A GREAT MISTAKE.

So they began their lives together. The old house was transformed. The gladness of a girl's presence filled it with sweet and wholesome influences. George's early breakfast was a pleasant event now that he had Lucy in her fresh cambric dress and trimly coiled hair to attend him, to pour out his coffee, to have the newspaper ready, to nod a bright good-bye from the steps as the horses came round to the door and he drove away to his work.

Mrs. March, who was often late for breakfast, declared, laughing, that she was not used to getting up at such unearthly hours; but Lucy's simple convent habits clung to her in many things; and, as she was always down stairs and in the garden long before even the Doctor made his appearance, he was sure of one companion at least to his early meal.

It was so natural to the girl to be busy that she was falling by degrees into her old habit of waiting on every one; she was perpetually running up and down stairs, and making herself a little smiling slave to her cousin and to Mrs. Ludlow.

But after a while this seemed to alter. George interfered quietly but with determination. Lucy began to find that she was to be waited on a little now.

Batters used to look to her wardrobe for her when she was out. The girl found her dresses brushed and smoothed, or laid out ready at dressing time; the buttons were always on her boots; all needful mending was carefully attended to.

Edward, the Doctor's own man, was ready at a moment's notice to go on Miss Lucy's errands, saving her little feet many a weary tramp, to fetch her a cab in wet weather when she was obliged to go out, to protect her with an umbrella as she got in and when she returned. Lucy would blush and protest, having become unused to such services during her stay in King's Road; but Edwards would state in his grave way that he had the Doctor's orders, though from his alacrity it was plain that the staid man servant obeyed these orders with satisfaction to himself.

The consequence of all this was that Lucy found time to read more and to practice her music, which she had sadly neglected. She found that George liked to hear her sing, and she began to hunt up all the songs she knew. She was able to be with Bee a great deal more too, which was a delight to both the girls, and sometimes she went away to Croome for several days at a time. Mrs. Ackroyd was always begging for her. The quiet little woman declared that she could not "take to" Mrs. March somehow, much as she liked the Doctor, but the children were always clamouring for Lucy.

"Who will see to your breakfast, you poor neglected George?" Mrs. March cried, with smiling dismay, when Lucy was first invited to go to Green Knowe. And Lucy, coloring, declared eagerly that she would just as soon stop at home.

But the Doctor would not hear of this. He knew that Mr. Olifaunt, the handsome rector, was often at Croome during Lucy's visits; but he resolved that he would carry out what he had begun, and think only of Lucy's happiness.

The girl's delight at returning was reward enough, after all, for his unselfishness. And indeed the house was not the same without her.

Her old pretty bloom and roundness were reviving rapidly in the rest and security of her new life. George had only to look at her, to hear how lightly she flew about the house, to see how bright she looked after her walks, and how easily she broke into a laugh, to know that she was happy in those days.

Chapter XLVII.

George March walked to church with his women kind and heard Lucy's voice in the hymns Edgar Bryer had no need any longer to make pilgrimages to St. Mark's in order to see his little blue-eyed divinity. It was a pretty family party, people said, and Mrs. March ought to be a very happy woman.

Indeed, Mrs. March looked as if she were. Naturally she was enjoying the agreeable excitement that had followed her return to Barlaston as a bride.

A good many entertainments had been given in her honor, at each of which she had worn a new gown from her tasteful trousseau and had excited a good deal of attention.

The Doctor was necessarily a great deal away from home during the day, and there was really very little to occupy his young wife's thoughts in the house so admirably managed by Mrs. Batters, so that Ada was free to amuse herself, and contrived to do so very well for some time by driving about in her pretty pony carriage—a gift from kind Tom Throgmorton to his wife's favorite—and by organising such parties of pleasure as were possible in the quiet old town.

Mrs. March indeed was rapidly becoming a small celebrity in Barlaston. Her appearance at St. Cloud's on Sunday was waited for as impatiently as a new number of the Young Lady's Gazette, and every one was talking of her delightful little dinners—every one, except perhaps Mrs. Batters, who at her age was to be excused for not altogether appreciating her mistress's new fangled ways, and who opened her provincial eyes somewhat widely at the cost of those apparently simple little banquets.

People, when they saw Ada's gray ponies driving about the streets and a graceful little lady, in a succession of charming toilettes, passing in and out of the shops or giving orders from her tiny carriage, used to look at each other and whisper eagerly that that was Mrs. March, and would point out, with never tiring interest, the fact that she was wearing another new bonnet.

Whenever the theater was open or there was a concert at the Town Hall, Mrs. March made up a party and secured a box; and what with her own striking dresses and the beauty of her cousin and Mrs. Throgmorton, her box generally attracted as much attention as the play itself or the music.

Wherever Bee went young Ackroyd was sure to follow. Jack Throgmorton was still away. He had not returned to Baslaston since the wedding, or he would doubtless have helped to swell the young matron's train. His mother's kind face was no longer clouded by the old anxiety on his account. George March learned from her than the boy had settled down to work in a London office and was behaving with unusual steadiness and moderation.

