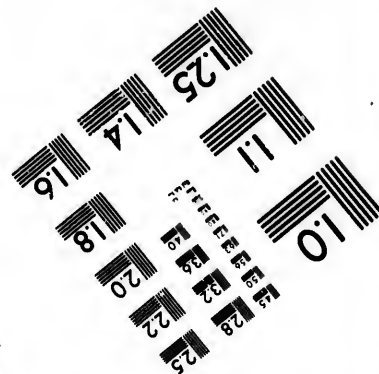
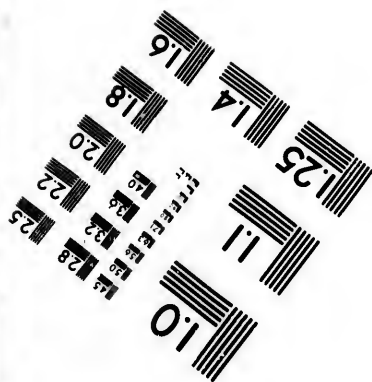
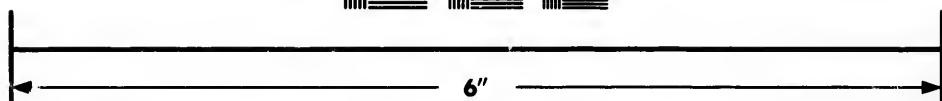
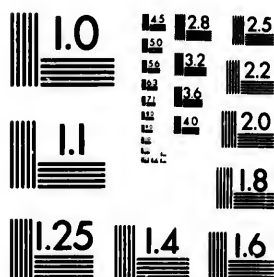


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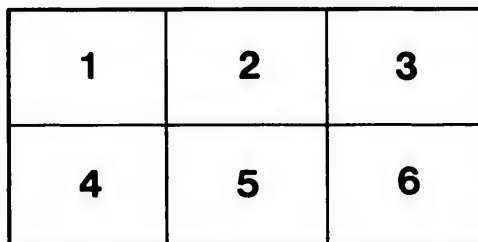
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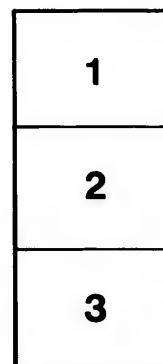
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A Crack County.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "STRAIGHT AS A DIE," "THE GIRL IN THE BROWN
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"A GLORIOUS GALLOP," ETC., ETC.

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A CRACK COUNTY.

CHAPTER I.

A VERY SELECT HUNT.

THE real name of the Hunt was the Morbey Anstead.

But in sporting circles it was always called "The Mutual Adoration." In fact, so generally was this latter appellation employed that most people were apt to forget it possessed any other.

As the "Mutual Adoration" they were known far and wide, but although there was not a finer country in Great Britain than that which they had the good fortune to hunt, the pack was not popular with strangers. Year after year the same faces might be seen at covert side; very few new ones ever appeared amongst them.

Rich young men with large studs, plenty of money and a desire to get rid of it, such as are invariably welcome in most country places; officers spending their long leave; fathers of families, hampered by the care of so many young ones, but as keen about hunting as ever, did not choose Morbey Anstead as their head-quarters.

This was the more remarkable, because the town itself offered many advantages. It was clean, healthy, well situated on the top of a breezy hill, and moreover abundantly stocked with good inns, and excellent stabling. But alas! both inns and stables stood empty.

And yet people who had been to Morbey Anstead once, never complained of it as a bad place from which to enjoy the chase. On the contrary, they praised it highly; but what they *did* complain of very loudly and very bitterly, were the manners of the "Mutual Adoration" Hunt. As strangers they went amongst that

fastidious crew and as strangers they came away, feeling that if they hunted from Morbey Anstead all their days, such they would remain. For after riding behind these exclusives the whole season, you were but too apt to find your existence overlooked just as much at the end of it as at the beginning.

Now there is no denying the fact that folks don't like this sort of thing; and various were the remarks made; often not altogether of a laudatory description. It may be vanity, but it is also human nature to desire some recognition from your fellow-creatures.

"Upon my soul, we might just as well be so much dirt," quoth one incensed sportsman.

"Dirt! say pitch," answered his companion. "For they *do* condescend to make the acquaintance of Mother Earth now and again."

"Ha, ha! very good, very good," said a third. "The worst of it is, though, after a bit a fellow begins to wonder what the deuce is the matter with him, when he goes out hunting and not a soul will say a word, or recognize his presence. He fancies that the fault must lie with himself, and that ain't by any means a pleasant feeling."

"True," put in a fourth. "But when you have seen a little more of the M.A.'s, then you turn round and inquire what the devil is the matter with *them*?"

"They are so confounded exclusive!" sighed the son of a grocer, who had taken to hunting, thinking he would get elevated into County society.

"My dear fellow," said the first speaker, contemptuously, "the whole thing lies in a nut-shell, and I for one say that the Mutual Adorationites are more to be pitied than blamed. They have only one idea in their heads, and that's hunting. They can think of nothing else, talk of nothing else. Their brains get brutalized, and their manners suffer in consequence. My own belief is that this rudeness and reticence proceeds from a very simple cause. They are not wise enough to know any better;" and so on, and on *ad infinitum*, for the malcontents were very numerous.

This remark happened to get round to the ears of those for whom it was not intended. Such remarks always do. They travel with marvellous rapidity, and

generally land in the precise quarter where they are calculated to do the largest amount of mischief.

The indignation of the Mutual Adorationites was quite comical.

Not know any better indeed! They flattered themselves they knew a very *great deal* better than to take up with every Tom, Dick and Harry who put on a red coat and chose to appear outside a horse.

They liked to know who people were, where they came from, how far their ancestors could be traced, and in what sort of society they moved, before jumping down their throats, and even then there was no hurry. It was always better to take plenty of time to consider about these things, for fear of making a mistake. It would never answer for them—the Mutual Adorationites—to incorporate a person into their select body, and then find that that person would not do! There had been such a case on record, and every M.A. to a man was agreed it must never happen again. And to do them justice, this was their first and last error of familiarity. Under the circumstances, it will not perhaps be difficult to understand how it came about that the Hunt was a small one. It was still further reduced by being divided and split up into sections.

First came the "riff-raff"—the kind of folks whom the M.A.'s saw year after year, and ignored entirely. They might be very good fellows in their way, but, to use their own expressive language, "they did not tumble to them."

Fortunately for these gentlemen—who constituted the larger portion of the field—they were able to form a society of their own, which enabled them to survive the frigidity of their fellow Nimrods.

Then came the "Half-and-halfers"—people whom the Mutual Adorationites, for various reasons, did not wholly condemn, even while they could not altogether accept.

These were tolerated, passively and in a luke-warm fashion, which proved more galling to some than direct avoidance.

On the recurrence of each hunting season, and after an absence probably of several months, they would find

themselves greeted by a careless nod and a muttered "How do?" Or if the M. A. happened to be in an unusually amiable and loquacious mood, he might even go the length of saying, "Fine day. Looks like a scenting morning."

But this was quite an oratorical effort, and generally meant, "There! I've done the civil to you, because you are a covert owner, but for goodness sake don't expect me to go talking to you any more to-day."

As a matter of fact, no real M. A. would ever unbend so far as to be seen carrying on a conversation with a "Half-and halfer." They kept their conversations and their ideas for themselves. They were too precious, or perhaps too scarce, to be showered upon the world of "outsiders." Anyhow, they were not scattered like pearls before swine.

The *bonâ-fide* Mutual Adorationites did not number more than a dozen.

When they went a-hunting they formed a coterie apart.

They rode together, talked or rather kept silence together, and jogged home together.

All the rest of the field were made to feel themselves without the pale.

But the M. A.'s, for all their exclusiveness, were not jovial. There was none of that friendly, harmless, good-natured chatter going on amongst them which is one of the characteristic features of most covert sides, and often is carried to too great an excess.

Occasionally one of their number would jerk out an observation, and his companion would grunt out a reply. But there was no mirth, or jollity; no fun and geniality.

They were stately, and solemn, and dull to a degree. As for a joke—but there! they never condescended to anything half so vulgar or so abominably plebeian. A joke would have been considered bad form.

The mere fact of riding about in each other's company seemed to afford a kind of sedate pleasure. Any interchange of thought was quite superfluous.

Unfortunately, their very exclusiveness rendered them few in numbers.

Death and absence had thinned their ranks to such an

extent that at the period when our story commences, there were not more than a dozen legitimate Mutual Adorationites left. Still, they sufficed to maintain the character of the Hunt, and effectually drove away any rash stranger, who, tempted by the beauty of the country, and the convenience of Morbey Anstead as a sporting centre, took it into his head to come out with the hounds.

First and foremost ranked the master, Lord Littelbrane.

He was a small, fair, colourless, insignificant-looking man, about forty-five years of age, with a drab complexion, and hair to match. He wore an eye-glass, which stood him in good stead, since the number of persons he contrived *not* to see at one of his meets was truly remarkable. He also was distinguished by a stony stare very disconcerting to its object. His eyes always seemed to look just a little above his neighbour's head, making that individual feel there *must* be something wrong or queer about his hat.

Another famous M. A. was old General Prosieboy, or The Squasher, as he was lovingly called by his intimates. He was a most useful personage, and had derived his sobriquet from the fact that he could annihilate an objectionable stranger better than any other single M. A. in existence. His method was very simple. He discharged a volley of oaths at the offender, and as these were by no means choice, generably forcible, and nearly always unprovoked, nine times out of ten the audacious enemy who had dared to address an M. A. without waiting to be first spoken to by him, retired in dismay, and never repeated the hazardous experiment.

Once, and once only, it was said that The Squasher met his match. The gentleman was fresh from California, and displayed a fluency, a facility and an originality of language, which fairly discomfited his opponent, whose vocabulary was limited in comparison.

Taking him all in all, Captain Straightem might fairly be reckoned the flower of the Mutual Adorationites. He was the best dressed, the coolest, the most silent, and least gregarious of the party. He had never been known to laugh, and seldom seen to smile. His brethren

were loud in his praise. Of the whole dozen good fellows who formed their ranks, he (always excepting themselves) was voted the best. As a specimen of the right sort, he shone pre-eminent.

He kept himself aloof, and never by any chance fraternized with the vulgar herd. As the owner of a large estate in the county, he was a man of considerable position, and looked up to accordingly, both by those who had, and by those who had not, the honour of his acquaintance.

And even his enemies respected him for the brilliant way in which he rode to hounds. They admitted that he had some excuse for his extremely good opinion of himself, but the other M. A.'s they declared had none.

Still there was no doubt that the Mutual Adorationites were on remarkably friendly terms with No One. It must have been the case, since nearly everybody else was dubbed "a creature, a brute, or an outsider." Nobody was good enough for them—at least, nobody under a baron. Yet the singular part of the whole business was this. If any one had told them that their Hunt was not popular, and that they were the sole cause of its unpopularity, they would have received the statement with a burst of incredulous indignation. The truth was, they had not the faculty of seeing things from any point of view but their own. Hence the limitedness of their vision.

CHAPTER II.

NECK OR NOTHING.

IT would have been difficult to conceive of a more melancholy day for the opening meet of the season than was Tuesday, the first of November, 188-

When Captain Straighton's servant called his master about half-past eight o'clock, that gentleman turned in bed like a lazy porpoise rolling on the top of the water, yawned and murmured in a voice muffled by blankets: "What sort of a day is it, Dickinson?"

"A tremendously thick fog, sir," came the prompt

reply, uttered in tones of unsympathetic cheerfulness. "You can't see twenty yards a'head of you."

"The devil!" exclaimed Captain Straightem, wakening into sudden life, and springing out of bed, so as to ascertain for himself the exact state of the weather.

But to his disgust, on looking out of the window, he perceived at a glance that for once Dickinson had not exaggerated matters.

A dense fog lay over all the land, enshrouding both hills and valleys in its weird and ghostly embrace. It rested like a soft, grey sheet upon the fields, tinging down to a sombre tint the bright green grass. As for the laurel hedges growing on either side of the drive, they were impregnated with moisture, and great wet drops rested on their glossy leaves.

Everything was dark, everything was dull, everything was damp.

He looked up at the sky, but could detect no break or gleam of light.

The prospects of the chase did not appear promising. Captain Straightem stifled an oath as he applied the razor to his clean-shaven face.

"Confounded bad luck! Still it may clear by-and-bye," he muttered, half-an-hour later on, when he sat down to his solitary breakfast in the big oak dining-room. "And at any rate it won't do not to go to the meet."

But as the fog showed no signs of giving, he drew an armchair to the fire, toasted his toes, and read the newspaper, waiting and hoping that the weather would improve. It was late before he started, and even then, instead of galloping to covert as was his wont, he allowed his smart little hog-maned hack to proceed at a comparatively leisurely pace.

Consequently by the time he reached the place of meeting, the majority of the field had already assembled; but although it was now long past the advertised hour, Lord Littelbrane had not attempted to make a move.

As a matter of fact, it would not have been easy to hunt, since objects at a distance of only a few yards were almost undistinguishable. To ride to hounds if they ran fast—which they so frequently do on these mild damp days, when the heavy state of the atmosphere seems to

prevent scent from rising and dispersing—would tax the powers of the keenest and most daring fox-hunter in existence.

"Deuced bore this d—d fog," growled his lordship, as soon as Captain Straightem joined the small and select circle which invariably gathered round him at the meet, as if to protect his noble person from any possible onslaught of the vulgar herd. "Deuced bore."

"Deuced," echoed Captain Straightem, laconically but sympathetically.

"'Pon my soul, I hardly know what to do. Whether to take the hounds home or not. All these 'Arries,' looking round contemptuously, "will feel terribly aggrieved if we don't show them some sort of sport on the first day of the season."

"Never mind them," put in General Prosieboy. "It's ourselves we've got to think of. Ourselves first, our horses second, our hounds third."

"What do you say to it, Straightem?" asked Lord Littelbrane. For, as before explained, Captain Straightem was a feature of the Hunt, and his opinion went for a great deal.

"Well, if I were you, I should wait a bit longer before giving up. Folks don't like to be disappointed on these kind of occasions, and it's just on the cards that the weather may clear."

And sure enough it did, though at no time in a satisfactory manner.

But at twelve o'clock the sun struggled so gallantly with the fog, that for a few minutes he actually forced it to disperse before his pale radiance.

Loud were the congratulations, and universal the satisfaction, when Lord Littelbrane, without losing a moment, gave orders for the proceedings of the day to commence, and hounds were at once trotted off at a brisk pace, to draw a covert close by.

Half-an-hour elapsed, and sadness and despondency once more fell upon the spirits of the field; for the improvement in the weather proved only temporary, and the heavy mist seemed to roll down worse than ever. Phoebus turned white and sickly like an ailing child, then sullenly hid his face.

"If this goes on we shall *have* to give it up, whether we like it or not," said Lord Littelbrane gloomily.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before a loud "gane forrard aw-a-ay" proclaimed that Reynard had left the snug undergrowth of the covert. There was evidently a hot scent in the open, for the hounds dashed out after him, close at his brush, and almost directly were lost to vision, engulfed, as it were, by the enveloping fog.

They threw their tongues merrily, and could be heard, though not seen.

And now began a curious chase; for every man had to ride by ear instead of by eye, and he who was deaf stood but a sorry chance.

Foxes are famed for their subtilty; and this one, as if on purpose to baffle his pursuers, chose about as rough and awkward a route as he could have selected in the whole country.

Fences loomed dark and formidable, their dimensions increased instead of diminished by the imperfect light. It was simply impossible to tell what they were like, until you were close upon them.

Horses sniffed the damp air through their open nostrils, and discharged it with disgust. They looked round suspiciously at this grey and unrecognizable world, were nervous and timid, and distrusted the commonest object. A log of wood, a cow, a stone, filled them with apprehension. And all this time, borne on the vaporous atmosphere, rang out the eager, murderous notes of hounds celebrated for their slaying qualities.

They were positively racing ahead.

But alack! alack! How to keep up with them? The task seemed well-nigh impossible, and each man realized to his bitter cost that there are some days in every season when hunting is attended with more pain than pleasure. Days when hounds, fences, elements defy you simultaneously. Five minutes sufficed to place the field in disorder. Their ranks opened and spread in every direction; and dire was the confusion that resulted.

Only Burnett (the huntsman), Captain Straightem, and a couple of hard-riding farmers succeeded in getting well

away. Their nerve and promptitude served them in good stead; but they had to ride as they had never ridden in their lives before. It was a case of neck or nothing.

Friendly gates could not be taken advantage of, as usual; for to-day the Pack would have vanished from view in the time that they took to open. The only chance of keeping with hounds was to keep close to their heels and negotiate every possible and impossible fence that came in the way. Providence must provide for the rest.

Crash, crash go the timbers of a stiff double oxer, as the gallant quartette fly it, each man charging a different place.

One of the farmers is down—no, his horse recovers himself. He staggers for a pace or two, then gallops on as before, fearful of losing his companions.

Suddenly is heard a shrill whistle.

It is the first intimation given to the pursuers that they are close to a railway.

"By God!" exclaims Burnett in agitated tones; "the hounds will be cut to pieces." For he knows by the sound that they are just ahead.

He calls them by name; first in commanding, then in entreating, finally in frantic language. Never had his horn given forth such loud and urgent blasts.

But their blood is up, and they heed him not.

In another second an express train dashes into their midst, and two of the best bitches in the whole Pack will never go a-hunting again, or stretch their fleet limbs over the broad pastures. Burnett is in despair.

He wrings his hands like a woman, and as he dismounts hastily and bends over the mangled carcasses of his dead darlings—those hounds that were his pride and his delight—the tears gather in his eyes, whilst his honest, weather-beaten face twitches with sorrow.

"Darn this fog," he exclaims resentfully. "It ain't fit to hunt in."

But the companions of poor Milkmaid and Merrylass evidently hold a different opinion. With deadly zest and joyous music they fling forward after their fox, every murderous instinct awakened and desiring gratification.

A solitary horseman is with them now, and follows their bold career. Burnett has stayed with his hounds, the fog has swallowed up the two farmers, who, until this point, have maintained their own right well.

On the face of him who smiles so rarely a solemn smile has settled. To have bested the field is the one delight of his life. He can conceive of no higher pleasure.

Swish! And he tears through a great, black bullfinch, and is almost dragged from his saddle. Slap! And the bough of an overhanging tree catches him one on the mouth.

His countenance brightens still more, though the blood is spurting from his lip. His pulses quicken and his eye dilates, for the dangers and the difficulties of this particular chase lend it a special charm. When he thinks it all over in his armchair after a good dinner, he will feel excusably triumphant and elated in proportion to the obstacles overcome.

But what is this black thing looming through the fog? Oh, for a ray of sunshine!

It might be a fence, it might be a house, it might be anything, for all he can tell.

The pulsations of his heart grow loud. He can hear them beating against his ribs. But the hounds have already disappeared behind the mysterious barrier, and where they go he is determined to follow. Whatever this man's faults may be, he is brave and knows no fear.

Besides, he has beneath him one of the most perfect and resolute hunters that ever looked through a bridle. A hunter who has carried him four seasons, and hardly put a foot wrong.

Captain Straightem leans forward in the saddle, pats his good horse's neck and speaks an encouraging word to him. Then he steadies him a trifle, and just when he is about to take off gives him his head. The animal knows his business, and is as courageous as a lion.

He springs from his hind legs, and oh!!!

Ten minutes afterwards, when Burnett, Lord Little-brane, and some half-dozen others, riding in search of the hounds, came to the fence in question they prudently avoided it; and went through a bridle-gate which they

had the good fortune to espy, congratulating themselves on not being forced to jump such a regular man-trap.

And yet the nerves of most of them were inclined to be more shaken than if they had made the attempt. For an unexpected sight met their vision.

Hard by, lying there on the ground all by himself, some ten or twelve yards distant from the fence, was Captain Straightem. His horse had galloped away, and could nowhere be seen, though a track of red blood seemed to tell that he must have been badly hurt in his fall.

For the thin dark line of treacherous metal, which has been responsible for so many accidents in the hunting-field, was bent and twisted, and in parts tufts of fine chestnut-coloured hair adhered to the rusty wire.

Captain Straightem lay there quite still. He never moved or spoke when his companions crowded around him.

His face was turned upwards to the sodden sky, one hand was clenched, and held between its stiffened fingers a bunch of grass torn from its roots, and in his wide open eyes there rested a dull and vacant look, which somehow struck terror in the hearts of the bystanders.

It filled them with a nameless dread, a horrible suspicion, which, staring blankly into each other's sobered faces, they had, in the first startlingness of the shock, not courage to mention.

And the soft fog curled itself around the dark twigs of the hedge, and as a memento of its passage left hanging from each pointed thorn a trembling drop. Even in that short space of time it had silvered the fallen man's hair and covered with a white, humid covering his red coat, his snowy breeches, his top-boots, and all the brave insignia of the chase, with which only that morning he had sallied forth, full of life and spirits.

CHAPTER III.

THE MUTUAL ADORATIONITES SUSTAIN AN IRREPARABLE LOSS.

LORD LITTELBRANE was the first to speak.

"I fear this is a bad business," he said huskily. "Does anyone know if there is a doctor out hunting to-day?"

"Yes, I do, my lord," answered Burnett, touching his cap. "I saw Mr. Smith of Cottlebury at the meet, riding that there rat-tailed grey cob of his."

"Go and fetch him then this minute."

"Yes, my lord."

"And hark you, Burnett, don't spare your horse. For once in your life don't mind if you bring him back lame or not; only for God's sake find this Mr. Smith; and get him to come here immediately."

It was not often that his lordship spoke at such length or with so much energy and decision. Burnett at once realized the gravity of the situation, and galloped off at full speed in the direction from which he had recently arrived.

When he had gone, Lord Littelbrane knelt down on the damp grass by the side of his prostrate friend, and putting out his hand, placed it under Captain Straightem's red coat, and over his heart. "I can't feel it beat," he said tremulously, looking up with troubled eyes, at those who stood near. "It is horribly still, and there's a look about his face which I don't half like. Straightem, old boy," giving him a slight shake, "pull yourself together."

But no answer was forthcoming. Still the same unnatural quietude prevailed.

And now the truth, in all its solemnity and horror, began to force itself upon Lord Littelbrane's comprehension. Fiercely and feverishly he endeavoured to thrust it from him, but the thought grew and grew, and turned his blood to ice. He had seen too many bad accidents in the hunting field not to know what this

portended. Only last year a young rough rider of his own had been killed whilst following the hounds.

There was the same expression on the lad's face as on Captain Straightem's. He recalled it with a shudder. His nerves had been shaken then, but now he felt as if they would give way altogether. He seemed stunned and dazed by the magnitude of the disaster.

For this man, lying here so pale and still, was his friend. He had not so many that he could afford to lose his best one—the only one really after his heart. Captain Straightem was endeared to him through many ties of association, such as when youths grow up bind them closely together. They had been born in the same county, and in the same year. As boys they had gone to the same school and displayed an equal amount of stupidity. As men, horses and hounds proved an unfailing bond of union between them. They knew each other's peculiarities, and their ideas of the position and importance of a Mutual Adorationite were identical.

And besides all this, Lord Littelbrane was not only proud of Captain Straightem, but he entertained a species of veneration for him. There was not another man in all the Hunt who could ride like the gallant captain. If any serious misfortune had now happened to him, who could he—Lord Littelbrane—depend upon in future to uphold the honour of their sacred body, and show these rough-and-tumble fellows the real scientific way to cross a country?

And if—if things were as he feared, who would jog home with him at his own peculiar pace, after a hard day's hunting, not taxing his conversational powers by an irritating flow of small talk, but only at long intervals giving vent to some choice and almost monosyllabic remark. Then, too, who would support him through thick and thin, in the various difficulties raised by covert-owners, farmers, poultry-losers, subscribers, &c?

A lump came into Lord Littelbrane's throat, which threatened to impede his respiration. He turned his head hastily away, so that none present should perceive the moisture which suddenly dimmed his eyes.

Meanwhile a couple of sheep hurdles had been torn up from a turnip field close by, and on these they laid

Captain Straightem's body, after first raising it reverently from the ground.

Then the mournful little procession marched slowly and sadly through the wet fields, until at length a road was reached. Near this road stood a tidy cottage, and in its parlour they deposited their burden on the sofa.

Lord Littelbrane would not leave his friend, even for a moment. He kept his eyes riveted on Captain Straightem's face, in the hope of seeing some sign of life return to it. But one of the party kept watch outside the door, and paced restlessly up and down the road, waiting and longing for Doctor Smith's arrival.

So the minutes passed anxiously away. They seemed interminable, and the gloom of the atmosphere coincided with the gloom of their spirits.

For although they tried by every restorative they could think of, to bring colour to the fallen man's cheek, warmth to his flesh, and light to his eye, all their attempts proved vain.

At last the sound of hoofs was heard, and in another second, Burnett emerged like a giant from the fog, followed by Doctor Smith on his grey cob. Both horses were panting, and gave evidence of the speed at which they had travelled.

The doctor dismounted, and after a few words of explanation from Lord Littelbrane, who came out to greet him, flung the reins to Burnett, and disappeared within the cottage. Arrived there, one look was enough to convince him that here were no bones to set, no cuts to strap, or wounds to dress.

Captain Straightem was past the aid of man. Not all the skill and science in the world could avail him now. He had gone where such things were unable to penetrate.

Doctor Smith shook his head, and his countenance assumed an unusually grave expression.

"Well!" asked Lord Littelbrane in an awestruck voice, for he knew what was coming. "Is there—is there any chance of his getting over it?"

"Not in this world," said the doctor seriously. "Captain Straightem is dead, and has been so for some time."

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"Dead!" exclaimed the other with sharp anguish. "Oh! no, not dead, surely not dead. I will telegraph to London for the best advice. Somebody *must* pull him through."

"Neither I, nor anybody else, can do him any good, poor fellow! I only wish that we could."

At this terrible confirmation of his worst fears, Lord Littelbrane sank down on his knees by Captain Straightem's side, and buried his face in his hands.

Absolute silence prevailed throughout the room. None felt inclined to break it. Only every now and again could be heard a suppressed sob, which escaped from his lordship almost involuntarily.

In spite of his vapidty, his reserve, and curious conceit he had a heart. During many years he had striven to conceal its existence, but now it burst through that veneer of impenetrability, on which, as a Mutual Adorationite, he had long prided himself.

Something seemed to give way within him, and he bowed his head and wept like a child.

The effort to maintain a dignified stoicism was beyond his strength.

And those who had never liked him—who had called him a fool, a prig, an aristocrat—thought better of him at this moment than they had ever done. The resentment of years vanished. The slights and insults of seasons were forgotten. For the first time almost in their lives, they felt that he was human: a creature like themselves, who loved, and mourned, and suffered. "He ain't such a bad chap after all!" they murmured to one another. "It's his way and very likely he don't mean anything by it. We have been foolish enough to take offence where probably none was intended."

Meantime Dr. Smith was making a minute examination in order to ascertain the exact cause of death. As a hunting man himself, he felt an unusual interest in the case. He soon discovered what had happened.

"Poor chap," he said, in his rough but sympathetic way. (At any other time Lord Littelbrane would have winced at hearing his best friend called a "poor chap," but he was too thoroughly upset and startled out of his usual groove to take any notice now.) "He has broken

his neck. It is quite clear to my mind, that when he fell he landed on the point of his chin, which caused the entire head to be violently jerked backwards, from which dislocation of the cervical vertebræ ensued." Then he looked commiseratingly at Lord Littelbranc, and added :

"Don't take on so, my lord. This is a dreadful business, but it should at least be some consolation to you to know that death was instantaneous, and that your friend was spared all pain."

But Lord Littelbranc shook his sleek, fair head, and refused to be comforted.

The shock was so great and so entirely unexpected, that for once in his life it made it forget himself and his dignity. Later on it would be a cause of shame, when he reflected that he had allowed these "outsiders" to see that he possessed feelings and emotions, and was not the iceberg he strove to appear.

But the "outsiders" respected his grief and, as before stated, thought none the worse of him in consequence.

While all this was going on, a considerable crowd had collected round the cottage.

