

MEG'S ADVICE

It was the day after the party, and can any day ever be more utterly wretched? I mean, of course, to the people who have given the party—especially when, like my uncle and aunt, they are of good-going habits and moderate means, and must let their guests dance in the dining-room and have supper in the biggest bedroom.

It was the day after the party, and every individual in the house was miserable. The days before the party had not been remarkable for comfort, but they at least had been tinged with the radiance of hope and bright anticipation, while now nothing remained but "dreary and bitterness," and to clear away and get the house into order again. This would have seemed rather a dreary task in any circumstances, I dare say; but it was greatly aggravated by the fact that we were all in very low spirits, or, to put it honestly, in dreadfully bad tempers, having each and all a special grievance of our own.

My uncle's household consisted of himself and my aunt, Mr and Mrs Gibe, their two sons, Christopher and Peter, their two daughters, Lottie and Sophy, and myself, Meg Merton, the orphan daughter of my aunt's only sister. My mother had died when I was eight years old, and my father, whose habits were by no means of a domestic kind, sent me to school, and allowed me to spend all my holidays at my aunts; and, when he died and my school days were over, my temporary home became a permanent one. This came to pass quite naturally, and was taken as a matter of course by my kind-hearted cousins; and aunt Charlotte, who had always regarded me as one of her own children, never seemed to suppose that she was conferring any great favor upon me by giving me a happy home amongst them all. But I appreciated it, and endeavored to prove my gratitude in every way possible. I was older than Lottie and Sophy, and left school before they did; and I became very useful in the house. Aunt Charlotte was of a nervous, timid nature, and, as I happened to be self-possessed and cool and decided, she soon came to rely entirely upon my judgment and energy; and in a year or two I was housekeeper-in-chief, and my advice was asked and pretty generally taken on matters both great and small—indeed, "Meg's advice" became proverbial in the household. Naturally I grew a little dictatorial, for I often wondered what they could have done without me. Chris was the only one I could not manage.

"Bully the others as much as you like," he would say, "but you shall never bully me;" and somehow or other I never felt inclined to try. "Tiffs occurred among us now and then; but, on the whole, we were a very happy family until the day after the party, when, as I have said, we were each and all miserable. My uncle was confined to his room with a bilious attack, where he lay groaning and anathematizing "that champagne." My aunt looked very haggard when she first came down in the morning, and said her head ached badly; and her appearance did not brighten as she and I investigated the state of the state of the crockery, et cetera.

"I shall never give a party again," she said quietly, but it was the quietness of despair. "Nine champagne glasses broken, two sherries, and three of the best china plates, and a great stain upon the drawing-room carpet! We might have been entertaining a set of barbarians!"

Christopher and Peter, usually the most affectionate of brothers, were now not on speaking terms with each other, as my aunt and I saw at breakfast time; and, instead of going to business together, Peter lingered until Chris had gone, and then started about five minutes afterwards. This unfriendliness arose, as I well know, because of a stylish disagreeable London belle, whom some friends of ours had brought with them to the party, and who had flirted desperately, but with maddening impartiality, with both my deluded cousins. Hence their coldness to each other this morning. As for Lottie and Sophy, I wished, before the day was out, that they were not on speaking terms, for they were nagging at each other all the time, and finished just before dinner with a downright and spiteful quarrel, and aunt Charlotte cried. Their grievances was about two brothers, Tom and Harry Newell; for Lottie liked Harry best, and Sophy liked Tom; and, with the usual contrariness of mankind, Harry was desperately in love with Sophy and Tom with Lottie; so it was usual, after every merry-making we might have, for Lottie and Sophy to fall out about them. I felt vexed with everybody; but I think I was quite satisfied in being so, for they would all persist in believing—or saying they believed—that I was in love with ridiculous John Howarth, just because he happened to be in love with me, and took care that every one should know he was too! I did think some of them at least might have had more sense. And now this fine Lon-

don belle had appeared on the scene—oh, I felt tempted to break another best china plate and all the remaining sherry-glasses as I thought about it! And, if aunt had only known the state of mind I was in, she would never have trusted me to wash them up and put them away. Even our Newfoundland dog seemed to share the general dissatisfaction, and kept coming from his kennel as far as his chain would permit and uttering long and dismal howls. The cook said that it was the sign of a death; but the housemaid persisted that it foretold a wedding. I did not feel as if I cared much which it was or what happened—only I think I felt more inclined for the funeral than a wedding, especially if the wedding entailed a breakfast and another party.

My aunt and I had been up as early as usual this morning—we had too much to do to lie in bed. Chris and Peter of course wanted their dinner at the usual hour, and their luncheon—which they always took with them, and ate in a little back room at the office—put up; and then when they had started for business, we commenced our dismal investigations through the house. We always dined at six o'clock, and it was nearly that hour before we had succeeded in reducing the house to anything like order. Then Lottie and Sophy had their quarrel, in the midst of which Chris and Peter arrived, and we went to dinner.

