

pending visit to Royd, and still more in consequence of a sufficiently affectionate farewell at his departure. Marianne had in fact been gradually minimising the incident, and was on her way towards asking Titus straightforwardly for an explanation, as, of course, she ought to have done at first.

It is quite possible Mrs. Eldridge might have kept this card up her sleeve if Marianne had not nettled her by the way she spoke of her John. She may have provoked it; but did that matter? She was not going to let anyone else pelt him. Anyhow, she played the card, and, glancing up at Marianne, had reason to be satisfied with the effect it had produced.

Marianne may have known she looked white, and wished for darkness to hide it, for she blew both candles out, and returned to her seat with her back to the window. The cat sighed, as lamenting the selfishness of mortals, and resumed her old place, now again available, with a pretence of magnanimity.

"I shall copy that letter on a clean sheet, and send it." The darkness seemed to give the speaker fortitude.

"Go your own way, dear! I've done my best." Mrs. Eldridge claimed freedom from responsibility.

"You know, I suppose, that I spoke to mamma about that Steptoe nonsense—the photograph?"

"No, I didn't. What did she say?"

"Said it was all sheer impossibility. Said Steptoe had been turning the cupboards over when we were away at Easter, and cooked it all up."

"That won't do us any good. How did Steptoe know the name of the coal-merchant?"

"Saw it on the back of the photo, mamma says."

"And how did she know the name Verrall?"

"Because it's Bob's second name. Besides, it's on a brass plate on Kate's old portmanteau in the trunk-room."

"I can't say I think that accounts for anything." Mrs. Eldridge pointed out two or three weak points in Mrs. Craik's explanation, and condemned it as worthless. She was wrong. The explanation was a good one *per se*, but, like so many explanations, taxed human powers of belief more than the thing it explained. However, no one who has