

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14.)

so much more pliable than at five and twenty.

Victoria, therefore, was as refined a girl—and withal fresh and natural—as one could wish to meet; and in that a somewhat provoking contrast to her sisters, for all their painstaking observance of every trivial thing connected with etiquette.

A grand family coach was in waiting, with a humble vehicle for the maids, and a couple of carts for the luggage, which quite filled the booking office of the little station.

A splendid footman, in a livery of canary-color and chocolate-brown, assisted the ladies to their seats; and, after a considerable amount of fuss and bother, the whole party was got en-route for The Towers.

Part of the way lay through a somewhat narrow lane, and in the middle of this lane they met a berouche, drawn by a pair of handsome bays, with coachman and footman in plain dark livery.

The two carriages had to pass each other so slowly, owing to the narrowness of the lane, that their occupants were able to exchange leisurely critical glances.

'Yes; I noticed her. She was very beautiful. Who can she be, I wonder?' mused Mrs. Muggleton, with a vague feeling of unrest.

The good lady knew everything. 'Burke's Landed Gentry or "Debrett's Peerage," could tell her about the aristocrats who were to be her neighbours; and deep down in her heart, there already lurked a hope that the young, unmarried baronet, Sir Gerald Vere, might fall a prey to the charms of one of her daughters.

It dashed her happiness a little—in spite of his genial bow and smile—to see him in company with that young and beautiful girl who sat behind his aunt.

'You don't know who she is?' she said, anxiously, addressing her husband.

'If No. Some visitor I should imagine. The elderly lady would be Sir Gerald's aunt, Lady Ruth Fallisier.'

'Oh, yes; I know that,' said his wife, impatiently.

'Well, I don't know any more. I thought she—Lady Ruth—looked an uncommonly nice little body. I don't know that I noticed anything else.'

'You should have seen the young lady, papa. She was so beautiful,' said Vi.

The two elder Misses Muggleton said nothing.

They had seen Lillian Delisle; and the sight had cast a sudden dampness over their spirits.

That graceful form, gowned in shimmering silver-grey—that lovely, flower-like face, crowned with the shining golden hair—had made them suddenly and painfully conscious of certain deficiencies of their own.

Their dresses were of the richest material, and had been made by the most skilful of Parisian costumiers; but now they doubted whether they were not too rich; and, glancing at each other's faces, they owned that they had an unbecomingly red and bloated appearance.

The intense heat of the day, coupled, perhaps, with a little very natural excitement was responsible for this, and at another time, they might not have thought much about it.

But, to themselves, they thought with a mingling of vexation and humiliation, how different they must have looked from the tranquil high-bred occupants of that other carriage—what a contrast the warm brick-colored colour of their complexion to the lively paleness of Lady Ruth, or to the exquisite rose tints of the girl who sat beside her!

CHAPTER XII.

LAUNCHED ON SOCIETY.

There was much excitement at The Towers.

It was several weeks since the Muggletons settled there; and now an event to which they had looked forward with mingled delight and trepidation was at hand.

A dinner-party was to be given at Vivian Court, and the entire Muggleton family were to be among the guests.

This was to be, as it were, the 'open sesame' to the charmed circle which bore the stamp of British aristocracy.

At Vivian Court they would meet the 'country'—so much of the country, that is, as possessed any attraction for Mrs. Muggleton and her daughters.

They had lived in kind of dream since they came down to Hampshire.

The life had seemed so tremendously unreal, that it was questionable whether they had not occasionally pinched themselves to make sure that they were awake.

They changed from a moderate competence to vast wealth had been so sudden, it might well almost threaten to destroy the balance of their minds.

It was so wonderful for Mrs. Muggleton to have a housekeeper, who looked a much grander lady than she herself had ever dreamed of being half-a-dozen years ago; and a man cook, who looked exactly like a gentleman, and who drove out in a neat little carriage of his own.

For a long time the worthy lady trembled when she spoke to her own servants—in such mortal dread was she of making some terrible blunder like that of the body in the fairy tale, who, being suddenly raised to a throne, mistook his magnificently-lad footman for court grandee, and invited him to play with him, while he despatched the plainly dressed prime minister to fetch the dominions!

