vast number of women are enduring misery because their husbands have become disillusionized, and can not conceal the fact? And that is the fault of the husbands. They construct an ideal woman, marry a real one, and live miserable ever after, because they can't have that imaginative toy of their brain. Now don't you think, if this were true—if this wretchedness were so wide-spread—it would cure itself? Have mankind gone on blundering for ages, because of the non-arrival of a certain awful and mysterious Surrey prophetess? Why haven't women formed a universal association for the destruction of lovers' dreams?"

"I tell you, you may laugh as you like," is the calm reply, "but what I say is true; and every married woman will tell you it is true. Why don't women cure it? If it comes to that, women are as foolish as men. The girl makes her lover a hero; she wakes up after marriage to find him as he really is, and the highest hope of her life falls dead."

"Then we are all disappointed, and all miserable. That is your conclusion?"

"Not all," is the answer; and there is a slight change of tone audible here, a slight smile visible on her lips. "There are many whose imagination never went the length of constructing any ideal, except that of a moor covered with grouse. There are others who have educated themselves into a useful indifferentism or cynicism. Unfortunately it is the nobler natures that suffer most."

"Well, this is a tolerably lively prospect for every girl who thinks of getting married. Pray, Frau Philosophin, have you been constructing all these fiddle-stick theories out of your own head, or have you been making a special study of Sylvia Blythe?"

"I know Lady Sylvia better than most people. She is a very earnest girl. She has ideals, convictions, aspirations—a whole stock in trade of things that a good many girls seem to get on very well without. If that poor girl is disappointed in her marriage, it will kill her."

"Disappointed in her marriage!" calls out the young man, who has been standing patiently with the bridle of his cob in his hand. "Why do you think that already? No, no. It is the girl herself—she lives in that solitary place, and imagines mere foolish things—it is she herself has put that into your mind. Disappointed! No, no. There is not any good reason—there is not any good sense in that. This young fellow Balfour, every one speaks well of him; he will have a great name some day; he is busy, a very active man. I hear of him in many places."

"I wish he was dead!" says my Lady; and, curiously enough, at this moment her eyes fill with tears, and she turns and walks proudly away, accompanied by her faithful friend.

The young man turns in amazement.

"What have I done? Am I not right? There is nothing bad that Balfour has done?"

"There is plenty bad in what he means to do, if it is true he is going to carry off Lady Sylvia Blythe. But when you, Herr Lieutenant, gave him that fine certificate of character, I suppose you didn't know that people don't quite agree about Mr. Ralph Balfour? I suppose you don't know that a good many folks regard him as a bullying, overbearing, and portentously serious Scotchman, a little too eager to tread on one's corns, and not very particular as to the means he uses for his own advancement? Is it very creditable, for example, that he should be merely a warming-pan for young Glynne in that wretched little Irish borough? Is it decent that he should apparently take a pride in insulting the deputations that come to him? A member of Parliament is supposed to pay some respect to the people who elected him."

Here the brown-visaged young man burst into a roar of laughter.

"It is splendid—it is the best joke I have known. They insult him; why should he not turn round and say to them, 'Do you go to the devil!' He is quite right. I admire him. Such cement!—I would do that too."

So much for a morning gossip over the affairs of two people who were not much more than strangers to us. We had but little notion then that we were all to become more intimately related, our lives being for a space intertwisted by the cunning hands of circumstance. The subject, however, did not at all depart from the mind of our sovereign lady and ruler. We could see that her eyes were troubled. When it was proposed to her that she should make a party to drive somewhere or other, she begged that it might be made up without her. We half suspected whither she meant to drive.

Some hour or two after that you might have seen a pair of ponies, not much bigger than mice, being slowly driven along a dusty lane that skirted a great park. The driver was a lady, and she was alone. She did not seem to pay much heed to the beautiful spring foliage of the limes and elms, to the blossoms of the chestnuts, nor yet to the bluebells and primroses visible on the other side of the gray paling, where the young rabbits were scurrying into the holes in the banks.

There was a smart pattering of hoofs behind her; and presently she was overtaken by a young gentleman of some fourteen years or so, who took off his tall hat with much ceremony, and politely bade her good-morning.

"Good-morning, Mr. John," said she, in return. "Do you know if Lady Sylvia is at home?"

"I should think she was," said the boy, as he got down from his horse, and led it by the side of the pony-chaise, that he might the better continue the conversation. "I should think she was. My uncle's gone to town. Look here, I've been over to the 'Fox and Hounds' for a bottle of Champagne. Sha'n't we have some fun. You'll stay to lunch, of course?"

In fact, there was a bottle wrapped round with brown paper under his arm.

"Oh, Mr. John, how could you do that? You know your cousin will be very angry."

"Not a bit," said he, confidently. "Old Sylla bus is a rattling good sort of girl. She'll declare I might have had Champagne at the hall—which isn't true, for my noble uncle is an uncommonly sharp sort of chap, and I believe he takes the key of the wine-cellar with him—and then she'll settle down to it. She's rather serious, you know; and would like to come the maternal over you; but she has got just as good a notion of fun as most girls. You needn't be afraid about *that*. Old Syllabus and I are first-rate friends; we get on capitally together. You see, I don't try to spoon her, as many a fellow would do in my place."