

"I quite think Miss Brookes needs a change," he said. "Indeed, only yesterday I was urging her to accept Mrs. Jaxon's invitation to Thetfield. Have you written yet to tell them to expect you, Stella? You know, Countess, I am a kind of relative, being so old a friend, and have to look after her in her brother's absence."

Helen's eyes, full of a look of baffled anger, were fixed upon him. But she said nothing, only subsided upon a low stool, and took up the exquisite embroidery which—as she never tired of explaining—she had learned to do in Russia.

"No," from Stella timidly. "But—"

"Then I would write to-day." And his significant smile added strength to his words. "Suppose you scribble a little note now, whilst I talk to the Countess? How soon can you be ready to start? By to-morrow? Wednesday is a very good day for a journey, I always think."

His brotherly manner was just what it ought to have been, just too what Stella needed to support her. She walked across to the writing-table with animation.

"I'll post it," declared Guy, taking possession of the note when finished. And thus the die was cast.

Only even as he walked to the pillar-box, with the envelope still in his hand, he found himself wondering whether he had done wisely in thus acting upon the spur of the moment. Certainly some sort of deliverance was necessary for Stella. But whether the visit of a friend to her might not have been a better arrangement than this virtual capitulation he could not determine.

Yet the letter travelled to Yorkshire by that night's mail. He found it impossible to suggest any disappointment which might again cause a cloud to gather upon Stella's face.

As to Mrs. Brookes when she heard, first from Helen and then from Stella, of the bold way in which matters had been brought to a crisis, her indignation rose high, higher indeed than was quite compatible with caution. For she gave Stella a broad hint of what, at present, she had not meant to tell her.



"HELEN KNELT IN FRONT OF THE GIRL."

"Just when you 'ave such a chance, too, a chance that don't come twice in a lifetime," she grumbled. "To marry 'into a fambly like theirs! A countess for a sister-in-law, and a real gentleman for a 'usband! You sha'n't blight your 'own prospects, so there! You'll stay at 'ome along o' me, miss!"

But that was a speech that roused even Stella to protest.

"Nothing in the world would induce me to accept Mr. Clive," she said. "And Mary will expect me now. If I don't go I'm sure she will come and fetch me herself."

This, as Mary Jaxon was no favourite with her step-mother, had the desired effect.

When, however, only two or three days after Stella's departure, Guy's conscience imposed upon him the unpleasant duty of calling upon Mrs. Brookes and personally observing how affairs were going on at Kingston Villa, he did begin very gravely to regret the impulse which had moved him to despatch Stella to her sister. For he found that in her absence the Clive interest was flourishing fast and furiously.

"It was quite too sad to think of our dear Madame all by herself; so lonely, so *triste*!" said Helen, a malicious gleam of triumph in her expression. "So we, Caryl and myself, we have given up our rooms next door, and come to look after her. It was wise? You agree with me?"

Which he certainly did. Very wise—for them.