It really seemed as if the Doctor's marriage to Miss Ludlow had cleared the atmosphere of the little town in quite a remarkable way. Lucy often said to herself that every one seemed happier for it.

Of course the Doctor joined his wife's parties as in duty bound, if only for an hour. It was for his sake, as Ada gently explained to him and her friends, that she exerted herself to make her home pleasant and to bring some bright influences around him.

"Dear George works far, far too hard," she often said, with a sigh. "It is my duty to induce him to take a little relaxation now and then."

So George, coming home in the evening, would find quite a large group assembled in his wife's drawing room, drinking tea and chatting, and perhaps making a little music. Ada would give him her most comfortable chair and an affectionate smile, and would declare that there was to be no running away to that dreary study, that he must just stay and hear Minnie's last pretty ballad.

It was delightful, Mary Throgmorton declared, to see the Marches together. And Ada made the best little wife in the world.

Certainly Mrs. March was indefatigable in her exertions to render her husband's home as complete a contrast as possible to what it was before his marriage.

Her greatest difficulty, as she sometimes gaily asserted, was in finding civilized young men to help her in carrying out her devices. In London, she would add, there were always so many idle young fellows, well-dressed and well-mannered, who were only too glad to dance attendance on an agreeable young matron, with whom they were sure of nice little dinners, or a place in a box, or a seat in a carriage; but in Barlaston, the Doctor's wife protested, with a comical little air of dismay, the young men were shut up in offices all day long, and, when they came home, seemed to think that there was something immoral or "French" in making themselves decently serviceable or amusing to a married woman.

Ted Ackroyd's sudden departure from Barloston, a couple of months after her return, left Mrs. March in a worse case than ever in the matter of masculine escort. She could not help expressing a laughing wish to her cousin that the young man had waited until after Christmas at least to propose to Bee Throgmorton, and to be refused.

"I suppose it will break up the party at Croome," she added regretfully—"and I was looking forward to that for several agreeable reeruits—unless, indeed"—with a somewhat cold smile—"Bee intends to relent before then. I suppose she means to marry him eventually?"

"I don't know," answered Lucy sadly. "I think she is unhappy about it. I am glad he has gone away, poor fellow. It will give her time to think."

Poor Ted's flight cast a decided depression upon Mrs. March's hardly kept together little "party," as she was fond of calling the few young people who had leisure to share her amusements. There was no one who could take the place of the rich, good-looking young man who was wandering about aimlessly half over Europe in the vain endeavor to heal the wound in his faithful aching heart.

Neither Bee nor Lucy could fairly be said to be of Ada's party. They had their own occupations and interests, which seemed to grow more absorbing every day. Ada laughed at them gently sometimes for their girlish enthusiasm.

"What you are trying to do," she said, not unkindly, "is being better done all round you by properly organized societies. Why, don't you send your babies to Janet Bryer's crèche, and your cooking and sewing girl to Mrs. Ackroyd's industrial schools?"

Bee and Lucy were a little crushed by this at first, and thought it only fair to consider the matter carefully.

They attended one or two meetings in the school rooms near St. Chad's. A great many ladies were there. Janet read aloud a long report, and, when the talking became too loud, rapped on the floor with her unbrella, and cried sharply, "Ladies, will you please come to order for a minute!" Votes of thanks or expressions of regret at the absence of one or two popular members were proposed and seconded, and the girls came home, feeling very warm and tired and amused.

They told George afterwards that they would rather keep on in the old way, feeling that their efforts reached a few of those who would have been scared away by the rules and regulations of the societies.

"We have no lists of contributions to print and nothing to talk about; so we have more time and money to spare for actual work," they decided; and so they went their way, busy and happy together.

Luck felt bound to accompany her cousin when Ada wished it; but she found the perpetual shopping and driving about the streets so monotonous, and it seemed to her such an utter waste of time, that all her good nature and politeness failed to conceal the fact.

"If we might go out into the country roads and lanes," she sometimes said in confidence to Bee, "I should like it very much; but to spend two or three hours of each day buying a yard of ribbon seems so stupid! And people stare at us so! I wonder if they are as sick of seeing our faces as I am sick of seeing theirs! I believe I know every soul in Barlaston by sight."

Something of this Ada extracted from her cousin before long, and the confession was received with perfect good humor.

"Poor Lucy!" she said, smiling. "You shall not be victimized any longer. I think I shall cultivate Minnie Bryer; she is not too strong minded to care for pretty things, and she has a brother who might be made useful with a little training. At present he is devoured by mauvaise honte; but, if he can be cured of his tendency to blush whenever he meets us, I think I shall appoint him, faute de mieux, my aide-de-camp, vice Ted Ackroyd, absent without leave."

"What do you want poor Edgar Bryer for?" Lucy asked, opening her blue eyes in sober surprise.

"Oh, to run messages, and buy tickets, and turn over my music! What does one ever want a man for? As dear George is too busy to go about with his poor little wife, I must only supply the deficiency as well as I can!"

