

Ernestine fully comprehended what was required of her. She carried off the silk mantle, which was almost new, and a very handsome present to give to a maid, and prepared herself honestly to fulfil her part of her bargain.

She understood that Mrs. Blair wished to have the first sight of the letter-bag; and she probably guessed that it was her object to find out whether Miss Blair received any letters from the departed Colonel Fleming.

Further than that, to do her justice, Ernestine's suspicions did not go.

It was the custom at Sothorne for the letters to be left at the lodge-gate about eight o'clock in the morning, by the walking postman, whence they were daily fetched by James the footman. Higgs the butler was supposed to keep the key; and when the letter-bag arrived, it was his duty to open it, and distribute the servants' letters to them, and then to lay the rest on the dining-room sideboard, save only Mrs. Blair's, which Ernestine always carried off to her mistress's room.

But Higgs, like many other good servants who have been long in their masters' confidence, was rather spoilt and lazy; he was fond of shirking as many of his lesser duties as he found he could, without detriment to his own dignity or his mistress's interests, hand over to the rather meek-spirited footman. Amongst other little duties, that of opening the post-bag, and distributing its contents, had of late years been completely entrusted to James.

The bag arrived just when Mr. Higgs was most comfortably enjoying his breakfast and his morning talk with Mrs. Pearse in the housekeeper's room. Higgs was fat, and Higgs was also getting old and lazy; it was therefore considerably easier, simpler, and less troublesome to himself in every way to give up the key to James; and, as he fetched the bag from the lodge, to let him also open it and distribute the letters.

Now, if there was one duty which James hated and detested above all other duties, it was that of fetching the post-bag from the lodge. Every morning, wet or dry, fine or foul, he had to trudge out after "them dratted letters," as he elegantly expressed it; and as his own correspondence was of an exceedingly limited and most unexciting nature, being chiefly composed of bills for to-

bacco and beer from the village public-house, and petitions for money from a drunken old mother whom filial duty commanded him to support, he was not very much interested in its contents.

These sentiments, being freely spoken and concisely expressed pretty frequently before his fellow-servants, were well known to Mrs. Blair's French maid.

She also knew—for trust a woman, above all a Frenchwoman, to discover such matters—that James was consumed with an absorbing passion for herself. Acting upon the knowledge of these two facts, Ernestine set to work to make an unconscious instrument of her admirer.

"Monsieur Jams," she said to him, with her sweetest smile, "do you not dislike very much to fetch the bag with the letters?"

"Ay, that I do, mam'zell," answered her swain, earnestly; "it just takes me off when everyone else is beginning their breakfasts, having to fetch them blessed letters; and if there's one thing I can't bear, it's not being able to sit down comfortably to my meals."

"Well, look at this, Jams—I will fetch it for you for a few days."

"You, mam'zell!"

"But yes. I have given a dress to Mrs. White, the woman at the lodge, to make for me, and I wish to go and see how she does do it every morning; and if you will give me the key, I will go fetch the bag at the same time."

"The key!" repeated James, rather dubiously; "well, I don't know about that—I don't know as I ought to give you the key."

"Oh, yes, give me the key, for I expect a letter from a friend in Paris—what you call a lover; but he is dying," she added quickly, seeing that James looked as firm as adamant at the mention of a rival.

"Ah, he's dying! Are you sure of that?" he said, with a gleam on his face at the melancholy news.

"But yes, he dies, and perhaps he leaves me some money."

"Ah, Ah!" with a delighted grin.

"Yes; and if he do, I can perhaps marry myself to one—whom I love much better;" and here Mademoiselle Ernestine glanced at her admirer with a most telling *willade*, and then looked coyly down at the corner of her apron. "So you see, Monsieur Jams,