

Not that she ever met with the least unkindness, indeed her position in this family was a very happy one; she had everything her own way, and was treated by the countess with that stately consideration which so perfectly well-bred a woman could not fail to show to the meanest member of her household. But, necessarily, Miss Thelluson's life was one of complete isolation; so that but for her pupils, their naughtinesses and goodnesses, she would have ceased to recognise herself as one of the great human brotherhood, and felt like a solitary nomad, of no use and no pleasure to anybody. A sensation which, morbid and foolish as it may be, is not rare to women who are neither old nor young—who, on the verge of middle age, find themselves without kith or kin, husband or child, and are forced continually to remember that the kindest of friends love them only with a tender benevolence, as adjuncts, but not essentials, of happiness. They are useful to many—necessary to none; and the sooner they recognise this, the better.

As Miss Thelluson kissed the little Ladies Daere in their beds—where, somewhat in defiance of the grand nurse, she insisted upon going to them every night—the thought of that helpless baby, her own baby—for was not Rosa's child her very flesh and blood?—came across her in a flash of sunshiny delight, that warmed her heart through and through. She began to plan and to dream, until at the end of that solitary evening walk through the park, which she seldom missed,—it was sad and soothing after the cares of the day,—she began to fancy she had not half appreciated Mr. Rivers's proposal, or responded to it half warmly enough; and to fear, with an almost ridiculous apprehension, that he might change his mind, or that something might happen to prevent the scheme from being carried out. And she waited with a nervous anxiety, for which she laughed at herself, the return post by which she had requested him to write his final decision.

It came in six lines:—

"I shall expect you, as soon as you can make it practicable. You will be like her lost mother to my poor little girl; and, as for me, my wife's sister shall be to me exactly as my own."

Hannah wondered a little how much his own sisters were to him; whether it was the close, affectionate bond—so free yet so strong—which had always been her unknown ideal of fraternal love, or the careless tie, less of sympathy than of habit and familiarity, such as she often saw it in the world—for she had seen a good deal of the world, more or less since she had been a governess. Also, just a little, she wondered whether, with the best intentions, it was possible to create an artificial bond where the real one did not exist, and how soon she should learn to feel at ease with Mr. Rivers, as much as if he had been her born brother.

But these speculations were idle; time would decide all things. Her only present thought need be that the die was cast; there was no drawing back now. She had, as speedily as possible, to arrange her own affairs; and first to give "warning"—as servants say—to Lady Dunsmore.

This was not exactly a pleasant task, for the countess and her governess had always got on together remarkably well: the one