

forwards. Women only give the underhand thrusts, of which Hannah that night had not a few.

"What a long, dark walk, Miss Thelluson; only you never mind dark walks. Were you really quite alone? And what has become of Bernard? for you generally know all his proceedings. We thought him looking so well—so much the better for going from home. But what can he have done with himself since church-time? Are you quite sure that——"

The question was stopped by Bernard's entrance—ten minutes after the dinner hour, of which Sir Austin bitterly complained to his son; and then offered his arm to Hannah, who stood silent and painfully conscious, under the battery of four pairs of feminine family eyes.

"I have been home to fetch Miss Thelluson," said Bernard. "Hannah, you should not have walked here alone."

And he would have taken a seat beside her, but Lady Rivers signed for Bertha to occupy it. Fenced in by a sister on each side, he had not a chance of a word with Hannah all dinner-time.

It was the same thing afterwards. Miss Thelluson would have been amused, if she had not been a little vexed and annoyed, to see herself thus protected, like an heiress in her teens, from every approach of the obnoxious party. Mother and daughters mounted guard successively, keeping her always engaged in conversation, and subjecting Bernard to a sort of affectionate imprisonment, whence once or twice, he vainly tried to escape. She saw it, for somehow, without intending it, she always saw him everywhere, and was conscious that he saw her, and listened to every word she was saying. Yet she made no effort to get near him, not even when she noticed him surreptitiously take out his watch and look at it wearily, as if entreating "Do let us go home." Every simple word and act of a month ago had a meaning, a dreadful meaning, now.

Hannah was not exactly a proud woman, but she had a quiet dignity of her own, and it was sorely tried this night. Twenty times she would have started up from the smooth, polite circle, feeling that she could support it no longer, save for Bernard's sad, appealing face and his never ending endurance. But then they loved him in their own way, and they were his "people," and he bore from them what he would never have borne from strangers. So must she.

So she took refuge beside Adeline's sofa. Young Mrs. Melville had never been well since her marriage; they said the low situation of Melville Grange did not agree with her. And ill health being quite at a discount among the Rivers girls, who were as strong as elephants, Adeline lay rather neglected, watching her husband laughing and talking with her sisters—flirting with them, people might have said, almost as much as before he was married; only, being a brother now, of course it did not matter. Nevertheless, there was at times a slight contraction of the young wife's brow, as if she did not altogether like it. But she laughed it off at once.

"Herbert is so merry, and so fond of coming here. Our girls amuse him much more than his own sisters, he says. Just listen how they are all laughing together now."

"It is good to laugh," said Hannah quietly.