ABSOLUTELY HER OWN MISTRESS.

BY J. T. J.

Part Two.—Matrimony.

CHAPTER XIV.

"It is the little rift within the lute,
Which by and by will make the music mute."
—TENNYSON.

There was quite a sensation in the neighborhood when, after an absence of six weeks, Mr. Feversham and his wife returned from their tour and took up their abode in Mr. Feversham's stone house, where the masons had just completed their work. A letter awaited the newly married man, and not a pleasant one. It came from England and was written in the plainest English, and assured him beyond a doubt that he would receive no more money till he could legally claim it, and what he had borrowed had nearly all melted away. He did not mention this matter to his wife; indeed, could not, as she was spoken of as the cause of his punishment, and alluded to as a "low creature." He locked the letter into his desk, and returned to the drawing-room, where Clara met him with a radiant face.

"That is a beautiful piano," she said, "the tone is much finer than mine at home."

"This is yours and you are at home, I hope," he replied with a smile.

"I won't take is as a gift; I will pay you for it," said Clara, shyly turning up her face to his.

He was by no means indifferent to the kiss, but wondered at heart how the deuce *he* should pay for it, and for the first time in his life the Honorable John Horace Francis Augustus felt something like care, and this because he was honorable, and like Brutus of old would utterly have scorned "to wrig from the hard hands of peasants their vile trash by any indirection." This was his first touch of want; till now it was only to ask and to have; if he took credit he knew he could meet all claims exactly at the right time; but now that was impossible, unless he mortgaged his farm, or borrowed money at enormous interest. Better that than live on his wife's bounty, or be forced into an explanation that would hurt her feelings. Love and pride, both just now at a monstrous altitude, combined to make him push through his troubles silently and alone. He strolled about the garden and thought about it, long after his wife was sleeping quietly in her new home, and being decided enough in character, soon made up his mind as to what he would do.

"Aw—Clara," he said the next morning at breakfast, "do you know I have a great mind to give up this building for the present, the carpenters make a deuce of a row and it would destroy the privacy which is so sweet to us both. The masonry could be well covered with pla—nks to keep it from the weathah. What do you say?"

"I don't care one bit about it," she replied. "Ten rooms finished and furnished are surely spacious enough to contain two poor little finite beings with a moderate train, but if you think there is not room enough, I could live at the other house, and I will, too, if you talk to me about the weathah."

Mr. Feversham was willing enough to answer this arch challenge, and enjoy a little loving banter and forget care for the moment, but the masonry was covered with planks and the worked checked.

Mr. Feversham borrowed a sum of money in Toronto, at twenty per cent. per annum, and settled with the masons, and paid for the piano. He did not settle with Mr. Gustavus Adolphus Browne at present, that little gentleman being willing to wait his leisure.

Of course everybody called on them, and after a week or two Mrs. Jackson gave a party in their honor, which Mrs. Feversham attended looking very stately and handsome, and much happier than on her wedding day: and about a fortnight later Mrs. Montgomery gave a monster party, over one hundred people being present,

This lady's house, which yet stands and is likely to stand is worthy of a description. To look at it from the outside, you would suppose it a story and a half, but once within, you find the basement is more than half under ground, and looking through a window your nose is on a level with the earth and the flowers. A monstrous luxuriant grape vine, which has never known the pruning knife, covers the house at the back, windows and all to the very roof, and so shades the rooms within that they are as dark as London during a November fog. To make matters worse, the stone walls of the house are four feet thick and the windows shaded within with heavy crimson drapery. It's the gloomiest house in all Canada, and you could no more be cheerful within its walls than you could in the catacombs of Rome. There is nothing bright within or without, but everything combines to chill and damp you, and suggests a painful history. The very flowers in the garden seem to grow as if upon graves. I have been there on a glorious spring day, but the dreary influence of the house got the better of joeund nature and my spirits went down like lead. It was not surprising that Clara shuddered slightly on entering those gloomy walls, or that she was not so cheerful as at Mrs. Jackson's party. Mrs. Montgomery took her off before supper and had half an hour's private conference with her in her own boudoir, a smell room without any window, lighted night and day by one dim lamp, suspended from the ceiling by a chain. The room contained a sofa and easy chair, a small iron safe and a number of stands supporting glass cases filled with trite curiosities, which you were in danger of damaging if you did not move carefully, the spaces being so limited between each article of furniture. As the room had been originally intended for a clothes closet, it was connected with a great number of large iron hooks, placed on all sides, at equal distances.

This is what Mrs. Montgomery had to say and though a private conversation we take the author's privilege and repeat it.

"Clara, you poor foolish girl, you have made a wretched match, by refusing to take your old aunt's advice and give that man up."

"Be careful what you say," replied her niece with spirit, "remember that man as you call him, is my husband."

"I am sorry for your sake that he is. Depend upon it, he is not worth a farthing; he paid for your wedding tour with borrowed money. He borrowed it from Gus Browne, his mother unlocked his drawer, when he was away one day—as she had a perfect right to—and found a note of hand from Mr. Feversham, drawn for a month and then renewed to make it nine months. If ever Gus gets that money it will be out of your interest, most likely the interest from Dickson's mortgage, which falls due in March—your father told me so. You watch him when that's due and you'll see he'll borrow it on some pretext and pay that note."

