

It was a critical moment. Most men, even the best of them, are, morally, very great cowards, and Bernard was no exception to the rule. Besides, Hannah was not his wife, or his betrothed—she had not even called herself his friend: she had given him no rights over her—asked no protection from him. What could he do or say? Irresolute, he looked from one to the other—excessively uncomfortable—when Hannah came to the rescue.

“Of course my brother-in-law will go without me: we are quite independent in our proceedings. And he will explain to Lady Dunsmore—the utmost it is necessary to explain, as I never talk of my private affairs to anybody—that I do not pay many visits; I had rather stay at home with my little girl. That will be perfectly true,” she added, her lips slightly quivering. “I prefer Rosie’s company to anybody’s. She loves me.”

Bernard started up, and then, fearful of having committed himself, sat down again. Lady Rivers, though evidently vexed, was equal to the situation, and met it with a dignified indifference.

“Pray, please yourself, Miss Thelluson; no doubt you act upon your own good reasons. You are, I always understood, a lady who never changes her mind; but if you should do so, we shall be glad to see you.” And then she passed over the matter, as too trivial to bear further discussion, and conversed in the most amiable manner for another half-hour. Finally, with a benign “Good evening, Miss Thelluson; I am sure Lady Dunsmore will be much disappointed at not seeing you,” she terminated the visit, as if it had been any ordinary call.

Hannah was not surprised; it was the fashion of the Rivers family not to see anything they did not wish to see: the only thing that vexed her was about Bernard. He had said nothing—absolutely nothing—except telling her, when he took his hat to accompany his step-mother home, that he would be back immediately. Was he displeased with her? Did he think she had acted ill? Had she done so? Was it her duty to submit to everything for his sake? Surely not. He had no right to expect it. Was it because she loved him that she felt so bitterly angry with him?

Yet, when, sooner than she had expected, he returned, and threw himself into his chair, pale and dejected, like a man tied and bound by fate, who sees no way to free himself—the anger melted, the pity revived. He too suffered—they suffered alike—why should they reproach one another?

“So, you have had your way, Hannah.” Yes, there was reproach in the tone. “Are you quite sure you were right in what you have done?”

“Quite sure;—at least, that unless I were some other than myself, I could not have done differently.”

And then they sat, silent, in stiff coldness, until the last ray of amber twilight had faded out of the room. What a pretty room it was—just the place to be happy in—for friends or lovers, or husband and wife, to sit and dream together in the quiet gloaming, which all happy people love—which is so dreadful to the restless or the miserable.