

a sunshiny happy-faced thing, like her elder sister, nor was she as gentle, though her heart was every bit as kind, perhaps. But she was stiff and proud, and sometimes perhaps a little hard when she meant to be only just. Then Dorothy was introduced to the third aunt, Minnie, who was not more than forty-five; she was a smaller woman than the others, and had a nervous little laugh. She came forward and kissed Dorothy.

"I am so glad to see you, dear," she said; and Dorothy sank back into the ugly chair again, relieved.

Tea was brought up, and some more people arrived. George Blakesley had quite a party, and every one looked at Dorothy, who felt herself getting more and more frightened.

"I only wish I dared make a face at that man sitting on the sofa!" she thought. The man on the sofa was handsome, but looked miserable (it was a way he had Dorothy found out afterwards); "and I would give all the world to do something outrageous, and horrify every one. Of course, they all think I'm dreadfully in love, and I'm not—not a bit; I'd give the world to go away and never see any one as long as I live!" Then a half sad, a half comic train of thoughts came floating through her brain. Never to see any one again! why, she must be a Robinson Crusoe to accomplish that! And she thought of Mr. Fuller, and the summer day on which he had told her, carelessly enough, that she should be "Man Friday," and the tears came into her eyes. "I shall never be so happy again," she thought; "never, never, as long as I live!"

"I have brought you some tea dear," a low voice said; and she looked up.

It was the man to whom she was engaged, whom she ought to love more than any one in the world, and whom, oh sorrowful thought! she did not love even the least bit. Presently the miserable young man rose, and went, and the other visitors followed his example, all but the aunts, each pointedly shaking hands with her, to show that they recognized her position.

"Tom," said George Blakesley, "I want to show you some fossils I have in my study." Dorothy rose to her feet also, but he went over and put his hand upon her shoulder, and wondered why she trembled so. "I dare say she is nervous, poor little thing," he thought. "No, dear," he said, in the kind voice her ungrateful heart would not answer; "you stay and talk to our aunts a little while."

And he vanished with Tom, and left her to their tender mercies.

CHAPTER XXIII.—TABBY, TORTOISESHELL, AND BLACK-AND-WHITE.

So they gathered round her—those three stiff spinsters, in their old-fashioned rustling silk gowns; the youngest (Minnie) did not wear silk either, but something soft and clinging, with a dead-white collar about her throat.

"And are you very happy, my dear?" began the eldest, in her purring sort of way.

"Yes—I don't know—I suppose so, Miss Mil—" stammered Dorothy, feeling that she was about to undergo a cross-examination, and fearing lest she should betray what a rank imposter she was.

"You must call us all aunts, my dear; I am Aunt Milly," you know," the old lady said, kindly.

"You must let me tell you, Dorothy," said Josephine, grandly, "you have every reason to congratulate yourself. I can assure you I do not know a more worthy young man than our nephew George. A most clever, upright, conscientious—"

But Minnie (among their friends they

were always addressed by their Christian names, preceded by the title of Miss) interrupted her sister with a nervous little laugh. "You musn't frighten her, dear Josephine," she said; and then, feeling it was her turn to put a question, she asked, "and when do you think it will be, Dorothy?" They all carefully called her Dorothy to show that she was considered a future member of the family.

But Dorothy only looked still more afraid, and said she didn't know, but "not for a long time she hoped;" and they thought it only natural that she should be shy.

Then they asked her if she was musical, and if she was fond of reading, and how long she had known George, and all sorts of questions, which poor Dorothy answered to the best of her ability till Tom and the hero of the occasion appeared, and the aunts got up to go.

"You must let us see you often, Dorothy," Josephine said; "I dare say George will bring you to dine with us one evening next week," and she swept grandly out of the small room, ruffling a tiger's skin, and nearly upsetting a valuable and singularly ugly old china vase on her way.

"Good-bye, dear!" said Miss Milly, kindly, and she whispered, "Be a good little wife to my George; he has always been my boy since he lost his mother, and now you must belong to me, too," and when she looked up, surprised at receiving no answer, she saw two wistful brown eyes, and so sad an expression on the sweet girl's face, that it haunted and puzzled her for many a day afterwards. She stooped and kissed her, and the third sister followed her example, and then they vanished, and the dreadful tea-party was over.