Ill news travels apace, as the saying tells us, and stragglers began to pour in from all sides.

"What, dead? Straightem dead? You don't mean it!"

"Yes, I do though. Terrible thing. Been dead an hour. Had a bad fall and broke his neck."

"Dear me! How dreadful! How did it happen?"

"The old story. Wire. Farmer deserves to be strung up."

The above were a specimen of the remarks that went the round. Everybody looked shocked and saddened. For even those who had not known Captain Straightem personally, knew him by sight, and were sobered by the intelligence of the disaster that had befallen him.

Men fear death; and none so much as the strong and healthy, whose minds refuse to dwell on the possibility of annihilation, and whose physical vitality laughs it to scorn. But this sudden cutting off of one of their

number brought home, in a forcible way, the dangers of hunting.

What had happened to Captain Straightem might have happened equally to themselves. They—not he—might have been lying dead inside the homely cottage.

The mere idea was enough to shake their nerves, and to send a cold shudder down their spines. Sadly and quietly they gradually dispersed, whilst Burnett collected his hounds—only twenty-one couple now, instead of twenty-two—and moved slowly off in the direction of the kennels. His orders were that they should not come out again for a fortnight. There was to be no hunting in the Morbey Anstead country during that time.

If Lord Littelbrane could do nothing else, he was determined to pay respect to the dead man's memory.

And so ended the first day of the season. It had both begun and finished badly, and the Mutual Adorationites had received a blow which quite prostrated them. For their king was no more, and they knew of none to fill his place. Where was the man who could combine such brilliant horsemanship with such hauteur, such exclusiveness and reserve?

CHAPTER IV.

LORD LITTELBRANE FEELS LONELY.

A WEEK after the sad event recorded in the last chapter, Lord Littelbrane and General Prosieboy sat down to a *tête-à-tête* dinner at the house of the former.

His lordship was a bachelor, and not much given to running after the fair sex.

As a matter of fact, few of the Mutual Adorationites were married men. Mutual adoration did not seem to work well in the bosom of one's family. Not many wives admired and looked up to their husbands as they ought. They had a nasty knack of bringing their lords and masters' weak points to light. So said the M. A.'s. Anyhow they did not approve of matrimony as an insti-

tution. It broke up their ranks, and introduced an altogether new and unwelcome element. Once a man married he was never quite the same. He was no longer allowed to follow his own judgment, and his visiting list soon showed a sad deterioration.

For this and many other reasons, it resulted that if one of the genuine Mutual Adorationites was rash enough to turn Benedict he was generally treated with a considerable amount of frigidity for a very long time afterwards.

It took several years before the offence was forgiven, and even if the bride were altogether charming she never found herself wholly accepted. The M. A.'s, to one man, felt that they owed her a grudge for weakening dear Adolphus's or dear Sidney's allegiance to their sacred body. But as regards Lord Littelbrane, he could not help entertaining an uneasy conviction that some day or other he was bound to get married. An heir to the title was imperative. He had told himself this for the last ten or twelve years, during which he made sundry virtuous resolutions, and repeatedly determined to sacrifice his bachelor independence; but so far these good resolves had come to nothing.

He would be forty-six next birthday, and Littelbrane Castle was still without a mistress. Match-making mammas, possessing ambitious daughters, had angled for him in vain, and now, in despair, they had given him up as a bad job, and reluctantly turned their attention elsewhere. Both the late Captain Straightem and his lordship seemed equally proof against feminine blandishments, and it was rumoured in the county that they would never take a wife to weaken, if not destroy their intimacy, and prevent them from being constantly together.

But since his friend's sudden death, Lord Littelbrane's whole mental condition had undergone a complete alteration. Circumstances had brought about a curious change in his ideas. When he looked round at his great big barrack of a house, with its endless rooms, swarms of servants, and absence of any real comfort, it struck him all at once that he was very lonely, that many a labouring man, with a stout red-cheeked wife

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and half a dozen babies, was happier far than he. He began to wonder what it would feel like to be the father of a family, to set his little children on his knee, and play with their golden curls. A strange yearning came over him for sympathy and companionship—a sympathy and companionship even closer than that which he had just lost.

And thus wondering and speculating, his thoughts reverted to a certain Lady De Fochsey, who was both young and pretty, and the widow of a deceased baronet. She was a very smart, natty little lady, who in her scarlet jacket and white waistcoat, did credit to his Hunt. The Mutual Adorationites all knew her, and on account of her good looks, received her as one of themselves. True he had never paid her any attention, but that might easily be rectified, and he fancied she would accept his advances graciously.

Still, it was a desperate plunge, this which he contemplated taking—so desperate that nothing but the loss of his friend could have made him entertain the idea in earnest.

His first notion was to invite Lady De Fochsey to come and take a quiet little dinner with him, explaining that he felt very melancholy and required cheerful society. He was convinced she was cheerful. Her laugh rang out so merrily at the covert side that it had once or twice actually aroused his curiosity as to the cause of her mirth. Women ought to be cheerful. He liked them so, as long as they were not "loud." He hoped she was not "loud," and wished he knew her well enough to make quite sure.

But when he came to consider the slightness of his acquaintanceship with Lady De Fochsey, he arrived at the conclusion that it was out of the question for him to ask her to dinner in this sudden and informal manner. So, as his solitude was rapidly becoming unbearable, he invited old General Prosieboy instead, who although he did not much appreciate the Castle *cuisine*, liked being able to say: "Oh, ah! my dear fellow! If you've nothing better to do to-night, come and take pot-luck with me. Damme though, I forgot, I'm dining with Lord Littelbrane. See you some other time I hope."

But he always took good care to leave that "other time" indefinite, and never alluded to it when next he met the "dear fellow." The dining-room at Littelbrane Castle was very large and also very cold. No matter how big the fire, it only warmed one portion of the apartment. The old windows rattled, the old doors creaked, and the wind seemed to blow in at all sorts of possible and impossible places.

Round and round the dinner-table stalked a pompous, grey-haired butler and a couple of solemnly-stupid footmen. These worthies took special care to prevent their master and his guest from indulging too freely in the pleasures of the table.

The soup might have been a liquid medicine, to be taken cautiously—one to two table-spoons in a little water. The fish was served out in such lilliputian quantities that it was only an aggravation to a hungry, healthy man. The entrée consisted of a tiny oyster patty apiece, with one single oyster in its midst—that is for the eaters. There were plenty of patties on the dish, but they were smuggled away with a sleight-of-hand that would have reflected credit upon Messrs. Maskelyne and Cooke. This was the more provoking as General Prosieboy was fond of oysters.

Mutton? Yes! there was mutton certainly, but what was the good of that when you were helped to a slice that might have been carved from the breast of a lark.

And yet, night after night, Lord Littelbrane sat down to this mockery of a meal because he considered it to be "the thing!" He would rather go without a morsel and be waited upon by three pompous men-servants, than he would dispense with their services, and help himself *as* he liked, and *how* he liked.

So much for fashion.

But General Prosieboy was not exactly a fashionable man, and moreover he possessed a remarkably good appetite.

At home he invariably insisted on his parlour-maid putting each separate dish on the table. Then he *did* get something to eat. But really! at Littelbrane Castle, in spite of all the fine furniture, old armour, and retinue of servants, when he got up from the table he felt very

nearly if not quite as hungry as when he sat down to it.

However, he was on his company manners, and stood too much in awe of Lord Littelbrane's exalted rank—his father had made all his money in Prosieboy's antibilious pills—to air his sentiments aloud. Had he done so they would probably have been translated by oaths. On the present occasion, with a mighty effort of self-control, he succeeded in maintaining a decorous silence, mentally determining to have up that excellent piece of cold beef he had had for luncheon, directly he reached home.

He fumed inwardly all the time the three great, silent sentinels were in the room, but when they removed their restraining presence, carrying everything eatable away with them that they could, the atmosphere seemed suddenly to have grown less oppressive. Then the two gentlemen drew up their chairs close to the fireside, and placed the port and claret on the mantelpiece where it was easily get-at-able.

After consuming four or five glasses, the strings of their tongues gradually became unloosened. The Littelbrane wine was good, and General Prosieboy revenged himself upon *it*, for not having dined.

"Ahem!" he said communicatively, and with the air of a man who considers he is imparting a wonderful piece of intelligence. "I forgot to tell you before, but I've seen him."

His lordship at that moment was thinking quite sentimentally—thanks to the Château Lafitte—of Lady De Fochsey's rosy, smiling face, her trim figure and sparkling blue eyes.

"Eh! what! Seen him? Seen who?" he asked with rather a guilty start.

"Why, the new man. The man who comes in for all poor old Straightem's property. The nephew, in short."

"Have you, by Jove! And what's he like? Can we have anything to do with him?" And as he made the inquiry, Lord Littelbrane's countenance assumed an expression which seemed to say that he, for one, was convinced the Mutual Adorationites could *not* be hand in glove with a total stranger, hailing from the colonies.

"Impossible," said General Prosieboy emphatically.

His lordship gave a sigh of relief.

"Why?" he asked, subsiding into his usual languid state, which forcibly suggested a torpid liver.

"Because, as far as I can judge, he's the wrong sort altogether."

"Ah! I expected so, and should have been very much astonished had he proved anything else."

"It seems he has lived all his life in Australia, and has never been to England before. In fact, one could almost tell as much from looking at him. Colonist is stamped upon him from the crown of his hat to the sole of his boots."

"Poor devil!" exclaimed Lord Littelbrane commiseratingly.

"Did Captain Straightem never mention this bushman of a relative?" asked the General, with an elderly man's curiosity. "I don't seem to have heard of him."

"Oh! yes, lots of times. But never without a shudder. Poor Harry was so refined," sighing heavily. "He told me, only the morning of his death, that the fellow had arrived unexpectedly and proposed running down to Straightem Court to pay him a visit. 'Awful bore,' said Harry, 'and the worst of it is, I don't know how the deuce to put him off. He's got a sort of right to come, since, unless I marry and have children, he's the next heir to the property.'"

"He has acquired a most unfortunate right to it now," said General Prosieboy lugubriously.

"Yes, worse luck. Times are indeed sadly changed. I wonder though if I ought to be civil to the man on Harry's account?" And Lord Littelbrane looked uneasily at his companion.

"I really don't see any necessity for it. It does your lordship's heart immense credit even to have suggested such a thing; but, I assure you, you can't possibly associate with this aborigine. If you had only seen the creature as I saw him to-day at the railway station, dressed in a brown velveteen suit, with a flaring red tie, and a pair of checked trousers that reminded one of a chess board, you would have recognized, in spite of your natural kindness, that it is quite out of the question

for a man in your position and of your rank to notice so very peculiar a person. Why, damme ! he wears clothes that are enough in themselves to make anybody who has the remotest notion of what is customary in civilized society cut him on the spot."

"And there is such a lot in clothes," murmured his lordship. "I think it was Kingsley who said you can transform any gentleman into a blackguard—at least as far as outward appearances go—by simply taking away his white collar and substituting a coloured scarf in its stead. By-the-bye, what is the duffer's name? It's not Straightem, I know, thank God for that?"

"No, it's Jarrett—Robert P. Jarrett—I saw it painted on his portmanteau."

"I wonder if Mr. Robert P. Jarrett means to favour us with his presence out hunting?"

"I expect he is sure to," returned the General. "These Australians mostly take kindly to sport."

"Confound the fellow ! We shall have him jumping on my hounds, and making that an excuse to scrape acquaintance with me. Really, Prosieboy, if he turns out objectionable, as I fully expect from your description of him, you must come to the rescue."

"With all my heart, my lord," replied his companion, dilating his nostrils, and sniffing the air like an old war-horse who smells powder and is eager to begin the fray. "You leave Mr. Robert P. Jarrett to me. I'll soon settle him, never fear."

"That's all right. Remember, Prosieboy, I count upon you should any emergency arise."

And with these words, Lord Littelbrane dismissed the subject.

A long silence succeeded, during which host and guest lit a couple of cigars and smoked away steadily. The occupation evidently strained every faculty ; for conversation languished, both feeling that after their recent outburst of eloquence they needed time to recruit their forces.

General Prosieboy was the first to make a remark. It was scarcely as original as might have been expected from the long period of incubation required to give it birth.

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"Feels cold to-night," he said. "I think we shall have a frost."

"Oh! Ah! very likely. Time of year we may expect them," answered his lordship.

Another silence of five minutes followed this brilliant sally.

Then the General again gave vent to an oracular utterance:

"Shouldn't wonder if we had snow before long."

"No, nor I."

Whereupon they both puffed away at their cigars harder than ever.

Their ideas appeared totally exhausted. Even the weather failed to furnish a further supply.

But by-and-bye a large lump of coal fell down on the grate with a clatter. Lord Littelbrane seized the tongs, and stooped to pick it up. This broke the spell.

"Awful bore when coals tumble about," he said.

"Awful," replied General Prosieboy.

Puff, puff, puff. Apparently neither of them could think of anything more to say. The General could only talk when he was drunk or in a rage. Take away his oaths and his liquor and he was nowhere. As for Lord Littelbrane, he never could understand why when people dine together they should be supposed to keep up a perpetual chatter. What was the pleasure of it in comparison with the fatigue?

Eleven o'clock strikes, and General Prosieboy rises from his seat and throws away the end of his cigar.

"Think I must be going home," he says.

"Must you?" rejoins Lord Littelbrane passively. He never presses his guests to stay after half-past ten. In the hunting season he invariably keeps early hours.

"Yes, think so. Good-night, my lord. Hope you will cheer up before long."

General Prosieboy's hand is on the handle of the door as he speaks. In another moment he would have vanished into the corridor.

His lordship plucked up all his courage, and made a desperate effort.

"By the way," he said, whilst a flush rose to his

sallow face, "what's your opinion of that little Lady De Fochsey? She's the right sort, ain't she?"

The question took General Prosieboy completely by surprise, but he was far too diplomatic a gentleman to express the astonishment that he felt.

"Oh, yes!" he answered in an off-hand way, seeing he was evidently desired to express approval. "Quite the right sort; a very nice little woman indeed. I know nothing whatever against her, except that she's rather too thick with some of the outsiders."

"Ah! she's young. She'll soon learn to distinguish, especially with the advantage of a little judicious guidance. But I'm keeping you standing; good-night, Prosieboy, good-night."

And so saying, Lord Littelbrane shook hands with his guest, and saw him out at the hall door. But this last remark of his host's had given the General much food for reflection.

No sooner was he fairly seated within the sheltering walls of his one-horse fly, than he drew a long breath of dismay.

"Thunder and lightning!" he exclaimed dejectedly. "So that's the little game, is it? Why! bless my heart alive, I do believe he's thinking of getting married. Was there ever such a set-out? There won't be one of us left at this rate. First a death, then a marriage! Upon my soul, I hardly know which is the worst of the two. As for the Hunt, it's going to the dogs altogether; and if Lord Littelbrane don't look out, he'll be having his country over-run with strangers, and a lot of confounded radicals who not only believe in but *act* on the principle of one man being as good as another. Such rot indeed!" he wound up indignantly.

His heart was so heavy within him at the mere thought of Lord Littelbrane's contemplating matrimony, that when he got home he found the cold beef insufficient to comfort the sinkings of his inner man. He was forced to take a very stiff tumbler of brandy and water in addition.

"Just to quiet the system, Mary, my dear; just to quiet the system," he explained to his pretty parlour-maid (he never would have an ugly servant in his house), chucking her familiarly under the chin.

"Hexactly, sir; I understands."

"The fact of the matter is, Mary, I've received a shock, and it has knocked me all of a heap."

"Take another glass of brandy, sir. It's uncommon soothing to the nerves."

"Yes, Mary, I will. I think your suggestion is a wise one."

He found it so wise that it was close upon one o'clock before he could at length be induced to toddle off to his bed. Mary had to help him to get there; but once safely between the sheets, thanks to the joint effect of Lord Littelbrane's port and of his own three-star Hennessey, he slept the sleep of the just.

He had effectually soothed his nerves by addling his wits.

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGER IN THE LAND.

ROBERT JARRETT's mother and the late Captain Straightem had been only brother and sister.

As children, the boy and girl were devoted to each other, but when they grew up, fate, that capricious goddess, cast their lots in very different places.

The young man went into the Guards, looked brave and handsome in his uniform, spent a considerable amount of money, idled away his days, denied himself no luxury, and, as times go, was a credit to his doting father.

As for Fanny, well, poor Fanny made what was considered a most terrible "mésalliance." She was destined to marry into the aristocracy and she married an agriculturist.

When this unfortunate event took place she was very young; only a month over seventeen, and had but just returned from a fashionable boarding school in Brighton, where she had been finishing her education previous to making her entry into society.

But, alas! like a silly romantic child she fell desperately in love with a young man, aged twenty-one, who

had been sent down to Stiffshire to learn farming; presumably because he had not brains enough to learn anything else, or to pass the necessary examinations for the army. At any rate, he took to turnips and oilcake.

He was a gentleman by birth, and that was about all that could be said for him—at least, so Squire Straightem declared, when his daughter came with tears in her pretty, blue eyes, and begged him to give his consent to her engagement with Mr. Charles Jarrett.

The squire turned purple in the face, almost had a fit of apoplexy, and refused flatly. The idea! Why, the girl must be mad.

But Fanny was too much smitten by her lover's pleasant manners, and professions of affection, to listen to reason. She even thought there was something fine in making a sacrifice for the sake of him she loved. Anyhow, she was young, ignorant and headstrong.

Her grandmother had left her five thousand pounds. Over this sum she possessed absolute control. Master Charles' income consisted of two hundred a year. He was an orphan, and had neither expectations nor interest; but, to do him justice, he was genuinely attached to Fanny. To make a long story short, one fine day the imprudent and impatient young couple got married secretly, trusting that when they were actually man and wife the squire would relent and be induced to make them some further provision than that derived from their own very limited means.

But, like many others, they reckoned without their host.

Old Squire Straightem flew into a towering passion when he found that little, innocent, blue-eyed Fanny had defied him by taking the law into her own hands. Refusing to listen to her prayers for forgiveness, he swore a mighty oath that she should never set foot inside his house again. And he was as good as his word.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Jarrett were therefore obliged to fall back upon their own resources. These, as we know, were not large. Fanny was inexperienced; she had been extravagantly brought up, and had no notion of house-keeping.

For six months they tried living in England; but they

found that, do what they would, they were running into debt. No one could have had better intentions than the poor little bride, but she had everything to learn in her new life, and also a good deal to unlearn. It came hardly to her at first, and nobody need blame her if she made a few blunders. Most of us similarly situated would have done the same.

But they were a brave young couple, and when things seemed likely to go from bad to worse, they made up their minds to shake themselves free of the old shackles and start afresh in Australia. This they did; and with Fanny's five thousand pounds Charles Jarrett bought a sheep farm and stocked it with sheep.

Sometimes they had good years, sometimes they had bad; but they managed to keep their heads above water, and on the whole prospered fairly well. At all events Fanny never regretted the step she had taken, even although it had completely estranged her from her father and brother.

Charles Jarrett was far too easy-going and indolent a man to grow rich. A large family—of whom Robert was the eldest—and as the years went by, very indifferent health, effectually prevented him from making a fortune.

Thus, when he died at the comparatively early age of forty-eight, he was unable to do more than leave his wife and children above want.

But Robert, or Bob as he was familiarly called, had already shown himself to be a far more active, energetic and stirring individual than his father. He had not inherited Charles Jarrett's constitutional laziness of disposition, which had effectually prevented him from getting on in the world.

The farm was left to Robert. The young man soon discovered that to a great extent it had been grievously mismanaged, and that its powers of production had never really been tested. His first care was to put everything in thorough order.

Next he tried hard to improve the breed of sheep and introduced several new strains of blood. But he was not satisfied with those that were available; and after a couple of years scraped enough money together to

provide for the family in his absence, and to take him to England.

Naturally, he was eager to visit the country where his mother had been born and bred. He was aware that, as matters stood at present, Captain Straightem's property would revert to him. But he never counted on this contingency.

It seemed altogether too remote, for Captain Straightem was by no means an old man, and might at any time take it into his head to get married.

Bob, in his own mind, was so convinced that sooner or later his uncle would espouse a better-half, that it very rarely occurred to him to think of himself as only one step removed from a magnificent estate and close upon fifteen thousand a year.

No such thought actuated him when he set foot upon English ground and deemed it his duty to write and inform Captain Straightem of his arrival, in case that gentleman might express a wish to make his (Bob's) acquaintance.

To this letter he had received no reply ; in lieu thereof came a lawyer's communication, formally worded, acquainting him of the fact that, owing to his uncle's sudden decease in the hunting field, he was now the possessor of Straightem Court, with all its adjoining lands. Bob's amazement may be more easily conceived than described.

In fact his astonishment was too great to allow him to derive any immediate satisfaction from the extraordinary alteration that had taken place in his prospects.

It did just flash through his mind that henceforth, if he chose, he might apply his energies to improving the breed of English rather than of Australian sheep, but that was all.

It never even struck him that his presence might be necessary at Straightem Court, until he received a second letter from the family solicitor, requesting his immediate attendance. Then by slow degrees he began to realize that he, who was accustomed to rise with the sun, to saddle and dress his own horse, to be content with the coarse fare and to put his hand to every job that came in the way, was now transformed into a fine gentleman,

who had nothing to do but take his pleasure and amuse himself from morning till night. This dawned upon Bob as such a stupendous idea that it almost took away his breath. It is not an easy thing when all your thoughts have been attuned to a particular groove, suddenly to divert them into another and totally unfamiliar one. It takes a little time before the adaptation becomes complete.

Bob was a young man who possessed an immense amount of vitality and of that nervous force which delights in work and in conquering it. He liked the active, even if somewhat rough, life which he had hitherto led.

He enjoyed the responsibility of being the head of the family and of feeling that his brothers and sisters were dependent on him. It sent a thrill of pleasurable pride through his frame to see their bright and happy faces as they came clustering round him after a hard day's work. Somehow or other the simple homely way in which they lived seemed to bind every member of the family, from the eldest to the youngest, in ties of close affection.

True they were not rich, each one had to take his or her share in the daily toil, but for all that they had been very, very happy.

Would they be as happy if they lived in a grand house, had any amount of money to spend and lots of servants to wait upon them, instead of waiting upon themselves as they had hitherto been accustomed to do?

Bob hoped so; but he was not quite sure.

This sudden change in their lives seemed to him a bit of an experiment; it might or it might not turn out well.

He was Australian born and bred, and loved the sunny land of his birth; he possessed a sturdy independence and manly bluntness, which did very well for the colonies, but he was sensitive enough to feel that, in his new position, his manners would probably require a considerable amount of toning down. In Australia people did not wrap their speech up in silver paper, they said what they meant and did not sneer at conversation which owed its birth to home interests, and often to home interests alone.

But Bob had not been four-and-twenty hours in the old country before he realized that a subtle difference existed between it and the new ; the former was more polished if not so fresh ; more fastidious and critical, though infinitely less light-hearted.

Even as regarded his dress, he soon came to have considerable misgivings.

His brown velvet suit, red tie, and checked trousers, no longer afforded him *quite* the same satisfaction as on board ship.

Somehow they seemed out of place in the London streets, where he noticed people all dressed quietly and mostly in black or dark colours. Once or twice his appearance evidently excited surprise, and he felt extremely uncomfortable, not knowing exactly what there was about it that was wrong.

In fact, if General Prosieboy had but known with how much inward trepidation "The Duffer, The Brute, The Creature," was about to enter into his kingdom, even he might have felt mollified and not been quite so hostilely inclined towards Captain Straightem's unknown nephew and successor.

But the die was cast ; the fiat had gone forth.

Robert P. Jarrett was doomed beforehand.

The Mutual Adorationites had decided that he should neither be known nor yet visited.

Other people might take up with him if they chose ; but *they* would not demean themselves by having anything whatever to do with an individual who wore the wrong kind of clothes, and had no pretensions of "the right sort."

Mr. Jarrett should be made to feel in every possible way that his presence in the county was undesired and superfluous ; that he was unpardonably occupying a house which, but for him, might have been inhabited by a good fellow ; and that under no circumstances could he ever be accepted as fit company for the Mutual Adorationites. If he insisted on coming out hunting, of course they could not actually prevent him. He had a right to gallop over the fields and tear after the hounds if he chose.

Nobody need speak to him, except to swear roundly

at him if he got in the way, or committed the smallest error of inexperience.

They could all stare at him blankly, and refuse to recognize his presence as a fellow-creature. They could feign deafness if he hazarded a remark ; blindness if he came across their path.

They could show him the cold shoulder to his face, and abuse him to their heart's content behind his back.

And this the Mutual Adorationites, according to their usual manners and customs, were determined to do.

He should be snubbed, and snubbed effectively.

For had not General Prosieboy given out that their poor old friend Straightem's successor was a "duffer" and an "outsider," with whom they ought not to associate? And would it not be showing disrespect to the dead man's memory, if they received with open arms a nephew of whom, in his lifetime, he was evidently ashamed?

Yes. There was such a thing as *esprit de corps*. If the Mutual Adorationites did not wish to be swamped altogether by the odious radical wave of the century, they were bound to uphold their ancient habits and customs.

Moreover, *they* were perfectly satisfied with themselves as they were, and wanted no innovations introduced amongst their ranks.

CHAPTER VI.

OPPRESSED BY SO MUCH GRANDEUR.

ALTHOUGH our friend Bob had heard and read a good deal of the luxurious and, to a great extent, indolent way in which English gentlemen live when at all well off, he had no really definite notions on the subject until he arrived at Straightem Court. His mother had often talked to her children of the magnitude of her old home ; but then seeing a thing with one's own eyes is very different from having an impression made upon your mind through the medium of somebody else's optics.

The number and size of the rooms at Straightem Court fairly amazed Bob.

"What are they all for? What are they all for?" he kept on asking of the family solicitor who showed him over the premises, and had promised to remain for a day or two.

"For use, I suppose," replied that worthy, with a strong accent of reproof.

"For use! Do you mean to tell me that one parlour is not enough for anybody? Why, on my farm in Australia, we never dreamt of wanting a dining, drawing, breakfast, billiard and reading room, as you seem to have here. And what's more, it ain't comfort—least-ways, to my mind," concluded Bob, decidedly.

His companion looked at him with a smile half supercilious, half contemptuous.

"You'll soon get to alter some of your opinions, Mr. Jarrett. It is quite evident that you have lived very much out of the world."

"Damn his impudence," muttered Bob, *sotto voce*. "He talks as if there were no other country but his own particular, little sea-girt island. It's wonderful how ignorant and how cheeky these Englishmen are. There's no getting them to see themselves in their true light."

But he kept his reflections to himself, and turning sharply to his uncle's solicitor, said:

"And pray, what about the servants? Am I supposed to keep all this troop of idle people eating me out of house and home? Because it strikes me that would come uncommon rough on a fellow, especially when, like myself, he is a stranger at the game."

"You will be able to arrange all these matters to your own satisfaction when once you have regularly entered into possession," said the other stiffly, beginning to think what a terrible, sharp, fresh, outspoken aborigine this was.

"Come! that's a mercy at any rate," said Bob, with a sigh of relief; for the mere contemplation of maintaining so large a staff of domestics was oppressive, and filled him with dismay. Yet, distrustful of his own opinions on subjects of which hitherto he had had no experience, he added seriously: "Listen, Tomlinson. You are a

sensible man, and can give me a straightforward answer to a straightforward question. I only want to get at the *reason* of things, and no doubt you can tell me what is the use of all these idle folks. It seems to me there are too many of them by half, and they only make work for one another."

Mr. Tomlinson scratched his head, and looked somewhat perplexed. The question put thus, was not altogether easy to answer.

"It is customary, Mr. Jarrett, in all large houses, to keep up a good establishment—that is to say, where there are sufficient means."

Bob's face assumed a thoughtful expression.

"I don't see," he said, "how one person, living quite alone like my late uncle, could possibly need so many people to minister to his wants. It seems an anomaly for a single man to employ such a number of servants just to attend to his mere personal requirements. Now, if I were an English gentleman, I should hate to feel myself dependent upon my cook, butler, or footman, as the case might be. It's turning a fellow into a regular slave, and a slave of a very poor, contemptible order."