Grievously was Mrs. Muggleton haunted with a dread lest she, in her ignorance, should offend against domestic etiquette in just such a fashion.

However, so far, things had gone on pretty smoothly.

The county people had manifested a

spirit of friendliness, and Mrs. Muggleton and her daughters were getting quite accustomed to seeing the names of squire, baronet, members of Parliament, and even earls, figuring on the bits of paste-board in the brand new silver card-basket.

Outward respect, at any rate, was being paid to the Muggleton millions.

Lady Ruth, instigated thereto by her nephew had paid a call at the Towers; and the call had been, in due course, returned.

Sir Gerald, too, had good-naturedly 'dropped in' to see Mr. Muggleton, had talked about 'a bit of shooing'; and, in short, had done a little that a thoroughly kind-hearted and well-ordered man could do to put his new neighbors at their ease.

But this dinner party was felt to be the true test of strength.

If they acquitted themselves successfully at that, the Muggletons knew the entrance of society was won.

Henceforward they would have nothing more to fear.

Indeed this had been Sir Gerald's thought in planning the dinner-party for their benefit.

'We must give the poor things a helping-hand, you know,' he had remarked, good-naturedly, to Lady Ruth. 'Once they get in the swim, they'll do very well; but we must help to launch them off a bit.'

'I'm sure it's very good of you to trouble about them,' Lady Ruth had answered. 'You are really too good-natured.'

And, indeed, in those days, Sir Gerald seemed literally overflowing with kindness and good nature.

There was a secret happiness in his heart which impelled him to kindly deeds, and made his countenance so generally bright that people wondered how they could ever fancy there was any look of melancholy in his dark brilliant eyes.

It was a time of sunshine, to be followed by as black and awful a storm-cloud as ever broke above the head of man.

But no shadow from the future assailed them.

He deemed himself a favorite of the gods and pressed on, blithely, to meet his fate.

The night of the dinner-party came at length, and the Muggleton carriage rolled away from the portals of The Towers, bearing its freight of silk-robed forms and wildly palpitating hearts.

Mrs. Muggleton wore black velvet and diamonds; her two eldest daughters were radiant in delicate heliotrope; satin, the toddlers draped with richest lace, and pearls circling their neck and arms.

Vi was very simple and charmingly dressed in pale primrose colour, which harmonised to perfection with her fair, rosy skin and dark prettily-curling hair.

Her sisters encouraged her to dress with youthful simplicity, wisely thinking it would have the effect of making them appear younger than they really were—and they were approaching an age when a girl thinks it a privilege to be able to peg herself back a little on the board of life.

Arrived at the Court, they were received by Lady Ruth with a tranquil politeness which Mrs. Muggleton immediately resolved to try to imitate; and by Sir Gerald with the very perfection of genial good-nature.

Mr. Muggleton himself was at home wherever he went.

He was a happy-natured, unaffected man, who, never pretending to be what he was not, was tolerably sure of being respected for what he really was.

If the truth must be told, he felt secretly a little good-natured contempt for the young baronets and squires with whom he now so often found himself, regarding them as 'hires of the field,' who could neither 'toil nor spin.'

A man who was no good 'in the City,' wasn't much good anywhere, in honest Samuel Muggleton's opinion.

However, he thought their air of good breeding a thing to be admired, just as he admired his own splendid service of plate at The Towers; and, as he had a breezy, genial, and thoroughly sensible manner, he bade fair to be a very popular man in Hampshire.

The ladies of his family were not quite so much as ease as he was.

But even they got on far better than they had expected, for everybody was ready to pay court to the wife and daughters of the millionaire.

It money cannot do everything, it must be admitted it can do some things very well indeed.

At first the ladies found quite interest enough in noting the furniture, and the general arrangement of the thing at the Court.

Their own great drawing room was resplendent with crimson and gold; its walls and ceiling were magnificently painted; and, altogether, it presented an appearance most brilliant and imposing.

Sir Gerald's drawing room was not at all like this.

