

think, dear friend," regaining his composure as he turned to the widow, "we had better postpone our little arrangement until Mr. Ryder's business shall have called him elsewhere."

Not even his determination to be pleasant to the owner of thousands of pounds which he coveted could quite keep the acidity from his tone and manner. And Mrs. Brookes, who fully understood that the two men were rivals, at issue not only with regard to her step-daughter, but also in reference to the disposal of her fortune, was quite shrewd enough to enjoy it position. To magnify her own importance—that was her chief delight in life. And to behold this little fencing match, in which her favour stood for the prize, was milk and honey to her.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Clive. But I should prefer for 'im to 'ear," she said calmly, though her glance at Guy was spiteful. "Then, Mr. Ryder, you will understand that I, at any rate, trust my own judgment and this good gentleman's opinion. I'm tired of consols, I am, and two-and-a-half per cent. I've 'ad my stock sold out—"

"All of it?" from Guy, almost despairingly.

"The ole lot. Ten thousand I mean to put into the Zarina. Sixteen 'underd a year that will be to me at once, near upon three times my 'entire present 'income. The rest my man of business 'ere," with a smile intended to be both flattering and coaxing, "will find another paying investment for."

Guy Ryder got up from his seat, and began to pace the room, making no effort to conceal his agitation.

"Oh, pray, Mrs. Brookes, do be advised," he exclaimed. "Not by me, if you don't wish. But call in some competent lawyer, such as Keen, who—"

"Mr. Clive's perfession is the law," she interposed grandly. "I 'ave 'evey saith in 'im!"

"But think of Mary, and Jack, and— and Stella—" he began, only to be again interrupted.

"Ho!" with a coarse laugh, "we 'all understand why you are so 'anxious about it, Mr. Ryder. Why not leave Mary and Jack 'out of the question 'altogether, Mr. Ryder?"

He flushed crimson, but by a great effort managed to keep his temper.

"The money belongs to them of right," he urged, rather awkwardly it must be allowed. "Their mother brought it into

the family. You ought not to risk its loss."

But despite his lack of diplomacy the argument was not without effect. Mrs. Brookes changed colour slightly and moved uneasily. The indications of indecision were not lost upon the alert Clives.

"How can you allow him so to venture to address you?" cried Helen, dropping her work in a real panic.

Was all their trouble to be lost just when victory seemed within their grasp? And Caryl bent down to whisper with imploring energy, "My friend, permit me to show him the door. He insults me, and trespasses far—quite, quite too far—upon your kindness."

But the widow merely waved him aside. Such a chance of exerting her own despotic will had perhaps never before occurred in her lifetime—a consideration which materially affected her attitude in the matter.

"You don't speak nicely, Mr. Ryder," she said. "But since you are so very pressing, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'm tired of 'all this rumpus, and want to git things settled. You shall 'ave a couple o' thousands to take care of for 'Mary, and Jack, and--and Stella,'" with a sneering mimicry of his own voice, "and I'll be bothered no more by you. If I make ducks and drakes o' the rest—well, that'll be no concern o' yours, nor anybody else's."

Had a thunderbolt dropped suddenly through the ceiling into their midst, greater consternation could scarcely have been shown by all three of the auditors. That he should undertake such a responsibility seemed to Guy an impossibility, and it was therefore small wonder that he looked amazed and embarrassed. Why so visible a cloud should have descended upon the faces of the brother and sister was, however, not quite so apparent.

"Indeed, I could not consent—" began Guy. But for the third time he was not allowed to finish.

"Mind, Mr. Ryder, I simply do this to quiet your tongue," Mrs. Brookes interrupted, "and upon the condition that you don't tell 'any one what a 'old fool I've bin. So there! Now give me my cheque book, Mr. Clive, if you please, and we'll get this little 'affair 'arranged."

Probably the extraordinary reason she had assigned for her strange proposal was indeed as near the truth as any other. Governed, as always, by impulse,