"I suppose you learnt those ideas out in Australia," said Mr. Tomlinson rather uncomfortably, and on that account trying to infuse an extra amount of satire into his voice.

"Perhaps I did, and perhaps I didn't," answered Bob, a bit nettled by the solicitor's overbearing manner.

"Anyhow, whether I learnt them in Australia or elsewhere, they are ideas of which I do not feel at all ashamed, and on the contrary should despise myself if I did not entertain. There is a padded person in this house, with sham white hair, and sham round calves, who comes to open the door. Can you tell me what that cumbrous mass of human flesh, with its painful deficiency of human brains, is good for?—since I am convinced he has never done a stroke of real honest work in his life. I ask this because the individual in question has aroused my curiosity."

"I presume you mean Charles, the footman. A very fine, well-made man, over six feet in height, and an

ornament to any gentleman's establishment," returned Mr. Tomlinson.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Bob. "Just as a fatted ox is an ornament to the gentleman's farm. I begin to see matters in a clearer light. Show evidently comes before use over here."

"Charles answers the bells, waits at table, and, as far as I know, has always proved himself to be an honest and respectable servant," said Tomlinson, testily.

"My dear sir, honesty and respectability are very excellent things in their way. Nobody has a greater respect for them than myself. But when you find these admirable qualities united to intense slowness of perception and pomposity of movement, to crass stupidity and the sloth of an overfed pig, then you can't help thinking that they are not all-sufficient. Now, last night, I wanted a glass of whisky and water. At home I could have gone to the cupboard, fetched the whisky bottle, boiled myself a drop of water in the kettle, and got what I wished for without further trouble and little or no delay. Here, there are a butler and a footman, therefore I rang the bell. They either *did* not, or *would* not hear it. In about five minutes' time, after pulling frantically at the bell-rope till at last it gave way, my friend Charles appears. I explain my requirements. He disappears. I wait another ten minutes. Presumably the water is being boiled. Unluckily there is no longer any bell to pull. I wait impatiently, and try to smother the oaths that insist on rising to my lips. Presently I hear a leviathan tread—the tread of an elephant—sounding down the passage. With the deliberation with which all his movements are attended, Charles brings into the room a hot water jug. There is neither glass, whisky, nor sugar. I ask him where they are. He answers that he has forgotten, but will bring them in a minute. A minute, indeed! Exactly a quarter of an hour has elapsed since I first made known my modest demand. By this time, all my desire for a glass of comforting liquor has vanished. I resolve to do without it. No doubt I am all the better for my abstinence, but it's no use telling me that this sort of thing is real comfort. It's downright bondage and nothing

more, and comes from your old habits, your old institutions and your old country."

Mr. Tomlinson drew himself up to his full height, mentally classifying Bob as an unbearable Yahoo.

"I am sorry our manners and customs should appear so inferior to your Australian ones," he said, with an ill-disguised sneer.

"It's not that," Bob explained eagerly. "Only you don't seem to value Time in the way we do. Now, to waste a quarter of an hour over a drop of whisky would appear to us almost a sin; and not only a sin, but downright ridiculous into the bargain. But then, we are used to waiting upon ourselves, which no doubt makes all the difference."

"We English are a conservative race, I'll admit," returned Mr. Tomlinson, in a more conciliatory tone; "but it is rather hard to find one's own children turn round and abuse one."

"My dear sir," exclaimed Bob, "pray don't imagine for a single moment that I have not the greatest respect and admiration for your race. Why! what have I come over here for, except to pick up a few wrinkles, and profit by some of your insular notions. But you must forgive me if, in my blundering way, I try to distinguish where you are ahead of us, and where we are ahead of you. We look up to old England with intense veneration, but then, even the best of mothers gets ancient, and leaves her offspring with an advantage of youth on their side. There are too many of you over here. Your population increases, and you are bound in by the sea. Soon the question will be: 'What shall we eat? How shall we exist?' In Australia and America we have still plenty of room, thank God! but on the other hand our manners are not polished, and we want a great deal of the refinement for which you are conspicuous."

"I am pleased to hear you make the admission, Mr. Jarrett."

"I feel disposed to make any number of admissions, Mr. Tomlinson, only I must not take up your time by inflicting too many of my crude, colonial opinions upon you. And now, what do you say to accompanying

me to the stables? A real English hunter is what I have longed all my life to behold."

The solicitor assented to this proposition, whereupon Bob and his mentor gave up arguing and proceeded direct to the stables.

CHAPTER VII.

"NOT HALF A BAD SORT OF GENT."

As is generally the case in most good hunting counties, great care and attention had been bestowed upon the equine department. The stables at Straightem Court were approached by a massive stone archway, rendered picturesque by the luxuriant ivy which clung to its walls.

This archway led into a square, neatly-tiled court-yard, round three sides of which ran the hunters' loose boxes, the remaining one being devoted to wash-houses, harness rooms, &c. The late Captain Straightem had prided himself on the number and the superior quality of his horses. No man in the whole county owned better animals or ones of a higher class.

Out of sixteen, nearly all were thoroughbred, or next door to it.

This fact, perhaps, was not remarkable in itself, but it was rendered so by every single quadruped being up to fourteen stone. And those who know anything of horseflesh will at once recognize how much time, trouble and money must have been expended by the deceased gentleman to achieve such a result.

It is far from being easily obtained.

As a rule, the class of thoroughbreds seen in the hunting field is represented by weedy screws, long and narrow, possessing handy heels and suspicious looking fore-legs. Nine times out of ten they are worthless cast-offs from the turf, who have been condemned at the very first trial, and never been allowed the chance of disgracing themselves in public.

When our friend Bob walked into the Straightem

Court stables, and glanced down the long line of roomy loose boxes, with their small-headed, satin-coated inmates, for the first time since his arrival in England he expressed himself in terms of unqualified admiration.

"Yes," he said, turning vivaciously to his companion, "you beat us here, I'll admit. Our horses are all very good in their way, but they are not a patch on these. They are a rough, ragged, common-looking lot in comparison. Not but what they can go—aye, and jump also. I'll back some of our kangaroos at home to get to the bottom of the best horse ever foaled. It's wonderful how the beggars slip over the ground. Occasionally, too, we come across timber that is real awkward. But for all this, I know quite well how very superior your English hunting is."

"I'm delighted you should think *anything* superior over here, Mr. Jarrett," said Tomlinson, still maintaining a tone of asperity. "You've been very hard to satisfy so far."

"Well, anyway, I'm satisfied now; I don't mind confessing how impatient I am to try my hand at some *bona-fide* fox-hunting, such as Australia cannot furnish."

"You have a stud of horses here, Mr. Jarrett, which I take it will enable you to see as much of the sport as you like. I'm no great *connoisseur* in such matters myself, but I always heard that no one was so famous for the quality of his cattle as my late respected client."

"Ah! poor chap!" exclaimed Bob, his face growing suddenly grave, "I was quite forgetting about him. Of course, never having known him makes a lot of difference; nevertheless it seems horrid of me to be looking forward to riding his gees, when he is hardly cold in his grave."

"It does strike one as rather soon, certainly," acquiesced Mr. Tomlinson.

Bob stuck his hands into his trousers pockets, and for a second appeared to be revolving some mental problem. It did not take him long to come to a solution, for in another minute he said, speaking decisively, as if to convince himself as well as his hearer:

"It's impossible to pretend to have any personal feeling for a man who is an absolute stranger to you.

Of course, I am sorry my uncle's death should have occurred; but if I were to go about in sackcloth and ashes, then I should feel like a most tremendous humbug. Besides," and his face lit up with youthful enthusiasm, "I can't help wanting to hunt when I get a chance. By-the-bye, do you happen to know when the hounds meet again?"

"I really have no idea," returned Mr. Tomlinson disapprovingly; for Bob's manners were not at all in accordance with his notions of what those of a gentleman occupying his client's present important position should be. "You know Matthews, no doubt?" and he turned interrogatively towards Captain Straighten's stud-groom, who up till now had stood silently by, looking at his new master with a very dubious expression of countenance.

If Matthews was anything, Matthews was conservative, and like Mr. Tomlinson, he perceived a good deal in Bob's aspect and attire not exactly in accordance with his ideas of the appearance a real "out-and-out swell" should present.

"Yes, sir," he said, in answer to the lawyer's inquiry. "'Ounds don't go out afore Monday week, and," *sotto voce*, "they would not go then, if Lord Littelbrance had his way."

"Not before Monday week!" exclaimed Bob, with a shade of disappointment. "Then I shall be obliged to curb my impatience. However," addressing Matthews in his quick, bright way, "I've already made up my mind which horse I shall ride."

"Indeed, sir!" said the stud-groom, not without a touch of irony. "May I make so bold as to inquire your choice?"

"Yes;" said Bob, "this is the animal that takes my fancy. I don't set up for an authority, but according to my views, he's the pick of the whole basket," and so saying, he opened the door of the nearest box, in which was standing a most admirably shaped and perfectly proportioned chestnut.

"You're not far out, sir," said the old groom, with a pleased smile beginning to steal over his face. "I see as 'ow you knows a good hoss when you sees him."

"I ought to," replied Bob, "for one way and another

I have had plenty to do with horses. What do you call this handsome fellow?"

"Kingfisher, sir."

"And not half a bad name, though he is such a thorough gentleman, that he ought to have been 'The King,' without the 'fisher.' But, I say," suddenly bending down and inspecting a couple of half-healed wales on the good horse's forearms, "what's the matter here? He looks as if he had been in the wars."

Matthews' naturally impassive face began to twitch.

"This, sir," he said, in a curiously subdued voice, "is the animal on which Captain Straightem met his death. Kingfisher was his favourite mount—and rightly so—for a finer hunter never looked through a bridle. But," with a sigh, "the hoss has got a bad name now, and I'm afraid it will stick to him all his life, though he don't deserve it—not one bit. It was no fault of his that the master came to grief; and, I tell you, sir, I went to look at the fence. I could see the hoof-marks where Kingfisher took off; but that there infernal wire was quite three yards away from the hedge. No animal living could have cleared it. But—there—there, I can't bear to think of it all."

And so saying, Matthews, totally overcome by the recent sad occurrence, and by the stigma which he imagined would attach to his favourite horse henceforth and for ever, turned sharply away so as to hide two great tears that were coursing slowly down his weatherbeaten cheeks.

Up till now Bob had taken somewhat of a dislike to the man. He fancied he was airified and stuck-up; but as he listened to the husky tones in which Matthews concluded the above speech, his heart grew suddenly soft, and yielding to a kindly impulse, he laid his hand on the old groom's shoulder.

"Look here, my man," he said, glancing down at him with a pair of bright, yet compassionate eyes, "you don't cotton over and above much to me, I know. One always feels these sort of things without being told 'em. From all I hear, you have had a very good master, and therefore I, for one, say you are quite right not to welcome a new one in too much of a hurry."

"It ain't that exactly, sir," interrupted Matthews, with evident embarrassment ; "leastways, not altogether."

"Well, never mind ; we need not go into all the ins and outs just now, but I can make a pretty shrewd guess as to your feelings, and, by jingo, were I in your place I should feel exactly the same. Moreover, Matthews, I can see quite plainly that you're not easy in your mind about Kingfisher. You think after what has happened, I shall probably want to sell him."

"Oh, sir, but you've just guessed my thoughts entirely," and once more Matthews' eyes began to blink suspiciously, whilst he cleared his throat with evident effort.

"Now look here," said Bob, "I daresay I'm very far from being the sort of master you have been accustomed to ; but that ain't my fault any more than it is yours. I may be rough ; nevertheless, when I say a thing I mean it ; and I give you my word of honour that the chestnut shall never pass into strange hands. I know without being told what a good horse he is. I will keep him and ride him fairly, just as if all this bad business had never happened ; and when he gets too old for work, and past picking up a comfortable livelihood in the green fields, then we'll just send a bullet through the poor fellow's head and put him out of his misery. There, does that satisfy you ?" and Bob looked the stud-groom straight in the face.

All of a sudden Matthews seized Bob's hand and began jerking it up and down, exactly as if he were at work on a pump-handle.

This process lasted several seconds. At last he found voice enough to say huskily :

"God bless you, sir, for those kind words. They show that you have got a good heart. And it would just about have broken me down to have seen the best horse in this, or any county, put up for sale at public auction. I bred him myself ; handled and broke him in. Nobody except me and my poor master ever knew how good he was. Oh, dear ! oh, dear ! the thought of losing Kingfisher as well as Captain Straightem has pretty nigh drove me mad," and he wiped his brow with a red cotton lar kerchief.

"My poor old chap, don't give the matter another thought. I have promised not to sell the horse, and nothing shall induce me to do so."

And so saying, Bob, who was himself beginning to feel a little affected by Matthews' emotion, left the stables and strolled leisurely towards the house.

Matthews looked after him long and critically.

"Yes," he muttered to himself, "he may be a bit rough—in fact, he *is* rough. There ain't one man in a thousand as has got the captain's beautiful, soft, lazy manner; but for all that, he's not half a bad sort of gent. Anyway, I intend to do my dooty by him and be all on the square. I'll let no one rob him if I can help it."

And later on, if Matthews ever heard a disparaging word about Bob uttered in his presence, he always looked severely at the offender, and said:

"You're talking of what you know nothing about. Now I can tell you for a fact that Mr. Jarrett is a truer gentleman than many of those as thinks a lot more of themselves and is not half so good in reality."

CHAPTER VIII.

LONGING FOR A RIDE.

A WEEK passed slowly away, and never in his life had Robert P. Jarrett, Esq., felt more thoroughly bored and altogether miserable. His new prosperity sat uneasily upon him. He missed the simple laborious open air life to which he had been accustomed. If he attempted to do the most ordinary thing for himself, he found that there was nearly always, within arm's reach, some individual whose duty it was to perform that thing, and who felt aggrieved and astonished by "The Master" encroaching upon his or her rights and privileges.

To be thus waited upon, might soon have grown bearable to one unaccustomed to luxury, had the particular thing only been well done. But this it never was.

To take one small instance amongst many.

Bob had always been in the habit of sharpening his

own razors. It is possible that they were not invariably perfectly stropped, but at any rate, he sharpened them to his entire satisfaction. But now he was no longer allowed to continue this practice. The gentleman of the padded calves took charge of his shaving apparatus, and professed to honour it with his personal supervision. The consequence was that never before had Bob's chin suffered to such an extent. Hardly a morning passed without its receiving some injury of a painful and unsightly nature.

His clothes were another source of annoyance.

They were constantly being folded up and put away in drawers and cupboards whose very existence he knew nothing of. To find any particular garment was like looking for a needle in a barrel of bran. It was enough for him to place an entirely clean pocket handkerchief in his pocket over night to discover it, after a long search, deposited next morning in the dirty linen basket, along with socks worn for three or four hours only, collars that had not a stain or a disfiguring mark upon them, and shirts that looked as if they had just returned from the washerwoman's hands.

Now these things, although trifles, were trifles utterly opposed to Bob's habits, principles and education. He had a horror of waste, but more especially of that waste so seldom considered, *i.e.*, the needless expenditure of human labour and of human vitality. His theory was that people should use their heads and save their hands.

"*Think* what you have got to do, and then do it!" he often said to the men employed on his farm; "but never put out your strength needlessly. For instance, I drop a handkerchief and a knife out of my pocket; if I am wise I pick them both up together. The one action of stooping answers a double purpose; but a foolish man will pick up first the one and then the other. Instead of bending down once, he bends twice, and by so doing expends physical force, which with a very little consideration might have been economized."

Bob's theories were, no doubt, all very well in their way, but he had not been four and twenty hours in the mother country before discovering that, when tested, they were practically useless. It seemed to him that

many of the lower classes in England had never been *taught to think*. At least, that was the only way he could account for their stupidity. As for the domestic servants at Straightem Court, they almost maddened him. One and all lived in a little narrow groove, filling their stomachs and starving their intellects, and performing their daily tasks without an atom of forethought or intelligence.

Perhaps it was because Bob had been brought up as a very poor man that habits of waste, luxury and expenditure did not come easily to him when he suddenly found himself placed in the position of a rich one.

To have plenty of money at one's command, no doubt was pleasant; but there were certain accompaniments of fortune which appeared almost intolerable to the simply reared Australian.

And amongst the most intolerable, strange to say, he classed his daily meals.

To eat breakfast, luncheon and dinner in stately solitude, and be solemnly stared at and execrably waited upon by a couple of stolid men-servants, was almost more than he could stand. Over and over again he felt as if he *must* jump up from the table—they were so horribly slow—and just take what he wanted, independent of the fuss and the dignity and the needless procrastination. It set every nerve on tension, and filled him with a mad desire to kick butler and footman out of the room, and dispense with their services altogether.

At such times he felt extremely home-sick and his thoughts would wander off to the pleasant, sociable meals of Australia. In his mind's eye he could see his mother sitting at one end of the table, smiling tenderly at him. He could see himself occupying the seat opposite, and all the bright, eager, healthy, happy faces of his young brothers and sisters, as they crowded round the board and looked up to him as the head of the family.

Once more he heard the merry hum of voices and peals of light-hearted laughter, mixing with the clatter of knives and forks, whilst from the oldest to the

youngest each tried to supply not only his own, but also his neighbour's wants. There was little enough of ceremony about those dinners. And yet how jolly they were! How entirely free from silly, unmeaning conventionality. Bob told himself he would rather eat a mutton chop over there than partake of Lord Mayor's fare at Straightem Court; in fact, he became so nervous, that he positively dreaded the long, dull stately banquets, eaten amidst outward surroundings of magnificence, but with an inward sense of intense discomfort and annoyance.

True, he had only to express a wish for the men-servants to retire; but that was precisely what he dared not do. He knew he was raw, he knew he was ignorant, and in his innermost heart burned a consuming ambition in all things to imitate the habits and customs of a real county gentleman.

"If I am to live here in future," he mused, with the common sense characteristic of him, "I must get to be one of them. I can tell by my own feelings that I've got the deuce of a lot to learn. It's queer that so many of these English habits should go so much against the grain with me, but I'll force myself to fall in with them all the same."

It was a brave resolution, rendered the more so because he had to exercise an immense amount of will-power to put it into force, besides a good deal of self-control, and what—to him—was personal inconvenience.

Liberty had been the one predominating feature of his Colonial life. The bonds imposed by civilization had hitherto sat lightly upon him. He was a child of the soil, of the sun, of the sky, of the wind; and as such, free and unconventional. To speak the truth and do your duty appeared to him better than all the most subtle and specious of religions.

And now he felt cramped and limited, like a man confined in a strait jacket. He panted for air, for space. England seemed to him great and yet small; great in her commercial activity, her factories, her vast and busy emporiums; but small, in that she could not see how her love of comfort, of luxury and pleasure,

was, like the Romans of old, slowly but surely bringing about her downfall. The nation wanted rousing; like an over-fed child, it was surfeited and sick.

Then in the midst of these tragically severe reflections, Bob's mind would dart off again to home. He thought of his favourite sister; dear, bright-eyed, good-natured Belle, who was always ready with sympathy on every occasion, and to whom he invariably confided all his sorrows and disappointments. Little Tottie too, with her rosy face and comical upturned nose. How he wished they were with him. He began to long for somebody to talk to. For Mr. Tomlinson had left, and Bob, who was not accustomed to his own society, quickly wearied of it and pined for companionship.

He missed the occupations of his every-day life on the farm; and unacquainted as yet with his new duties, he wandered aimlessly about from house to stable, from stable to garden, and from garden to outbuildings.

He would have given a ten pound note to set to work and dress a horse, dig a potato bed, or round up the cattle in the big green undulating fields.

But although Englishmen might condescend to such occupations in other countries, they could not do so in their own. Caste and custom equally forbade it.

At last this long, long week came to an end, and the meets of the Morbey Anstead hounds were once more advertised in the papers.

Bob's spirits rose as he conned them over; the depression which had crept upon him vanished. Once more he was all eagerness and expectation.

His intense wish to go out with a first-rate pack of English fox-hounds, and judge for himself what the national sport was really like, at length appeared in a fair way of being fulfilled. He looked forward to this novel experience with all the ardour of a child.

November the fifteenth broke very differently from November the first.

The one day had been made up of gloom and fog, the other was as brilliant as a blue sky and clear sunshine could render it. A soft air blew, the fields were vividly green, the hedgerows only just beginning to

change colour, and but for a few fluttering leaves falling with light irregular motion to the ground, one might have fancied that summer was still lingering, loth to take a seven months' farewell of Mother Earth.

On this eventful morning Bob woke early, and spent an unusual time over his toilet. To tell the truth, until now he had never given it a thought.

But alas! there were many difficulties in the way such as he had not dreamt of.

These, perhaps, may be better understood when it is hinted that he possessed neither breeches nor boots. The necessity of such articles had not occurred to him, and even now he did not consider them to be of very paramount importance.

But his state of mental serenity soon received a severe shock.

Charles the solemn, Charles the lethargic, Charles the padded, was he who dealt the blow. He informed his master that without such articles of costume he could not possibly be seen in the hunting field.

"Why, bless my heart alive," expostulated Bob, with considerable animation, "when we go kangaroo chasing in Australia we none of us care twopence what we wear. We think only of the sport, not of our clothes."

"Yes, sir, I suppose so, sir," answered Charles, not yielding an inch from the position he had assumed.

"Why! have you ever been out there?" asked Bob quickly.

"No, sir; never, sir."

"Then what made you say, 'I suppose so.'"

"Because," said Charles, with a huge accession of dignity, "I himagined that them sort of way was good enough for the Colonies, but they don't do over here. Gents is more pertikler."

"How do you mean? I don't quite understand."

"They likes to *look* like gentlemen," responded Charles unsympathetically.

This answer had an exceedingly dispiriting effect upon Bob. He wondered what Charles meant by it? Did he intend to say that no man could look like a gentleman unless he wore boots and breeches out hunting, or was the remark applicable only to himself?

"What the dickens am I to do, then?" he inquired despondently.

Charles scratched his head; an operation which apparently furnished him with an idea.

"Couldn't you get into some of Captain Straightem's breeches?" he suggested. "You and he are about of a size, though you ain't shaped exactly alike."

But Bob firmly repudiated this notion.

It seemed to him quite sufficient to step into the dead man's shoes, inherit his property, and ride his horses. He drew the line at wearing his clothes. There was something unnatural and repulsive in the thought.

"No, no; of course I couldn't," he answered indignantly. "I'd sooner cut my throat first. Don't mention it again." And he looked sternly at Charles.

The latter, though infinitely disgusted, gave up the point, but not before he had succeeded in detracting considerably from Bob's pleasure, and making him feel on thoroughly bad terms with himself.

Finally, after much hesitation, and still more perplexity, Susan the housemaid was politely called for, and requested to sew on two elastic straps to the hem of Bob's everyday trousers. With this contrivance, he devoutly hoped his pantaloons would stop in their place.

Nevertheless, a species of subdued irritation pervaded his being.

Charles' remarks had left their sting, and the supercilious smile which wreathed his fat and oily countenance, whilst the straps were being adjusted, still further served to incense Bob, and to increase his anxieties as to his "get-up."

He had very little personal vanity, perhaps because as yet it had never been called into play. Clothes, as clothes, had not formed one of the chief studies of his life, as they do of the modern "Masher."

The cut of his coat, the sit of his collar, the glaze of his cuffs, and elegance of his cane, had seldom given him more than a passing thought; but now, all at once, he began to conceive of the immense benefits which such important items confer upon a man moving, or

aspiring to move, in good English society. When, eventually, he sallied forth, he could not help confessing to himself that even Charles' opinion carried weight. He would have felt many degrees easier in his mind could he but have been convinced of that individual's approval instead of his undisguised scorn.

The influences of the mother country were already at work; and Bob was soon destined to learn how important a factor dress is in the hunting field, and how often by it, and it alone, men are judged, accepted or rejected.

Ties, bows, buttons, breeches. Who can affect to despise ye?

Across Bob's mind flashed a little incident, which long ago he remembered having read in some English magazine. The words recurred to him vividly.

"A man once came out hunting who did not see fit to wear a white collar. In its place he sported a blue spotted comforter, which he wound several times round his thick purple neck. Now that man never got on. He was cut by the county. Nobody knew him. Nobody dreamt of asking him to dinner. The reason? Oh! the reason was simple enough. The comforter damned him. He might have been ever so good a fellow, but not a soul would take the trouble to find out what a person was like who was rash enough to dispense with white collars."

This passage seemed, under present circumstances, so well adapted to himself, that Bob's spirits sank away to nothing at all.

Thank goodness! he *had* on a well-glazed collar, but then it was of a turn-down shape, which Charles strongly condemned; and to make matters worse, his tie was blue, and spotted also.

As for his nether limbs, when he thought of those two elastic straps, and how all his enjoyment and moral peace depended upon their standing the strain to which they were subjected, he really had not courage to glance at them.

He could not refrain from gloomy misgiving.

For what if they were to give way? In what position should he then be placed? Torturing visions of creased

socks, shortened trousers, and white legs, rose to his mind and thrilled it with unutterable dismay.

But he was fairly started now, and of all his retainers, old Matthews had been the only one to administer a crumb of comfort.

Bob, as already related, desired to ride Kingfisher, but Kingfisher's wounds were not yet healed, and Matthews had recommended a fine, upstanding bay in his place, named The Swell.

"Is he a good 'un?" asked Bob with some curiosity.

"Yes, sir, a ripper, particularly at timber. You can ride him with confidence. He has but one fault."

"Any objection to stating it, Matthews?"

"No, sir, not in the least. He won't face water."

"Oh! won't he? The beggar! Not even if he is made to?"

"Not even if he is made to," responded Matthews gravely. "The man who rode him last was not one to put up with any denial. 'Owever, we have so few brooks in these parts that The Swell's little peequilarity don't so much signify."

So Bob mounted his hunter and rode off.

He was accustomed to horse exercise, and had constantly been in the habit of galloping from one end of his farm to the other, but he was *not* accustomed to the easy paces and springy action of the animal he now for the first time bestrode.

In ten minutes he had forgotten all about the vexations with which his day had begun. As he entered a grass field, and let The Swell stride along over the ridge and furrow, he thought that in his whole life he had never experienced a more perfect and exhilarating sensation.

He had decided to ride his hunter out to covert, the meet being within a couple of miles of Straightem Court. But short as was the distance, it proved sufficient to put him on good terms with The Swell, and inspire him with confidence in his mount.

As he trotted down a long, straggly street, bordered on either side by small sit and unevenly built cottages, which went by the name of Morton village (the fixture for the day), and watched the women and

children clustering round the doorways, a smile spread slowly over his countenance.

Everything was new to him; everything a source of interest, wonderment or amusement.

Unconscious of the fiat which had gone forth against him in the names of Lord Littelbrane and General Prosieboy, he looked forward with keen delight to his introduction to an English field and to a pack of well-bred, well-trained English fox-hounds.

Every nerve in his body was quivering with suppressed excitement.

It seemed to him that surely this would prove a red-letter day in his life, ever to be looked back upon with gratifying recollections.

Poor, foolish young man! He had yet to learn that no pleasure equals the pleasure of anticipation—that joyous picturing of the imagination, which stern reality strips of its fancies, just as approaching winter strips the pretty many-coloured hedgerows.

CHAPTER IX.

WELCOMING THE STRANGER.

OF the natural stiffness of county gentlemen, their reserve towards strangers, their curious reluctance to make fresh acquaintances, their distrust of every one who is not at least the friend of a friend, a scion of the aristocracy, or furnished with undeniable credentials Bob knew absolutely nothing. Cliques and coteries were to him empty, meaningless words.

Where he came from, such nice distinctions had not yet been introduced.

He had a kind of an idea that people who went out hunting were all "hail fellow, well met;" the sport united them in bonds of sympathy and companionship; the farmer was as good as the lord, the tradesman as the farmer. At least, such were Bob's notions.

They showed how ignorant he was, and how extremely little he knew of the Morbey Anstead Hunt. Democratic

views were sternly suppressed by that self-approving body of gentlemen known as the Mutual Adorationites.

When Bob reached the end of the village, he found the cottages widened out on either side in order to inclose a small triangular-shaped common of about two acres in extent. Here, of a summer's evening, the lads assembled in great force, pitched their wickets and enjoyed a good game of cricket.