The carpet was rich, but dark; the upholstery of the most delicate and subdued tint—tints, however, which set off to perfection the brighter hues of the ladies' dresses, and the masses of hot-house flowers.

Mrs. Muggleton, glancing anxiously about her, was not quite certain she preferred her own splendid room to this one.

The sounding of a gong, and the entrance of a footman to announce 'Dinner is served, my lady!' broke into the good lady's musings; and, in a few minutes, she had the gratification of being taken to the dining-room by Sir Gerald, and seated at his right hand.

She had been introduced to all the people present, and could meditate upon them at her leisure.

Lady Cantrip, in the famous cherry satin and the false diamonds, sat opposite, and next to Mrs. Muggleton was John Morewood; next to him, again was her eldest daughter, Marie.

Mrs. Muggleton beamed with satisfaction.

She knew Morewood as master of Beech Royal, and a bachelor; and she would have been well satisfied to give him one of her daughters to wife.

'Marie looks charming—dear girl,'

thought his proud mother; and I am sure he is very attentive and polite'—which, of course, was true, for Morewood was a gentleman.

Janetta had got, for her neighbor, a Sir Granville Granly, a handsome dissipated looking man of seven or eight and twenty.

He, too, was a bachelor, and again the mothers heart beat high.

With her youngest daughter's neighbor she was not so perfectly well-pleased.

He was a handsome, jolly-faced young man, with broad shoulders, blue eyes, and splendid teeth, which he was constantly showing as he laughed his hearty, ringing laugh.

He was not more than four or five and twenty and his name was Harry Rolleston.

He was the nephew of old Squire Rolleston, who lived at a broken-down old manor house, half-a-dozen miles away.

He had neither wealth nor title, and Mrs. Muggleton did not care to see her pretty youngest daughter chatting so familiarly with him.

Vi did look pretty, very pretty with her dimpled mouth, and bright color and sweet laughing eyes.

There was one other person at the table whom Mrs. Muggleton watched with keen interest—namely, for the matter of that, was the chief object of interest to everyone present.

This was Lillian Delisle, gowned in pure white, with no touch of color about her save her gleaming golden hair.

She looked like a lily in her pure whiteness with that single dash of gold.

She was the cynosure of all eyes; for it had begun to be whispered, in the neighborhood, that she was to be Lady Vere.

Even Mrs. Muggleton had heard the rumor, and had parted with that sweet glow of hers which had pictured one of her own girls as mistress of Vivian Court.

There was no formal engagement.

Indeed as a matter of fact Sir Gerald, passionately in love though he was, had never breathed another word of his passion to Lillian since that day when he had spoken in the park, and she bade him take time to consider and reflect.

But, although no formal announcement had been made, it was clear to every body that Miss Delisle occupied no ordinary position at the Court.

Lady Ruth treated her as a friend and equal, and Sir Gerald's devotion could be read in his eyes.

One other personage at the dinner-table deserved attention.

This was the Reverend Augustus Tiptaft a clergyman.

A tall, finely-built man a little over thirty years of age, clean-shaven with a smooth pink skin, very fine teeth, light grey eyes, and beautifully-arranged light brown hair.

Most people considered him handsome; but he was admired by women more than by men.

There was a sleekness about his smooth, admirably-preserved complexion, and a look in that light grey eye, which made men 'ware of the Reverend Augustus.'

For the rest, he was of good family—the nephew of an earl—and most punctilious in the observance of his priestly duties.

After dinner, when the men came into the drawing room, Mrs. Muggleton watched anxiously to see how they would comport themselves.

A little to her disappointment, Morewood did not join her eldest daughter; instead, he found a vacant place beside Lady Ruth.

Sir Granville sauntered up to Janetta, and Harry Rolleston annexed Vi in the boldest, easiest fashion in the world.

For a minute or two, it seemed as though the eldest Miss Muggleton was to be left alone, but the Reverend Mr. Tiptaft, spying the vacant place on the couch beside her, slid gently into it, and commenced a conversation in soft, bland tones.

Thus the Muggleton family were flattered on to the treacherous waters of society.

And there, for the present, we may safely leave them.

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CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE LANE.

