inside the doors again. She thinks you such a dangerous character!"

"Oh, she does?" said the colonel, complaisantly. "Well, once it would not have been easy to keep me out where I wanted to get in. Loo, we must have Peake to dine some day. Have you finished your invitations? for I must be off."

"I shall be ready directly," replied Mrs. Chutney, sealing her notes. "There!"

The colonel took out his glasses to examine the directions. "That's all right," he observed. "I shall send the boy with this one to Deal. Keep Mary to dinner, Loo." And, with a general wave of the hand, Colonel Chutney departed.

"Ah, Mary," exclaimed Mrs. Chutney, "I wish I could manage him as well as you do!"

"Loo dear," returned Mary, laying her hand impressively on Mrs. Chutney's arm, "I have one enormous advantage over you."

"Pray, what is that?"

"I am not his wife. But, Loo, dear, I have not seen you for three days, and have not been able to have a real talk since the morning you left me at Mrs. Bullion's palazzo in Regent's Park, and O, I had such an adventure!"

"An adventure?" repeated Mrs. Chutney.

"You shall hear." Her cousin's eyes sparkled with fun and mischief. "I had not sat five minutes before some one was announced by the palazzo valet, a name so utterly distorted that I haven't a notion what it is, and there entered a tall, aristocratic, well-dressed, good-looking man."

"A stranger?"

"I never saw him in my life before. After the first greetings, he scarcely spoke to the hostess, but addressed himself much too exclusively to me. That did not embarrass me so much; only while uttering common-places he would look tenderly at me!"

"Your fancy, Mary, depend upon it," remarked Mrs. Chutney, gravely.

"Fancy or not, he shortened my visit; and I had hardly walked to the end of Portland-place before I felt him coming after me."

"What nonsense!"

"The instinct was a true one," continued Miss Holden, "for presently he was at my side, lifting his hat gracefully, and turning all sorts of compliments. Of course I left a little frightened. Still I could not resist the fun of it, somehow."

"You surely did not encourage him?"

"To the extent of asking him to be so very kind as to call a cab for me, in order to get rid of him."

"And you did get rid of him?"

"Not altogether; for yesterday morning I was returning from Kensington with a book for Miss Monitor, and, when near to the Old Palace, my fashionable admirer suddenly presented himself and addressed me again."

"Mercy, Mary!" cried Mrs. Chutney aghast, "what did he say?"

"Well, nothing worthy of death or bonds; only that I had never been absent from his mind, and all that, you know—the usual formula. I fear I laughed."

"Oh, Mary!" interrupted Mrs. Chutney, in a distressed tone, "how could you be so imprudent! What will that gentleman think of you?"

"Nonsense, love," returned Miss Mary with a saucy smile, "don't grudge me a little harmless diversion. Remember what a dull life I lead. And this man! Why, I shall never see him again;

if I do, trust me to take care of myself. Now put on your bonnet and let us take a stroll in the gardens while the morning is cool."

CHAPTER II.

The same bright morning which shone upon the gorgeously furnished house in Richmond-gardens, Bayswater, was lending more than ordinary effect to the various costly buhl and marqueterie tables, cabinets, and rich textures displayed in the renowned show rooms of Messrs. Deal, Board, and Co., upholsterers, Piccadilly.

It was yet too early for any of their distinguished customers to drop in. Mr. Adolphus Deal—who had become the head of the firm on the death of the honest old cabinet-maker his father—had not yet appeared above the visible horizon. He was an exaggerated specimen of the modern fashionable tradesman who incongruously combines the fine gentleman with the eager shopkeeper. He had a profound belief in himself, was a man of taste, a man of business, and a man of pleasure.

A few shopmen were dotted about, and a grey-headed old clerk occasionally addressed a remark to them through a pigeon-hole in an enclosed desk where he was shut up like a parrot in a cage.

"Half-past twelve!" he ejaculated, "and no Mr. Deal. It would be better," coming out of his box, his pen behind his ear—"it would be better if he left the concern to Board altogether."

The shopman thus addressed, winked. "Don't you know where he's gone to? Why, to Richmond-gardens, to be sure, about Colonel Chutney's order."

"And a pretty hash he has made of them!" the clerk added. "What with false measures, and contradictory orders, the sitting up of Colonel Chutney's house has been more bother than profit."

"Ah!" remarked the shopman, lowering his voice, "that don't matter to Deal. He'd go there every day if he could. Why, when the colonel's wife knocked down the seven-guinea rauze here, didn't he pick up the pieces and say it wasn't of no consequence? O, he's deadly sweet upon her, he is!" No form of impudence is so thoroughly intense as the assumptions of a certain class of young shopkeepers who see enough of their aristocratic customers to imitate their dress, manners, and external vices—except the insolence of their shopmen, who imitate them. The clerk's reflections on his master on the matter took this form: "Well then! respectable, smooth, elegant, soft-spoken sort, never has no kind of morals to speak of."

At this moment enters Mr. Adolphus Deal in an exquisitely fresh summer morning costume of light grey with turned-down collar, a moss rose in his button-hole, a bunch of charms at his watch-chain, and a flaring red and mauve cravat drawn through a massive ring, luxuriant whiskers and moustache of auburn tinge, and unexceptionably small Balmoral boots.

Deal, on removing his hat, passed one hand meditatively through his hair.

"Briggs," he said, "where are those fragments? I mean the pieces of the jar Mrs. Chutney broke the other day?"

"O! I sent them to Pasticci, the china mender, sir, and he says he will make it a real antique now," answered the shopman.

"Ah!" returned Mr. Deal, pensively. "Some-one must go to Richmond-gardens about that ottoman. Perhaps, though—"

He was interrupted by an errand-boy, who with much respect handed him a delicately addressed note bearing a crest and monogram. Mr. Deal gazed at it with affected indifference, and finished his sentence before opening it—"Perhaps, though, I had better go myself, Briggs."

His patience could carry him no further, and, hastily retreating to a dingy sanctum reserved for the head of the firm, he tore open the envelope, and scarcely could he believe his delighted eyes as they showed him what follows:

"My dear Sir. Knowing your time is much occupied, I venture to ask the pleasure of your company to a quiet dinner here on Thursday next, with some hesitation. If, however, the