Just now, the point of attraction proved to be a neat little whitewashed inn, over whose door hung a large and brilliantly painted signpost. Its yard was full of horses standing champing at their bits, or stamping restlessly as the groom in attendance tightened up the girths, preparatory to the mounting of his master or mistress. The hounds had already arrived and were congregated on the grass, some rolling, some playing, some placidly waving their fine-pointed sterns to and fro.

Burnett stood in their midst, mounted on a powerful, blood-like brown gelding, whilst the first whip occasionally made the lash of his hunting crop crack with a resounding noise, when an inquisitive hound, more excitable and less obedient than his comrades, ventured outside the circle.

The old ones, who knew what they had come out for, were mostly sensible enough, but now and again, a youthful member of the establishment, possessing an active canine mind, would exhibit a propensity to make acquaintance with horses' legs, or sniff suspiciously at the knots of little sturdy boys and girls who stood watching the proceedings, half in fear, half in delight.

Then the thong descended on the offender's hind quarters, and sent him yelping back from whence he came, smarting under a sense of injury. Bob pulled up his horse, and watched these and similar incidents with keen interest. Nothing escaped him. He noticed the sleekness of the hounds' coats, and what an admirably matched lot they were. He looked down into the depths of their honest, wistful eyes, that appeared now yellow, now brown, now luminously red, according to how the sunlight fell upon them.

Mongrels he had seen by the score; but never such

hounds as these. It was a delight to watch them; each movement betrayed high pedigree. One sedate and curiously marked fellow particularly took his fancy. He was a very light hound, almost white, save for a few patches of tan, and he lay on the grass, as if determined not to distress himself until necessary, with his noble head reposing contentedly on outstretched paws, stained to a dark hue by the muddy roads along which he had travelled.

"Is that a good hound?" asked Bob of one of the whips.

"The best killer in the pack, sir. He comes from Lord Lonsdale."

And now people began to arrive from every quarter. The little common was dotted over with red coats, thrown up by a sprinkling of black. The sun shone out and made the brass buttons twinkle like miniature stars; it cast a sheen on the horses' smooth coats, bringing their strong muscles into high relief, and lighting up the whole stirring and varied scene with its clear, genial rays. Overhead was a soft blue sky, across whose broad expanse of tender azure floated a few gossamer clouds, misty and white, their snowy purity contrasting vividly with the distant ether.

Bob—who was naturally observant—thought that, taking it altogether, he had never looked upon so goodly a sight.

He no longer wondered at the pride and enthusiasm Englishmen displayed when talking of fox-hunting. He could fully sympathize with their feelings.

For even as he gazed at the bright array, a glow of exultation thrilled his veins. In fact, he was so absorbed by all he now saw for the first time, that he did not notice a small group of well-mounted, well-appointed men who had drawn near and were evidently criticizing the new-comer's appearance.

Perhaps it was just as well that he escaped seeing the smiles of mingled indignation and contempt which disfigured their countenances, as they stood there and took stock of their fellow-creature.

Luckily for Bob, it did not enter his head to imagine that he was furnishing subject of amusement. To tell

the truth, he had clean forgotten all about those unfortunate elastic straps. The excitement of the moment had chased their memory away.

Besides, he also was engaged in making mental observations, and had already taken a rapid survey of the assembled field.

Some few elegant sportsmen he marked down in his mind's tablet as "real swagger chaps, regular out-and-out swells." Needless to say these were the Mutual Adorationites. Others again appeared to be good fellows, without an atom of "side."

Yet, curiously enough, Bob's instinctive desire was to make acquaintance with the former rather than with the latter class. Chiefly because these extra-refined individuals were rarities in his Colonial life, hitherto seldom met with; and also because he had a notion they possessed a certain amount of originality and constituted a type altogether novel in his experiences. Perhaps, too, some inward consciousness whispered that they belonged to an entirely different order—the order to which, by his uncle's death, he ought now to aspire. No doubt they could teach him manners. For manners, above all, were what humble-minded Bob told himself he was sadly deficient in. His heart might be good, his sentiments irreproachable, but what was the use of that without fine old British polish? He was determined to lose no opportunity of acquiring it.

Meantime, Lord Littelbrane gave the signal for a move to be made, and hounds were at once trotted off at a brisk pace to draw Neverblank covert, whose name was suggestive of the good sport it invariably afforded.

It lay on the slope of a hill, removed from roads and railways, and was situated in a scantily populated portion of the county. The strong, healthy gorse of which it was composed afforded a retreat dear to the vulpine race; and dire was the disappointment if by any chance Neverblank failed to furnish a fox when called upon. As a rule, the chief difficulty consisted in dislodging the quarry; for owing to the stoutness of the gorse, it was by no means an easy covert for hounds to draw.

But to-day they were fresh and eager, and in their ardour heeded not the stabs inflicted on their fine skins by the sharp-pointed prickles. By the end of five minutes no less than three foxes were viewed stealing across the rides.

"Hoick, my beauties. Hoick, hoick at 'em," called out Burnett encouragingly, in a mellow, resonant voice that could be heard from afar.

Nevertheless, a considerable delay occurred, during which our friend Bob was on the tip-toe of expectation.

Once three or four young hounds appeared for a few minutes, and gave chase to a startled hare. Bob immediately joined in the pursuit, but to his intense disappointment, up rode the first whip and administered to the offenders such a punishment that they were only too glad to effect a retreat, their sense of guilt weighing heavily upon them.

As for Bob, not being a hound, he was castigated by the human tongue instead of by the lash. To his consternation, he suddenly found himself addressed by a stout, white-haired, red-faced, choleric-looking old gentleman, who at that moment bore a curious resemblance to an infuriated turkey-cock, thanks to the wobbling muscles of his purple throat.

"God d——n it, sir! Where the devil are you going to?" he roared out at the top of his voice, glaring fiercely at Bob with his small glittering eyes.

"I thought we were going to have a run," answered the young man apologetically.

"The deuce you did, and pray," blankety blankety, blank—the reader's ear must not be offended by too faithful a repetition of the General's language—"what the dickens do you mean by encouraging Lord Littelbrane's hounds to run riot? Eh? answer me that question." And once more his flabby, pendulous throat became convulsed.

"I didn't intend to do anything wrong or against the rules," said Bob meekly. "But I fancied we were off."

"Off! indeed. You seem to possess a lively fancy, sir; rather too lively when combined with so *very*," he laid a sneering emphasis on the word, "small knowledge of hunting. But you've made a mistake, let me tell

you. The Morbey Anstead don't go in for teaching beginners how to hunt. You had far better try some other pack, for *we*"—oh! the importance, the majesty and superiority contained in that word—"expect people to behave themselves when they come out with us."

This speech angered Bob not a little; still with an effort he stifled his wrath. He had no wish to enter into a quarrel, but more especially did he dislike squabbling with a man so many years his senior. He determined to try the effect of a soft answer.

"I beg pardon," he said quietly but firmly. "I had no idea that I had committed so gross a breach of etiquette as, according to you, I unfortunately appear to have done."

But General Prosieboy was not one to be easily appeased. After the conversation which had taken place between himself and Lord Littelbrane he felt as if his personal honour were at stake, and that he was bound not only as a gentleman, but also as a M. A., to crush Bob down to the very ground. If his opponent had flown into a temper he would have been more at ease. The young man's humble, yet at the same time manly, manner was just a trifle disconcerting. He must not let his rage evaporate.

"Damnation, sir," he retorted irately. "*You* had no idea, indeed! Pray what excuse is that? None, none whatever. It cannot be permitted that you should ruin our hounds and spoil our day's sport. People have no right to come out hunting with a pack like the Morbey Anstead when they don't even know the difference between a fox and a hare."

Bob reddened. The speaker's manner was so intentionally offensive that he realized at last that this foul-tongued old gentleman was deliberately setting to work to insult him. He was a high-spirited young fellow, and having once arrived at this conclusion, no longer made any effort to conceal his indignation.

"Will you be good enough to tell me who you are and what your name is?" he inquired with considerable heat.

Blankety—blank. "What's that to you?" replied the General.

"A great deal. I wish to know if you are authorized to keep the Field in order, and for what purpose you disgrace yourself by using bad language."

"Damn it, sir. Do you mean to tell me that you question my authority and wish to know my name?"

"You have guessed my desire correctly."

"By gad! sir, I'm not ashamed of it," returned the other excitedly. "It's Prosieboy, General Prosieboy."

"A very applicable name, no doubt," said Bob, with a sarcasm he could not refrain from.

"And as for my authority," continued the General, treating this remark with the contempt it deserved, and inflating himself like a balloon filled full of pride instead of gas, "you need be under no apprehension about *that*. I am Lord Littelbrane's most intimate friend, and every action of mine invariably meets with his concurrence."

On such an occasion, when he was fighting the battles of the whole sacred body of Mutual Adorationites, General Prosieboy's conscience told him that it was a gallant and virtuous thing to draw the long bow. The young man had to be suppressed and squashed. At present he showed no signs of submission.

"I presume then," said Bob, with a twinkle in his eye, for General Prosieboy's grandiose manner had an irresistibly comic effect upon him, "that his lordship is by no means particular with whom he associates and has not an easily offended ear."

And so saying Bob galloped off at full speed, for a loud "gane forrard awa-ay" rang through the air, repeating itself in many sounding echoes. This time the fox really took to his heels, and he, Bob, had not a moment to lose.

General Prosieboy stood for a second and looked after him. Then he shook his head doubtfully.

"He ought to be settled—he ought to be settled," he muttered three or four times over in tones full of anxiety and dissatisfaction. "And yet ——" with an oath, "I'm not sure that he is. Mr. Robert P. Jarret is just about as tough a customer as I've come across for a long time. However, if he feels inclined to show fight I'll have another shy at him by-and-bye." Whereupon he clapped spurs to his horse and rode off for the nearest road.

CHAPTER X.

CUTTING THEM ALL DOWN.

"WELL I'm blowed," said Bob to himself, as The Swell glided over the pastures with his long, smooth stride. "That old cove's boots and breeches were perfection, and yet I wonder if he is a specimen of the sporting gentleman. If so, they must be an uncommonly queer lot."

But General Prosieboy soon vanished from his thoughts, for the hounds were straight ahead, running hard and mute, whilst the Field were already split up into half-a-dozen different divisions. The Swell, too, was pulling like one not accustomed to the indignity of seeing many of his own species in advance of him. Bob let him go, being also anxious to get to the front as quickly as possible.

Although, thanks to his recent encounter, he had not been particularly fortunate in securing a start, he soon made the pleasing discovery that, owing to the extraordinary speed of his horse, he was only cantering when others were galloping, and before very long he succeeded in joining the leading horsemen.

This position contented him, and he resolved if possible to maintain it. As before stated, he was accustomed to riding, and what he wanted in judgment he made up in "pluck" and dash. Although The Swell missed the delicate handling—the artistic lengthening and shortening of the reins to which he had grown accustomed when carrying his late master—he quickly ascertained that his present one was not to be denied. The good hunter's desire was to be where he could see the hounds. Bob's wishes were identical, and as he had the sense to leave The Swell pretty well alone at his fences, they got on better than might have been expected.

They had already flown some six or seven obstacles and had established a friendly communication. Bob's spirits rose almost to the ecstatic pitch. His heart beat fast. Through his veins ran a warm glow that pervaded

his whole frame and rendered him, for the time being, insensible to danger. Up to this point the fencing had been comparatively easy. But now they came to a narrow gap, blocked entirely by a huge fallen tree.

The leaders pulled up and looked at it dubiously. Somebody even suggested dismounting and trying to force the stubborn branches aside. Bob laughed in his sleeve. This was the species of jump with which he was most familiarized. That bare, brown trunk, with its spreading stems shooting between four and five feet in the air, had no terrors for him.

He gave The Swell a touch of the spurs.* No, to be correct, it was more than a touch. He intended the application to be of the gentlest possible nature, but somehow the rowels remained fixed in the animal's sides and the next moment they were over, though not without a scramble.

Still, he had shown these hard-riding Morbey Anstead gentlemen that the thing was possible to jump, and before many seconds had gone by he was joined by Burnett. At length, after the branches had been considerably beaten down, several other Nimrods hardened their hearts, whilst the timid went off in search of a gate.

Lord Littelbrane was one of those who had viewed Bob's performance.

"He's a deuce of a fellow to ride, that nephew of Straightem's," he observed to General Prosieboy, as the road division joined them. "A deuce of a fellow, though he knows nothing whatever about it."

"I'll tell you what he can do as well," said the General with venomous animation.

"What's that?" inquired his lordship apprehensively.

"Talk. He'd talk a dog's hind leg off. Take my advice, my lord, and don't give him the chance of getting in a word."

"I don't mean to."

"That's right. I had a tussle with him this morning, and he's simply impossible. Much more so even than I thought."

"Did you give it to him, Squasher?"

"I did," responded the General grimly. "But he's

not had enough yet. He is one of those gentlemen who require a second dose."

"One is enough as a rule, is it not?" said his lordship, with a faint smile.

"It is, but I shall take care to make number two a very great many degrees stronger."

Meanwhile, Bob was superlatively happy. Every yard that the fox continued running he became increasingly alive to the merits of the animal he bestrode. No wonder, then, he was pleased, for it takes such a combination of qualities to make a good hunter. A single one goes for so little. The fencing is of no use without the speed, or the speed without the staying, and even then, bad manners will often destroy the whole. In short, a horse who possesses every desideratum is almost as hard to find as a pretty woman destitute of vanity, or an ugly one who is not soured.

Fence after fence The Swell threw behind him without a mistake. There are few sensations more delightful than bearing down on a good big place, finding your horse come at it exactly in his stride, and feeling by intuition before he takes off that you are safe to get over well.

The Swell was fresh and in an extra good humour. So far, nothing had occurred to put him out. The ditches were dry and no gleam of obnoxious water offended his eye. Bob's confidence increased momentarily.

Thirty glorious minutes—minutes full of concentrated enjoyment—had elapsed since the fox broke covert. But the pace had burst him, and he now held out signals of distress. Burnett's sharp eyes spied him stealing wearily down a hedgerow, carrying his brush low and his head outstretched, yet with every faculty intent on making his escape.

But how to get into the same field?

The fence that surrounded it was absolutely unjumpable. It consisted of a huge bullfinch, black as Erebus, some eight or ten feet in height, and bordered on either side by a stiff ox rail.

The boldest Nimrod present recognized that it would be sheer lunacy to attempt such a leap. There was but

one means of ingress, namely, through a five-barred gate, but this proved to be securely chained and padlocked. With the smallest possible delay a couple of horsemen dismounted and endeavoured to take the gate off its hinges. No, it would not yield an inch. The assembled group were done. They stood looking at the timber barrier in dismay, whilst hounds burst into a bloodthirsty chorus and raced across the green sward. Burnett cursed the fate that had mounted him on a horse bad at rails. He hesitated, and his companions hesitated too. Even in the far-famed Shires, a five-barred gate is a thing not often jumped, but it is done sometimes, and generally either by a well-known bruiser or else by a complete novice. There was one novice present who felt desperate, and who moreover was in a state of such intense physical ecstasy as rendered him impervious to fear.

"Make way," he called out excitedly. And then he rode resolutely at the gate.

For a brief second, The Swell did not seem altogether certain whether his rider were in earnest. The next, reassured by that subtle electric current which surely exists between man and horse and speechlessly communicates to each the other's intention, he cocked his small ears and gathered himself well together.

Then with a powerful twist of his hind quarters, he flung over the gate, just tapping it lightly with one hoof, and landed safely on the other side. It was both high and stiff, and Bob, conscious of the difficulty of the jump, cast a hasty backward glance to see who intended following in his wake.

But nobody showed any disposition to emulate his example, especially as the leading hounds were already beginning to turn.

Lord Littelbranc watched Bob's performance in silence. If there was one thing he respected more than another it was courage; perhaps because he suspected a deficiency of that quality in his own nature, although nothing would have induced him to admit the fact. Something very like a tear gathered in his dull blue eyes.

He turned away, and as he did so, almost came into collision with General Prosieboy.

"Prosieboy," he said, mournfully, "I have never felt the loss of poor, dear Harry so much as at this moment. We have nobody left to ride for us now."

"Why, my lord! What's the matter?"

"The matter!" he replied in tones of indescribable misery. "That terrible person"—a shudder went through his delicate frame—"that nephew of Harry's has just jumped a five-barred gate and cut us all down."

"The devil he has! Well, I'm not surprised to hear it. He's mad enough for anything."

"Yes, but not another man dared follow. Even Burnett turned away."

"And quite right, too," said General Prosieboy, who was by no means an advocate of risking one's neck through the taking of hazardous leaps.

"It's a shameful thing to let this Colonial fellow take the shine out of all our best men," returned Lord Littellbrance. Then, with an unwonted burst of emotion, he added: "Oh! Harry, Harry, dear old man; this would never have happened had you still been in the land of the living. The glory of the Morbey Anstead has departed."

After clearing the five-barred gate as related, Bob experienced a few moments of triumphant elation; he leant forward and patted The Swell's bright, slender bay neck. But before many minutes his elation changed to dismay.

First, he was a little disconcerted at finding himself entirely alone. Second, he was not altogether certain how to proceed, and third, he perceived that the hounds had turned sharp back. The last circumstance was the most annoying of the three. For, as there was but one way into the field, so was there but one way out, and that the same.

Now it is one thing to charge a dangerous obstacle when the fury of the chase is upon you, when your blood is heated to almost fever pitch, and dozens of critical eyes are watching your performance; but it is a very different affair having to retrace your footsteps in solitude, perhaps doubting the wisdom of your action in the first instance. It is astonishing under such circumstances how much bigger the original leap looks.

As so often happens out hunting, it proved a case of the timid finding themselves better off than the brave. The former were now in the same field with the hounds.

Bob alone was separated from them. He glanced at the gate. There was no other possible mode of joining his companions. It looked horribly so, and to make matters worse, the take-off was now slightly up-hill, and indented by hoof-marks of cattle. He saw that he must not give himself time to think. If the thing were to be done at all, it must be done at once.

But perhaps what decided him was the sight of the noble master and his choleric old friend staring at him from their point of vantage with evident amusement.

He resolved to fall rather than let himself be laughed at by them, and sure enough, fall he did. The Swell made a gallant effort, but he tripped over some uneven ground just as he took off, and hitting the gate hard with both fore-legs, turned a complete somersault. Bob was a little shaken, but not really hurt, and soon recovered from the shock. He did not mind the disaster one bit; but what *did* get his monkey up, was seeing those two stuck-up, stand-off men close by never offer to give him the least assistance. He thought it downright ungentlemanly of them, and felt their conduct very keenly; especially as he overheard General Prosieboy say scoffingly:

"Ha, ha! Tried to show off once too often. Glad he found out his mistake."

The other nodded his colourless head, and then they rode away together.

But if the Mutual Adorationites were not kind, others were.

A jolly, good-natured farmer immediately rushed to the rescue, saying admiringly:

"Gad, sir! But that was a gallant jump of yours, and a real nasty one into the bargain; I hope you are none the worse for the roll?"

"Not in the least, thank you," said Bob, beginning to recover from the annoyance occasioned by Lord Littellbrane's and General Prosieboy's conduct. "And fortunately the horse is not injured either. At least, as far as I can judge."

GEN. PROSIEBOY COMES TO THE FRONT. 65

"Ah! That's lucky, for he's a good 'un. Many's the time I have seen the late Captain Straightem ride him to hounds."

"By-the-by," said Bob, "perhaps you can tell me who that small, fair-haired, drab-faced man is, speaking to General Prosieboy."

The farmer looked in the direction indicated.

"That!" he said, as if astonished at his companion's ignorance. "Oh! that is Lord Littelbrane."

"I thought so," responded Bob. "What sort of a fellow is he?"

"That's rayther a difficult question for me to answer, sir, seeing as how I am one of his lordship's principal tenants."

But Bob had already discovered what he wanted to know from the man's manner.

"Never mind," he said; "I understand. If a question is difficult to answer, nine times out of ten it answers itself."

"You're uncommon sharp, sir," said his companion.

"Think so?" said Bob. "Not sharp enough, I am afraid, to pick up good manners from your English gentleman."

With which enigmatical remark, being now fairly mounted, he rode off to rejoin the hounds, who were already a couple of fields distant.

CHAPTER XI.

GENERAL PROSIEBOY COMES TO THE FRONT.

Bob urged the Swell to his speed and soon overtook the pack. He reached them in the nick of time, for this good bold fox, finding himself sorely pressed, after dodging round some farm premises to regain his lost wind, once more faced the open, in hopes of gaining Amberside Hill, some two or three miles further on.

The gallant fellow put on a desperate spurt. He knew it was the last of which he was capable. The

country was strong and thickly fenced. For another ten minutes the fun continued fast and furious.

As if anxious to wipe out the indignity of a fall, The Swell jumped brilliantly, and completely re-established the high opinion he had hitherto held in the estimation of his rider. Such glorious excitement soon made Bob forget his resentment against Lord Littelbrane and General Prosieboy. He felt on good terms with all mankind, himself and his horse in particular.

For the hounds were in full cry now, pursuing the failing quarry with wide-open jaws, red hanging tongues, gleaming eyes and upright bristles. Only one more field separated poor Pug from Amberside Hill. His foes were bent on pulling him down before he reached it. He was equally determined to baffle them. It meant life to him—only a mouthful of unsavoury food to them.

But though he toiled on gamely, he was now in full view, and the baying of the hounds and the yelling of his human enemies served still further to terrify and dishearten him. He just managed to creep through the last fence dividing the road from Amberside Hill, and lay down panting in the ditch, where, hidden by dead brown leaves and yellow edish, his body was almost undiscernible. If by this ruse he could but gain a few moments, then he might steal into the covert and seek the shelter of a friendly earth. His calculations proved correct, for one by one the eager hounds flashed over him and disappeared in the wood beyond.

Excited by the prospect of a near finish to so good a run, every horseman was on his mettle. They did not heed the stiff top-binder that ran through the fence, but charged it in a dozen different places.

Crash! crash! and two sportsmen bit the dust simultaneously, rolling into the road more forcibly than pleasantly.

Bob got over all right, and hearing the noise of falling bodies turned to see who the unfortunates were. To his surprise, he perceived that the one nearest to him was no less a personage than General Prosieboy, who, inspired by the universal enthusiasm, had for once ventured on so formidable a leap.

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He was a stout man and a heavy, and he did not fall easily. Few people do when they weigh over fifteen stone and have passed sixty years of age. For several seconds he lay immovable. Perhaps he was more frightened than hurt, but anyhow the sight of his white hairs mingling with the dust filled Bob with a sentiment of compassion.

"Good for evil," he said to himself; and in another minute he was off his horse and lifting the General from the ground. He wiped him clean, caught his hunter, and finally—when he had ascertained that no great damage had been inflicted—helped him to remount.

All this time General Prosieboy spoke not a word. He accepted the attentions bestowed as if they were his due. At last he gathered up his reins and prepared to move on. At that moment, Bob, seized by a sudden desire for reconciliation, and also prompted by his good-natured Australian hospitality, looked up at the great M. A. with a pair of honest, pleading brown eyes, and said:

"Hullo! old chap. Don't you think you and I might just as well be friends?"

To do the General justice, taken by surprise, for one single moment he relented.

Perhaps Bob saw the softened expression of his face, for he continued, in tones of greater confidence: "I'm all alone, and deuced dull I find it. We have not been formally introduced to each other, but what do you say to coming and taking 'pot luck' with me this evening at Straightem Court? Eh?" And as he spoke, he settled one of the General's gouty old feet in the stirrup.

But that gentleman, ashamed of his momentary weakness, and indignant with himself for having experienced it, recovered from any temporary feeling of softness. He now considered it incumbent upon him to be doubly severe and repulsive in order to atone for the lapse of dignity which, owing to peculiar conditions, had unfortunately already taken place. He must not let the enemy see that there was any joint in his armour.

Consequently he drew himself up in his saddle, protruded his chest, and fixing his cold, gimlet-like eye on

the audacious Bob, said in a solemnly frigid voice, as if his feelings were outraged beyond description :

"Young man, I make a point of *never* dining with persons whose acquaintance I have not had the pleasure of making in a proper and orthodox manner. The fact is, there are so many outsiders come to hunt with these hounds that it is impossible to be too particular. Under these circumstances I must decline the honour of taking 'pot luck' with one who is a complete stranger to me and likely to remain so."

So saying, and without uttering a single word of thanks for kindness received, he trotted off to a field close by, into which poor Reynard's body had been dragged, and was there undergoing the final obsequies. Despite every shift, his murderers had found him out.

Bob could only gaze after the General in speechless amazement.

"Darned old fool !" he exclaimed at last, with a burst of irrepressible wrath.

And yet there was something comic about the ancient warrior's behaviour too. It was so *very* VERY small, and displayed so lamentably narrow a mind. Angry as he felt at his insolence, Bob could hardly suppress a smile.

But how about these celebrated English manners, whose delicacy, refinement, and true politeness he had so often heard quoted at head-quarters ? Were these them ?

Why, out in the bush, if one man behaved to another man in so gross and insolent a fashion, no name would be considered bad enough for him. But then, on the other hand, the offer of a good dinner did not come as often over there as it did here. Perhaps that fact made all the difference.

But reason it out as he might, Bob had received a tremendous shock. All his preconceived notions had been subjected to severe disillusion, an operation which whenever it takes place always leaves a feeling of soreness and blankness behind.

He had been so humble and diffident, so ready to learn of all the Englishmen he came across, simply because they possessed the inestimable advantage of being Englishmen ; and now he thought that he himself had

more polish than they. He might be rough, blunt, outspoken, but he would have been ashamed to treat a fellow-creature as Lord Littelbrane and General Prosieboy had treated him.

It took him much longer this time to recover from his disappointment and indignation, and during the process he did not attempt to speak to a soul; in fact, after his experiences of the morning, he laid it down as a rule, so long as he remained in England, not to address a single person until overtures had first been made to him. He would be on the safe side, at any rate, and not expose himself to any more insults and rebuffs. But circumstances defeated this intention, and prevented him from putting it into execution.

Whilst jogging on to get to the next covert, the whole Field had to pass through a series of nasty little, awkward bridle-gates, that flew to, almost as soon as they were opened. Bob, being mortal and a man, had before now noticed a very pretty, smart-looking, little woman, attired in a scarlet jacket, a white waistcoat, and a glossy hat, from beneath which her small coquettish face peeped out very alluringly. An incident now took place that shocked all his sense of chivalry. No less than three gentlemen in succession pushed by, and allowed one of these gates to slam upon this lady, thereby preventing her from getting through and hurting her hand as she stretched it out in self-defence.

The very sight made Bob indignant. There was something so currish and unmanly about the proceeding to his mind, especially when there was not even the excuse of hounds running hard. He darted forward, held the gate open, and although several other men availed themselves of his courtesy, insisted on the lady passing through before he relaxed his hold.

So natural did this action appear to him, that he was quite astonished to find her waiting for him on the other side.

"Thank you so much," she said in a clear, cheery voice. "It was awfully good of you letting me take your turn."

"Please don't mention such a trifle," he said in reply. "Anybody would have done it."

She shrugged her shoulders, and shot an inquiring glance in his direction.

"Are you well acquainted with the Morbey Anstead?"

"No, this is the first time I have been out with them."

Lady de Fochsey—for it was she—smiled, and leaning confidentially towards Bob, said:

"You are Mr. Jarrett, are you not, Captain Straightem's nephew?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Never mind, perhaps I guessed. Tell me, are the ladies in your part of the world better treated than they are here?"

"From what I have seen in your case, I should say, most certainly," said Bob emphatically.

"Ah! don't waste your indignation. The Morbey Anstead females do not expect to be made a fuss with; if they are tolerated it is all they can hope for. You see the men think such a tremendous lot of themselves, that it is impossible for them to think much of anybody else."

"So it appears," said Bob grimly. "You have hit it off exactly."