Chris folded his arms and put on a dogged and determined look as he took his place at the table. "I breakfasted off cold fowl," he said gloomily—"I lunched off cold fowl—I refuse to dine off it." My aunt grew fearful again. "This is not cold fowl," she answered; "it is turkey, and you might eat it. Cold beef will keep a day or two—fowls and turkeys, with sauce over them, will not rot. But—turning to me resignedly—"ring for the beef to be brought in Meg; we have had enough unpleasantness for one day."

"How is it there is a whole turkey left?" inquired Chris, somewhat mollified as the beef appeared. "It was Meg's fault," replied aunt Charlotte. "She put it on that dark shelf behind the cellar door, and I found it there this morning quite forgotten. But I wonder Meg, you did not notice that there were only two turkeys at supper; this would have been eaten if it had been there."

"I did not have any supper," I said, "for I thought there would not be room."

"That is merely an excuse," interposed Lottie; "you were spooning with John Howarth in the conservatory all the afternoon."

I meant to look defiant, but I may have looked guilty.

"Did he propose to you?" asked Sophy, staring at me.

"I will put a stop to this nonsense about John Howarth!" I said derisively. "You shall all know exactly how the case stands and then there will be no further display for stale wit at our expense. As Sophy supposes Mr Howarth did propose to me last night."

"Oh, Chris," interrupted Lottie, "how could you hit my cat in such a savage way! Come here Tip—poor pussy."

"You should teach your cat not to stick his claws into one's legs at dinner-time," retorted Chris; "then he would not get hit."

"He was not touching you!" returned Lottie warmly. "He was begging quite inoffensively."

"He was sticking his claws into my leg," reiterated Chris, with quiet and most aggravating obstinacy.

"Now don't you two begin quarrelling," said Sophy impatiently. "But let Meg tell us about Mr Howarth. I have often read about proposals in tales, but I have never heard a real *bona fide* one described. Do tell us every word he said, Meg!"

"Did he go down upon his knees?" asked Chris. "For, if he did, I wish I had been there to see him."

"I shall not tell you whether he went down upon his knees or not," I answered calmly; "nor shall I tell you what he said. But, I added with sentimental meditation, 'he said some very nice things indeed to me—me—nicer than you could put together, Chris, if you tried a hundred years.'"

"I can assure you I am not going to try, even for a minute," answered Chris giving me a most savage look.

My aunt suddenly burst into tears.

"This is the finishing blow," she sobbed—"Meg going to be married! I will never give another party as long as I live! It was against my better judgment that I yielded this time. I did it to please you all, and this is the result—furniture ruined, eatables wasted, your father ill, you all quarrelling like this, and Meg going to be married! No, never another party in this house!"

"What—not even when Meg marries John Howarth?" sneered Chris.

"No—not even then," replied aunt redoubling her sobs.

"Well, don't cry, auntie," I interposed, "for I am not going to marry him. I gave him a very decided 'No.'"

Chris here gives a quick covert glance in my direction; after which his assump-

tion of perfect indifference seemed to me a trifle overacted.

"Oh," laughed Lottie, "that explains why the poor fellow ate trifles instead of fowl with his boiled ham, and never found out the difference. I thought what a curious taste he had."

But aunt refused to be pacified; she had reached that state of mind when troubles are positively preferred to blessings.

"Saying 'No' to Mr Howarth will not buy a new drawing room carpet," she said, "or eat up all the tarts and custards and cakes. I am sure"—warning to her subject—"the waste has been shameful! When the confectioner's man came this morning, I had not a single cake or jelly or blancmange to send back, for every one had been broken into! And I saw you, Chris, take just a spoonful out of that expensive porcupine, when a plain cake already commenced was close by you."

"Oh, don't blame Chris for that! He is innocent!" I exclaimed. "It was done for Miss Jones. If he had the power, Chris would cut a bit off the Koh-i-noor itself she asked him."

"I would," said Chris; "she is worth a hundred Koh-i-noors."

"Really!" observed Peter, aroused at last from the gloomy lethargy that had possessed him all dinner-time, and addressing Chris. "What a pity she does not regard you in the same light! She told me last night how she hated dancing with you, saying that you were so clumsy you were constantly getting your feet on her dress."

"Indeed!" retorted Chris. "She told me the same thing about you."

"I don't believe it," said Peter.

"Do you mean to say I am telling lies?" demanded Chris.

"Another quarrel!" cried my aunt. "Oh dear, dear, what will be the end of it all?"

"The end of it all might be pleasant enough," I replied with energy, "if only every one of you would display a little common sense. I am out of patience with you all!"

"Well, Meg," said Lottie calmly, "you generally seem to consider yourself capable of setting the world to rights; so can you set our little world straight? It seems to me we are all miserable. What can you suggest to make us all happy?"