"Aunt, I would rather die than gain information by dishonorable means as Mrs. Browne has; I must fall low indeed, before I stoop to watch my husband or pry into his private affairs. What he wishes me to know, he will tell me, and that is all I ought to know."

"Then I suppose he has told you why he stopped the building; he was at one time so anxious to get it finished before the winter?"

"You have no right to ask me that question. In my father's life time you knew better than to pump me about his affairs."

"But I stand in the place of your father now, and you may depend upon it, if that building is ever finished it will be with your money."

"It is very wrong for you to say these things," exclaimed Clara, her hands shaking with nervous indignation, "and I will not listen to them, understand that, aunt, for the future. I——"

But at that instant there was a tap at the door which gently opened and admitted Mr. Feversham.

"Ah! I have found you at last—may I be pardoned for intruding? A delightful little apartment this, Mrs. Montgomery, quite classical, reminds one of a cell in the tower of London. Have you seen the towah? No thumbscrews or anything of that sort, I suppose?" and he lifted his eye-glass to inspect the cases with his usual ease.

"I wished to see my niece alone for a few minutes," said Mrs. Montgomery, with emphasis.

"So I perceive, but everybody is asking for you, and Mr. Jackson wishes to monopolize you for whist, so the conference must be preserved for another day. My dear, you seem chilly, you should have a shawl," and he opend the door into the broad lighted room, and skillfully prevented all further privacy by exclaiming, "Here it's the lady, Mrs. Jackson, I have found her for you."

Clara, though relieved, felt sorry for the interruption, it seemed so much as if he knew what they were talking about, and had done it on purpose; and that evening she took such a gracious, kindly leave of Gussy Browne, that the young fellow blushed with delight and pleasure, and made an enemy of his mother by the frigid civility of her bow as she said good-bye to that dowager.

"I think, Horace, I shall not go and see aunty for a long time," she remarked to her husband as they were driving home, "she does not like you."

"Aw—well, that need not trouble you, but it's not a cheerful house to visit, makes one think of old prisons. That little curly stair a very suggestive of dark deeds, and that little cell with the iron hooks to hang up a dozen fellahs at a time is quite the perfection of prison architecture. If it was the thirteenth century instead of the nineteenth, I should feel it rawther risky to venture in ithere alone, she might string a fellah up suddenly."

Clara could not help laughing, yet it was that kind of laugh which is vulgarly said to come on the wrong side of the mouth; the suspicion and enmity on one side and the contempt on the other troubled her, and though often invited she went no more to her aunt's.

Mrs. Montgomery had proposed as soon as they returned from their tour that Clara should let her father's house and not keep up two establishments. "Briggs is lonely," she said, "since you took Sally away, and it's perfectly ridiculous to have her living alone there with Billy Puddle; she is frightened when the dog howls, and then the useless expense of the thing."

"Oh! I would not let the place for the world, aunt, I love the place," exclaimed Clara. "I could not give it up to strangers."

The elder lady appealed to Mr. Feversham.

"That is just as Clara pleases," he drawled; "if she pleases herself she aw—pleases me."

In the early days of their marriage they lunched there every day after a long drive or ride, but after a time she gave up these visits suddenly without assigning any reason for doing so, and avoided the old place, the fact being that Dickey had repeated some remarks made by Briggs in confidence to her daughter Sally when he was present. They were very uncomplimentary to Mr. Feversham, and the sight of Briggs' face, round and smirking, at once became distasteful to Clara.

Soon after the party at her house, Mrs. Montgomery called upon her niece, and entering the bright drawing-room, cried out imperiously as she crossed the threshold:

"Put down them blinds this minute, Clara. You know how weak my sight is, and living in this glare is enough to make you as blind as I am."

Clara was not in the room, and Mr. Feversham, who could always be blind at will, now chose to be a little deaf. He advanced languidly and gave the little lady two fingers, and conducting her to a seat where the light shone the brightest, said, aw—it was too bad, but Clara was from home, gone to call on Mrs. Danton or Mrs. Drayton, upon his soul he couldn't remember which—(they lived in opposite directions)—it was really quite unfortunate; would she stay and take tea with him; he would be delighted? But Mrs. Montgomery bounced out of her chair, and made an abrupt leave-taking, and on her way out met her niece returning. She asked her to come back with her, but Mrs. Montgomery said no, nothing but the strongest sense of duty made her come under the roof of that man. Clara waited for no more, but made a little bow, pulled down her veil and walked on.

"Why, my love, what brought you back?" exclaimed Mr. Feversham in surprise. "Were they from home?—even if they were you should have waited till I came and not walked both ways."

He wheeled the easy chair to the coolest, shadiest corner, and pulled down a blind.

"You are not sorry to see me, I hope."

