

Mrs. Cheston spoke here almost in haste.

"Oh! Belle dear. . . . I'm sure Mrs. Ambrose does everything she can! She is as anxious about them as if they were her own children."

"Oh! *please* don't think I want to say anything against Mrs. Ambrose," cried Isabel . . . "she's a darling, so sunny tempered and so nice to look at . . . but I mean they want a man over them or someone in authority. At least Dick does"—she paused—"of course Silvia is only young yet. But oh! dear, how she does hate her stepmother! It would be funny if it weren't a little serious."

"Couldn't you come to the rescue, mother?" John Cheston asked.

"What could I do?" Mrs. Cheston answered, with that thrill in her voice which suggested nervousness.

"Oh! well, I don't know exactly, but after all we ought to be a little decent to the Ambrose lot: they're different to most of the people round and about and it might do you good to have the girl here now and then."

"I should be glad if I could do anything but——"

The sentence was not finished.

The young man looked at his mother. She had just risen from the table.

Even now when he imagined he knew her every mood she was capable of giving him a sensation of surprise: even now when he realized only too well the extraordinary sensitiveness of her nature he was conscious of a touch of impatient regret that this still lovely woman should be content to lead such a secluded, such a dull uneventful life.