"Do you know," and she cast a side-long glance at him, "the highest compliment I have ever received from an M. A. was to be told, I was not in the way. Don't you think a woman ought to feel immensely flattered by such a speech? However well she may ride, however pretty she may be to look at, and nice to talk to, her highest reward is 'not in the way.'" And her ladyship burst into a little sarcastic laugh.

"Do you mean to tell me that such a saying is meant for praise?" asked Bob.

"Yes," she answered demurely, "from a Mutual Adorationite: very high praise."

"I don't quite understand the phrase; what does 'Mutual Adorationite' mean?"

"I won't explain, because it would take too long, and you so soon will find out for yourself. But to return to our sex. When gates out hunting are small, gentlemen in a hurry, ladies numerous, the latter go to the wall. They always do, all through life, for the simple reason that of all animals, man is the most animal, and the

most selfish, woman the weakest, and the least protected."

"I am sorry you should think so badly of us," said Bob.

"I do not think badly of *you*," she replied, letting her limpid blue eyes rest full upon him. "You exerted your strength in my behalf."

To her surprise he made no immediate answer. To tell the truth, he was a little taken aback. Being flattered by a pretty woman was a novel experience.

"What are you thinking about?" she inquired a trifle pettishly. "You seem as if you had not heard what I said."

"You must excuse my apparent inattention, Miss——" and Bob stopped short, for he had not an idea whether his companion were wife, widow, or maid.

She laughed outright.

"No, I am not a Miss, though you evidently seem to think that I ought to be one. My name is Lady de Fochsey." Then she looked at Bob, and told herself he was very well-favoured, and added softly, "Widow of the late Sir Jonathan."

There could be no harm in letting him know that she was free to wed again, if so disposed.

Besides, she liked young men. Old ones were so dreadfully prosy, and always *would* talk of themselves. There was a manly strength about Bob, combined with an honesty and good-humour of countenance, which she altogether approved of, even although his clothes were not exactly what they might be. But being a woman and he a man, she was inclined to regard this defect leniently, whereas if Bob had belonged to the same sex as herself, every article of costume would have been severely criticized. But ladies are nearly always kinder to gentlemen than to other ladies, and *vice-versâ*.

"The fact is," said Bob explanatorily, "whilst you were speaking, I was guilty of the rudeness of making comparisons between your country and mine."

"May I ask with what result?"

"Certainly. I came to the conclusion that our men would go simply wild over a pretty woman," Lady De Fochsey smiled encouragingly, and Bob, surprised at his

own hardihood, added, "like yourself, for instance. Whilst over here, from all accounts, she is not half appreciated at her true value."

"Oh, yes!" she said, with a twinkle in her eye. "We are appreciated after a certain brutal fashion, but not in the chivalrous, Homeric way, of which you seem a regular champion."

"Chivalrous! Homeric!" echoed Bob, a trifle puzzled. "I'm afraid I'm rather dull of comprehension."

"Very. Let me put my meaning clearer. Well, then, in Merry England, the pattern of philanthropy and civilization, we are regarded in one of two lights. Either we are pretty creatures, fatted and kept sleek at our lords' pleasure, or else we are beasts of burden, who have to do all the hard work, and get none of the credit; who screw and save at home, whilst *monsieur mon mari* cuts a figure in the world, and spends all the money on amusing himself. Oh, yes! I know." And she pouted her full lips in a provocative manner.

"No one could associate *you* with the beast of burden," said Bob, growing bolder as her ladyship became more gracious.

She laughed airily and changed the conversation.

"Come," she said, giving her horse a touch of her heel, "those tiresome hounds are nearly out of sight. We must be moving on."

Whereupon they put their respective steeds into a canter, but Lady De Fochsey's chestnut was completely outpaced by The Swell, and further conversation was therefore carried on under difficulties. Just then her ladyship spied Lord Littelbrane a little way ahead.

"Good-bye, for the present," she called out, "come and see me soon. Any one will tell you where I live. Your aboriginal ideas are as interesting to me as, it is to be hoped, my English ones are to you." And she waved the tip of her fingers.

Whereupon Bob rode on, considering he had had his dismissal, and consoling himself by thinking it really did not so much matter what the men were like, when the ladies were so very, very charming, and so entirely free from all stiffness and ceremony.

As for calling, of course he should call, and only too thankful for the chance.

She was undeniably pretty, although after the first flutter of excitement had passed, he told himself that, in spite of her ladyship's charms, she was not altogether "his style."

She wanted something. He was not quite sure what ; but he fancied it was *soul*.

It was very pleasant, having agreeable things said to one, but then the pleasantness was in some degree diminished if you were not quite certain of the speaker's sincerity, and could imagine her making the same pretty little speeches to every man of her acquaintance. After the reception he had met with, it was extremely ungrateful of Bob to harbour such ideas, yet they occurred to his mind almost involuntarily.

Some inward voice seemed to warn him, that however much he might be captivated by Lady De Fochsey, he should never find in her the ideal woman, with whom some day he hoped to pass his life in perfect sympathy and community of spirit.

All the same, he was flattered by the notice she had taken of him. Besides, she was the first person, excepting Farmer Jackson, who had spoken to him in a frank and friendly fashion. She had lifted the sense of isolation that had gradually stolen over his spirit, and he felt more able now to put up with sneers and insults.

CHAPTER XII.

A CHARMING WOMAN.

LADY DE FOCHSEY had many admirers. Amongst their number it was not often she encountered one who had the keen insight to look beyond a pretty, superficial surface and seek to gauge the depths or shallows of her real character.

Hers was not an uncommon type of womanhood. A type that fluctuates between the good and the bad, and

is continually being attracted and repulsed first by one, then the other. Stability is difficult to arrive at under such circumstances, and scarcely to be looked for. Without *will-power*, that much talked of thing, the human soul is but a poor vapid affair.

Lady De Fochsey was frivolous, and yet not conscious of her frivolity; artificial to a degree, but not purposely or intentionally so. Her nature was light, facile, variable, and, unfortunately for herself, it possessed certain dramatic instincts, which all through life made her seek for and delight in "situations." As an actress she might have made a reputation, since as a woman she never could refrain from acting. She meant no harm by it. It was only imagining the world a stage and she the player. Occasionally some of her parts fitted in very well. They *did* produce an effect. At other times they failed, and then of course the player was abused and called a "humbug," if not worse.

And yet, in the real sense of the word, Lady De Fochsey was not a humbug. She was true to the instincts implanted within her. That they were changeable, capricious, ever striving after sensation, was perhaps more her misfortune than her fault. It is not given to all women to be strong and simple, to see the follies of their sex, and as much as possible stand aloof from them. There must be butterflies, even if their pretty wings are frail and liable to be smirched and stained.

Lady De Fochsey's conversation was bright and by the majority all the more appreciated from the fact of its containing no depth whatever. With her pretty face and neat figure, few ever noticed if she floundered a bit whenever the more serious topics of the day were mentioned, or got hopelessly muddled if by any chance the sciences and ologies were touched upon.

What did it matter? Women were made to be amusing, not clever. Nobody wanted them to be cleverer than the men—it was only upsetting the long-established order of things, which worked so satisfactorily for the male portion of creation. It is so easy to starve another person's intellect and then say, "You are a fool," and so hard for the person thus treated to disprove the assertion. Many women now-a-days want a chance given

them—a chance of enlarging their education and proving the real grit of which they are made. Lady De Fochsey had no such ambition. She would rather lead up to an emotional situation with a man, very human, very weak, and if a little erring so much the better, than aspire to the highest knowledge. She liked experimentalizing and finding out what chords and combinations could be wrung from the masculine nature.

About the female one she troubled herself very little, except in her own individual case.

She considered that her duty in the world was to smile graciously, make full use of her china-blue eyes, pay little insincere compliments and by so doing get herself talked about as "a charming woman."

This duty she fulfilled admirably, though it must be admitted she possessed more allies amongst the men than amongst the ladies.

Taken as a general rule, the hunting field is not a sphere calculated to develop the exchange of many intellectual ideas. When pursuing the fox, her ladyship was in her element.

To have a train of young men, no matter how vapid they might be, always dangling about her habit-skirt, rendered her supremely happy. The more the happier. It was a delight to count them up; a real grief to find that one had escaped from his allegiance. She called them her "tame cats," and was perpetually getting up pretty little scenes with them, that would have been an ornament to any private theatricals. Act the first was invariably: "Charming woman—love at first sight." Act the second—"Quarrel. Charming woman misunderstood." Act the third—"Grand reconciliation. Charming woman more charming than ever." Sometimes, however, but never when she could help it, there was a fourth act—"Break away of captive, charming woman in despair—confounded at hearing herself abused."

It is astonishing how many varieties this little play was capable of. The chief actor never seemed to tire, but derived fresh amusement from every rehearsal.

All were fish that came to Lady De Fochsey's net. She welcomed Bob as a new admirer, partly because she was already prepossessed in his favour by the episode of

the gate, and partly owing to her own peculiar ideas of true love.

She was always in search of true love, yet curiously enough had never found it. When she married the late Sir Jonathan, fat, red and wealthy, twenty years older than herself, she was persuaded the *grande passion* had come at last. It hadn't.

Two years of matrimony completely did away with the illusion as far as the baronet was concerned. Query :—Would she have entertained it if he had not had twelve thousand a year ?

When Sir Jonathan died, Lady De Fochsey did not weep her eyes out. After a decent interval—it was scarcely more—she recovered from her grief.

And now! behold the beautiful confidence of the female nature. She was so romantic, so trustful and enthusiastic, that she firmly believed there was no reason, because one man had failed to answer her expectations, why another should do the same.

She had now been a widow for five years, was twenty-eight years of age, and began to feel a trifle disappointed with herself, for not having succeeded in falling in love.

She was puzzled why the *grande passion* did not arrive. She had done her best to foster it, by reading all sorts of novels of the ardent, consuming, soul-too-big-for-the-body type. If anything could have kindled the required spark such literature ought to have proved successful.

It helped a little, but only a little, for the provoking part of it was, that noble and high flown as were the theories propounded, they did not work well when applied to practical life. There was always a hitch somewhere.

The Byronic young man with dark passionate eyes, hollow cheeks and wondrous magnetic power over all the women with whom he came in contact—the young man who cared nothing for material comforts, who disdained luxury, and did not even care for a good dinner, was not to be found now-a-days. The type was dying out, and every year became more scarce. Lady De Fochsey entertained a species of veneration for it; but even she could not help admitting, in her own secret con-

sciousness, that living on romance and sentiment, and whimsical, high-flown words, might be an exceedingly fine thing, yet when put to the actual proof, it was a still finer thing after a hard day's hunting, when you came home tired and wet, to find a nice warm room, a glowing fire and a *recherché* little repast awaiting you.

When she stretched herself out full-length on a sofa, attired in a captivating tea gown, and read one of the fashionable Spiritualistic novels on the mysteries of the occult world, astral planes, electric forces and so on, she never could quite determine in her own mind how much or how little of an impostor she was.

For she *did* like her comforts—especially when she could enjoy them in private. It was impossible to deny the fact, and what was worse, each year she seemed to like them better. But then on the other hand how exquisitely divine it must be for your amorous soul to have the power of making little celestial expeditions quite independent of its mundane body, and go flitting and flying about in search of the much-wished-for and sure-to-exist-somewhere kindred spirit.

There was something ecstatic, captivating and ennobling in the very idea.

And then the delight of the kindred spirit! The meeting, the joy, the embracing! It is to be feared that Lady De Fochsey's little head was often in a muddle. She accepted every new theory of the day, without understanding a single one.

The conflict going on between her body and her soul verged on the pathetic.

She could not make up her mind whether to throw in her lot with things heavenly or things earthly. They both had their fascinations, and the struggle was terrible.

When she found disappointment in the one, she had recourse to the other. But during the hunting season, terrestrial influences decidedly preponderated.

She could not help liking smart habits and nice clothes, nor could she refrain from a feeling of triumph when she reflected that her waist with a little squeezing only measured twenty inches round, and that she could tie a tie better than nine hunting men out of ten.

Such facts as these compensated for a good many minor disappointments.

Chief amongst the latter, had been the want of attention hitherto paid to her by Lord Littelbrane.

As a man, she did not care for him one bit, and moreover with that marvellous—what may fairly be called *husband*—instinct possessed by the sex, she knew that she never should.

He exhibited none of those points which attract a woman.

He was neither handsome, nor good company, nor miserable, nor mysterious, nor magnetically sympathetic. He was just Lord Littelbrane, with fifteen thousand a year, and if he had not been Lord Littelbrane, everybody would have said what a dull, stupid, uninteresting little creature he was, and laughed at him for giving himself airs.

Although his lordship invariably bowed to Lady De Fochsey, and sometimes even went the length of making a remark about the weather, she was distinctly aware that, in spite of sundry small overtures on her side, she had failed to make any impression. Now this knowledge always irritates a woman, especially if she be young and pretty, and a flirt. The game may not repay the trouble, but if she can't play it to her mind then she always hankers after it.

This was exactly Lady De Fochsey's case.

Besides, she considered it the "proper thing" to be hand-in-glove with the master, if only because he *was* the master. She could forgive his showing no civility to any other ladies, if he showed it to her. But to be treated exactly the same as the whole tribe of women who hunted with the Morbey Anstead hounds, women who had no pretensions to good looks, who had not an idea of "getting themselves up," who did not wear scarlet jackets and white waistcoats, and whose waists were as flat as pancakes, was exceedingly mortifying. Nay, not only mortifying, but incomprehensible. It went beyond her experience everywhere else. By much flattery and insensibility to downright rudeness, she had contrived to a certain extent to ingratiate herself with the Mutual Adorationites. They all condescended to

speaking to her, but the desire of her life was to get up a flirtation with Lord Littelbrane, if only for the fun of paying him out for having resisted her charms so long. For that he should have done so was in every way unaccountable. She wanted to see him incorporated among her "tame cats;" then wouldn't she lead him a pretty dance.

CHAPTER XIII.

LOVE BY SELECTION.

WITH the instincts of a thorough coquette Lady De Fochsey slightly slackened her horse's speed, as she overtook Lord Littelbrane. If he wished to join her, he should have the opportunity. Thus thinking, she favoured him to one of her sweetest smiles. It was by no means the first time she had smiled upon him; but she told herself that random smiles were like air-wafted seeds, there was always a chance of their bringing forth fruit.

So she smiled on and on, with all a woman's perseverance, and with all a woman's resolution to turn failure into success. This man's impenetrability had piqued her, otherwise she would never have troubled her head about him. He was far too stiff and solemn for her taste. She liked people who could tell a good story, who could appreciate one when they heard it, and who didn't mind calling a spade a spade. Now, with his lordship it had to be termed a "trowel," or else an "implement for digging the earth." She liked fun and gaiety and amusement, whereas all he seemed to think about were the "proprieties."

And she was sick to death of them; they had been dinned into her ears ever since her girlhood, and Sir Jonathan, in his time, had frequently waxed eloquent on the subject.

Lady De Fochsey was a woman to whom admiration was as the breath of life. But she possessed a certain amount of worldly sharpness, and had long since come

to the conclusion that the best way of attracting men was by amusing them; and if you amused them, it did not do to be too particular either in your manners or your conversation. She had not a very exalted idea of the male sex, nevertheless she could not do without masculine society, and often weakened her own self-respect in the efforts she made to prove agreeable. She could no more help casting an inviting glance at Lord Littelbrane than she could help being a social butterfly. That glance seemed to say: "Oh! do come and talk to poor little me. For goodness' sake, don't be so stand-off."

Had it not been for his lordship's late feeling of desolation, he might not have construed the look in this manner, but big with his resolution of committing matrimony, he was more amenable to feminine influences. Therefore he responded to Lady De Fochsey's pretty smile, and cantered up to her side. She immediately checked the chestnut's speed.

"Good morning," she exclaimed gaily. "I have not had an opportunity of exchanging a word with you all this long, long time. You seemed determined on ignoring my existence."

He reddened. His conscience pricked him more than was agreeable.

"Now that is positively unkind of you to say such a thing. Of course one can't speak to everybody who comes out hunting, but you," rather clumsily, "you are different."

"Ahem! that's a mercy; it's gratifying to my feelings to find I am not included in the list of people with whom your lordship cannot condescend to hold converse in the hunting field."

The satire was lost upon him; he only thought her words showed a very proper sense of his position and of the responsibilities entailed by it.

"Oh! Ah! You see there are so many queer folks come out with these hounds that one is bound to draw the line somewhere."

"Of course," she answered with fine irony, "still it is pleasing to find you do not draw it at me, as I began to suspect. One has feelings, you know," shooting a

languishing glance at him, "even although one *is* only a woman."

"I have feelings too," he said solemnly, looking as grave as an undertaker.

"I'm delighted to hear it, my lord. Upon my word, there have been times when I doubted their existence: I should think they were very uncomfortable ones, judging from your manner."

"They are rather," he admitted, relapsing into silence. He did not wish to do anything precipitate, and he thought he had gone far enough on that tack for the present. There were just one or two little points which he wanted to ascertain before committing himself. Was she a flirt, was she the least bit "loud," and was that pretty waist of hers produced by tight-lacing, or merely the result of natural slimness? He set his face against women compressing this particular portion of their body unduly. It was detrimental to the future race. When he married, he intended to marry with one given object in view. On that point he was quite determined. Nothing else could have induced him to sacrifice his bachelor independence. At forty-six men are apt to regard matrimony as a dubious pleasure; they have become too selfish and too confirmed in their own habits.

But in spite of her companion's taciturnity, Lady De Fochsey had no intention of allowing their interview thus soon to come to an end. So good a chance of inserting the thin edge of the wedge might not occur again for a long time. If he would not talk on one subject she would try another, a very harmless and innocent one, that could not possibly frighten him. Perhaps she had been a little—just a little—too sarcastic, only she did so long to give him a good shake, and put some life and naughtiness into him. He was so frightfully slow and heavy, and yet did not seem to have the least idea of the fact.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, reining in her horse, with a gesture of feminine exhaustion. "What a terribly long jog! How much further is it to the covert?"

She thought it well to ascertain what time was likely to be accorded her, so as to make a satisfactory disposition of her forces.

"Only about a quarter of a mile," he answered, taking stock of the width of her chest and the symmetry of her limbs. A narrow-chested woman would not have met with his approbation.

"What a comfort! That's the most cheering piece of news I've heard for a long time."

"Are you tired, Lady De Fochsey?"

"Dreadfully so; Burnett has been going at such a tremendous pace; I can't think what has made him in so great a hurry. Poor Little Mayfly," bending forward and patting her horse's neck, "is quite hot."

"And her mistress?"

"Her mistress is hot too."

"Why don't you walk a little, and take a rest?" he suggested.

"I can't, I should be left alone, all by myself, miles away from everybody."

"Not if you will let me stay with you."

She turned her blue eyes full upon him. She had never noticed before how weak and watery his colourless ones were, but she softened her voice, and said caressingly:

"You! Oh! Lord Littelbrane; you can't be in earnest, surely?"

"Yes," he rejoined, growing bolder. "Why not me as well as another?" and the warm blood rushed up into his faded face, giving it quite an animated expression.

Again she smiled; this time with conscious triumph. Her theory of the seedling had proved correct. A clever woman has only to bide her time, and there are very few men who will escape her. If she has good looks as well, then she can count almost surely on the result.

"You—you are very kind," she said coyly.

"I think you might trust me a little bit," he said, dropping his voice.

But this was too much for her ladyship's sense of the ridiculous. She laughed out loud.

"I *have* trusted you, Lord Littelbrane, I have trusted you for the last three years, and hunted regularly with these hounds. Only——" checking herself abruptly.

"Go on," he said impatiently. "Only what?"

"Must I tell you?"

"Yes."

"Then," raising her limpid blue eyes reproachfully to his, "you have never displayed the slightest wish for me to place faith in you until to-day. I have trusted you enormously, but always—from a distance."

He felt flattered. He was not sharp-witted enough to detect the fine sting of irony present in even her prettiest speeches; at all events he chose only to extract the honey.

"Lady De Fochsey," he said, with considerable agitation, "will you promise me something?"

"What is it, my lord? A wise woman never makes rash promises. She listens first, and promises afterwards."

"Promise that you will trust me from a distance no longer."

She hesitated for a moment—just a pretty little feminine hesitation, calculated to make him more eager. Then, with another swift upward look of the blue eyes, she said demurely:

"It is for you, not me, to decide the distance. You can hardly expect me to make the first advances. Remember, that for these three long years I have always been under the impression you did not like me."

Never had Lady De Fochsey appeared to greater advantage than when she uttered these words.

The air and exercise had brought a rosy flush to her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled with fun, triumph, and excitement, and her neat, upright figure, with its perfectly fitting scarlet coat, swayed voluptuously to and fro, yielding to every movement of her horse. What matter that the captivating golden fringe, which peeped from beneath her hat, was false; or that she was suffering agonies from the pretty little patent leather boot displayed with such extreme liberality? The soul knoweth its own bitterness, and Lord Littelbrane knew nothing of these things. He saw her only as she appeared to the outside world, not as she was and felt to herself.

"Me! Dislike *you*!" he stammered, beginning to wonder at his own indifference. "How could you have entertained so preposterous an idea?"

"I did not know—I—I thought you tried to avoid me."

"Pure imagination, my dear lady. The fact of the matter is, that in my position as master of hounds, it does not do for me to display any active preferences out hunting."

"You have certainly succeeded in concealing them admirably," she interrupted, her love of fun getting the better of her prudence. "No one could possibly have suspected that you entertained any. In fact your avoidance of womankind was almost marked."

"I don't profess to be what is called a lady's man," he said, not without a touch of pride.

"And I am sure that nobody would accuse you of being one," she retorted in her most *agaçante* manner.

"But," he went on, blushing up to the very roots of his hair, "I have always admired you. Always," emphatically. "From the very first."

She burst into a peal of silvery laughter.

"Oh! my lord, you do me too much honour. I am charmed to hear it." And through her vain little frame shot a thrill of triumph.

"'Pon my soul, it's the truth. You're an awfully nice woman."

"In that case, you must be a very stupid man not to have found it out sooner."

"By Jingo! I believe you are right. You think I have been remiss in my attentions, do you?"

"I did not say so, my lord."

"No, but your words implied it. Come, tell me. Have I not guessed pretty near the mark?" And he sidled up an inch or two nearer to her. It pleased his vanity to think that she had been hankering after him and felt hurt by his non-sociability.

"I will not make any damaging admissions," she responded, "though perhaps," sighing sentimentally, "it may have occurred to me now and again, that you considered women out of place in the hunting field."

"I swear that I never thought any such thing. Why! Lady De Fochsey, I have always looked upon you as one of the chief ornaments of my hunt."

She could not suppress her mirth. It was so irre-

sistibly funny after three whole years to find him wake up all of a sudden, for no apparent rhyme or reason, and begin paying her a series of grave and elaborate compliments. She hardly knew whether he was in earnest or not.

But anyway, she had not the least intention of letting him see how elated she felt. She was far too well versed in the ways of the world to jump down a man's throat who had committed the heinous offence of taking such an unconscionable time in discovering her attractions. True, it was better than not finding them out at all, but he must be made to feel his own stupidity—the pleasures he had missed.

"You will turn my head by so much adulation," she said demurely. "May I venture to ask when you first made the discovery of my being an *ornament* to your hunt? It must have been extremely recent."

Her mocking, airy tone disconcerted, whilst it provoked him. He hated "chaff." And across his mind dimly crept the idea that she was "chaffing" *him*.

"I have stated a fact," he said reprovingly, "and you seem to doubt my word. I don't like sceptical people."

"Quite right," said her ladyship quizzingly. "They are apt to be bores at times. Nevertheless, I do not think you need feel surprised at my being a little slow of belief. It has only just dawned upon me, that I am an ornament, at all events in your eyes."

"I suppose you thought me blind, then?" he said somewhat huffily.

"I am not quite sure. I believe I considered you blind, after the manner of those who won't see. People say that is the worst form of any."

"Well, my eyes are opened at last, at any rate, and I apologise for all my shortcomings."

"Don't," she said jestingly. "It would take you such a long time. Besides," shrugging her shoulders with a coquettish gesture, "it really would be too absurd to apologise to me, because it has never entered your head to see anything to admire in me, until to-day."

Her persistent levity had the effect of making him more earnest.

"It by no means follows that a man does not admire a woman because he has not the impudence to tell her so to her face," he said, with some heat.

"Don't you think women very easily forgive that sort of impudence?" she asked innocently.

"I hardly know."

"Do you suppose *I* would not have forgiven *you*, Lord Littelbrane?" And the arrant little flirt looked wickedly round at him with her babyish turquoise eyes.

"Well—perhaps you might," he answered, beginning to feel his head swim, and his heart beat with a strange and unaccustomed sensation.

"Then why didn't you tell me?"

This was a regular "poser," and he took some time before making any answer. At length he said, with a return to his serious manner:

"I could tell you a good many things if I chose." And he stared straight out over his horse's ears, as if afraid to encounter another glance so full of temptation as the last.

"Do," she said persuasively. "I'm all curiosity."

He looked undecidedly at her for a second, then turned his head away.

"Perhaps I may some day," he responded with growing solemnity, for the immense gravity of the step he had in contemplation weighed upon his spirit like a ton of iron.

If he married, it was from a sense of duty alone, not to gratify his personal inclinations. He was bound to commit matrimony sooner or later, and the lady of his choice was equally bound to be young, healthy and well-bred, in order to bring into the world a desirable number of little Littelbranes. Selection was a thing he had not studied very deeply, but he opined that it should certainly be exercised amongst people in exalted spheres. His own, he considered a very exalted sphere; and therefore the mother of the future heir of Littelbrane Castle was a being not to be chosen from the low standard of human passion, but from the far nobler and loftier one of the influences she was likely to bring to bear upon posterity.

Keeping this laudable object steadily in view, Lord

Littelbrane had slowly come to the conclusion that amongst all the ladies of his acquaintance, Lady De Fochsey best fulfilled the necessary conditions.

Eight-and-twenty was an excellent age. Neither too young nor yet too old. The only thing that distressed him, was that she had had no family by her first husband. But then her married life had been short, and Sir Jonathan very ailing and infirm.

Such were his reflections, as, fatigued by the magnitude of the conversational effort already made, he once more relapsed into silence. But he little knew the daring aggressive nature of the woman with whom he had to deal. Lady De Fochsey had long since recognized him as one of those men who must be "talked to." She found it up-hill work, but much practice had rendered her equal to the occasion.

"A penny for your thoughts!" she exclaimed, after a prolonged pause, during which she had been stealthily studying her companion's face, and thinking how terribly vapid and dull its owner was. He started and turned red at being thus attacked.

"At that particular moment I was wondering whether you ever felt lonely," he said simply.

She forgave him his stupidity, since she had been occupying his brain.

"Sometimes," she said, putting on a pensive air. "But why do you ask. Do you?"

"Frightfully, since poor dear Harry died. I don't know that I can go on living by myself much longer. I begin to want a companion very badly indeed."

Lady De Fochsey was an audacious little person, and had the gift of saying the boldest things in the most innocent and artless of manners.

"If that is so, Lord Littelbrane, why on earth do you not get married? Everybody says that you ought to."

"Do they?" he inquired, flushing crimson.

"Yes, everybody. Is there no one you like well enough to make your wife?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "I—I—think—there—is."

"Ah! I thought so. And pray, who may the lucky lady be?"

Something in the expression of his countenance made

her heart palpitate. A strange thought flashed through her mind. A thought full of gratified vanity, but without one particle of sentiment in its composition.

He turned quite pale, opened his lips as if to say something, when alas! alas! a loud tally-ho came ringing through the air.

In another moment they were engulfed by a galloping crowd, and borne far apart.

"Was there ever anything so provoking?" said Lady De Fochsey to herself. "I do believe he meant to propose. And oh, what fun it would have been, and what a feather in my cap!"

As for Lord Littelbrane, the perspiration had gathered in great beads upon his noble brow. He wiped it hastily away, and uttered a sigh which seemed torn from the very depths of his being.

"By Jove!" he muttered, "making love is awful work, worse even than I thought. It would have been all over with me in another minute. I was going ahead so deuced fast." Then he shook his head, and murmured disapprovingly: "Too fast—too fast by a great deal. It's just as well that fox went away when he did. Now I can take another week or two to make up my mind, and think the matter over."