"I am glad; the house seemed dreary without you; but not glad that you walked. I have finished my sketch?"

"It is a good thing I am welcome to you, for I don't think I am very welcome elsewhere, since my marriage. The Danton's did not seem very glad to see me. I fancy nobody is as friendly as formerly, or is it that your society, Horace, has spoiled me for any other?"

"I hope it is that," said Mr. Feversham, with a fond touch in passing to get her a footstool.

This is the true explanation of the Danton coolness, the postmaster—although it is against the law to reveal such secrets—had in the dead of night, confidentially told his wife that Mr. Feversham did not receive so many post office orders as formerly, in fact had not had a money order since May, and Mrs. Postmaster told a friend, who confidentially told a friend, who confidentially told Mrs. Browne, who told Mrs. Danton, in fact the two ladies were just talking it over when Clara called, and naturally felt a little confused and constrained at her arrival, and forgot to ask her if she was weary, or if she would not take tea, till she was half way home again; then Mrs. Danton's conscience smote her.

"The poor thing will be quite fagged out," she said

"And serve her right for marrying that young tuft hunter," said Mrs. Browne severely.

As the months passed Clara saw less and less of her neighbors, and by the time winter came she visited nowhere, and the only person who came to see her as of old was Dickey Thompson, who would have been better away. Mrs. Montgomery, though beaten again and again, had returned to the charge, and took so many people into her confidence, that there began to be a general and fixed impression in the neighborhood that Mr. Feversham was a worthless fortune-hunter, whom Clara had taken in to keep; there were hints abroad that even his farm had been paid for with her money; people remembered his uncle's speech about the Spanish galleon and repeated it with variations, and many ugly rumors came back to her through Dickey Thompson's clacking little tongue. He and Mrs. Montgomery were the only two who had the impertinence to speak to Clara on the subject, and she snubbed them constantly and never repeated their remarks to her husband, yet by a sort of instinct he began to divine that there was a false impression about him got abroad somehow, and that he was unpopular, began even dimly to recognize that this chill unfriendly atmosphere was extending to his wife herself as the winter advanced. Many times he had collected small sums of interest for her, to save her trouble, but he always gave her the money till Dickson's fell due, when he asked if he might borrow this sum of money for a month or two exactly as Mrs. Montgomery had predicted. Clara, of course, said yes, she did not need it. If her husband could have guessed the truth he would have set her doubts at rest in three minutes, but he thought the gossips only pointed to his age—or rather youth—and knowing he had deceived her on this point avoided any word that might lead to explanation or reproach.

Poor Gussy Browne, who had led a dreadful life for many months owing to his mother's persistent reproaches, was glad to get the money back, and though he refused the interest, told his mother that Mr. Feversham had paid him ten per cent., being driven to hypocrisy by sheer cowardice and dread of a "strife of tongues."

CHAPTER XV.

"Sweet bells jangled out of tune,
And harsh—" —SHAKESPEARE.

Between vulgar couples estrangment and doubt generally finds vent in bitter invective and recrimination, and a quarrel is certainly in the case of husband and wife sometimes a step towards a better understanding; but refined and conscientious natures shrink from open rupture and bear a good deal before speaking. Now Clara had nothing tangible to complain of, and daily prayed against her suspicions as mean and wrong, but nothing on earth is so hard to govern as thoughts, as Clara found more and more to her sorrow. Her husband was kindness and courtesy itself, unremitting in tenderness and attention, as much so as before they were married, but the ill-natured gossip she had heard made her doubt that he loved her, made her fear that some less worthy motive had induced him to hurry on the marriage, and carry it through at once at all hazards, even against her better reason. His constant affection before company, and naturalness when alone with her, were contradictions of manner that might imply even more than two sides to his character. Aware that many people thought him a fool, his wife well knew that he was not one. He was fond of reading and had great taste and discrimination in his choice of books. He was fond of poetry and read delightfully; "Like an actor" said Jack Montgomery in great admiration.

"He is an actor," said his mother.

Clara thought uncomfortably of this remark when her husband next offered to read to her, but in five minutes she had forgotten all disagreeables, forgotten herself in the pleasure of listening, and Mr. Feversham knew his power in this respect and enjoyed it. She never refused to play when he asked her, but sometimes wondered if he really liked her music, or asked her to play because he knew she liked to play. Six months ago she would have looked saucily in his face and asked the question, but now she could not. His countenance seemed open enough, and always brightened when he looked at her, yet she could not open and probe the subject that gave her so much pain, for if these doubts and suspicions, she was half ashamed to own even to herself, proved true, she felt existence would be unbearable, for she did love the man, there was the sting of it. He never spoke of his relations, never spoke of his income, or of business of any kind, and Mrs. Montgomery declared she felt morally certain that he was living entirely on credit, and this in Dicky Thompson's presence, who repeated the remark to Clara when he next saw her. She scolded him for it, and even gave him a little shake, but could not contradict what he said, for she did not know what they lived on, or where the money came from that supported them. He had not told her of the note to Gussy Browne, or hinted that the want of means had stepped his building. She now knew by gift books presented to him on his birthday, that he was not yet twenty-five years of age, and had wilfully deceived her on that point. The house was well provisioned when she came, and there had been no necessity to buy anything of consequence since but flour and meat. Mr. Feversham offered to keep the household accounts, and his wife acquiesced, remembering her father's old axiom that it was a man's duty to relieve his wife of all care in money matters, and the head of the house should carry the purse, and look after the provisions. This was the most unselfish act of Mr. Feversham's whole life, for he detested accounts, he hated money matters, and, though he certainly had better business faculties than Frederick, Duke of York, who never knew a shilling from a sixpence, yet his financial abilities were of a very low order, and he hated the sight of the account book, and thought Clara must have the same feeling only that with her sweet patience she would not admit it. He would save her from this drudgery, so he faithfully recorded the price of washing soda and button blue, the cost of beef and mutton, flour and potatoes, with an inward curse upon the man who invented accounts, and a resolute determination not to let his wife see that this self imposed task was "a dayvil of a bore," to him.

