

CHAPTER IV.

MARY'S "LANES."



IN the morning following her arrival at Thetfield Stella of course took the opportunity of pouring into Mary's ear the story of her own grievances, and of Mrs. Brookes' foolishness.

"Altogether you can understand how uncomfortable it has been for me," she concluded. "Without Guy, indeed, I don't know what I should have done. But he is just the same as he always was, and as good as a second brother."

"As perfect as Jack, in fact?" Mary insinuated slyly. But that was a heresy by no means allowed to pass unrebuked.

"How can you? Nobody ever has been, or ever will be, my boy's equal. And don't you think that he's growing quite handsome, Mary, lately? Really, since his moustache has come——"

"You absurd child!" her much-amused sister broke in. "You couldn't think more of Jack if he were your husband!"

"Husband indeed!" with the contempt of the unattached maiden for that, as yet, unknown article. Then, with a change of tone, as she glanced out of the window, "Here comes *your* husband, though, and his brother with him. They're not one scrap alike, Mary. What a nice man Dr. Jaxon is!"

"Thanks, dear, for the compliment to Walter." Then, seeing Stella's face of dismay, she laughed. "Silly girl! Of course I understand. For one thing, Harry isn't a quarter as good-looking as my man, are you, Harry?" as the pair entered.

"Not a quarter," he responded with readiness. "Oh yes; I distinctly caught your civil speech whilst I was in the hall," in answer to her stare of surprise. She had not bargained for such quickness of hearing. "But where are the bairns? I promised May to bring some 'shoc'let cweams' as she calls them, and I should like her to appreciate the manner in which I keep my vows."

He was already depositing various bags, each containing about half a pound of goodies, upon a neighbouring table, whilst Mary regarded him with smiling eyes. His was indeed a pleasant face to look at, with its broad brow, and clever, keen expression. But the features were too strongly marked for beauty, and beside the tall figure of the vicar he looked, as indeed he was, distinctly short, far below even middle height.

"I trust you don't intend to give that solid mass of indigestion and general seediness to my youngest born, Hal! And you a doctor, too, who ought to know better," remarked Mr. Jaxon, as the sound of chattering voices outside became audible. "Why, May would gobble the lot up in five minutes, and never dream of the consequences. However, you'll be on the spot to physic her for nothing, which is an undoubted consolation."

"Only he never considers any less abstruse subjects than nerves and brains worthy of men," interposed Mary. "Come, my darlings. Why, May, what's the matter?"

For that young person had paused in the middle of the carpet, with large round eyes fixed upon Stella's face, whilst every sign of trouble was written upon her own. Finally the tears rose, and began to roll silently down her cheeks.

"My pet, what is it?" from the anxious young mother. "See what uncle has for you, May. Don't cry."

The sound of rustling paper had an undeniably cheering effect, and one glance inside the packet offered readily by her devoted relative banished the yet remaining gloom. It was not until after a very large chocolate oystershell had disappeared that May was able sufficiently to disengage her mind from her appetite to remember her sadness again. Then, however, heaving a big sigh, she remarked, "May fought it was Godmovv."