

"Suppose, now," she said, "that you had been putting yourself in a wicked passion for nothing. Suppose I had changed my mind about Edward. Suppose I thought you quite right in not placing any more of our own people. And suppose I only wanted a little information about somebody's antecedents. What then?"

"Why then I have been a brute. Say on."

"My dearest James. Do you know anything against Lieutenant Hillyar?"

"H'm," said the Secretary. "Nothing new. He came over here under a cloud; but so many young men do that. I am chary of asking too many questions. He was very fast at home, I believe, and went rambling through Europe for ten years; yet I do not think I should be justified in saying I knew anything very bad against him."

"He will be Sir George Hillyar," said Mrs. Oxtan, pensively.

"He will indeed," said the Secretary, "and have ten thousand a year. He will be a catch for some one."

"My dear, I am afraid he is caught."

"No! Who is it?"

"No other than our poor Gerty. She has been staying at the Barkers', in the same house with him; and the long and the short of it is, that they are engaged."

The Secretary rose and walked up and down the verandah. He was very much disturbed.

"My dear," he said at last, "I would give a thousand pounds if this were not true."

"Why? do you know anything against him?"

"Well, just now I carelessly said I did not; but now, when the gentleman coolly proposes himself for my brother-in-law! It is perfectly intolerable!"

"Do you know anything special, James?"

"No. But look at the man, my love. Look at his insolent, contradictory manner. Look at that nasty drop he has in his eyes. Look at his character for profligacy. Look at his unpopularity in the force; and then think of our beautiful little Gerty being handed over to such a man. Oh! Lord, you know it really is ——"

"I hate the man as much as you do," said Mrs. Oxtan. "I can't bear to be in the room with him. But Gerty loves him."

"Poor little bird."

"And he is handsome,"

"Confound him, yes. And charming too, of course, with his long pale face and his *dolce forniente*, insolent manner, and his great eyes like blank windows, out of which the devil looks once a day, for fear you might forget he was there. Oh! a charming man!"

"Then he will be a baronet, with an immense fortune; and Gerty will be Lady Hillyar."

"And the most unfortunate little flower in the wide world," said the Secretary.

"I think you are right," said Mrs. Oxtan, with a sigh. See, here she comes; don't let her know I have told you.

Gertrude Nevill came towards them at this moment. She was very like