Mr. Feversham was not so entirely past the age of boyhood, as to have quite conquered a feeling which he utterly despised and would not have admitted to any human being, least of all his wife; a feeling of shyness, (and let no one confound shyness and modesty, for they are as far apart as the poles.) Only occasionally did he feel it, and never but when in her presence. As the winter advanced there were times when he was absolutely awed by the sight of his wife's grave handsome face, and he often felt that he did not entirely understand her. He attributed the change partly to ill health, and so far was right in his judgment, for Clara had never in her life been an invalid till now, and people who have always been strong and healthy are apt to exaggerate their ailments and think themselves worse than they are. Being unused to pain the first interview with the universal teacher frightens them. Even the great Bacon allowed that an uncommunicated trouble is the most wearing kind of grief, and Clara's doubt of her husband added greatly to the ill health. A touch of coarseness or a spurt of ill temper, attentions with which some lords favor their ladies, especially when in an interesting condition, would at this time have made her hate him, just as his unfailing delicacy and kindness, would sometimes swell her heart with a thrill of love, that had more of pain than pleasure in it when combined with a doubt of his character. If put upon oath, Clara could not honestly have declared that she knew more of her husband, than she did a year ago. He was a very gentlemanly young man, capable of keeping his own counsel; he had personal courage, tact, and self-possession; he had made an immense profession of love, but never given her his confidence, though his constant aim appeared to be to please her. This she knew, and no more, except that he was her husband, and the father of her unborn child, and that any ill word about him gave her acute pain. She could not bear the sight of Briggs for wagging her tongue against him, and would rather have frozen when out for a drive, than warmed herself in her old home. Driving out on a cold sun shiny day, she said somewhat suddenly, "Will you turn, Horace, please, my hands are so cold."

They were near the old home, and Mr. Feversham said, "You had better go in here and get warm, I see Briggs has a fire in the parlor."

"No, no," she replied, with a petulance unlike her usual self, "drive home, I will not go there."

Mr. Feversham drove as fast as possible, but Clara's hands were aching, and the tears rolled down her cheeks with the pain she suffered, when seated by the warm fire. Her husband tenderly removed her wraps, brushed off the tears with his own handkerchief, chafed her hands in his own, and asked as he rang the bell for Sally to bring warm water, "Why were you so wilful, my dear, and why do you avoid the old house?"

She answered with her usual directness, "Because Briggs has annoyed me very much by ——" but here, meeting the searching dark eyes, her tongue faltered, and she left the sentence unfinished.

"By what? Something I am not to know. Do you know I sometimes think I have annoyed you, though I don't know how, and you look as if you would punish me by avoidance like poor Briggs, as if you would like to go to Kamtchatka to get away from me and leave me desolate; as if you wished me at the aw—dayvil."

Not without a struggle with a sudden fit of shyness had the words been brought out, and they left him red in the face as Sally entered with the warm water. She had heard the last word, and putting that and that together as she looked at her mistress's face, she felt there was something wrong between them. Briggs had seen them pass with bitter disappointment; not for the first time had she lighted a fire in the parlor, brewed the best of tea, and make Clara's favorite cake in the hope that she would come in. Pricks of conscience and affection combined, forced the tears to the eyes of Mrs. Briggs, when Sally told her that Mrs. Feversham had cried with the cold when she reached home. For six months her mistress had not crossed that threshold or spoken to Briggs. She never came into the kitchen where Briggs went to see Sally, though she knew she was there, for she always told Sally to make her mother a cup of tea, and asked after Clutie and Dixie.

"It's all along o' that long-tongued hateful little Dickey, I know it is," thought poor Briggs, in bitterness of heart, "but I shouldn't a said it, and then he couldn't a told it, and I shouldn't a thought it either; if ever I see Miss Clara I'll tell her as I was wrong, but I'd die before I owned up to Sally."