It was nearly midnight when Morewood left the Court.

He had driven himself over in his dog-cart, crying but hilly for the attendance of servants when he could do without them.

And now, on the homeward journey, he was giving a lift to Mr. Tiptaft, who had walked over from Little Cleeve.

'I can drop you at your rectory without going two hundred yards out of my way,' he had said, good-naturedly.

And the reverend gentleman had accepted the offer with alacrity.

As they drove through the moon-lit park, Mr. Tiptaft was the first to speak.

'What do you think of our new neighbors?' he said.

'What, the Muggletons?' 'Yes.'

'The men himself I like. I think him a fine, hearty, honest fellow—a diamond in the rough, but a diamond after all. I wish there were more men like him. I mean, in his genuine honesty, and in his plain common sense.'

'Yes, I should say he is honest,' said Mr. Tiptaft, very much as though he considered honesty was poor Mr. Muggleton's only virtue. 'And the women of the family,' he resumed, after a pause, 'what do you think of them?'

'Oh, they are right enough. Mrs. Muggleton hasn't the repose of a Vere de Vere perhaps—a little fidgety and over-anxious I thought; but she's a pleasant, good-hearted sort of creature. And as to the girls, they're really rather nice—the young one especially. It's quite a pleasure to watch her. One doesn't often see such a bright, pretty, unaffected little thing.'

'H'm! it was one of the elder ones you sat next to, at dinner, wasn't it?'

'Yes, Lady Cantrip says she used to be called Lillie, but that they re-christened her Marie when they went to France. But you know what a spiteful old gossip she is. Upon my word, I ought to be ashamed of repeating what she says.'

'Then you admire Miss Marie?' 'Oh, I can't go so far as that! She seemed a pleasant young woman; and will be still pleasant, I dare say, when she gets a little more used to their new position here. But, to tell you the truth, I didn't take much notice of her. Now you did, I fancy. You were sitting with her the greater part of the evening.'

Odd though it may seem, the reverend gentleman did not care for this allusion.

He was visibly discomposed, and cleared his throat several times before he spoke again.

Then it was to say—'Upon the whole, then, you think they may be received into society?'

Morewood turned and looked at him in surprise—perhaps, secretly, a little in disgust as well.

'Received into society!' he repeated. 'My dear fellow, of course they may.'

Mr. Tiptaft made a little deprecating gesture.

'Oh, pray don't think I say a word against it!' he exclaimed, hurriedly. 'That would ill beseem my profession.'

'I hope I shall never be ashamed of knowing a man like Muggleton,' said Morewood with decision.

'And you would not hesitate to marry into such a family?'

'Ah, that's another thing! One chooses one's wife a little differently from how one chooses one's friends.'

'Yes, to be sure. You are quite right. Upon the whole I agree with you, perfectly. These people are worthy people, and it behooves us, as Christians, to give them the right hand of fellowship. But we cannot bind our eyes to the fact they are not—exactly the sort of people we should care to unite ourselves to in marriage.'

'Of course I, as a minister of religion, am bound to show them every courtesy. Indeed, I shall make a point of visiting them very frequently, and of doing everything in my power to make their residence among us agreeable. So much, I take it, Christian charity demands. A clergyman, Mr. Morewood, must needs make himself "all things to all men." I do not forget what I owe to the Muggletons as their parish priest. The Towers is in my parish, you know. They shall not find me lacking in my duty.'

The reverend gentleman spoke with unctuous solemnity.

His sleek, smooth face looked absolutely smug as he turned it sentimentally towards the full bright moon.

Morewood set him down, in his own mind, as a humbug.

He would have liked him better if he had not talked so much about his duties as a Christian; and he wondered, vaguely, what he was driving at.

Certainly, he was very far from guessing the plans which, at that moment, filled Mr. Tiptaft's mind.

Having made diligent inquiries, he had discovered that Mr. Muggleton was able to bestow on each of his daughters a fortune amounting to close upon a million pounds.

This enormous wealth had so stirred the heart of the rector of Little Cleeve, that he had forthwith conceived the ambitious project of annexing one of those millions for his own special benefit.