"Common sense," I repeated—"only common sense. Take my advice and peace will be restored at once."

"Let us have it then," said my aunt querulously.

"Oh, let us have 'Meg's advice' at once!" sneered Chris again. "How is it we have not thought of this panacea earlier?"

"I will commence with my uncle," I began firmly. "Let him—at least, make him—see the doctor tonight, and he will be better before morning."

"That is good advice enough," said aunt, and I will tell him.

"As for you aunt—go to bed at once and forget your worries. We will start a subscription list for you, which I will hand with five shillings; and, if the others give with equal liberality according to their means, you will be able to replace all the broken crockery and have the white hearth rug cleaned also."

"That is good advice too, and I will do my part by going to bed immediately," said aunt meekly. "I am much obliged to you, Meg."

"As for you, Peter," I continued severely, "I think, instead of quarrelling with Chris about Miss Jones, you had better turn your attention nearer home. I know poor little Kitty Reynolds would nearly cry her eyes out when she got home last night, or rather this morning."

"You know more than I do then," retorted Peter.

"Yes, I do; for I am in Kitty's confidence, and you are not; and I know what Kitty said to me when she was going home, and you do not. And my advice to you, Peter, is to make up with Kitty, and leave Miss Jones for those who want her."

"Capital advice! But I never asked you for it, you see; so I don't consider myself bound to take it;" and he went on eating tarts.

"And now, girls," I continued looking at Lottie and Sophy, "make up your minds to the inevitable, and change lovers. They are twins, and as much alike you cannot always tell which is which; and I think it must be merely contrariness in you two to pretend you like either one better than the other; and—with just a careless glance at Chris—"contrariness never pays in the end. So take my advice, transfer your affections quietly, and say no more about it."

Then I helped myself to some blancmange, and went on eating my dinner. But you have forgotten me," observed Chris, pray have you no advice for me?"

I hesitated a moment, then looked at him defiantly.

"Well," I said, "I think the advice I have given to Peter might also apply to you; instead of making yourself ridiculous about Miss Jones, I think you might find some one to admire nearer home."

Then, owing to Peter's delighted "Bravo Meg!" and Chris's steady stare

I had a sensation that I had never experienced in all my self-possessed life before—I think it was embarrassment—and I rose hastily from the table and left the room, presumably to see "why that dog howled so." And Chris too, he also left the table and followed me to Nero's kennel.

When we came in again, Peter was standing in the hall with his top-coat on, brushing his hat very carefully.

"Why, Peter," I exclaimed, "where are you going? I should have thought you would have been more inclined for bed than a walk. Where are you going?"

Peter looked at us with a curious mixture of defiance and sheepishness in his expression.

"I am going to see Frank Reynolds," he said. "He told me last night that he has a little terrier he thinks I shall like, and he said he would let me have it cheap; so I am going to look at it."

"But," remarked Chris pitilessly, "you know that Frank has gone away from home today, and won't be back until Monday; and your journey will be utterly fruitless, will it not if you find only Kitty in?"

"I shall see the terrier," muttered Peter, putting on his hat, "and shall leave word whether I will have him or not."

"Oh, I have no doubt it will be all right," I remarked with an innocent air.

Peter looked at me, and then said—"What was the matter with Nero?"

"Oh—his chin—I think—his collar!" I stammered, taken aback by the suddenness of his question, and ending by an appealing glance at Chris.

"Never mind, never mind!" cried Peter, waving his hands. "As you said, Meg, I have no doubt it will be all right; it's leap year you know, and Chris has only acted as any other man—Hero Peter darted through the hall door and slammed it after him, otherwise the hat brush would have struck him."

When Chris and I entered the dining-room, aunt was there.

"Your uncle has just seen the doctor," she said, smiling as she kissed me before saying good-night; "and, if any of the others have been as ready to act upon your advice, you can let us know in the morning I think we are all ready for bed tonight."

"I shall have to sit up for Peter," said Chris.

"One of the servants can do that," said aunt.

"No, they are all tired out," answered Chris; "and I shall like to sit up, just to see poor Peter's bewilderment when I ask him what is the color of the terrier."

"Oh, he won't be bewildered at all!" I put in. "He'll answer in all simplicity, 'Plum-colored' or 'Navy-blue,' and then wonder why you look surprised."

When aunt had retired, I noticed that Lottie and Sophy were busy doing something to their photograph-albums, and, observing them quietly, I saw them exchange two photographs, I said nothing; but, when we all went up-stairs together, they were merrier than usual, and quite friendly again.

Thus the day began so dimly ended right happily; and its results were happier still—for Peter and Kitty are married and happy now; Lottie and Sophy are whispering about a forthcoming "double wedding"; and Chris—having condescended to take "Meg's advice" for once—has a wife who worships the very ground he treads on—and he deserves it too.

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