He had no doubts about Lady De Fochsey. It never occurred to him to imagine that if he condescended to ask, she was not prepared to accept with pleasure.

CHAPTER XIV.

HE WON'T FACE WATER.

ALTHOUGH it was now nearly three o'clock, and sportsmen had already indulged in one good gallop, it had by no means abated their keenness. After the long summer's inactivity, they were full of ardour, which even the blindness of the country could not keep in check.

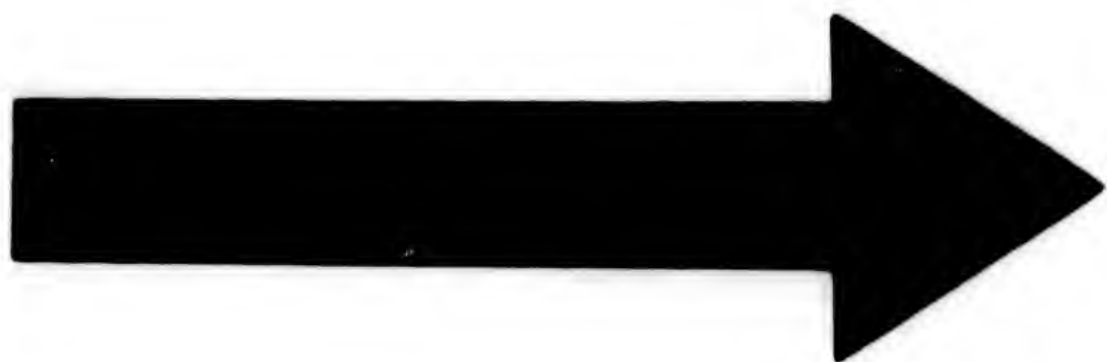
They were just as eager to pursue this second fox as they had been to follow the first, and he took them along at a very fair pace; though after the first ten

minutes were over he showed himself in his true colours, and turned out a faint-hearted twisty brute. This fact, however, did not in the least detract from Bob's pleasure. He was far too much of a novice at the game to care whether hounds ran straight, or round and round in a ring. It was all the same to him, as long as they kept moving on, and he could get plenty of jumping. The jumping, indeed, constituted his chief delight. He thought far more of it than of fox and hounds. They were quite subordinate considerations, as compared with the glorious and intoxicating sensation of feeling yourself up in the air and never knowing in exactly what fashion you would descend to the earth. There was an element of danger in the whole business which gave it a special charm. One moment your heart was in your mouth; the next, words failed to express the sudden elation which took possession of every faculty, and made the pulses thrill with ecstasy. But The Swell and his rider were no longer so exactly of the same mind as they had been earlier in the day.

That fastidious animal began to consider that his powers had been quite sufficiently exerted. He was too wise and old a hunter to love jumping for jumping's sake. He looked upon every unnecessary leap as an indignity to his understanding, and grew more and more sulky in consequence.

His late master had almost invariably ridden him first horse, and sent him home early. The cunning creature could not see the fun of being kept out so long, and hankered after his comforting warm mash and good old oats. His buoyancy and spirits departed. It was almost with a feeling of resentment that he turned his head away from home, and for the second time joined in the chase. His ill-humour soon became evident. He no longer fenced as faultlessly as in the morning. One or two places he negotiated quite slovenly, crashing right in amongst the thorns and binders with his hind-legs.

So badly indeed did he behave, that Bob, as he sailed down at a big hedge, newly plashed, with a very blind ditch on the near side, into which all the lopped-off twigs had been cast, deemed it advisable to rouse him up a little bit. The Swell resented the process and the



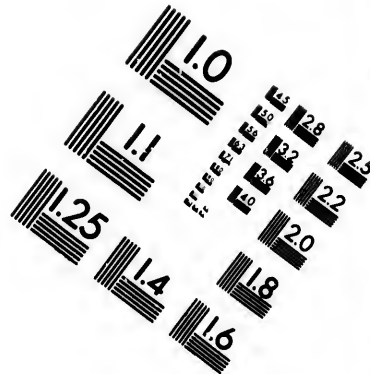
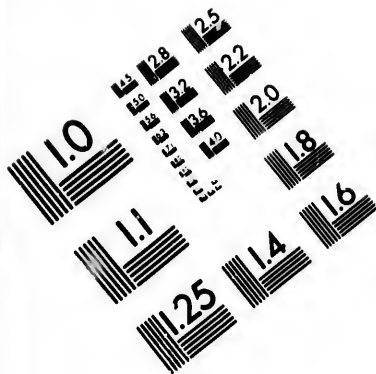
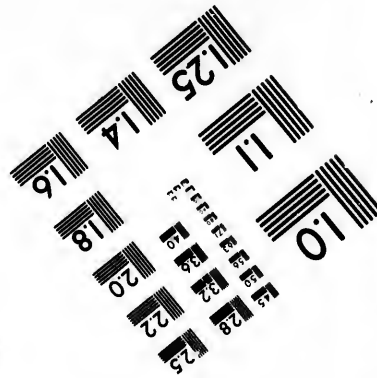
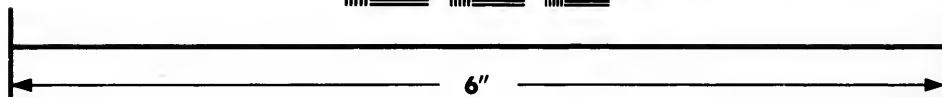
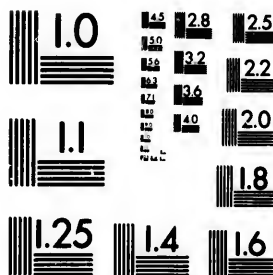


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the manner in which it was done. He missed those subtle touches of hand and heel to which he was accustomed. His mouth was fine and very sensitive.

Bob gave it a job, and the horse immediately tossed up his head, with the result that he almost put both forefeet into the ditch, and only succeeded in getting over with a desperate flounder, which landed him on his knees.

Crack, crack, rang an awful report in Bob's ears as he was jerked violently forwards, and then nearly as violently back, whilst The Swell righted himself, grunting with terror and indignation. His unhappy rider knew what had happened. He needed not to be told. The disaster which he feared, with almost morbid fear, had taken place at last. He glanced hurriedly at his nether limbs.

Yes, there they were! Those two abominable elastic straps, dangling down about a quarter of a yard in length, from the hem of his trousers. One of them had even a little square bit of cloth still sticking to it, which proved that the wrench must have been considerable. An unutterable horror seized him. A kind of sinking shame. And yet he did not realize the full extent of his misfortunes until he had galloped half-way across a fifty-acre field.

Then he began to feel odious and horrible sensations of discomfort. They seemed to come creeping slowly, slowly upward and to run all along his spine. Warm as he was, a shudder passed through his frame. He tried not to look downwards, but a species of fascination forced him to do so.

Unhappy young man! The man who had fancied himself superior to clothes, and who affected to despise boots and breeches. What did he see, you ask?

He saw two inches of white leg—disgustingly white, that made the matter so much worse—fully exposed to public vision; whilst his stockings had wriggled themselves into the heels of his boots, and his trousers were up to his knees. Pitiable spectacle! With the agony of desperation, he tried to pull the one up and the other down. It afforded only temporary relief. The wretched things would not stop in their place. And all this time

hounds were running well, even if not at a furious pace. Had there been a gate close by he would have hailed it with joy, and hidden his diminished head amongst the roadsters. But there was none. For once Stiffshire failed to supply the desired commodity. He *must* go on riding, and he *must* go on jumping, whether he liked it or not.

Overwhelmed with confusion, all of a sudden he heard a loud guffaw. Turning sharply round in the saddle, he perceived, carefully crawling through a handy gap, no less a person than his old antagonist, General Prosieboy. That man seemed to have a knack of turning up on every occasion, just when he was least wanted. At the present moment he was evidently gloating over Bob's discomfiture. His fat old sides literally shook with laughter, whilst his face assumed a deeper and more purple hue than its wont. Perhaps Bob was unreasonable; but the sight of the old gentleman simply maddened him. It seemed to set every nerve quivering and throbbing, and added a thousand times to his distress. He would have given a hundred pounds at that moment to have been able to punch General Prosieboy's head. There was a murderous instinct within him, which, if not quelled, might lead to terrible results.

Clapping spurs into The Swell he fled precipitately, as the only way of escaping from his tormentor.

But whither?

He did not think—he did not care, so long as he was somewhere near the hounds, and away from the rest of the field.

For five whole minutes he rode like a madman; cramming his horse at all sorts of break-neck places, now crashing into a bullfinch, anon scrambling over fences, again smashing recklessly through timber. The Swell had never been so utterly amazed and disgusted in the whole course of his career. His legs were a pincushion. They were stuck full of thorns, his sides were dark with crimson gore, and a long red scratch disfigured the stifle of his near hind leg. To look at him, he might have been a miserable hireling, whose rider was bent on having his two guineas' worth to the very last farthing.

Presently Bob grew calmer. For a hasty backward glance had shown him that not a soul was following in his footsteps. All he wanted was to get away from the crowd, and to escape their gibes and jeers.

But before long, his thoughts took a different turn. He began to imagine that he was entirely alone with hounds. It never struck him to look to the right or to the left. His eyes were fixed on the light vanishing sterns ahead. Even the recollection of those two white legs faded from his mind, erased by the imaginary glories of his position. Neither was excitement wanting. For none can be greater than that of riding a well-nigh beaten horse at a succession of big fences, and counting surely on a fall at each one. A man's courage is severely tested then—more perhaps than at any other time.

With all his good qualities, The Swell was not a *bonâ fide* stayer.

He could live through a really fast run, first thing in the morning when he came out fresh and well, but although it might take some time to discover the fact, he was a cur at heart. For if he once got ever so little pumped, he never came again that day.

The morning gallop had stretched his girths quite as much as he deemed fit. After five-and-thirty to forty minutes, a twenty-pound screw would have carried a man almost as well to hounds for the remainder of the afternoon.

Besides which natural idiosyncrasies, he had not been out hunting this season and was a little short of condition, like most gentlemen's horses early in November. Bob, however, was not sufficiently experienced to take these things into consideration. He had a good deal to learn yet, before becoming a finished cross-country performer. The number of jumps you have jumped, does not constitute the sole glory of fox-hunting, as before long he was destined to discover. Wise is he, who, nursing his horse, looks upon leaping simply as a means to an end.

All of a sudden, straight in front of him, Bob saw the gleam of water peeping coldly out from amongst a fringe of low, stunted willows. As he did so, Matthews' words

recurred to him : " He has but one fault, sir. He won't face water."

But he—Bob—was in a state of sur-excitation, when he flattered himself that a really resolute person on The Swell's back was bound to make all the difference. Because a horse refused to look at a brook with one man, he might be persuaded or forced to have it with another. Anyhow, he would not show the white feather, even although he believed there was no one to see what he was about. But his own self-respect shrank from the idea of "funking." Physical cowardice inspired him with a supreme contempt. As for the hounds—well, he forgot to notice whether they had actually crossed the brook or not. He *thought* they were going to, and that was enough. He never observed how old Truetongue paused on the very brink, and then feathered along the side. Instead of closely watching her movements, he caught his horse by the head, and drove him at the water, just as hard as ever he could.

To his surprise, he found on approaching the brook, that it was bigger than he suspected. Should that alter his determination? Certainly not.

He raised his whip hand. The Swell swerved away from it; and then—oh, horror! he felt him begin to collapse under him. He dug the spurs into the poor beast's sides and kept him as straight as he could. He held him in such an iron grasp that he thought the horse was bound to make a bid for it. Not he!

In the very last stride, The Swell stopped dead short, stretched out his neck, lowered his head and gazed in mute obstinacy at the dark depths beneath him. He knew what they felt like. He had tried them once, long ago in his early youth, and had made a mental resolve never, by any chance, to renew their acquaintance. Some might like cold water. *He* did not approve of it. The dry system appeared to him to possess insuperable advantages. And Bob? the rash youth who thought his will was stronger than that of the animal he bestrode, and who did not know that a horse, when he is in earnest, can defy any man ever born! Well, Bob simply flew over his head, like an arrow shot from a bow, and descended plump into the midst of the stream.

It was awfully deep! He went right down to the bottom, rolled about in the soft mud, and imbibed more water than he had ever done before or hoped to do again. Gasping and spluttering, he rose to the surface, making frantic endeavours to regain his footing. Roars of laughter greeted his reappearance—real, unfeigned, hearty laughter.

It seemed to him, in that never-to-be-forgotten moment, which crowned all his previous mishaps, as if the whole of the Morbey Anstead Field were congregated on the banks of this fatal brook, and were unanimous in regarding his involuntary immersion as a most excellent joke. If he could have felt any sensations of heat, he would have grown hot with indignation. Even The Swell turned his full blue eye upon him with an air of amiable triumph, which seemed to say: "Ah! you would have done much better to have taken my advice."

It was a terrible thing, having to scramble out on to *terra firma* before all those laughing faces. Nobody appeared to possess the least instinct of pity. Even Lady De Fochsey, his quondam ally, was smiling broadly and was evidently greatly amused.

Poor Bob stood and shook himself like a Newfoundland dog. The water poured from his ears and saturated clothes. The glory of the day had departed. The sky had clouded over, a cold wind arose which whistled across the uplands. He felt chilled to the bone. And then, all at once, a gruff voice from amongst the crowd said:

"I say, young fellow, how are the legs? They look whiter than ever after getting such a real good washing. It will save your soap, anyway."

This sally was received with much tittering and applause.

Bob could have sworn the voice belonged to General Prosieboy, but he failed to perceive that gentleman's whereabouts. Perhaps it was lucky for his grey hairs. It is the last straw which breaks the camel's back.

Bob had endured a good deal, on this memorable day, from the hands of the Mutual Adorationites! He now felt as if he could endure no more. His wet clothes

clung heavily about him and weighed like a ton. Without saying a word he clambered laboriously up into the saddle, and rode straight off in the direction of home. Any temporary feeling of elation had been destroyed by his cold bath. A more crestfallen, dejected and miserable young man, it would have been impossible to find in all Her Majesty's possessions. Just when he was particularly anxious to make a favourable *début* in the hunting field, he had contrived to tumble off and provide amusement for every one present. The tears almost started to his eyes. He felt so bitterly humiliated. Swearing was not a habit he greatly approved of, but oh! how he swore at those "confounded" straps, which, rightly or wrongly, he looked upon as the chief cause of his disasters.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PLEASURES OF HUNTING.

As soon as he succeeded in reaching the first road, Bob set off at a swinging trot. His teeth were chattering, and his limbs frozen. To make matters worse the wind increased, till it seemed to blow through his clothes as if they were paper, and chilled the very marrow in his bones. Under these circumstances, it was perhaps excusable that he displayed but little regard for The Swell's fore-legs, and went pounding along at a tremendous pace. After he had gone about a couple of miles, he saw a poor old labourer engaged in the tedious task of breaking stones by the road-side.

Then for the first time it occurred to him, that for aught he knew, he might be going wrong, since he was by no means sure of the way. Therefore, checking his tired horse, he asked: "Is this right for Straightem Court, my man?"

"Yes, sir, quite right, sir," came the reply. "Keep straight on till you pass Killerton village, then turn sharp to the right, through a bridle-gate, that takes you across

the fields almost into Straightem. It'll save you a couple of miles if not more."

"But how am I to find the bridle-gate?" inquired Bob, intent on making sure of his directions.

"You can't possibly mistake it, sir, because there's a sign-post within five yards."

Moved to compassion by the feeble old man's shrunken frame, hollow cheeks and half-starved appearance, Bob fumbled in his waistcoat pocket until he found a shilling.

"Thank you," he said kindly. "There—take this. I have no doubt that it will do you a great deal more good than it will me."

The recipient's blessings followed him as he rode away, and for a few minutes he reflected gravely on the miserable condition of an honest man like the one he had just left, when age and infirmity combined to render the struggle against poverty more and more difficult. What could life mean to him? Only a weary, weary warring against cold and wind and rain; against hunger and fatigue; without amusement, without pleasure; without comfort of any sort. A dreary existence at best, but rendered a thousand times more so by failing health, and the pains of a poor, worn-out old body. The body! Ah! what a drag and torment it was to human beings! If only they could rise above it! And yet even a simple toothache could dethrone the greatest genius from its seat. Brain, psychic force: of what did they avail, when Pain could lay them in the dust so easily and ride triumphant over them? Their very defeat only served to prove the weakness and mortality of man.

But Bob's meditations were cut short by a fresh calamity. The road had been newly mended and was covered with stones. The Swell toed them with the carelessness of a weary animal. Suddenly he trod on a loose flint, and immediately afterwards went dead lame. So lame indeed that trotting was out of the question. It was as much as he could do to walk.

Bob's star was clearly not in the ascendant to-day. He thought that he had already reached the limits of his ill-luck. He found there was still a margin which had

not entered into his calculations. The Swell's small ears now bobbed up and down with torturing irregularity. They made him feel like a monster of cruelty.

Dismounting, he proceeded to examine the poor beast's foot, but could perceive nothing to account for his sudden lameness. In truth, it would have taken a pretty powerful magnifying glass to have detected that small, sharp piece of granite, which having penetrated the frog, was causing such exquisite agony.

Being now forced to travel at a foot's pace, Bob considered it was warmer walking than riding, besides he could not help being sorry for the unhappy animal, whose appearance had undergone such a total transformation since he sallied forth in the morning, championing at his bit, arching his glossy neck and playfully whisking his tail. There was not a symptom of light-heartedness left now.

The unfortunate Swell no longer merited the name. Anything less like an equine dandy could not have been imagined. His sleek bay coat was hard and white with dry perspiration, his sides were disfigured by spur marks, his legs incrustated with mud; whilst his eye wore a dull, glazy look, which told of physical discomfort. If to him had been given the gift of speech, he would probably have said: "My master may be 'plucky,' but never let me see him again—never let me have anything more to do with him. He has ridden my tail off."

Bob trudged sturdily on, till at length he reached Killerton village, and the bridle-gate beyond. Then, when once more a vista of green fields refreshed his eyes, he remounted, thinking that the probabilities were The Swell would go less tender on the soft, springy grass.

In this supposition he was correct, nevertheless it was a weary ride home, cold and slow and miserable. The sort of ride which effectually obliterates any pleasant impressions left by the day's sport, and which makes a man begin to ask himself whether fox-hunting repays the many disappointments and discomforts that must necessarily come in its train.

It was a bad thing for Bob, on his very first acquaintance with the noble pastime, to have arrived at such a

stage, but, as before stated, physical misery soon makes a different creature of man, and quickly subdues him.

Our hero followed the track as well as he could, and his spirits slightly revived. But after a time, the path disappeared, swallowed up in a sea of grass, and then he had to trust entirely to his bump of locality—a bump which he did not possess in as large a degree as might have been expected.

Besides, it is by no means an easy thing to thread one's way through a series of narrow gates, in an entirely new country. These huge uninhabited pastures, for which Stiffshire is celebrated all over the hunting world, and which constitute its glory and its renown, are desolate in the extreme. You may go for miles and miles without meeting anything but herds of grazing cattle, woolly sheep, and an occasional rough young colt. The cloud-shadows race across these vast stretches of undulating verdure, and the wind sweeps over them at its icy will. There are scarcely any trees to break its fury. Only a few isolated specimens in the hedgerows, which rear their gaunt, stunted arms to the dull sky, as if imploring that their lives may be granted them. Here and there a great black bullfinch, situated on the summit of some rising hill, lies like a long dark wall against the grey horizon. A magpie flits across the path. Intersected lines of fences break up the green, rendering it yet more vivid—and this is Stiffshire. Lonely, silent, sullen, undecked by the beauties of Nature, yet withal not destitute of a certain grandeur, born of her vastness and her desolation. A solitary country, that after a time possesses a kind of weird charm for the solitary soul that walks the earth alone. Bob looked about him. Far as eye could reach, not a human habitation was within vision. He began to experience fresh misgivings as to the route. Sometimes the fields were so large that they had two or three gates, and then he was just obliged to guess at the most likely one. But he might have gone wrong a dozen times over, and as the afternoon advanced, would have been many degrees easier in his mind, could he but have reached a road. Many and many a time did he regret having left one. He would not have grudged the greater distance, for the sense of extra

security conferred. Already it seemed to him as if he had been hours on his way.

All of a sudden, just when he was settling down into a state of melancholy resignation, he perceived a brand new gate, painted white, about fifty yards ahead. And through the bars of this gate, he saw the moist road glimmering, as the young crescent moon, high up aloft, reflected her pallid face in a little pool of water. Joyfully he hastened his steps, whilst even The Swell pricked his ears, and seemed to know he was nearing home.

Bob stretched out his arm, and tried to lift up the latch with the crook of his hunting crop. It was secured by some new-fangled process which he did not understand, and yielded not an inch. He made another essay with the same result, another and yet another. Then The Swell grew impatient, and pushed heavily against the barrier with his strong chest. Finding it still closed, he lurched away from it in disgust, as much as to say, "It is for you to open this, not me. I've done my best, now you do yours."

Bob did all he could to coax him up to the gate again. He tried patting, he tried speaking, he tried spurring. But the horse refused with all the obstinacy of which brute nature is capable. In little, as in big things, The Swell would try once, but never more often. He was like some men and many women—easily disheartened by failure, and let failure conquer *him*, instead of *he* conquering failure.

This delay proved most vexatious. For when you have been immersed in a brook, on a cold November afternoon, every minute appears of consequence. Your whole soul hankers after warmth, and a dry change of clothes. There was nothing for it, however, but to get off. Bob did so, and throwing the reins over his bridle arm, proceeded to ascertain why this particular gate was unlike all other gates, and refused to allow itself to be opened. But heaving, pushing, lifting—all proved useless. At the end of five minutes he was in despair. Finally he put his shoulder to the refractory bars, and tried to break them down by main force. He was a strong, athletic young fellow, six feet in height, and broad of chest, with muscles developed by the healthy

open-air life he had led. But he was just as powerless against those strong white timbers as a child of six. He could not even bend them, although he put forth all his strength, and his face turned scarlet with exertion.

A heavy sigh escaped from him. It acknowledged his defeat. Totally disconcerted, he told himself that he must retrace his footsteps and seek some fresh means of entering the road. He glanced at the fence which ran on either side of the gate. But it was perfectly unjumpable, and even had it been otherwise, he doubted very much whether The Swell, in his present state, could have made an effort. He was at his wit's end. And then, all at once hope surged up into his heart.

He heard a noise, the clatter of hoofs approaching on the hard macadam. Thank goodness! help was at hand. The people of the country would surely understand how these mysterious gates opened. And even if the worst came to the worst, with the aid of another good, strong man, he felt confident that he could break the wretched thing down. It would be easy to pay for the damages afterwards, but home, sweet home, was the chief consideration just at present.

Bob's disappointment was therefore extreme, when a sharp turn in the road revealed a young lady, riding a smart dun cob, about fourteen hands high.

Their eyes met, and she seemed immediately to guess the cause of his distress. She blushed a little, hesitated for a moment, and then pulled the dun up to a stand.

"I see you are in difficulties," she said, in a voice whose frank, straightforward tones impressed him favourably. "Will you allow me to help you?"

In his amazement at this slim, slip of a girl imagining that she could open a gate which had defied all his own energies, Bob did a very rude thing.

He made no answer, but simply stood still, and stared at the fair Samaritan who thus kindly volunteered to assist him.

CHAPTER XVI.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

AND as Mr. Robert Jarrett continued to stare, he suddenly woke to the consciousness that the young lady, whoever she might be, possessed a very charming face. A face soft, and fresh, and fair ; round in form, delicate in colouring, and beautified by a pair of clear grey eyes, fringed with long dark eye-lashes, whose straightforward and honest expression was attractive in the extreme.

She reddened imperceptibly at his somewhat prolonged scrutiny. Then finding he did not reply to her offer of assistance, she broke into a little laugh, and said lightly :

"Ah ! I see you think I am making a vain boast, in offering to help you out of your present dilemma, but the difficulty is by no means as great as it seems."

"It has puzzled me for some time," said Bob, wiping his damp brow with a silk pocket-handkerchief. "I never saw such a gate in my life."

She laughed again, merrily like a little child, and clapped her hands together.

"Ah ! you are not the first gentleman who has been similarly baffled. Indeed, I often tell Farmer Budge quite seriously that he ought to put up a notice, giving full directions as to how his gates open, but he declares this is precisely what he does not want. Now, look here and I will show you the secret. There ! do you see ?" and stooping down from the saddle, she pressed a small iron knob, imbedded in the wood at the very end of the latch, and which Bob in his impatience had entirely overlooked.

The gate immediately flew open.

"It is quite simple once you know the way," she said with a smile of amusement.

"Like a good many other things," he remarked, as he led The Swell on to the road.

"These latches were exhibited at the last Agricultural Show, I believe," she went on, talking naturally and easily. "Farmer Budge has taken out a patent and claims to be the inventor. He is very proud of them,

but all the hunting gentlemen are loud in their condemnation."

"I don't wonder. They are diabolical things, and I really can't think what would have become of me if you had not just happened to appear when you did."

"And yet you looked a little disappointed, at least judging from the expression of your face," she said archly.

Bob blushed. He had no idea that his countenance had betrayed him, or that she would prove so discerning.

"How sharp you are. Well, I will not deny the truth. I *was* a little disappointed, because I thought it had come to be a regular case of brute force, which would require a couple of men's strength."

"Whereas female cunning has answered the purpose as well," she retorted gaily.

"It has answered the purpose so far, that I cannot help feeling I owe you an immense debt of gratitude."

And as he spoke, he caught hold of The Swell's mane, hoisted himself into the saddle, and moved on a pace or two.

His companion, whose way was apparently identical, instead of wishing him good-bye, continued to ride by his side. She was not very smartly dressed, not nearly as smartly as Lady De Fochsey. Her plain black habit showed symptoms of wear. It had a large leather patch over the knee, and the seams were decidedly threadbare; but for all that, Bob thought there was no comparison between the two women. With the one, every tone, every action, was evidently studied; with the other, a freedom from all self-consciousness gave her an undefinable charm, which he felt before he had been two minutes in her presence.

"Oh!" she exclaimed; "how dreadfully lame your poor horse is. What is the matter with him?"

"I don't know," answered Bob. "But I can't get him along at all."

"You shouldn't try to," she said reproachfully, as he endeavoured to increase the speed. "If you do, you deserve to be taken up for cruelty to animals."

"It would not matter if it were not so infernally cold," he rejoined with a shiver.

She looked up at him with an air of true feminine pity, which sank deep into the foolish fellow's heart. All through the day that particular organ had been hardening and hardening, until at last it felt like a stone. One single glance from a pretty, fresh-faced young woman made a curious difference in his sensations. It was so sweet to find that *somebody* sympathised in his misfortunes, instead of turning them into ridicule. A lump came into his throat, as her soft, compassionate eyes rested upon him.

"Did you meet with an accident?" she asked commiseratingly.

It was as if he could not tell her an untruth, or even conceal his shortcomings.

"I tumbled off into a brook. My horse stopped short, and I flew over his head. No doubt I ought not to have quitted the pignskin, but I did."

He spoke with a kind of defiant doggedness, which betrayed a secret fear that she might laugh at him. Apparently nothing was further from her intentions. She had laughed merrily enough a few moments ago. He had only thought to himself how pure and childlike her mirth sounded. But now her little flower-like face, with its large eyes and rose-bud mouth, looked very grave and sedate.

"Everybody comes off when they ought not to," she said consolingly. "We think nothing of such small casualties down here. Why! the very best rider in all the Hunt—a poor man who was killed only the other day, flew off last season before the whole field, without any apparent reason. But tell me, have you far to go? Because if so, we could change saddles, and I might lend you my dear old Mouse to ride home upon. You would get there sooner."

Bob was quite affected by the kindness of this proposal, coming as it did from a complete stranger.

"And you—what would you do?" he said after a slight pause.

"I? Oh! I should put your horse into our stable, and let the poor thing remain there until you send for him. How much further have you to go?" returning to her point.

"I really haven't an idea. I'm a stranger, and have never hunted here before to-day."