The September days were drawing in when Dorothy and her brother and George Blakesley left the prim cottage.

"We'll go and make Netta sing to us in the twilight," the latter said, as an excuse for returning with them; and then he asked, "well, how did my little girl like the aunts?"

"They were very kind," she began.

"Nice old cats!" said Tom, approvingly.

"Tom!" exclaimed Dorothy, horrified.

"Well, so they are; I don't mean it disrespectfully, do I, Blakesley?"

"No, of course not!" he answered.

"Do you know," continued the youth, blithe at finding himself encouraged, "the eldest makes me think of a nice kind old purring tabby. I like cats," he added; "so does Dolly; I remember she blubbered like anything over Venus's funeral two or three years ago."

"I'm sure I didn't, Tom!" said his sister, indignantly; and then she added, "do you know, I think Aunt Minnie is something like what Venus was—so very gentle and soft, and all black-and-white."

"And what is Aunt Josephine?" asked Blakesley.

"Tortoiseshell, of course!" said Tom. "She's handsome and grand, and wags her tail just like a tortoiseshell."

"Very well then, we'll call them Tabby, Tortoiseshell, and Black-and-white, in future," he said; and thus, without one spark of disrespect, and in no uncomplimentary spirit, the aunts were generally spoken of afterwards.

"Now I shall trudge on," said Tom, obligingly, and give you two a chance to spoon in the twilight."

Dolly tried to hold him back (being alone with her fiancée always distressed her), but he said he wanted to get on faster, and left them to their fate.

CHAPTER XXIV.—"DOROTHY."

"We might take a walk," George Blakesley said.

"No," she pleaded, humbly.

"Yes, come a little way," he said, and went on under the dim trees. "I want to ask you something. Can't it really be this year, Dorothy?"

"No, no! oh no!"

"Why not?"

"I don't know; I can't tell you. Let me be free a little longer. And I must go in. Turn back, oh do turn back, George!"

She had hardly ever called him by his Christian name before, and he gave in to her immediately on hearing it. Yet when they reached the house he was still loath to enter.

"Will you come into the garden and talk there?" he added.

"Yes, if you will let me go in and speak to them all first," she answered.

She wanted to see what they were doing. "Then I will wait for you under the sycamore-tree;" and he passed through the house and out into the garden.

Dorothy opened the door of the sitting-room, and walked in. It was dark, and yet there was the sound of some one within.

"Netta," she said.

"It is I," said a voice that in her present mood made her almost shiver. "Come in Dorothy." It was Mr. Fuller. "I am alone," he said. "Your father is in the study, and has called Netta to him for a minute or two, and your mother has a headache, and is lying down. Come in, child, and don't stand like a frightened ghost by the door!"

"It is so dark," she said; "and I am going into the garden; Mr. Blakesley is waiting for me."

"Never mind him," he answered, impatiently; "I want to know how you like your new relations?"

"Very much," she said, awkwardly, thinking how strange his manner was.

"Come in," he said again, impatiently; "do you think I am going to eat you? Or are you afraid Blakesley will if he catches you talking to me?"

"No," she answered; "I am not a bit afraid."

"Well then," he said; and going up to her, he took her hand, and drew her further into the room, till in the grey light he saw her pale face and flashing eyes. "Come and tell me how you got on with your new relations. You have quite forgotten me; I said Blakesley would cut me out, you know, dear."

"No, he never did, never!" she exclaimed. "You forgot me, and liked Netta better because she was beautiful and—"

"No," he said, "remember how I kept your rose."

"I don't care," she answered, proudly; "that was no sign you remembered me; perhaps you merely forgot to throw it away, and afterwards, you know, you liked Netta."

"How can you be so silly, child! I only wanted her to sit for me because she was pretty. You were always my friend. Don't you remember what chums we used to be, Dorothy? You were quite fond of me till the interloping Blakesley came and cut me out."

He had roused the fire sleeping in the girl's nature at last, and she turned round and faced him.

"I was very fond of you when I was a child!" she exclaimed. "You were very kind to me, and the dearest friend I ever had, and I shall never forget you as you were then." Her voice softened as she spoke of the old days; but she put her hand to her throat for a moment, as if to steady it, and then went on as hard as before.

"But when you came back, though I was the same, you had changed. I had the old feeling still, and you pretended to be