

After half an hour's pleasant chat, dinner was announced.

'I regret that my son's absence,' observed my hostess—this was the first allusion made to Jack—'will necessitate my calling upon the kindness of my guest to assist me at table; but by two such old friends,' turning towards Mr. Briarton and myself, 'I am sure no apology will be required.'

My heart sank within me at these words. A pretty situation truly for a person who had never had a carving knife in his hand. But I replied that I should be happy to make myself of any possible use (alas! was I fast becoming an adept in the art of easy lying?) and that it would be a great pleasure to me.

With a steak or a plate of chops, I felt I might achieve a tolerable success; but with anything requiring animal dismemberment, my case was hopeless.

Mr. Briarton was placed at one end of the table, and I at the other. There was a large dish before me, and with the gloomiest forebodings I contemplated the cover that concealed the dreadful secret which lay beneath. Indeed, so disquieted had I become that I did not observe a strange young lady in the room; and I was only made aware of her presence by someone's saying, 'This is Cornelia; you have of course heard of *her*.'

I rose to my feet, blushing deeply, stammered an apology, bowed towards that person, and said:

'Oh! yes, indeed, I have heard of Cornelia—frequently.'

I was proceeding, in evident confusion, of ideas, to say something about my admiration for that noblest of Roman matrons and brightest ornament of her sex, when the waiter, removing the cover before me, revealed a pair of roast ducks, confirming my worst apprehensions, and effectually destroying all my interest in ancient history.

I looked anxiously at Mr. Briarton's dish of roast beef, as I took up my knife and fork and proceeded to mutilate in the most masterly manner

the poor amphibious animals which had certainly offended me in no way that they should have been subjected to such barbarous treatment at my hands. And after supplying the wants of those who partook of my dish—Mr. Briarton having stiffly declined duck—I sat down flushed and exhausted, for I had laboured dreadfully over the refractory animals—whether because the ducks were tough or my knife dull, I didn't know—and proceeded to satisfy what little of my own appetite remained to me.

Although my hostess and her two charming daughters exerted their utmost powers in making themselves agreeable, I was far from feeling entirely comfortable. I wished Harry would come; but his absence I could easily account for, as he had been undoubtedly detained at Toulouse; but why Jack Morley himself should have been absent without leaving either apology or explanation, was something I could not understand. But as they were plain, old-fashioned people, this was perhaps nothing more than plain, old-fashioned behaviour on his part; though even with my limited knowledge of the usages of polite society, I could not help feeling somewhat annoyed too, by Mr. Briarton's conduct; though I took not the slightest notice of him, and I hoped that Miss Morley, likewise, was too intelligent and discriminating a person to care anything for such a puppy.

Our conversation turned chiefly upon books, and covered a wide range of subjects. 'Daniel Deronda,' 'Helen's Babies,' 'Through the Dark Continent,' and other popular works of the day came under review; upon all of which my two younger entertainers expressed the most intelligent and correct opinions. Their intellectual gifts indeed seemed not one whit less than their graces of conversation and manner, and I felt that I might, upon the whole, have passed a not altogether unpleasant evening had it not been for one unfortunate occurrence.