

## A DISGRACE TO HER FAMILY.

## CHAPTER I.

## GIRLS TO MARRY.

Everybody pitied Mrs. Brotherton, but nobody pitied her as much as she pitied herself. If you wish to know the reason why, the unfortunate woman was the mother of five daughters, all of them grown up, and all of them unmarried. They were like ripe plums waiting to be culled, and nobody came to cull them, although they presented their most pleasing and attractive side to the world.

Every right-thinking British matron will sympathize with Mrs. Brotherton and admit that so calamitous a fact was sufficient to embitter her life, and cast a stigma on her character generally. And yet she had tried her best to marry off the girls. The undertaking was difficult enough in itself, but it was rendered a thousand times more so by her not possessing the slightest control over any one of her five daughters.

They were absolutely unmanageable and shocked their mother beyond measure by the free and easy conversation, actions, and manners of thought, of the modern school of young ladies. Poor Mrs. Brotherton tried to impress upon their minds how different things had been in her time. She was told that she was old-fashioned and out of date, and did not understand the world in its present condition.

One thing was certain. She had failed to marry her daughters, and, as is usual in such cases, opinions were divided as to whose was the fault. Both parties had their partisans. Some said Mrs. Brotherton was a poor weak thing with no head on her shoulders, others declared the girls to be a wild, wilful, headstrong lot, calculated to send any woman into her grave. Their crime consisted in remaining spinsters, against the wishes of themselves, their friends, and their only surviving parent. Surely it was a hard case. And yet the clearer headed vowed that it was not fair to blame the poor young women for not finding husbands. The article was getting scarce, and on all hands it was pretty freely admitted that the demand was in excess of the supply. In fact, there were not eligibles enough to go round. It was simply impossible for everybody to draw a prize.

With the exception of Maggie, the youngest, who, being kept studiously in the background by her elder sisters, had seldom given matrimony a thought, the Misses Brotherton were perfectly alive to the advantages of connubial bliss.

Was it their fault that they lived in the country all the year round, and instead of going to London in the season were obliged to put up with lawn tennis parties, and lanky curates, or that they had so few opportunities of enlarging their circle of masculine acquaintances? And opportunity, as we all know, is everything in this world.

There are girls born under a lucky star, who see any number of men; whilst others rust and vegetate in some dull, out-of-the-way place, until all the freshness and the life is crushed out of them, and they resemble limpets rather than human beings. Year after year goes by in a monotonous, joy-extracting round, and no King Cophetua comes near the spot where dwells the starving beggar-maid. For she is starving. Starving for want of affection, and the natural outlet to her woman's nature. All the capacity of loving implanted within her breast, must be sternly suppressed, the yearnings of her heart silenced, until, after a bitter, lingering struggle, youth's passion and desire fade like a withering weed.

Until Squire Brotherton died, things had gone well with his family. He was a good father and a kind husband. Everybody who knew him loved him, and all had a favorable word to say of the esteemed master of that crack pack—the "Ripper" hounds. He it was who had brought them to such a state of perfection that, week after week, the sporting papers were full of their exploits.

Mrs. Brotherton adored her husband, and whilst he lived scarcely realized her own weakness. The Squire decided everything, and always gave sensible advice whenever an emergency arose. But, five years previous to the date of this story, a neglected cold, originally contracted out-hunting, carried off the gallant sportsman, and since then his widow had resembled a ship without a rudder, tossing and laboring with no very definite ends in the stormy sea of existence.

Ill-health, low spirits, weak nerves, and vacillating purpose combined to render her little more than a puppet in the hands of her elder daughters. They did exactly as they liked, paying no attention whatever to their mother's feeble, if querulous remonstrances and the mistress of the house had by degrees settled down into the unenviable position of a nonentity, whose wishes were seldom, if ever, consulted.

The poor soul longed for her elder girls to get married if only to acquire a little more authority over the younger ones. Reviewing the past few years, she never could understand how she had lost it so completely. During her husband's life-time they were docile enough, and she put down all her present difficulties to that one great trouble. If he had lived, everything would have been different.

Her eldest daughter, Matilda, was now twenty-five—a young woman of stubborn character, and exceeding firmness of will, who imagined herself very clever and superior, and who gave out her opinions in a dogmatic manner, which brooked no contradiction.

Then came the twins, Lily and Rose, light-hearted, boisterous girls, shallow, but good-natured, and possessing a great many Tom boy elements. They spoke loud and laughed louder, affected masculine garb, and occasionally had been known to utter a naughty word beginning with D. They were three-and-twenty, and would have accepted the first man who proposed, simply because he was a man who wore trousers.

Unfortunately for them, their chances were completely put into shade

by Geraldine, the beauty of the family, an extremely pretty, fair-haired, blue eyed girl of twenty-one, who contrived to attract all the admiration that might otherwise have been more equally divided among the sisters.

