

deep a *h*interest in my business. Of course I comprehend your *disinterested*," with a sneer, "*h*object in all this. Come to consider though, doesn't it *h*appear to you that I am *h*able to manage my *h*own *h*affairs? I *o*pe you don't suppose that I'm in my second child^hood yet, or got softening of the brain?"

The real question in his mind was whether she ever had had any brain at all. But how to say so? However, the lady proceeded, the pink rose in her cap nodding an emphasis to her words from the position it had taken up over her right ear (it was one of Mrs. Brookes' singularities that her headgear was always crooked, invariably gaudy, and very often rather dirty.)

"If I *ad*, you see," with rising temper, "there are *h*other *h*advisers to *om* I should go than you, Mr. Ryder. Clergymen ain't supposed to compre^hend figures, and I don't doubt that you're *h*only ekill to the rest in that. Now please take it from me once for all——"

"Good-morning! And who is it that is bothering the good friend at this time of the day, when one ought by rights to be still invisible? Surely I never overheard the commencement of a business discussion?"

And with the greatest coolness Caryl Clive slipped into an armchair, and fixed his glasses at a convenient angle for the inspection of the curate. He had altogether the air of being so very much at home that Guy experienced an unpleasant shock. But Mrs. Brookes showed no surprise. Instead, she recovered her temper upon the spot, and began to laugh.

"Oh, Mr. Clive, 'ow you startled me! But I'm glad you've come. Mr. Ryder fears that I *am* a person no longer to be trusted with the control of my *h*own little money," she explained merrily. "Yet there *ave* been times when you *aven't* suspected me of squandering it?—eh, Mr. Ryder?"

The allusion was pointed. Up went Guy's shoulders in that familiar shrug.

"If parochial charities are under discussion—but pardon me, Mrs. Brookes. I see that you are determined not to listen. I only hope that all may turn out as well as you anticipate. I suppose that I shall find Stella in the drawing-room?"

And he waited for nothing further, but was already out of hearing before Mrs. Brookes could shout his name after him. "Mr. Ryder! Mr. Ryder!"

Clive, who had followed the retreating form with a frown, rose deferentially.

"You want him? Permit me to summon him."

But she shook her head.

"No, no. It don't signify now, Mr. Clive. You stop 'ere and tell me about the last returns from the Zarina. It was only that I won't 'ave 'im a-'unting *h*up Stella like this. *H*afters what you said to me a Toosday, I look on 'er as 'alf your wife a'ready. So——"

"Helen is with Stella," he returned significantly. "Still I can but thank you for your great kindness. And now as to the Zarina. By the way, the shares are being snapped up in the most marvellous manner. If you really want some I should not recommend much further delay. A certain return of sixteen per cent. is not to be obtained safely every day."

And so their talk proceeded, whilst Guy was each moment becoming more and more convinced that he would have no opportunity to-day of informing Stella of his ill success. For the Countess Helen had entirely taken possession of Miss Brookes, and appeared by no means desirous of relinquishing the charge.

Her lank, thin arms were clasped round Stella's waist as Helen knelt in front of the girl, and her long, pale, and singularly plain face was raised towards Miss Brookes' rather disgusted visage when Guy entered the room. With a sigh of relief Stella seized the chance to free herself from that clinging embrace by rising to shake hands with the curate.

"Our dear Stella is not looking quite herself of late," the Countess remarked, as a promising opening for conversation. "You agree with me; is it not so? I have been trying to persuade her—ah, so hard!—to let me take her a little trip. Variety, alteration of air and scene, don't you call it? And the dear Madame, she thinks quite as I do."

Perhaps it was owing to her longer residence abroad that Helen's speech was even more decidedly foreign than that of Caryl. But that was a speculation that at present did not interest either Stella or Guy. She was feeling too much alarmed lest such a scheme should actually be carried out. And he was no less startled by the idea of the possibilities which it afforded. Happily, however, he was a man of resource.