Minnie Bryer was by no means loath to take Lucy's place in the pony carriage and elsewhere. Her life was as uneventful as that of most girls in a quiet provincial town; and, her sister Janet having become more decidedly serious than ever since Doctor March's marriage, the poor little country belle was left a good deal to her own resources.

Mrs. Bryer felt that it was a very good thing for Minnie to have the opportunity of going about with the fashionable Mrs. March, and of making the most of her youth and good looks.

Accordingly the Doctor's wife and the younger Miss Bryer became very intimate in a surprisingly short time. They fell into a way of dressing a good deal alike—Ada had great taste and skill in millinery matters, and contrived to produce a great effect at small expense—and always in advance of the mode, thanks to their diligent perusal of the Paris fashion book, for which Mrs. March subscribed.

They spent their mornings together very often, while George was on his rounds and Lucy reading to Mrs. Ludlow upstairs; and, after luncheon, when the pony carriage drove up to the door, they went out very gay and smiling to display the result of their industry and to execute a great many small purchases in the principal streets.

The drive generally ended by a turn through the less ornamental thoroughfares by which the Barlaston young men came home from business. Edgar Bryer was among the very first to appear always, and Mrs. March fell into a habit of picking him up and driving him with his sister back to Beaudesert gardens for tea and a little duet singing before the young people went home to dinner.

"It looks well for dear Minnie's sake," she said to her husband, who had wondered rather scornfully what Ada could find in such a cub. "And poor Edgar is useful, if not ornamental."

Doctor March supposed that it was only natural that Ada should desire to amuse herself. "Let her be happy in her own way, poor little soul," he said to himself. "It seems rather an unmeaning way, but I suppose it is all right—and I am no judge of women's fancies."

In truth he did not yet dare to speak earnestly to the woman he had married, nor to attempt to draw her nearer to him. He was waiting until he should be able to do so with a clearer conscience, until he had subdued all lingering remnants of a feeling which was a wrong now to his wife.

The young man was honestly trying to do his duty, and hoping one day to find quiet and contentment, if not happiness, in the doing of it; but there was so much that was painful as well as sweet in his new life that the struggle proved a hard one, almost too hard for his strength; and he was thankful if at first he succeeded merely in hiding his suffering and in presenting a decent calm to his wife and to the world.

So Mrs. March's blushing aide de camp began to haunt the house in the square at every moment which was not absorbed by business. It seemed to George that he was always walking over the young fellow's long legs when he came home of an evening. Ada was teaching Edgar some songs; and she was so eager for her pupil's progress that often she could spare only a nod and a smile for her husband, and it was Lucy who brought George his slippers and his cup of tea.

"You poor dear George!" Ada would say when her visitors were gone. "It is well you have Lucy to look after you a little. And really I am afraid poor Edgar is rather a hopeless pupil. He seems incapable of singing in tone."

She continued however to make something of a pet of the blushing boy, laughing kindly at his persistent devotion, and reading him the most charming elder sisterly lectures at times about his waste of time and neglect of his family.

The lectures did not appear to be productive of much effect. Edgar appeared only the more determined to persevere in his visits, in finding excuses for which he displayed considerable ingenuity.

On one or two occasions, when Mrs. March happened to be from home when he called, he worried poor Lucy by insisting shyly on waiting for her cousin rather than disappoint Minnie of the embroidery pattern for which she had sent him.

"He is dreadfully stupid, Ada!" Lucy complained. He never says a word, but sits and stares at you as if he were moonstruck!" "Oh, but that is because you don't understand how to talk to him!" declared Ada, smiling. "Edgar is quite agreeable, really, to those who understand him."

On a second and third repetition of this complaint from Lucy however, Mrs. March felt that it was time to scold her protege again and more seriously. He was evidently becoming reckless.

She made an appointment with him one evening. No one else was admitted, not even Minnie, to whom her friend had complained that morning of headache.

The weather was growing chilly, and in Mrs. March's pretty drawing-room a bright fire was burning, which flickered picturesquely among the gold frames and the blue and white china on the walls. Ada had put on a pretty velvet gown and fastened some roses in her belt.

Edgar found her sitting in a low chair holding a screen before her face in a hand that sparkled with rings, and with her small high-heeled shoes daintily posed on the fender stool.

"I am so glad you have come!" she said, giving him the little glittering hand and a pretty smile. "Come and sit down here by me. Yes, you may have the stool if you like. Perhaps such a humble position may reduce you to a properly submissive frame of mind and compel you to look up to me. Do you know that I am going to scold you Eddie?"

"Oh, Mrs. March!" Poor Edgar fidgeted on his stool, which was rather a precarious seat for a person of his robust proportions, and turned very red.

"Oh, you may call me Ada still!" said the young matron gently. "All my friends do; and I hope you and I are going to remain very good friends in spite of what I am going to say." As she spoke she laid a caressing hand for a moment on the boy's dark curly hair. "You promise me that; do you not?"

Edgar nodded. He felt decidedly ill at ease.