He was aware, however, that this might be a risky feat to accomplish.

Other men would be in pursuit of the heiresses—probably men who had far more to offer in exchange than he.

Although he was the nephew of an earl, the earl was only an Irish one, and a battered, disreputable old rake at that.

Nothing was to be got by his influence, and not much from his name, even with the appendage of a title.

Of private fortune, the Reverend Augustus had not a penny.

The living of Little Cleeve brought him in barely a six hundred a-year, and his abilities were not a type to mark him for rapid promotion in the church.

Clearly, he had not much to offer in exchange for a wife with a million pounds.

Two qualities, however, he did possess

in perfection—a selfish cunning, and an egotism conceit—very valuable qualities as men have found them in all ages of the world.

Many men knew on which side his bread was buttered, and deemed, moreover, that he deserved more of the 'butter' than his fellows, that man was the Reverend Augustus Tiptaft.

Sitting at Sir Gerald's dinner-table, he had feared that John Morewood intended to 'make the running' for Marie Muggleton; and hence the gentle 'pumping' to which he was subjecting him during this homeward drive.

Well enough he knew he could never compete with the master of Beech Royal; and so he endeavored to give him a distaste for the pursuit from the very first, while reserving to himself the privilege—as an exercise of Christian virtue—of being as intimate with the millionaire's family as he might choose.

Morewood, dreaming nothing of what was passing through this 'great little mind' fell into a reverie as soon as the reverend gentleman relapsed into silence.

It the truth must be told, his thoughts were of Lillian Delisle.

He was recalling her as she had looked that night in her grand, rare loveliness.

He was asking himself whether he could be quite content to know she was to be Sir Gerald's wife.

Very deep in thought was he as the dog-cart passed out of the park, and bowed smilingly along a lane, which lay bathed in the moonlight, in spite of the trees arching overhead.

A plantation ran on one side of the lane.

A sound, as of someone breaking through the undergrowth, made him look in the direction whence it came, and as he looked, the blood rushed madly to his heart, and he could feel himself turning.

We might his heart give a mighty throb, and he stand still, for, just inside the plantation not a dozen yards away from him, stood Madeline Winter—the woman he had assisted to escape—the murderess of Miss Marshall—the sister of Lillian Delisle.

One moment—no more—she stood there, and then swiftly and silently, she turned away, and was immediately lost to sight among the trees.

Brief as had been his glance at her, he knew it was impossible he could be deceived.

The moon had shone full upon her face, making it appear very pale—as it had appeared on that never to be forgotten night.

Her eyes—those strangely thrilling, soul haunting eyes—had looked straight into his own.

Whether the recognition had been mutual he could not tell; but the woman had looked at him fully, and then had disappeared as though anxious to escape.

'Great Heavens! what is the doing here?' he muttered, almost aloud in his excitement. He feared his companion must notice how disturbed he was; but he need not have feared.

The Reverend Augustus was absorbed in blasphemous calculations of his own.

He had not even seen the face in the plants on.

If Morewood had been alone, he would have got down from the dogcart, and attempted to find the woman; but he could not do this now without offering some explanation to Mr. Tiptaft.

And what explanation could he give? Indeed, what good could he do, even if he found the woman?

Unless he were prepared to give her up to justice—which, assuredly, he was not—what had he to do with her?

Accordingly, he drove on through the moonlight, and set down Mr. Tiptaft at his neat rectory, and then, full of thought, continued his own way home.

But, all through that night, and in the morning, too, he was oppressed by a feeling that the appearance of Madeline Winter boded evil—evil to his friend Sir Gerald—evil to Lillian Delisle.

'I had hoped she was at the other end of the world,' he muttered vexedly, to himself. 'Heavens! what a strange thing that I should be concerned in an affair like this! What a pity it is the guilty woman did not die. How much better for all parties concerned if she were lying in that grave yonder.'

Then, again, the question forced itself upon him—

'Why had she come to Hampshire—to this particular spot, of all others in the world? Surely she must know that here she was most likely to be detected? Could it be to see her sister she had come?'

It was possible, but, surely, not probable, seeing that Lillian did not to much as know she was alive.