With these thoughts in her heart Briggs walked up the hill next day, and was, to use her own expression, "taken off her feet" when the back door was opened by a stranger, a neat, comely, pleasant woman, who brushed the snow from her shoes and explained that she was "the nurse," and Sally, who was sweeping up stairs, would be down in a minute. For once Briggs' feelings were too deep for speech, as she mechanically took the offered chair, for she had looked forward to the birth of the baby as a time of reconciliation, and felt sure her mistress would want her then, and now behold in her place, a stranger, who said "it is very cold, ma'am, without, as I know, for I've just come from Hamilton," and welcomed her and made up the fire, with the air of one who had a right there.

Sally guessed her mother's feelings, and timidly asked her mistress to step down to the kitchen and speak to her. "She's him so often and you hev'nt seen her, that I am sure she feels hurt like," said Sally.

Mrs. Feversham, after a minute's thought, said she would come down, and presently did come and said "good afternoon, Briggs" quite naturally, as if they had parted yesterday, and said she must have a cup of tea and take some milk back with her as Bossy was going dry she heard. Were Clutie and Dixie quite well, and did she get on with Billy Tuddle? Yes, it was very cold weather, the kitchen felt like a well, and she drew her warm shawl about her, as she spoke. Never had her well-featured face looked so calm, so cool, so utterly unapproachable. If Mr. Feversham was awed at the sight of it, what wonder that poor, fluttering Briggs felt chilled and tongue tied, as in the presence of an ice berg. She could not break that ice or tell her little tale of penitence, and presently her mistress placed her plump, warm hand in hers, and said, "Good bye, Briggs. I shall not see you again to day, as I am going to lie down," and sailed away again to her own apartments.

"No, nor any day," thought poor Briggs, with a lump in her throat, "and I shan't see your face, till I see's it in the coffin, for that dog don't howl for nothin'." She did not stay long, or enjoy her tea, and on her way home she met Mrs. Montgomery driving herself in a cutter. Now disappointment is akin to anger, and Briggs was at that moment in a great state of fluster through many contending feelings. Mrs. Montgomery stopped, and before she could speak, Briggs burst forth, "I've been to see the poor young Missus, and she looks like one cut in marble, an' if she dies, I'll not wonder, with the dog a howlin' every night reg'lar, as if he knowed it, an' I always felt sure as no good could come to them as is wedded in May."

To this extraordinary speech, Mrs. Montgomery, who looked like a brown bear in her great fur cloak and hood, replied, "It was June, you foolish woman."

"It was May by the old calendar, as is the only one wuth a farden, and made in my great grandfeyher's day; an' ill luck it was too, to wear her hair down her back all among like the old 'oman's geese, I may say, instead o' filleted up like a Christian. I fear me she'll die."

"Very likely," replied Mrs. Montgomery, calmly, "her mother did with the first child. I'm going to advise her to make her will today; it's as well to be prepared, and she'll not die a day sooner."

"Well, if she does go, poor lamb," said Briggs bursting into sudden wrath, her pent up feelings exploding in an instant like a fire cracker, "we may all say as they did about cock robin as we've every one 'ad a 'and in it, and you the wust as might be ashamed o' yourself to frighten her about wills, as if her money was better nor herself—I've no patience with you, nor him either, as skates away on you pond every day no matter who's dying. I believe he'd go to her funeral on his cussed skates. An' to hire a dickensed stranger to nuss her, and not them as she's knowed all her life, as if he wanted to kill her."

"Go home, you impudent woman," said Mrs. Montgomery in a tone between anger and astonishment, and drove on in high dudgeon to see her niece.

Mr. Feversham never drove or rode abroad when his wife was averse to turn out but took his exercise by skating on a pond between his own house and Clara's. Coming into the lobby suddenly on this afternoon, he overheard a remark made by the sharp voice of Mrs. Montgomery to his wife, which startled and shocked him more than Mulrooney's bullet, or the thunder storm that preceded it. It was the key note to the slight, unspoken misunderstanding which had crept in between him and his wife.

"It is your duty to make your will, Clara, and you will not die a day the sooner. Your life is in more than ordinary danger, for remember your mother died in childbirth, and if you should die, and your child too, your husband can claim all your property."

"Well, let him," was the reply, "he has claimed better things, and I have given them."

To Mrs. Montgomery this was a mere high flown foolish speech, words without meaning, for nothing in her opinion was worth more than money, houses and land, but there was a tinge of bitterness in it that went straight to her husband's heart. He ran lightly down stairs and called Sally.

"Look here, my girl," he said, "if Mrs. Montgomery comes again while I am on the pond, hoist a red handkerchief as a signal and I'll come home at once."

"Very well, sir; but if she pokes her nose in before you come."

"I can't help it, and I know she makes the mistress awful low-spirited whenever she sees her."

"Well, lock the door of the apartment and tell her aunt she's asleep, and keep the key till I come."

"That would be a cracker, sir," said Sally.

"Aw—well, I suppose so, but for all that you'll find it a rung in the ladder to heaven. All English servants tell such 'crackers,' and I believe it will be counted to them for righteousness. A man's house is not his castle if he can't keep out the bores. Do as I tell you, Sally."

