

On the morning of the sixth of November there was even a light fall of snow, and people began to speculate of the "dreadful night" it would be, and on the "no fireworks." They also considered seriously on the difficulty there would be attendant on the journey to and from the Hall, Atherton resources in the way of conveyances being somewhat limited. For it had become the custom for many neighbors to join the evening festivities which took place after the dinner.

But as daylight faded and evening drew in, the snow had ceased and the evening became clear and cold and frosty. Shortly after four o'clock spring-carts and light waggons began to arrive, bringing country tenants from far-away farms. The dinner-hour was five, but it was thought advisable to be in time, and not lose any part of the proceedings by a late arrival. Taking them as a whole, they were a very pleasant group of faces which the smiling matrons, rosy girls, stalwart farmers, brought with them to greet the squire on his birthday—a cheering sight on any day, and now the frosty air had vigorously brightened each pair of cheeks that passed through it, as if it also wished to add its help to the general effect.

They gathered in a large, warm, well-lighted room, adjoining the servants' hall, where the dinner took place; the greetings were varied and hearty; some met, who perchance had not met since the year previous at the same time and place.

It was a comforting and inspiring sound when a great full-toned gong announced that dinner was ready, and they trooped in to it without rhyme or order, excepting that those who stood nearest when the gong sounded went in first.

Claude Egerton walked into the room, greeting everybody cheerily as he came, and took his place at the head of the long table, whilst Cyril followed to head the other and smaller table. When Claude first entered there was no change from his usual pleasant manner, and all took their seats round the tables; it was only as the time went on that one, then another, amongst those who knew him best noted that there was some difference in him—that the squire was unusually quiet, that his manner was somewhat abstracted. Something apparently was equally the matter with his brother, who spoke but seldom, and when he did so it was with a serious face and uninterested expression. This was more noticeable in Cyril than it was in Claude, for Cyril's manner was usually joyous, gay, and light-hearted, that his present behaviour could not but attract attention.

Long before dinner had come to an end, this fact was being noted and whispered about from one to the other amongst the guests, and speculations were rife as to the cause of it; not a few concluded that some dispute or difference of opinion between the brothers must be the reason, and all agreed that this "birthday" could not hold a candle to some birthdays which they could remember.

The drinking of healths and proposing of toasts seemed to be but half through when it was reported that the fireworks were beginning. It had been found from old experience that this was one of the persuasions which would induce people to think that they had had as much as was good for them, and that dinner was at an end. In another moment there was an instant rising from the tables, and whilst the men rushed up for their overcoats and hats, and poured out into the terrace the better to behold the fairy-like splendours, and the women crowded about the windows, Claude Egerton disappeared from among them.

Up-stairs in the drawing-room was a gathering of his richer friends and neighbors; they had followed the example of the rest, and some of them had gone out on to the terrace, and the more timid had gathered in the deep-set windows which faced the terrace where the display was taking place.

Claude was held and claimed by first one then another; and it was not long before he was aware that Gwendoline Majendie was not amongst them. By-and-by he asked after her, and heard that she had been there but a few minutes before. Still, however, she did not come, and whilst he was wondering where she could be he heard some one ask the same question that he had asked.

"Oh, Gwendoline Majendie has gone outside. Cyril Egerton persuaded her that she would have a far more satisfactory view there, but I told her she would be certain to catch her death of cold," was the answer.

Claude Egerton's back was turned to the speaker, but no sooner had he heard these words than he abruptly ended the conversation he was engaged in, and as abruptly left the room.

Outside in the bright moonlight was a comfortable happy-looking group of delighted people, staring at a fizzing fussing great Catherine wheel with the greatest satisfaction, its blazing light outdoing the moon, and throwing strange mingled lights in their faces.

Two fair faces were side by side, smiling and enjoying the spectacle as much as any present. Claude glanced from his brother's face to Gwendoline, wrapped in a large fur jacket, her cheeks under their tinge of the frosty air, looking like peach apples. Cyril turned, smilingly to speak to her, but before she could answer him Claude stood beside them. The blaze of the Catherine wheel went out, and in the momentary darkness which followed Gwendoline started to perceive Claude on her other side, bending towards her as he asked her whether she would not be better in-doors.

No, Gwendoline infinitely preferred remaining where she was, and resolutely Claude retained his place beside her. And during the whole blazing display which followed, that one group of three perhaps alone of all the watchers never altered their positions or moved. More than one noticed them as they stood, and more than one made significant remarks, and smilingly observed the squire and his brother seemed to be of the same mind about that young woman, whatever else they had differed in.

Bessie Vernon met Cyril on the stairs as they came in, when the fireworks were over, and she said to him somewhat angrily, "Have you been riding down the short cut past Birdshill to the common lately?"

She had not alluded to this in any way since her interview with Basil Crawford, it had therefore had time to rankle and grow; and having all along fully believed that Cyril Egerton was the culprit of that romance, she now concluded that she had made him thoroughly uncomfortable.

"Down the short cut past Birdshill to the common?" he repeated, attending fully to her words for the first time.