"Will you tell me, then, for what place you are bound? I know most of the distances pretty accurately, having lived in this part of the world nearly all my life."

"I am bound for Straightem Court," said Bob in reply.

She gave a little start.

"Then you are Mr. Jarrett! I thought as much."

"Did you? How was that?" he asked with awakening curiosity.

"Because I know the greater number of the regular *habitués* of our hunt, at all events by sight."

"Don't you think," said Bob, "that since I have told you my name, you might as well tell me yours. It's always more comfortable to know who people are."

"If it would add to your *comfort* in any way, Mr. Jarrett," she replied jestingly, "I have great pleasure in informing you that my name is Dot." And two mischievous dimples appeared in either cheek.

"Dot!" he repeated, lingering unconsciously on the word. "What is Dot short for?"

"Dorothea. Being a rather small person, I was presented with a very grand name. But as everybody seems to find it rather a mouthful, it has been reduced to Dot."

"Dot what? I rather like Dot," and Bob stole a glance at her; "but I suppose you have a surname like all the rest of the world."

"Oh! yes, Lankester. But let me introduce myself formally. Miss Dorothea Lankester, only daughter of Dr. Hugh Lankester, who enjoys the privilege and distinction of dispensing nostrums to the good people in your village. When you require medical aid, Mr. Jarrett, please think of us." And she turned a pair of laughing grey eyes full upon him.

"Would you come to nurse me?" he asked, chiming in with her mood.

"I should have to. No choice would be given me in the matter. So mind and don't fall ill. I always say that I would rather attend to a dozen women than one man."

"Why? I should have thought it would have been the other way about."

"Because the men have not got a bit of pluck, and give in at once. They always make up their minds that they are going to die, even if they only cut their finger, whereas women are so used to discomfort and physical pain, that they bear even the most dreadful sufferings with stoicism."

"I shouldn't mind putting up with a good deal of discomfort to be nursed by you," said Bob, still harping on the same idea, and getting bolder as he began to feel more at ease.

"Oh! no, you wouldn't." And she pursed up her little face till it wore a comically severe expression. "I'm an awfully strict nurse and keep my patients in thorough order."

"I hope we shall see a great deal of each other," he said, visions of neighbourly visits, pleasant dinners, and delightful country rides with Miss Dot flashing across his mind's eye. "It will be so nice for us to be good friends."

"Very," she replied with frank unconsciousness. "The worst of it is, father is generally so dreadfully busy, he hardly ever has a moment to himself. He was only saying to-day, that really we ought to call upon you."

"Who are we?" asked Bob, artfully endeavouring to find out of how many members the family of Miss Lankester consisted.

"Mother and me. Father very seldom is able to come with us when we leave his paste-boards."

"Don't pay me a formal visit," he said eagerly. "I do so hate them. And—and—what day may I expect you?" He was making great strides towards intimacy. Somehow he felt as if he had known her all his life.

"I really can't say exactly, Mr. Jarrett," she replied, smiling at his *empressement*.

"Come any non-hunting day. Tuesday, for instance. That's to-morrow, isn't it?"

"Very well, I'll ask mother."

"Wait a bit, though. Why not come to dinner?" urged hospitable Bob. "It would be ever so much

jollier." Then, with a sudden burst of confidence, inspired by Miss Dot's sympathetic manner, he added plaintively: "I can't tell you how lonely I've been all this time. It will be a perfect godsend to me to have somebody to talk to."

"Don't you find everybody remarkably talkative out hunting?" asked Dot mischievously.

"No, very much the reverse. They seem a rum lot of fellows, at least according to my way of thinking. I never met a duller, solemn set in my life."

Dot's clear laugh rang out. It did him good to hear it. There was something so genuine and so hearty about her laughter.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "I perceive that either directly or indirectly you have been making the acquaintance of some of our great people."

"Yes," he said, savagely, "they are *very* great, at all events in their own estimation. As for me, I confess I cannot see wherein lies their superiority over the rest of mankind. They are intolerably rude and entirely wanting in good manners."

Then he checked himself suddenly, feeling that he might possibly be committing an indiscretion, and that it was scarcely wise to abuse folk with whom Miss Lankester was probably well acquainted. For all he knew, they were perhaps personal friends of hers.

"Forgive me," he said, turning crimson, "I was forgetting that I might be hurting your feelings."

She smiled brightly, and when she smiled Bob could not account for the attraction her face possessed. With the exception of the eyes, it owned no really striking feature, and yet he admired and liked her more than any girl he had ever seen. His own sisters were good-looking, but there was a subtle refinement about Miss Lankester which he felt was wanting in their case. Nevertheless, it was hard to define the difference. As for Lady De Fochsey, she seemed positively vulgar in comparison.

"Pray don't have any fear of hurting my feelings," said Dot, with just a touch of satire audible in her clear young voice. "*We* are only small fry; and such exalted personages as the Mutual Adorationites do not

even condescend to know us. We regard their many virtues from a distance——”

“The greater the better,” he interrupted.

“But,” she went on, more seriously, “you must not condemn all Englishmen from the specimens you may have seen to-day. There are some”—and a tender look illumined all her face—“who don’t live exclusively for their personal pleasure and consider it the chief and foremost object of existence—men whose ideal is not mere amusement, but something worthier and nobler, and who see that work and work alone can bring out the grit and substance of a man’s character.”

Bob looked at his companion with growing interest. She spoke enthusiastically, and her views evidently coincided with his own. Young as he was, he had arrived at a philosophy of life which in substance was much the same.

“You are right, no doubt,” he said. “And those are the men I thought and hoped I should meet over here. Perhaps I expected too much.” And he gave a sigh of disappointment.

“I don’t think so. You forget that those who represent the hunting-field mostly belong to the rich and consequently idle class: a class without professions, and which has no incentive to bring its higher faculties into play.”

“They look down upon a fellow,” said Bob bitterly, “because his clothes are different from their own, because he has not been born in England, and for a hundred and one different reasons, equally trifling. I am sharp enough to know what they think of me. They think me an ‘outsider,’ and therefore cut me dead. It’s not pleasant being cut, Miss Lankester,” he concluded pathetically. “One can’t help feeling it, especially when, as in my case, you have always been brought up to look upon these men as brothers, and people of your own kith and kin.”

“Never mind,” said Dot, soothingly. “Things may very likely improve after a bit, and in any case you must not form your opinions too hastily. I only wish you knew a man——”

But she stopped short, and did not finish the sentence.

A bright blush rose to her face, and Bob wondered inwardly what had caused it, whether some chance word of his had touched any secret chord.

"Good-bye, Mr. Jarrett," she said after a somewhat prolonged pause, holding out her hand as she spoke. "Here we are in the village. You cannot possibly mistake your way now, since if you go straight on for another hundred yards you will see the gates of Straightem Court. I turn down here," pointing to a side road that branched off at right angles from the main one.

"Good-bye," said Bob, reluctantly, detaining her little gloved hand decidedly longer than strict politeness demanded. "I'm tremendously obliged to you."

"What for?" she asked, with the innocence of a child.

"Oh! for ever so much. I felt most awfully down in the mouth when you joined me at that beastly gate, regularly out of sorts all round, but thanks to your company, I am pounds better already."

"I am very glad to hear it, Mr. Jarrett. Please keep up your spirits, and don't forget that we English, as a race, are not so bad as you seem to imagine."

"I except the fair sex," he replied gallantly. "I think that English women—especially English girls, are perfectly delightful."

"Oh! so you have made their acquaintance already, have you?"

"Yes," he answered, raising his hat wit' the courtesy of an Elizabethan knight. "I have met *you*, Miss Lankester. That is quite enough for me."

Her smooth, pink cheek turned just a shade pinker, but otherwise she took but little heed of the implied compliment. It did not ruffle her calm serenity.

Dot Lankester was not a flirt. Never did there a girl exist less coquettishly inclined. The frank simplicity of her nature prevented her from seeing in every man a possible lover; besides, she was content to remain as she was. In her youth and innocence she believed firmly in platonic friendships. She was touched, too, by Bob's confession of loneliness. She knew the big house, with its cold, formal rooms, and retinue of

servants—knew it and shuddered at it. Some are born for grandeur, some are not. Dot's idea of happiness was a small abode, little bigger than a cottage, and two softly-treading maids to wait upon her. She did not covet wealth or the pomp of this world.

And so, she could fancy how dull and how home-sick the young man must feel, separated from all his relations, living alone in that great gray old place.

It was not in her power to do much for him, but what little she could, she would.

"Before you go, do promise faithfully to come on Tuesday," pleaded Bob, still holding her hand in his. "Surely you need not treat me like a stranger or stand on ceremony."

She withdrew it gently, and with a little air of quiet dignity, which told him as well as actual words that he must not attempt to take any liberties. If they were to be friends, the limits of their friendship must not be over-strained, especially on so short an acquaintance.

"Thank you. I will tell my father and mother of your kind invitation, and an answer shall be sent this evening. Will that do?" shortening Mouse's reins.

"It will have to do," he said, not feeling wholly satisfied, yet afraid to urge the matter further.

"Good-bye, then," she said again, this time moving away at a fairly brisk trot.

"Good-bye." And cold and wet as Bob was, he reined in The Swell until Miss Lankester's girlish form had completely disappeared from vision.

Coming to him as she had done, in the midst of his distress—the only person during all that day who had treated him kindly and with commiseration—he felt ready to fall down and worship at her feet. His imagination magnified a hundredfold the service she had performed.

So deeply does a little sympathy sink into the heart of those whose sensibilities have been outraged and feelings wounded.

At such times a few kind words will restore a man's self respect and make him the friend for life of the woman who utters them.

Only such words are dangerous, from the very fact that he is apt to think too much of them and to take them for more than they are worth.

In Bob's case, he immediately jumped at the conclusion, that as a specimen of a fair, frank English girl, utterly devoid of conceit or affectation, there were not many who could compare with Miss Dorothea Lankester.

He had arrived at the age of four-and-twenty, and, strange to say, had never been seriously in love. The Australian maidens had failed to captivate his fancy, though perhaps the reason might have partly been that until now he was not in a position to marry. Be this as it may, those five minutes spent in Miss Dot's society, her grey eyes, and fresh young face, put some very strange and novel ideas into his head.

He himself was startled by their presence and by the suddenness with which they took form and shape. Only yesterday he would have been the very readiest to laugh at such a thing as love at first sight. To-day he was by no means so sure that it was as idiotic and absurd as he had hitherto maintained.

CHAPTER XVII.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

HAD our friend Bob not had the good fortune to encounter Dot Lankester when he did, he would most assuredly have sunk in the lowest depths of despair on proceeding to review the results of the day, to which he had looked forward with such a large amount of youthful enthusiasm. Few pleasures equal the anticipation that they excite. When they do they are too short-lived to produce any substantial satisfaction. Only a few brief moments, snatched from the dreary waste of life, which we fain would lengthen if we could, but whose very brightness makes the dull daily path seem darker in comparison. Every human being has an insatiate—perhaps a selfish—desire for happiness. It is all very

well to philosophize, to preach wisdom, moderation and content. When we are first put into the world, and are young and sanguine, we all of us expect something from it. We look upon it as a kind of fairy godmother, who will certainly grant our wishes and fulfil our desires. It takes a good many years to learn the truth, and the learning is seldom pleasant. Some never learn it. The lesson is too hard. They cannot understand why, instead of showering good gifts upon their children, the world only robs them of their small possessions, and takes away with hard covetous hand, faith, hope and illusion. What then is left? Little save endurance. A growing apathy which renders the buffets of Fate a trifle less hard to bear, and a conviction of the pettiness of human strivings, when opposed to the stern, resistless pressure of nature. A sense of defeat still hung over Bob. He was as sore morally as if he had been thoroughly thrashed for an uncommitted offence. Nevertheless the remembrance of Dot's innocent face, when she had looked up into his own and offered to lend him her cob, exercised a wonderfully soothing effect upon his over-wrought nervous system.

It contrived to render bearable what otherwise would have seemed wholly unbearable. For his heart was full of wrath when he reflected upon the reception accorded him by the master of the Morbey Anstead hounds and his friend General Prosieboy. It was useless trying to persuade himself that he did not care. He *did* care, and moreover very deeply; although he declared inwardly that he was every bit as good as these men who affected to despise him. But it was not enough for him to know the fact, he wanted them to acknowledge it also. Besides, was he not their neighbour, and the owner of lands broad and goodly? Surely these latter entitled him to some consideration.

In short, Bob was very angry, almost as angry as he had been when he had caught one of his cowboys red-handed in the act of torturing some cattle. From that day until this no such volcano had raged within his breast. He hardly realized what tumultuous passions he possessed. But if he was quick-tempered, he was not vindictive.

By the time he had eaten a good dinner, comforted the inner man by flesh, and fowl, and wine, his anger gradually cooled. He was thoroughly warm again now, having as soon as the evening meal came to an end taken up his quarters in the smallest and cosiest sitting-room in the house, and ensconced himself in a luxurious arm-chair before a blazing fire, whose blue and yellow flames shot merrily up the chimney, licking its sooty sides with greedy avidity.

A long day's hunting in the open air, especially when accompanied by an increase of the physical temperature, gives birth to a gentle lassitude, which promotes dreams, and renders a state of do nothing not only permissible but enjoyable.

A man feels at such seasons that he has earned a right to repose, and nine times out of ten gives himself up to slumber, or, if not to slumber, to quiet meditation which encroaches on the borderland of sleep. Bob began by going over all his experiences since the morning. He summed up the pleasures and the pains with almost morbid precision, trying hard not to detract from the former, or to exaggerate the latter. But do what he would the pains preponderated until, down the road of thought, his brain travelled as far as Miss Dot.

There he came to a complete halt, almost as if he did not care to pursue his retrospections further, but was quite content to dwell upon the image conjured up by her frank face, bright eyes and soft fresh tints.

And all of a sudden it occurred to him, like a genuine flash of inspiration, that the big, desolate house, with its empty rooms, and uninhabited appearance, might wear a very different and more home-like aspect if presided over by a clear-headed, sweet-voiced mistress. What was wanting at Straightem Court was a gracious, feminine influence. He had felt it from the first moment he set foot inside the hall, but now there could be no doubt whatever about the matter. A man alone could not possibly keep authority in the household, or make the intricate wheels of domestic life run smoothly. How was *he* to order dinner, and add up the butcher's book, and keep peace between the maid-servants? There was only one answer to such a question, and that answer was

—impossible. He could look after cattle and sheep, attend to the farm and stables, but as to ordering in legs of mutton and sirloins of beef—why he simply could not do it. He revolted at the mere thought of entering into such petty details. As for women, it was the business of their lives. Man-like it never struck him that the same "petty details" which worried him while he scorned them have rendered many a woman miserable, and laid a daily burden on her shoulders under the weight of which she often groans.

But there is no escape for her. One of the chief uses of a wife is to lay the blame of everything that happens at her door. And for this reason, of all luxuries she is the greatest. It is so easy and so nice to be able to say in a loud, chiding voice, "My dear, it is your fault. I told you to do it," or, "Why the dickens have you made such a regular mull of things all round?"

The responsibility is shifted, very conveniently, and the poor "luxury" can only mumble feeble excuses and in her turn try to implicate Mary Anne or Susan Jane.

Bob had had about ten days' housekeeping, and already he wished to resign the situation. He told himself that with a nice little wife sitting opposite, even English dinners might prove enjoyable. His imagination could not conceive of Mrs. Robert P. Jarrett's fascinations being put to a greater test, but he believed Dot would emerge from the ordeal triumphant. True, he was very young to think of marrying; indeed, up till now, he had always been a staunch advocate of the theory that men should have their fling—and a good one too—before settling down to jog-trot matrimony.

But it is astonishing how a pretty face and good eyes will revolutionize the most strong-minded male's theories, crumbling them to the very dust with lightning-like rapidity. They can alter a man's whole train of reasoning in a few seconds, and more wonderful still, make him advance an entirely new line of argument. No deserter in action could possibly change front with greater speed or make more plausible excuses for his conduct.

Bob, who hitherto had professed to be a confirmed bachelor, felt suddenly convinced that the proper thing

to do was to marry a girl directly you saw one who you thought would suit you. Only fools shilly-shallied under such circumstances.

The funny thing was how, after five short minutes' conversation with Dot, he should have arrived at so momentous a conclusion as to believe that he had certainly discovered his affinity, and could not possibly be enchained by any other.

How men can flatter themselves they know anything of a woman's real character in such a brief space of time is marvellous, to say the least of it. And yet that they do so imagine is seen every day of one's life, and proved by the ill-assorted and incongruous couples so frequently met with. A face endowed by nature with certain good points, a pink and white complexion and a nice expression, is quite sufficient to convince the lords of creation that they know the proprietor perfectly well. Just think of it! *I know* WOMAN! that masterpiece of caprice, of fitful moods and sudden impulses; that coy, uncertain, changeable creature who does not even pretend to know herself, and who admits the variability of her character.

Oh! men, beware of your passions. They render you blind as the veriest mole that ever burrowed earth. For fully an hour Bob sat there musing rapturously on Miss Dot's perfections. Then by degrees a sleepy inclination stole over him. At last he made a vigorous effort, and rising from the arm-chair, laid aside his pipe and went towards the writing table. It was some time since he had written to his mother, and she would be getting anxious if she did not hear from him. Therefore he sat down and inscribed the following letter:

"DEAREST MOTHER,

"I sent you a hurried account of my uncle's sudden death and the altered circumstances in which it left me. Even now I can scarcely realize all that has happened, or appreciate what I suppose most people would call my good fortune. I need not say that I wish you and my brothers and sisters to share in it. It is unnecessary attempting to describe Straightem Court to you, because of course you know it well. I will only mention that in size and grandeur it far exceeds my ex-

pectations. Indeed, I often think I should like the place better if it were not quite so big. Ten days have elapsed since my arrival, and I begin to doubt if I shall ever settle down. Everything seems so new and so strange—forgive me if I add so dull and so formal. There is a want of freedom here, a stiffness and a conventionality which produce a stifling effect upon me. People all seem to jog on in one little narrow groove, from which they either cannot or will not emancipate themselves. The consequence is there is very little real independence, such as we see at home; the ladies and gentlemen are very much to be pitied in my opinion; as far as I have had an opportunity of judging, they are mere slaves to their establishments, their institutions and their bodily comforts. They are like a flock of sheep; if one treads a particular path they all follow, however inconvenient and ridiculous it may be. Appearances are evidently a great deal studied in this country; the verdict of the world carries much weight, yet in curious contradiction to this fact, the upper classes seem going to the dogs altogether. From what I gather, their morality is at a very low ebb. Even dukes and duchesses figure in the Divorce Court. There is a famous case going on now, some of the details of which would simply horrify you. The men here have no veneration for women; it is dreadful the way they speak of them, and yet I am informed that in fashionable society the women deserve all they get. But whether they do, or whether they don't, it seems to me a mean, unmanly sort of thing to go about backbiting the poor creatures. You will think I have turned very censorious, so now for a change of subject. I went out hunting to-day for the first time; the sport is a grand one; I don't believe there is another that can compare with it, and yet it seems odd too, wherein the pleasure consists of chasing a little red animal, and running the risk of breaking your bones, if not your neck, in the pursuit. But there are some things that don't bear analyzing and, thank goodness! fox-hunting is one of them. May it never be picked to pieces by a herd of dissecting critics, for when it ceases to exist England's day will be done, and she can take a back seat among the nations; so much for

the glorious chase. You see what an enthusiast it has made of me. But the field ! the people ! those genial, jovial squires whose acquaintance I so longed to make ; words cannot describe the insolence of their manners towards an unoffending stranger. To tell you how they treated your first-born, mother dear, would only pain you. Therefore I pass over my reception in silence. Suffice it that all my illusions are gone, I fear me, never to return. The question is, whether I shall be able to live amongst these people. And this brings me to an important point. How strange it seems having to communicate one's plans by letter. At present it is horribly cold over here, and later on the climate becomes, if possible, worse. Now what I would propose is this. In the spring I must certainly return to Australia, if only to wind up affairs and hand over the farm to Dick. Instead, therefore, of you and the girls joining me at once, leaving warmth and sunshine and coming to frost and fogs, I am of opinion that it would be far wiser to defer your journey, until the winter is over. Then we might all travel back together. What do you say to this idea ? To tell the honest truth, I feel as if my life here were an experiment. I may or I may not settle to it. In two or three months' time I should be in a better position to judge whether you and the girls are likely to be as happy at Straightem Court as at home. We have been colonists so long that frequently I have misgivings as to our ever succeeding in converting ourselves into fine gentlemen and ladies of the orthodox type. One needs to be brought up to it. To break up our dear old home before we are perfectly certain the new one will suit us, appears to me an imprudent act. For myself, it is quite on the cards that you may see me, at any time, return unexpectedly. I feel awfully homesick already, and miss you all most dreadfully. I never thought it would be possible to get so dead tired of one's own society. Nobody has condescended to call upon me so far, except a couple of parsons, who both immediately begged for subscriptions to various charities. The County people seem a very stuck-up lot. I don't wonder you preferred my father, and showed your good sense by running away from them. And now, dear

mother, I am very tired and very sleepy, and must leave off. Give my love to Belle and Tottie, and the little ones, and tell Dick from me that I trust to him to look after you well in my absence.

"Ever your affectionate son,

"ROBERT P. JARRETT."

Not a word of Miss Lankester. Something made Bob shy of mentioning her name, even to those he confided in most.

And yet he felt as guilty as if he were concealing a secret of vital importance. He re-read his letter, and made some trifling corrections. But when he came to the end a sudden impulse urged him to add :

"I forgot to tell you that I am giving my first dinner-party to-morrow night. It is almost absurd to call it by such a name, since the company consist only of a Doctor and Mrs. Lankester and their daughter. They live in the village, and are my nearest neighbours."

Bob perused this postscript with considerable self-approbation. It satisfied his conscience and yet revealed nothing. He felt proud of having handled such a delicate matter with so much skill, for if, at any future time, there should be anything to tell, then he flattered himself that he had paved the way for telling it. At least the name of Lankester would not burst like a bombshell upon the family circle.

As he sealed up his letter Charles brought in a note on a silver salver.

It was from Dot.

The contents were brief enough.

"DEAR MR. JARRETT,

"My father and mother wish me to thank you for your kind invitation, and to say that we shall be very pleased to dine with you to-morrow at half-past seven.

"Hoping you feel none the worse for having got so wet, believe me,

"Yours sincerely,

"DOROTHEA LANKESTER."

Only a formal note of acceptance, worded in polite but distant language, and yet Bob gazed at it with rapturous admiration.

What a pretty handwriting she wrote! so clean and neat, and thoroughly feminine. He liked the way she crossed her t's and dotted her i's; there was a deal of character about them. And then he took to speculating how the signature would look if it were signed Dorothea Jarrett instead of Dorothea Lankester.

Lankester was a fine, high-sounding name. The sort of name just suited for the heroine of a novel, but for all that there was something very pleasing about Jarrett.

D. for Dorothea, and J. for Jarrett went well together—very well, he considered.

So, with his head stuffed full of strange new thoughts, this hitherto sensible young man went to bed, and—dreamt of Miss Dot?

Not he.

He was far too tired and stiff to indulge in any trance-like visions.

The dun cob, the grey eyes, the frank, innocent face, all faded from his mind as if they had been a mirage, and settling down between the sheets he slept like a top.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GETTING UP A FLIRTATION.

PUNCTUALLY at half-past seven next morning Bob was roused from his dreamless slumbers by Charles, who, after tapping at the door and receiving no response, entered the room majestically, and began pulling up the blinds with noisy clumsiness.

"Hulloa! Charles, is that you? What's the time?" yawned Bob.

"It has just gone half-past seven, sir."

"By Jove! You don't say so."

And before he was thoroughly awake Bob jumped out of bed, goaded by the knowledge that he had a journey to take. After his experiences of the previous day the

indifference to personal appearance which he had hitherto displayed vanished miraculously. He was prepared to admit that there might be something in clothes after all. Those soft snowy leathers and bright scarlet coats undoubtedly did set a man off. Until he had actually seen them with his own eyes he could not have realized how great an effect they produced. In fact, all Bob's ideas on the subject of adornment had undergone a complete transformation. He was now filled with a consuming desire to appear out hunting dressed precisely as his neighbours were dressed.

Consequently he had decided to run up to town, and lose no time in ordering a suitable stock of boots and breeches. Although he had said as little as possible about the discomforts caused by his attire, and the breaking of those elastic straps, he had been unable to prevent Charles from acquiring a tolerably accurate knowledge of the situation; and Charles had strongly advised and approved of his going to London and purchasing a proper hunting kit without any delay.

"I told you afore you went 'unting 'ow it would be, sir," he said, with a malicious chuckle. Consequently Bob had studied the Bradshaw, and discovered that if he rose tolerably early he could reach the metropolis a little after eleven o'clock and return in time for dinner.

So he dressed hurriedly, ate an excellent breakfast, and by half-past eight was bowling along to the station in a light, two-wheeled cart, drawn by a hog-maned fast-trotting pony.

The morning was fresh and bright.

The big green fields on either side of the hedgerows were steeped in pale, yellow sunshine, not fierce and glaring as in the summer-time, but cool, light, clear, and refreshing to the eye. Every now and again a swift, dark cloud shadow would come coursing along their emerald surface, for a few minutes converting all the vivid tints into a sombre grey. But as it raced ahead it was beautiful to behold the glory of leaf and blade bursting out afresh, appearing yet brighter and greener for their temporary obliteration.

Big, black, limpid-eyed oxen stood close under the hedges rubbing their broad, scurfy foreheads against the

knotted twigs, and slowly but steadily boring apertures in the thick fences with their strong, polished horns

Gay autumnal hues adorned the trees; red, brown and yellow combined to render their last span of life beautiful. Their tall, irregular tops towered up towards the faint blue sky, and in places where the leaves had already fallen, revealed the delicate network of their construction. As for the birds, they were twittering and chirping, flitting and alighting, almost as if the time of year had been March instead of November, forgetting that the winter was approaching with its cruel frosts, cold snows, and pitiless winds. They recked not of the future, wee, happy, thoughtless things! The present with its gladsome sunshine was all they cared about, believing that this one bright day would last for ever.

As Bob drove along, the cool, bracing air bringing a healthy glow to his cheeks, he thought that never had he been out on such a fair morning. What struck him most was the astonishing greenness of everything. Here was no sign of drought or barrenness, but everywhere the same verdant, fertile stretches of undulating pastures meeting the sky-line and extending in all directions, far as the eye could reach. It was a perfect harmony of blue and green, with a dash of yellow thrown in to give light to the whole.

Bob arrived at the station in good time, took his ticket, purchased a morning paper, and ensconced himself in a smoking carriage.

He waited thus some minutes, when beginning to wonder why the train did not start, he put his head out of the window. Then for the first time he became aware of a commotion on the platform, which appeared to be caused by a dapper little female figure, enveloped in a thick Scotch ulster, that presently came tripping along as fast as it could move for a pair of brand new, and evidently extremely tight, hunting boots.

"I'm late, dreadfully late," cried an excited feminine voice, speaking in high, agitated tones. "There was a mistake about the horse-box. Put me in anywhere; I'm not at all particular."

Bob had already filled and lit a favourite cherry-wood pipe. The next moment, to his no small discomfiture,

he found the owner of the voice securely locked into his compartment by a stalwart, red-bearded guard.

"What an idiot that boy of mine is, to be sure!" exclaimed the fair one crossly, apparently too much flustered to notice that she was not alone, and evidently venting her wrath by giving utterance to it aloud. "I declare if he didn't go and take a ticket for Masterton, when I told him as distinctly as possible overnight that I intended hunting with the Gallopers to-day instead of with the Seldom Kill hounds. I really think I shall have to give him warning. His stupidity is too great for anything."

So saying, she stood up and smoothed her ruffled plumes, buttoned up her ulster, and generally adjusted her toilette, the finishing touches of which had clearly been performed in a hurry. The train whistled, and moved slowly out of the station. She was jerked back into her seat, and Bob half rose to go to her assistance.

The recognition was instantaneous.

