

Hannah offered the customary good wishes.

"It is indeed a most suitable marriage, and we are quite pleased at it. So now, my dear, let bygones be bygones. Will you come with Bernard to meet Lady Dunsmore at dinner on Friday?"

Never was there a more composed putting of the saddle upon the wrong horse, ignoring everything that it was advisable to ignore, for the sake of convenience. And many a woman, prudent and worldly-wise, would have accepted it as such. But, unfortunately, Hannah was not a prudent woman. Against certain meannesses her spirit revolted with a fierceness that slipped all self-control.

She glanced towards Bernard, but his eyes were turned away; he had the moody, uncomfortable look of a man dragged unwillingly into women's wars. Thrown back upon herself, alone, quite alone, pride whispered that she must act as if she were alone, as if his love were all a dream, and she once more the solitary, independent Hannah Thelluson, who, forlorn as she was, had always been able till now to hold her own, had never yet experienced an insult or submitted tamely to an injury. She would not now.

"I thank you, Lady Rivers, for the trouble you have taken, but it will be quite impossible for me to accept your invitation."

Lady Rivers looked amazed. That any concession she made should not be joyfully received, that any invitation to the Moat-House should not be accepted with avidity; the thing was ridiculous. She paused a moment as if doubting she had heard aright, and then appealed to Bernard.

"Pray assure Miss Thelluson that she need not hesitate. I have watched her narrowly of late, and have quite got over any little prejudices I might have had. I and the girls will be delighted to see her. Do persuade her to come with you."

"Excuse me, but I always leave Miss Thelluson to decide for herself."

The cold voice, the indifferent manner, though she knew both were advisable and inevitable, smote Hannah to the core. That bitter position of love and no love, ties and no ties, seemed to degrade her almost as if she had been really the vile thing that some people thought her.

"Mr. Rivers is right," she said. "I must decide for myself. You wished my visits to you to cease; I acquiesced; it will not be so easy to resume them. As Mr. Rivers's sister-in-law and housekeeper I shall always be happy to see you in his house, but I fear you must excuse my coming to yours. Let us dismiss the subject. Shall I offer you a cup of tea?"

Her manner, gentle as it was, implied a resolution strong enough to surprise even Bernard. For Lady Rivers, she coloured, even beneath her delicate rouge—but she was too prudent to take offence.

"Thank you. Your tea, as I said, is always excellent; and perhaps when we have more attractions to offer you, we may yet see you at the Moat-House. In the meantime, I hope, Bernard, that Miss Thelluson's absence will not necessitate yours."

And she looked hard at him, determined to find how he felt in the matter, and to penetrate, if possible, the exact relations between the two.