"Frankness is always best," Mrs. March went on, with just a shade of hesitation; "and I intend to be frank. I have always thought, Eddie, that you at least did not misunderstand me and my poor abused little London ways, and that I was therefore justified in admitting you to the intimacy which has been so pleasant to us both; has it not? But I am beginning to think I was mistaken."

"No; I give you my word, Mrs. March!" protested the boy eagerly.

"Of course I don't pretend to dislike devotion on the part of my aide-de-camp; but"—smiling prettily—"that distinguished officer, whoever he may be for the nonce, must temper his devotion with discretion. Now what is this I hear about your sitting out your Lucy's patience the other day when I was in Upper Brunswick street?"

The boy turned very red again.

"You know, Eddie, that will not do; and I am going to impose a little punishment, because it is not your first offense. We shall have people talking; and I think you must promise me not to come here quite so often."

"Oh, Mrs. March"—the boy started up from his stool, looming big and ruddy above her little flaxen head—"don't say that! I don't believe I could keep away now if I tried!"

"Poor boy," murmured his friend, looking up with her large calm eyes. "Not if I asked you to do so for my sake?"

"But why should you?" he persisted, eager and stammering. "I have never said a word—I never will, until you give me leave!"

"Eddie," protested Ada softly, "I really must not listen to this."

"I know the Doctor thinks I am a bit of a fool," Edgar went on impetuously, now that the ice was broken—"and of course I am young yet, and earn only ninety pounds a year; but I'd wait as long as ever he wished; and, if I only thought I was working for Lucy, I know I should get on—you'd see Mrs. March."

There was a little pause; then Mrs. March rose too, pushing away the footstool with a gentle movement of the foot:

"You foolish boy," she said, smiling. "Of course I found out your secret long ago; and you can judge for yourself whether I have been on your side or not."

"Oh, you have been awfully good, Mrs. March! I have been in love with her ever so long, and but for you I might never have met her to speak to."

"Yes; but you are going to undo it all, sir, if you persist in teasing poor Lucy with such long visits! It was to tell you so that I asked you to came this evening when I was alone—"

"You think she—she does not care for me?" cried the boy in an agony. "Oh, Mrs. March, if you would only say a good word for me, I—"

"Of course I will, you stupid boy—all in good time!" Mrs. March was getting towards the door with her awkward young visitor; and she laughed a little impatiently as he caught her hand in both of his. "There, there—you had better go now! I am sure I don't know what your mother would say to all this. I will write—I will sound Lucy and write to you. But pray go now, or dear George may come in! It would never do to tell him just yet. You must leave it all to me."

After that day young Bryer was seldom seen in Beaudesert Gardens or behind Mrs. March's pretty ponies.

A charming sisterly note had warned him in playful terms to absent himself for a while from the house in the square, where accordingly George was no longer compelled to listen to his singing of "Speak to me," or "A Te" every evening.

"He was getting quite too tiresome!" Ada declared to her husband when he remarked the lad's sudden disappearance. "I was obliged to send him away!"

Chapter XLVIII.

Quite a happy little lull fell upon the household at number nine after the dismissal of Edgar Bryer. It seemed so at least to the Doctor, though Ada frankly confessed with a pretty yawn that the days in Barlaston seemed twice as long as the days everywhere else.

"Poor Ada!" George answered with a kind smile. "You must try to find some work for yourself. There is never very much going on in a provincial town; and, if we were to made amusement our only aim, I am afraid we should all feel the days too long."

Ada took the little sermon quite good-temperedly, and declared that Lucy and Bee had left her nothing to do.

"Except to be happy, dear George," she added. "You don't think me very frivolous for enjoying the first few months of our married life in my own way? Remember what two sad years I spent before."

The Doctor smiled down at the gentle face uplifted to his, and told her that he was only too glad to see her happy. He had his own work to do; and had not much time for fretting or thinking. But, if he had had, he would have told himself in those days that he was not unhappy—not altogether sorry for the irrevocable step he had taken.

He had begun to believe at last that Lucy had never cared for him. The girl's sweet and cheerful directness with him, her renewed life and courage and color—all seemed to say that he had been mistaken, that she had sacrificed nothing in giving him to another woman, that, had he been free again, she would have been no nearer to him, but farther—much farther away. And, feeling this, George began to admit to himself that it was better to have Lucy for his friend and sister than to have let her go out of his life altogether, and to be ashamed of the lingering emotion which, in spite of better resolves, the girl's presence or voice still stirred within him.

Such emotion was a wrong done to Lucy, he knew, and was a breach of the brotherly faith and devotion he had pledged to her on that last sad day by the mere. Trusting to him entirely in her innocent security, the poor child had come into his house, and it was his duty to make that house her safest refuge.

The poor fellow tried hard to make a friend of his wife—tried to enter into her amusements, to talk to her in the long light evenings while they were alone and Lucy was watering her flowers in the cool of the day—tried to interest her in his plans, to busy her by degrees among his poor patients, to find in her a rational companion for his hours of rest.