Sally thought her master a queer fellow, but promised to obey, remembering how often she had saddled the pony for Miss Clara to run away from her aunt.

Mr. Feversham did not seek his wife's apartment till Mrs. Montgomery had gone, and when he did he found her in tears. She thought he was still on the pond, and his coming was unexpected. There was a great deal of concern in his dark eyes as he took her hand.

"Why, you are cold," he said, "and the fire is low. I should not have left you so long."

Clara was sitting in an invalid chair with a footboard to it, and in an instant he wheeled it nearer the fire and poked the smouldering wood into a blaze.

"I have not been alone," she cried, trying to command herself, "aunt has been here."

"Cheerful company," he replied with a shrug and a smile.

"Oh, Horace," she began, and then stopped short.

"Well, dear?"

"I do not want to see aunt again just now. She does not mean it, I know, but she makes me miserable whenever I see her, and I feel sometimes that she is more than I can bear."

"You shall not see her again till you wish it," he said, and no one could have doubted his sincerity on this point, but though he chafed her cold hand, and warmed it against his cheek, no further confidence was offered. "I wish I knew how to comfort you," he said after a pause.

"Your promise is a comfort," she replied, a smile struggling with her tears, "because I know you will keep it."

"Have you anything more to say to me," he asked gently as last, "and wish I could gratify? Or shall I read you just forgetting this trouble of your peace?"

"Oh! read to me please," she said, but tonight he could not beguile her. She thought wholly of the reader and not at all of his subject, with a puzzled feeling between pleasure and pain. "He must love me a little," she thought, "if I die he will surely miss me, but oh! if I could go back a year I would not be his wife, not if he pleaded on his knees, my answer should be no a thousand times over."

CHAPTER XVI.

"An Englishman's house is his castle."
—POPULAR BRITISH PROVERB.

"I'll buckler thee against a million."
—TAMING OF THE SHREW.

The next day was very dreary and bleak, and Clara's spirits were lower than they had ever been since she saw her father in his coffin. A sort of aching, longing for the old father's company had taken possession of her, and she wandered restlessly from room to room all the morning, absorbed in old memories, while her husband skated on the pond. After dinner he came into the parlor book in hand, as if he meant to stay. Clara sat very still, and could scarcely keep from tears; if he had not been present she would have wept freely. He offered to read to her but she declined, hoping he would soon leave the room. She sat with her face to the window, and occasionally looked out over fields of snow, where all nature was buried for the time beneath the universal white mantle; hillocks, bushes and fences had disappeared and all was a uniform level. There was no sunshine abroad to-day, and the tall and naked elms in the valley were fiercely blown, the larches bent like reeds before the March wind. The pond which Mr. Feversham had cleaned with his wooden shovel in the morning, was again covered by the drifting snow. Nothing living enlivened the landscape. Two hours passed, the lady knitting quietly, the gentleman reading, or pretending to read. With Clara the longing to be alone had grown almost intolerable, when the door suddenly opened, and in rushed Dicky Thomson, red and breathless from the March wind.

"My hen laid to-day, Miss Clara," he announced with a gasp, "and I brought the egg up for you."

"I did not see you coming, Dickey," said Clara with an effort, as she took the little white egg in her hand.

Mr. Feversham had never before been present during a visit of Dickey's. "Why don't you say Mrs. Feversham?" he asked eyeing the new comer calmly and critically.

"Because I hate her being Mrs. Feversham," returned the little gentleman promptly. "She ought to have married my pa, and then she would have been happy and never got sick, and I should'nt have to climb this hill to come and play with the little bricks."

"Aw—then you don't like me?" drawled Mr. Feversham.

"No, I hate you," said Dickey, "and so does my pa."

"Really—why?"

"Because you married Miss Clara for her money; my pa says so, and everybody, so it's no use saying you didn't. And you make her unhappy—leastwAys she's crying. I think you might be ashamed of yourself."

That ruthless little tongue had probed the wound and the long pent tears fell. Mr. Feversham rose and taking Dickey under the arms, put him outside the door, "Go and ask Sally Briggs for a cake," he said.

Dicky felt rebellious, but the cake was tempting; he went. Mr. Feversham moved his chair to Clara's side. She sat near a window, commanding, as I have said, a wide view of the country beneath, the house where she was born crowning the opposite eminence, and Mr. Feversham, glancing out, saw a large pleasure sleigh flying along the old plank road, and recognized Jack Montgomery's grey horses. As they turned from the main road and dashed into the fields, he had no doubt of their destination. "The dayvil," was his inward exclamation, but that was only an unexpressed thought, and aloud Clara heard his voice saying very gently, "My love, I see a sleigh load of people coming, I suppose to spend the evening"—you do not wish to see them?"

"Oh, no. I really could not," she sobbed in reply.

"I'll manage all that—I'll excuse you. I'll say you're asleep, but if they stay, it will be a long and lonely evening for you."

"I was longing to be alone when Dicky came. I am very bad company, Horace," was the sobbing confession and apology, as he lifted her hand and laid it caressingly against his cheek.

