

AN EXPERIMENT.

By Nancy Rivers.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. Lavington and her niece, Leighton Kennedy were driving home from the Blackwood's Thursday evening crush at Buckingham-gate.

Mrs. Lavington was a widow of the smart type, and Leighton had for some time been on what she euphemistically alluded to as "her mind." That she had very nearly reached her nerves as well was indicated by the irritable note in her voice when she at length broke a somewhat protracted pause in the conversation.

"I should like to know whether this drive is to be continued to the bitter end in dead silence?" she inquired, frigidly, turning a little towards her companion.

Leighton started. Then she laughed a little.

"I was thinking," she explained. "These bad habits grow on one. I'm very sorry, auntie! What shall I talk about? Shall I give you a graphic account of Mr. Reivert's conversation with me in the conservatory? Or would you like the meanderings of the philosophic, if slightly satisfying, Mr. Merton? Or—"

"You know, Leighton," her aunt broke in, sharply, "it's all very well for you to be clever at the expense of every man you meet, but men hate that sort of thing, and— Well, please yourself, of course, but you'll never get married, and you'll only have yourself to blame—"

"Like 'Sweet Lizer.' Auntie you are too severe," murmured Leighton, plaintively. "The fate you condemn me to is surely out of all proportion to the offence. You should make the punishment fit the crime better than that. Even Herbert Spencer says so."

"Considering," said Mrs. Lavington, warming to the subject, "considering that you have done your best to put men off. A great many of them already think you are clever—what with your writing and one thing and another—and you know how men dislike cleverness in women—to marry, I mean. Considering how foolish you've been, you've had more opportunities than you deserve. You see how you neglect your chances! Well, I shall wash my hands of you," she concluded, with a gesture, "and if you're never married—and I'm really beginning to be afraid you never will be—it will be entirely your own fault."

"You have, at least, a flattering way of conveying a reproof, auntie," Leighton answered, with becoming meekness. "Won't you go on and give these rather vague 'opportunities' a local habitation and name? There's something quite fascinating about the idea of a concrete 'opportunity,'" she added with a reflective air.

"Do you mean the men you might marry?"

"Yes; but don't put it in the plural, auntie—it's shocking!"

"You know quite well yourself," returned Mrs. Lavington, unheedingly. "To begin with, there's Mr. Reivert. He's very well off; he's a thoroughly good fellow; he—"

"Yes; he has all the virtues, but his brains were left out—by mistake, I suppose. Also

two front teeth. I don't know whether that's also by mistake, but I hope not. If so, it indicates a careless and slovenly disposition in Mr. Reivert. You wouldn't wish me to marry a man with two teeth missing, auntie, surely?" she asked, with great earnestness. "One could forgive the brains—the want of them, I mean, of course—but the teeth—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted her aunt. "Any dentist could put that right in no time. I must admit that I can't think why he doesn't have it seen to—What are you laughing at, Leighton? As for me, I've always thought it un-Christian—even in bad taste—to jeer at the afflictions of others." Mrs. Lavington bridled, and fanned herself vigorously for a moment.

"So it is. I'm sorry. I hope he'll go to a good dentist," Leighton answered, with preternatural gravity. "But go on, auntie; let us imagine Mr. Reivert put aside for subsequent consideration."



"Well, why not Mr. Marriott? You can't complain that he isn't clever, Leighton! He's forever lecturing somewhere or other, for the spread of something."

"Best butter, mainly," Leighton murmured, abstractedly.

"Or the enlightenment of somebody. And he reads incessantly, and recites, and has views and theories enough, I am sure."

"Oh! he has—he has!" groaned Leighton, "and I'm so sorry for him; but what can I do, auntie? the disease is incurable!"

"Disease!" echoed her aunt. "What are you talking about, my dear child! Why Mr. Marriott's the picture of health! His complexion is lovely—but there, what is the use of talking to you, Leighton? I might just as well save myself the trouble. You'd take your own course, as you always do. Why didn't you talk to Mr. Graham to-night? You used to have plenty to say to him. Indeed, I

thought that just because he is the least eligible man of your acquaintance, you might—What have you to say against him?"

"Nothing! Absolutely nothing!" The carriage had stopped, and Leighton was getting out; "and that's just the worst of it," she added, with a laugh as they went up the steps together.

"Good-night, auntie"—she put her wraps down on the hall table as she spoke—"I'll go straight upstairs, I think. Don't trouble about me. If I join the noble army of spinsters after all, no one can say it is your fault. I have at least been very frankly warned."

CHAPTER II.

Leighton went upstairs with a light step, humming the refrain of a little French air someone had sung during the evening.

She locked her bedroom door, crossed the room rather hurriedly towards the fire, and, kneeling down before it, burst into tears. When the fit of crying had worn itself out, she rose slowly, and began to walk restlessly about the room.

Her writing table stood open. On the shelf above it was the photograph of a girl. She took it down, and looked a moment at the clear, steadfast eyes which returned her own gaze. Then she sat down at the table, opened her blotting case, and began to write.

She had filled a sheet of notepaper, however, before the following words appeared.

"Of course, you know what all this is the prelude to, and as I daresay you will skip the preface, I won't waste any eloquence upon you. I told you about Jim Graham. He proposed to me to-night at the Blackwood's, and I said No. It sounds very simple, doesn't it? But it wasn't. I wish you were here. When are you coming home? I want your advice badly. Don't say, with that aggravating air of calm good sense (which you know drives me wild) that there can be nothing to say, since I have settled the matter."

"There is everything to say. Have I done right or wrong? I want you to tell me, and you may be quite sure that, whether you decide for or against me, I shall disagree equally with either decision."

"Do you remember, Joan, you used to prophesy I should never marry, because the man I could marry doesn't exist, and never has, and never will?"

"A man who is in the first place, tall and strong and good to look at—a man who has brains, and, without being effeminate, something of the poetic temperament—who has a considerable amount of earnestness (very well disguised or else he would bore me) about some of the great questions of life—and more than a touch of the devil with regard to others. A man, in fact, who, while he is above all things manly, possesses what is most complex and most fascinating in a brilliant woman, you wisely assured me I should never meet, and I thoroughly agreed with you."

"Well, I have met James Graham. You will smile, superior, of course, but I thought he approximated, at least, to all this, and, what is more, I think so still, and if only I could find myself mistaken it would be such a relief."

"Then why—'you will begin. Yes—why? That is just what I want to know! Why don't I love him? I'm going to perpetrate a platitude, but I've warned you. Love is the most mysterious thing in the world! If he were different in every respect to my ideal man, I should most likely be in the seventh heaven at this moment."