Ada behaved charmingly—listened with pretty sympathy as she sat at work in a fresh and tasteful toilette; but she did not say very much. George could not always be sure that she had heard what he was saying. Sometimes he thought he saw her stifling a yawn, and then he would jump up and ask for some music, and, having listened dutifully in his turn for a while, he would take himself off to his tobacco scented study and his old shooting jacket and slippers.

Mrs. March had playfully insisted on her husband's dressing for dinner every day. George laughed, and pronounced it absurb for people in their position, but he gave in, as he did when possible to all his wife's wishes, and went through the little ceremony, no matter how tired or out of sorts he should be.

But in his study, a sombre book lined room opening upon the garden, he was free to pull off his white tie and fling aside his dress coat, and to sit with his heels on the window sill if he chose, smoking and dreaming, and watching the daylight fade above the ivied walls.

Sometimes Lucy was still among the gooseberry bushes and the roses, and he could see her standing with her pretty bronze head against the dying light, while the pigeons went whirring over the stable yard to roost, and the rustling old elm trees grew darker and darker in the dusk. She would come along between the box borders, carrying her watering pot, and holding her muslin skirt aside, quite unconscious of the heavy eyes that were watching her behind the wire blinds of the study.

Sometimes he could hear her singing the tunes he liked overhead, or perhaps she would knock at the door and ask him to come upstairs for some tea.

He did not know how frightened Lucy had been the first time she did this—she never understood why herself.

It was a night or two after the bride's return, and Ada had sent her cousin to call the Doctor out of his den. The room was full of smoke when Lucy entered in obedience to a deep "Come in," and the young man, in his comfortable old coat and slippers, was reading a newspaper, with one leg thrown over the arm of his chair.

He turned as she entered, throwing down the newspaper, and springing up with a kind, haggard smile.

"Come in, Lucy," he said, holding out his hand. "Do you dislike the smell of my pipe?"

Lucy answered somewhat incoherently, and ran back into the hall, shutting the door hastily behind her. She was trembling from head to foot as she leant against the old panelled wall; her heart was beating in great painful throbs. The same feeling had come upon her—only a hundred times stronger—as when she had first seen George carve and had eaten of his bread at the same table with him.

She had never before seen Doctor [illegible] out of the regulation garb which he [illegible] in common with other men in his hours [illegible] iness or in society, and the sight of [illegible] old gray coat and shabby slippers thrilled her with a quite indescribable emotion.

She blushed, and pressed her hands over her eyes; her cheeks were burning; a great rush of passionate pity and nameless yearning came over her. Then she heard the handle of the study door rattle behind her; and she flew breathlessly up stairs, not into the lamp lit drawing room, but higher still into her own cool and silent chamber, lighted only by the midsummer stars that were glimmering whitely beyond the wide open sash.

She went and knelt down by the window. The tops of the tall trees were rustling tranquilly in the dark; the windows opposite were lighted up here and there; a dog was barking far off; the sound of Ada's singing came floating up from below. It was all very still and sweet, and before very long the night air calmed the tremor in Lucy's veins.

"What was the matter with me?" she thought, breaking into an uneasy little laugh. "I must go down again. George will think I am crazy to run away from him like that."

George knew nothing of this while he was accusing himself of wronging Lucy with his useless regrets. It was the girl's sweet frankness and courage with him which touched him deepest.

"She thinks—Heaven bless her!—that there is some magic in the words of the marriage service, and that, when people utter them, they blot out everything that has gone before."

The poor fellow spoke with a bitter sadness; but he resolved that Lucy should never be undeceived if he could help it.

When the chilly evenings set in, there was no longer any white slim shape to flit along under the ivy wall and disturb him from his books and letters. He sat with drawn down blinds and lighted lamp then; and, for all his courage, he found it prudent even yet to spend a good deal of his leisure time alone with his pipe.

An agreeable diversion as it seemed to the doctor's wife, occurred just then in the arrival at Croome of Captain Sugden and one or two of his friends. Mrs Ackroyd had wanted to put them off, being in no mood to entertain strangers; but her husband, who had been much relieved by Bee's refusal of his son, was still cherishing plans for Ted's advancement, and had insisted on receiving Lady Sarah Vamneck's cousin and his friends.

The young men remembered very pleasantly their visit of the year before, and were by no means averse to shooting Mr. Ackroyds coverts again, or to meeting "that very handsome Miss Throgmorton" who had snubbed them all so unmercifully, or "that awfully pretty Miss Thrale" whose illness had put an end to the tableaux.

But a very different state of things reigned now in the old Queen Anne house. Poor Ted was still away, and no party had been brought together to meet them.

Mr. Ackroyd handed his guests over to the keepers every morning, and provided liberally for their comfort. Mrs. Ackroyd gave them a capital dinner in the evening, vanishing herself as soon as she decently could to her nursery, and not appearing again that night.

There was no denying that the evenings were terribly slow; the men were balked of the pretty faces they had expected, and the most highly spiced smoking room stories proved an unsatisfactory substitute for the pleasant little flirtations they had been looking forward to at the close of their day's work.