"The company I love best," he said, and kissed the palm. "There they are knocking—confound them—shall I take the key? These women are so intrusive and pressing, they might pay you a visit in spite of my prohibitions."

"Oh, yes do. Look me in," pleaded Clara, feeling gratefully, that if he was a rascal, he was a well bred one, possessed of tact and kindness.

"If you want anything, just ring. I'll tell Sally to come to me if you ring, and I'll answer the bell myself."

The parlor where they sat opened into the hall, and now there were voices in the hall, laughter and exclamations. He rose, hastily kissed his wife, left the room quickly, and softly closing the door behind him, turned the key and deliberately put it in his pocket.

"Aw—delighted, I'm su-ah," he drawled. "This is—aw—a pleasure indeed; which shall I shake hands with first? Mrs. Feversham? Not very well, tha-anks; had a toothache and didn't sleep last night. You must excuse her for the present as she is—aw—asleep. This way, ladies;" and he conducted them into the great drawing-room, and poked a blazing fire, which he had ordered Sally to light to day and every day, as there in future all visitors were to be shown, and not into Mrs. Feversham's parlor.

"Toothache! nonsense," cried Mrs. Montgomery in her imperative way; "it's mere nervousness; a little cheerful company would do her all the good in the world."

"I must see her, for I want to know who made her last bonnet," cried little Miss Browne gayly.

"See her, of course we all shall," said Jack, "as soon as she wakes."

"Well, I should hope so," chimed in Mrs. Jackson, "we thought a little surprise party would cheer her up and do her good, but if she does not feel equal to society we'll see her for a little while in her bedroom. A hop pillow is an excellent thing for restlessness at night, Mr. Feversham."

"See her in her bed room, that's hardly fair," exclaimed Mr. Jackson, "unless she holds a levee and sees us all. I wanted to ask her a question in arithmetic that has puzzled me for a long time; but you can put it for me, Feversham, when the toothache's gone."

"Delighted, I'm sush," was the reply.

"You just ask her this," said Mr Jackson, now fairly mounted on his hobby and off. "If a train forty rods long overtakes a man walking three miles an hour, and passes him in three seconds, how many miles an hour is the train running? It's a simple thing, very simple, but the fact is I am growing old and stupid. You put it to Clara, she'll do it in a second."

"Oh! certainly," said Mr. Feversham. "I'm not very clever at fractions, but I'll try and remembah."

"I'm so disappointed not to see dear Clara," said Mrs. Browne, "she promised me a receipt for that delicious jelly cake, and I wanted it to-night. Why, this is surely little Thompson, what is he doing here so late?"

"Dickey, dear," said Miss Browne, coaxingly, "won't you give me a kiss?"

"No I shant. I want to see Miss Clara, she was crying like anything, and now Mr. Feversham has locked her into the room," was the startling reply.

Eyes were opened at this statement and glances exchanged that expressed more than surprise.

"Why Clara must be very bad to cry," said Mrs. Montgomery, fussily. "I will go to her room at once."

"She is asleep now," drawled Mr. Feversham never at a loss, "I locked the door to keep Dickey out."

"Give me the key, and I'll be very cautious," said Mrs. Montgomery, "I'll go in on tiptoe and not make the least noise."

She wore a gown made of a kind of silk that rattled like sheets of tin when she moved.

"Certainly, as soon as she wakes, tha—anks," said Mr. Feversham. "Shall we have whist, or a round game or what? You ladies will decide while you are taking off your wraps. Mrs. Montgomery knows the way to the spare bed room—and aw—if you will excuse me a moment, I'll see what Sally can give us for supper."

The ladies did not spare him while removing their bonnets and, Jack, left alone with Mr. Jackson and Dickey, looked thoughtful and failed to solve an arithmetical problem propounded by the elder gentleman. Mrs. Montgomery had planned the surprise party, and come with a purpose unknown to those who accompanied her, except Mrs. Browne, who quite approved. Gussy was to have been one of the party, but his mother, dropping a hint of the object of it, he recoiled with something like horror from the proposed festivity.

"Go if you like, mother," he said, "but I will not; it's a cold blooded proceeding," and he made up his mind to tell Jack Montgomery the first opportunity he got. That practical little lady's object was, of course, Clara's will. She had spoken to Mr. Martineau, but he declined to help her, and plainly advised her not to meddle in the matter, but rather set about looking up another rich wife for Mr. Jack. He knew Mr. Feversham's difficulties were but temporary, and had no desire to give further offense to a man, who might yet give him a good deal of business, if he forgot the old grudge; he admired Clara and hoped she would not die, and cared not a button who got her property if she did; so he listened to all Mrs. Montgomery said with civility, and advised her to let Mrs. Feversham alone.

"I will not let her alone," replied his rebellious client, "if the girl dies, she can't take her property with her, and that man shall not have it, if I can prevent it."

Hence the surprise party, planned with a settled purpose, by this irate and determined little woman. "I will see Clara to-night," she said in angry confidence, or rather defiance to the other ladies as they were returning to the drawing room. Their host returning also, was close behind them, and overhearing the remark mentally answered "you won't." He induced his fair guests into the most comfortable seats, and said, "Dickey you, ought to go home."