"Yes," she added triumphantly; "it is not a very long piece of road, and as a rule there is not much to interest on the way, but perhaps you go that way so often, particularly on horseback, that you cannot remember any particular time."

"I never go that way on horseback!"

"Oh, never! You are quite sure of that?" she said, with an angry sparkle in her eyes.

"I may have gone by that miserable road some day in reckless carelessness as to my horse's knees; but was I doing something unusually wicked thereby, and did it make you angry?"

"Angry! angry!" she cried, like a cross child, and catching hold of the word which had most aggravated her. "No, not in the very slightest, I was only delighted to think what a pretty picture you were able to compose, so far more beautiful and with so much more of nature in it than the most of your pictures!" This was rude and unkind to poor Cyril's efforts in the art line.

For a moment or two he maintained a perfect silence, and then a sudden idea took possession of him, but he would assure himself that his surmises were correct without betraying his plan. Bessie was such a very simple innocent unsophisticated parson, that deceiving her was a very easy matter; she had been unnecessarily sharp to him, and on a subject whereon he was very vulnerable—he would therefore obtain information and tease Bessie at the same time.

"Who make the prettiest picture, the lady or the gentleman?" he enquired.

"The lady," was the reply; some gentlemen cannot make pretty pictures if they try ever so!"

"Ah, then they ought never to try again; but let us consider why he failed in composing a picture. Let me see, he was on horseback, and she was walking along the road towards him."

"Oh dear no! It was far more interesting and picturesque; she was on the other side of the garden wall. You see I know all about it."

A fresh light broke over Cyril, and he added, "Then they were not together after all!"

"It is very absurd of you to try and pretend you know nothing of it," she said, crossly; "when people are in saddles they are tall enough to lean

over anywhere; tall enough to be as near to people as if they were standing beside them; tall enough to hand them baskets of flowers." This was said in sarcastic tones, and she stood aside for him to pass on the stairs; but Cyril was now in no hurry to pass on, and in the same bantering tone he continued, "Well, I almost forgive them for their wickedness, as they composed such a pretty picture; I suppose the sun was shining, and if she had fair hair it must have looked very pretty. Had she fair hair?"

"Of course she had!" said Bessie, viciously, and thinking of her own dark locks; "he would not have staid to admire it if it had not been a nice carrotty yellow."

"Ah, true! and she was waiting for him and his flowers?"

"Of course she was!" Bessie knew but the out line of the tale, so she felt at liberty to embellish and beautify, and she added, "And what could have been a prettier arrangement—the flowers, the garden-wall, the fair lady, and the mounted knight—it was like an old German tale, and could only have been got up by a man accustomed to getting up pictures."

"The only drawback was that it was somewhat unseasonable, if this pretty scene took place lately."

Yesterday morning was a very different day, from to-day; the sun was out, and it was comparatively pleasant for some hours in the middle of the day. Did you find it pleasant?"

"I did," he answered aggravatingly, and with some indignation she turned and left him on the stairs.

Cyril stood still for a few moments, thinking over what he had heard. The two who had composed this picture were of course undeniably Claude and Gwendoline, and Cyril was one of those mortals who are but stimulated to fresh endeavours by each difficulty and embarrassment thrown in their paths.

Bessie, it was easy to see, fully believed that it was no other but himself who had handed the flowers over the garden-wall, and thereby hung a faint mystery—for if she herself had seen what she had described, her eyes would not have failed to recognize the rider of the horse.

In the meantime Gwendoline had just entered the drawing-room, and, pulling off her gloves as she came, she made her way to the fireplace, saying that her fingers were pinched with cold. Claude followed her, and, as her pink fingers were greedily stretched out to the comforting warmth, he instantly observed a remarkable-looking ring on her finger, and one he had never seen before. It was not a ring to escape attention; and, following a first impulse, he said "Why, Gwendoline, what a strange ring!—where did it come from?"

She started somewhat, and let the hand bearing the ring fall down beside her. "It is an old curiosity," she said; "I forgot to take it off."

His curiosity was roused. "May I see it? It looks interesting."

Alter a moment's pause she boldly held out her hand, and Claude bent his head, and looked at it. It was quite unique in its way—evidently very old, and of some value. Rings such as this one did not often find their way into Atherton; in fact, Claude had never before seen anything like it; and he was still gazing at it with admiration and interest when he heard Cyril's voice beside them, saying, "Claude, you are to be off down-stairs immediately; they want you to help set the games going. Be off with you!"

Claude started, raised his head, and instinctively turned to comply with the request, and walked towards the door.

Cyril, as he approached them, had seen them bending over Gwendoline's hand, and, when he was near enough, he observed the ring on her finger. "Claude has given it to her! there is some understanding between them, after all, then!" he thought. And no sooner had Claude turned away than Cyril unceremoniously seized her hand, and, with no pleasant expression on his face, frowned at the antique ring.

That it was of great value immediately crossed his mind. It was rich and rare; a fitting gift for the squire to bestow on his lady-love; but it was mean of him to be so secretive, ungenerous, distrustful, and unlike Claude in every way.

"Who gave you this ring, Gwendoline?" he said.