Mr. Ackroyd urged this point strenuously on his wife's attention, whereupon, though she secretly considered it heartless on her husband's part to desire to make merry in her poor boy's absence, a dinner party was given, which enabled Captain Sugden and his friends to renew their acquaintance with the charming girls they remembered with so much enthusiasm.

This was followed by other entertainments in town, by a dinner in Upper Brunswick street, a dance at Mrs. Bryer's, and by one of Mrs. March's dainty and exclusive little banquets in Beaudesert Gardens.

Those few weeks were the most brilliant of Ada's married life so far.

The weather happened to be wet and dismal, and the atmosphere of the old house at Green Knowe was correspondingly depressing. Mrs. March's drawing room appeared to the bored sportsmen a sort of oasis in the social desert; and Lucy's blue eyes shone brightly through the mists and showers of the country roads, luring them half unconsciously from turnip fields and fallows to still more seductive game in town.

All the afternoon there was a little bustle about the door of number nine. The T-cart from Croome would come dashing up crowded with well dressed men; the old door resounded with vigorous knocks; and now the Doctor found the scenes repeated which had excited his scorn in Edgar Bryer's reign, only with more long legs to walk over when he entered his wife's drawing-room.

Never had that drawing room been more temptingly arranged, never had Mrs. March worked harder in the construction of pretty toilettes for her daily kettledrum. Poor panting Minnie Bryer toiled after her in vain. She had not the young matron's resources for such a lengthy campaign.

Mrs. March, hearing from Barry Sugden that it was now quite good form in country houses for those ladies who had walked with the guns to appear at afternoon tea in fanciful wrappers and caps, had such a costume prepared at once, and received her guests next evening in a glorified dressing gown of white cashmere, and a coquettish little cap to correspond.

The young men declared with one voice that it was tremendously becoming. Mrs, March had unbound her long flaxen hair, which fell below her waist. As she lay on the sofa she displayed the prettiest little white slippers imaginable.

The Doctor, however, who happened to come home a little earlier than usual that evening, looked decidedly grave as the vision met his eye of his wife in this careless attire, lounging among her pillows before what he mentally termed "a roomful of young asses."

The room was very warm and fragrant, the light was pleasantly subdued. Minnie was singing one of her ballads, which came to an untimely end with a little crash and a little scream as George entered.

"I would not sing before Doctor March for the whole world," she declared, showing her dimples.

To poor George, coming in, tired and hungry, out of the chill clear air of the October evening, the atmosphere of his wife's drawing room, the odor of tea and perfumes was unbearable.

"Have you a headache, Ada?" he said, going over to kiss her with much simplicity on the forehead. "No wonder, if you have been stifling in this air all day! Why don't you open these windows and get rid of half these flowers?" And in a lower voice he added, "Don't you think you had better deny yourself to visitors another day when you don't feel equal to the exertion of dressing?"

"You dear stupid George!" his wife exclaimed gaily, but flushing a little under his steady eyes and assuming a less easy attitude. "I am charmingly dressed! This is the fashion now for afternoon tea, dear. Ask Captain Sugden!"

But Captain Sugden had started up to speak to Lucy, who at that moment came into the room, pulling off her bonnet and gloves, having just got home.

It was her day at the hospital with Bee. The girl was looking as fresh and clean as a daisy in her simple dark gown, the close-fitting lines of which displayed the charming slimness of her figure, and the sombre color of which contrasted prettily with the bronze of her hair and the gloomy whiteness of her complexion.

All the young men were very eager to hand Miss Thrale her cup of tea. She might have had half a dozen slices of bread and butter at once if she wished.

"Thank you," she said, laughing and blushing, as she parried these attentions. "I have had tea with Bee—with Miss Throgmorton—and I must go upstairs now to aunt Letitia."

Her modesty charmed the young men. Barry Sugden sighed when the door closed behind the pretty girl. George got up too and went away to his study. Lucy was standing on the great old fashioned landing as he went down stairs. She was talking to Mrs. Batters about jelly and broth for her sick people. She turned and smiled gravely at the young man as he passed.

"Have you been hard at work," he asked kindly; and he proceeded to ask some questions about one or two of his patients to whom Lucy had been reading that afternoon.

He tried not to remember too keenly the contrast between this slender shape and earnest face, still lit up and quivering with the remembrance of the scenes the girl had come from, and the little flaxen haired woman in the dressing gown, though one swift flame of unavailing anger against his destiny did leap up within his breast in spite of him. Poor fellow, it was hard to be living in sight of the heaven he had lost.

"Go and rest a while," he said kindly, as Lucy and he stood for a few moments together. "You look tired, child."

"Oh, I am tired and rested too," Lucy answered, smiling. "When I come home, George, I don't know whether to be most happy or sad. The fires and the flowers, and Ada singing to us, and the dinner waiting—it is all so dear to me and so comfortable. And the poor girls I have been to see seem to have bodies only to feel hunger and pain with. It is terrible, George. And the poor things have no thoughts in their heads. They have never read books or seen anything but poverty and ignorance. What can they do but ache and wait and be patient?"