She was looked up to by the twins with great respect, in spite of her tenderer years, since she was the only one of the Brotherton young ladies who had received a bona fide offer of marriage. True, the gentleman was merely a poor clergyman with two-pence halfpenny a year, but that was bad luck, and did not detract from Geraldine's triumph. He might have been a Duke, or a millionaire.

Next to Geraldine came Jack, Mrs. Brotherton's only son, and heir to his father's estate, and after him followed Maggie, a raw slip of a thing, just eighteen, but looking younger than her age. If Geraldine was considered the family beauty, Maggie was regarded as its fright. She resembled a wild young colt, with her shaggy, red hair and unfurnished frame.

She had a wide mouth, a pulpy nose, a freckled complexion, and light-colored eyes and eye-lashes, and, to tell the truth, would have been downright ugly had not the expression of her face redeemed the whole. But it was so delightfully good-humored, so brimming over with fun and kindness, that, although no one could think her the least pretty, she was quite as popular as if she were. Perhaps more so, for none of her numerous female acquaintances felt at all jealous of her. They were convinced no man would ever look at Maggie in their presence, and such a conviction renders young ladies wonderfully civil and amiable. In short, Maggie was "safe." She could not take away their lovers from them if she tried, so they could afford to make a bosom friend of her.

When Maggie went out hunting she was surrounded by a batch of old gentlemen, who were devoted to the unconscious good-natured girl. They had arrived at an age to prize sweetness of temper more than looks, but the younger ones either ran after Geraldine, or else carried on a noisy flirtation with Lily and Rose. They frequently quite ignored Maggie's existence; but this seemed to her the most natural thing in the world. She was ugly, they were pretty, and she had not a particle of jealousy in her composition. She could stand by and see other women admired without a pang.

As regarded herself, her own private opinion, which coincided with the freely expressed one of Geraldine—was, that she was hideous, with the uncompromising hideousness of an ape or a gorilla. She had thought so ever since she had thought at all, and after much inward battling had arrived at the sage decision to give over thinking of her appearance, and to habituate herself to being eclipsed on every occasion by her better favored sisters. True, they treated her like a Cinderella, ordering her about in the most cavalier fashion, but if she sometimes sighed in secret over her apparent inability to earn their good-will, she had the consolation of knowing that, in spite of her plainness, she was Jack's favorite sister.

In his rough, boyish way, he was quite devoted to her, as she was to him; and often when they were closeted together she would summon up courage to say plaintively:

"Now, Jack, do tell me the truth. Am I really so *very* very ugly? Don't mind hurting my feelings, I'm used to that; only speak the truth."

Then Jack would take her piteous little face between his hands, and scanning it with critical eyes say:

"Yes, Maggie, you are. It's no use trying to deceive you. You ain't a beauty and never will be one, but what's the odds? You're a regular brick, and I like you ever so much better than Matilda, or Lily and Rose, or that stuck-up, conceited Geraldine."

"Oh! Jack, dear, I am so glad you think me a brick, because perhaps if I go on trying to be a brick, and do my best to please people, they may forget about my ugliness, just as you do. You don't seem to mind it one bit."

"Of course not," responded master Jack, in his most lordly and patronizing manner. "Why should I? Don't you know, you little goose, that beauty does not signify two straws when you live with a person? You never think what they're like. Girls are always bothersome about their looks, but no sensible man cares twopence whether they are pretty or plain, so long as they are nice."

"Is that true, Jack? Don't they really?"

"Quite true. Why! what fools you must think us. Men's heads— and he drew himself up with an air of importance—are full of fighting and hunting, and horses, and rats and terriers. They have something better to occupy them than silly women."

"But they need not be silly, Jack, even if they can't aspire to rank with rats and terriers."

"Certainly not, only, unfortunately, they mostly are. Dressed-up painted things!"

"I'm sure I'm not dressed-up or painted," answered Maggie, gallantly trying to defend her sex, and looking down somewhat consciously at her plain serge gown, bearing ink-marks and sundry other spots, all down the front. "No one could accuse me of being too smart."

"No, that they certainly could not; but you are an exception, as luckily for yourself, are more like a boy than a girl."

"Oh, Jack!" exclaimed Maggie, vastly flattered by this assurance, "do hope, when I marry, though I don't suppose I ever shall, that I shall have a husband just like you."

"No doubt you do," responded Master Jack, complacently, but with merry twinkle in his eye. "Only let me tell you this, young woman, you be deuced lucky if you come across any one half so good."

"Yes, Jack, I know that," rejoined Maggie, lovingly. "There's none in this Hunt to compare with you."

"And if I were you," he went on, accepting this tribute to her merit quite as a matter of course, "I'd give over thinking of such things as husbands. See what it has brought the other girls to. Lily and Rose used to be decent enough once upon a time, but now they're always out