"I know I ought," replied the little man, "but it's getting dark and I'm afraid."

"Aw—I'm glad of that, I hope you'll see a goblin," said Mr. Feversham looking at his small enemy through his glass.

"I hate you," replied Dickey frankly, "and I won't go. I'll stay and sleep with Miss Clara, I've done it before."

"That you won't, all that sort of thing is over forever."

"Then I'll sleep with Sally Briggs."

"Aw—well, go and ask her, and don't come back he-ah, understand, or I'll put you on the fi-ah for a back log."

"My pa will be frightened if I don't go home," said Dickey, undecided and inclined to whimper, "Miss Clara used to go a piece with me. I wish she had married my pa," and he retreated to the kitchen with this parting shot,

Mr. Feversham wheeled forward the card table, and they all, with one exception, began to enjoy themselves. Their host, if not cordial, was polite, though once he left them for a minutes at a mysterious summons from Sally Briggs. The supper, when it came, was excellent, and supper over the ladies made a last flight to see Mrs. Feversham.

"How could we leave in such anxiety?" exclaimed Miss Browne gushingly. "Do let us see dear Clara, we'll not say a word to excite her. Don't be so cruel as to send us away without kissing her. It would comfort her."

"Do you—aw—really think it would cure toothache?" said Mr. Feversham, raising his glass and regarding the speaker curiously. "Well, in that case, I will deliver them faithfully. It will be the same thing. A man and his wife are one, you know."

"You are the most impudent of men," said Miss Browne, blushing but not altogether displeased.

"Such a beautiful large room," sighed stout Miss Drayton, "if Clara had been here to play; and she keep such beautiful time, we might have had a galop. You are a hard hearted man, Mr. Feversham."

"Have one as it is and I'll tune for you," exclaimed Mr. Jackson, and he struck up with great spirit, "Tri r-r-r rumpty tumpty tiddlete too, hi ti ri li r-r-r ri ree," and Jack Montgomery took Miss Drayton in his arms Saratoga fashion, and whirled round the room to the old gentleman's music, and Mr. Feversham, knowing that his eye-glass would be useless in repressing what was evidently irrepressible, drawled out, "will you—aw—do me the honah, Miss Browne?" and the young lady, putting her hand on his shoulder, they whirled round the room too, till coming in contact with the stouter couple, they bumped them on to a sofa with the force of the collision.

Mrs. Browne, who disapproved of this impromptu dance, frowned at her daughter, and looked at her watch, remarking as she did so that it was getting very late; "do you really mean to turn us out without seeing Clara, Mr. Feversham?"

"I shall be very angry if you do," said Mrs. Montgomery, beginning to feel in her heart that he would. "She can't be asleep all this time."

He turned his glass on the ladies who sat side by side on a sofa, and said, after a long pause and stare, "aw."

"I shall not be angry," said Mrs. Jackson, "but I shall be grieved. I think you are very wrong to keep her such a prisoner, a little cheerful society would do her good."

"Of course, of course," struck in Mr. Jackson, who had by this time recovered his breath, "don't forget the little problem in arithmetic, and now I think of it, I'll give you another. You should think of these things now you are a farmer, Feversham, and practice up; if you are a little stupid at first, you'll get over it in time with Clara to help you; you'll improve. Break your eye glass, which you want no more than a third leg to walk on, and fill your mind with figures; they exercise the brain and keep off idle thoughts. Now brace up your mind and tell me the cost of wheat at eighty eight cents per bushel, which will be required to sow a field sixty rods long and forty rods wide, if a quarter of an ounce be sown to every square yard?"

Mr. Feversham lifted the obnoxious eye glass with a determined click, and stared so long at the old gentleman that he was delighted, and said, "Hard brain work, eh? Found it out, eh?"

The problem had scared the ladies away to put on their wraps, and abuse Mr. Feversham in the bed room, and Jack Montgomery had stirred up Sam, the man (who was asleep in the kitchen with his head on the table) to go for the horses, while he put on his great coat.

"If you send me away without seeing my neice," said Mrs. Montgomery, on her return to the drawing room, one large unwieldy bundle of clothes, "I shall take it as an insult, and all these ladies feel as I do."

"Sorry to make such fair enemies; I shall be obliged to weah chain armor as a protection; but I believe I am doing my duty, and that supports me under such a weight of disapprobation, and if you will excuse me for saying so, I believe I know what my duty is. It's not so long since promised to love and cherish that I should forget the obligation."

"Good gracious how do we know what you promised when we were nearly all fainting from fright," said Miss Drayton.

"You are entirely mistaken, dear Mr. Feversham," said Mrs. Jackson, suavely, "none of us doubt that your intention is right and kind, but you want what we have, experience."

"Aw—Well that is a thing that makes fools wise I have heard, so in time I may hope to improve, as Mrs. Jackson says."

"The horses are impatient, mother," cried Jack Montgomery from the hall door. "