"Well, you have given poor Eliza something to think of to-day," said the young man gently.

"Oh, yes! She was so delighted with Ruth Pinch's beefsteak pudding that I told her all about mine, and how young Ackroyd ate it. I have felt grateful to him ever since!"—breaking into a bright laugh. "Then she wanted me to tell her whether John married Ruth in the end or not; but I would not. No doubt she will make the story up after her own taste, poor thing, while she lies awake in the night!"

With a nod and a smile Lucy ran up stairs to change her dress. George stood and looked after her, sighing. Then he too went away. The little blue chair still stood by his study fire; but he would not look at it, and went straight to the window, folding his arms and staring out at the chill sad evening. Autumn leaves were falling slowly on the window sill. He could hear Minnie singing a noisy song up stairs.

Next evening, though Mrs. March and Miss Minnie were in readiness as usual to receive Captain Sudgen and his friends, not one of these gentlemen put in an appearance at Beaudesert Gardens. From Mrs. Throgmorton, who came in to luncheon on the following morning, Ada learnt that the truants had spent the afternoon in Upper Brunswick Street listening to Bee's music.

"And really, my love," added the kind woman, with something of a blush, "it is as well perhaps that the young men should not come here quite so often. You know we country folk will talk, and the Doctor is so much away. You don't mind my reminding you, Ada, do you?"

"Mind!" repeated Ada gently. "I am very much obliged to you, dear Mrs. Throgmorton. I have not any great horror of the Barlaston opinion myself; but for dear George's sake——"

"I knew you would say so!" cried Mary Throgmorton, immensely relieved. "You are a dear, sensible, good girl!"

"Oh, don't praise me too much, pray!" returned Ada, smiling. "I am afraid I was getting a little tired of Captain Sugden, and it is quite Bee's turn to amuse him."

"I had hard work to make her play," answered the fond mother sadly. "Ever since poor Ted went away she has not been herself at all. I dare say she is sorry for him, though she cannot——"

"Oh, Bee will bring Mr. Ackroyd back again!" said Mrs. March somewhat coldly. "You must not fret about that, dear Mrs. Throgmorton."

"I try not to fret, my love," said poor kind Mary. "But what with Bee's low spirits and poor Jack away——Well, well"—she brightened resolutely—"I won't complain. The poor boy is getting on very well and behaving very steadily. We must only hope for the best. It is a comfort to know that you and George are happy, at any rate."

"Dear Mrs. Throgmorton!" murmured Ada, gratefully squeezing her friend's hand.

She was anxious to get back to her work and to change the bows on her gown for the afternoon. No one saw the new bows but her husband. Mrs. March and Minnie drank their tea alone again, and Lucy mentioned at dinner that Bee had taken a long ride that afternoon with Captain Sugden to St. George's Park, and that she herself had been asked to go with Mrs Throgmorton in the carriage.

Barry Sugden had openly admitted that he could not stand "that Bryer girl" any longer, and that he for one was not going to annoy that fine fellow March by kicking his heels all day long in the little woman's drawing-room—a burst of heroism which might have been received with less derisive shouts by little Barry's audience in the smoking room if he had not been so palpably hard hit by Bee Throgmorton's dark beauty, and if they had not all discovered that the surest place to meet "that sweet little Thrale" was not in her cousin's house, but in Upper Brunswick Street.

Chapter XLIX.

Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Throgmorton and her daughter went out to Croome to spend a week; and then Mrs. Ackroyd came to Beaudesert Gardens and begged for Lucy as well. She declared that Captain Sugden was bothering her life out about the two girls; so she had invited a few more people, and had made up quite a pleasant impromptu party. Even Lady Sarah Vamneck had promised to come for a day on her way to the North. Lucy felt that she ought not to go. She fancied that Ada was feeling a little depressed, and thought it natural that her cousin should miss the society of her London friends, who were hardly ever seen now in the flower scented drawing-room in the square.

"They seem rather stupid to me," the girl said to herself. "But Ada has known them a long time, and I suppose they have all sorts of things to talk about that interest her."

Lucy ventured timidly to suggest this to Mrs. Ackroyd, and to explain what an enjoyment such a visit would be to Ada.

"My dear, Mrs. March's place is with her husband," said the quiet little woman sturdily. "And I should think nothing would induce her to leave the Doctor alone. But you girls have a right to all the dancing and fun that comes along, so make the most of your time. Mr. Olifaunt has been asking after your again!"

There was no difficulty now as to ways and means. Lucy had an ample store of pretty morning dresses and walking costumes, and fresh white muslin gowns for the evening. And it certainly was a temptation to spend a whole week with Bee and the children and the kind admiring young men who were so anxious to improve her knowledge of lawn tennis.

The house in the square seemed strangely dull when she was gone. Mrs. March was looking delicate, and her depression seemed to be growing deeper. Her friendship with Minnie Bryer having cooled a good deal, and Mrs. Throgmorton being away, time hung heavy on the young wife's hands. Her silent, well regulated house, with only her mother's somewhat monotonous society, seemed to oppress and stifle her, though she always kept a smiling face for her husband on his return, and endeavored to prevent his feeling the change that Lucy's absence produced in many little things.

