

and her voice, when she had to speak, just like that of any other dinner-table guest, who joined placidly, or carelessly, or combatively, in the conversation that was going on. It was best so; best to buckle on at once the armour that, in all probability, she would have to wear through life.

Lord Dunsmore seemed hopeful of his cause. He had entered into it, unlike many others, from purely impersonal motives—from a simple sense of right and justice; and he had a strong faith, he said, that the right would conquer at last.

“Not,” he added laughing, “that I want to compel every man to marry his deceased wife’s sister, as some people seem to think I do; I am sure I have not the slightest wish ever to marry mine! But I consider all restrictions upon marriage made by neither God nor nature, a mistake and a wrong. And any law which creates a false and unnatural position between man and woman is an equal wrong. Let there be no shams. Let a man have his natural mother, sister, wife, but no anomalous relationships which pretending to all, are in reality none of the three.”

“And,” said Lady Dunsmore, mischievously, “such is the nature of man, that when all these pretty pretences were broken down, and a man must either marry a lady or have nothing to say to her, I believe he would choose the latter course. You are such contradictory creatures, you men, that I suspect as soon as all of you might marry your wives’ sisters, you would none of you desire to do it! But, come, we ladies have had enough of the Marriages Bill, though everybody must put up with it in this house; for when my husband gets a hobby he rides it to death. I ride with him, too, on this one,” she added, as stepping aside to let her matron guests pass into the drawing-room, she quietly, and without any apparent intention, took hold of Miss Thelluson’s hand. There was something in the warm, firm clasp, so sympathetic, that for very gratitude Hannah could have wept.

The subject ended with the closing of the dining-room door; no one suspecting for a moment that one guest present had a vital interest therein. The ladies gathered round the fire, and the countess, who was as popular and agreeable with her own sex as she was with gentlemen, began talking gaily of other things. And so Hannah’s ordeal, from which no one could save her, from which it would have been dangerous to attempt to save her, passed by for the time being.

It was a very happy evening; not exactly a family evening—the public life the Dunsmares led precluded that—but with a great deal of familiness about it; more than Hannah had ever imagined could be, in the days when she sat aloof in her attic parlour, and spent her lonely evenings, empty of love, and feeling that love would never revisit her more. Now, when she saw Lord Dunsmore speak caressingly to his wife, and watched one young couple slip away into the inner parlour—Lady Dunsmore had a proverbial faculty of allowing young people to fall in love at her house; not make a marriage, but really fall in love—Hannah remembered, with a strange leap of the heart, that her love-days, too, were to come—not past.

Yes, she had been loved—she was loved—even like these. She had felt once—just once—Bernard’s arms close around her, and his