But George was conscious of an effort under her smiles, and by degrees it came to seem kindest on his part to spend his after dinner hours, when he was at home, in his own room, or to stay out and play a game of billiards while Ada amused herself with her millinery.

She could always find a great deal to do to her dresses, altering and revising, and planning new effects for the coming winter. And now there was every probability of a dinner at Croome when Lady Sarah arrived, and perhaps a visit of a day or two as well.

"Every artist requires an audience," she had once said to her mother and Lucy. "It is of no use dressing prettily for dear George. I believe he thinks Lucy's gray gowns and linen collars the perfection of good taste."

"If he thinks of them at all," Lucy had answered, laughing.

The dinner party came off duly, and Mrs. March's toilette was certainly the most striking in the room.

Lady Sarah had arrived, looking much brighter and less tired than of old, though her gowns were just as passe as ever.

Barry Sugden had confided to Miss Throgmorton the news that his cousin was about to be married to her first love, a widower with three little boys, who had come back from India a good deal stouter and richer than when the Earl had sent him away ten years before.

"Lady Sarah is the best soul in the world," the sprightly little soldier added; "and I am awfully glad she is going to be made happy at last."

Bee echoed this wish very heartily. She blushed guiltily when kind Lady Sarah asked for news for poor old Ted, seeming all the while to read with her shrewd gray eyes the whole story of his wanderings.

"My dear, you must tell him to come back," the lady said, laying a gentle finger on the girl's crimson cheek. "Happy as I am, it would make me happier to know that he was at home and had something to hope for."

Then Barry came fidgeting about them; and Lady Sarah, with a good natured laugh, gave Bee up, and went and sat down by Mrs. March, who was looking a little neglected.

The young men seemed to have renounced their London faith, one of whose chief articles was that girls were a bore, and only married women worthy of the least attention. Ada, with her exquisite French looking dress falling off her white shoulders, with her prestige as a bride and gentle audacity of manner, found herself almost as much alone at Croome as she had been at home, while Lucy and Bee were surrounded all the evening by a little crowd of chattering adorers.

The Doctor had not come with his wife He had not time, he explained somewhat curtly, when his wife came down stairs in her pretty white wraps, surprised to see that he was not dressed. And so he dined by himself once more, and sat and smoked his pipe afterwards sadly enough in his study. He did did not dare to go and meet Lucy Thrale at Croome.

"How happy you must be!" Lady Sarah said to Mrs. March. "I remember your husband with so much pleasure. And it is delightful, is it not, to be done for good with that dreadful London grind?"

"Yes," Ada returned smiling. "It is very pleasant of course for a while but I confess I rather look forward to settling in London again some day."

"That is Doctor March's intention?" asked Lady Sarah, surprised.

"Oh, yes!" Ada said prettily. "My husband's talents are of quite too high an order to remain buried for life in the country."

Lady Sarah was silent.

"How blind men are!" she was thinking, as she looked from Ada's bare shoulders to Lucy's sweet girlish face. "Why did not that good fellow marry that charming, earnest little creature who would have been a help to him in life, and would have understood him and his aims?"

In a little while Mrs. Ackroyd's visitors were gone, and Lucy was back again in the square. Mr. Olifaunt sighed when he said good-bye.

The girl noticed with terror the slow creeping of some deeper discontent in Ada's mind. It seemed that Mrs. March found her tranquil, comfortable home and her long idle days more depressing than ever now that the transcient excitement caused by the young men's presence in the neighborhood had subsided.

There had been a few words said by Lady Sarah at parting to Lucy which led Ada to believe that they were to recieve an invitation to the old Castle Rackrent in Lincolnshire, which was to burst out into an evanescent jollity and splendor at Christmas on the strength of Lady Sarah's approaching marriage; but, when the invitation arrived, it was found to be for Lucy only, and all she pretty toilettes which Mrs. March had been contriving were wasted.

George would have insisted on Lucy's going to Wastelands, miserable as the house seemed without her, but the girl pleaded to be allowed to decline the invitation. Ada was not strong, she urged; and she herself had had enough gaiety already.

"I would rather spend this first Christmas at home, if you will both have me," she said, smiling, but with April tears in her blue eyes. And she wrote a little note to kind Lady Sarah, excusing herself on the score of her cousin's delicate health.

After that life went on quietly for a time. The autumn had burned itself out. November fogs came creeping about the old house in the square, and dead leaves were blowing along the garden walks.

Ted was still away. Jack did not come home for the holidays, but remained in London, to his mother's great distress. There were no festivities except the children's party in Primrose Alley, which was a much more serious undertaking this year, and included the mothers as well as the babies.

Lucy—and perhaps Bee too—were thankful for these outdoor calls on her time and her sympathy. The Doctor helped the girls in their work, and gave them good advice and suggestions; he was too glad of any excuse to be constantly busy during that long winter.

(To be continued.