"Lady De Fochsey!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Jarrett!" she ejaculated on her side, in well-pleased accents, for Bob's fresh, good-looking face had already made an impression upon her ladyship out hunting, and she was determined to get up a flirtation, in the hopes that that long-deferred passion might possibly spring into life. "I do hope you will forgive my forcing my company upon you in this exceedingly unceremonious fashion, but the truth is, I was so abominably late that I really had not time to notice whether the guard put me into a smoking carriage or not."

(As a matter of fact, she invariably chose one by preference, having a rooted dislike to the society of her own sex, but this idiosyncrasy she did not deem fit to mention.)

"Pray don't apologize," said Bob politely, knocking the tobacco out of his pipe with an alacrity more feigned than real.

"Oh! Mr. Jarrett, why did you do that?"

"I thought you might object to smoke. Nine ladies out of ten do."

"I don't. Not in the least. I assure you I'm quite

accustomed to it. Besides"—casting a languishing glance at him from under her goldenish eyelashes—"you need not mind me, surely."

"I can't help minding you," he responded audaciously, having already decided that if he indulged in a few flowers of speech, there was not much fear of his meeting with a rebuff. "You are far too charming to be ignored, wherever you may be."

She smiled encouragingly. This young man promised uncommonly well; better even than she had suspected. She had feared he might prove shy, but now she altered her opinion. If there was one thing she loved in this world, it was a good, honest, outspoken admission of her charms. If only her admirers would keep on telling her that she was pretty, fascinating, divine, she could forgive them almost any impertinence. She was not very strait-laced, but flattery she must have.

"When are you coming to see me?" she inquired coquettishly, in answer to Bob's remark.

"When are you going to ask me?" he rejoined, giving up any attempt at reading the newspaper, and seating himself directly opposite to her.

"I have asked you already, Mr. Jarrett."

"Only in a very general way. I would prefer your specifying a day, if you have no objection."

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, "how punctilious we are to be sure! Do you always stand on so much ceremony? One is not accustomed to it now-a-days."

"Yes," answered Bob gravely; "whenever there is a pretty woman in the case, I would rather have five minutes' chat with her alone than three hours in the presence of a dozen other men. The fact of the matter is, I'm covetous, and prefer not sharing my bone."

Lady De Fochsey was delighted. She thoroughly enjoyed this style of conversation, and moreover possessed the happy faculty of believing that where she herself was concerned men meant all they said, and were perfectly sincere in their professions of admiration.

"Oh, you flatterer!", she said, shaking her blonde head playfully at him; "you are trying to put me off with compliments, instead of settling a day for your visit. I call that too bad."

"Such an idea never entered my head," protested Bob. "When is your ladyship at home?"

"I'm always at home to my particular friends."

"And may I venture to think myself included in their number?"

"Now, Mr. Jarrett, you want to know too much. That's hardly a fair question."

"Perhaps not," he admitted. "I'll ask you another one instead. Tell me, is not Sunday generally supposed to be a good day for calling, or do your devotions prevent you from receiving gentlemen on that afternoon?"

"Oh, dear no, not at all."

"Ah! I'm glad to hear it. I was afraid you might have some religious scruples on the subject." He spoke with just a touch of sarcasm, which she detected and resented.

"I do not know why you should have imagined anything half so foolish," she rejoined tartly. "And as for my religious scruples, I flatter myself that I possess neither more nor less than my neighbours. Perhaps you mayn't believe me, but I always make a point of going to church every Sunday morning, if only for the sake of the example."

"One attendance franks you for the rest of the day, I presume?" said Bob with a laugh.

She recovered her good humour. It was a relief to find he was not disagreeably strict.

"Well, yes, it does, I confess."

"Ah! I thought so."

"For my part," she said decidedly, "I can't see the least harm in entertaining a few amusing people on a Sabbath afternoon."

"Neither can I," he acquiesced, quite approving of the sentiment.

"In that case, Mr. Jarrett, I shall expect you on Sunday without fail."

"How long an audience do you grant your admirers at a time, Lady De Fochsey? Ten minutes, quarter, of an hour?"

She laughed her little, thin, artificial laugh.

"You shall have a whole hour if you are good, and promise to come early."

"That I certainly will. The instant I've gobbled my lunch I shall set out."

"Do. I live quite close to Straightem Court, Mr. Jarrett. Only about two miles; it's nothing of a walk, and I hope you will come over often."

"Thanks, you are very kind. And I can assure you that were the walk ten times as long I should think nothing of the distance with such a reward awaiting me at the end of it."

She put out her foot, and glanced coyly down at it. It was a very pretty one, and she was quite aware of the fact, and saw no reason why other people should not become acquainted with it too. A clever woman always makes the most of her good points, and hides the bad ones. Lady De Fochsey was not a bit ashamed of her foot, no—nor of her ankle either. Thank goodness! they were both symmetrical and patrician, though her people were nobodies, and she herself was only in the position of a poorly paid companion, when Sir Jonathan had been smitten by her charms.

"Really, Mr Jarrett," she said, in honied tones, "you will quite turn my head if you will insist on paying me so many compliments."

It was a regular invitation to repeat the offence. At all events, Bob, who was no fool, construed her ladyship's accusation as such, and construed it aright.

"I don't think it altogether fair to lay the whole blame at my door," he responded, feeling more and more amused by her transparent coquetries, and evident desire to egg him on.

"Why not?" she inquired with a simper.

"For the very simple reason that if that extremely pretty little head of yours were capable of being turned in such a manner, the mischief must have been done long since. I can only be one of many sinners."

"Positively, Mr. Jarrett, if you go on talking in this foolish fashion, I shall have to impose a fine upon you," she rejoined, her whole countenance beaming with delight.

"Any fine imposed upon me by your ladyship would be rapturously accepted," he said, not able to refrain from laughter.

Then thinking she might wonder at his mirth, and also that he had administered enough sugar—at any rate for the present—he added more seriously:

"By-the-by, where are you going to hunt to-day?"

"I? Oh! with the Gallopers. I get out at the next station——"

"So soon?" interrupted Bob, with a well-simulated sigh.

"Yes, you ridiculous creature. So soon, and what's more, I shan't have any too much time, as I have to ride nearly twelve miles to the meet."

"I had no idea you were so determined a Diana. But won't it make a very long day for you?" he inquired, wondering at her energy.

"It would, only, luckily for me, I am not coming home to-night. A great friend of mine, a Mrs. St. John, has asked me to stay at her house this evening. In fact, that was the principal reason why I determined to hunt to-day. I wanted to see the Gallopers, and I also wanted to attend a private *séance*, which is to take place to-night at Mrs. St. John's."

"A what?" echoed Bob, in tones of bewilderment.

"A *séance*. Surely you must know what that means."

"Not exactly. There are so many different kinds."

"Mrs. St. John is a firm believer in spiritualism," explained Lady De Fochsey, "and she has invited a well-known medium down from town, on purpose to try and obtain some fresh manifestations. Only a few chosen spirits are to be present."

"Do you go in for that kind of thing?" asked Bob, thinking what a queer mixture his companion was.

"A little," she answered, dropping her voice to a mysterious whisper. "Mind you don't tell anybody. I don't wish it known all over the hunting field, but I'm developing psychic force."

"Oh! indeed, and pray how do you develop it?"

"I can't tell you now. It would take too long, but I will some other time. Unfortunately I don't get on very fast."

"How's that? Uncongenial influences?"

"Yes, partly," she replied. "The difficult thing is that the electric current, which by many is supposed to

be the foundation of all spiritualism, can only be communicated in my case by means of a kindred spirit."

"And do you mean to tell me that you have never come across one?" asked Bob incredulously.

She looked up at him with an odd, uncertain expression.

"No, Mr. Jarrett, I have not."

Then the blue eyes dropped suddenly, and she added hesitatingly: "But—perhaps—I may now. Who knows?" and up went those azure orbs again, with the most infantine and innocent of looks. Somehow they seemed to go right through Bob, and to produce a most uncomfortable sensation, just as if he were being requested to perform some action which went against the grain. He reddened up to the very roots of his hair, and remained transfixed, as it were, until her gaze was withdrawn. What a queer little mortal she was. He couldn't make her out at all.

Did she intend to convey the idea that *he* was the kindred spirit whose advent had been expected and looked forward to for so many years? His modesty took alarm at the thought.

And yet she was very pretty in her little, neat, got-up style, very pretty—and *very*, VERY amusing. Nevertheless so embarrassed did he feel by Lady De Fochsey's words and more than gracious manner, that it was quite a relief when the train in which they were travelling rushed into a station, and the lady declared that she had arrived at her destination.

"How quickly the time has gone, to be sure!" she exclaimed regretfully, gathering up her skirt, her hunting crop and her worsted gloves. "I had no idea we were so near Millingboro'! It only shows what an agreeable companion you have been. Good-bye, Mr. Jarrett; don't forget to come on Sunday." And she waved the tips of her fingers airily, and hopped out on to the platform before Bob had had time to recover his self-possession.

"Is there nothing I can do for you?" he asked, with a sudden sense of relief. "I will go and see after your horse-box if you like."

"My dear, foolish young man, don't think of such a

thing. Why, your train starts again immediately. Ta ! ta ! And don't lose your heart in the gay but vicious metropolis."

So saying Lady De Fochsey walked away, and as the train once more moved off Bob could hear a high-pitched feminine voice, shorn of all its dulcet and melodious intonations, scolding away at an unfortunate groom.

"Phew !" he exclaimed, as he settled himself in his seat, and once more re-lit the cherry-wood pipe. "That woman's a rum 'un, and no mistake. Awful sport, though, if she weren't quite such a humbug, and didn't stare at you in such a funny way. I wonder what the deuce she means by it." And then he thought of somebody who, he would stake his life, was as true and honest as the day ; somebody who did not look at men in that queer, equivocal fashion, who scorned petty artifices and unjustifiable means of rendering herself attractive, and who, on that very account, was a hundred thousand times more so.

Fancy his talking to Miss Lankester in the free and easy style he had at once adopted when addressing Lady De Fochsey ! He could imagine how wide the grey eyes would open with indignant amazement.

And now that he was alone, and removed from her ladyship's fascination, he even blamed himself for having been so familiar. The temptation certainly was great. It takes a very strong man to resist the advances of a good-looking woman. He may pick ever so many holes in her afterwards, but *at the time*, he can't help feeling flattered and amused, and if she gives him an inch, takes a liberal ell. Masculine nature will out.

Furthermore an irresistible sense of mischief had arisen within Bob's bosom. It was fun—splendid fun, paying the vain little woman high-flown compliments and seeing the avidity with which she swallowed them ; but, nevertheless, when he came calmly to review his own conduct, he was fain to admit that such silly, butterfly specimens of the female sex could not exist unless men encouraged them.

It was the perpetual fostering of their vanity by speeches containing not a germ of truth, but which were accepted by the listener in perfect good faith, that was

responsible for so painful and preposterous a pitch of feminine idiotcy.

In his heart of hearts, despite her youth, position and personal attractions, Bob felt repulsed rather than drawn towards Lady De Fochsey. She represented a type of womanhood which he both pitied and despised. And yet he did not for one instant believe that there was any real harm in her. She was only silly—very silly and frivolous. But he experienced an uncomfortable conviction, that he had encouraged her to be even more silly and more frivolous, just for his own amusement.

Was this right, or gentlemanly, or honourable?

He preferred not to answer the question.

For he had sense enough, and good feeling enough to know that female credulity, vanity and folly, all combined, in the absence of much heart and a total deficiency of head-piece, render a woman one of the saddest spectacles on the face of this earth.

As for what had been said between them when one came to analyze the conversation, a single word summed it up.

That word was rubbish—unmitigated rubbish from beginning to end.

Yet, no doubt, this was the way people talked in polite society.

CHAPTER XIX.

LEFT IN THE LURCH.

BOB returned from town in an extremely satisfied state of mind. Fortune had favoured him almost beyond his expectations, for on driving to Messrs. Tautz and Son's well-known establishment, in order to be measured for some breeches, he was lucky enough to find a pair that had just been returned which exactly fitted him.

These he purchased on the spot, delighted to have something to fall back upon during the time his own were being made. After enjoining haste, he repaired to another celebrated emporium, and spent a small fortune in boots, gaiters, &c.

Altogether, the day's expedition proved a great success, and although quite a week, if not more, must elapse before he could array himself in the full glories of a brand new red coat, still as long as his nether limbs were suitably cased, he no longer felt afraid of appearing in the hunting field. Even General Prosieboy would not seem half so formidable when opposed by boots and breeches as immaculate as his own. As for bow-tying, Charles had promised to give him a lesson, and initiate him into all the difficulties of that delicate art.

Bob reached Straightem Court just in time to dress for dinner.

In honour of Miss Lankester, he had given orders for the drawing-room to be lit up, and to this room he therefore repaired to receive his guests. The housemaids had been busy most of the forenoon, removing brown holland covers, taking up druggets, and shaking out curtains. Consequently Bob was unprepared for the gorgeousness now revealed. As he stood warming himself before the fire, with his back leaning against the solid marble mantelpiece, he looked round complacently at the old-fashioned crimson and gilt furniture, the rich velvet hangings, and elaborately decorated walls on which Cupids and cherubims were freely represented. The style of the whole thing was perhaps rather florid, but Bob knew very little of the tenets held by the æsthetic school; he had not been educated up to the sun-flower and the lily, the bulrush and the peacock, and therefore considered the general appearance of his drawing-room highly satisfactory.

Of course, if later on, Miss Dot wished anything changed, or innovations introduced, she had only to say the word. In matters of taste, Bob was quite willing to defer his judgment to hers. Women knew a great deal more about these things than men. Besides, they had such a wonderful way of twisting chairs and tables about, and robbing them of all their formality. No room really looked habitable until touched up by a feminine hand. Perhaps Dot might like to have a new carpet. The present one, although handsome, was certainly somewhat too crude in colouring, and too suggestive of Joseph's coat. A grand piano also—he suddenly noticed that

the room contained only a cottage instrument of very antiquated appearance—she must have one naturally. It should be the very first present he would make when—when they were engaged.

Thus resolving, the door flew open, and Dr. and Miss Lankester were announced.

The blood rushed up to Bob's face as he went to greet his visitors, and shook the object of his thoughts warmly by the hand, feeling that she, at any rate, was quite an old acquaintance.

"Why, where is Mrs. Lankester?" he inquired of her husband, after they too had gone through the ceremony of hand-shaking. "You have not left her at home, surely?"

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Jarrett, that my wife was unable to accompany us," replied the doctor apologetically. "The fact of the matter is, she is subject to very bad, sick headaches, and unfortunately one attacked her this afternoon."

"I regret to hear that," said Bob politely, disappointed at Mrs. Lankester's absence, since he had been curious to see what manner of woman Dot's mother was.

"We ought perhaps to have sent and let you know," continued Dr. Lankester, "but my wife hoped, up to the very last moment, that she might be able to dine with you to-night, and so put off sending until it was too late."

"The loss is altogether mine I feel certain," returned Bob in his most cordial manner. "But I shall hope very soon to have another opportunity of making Mrs. Lankester's acquaintance. Tell her we missed her much."

But although he spoke so courteously, after the first moment he did not seem to mind doing without the mamma, as long as he had the daughter. Until now he had hardly trusted himself to look at Dot. He had felt so curiously and unaccountably shy, whilst his heart beat so fast that it seemed to him as if she must hear it. But when he had ensconced her in the most comfortable chair he could find, he summoned up sufficient courage to steal a sidelong glance at her. Hurried as it was, it enabled him to take in all the details.

He could see that she was dressed in some sort of

soft, cream-coloured material, made high to the throat, and cut in the simplest possible fashion. No frills, no furbelows, no flounces. Perhaps if he had been entertaining a party of fine ladies, they might have called Dot's gown skimpy and old-fashioned. Certainly it displayed no artificial protuberance below the waist, or deficiency of stuff above. If it was skimpy it was skimpy only as regarded the skirt, not the body. But whatever might have been its defects, to Bob's mind Miss Lankester's gown suited the wearer to perfection.

The clinging muslin outlined her slight form admirably, displaying its rounded curves to far better advantage than the costliest silk or satin. Above the soft, creamy folds rose her slender throat, and shapely, well-poised head, whose stag-like carriage was full of grace and beauty, and constituted one of her chief attractions.

There was no doubt about it, she was very pretty—prettier even than he had believed her to be; whilst the singularly honest expression of her face rendered it to him, at least, peculiarly fascinating. Then he looked critically at her father standing within a few feet of him. Doctor Lankester was a handsome man. It was easy to see from whom his daughter had inherited her good looks. He had the same straight, delicate features, the same colouring, and clear, grey eyes, with large dark pupils, which in some lights appeared almost black. Like Dot, he was short rather than tall, but slender and perfectly proportioned.

"Well, and what have you been doing with yourself to-day, Mr. Jarrett?" Dr. Lankester asked of his host, as soon as the first bustle of their arrival had subsided. "I suppose you did not go out hunting. The meet was a long way off."

"It was," answered Bob. "And therefore I profited by the opportunity to take a run up to town."

"Indeed! And how was town looking?"

"Simply filthy. When I left here about half-past eight o'clock this morning it was the most lovely day imaginable—a bright sun and a blue sky—but as we neared London a dense curtain of fog arose, which grew thicker and thicker every moment. As for the atmosphere, it was laden with smuts, dirt, and every kind of abomina-

tion, which got into my eyes, down my throat, and up my nostrils. I never was more thankful in my life than to get back to fresh country air that did not poison one's lungs. Phew! I can feel it now."

"And yet people who live in London don't seem to mind the fogs one bit," remarked Dot.

"I suppose they get accustomed to them," returned Bob. "But it would take me a very long time to become acclimatized." And as he spoke he began to cough, the impure air to which he was not habituated having evidently irritated his throat to a considerable degree.

Dot looked up.

"Have you got a cold, Mr. Jarrett?" she asked with concern.

"Yes, I believe I have managed to catch a slight one. Somehow or other I have felt shivery ever since yesterday's wetting."

"Then you should take care of yourself," said Dr. Lankester in a kindly, but semi-professional manner.

"Too much bother," answered Bob lightly, with all a strong young man's disdain of coddling. "I never think anything of a cold. Besides, it's really nothing. Not worth talking about."

But as he said the words, he coughed again, and this time worse than before.

Doctor Lankester glanced at him, and saw that he was flushed and showed every symptom of having contracted a chill.

"Very likely not," he said quietly. "But you must remember, Mr. Jarrett, that you are not used to our English climate. It is a very treacherous one, I assure you, and few people can afford to take liberties with it. The winters are often extremely severe, especially of late years, when in some parts of the country the thermometer has registered as many as twenty degrees of frost."

The conversation was here interrupted by the entrance of the butler, who announced that dinner was ready. No Englishman is ever indifferent to this acceptable summons, and Dr. Lankester at once ceased talking, and waited politely for his host to make a move.

Bob gave his arm to Dot, regretting that he had been

unable to provide an agreeable, elderly lady for her father.

"It is so good of you to come in this sort of way," he said apologetically. "I wish I could have asked some people to meet you, but the fact of the matter is, I don't know anybody yet."

"I'm very glad you didn't," answered Dot with characteristic frankness. "My father and I will enjoy a quiet evening alone with you ever so much more. You see," she added brightly, "we look upon you as a novelty. You can tell us all kind of things we know little or nothing of, whereas Mrs. Smith or Mrs. Jones—dear, excellent people as they may be—only prattle away about their domestic concerns, with which we are already thoroughly conversant."

Bob laughed.

"I'm so awfully afraid you'll find it dull," he said.

"Dull!" looking up at him with sparkling eyes. "That is paying yourself an exceedingly bad compliment, Mr. Jarrett. As for me, I am a pretty good hand at amusing myself. There is a great deal of enjoyment to be got out of life, if only one has a sense of the ridiculous and cultivates the faculty of applying it to everyday trifles. Besides, you forget that a visit to Straightem Court is quite an event in our humble experience."

"Why? Did you not come here often in Captain Straightem's time?"

"Often? No. We came exactly once a year. Every spring we were invited to a formal luncheon at the conclusion of the hunting season. We invariably met our clergyman and his wife, whom, as you may imagine, we see frequently, and the county solicitor and his married daughter. This lunch was evidently a duty affair. It could not possibly be mistaken for anything else. The conversation was lame and forced on both sides. We asked after the sport and the hounds, our host after our individual health, and how we had got through the winter. After these civilities had been exchanged, we fell back upon eating and drinking. As for poor Captain Straightem, it was impossible to help pitying him. He looked so superlatively miserable, and so infinitely

bored. Altogether, the relief was immense when the festivity came to an end, and the strain was over. But," she concluded, pulling up short, "I ought not to talk in this sort of way, now that Captain Straightem is dead and gone."

"I am surprised at what you tell me," said Bob, who had listened attentively to his companion's observations. "I can't imagine how my uncle could have lived so near to you without getting to be on very friendly terms."

For his part, he felt convinced that if he were to see Miss Dot only a few times more, his feelings would inevitably become something even warmer than friendly. He was irresistibly drawn towards her.

"You don't seem to know much of Captain Straightem," said the young lady seriously. "If you did, you could not fancy him capable of being on what you call 'friendly terms' with people in our lowly position."

"What was he like?" asked Bob with considerable curiosity.

"He was a very gentlemanly man," she replied. "Exceedingly quiet and reserved in his manner, and always remarkably neatly dressed. Further than that, I can tell you nothing, except that somehow or other he invariably contrived to make you feel that he looked upon you as an inferior."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Bob, "but that's exactly the way some of these swells made me feel yesterday."

"Did they?" said Dot. "Then I can sympathize with you, Mr. Jarrett, for I know from experience that it is by no means a comfortable sensation. I do not mind a bit on my own account, but I do mind on father's. He is so clever and well-informed, and I can't bear to see him snubbed by people who have not as much in their whole bodies as he has in his little finger."

"And does not Dr. Lankester resent such conduct?"

"No," she answered spiritedly. "I have to resent it for him. Father has far too large a mind to take notice of trifles."

"He has a warm champion, at any rate. It must be

very nice to have somebody to stick up for one," said Bob. "I only wish——"

But he was unable to conclude the sentence, for having marched down a long corridor, they had now reached the dining-room, and after seating themselves at table, were soon discussing an excellent dinner. The meal passed very pleasantly.

Dr. Lankester was not only a good talker, but had the rare art of inducing those with whom he came in contact to talk also. He would start a subject, and when it was fairly launched through the shallows of polite conversation, adopt the *rôle* of listener. Before long Bob found himself describing his life in Australia, the soil, climate, government and a hundred different things, in all of which Dr. Lankester appeared to take an interest.

Dot did not say much; nevertheless, from the animated expression of her countenance, it was easy to tell that her silence did not proceed from stupidity, but rather from modesty, youth, and a highly receptive faculty, which rendered it a delight to sit still and listen, whilst others were talking sensibly.

They lingered long over their wine. Dot had made a movement as if to leave the gentlemen to themselves, but Bob particularly requested her to remain. Consequently it was nearly a quarter past nine before they rose from the table.

"Would you like to smoke a cigar, doctor?" asked Bob, "because, if so, we can go into my little snugery, provided, of course, that Miss Lankester does not object."

"Oh! never mind Dot," he answered with paternal confidence. "She is quite accustomed to the smell of tobacco, and always keeps me company over my post-prandial pipe."

Upon this, the trio adjourned to a small, cosy apartment of which Bob had taken special possession, and which, being one of the oftenest used, was about the most comfortable room in the house. Three capacious easy chairs were dragged in front of the fire, and herein they seated themselves. There was something pleasant and informal about this arrangement, which the hard-

working doctor, for one, highly preferred to the red-and-gold glories of the drawing-room. He had had a long day, and thoroughly enjoyed stretching his weary limbs before the hearth, and deliberately puffing away at the fragrant cigar which Bob had just handed to him.

They were settling down to a quiet, peaceful evening, when the general harmony was disturbed by the delivery of a note for Doctor Lankester.

He opened it a trifle impatiently. Calm and easy-going as he was, the moment proved inopportune. "Dear me!" he exclaimed in accents of vexation, when he had read the letter through, springing to his feet as he spoke. "This is terribly annoying, and the worst of my profession. One never can be at rest for two minutes at a time."

"What is the matter, father?" inquired Dot.

"A summons to a bad confinement case. I must go at once. The woman's life is in danger. I wish to goodness people would give over having babies, or else that they would time their entry into the world at more convenient hours."

Poor Doctor Lankester! He was very, very tired, else he never would have spoken in this manner.

"Must you really go?" asked Bob.

"Yes, I am sorry to say I must, and that at once. The case is a very urgent one, and I should reproach myself for ever if I allowed my own love of comfort to prevent me from going to the poor creature's assistance." And he threw away his cigar, as if trying to resist temptation.

Suddenly he remembered his daughter.

"Dot, my girl," he said, addressing her, "what's to be done? I shall have to take the carriage, since every minute is of importance."

"All right, father," she answered cheerfully, "I will go and get my shawl at once."

"Stop a bit, Dot. You don't quite understand the situation. I can't possibly take you with me."

"Why not, father, can you not drop me on the road?"

"No, I have to go in quite a contrary direction. The

only plan will be for you to stay here until I can send the carriage back—that is to say, if Mr. Jarrett has no objection.”

Bob expressed his extreme satisfaction with the proposed arrangement. He liked Dr. Lankester uncommonly, but he liked his daughter better, and looked forward with delight to a most agreeable *tête-à-tête*.

But the young lady did not altogether appear to relish the idea. A shade of displeasure passed over her sunny face.

“I think that I had better come with you, father,” she said in the same tones of gentle dignity Bob remembered her using once before. “I could wait in the carriage, just as well as here.”

“No,” he replied. “It would only fidget me to think that you were there. Besides, it is quite likely I may have to send Tomson into town, to fetch medicines at the dispensary, in which case you might never get home all night. Leave it to me, and I will either send the carriage back as soon as possible, or else order a fly.”

“I can walk back,” said Dot resolutely. “It’s no distance, and my shoes are tolerably thick.”

Evidently the *tête-à-tête* was not to her mind, or else she disliked its being forced upon her without her giving her consent.

While this discussion was going on, Bob stood by, feeling a perfect beast. There were horses enough and carriages enough too in his stables, doing nothing at that very moment, but he never offered to produce them for Miss Lankester’s benefit. The single brougham would have conveyed her most snugly back to her home. Yet he said not a word.

The truth was, his imagination had taken fire at the bare thought of getting Dot all alone to himself for half an hour, or with good luck, perhaps even a whole one. He felt thoroughly ashamed of his conduct. He did not attempt to excuse it in any way, but the temptation was too strong to be resisted, and he maintained an obstinate silence. Even when once the girl looked appealingly at him, he made no offer of lending a vehicle. Dot, on her side, though she knew quite well that there were any number in the coachhouse, was far

too proud to beg for the loan of one. Only for the first time, she experienced a kind of hostility against her host. He might have helped her out of her difficulty, and he had refused to do so.

"Well," said Dr. Lankester, giving himself a stretch, "there's no peace for the wicked, and I must be off. Good-night, Jarrett. Thanks for your hospitality."

"And am I really to stay here, father?" asked poor Dot in consternation.

"Yes, child. I thought we had settled all that. I will send the carriage back if I can, but if it is not here by half-past ten, and I am unable to get a fly, I have no doubt that Mr. Jarrett will kindly let one of his men-servants see you safely home."

"I will see her home myself," said Bob effusively, suddenly finding his tongue, now that matters were definitely arranged according to his desires.

"All right, then; I leave her in your hands." And so saying Dr. Lankester hurried off, leaving his daughter a prey to a whole host of curiously mixed sensations.

In many ways the village doctor was a strangely simple and unworldly man. Despite his forty odd years, it apparently never entered his head to think that there was anything the least unusual in letting Dot remain by herself, at a tolerably late hour of night, in the house of a young bachelor acquaintance who, most ordinary people would have perceived, admired her immensely.

He would have been astounded if anyone had suggested such a thing.

But Dot's perceptions were sharper.

Her maidenly instincts rebelled against the situation.

She knew the innocence and simplicity of her father's nature, but for once she wished that he possessed a little more of that worldly cunning of which her mother owned so large a share.

She liked Mr. Jarrett very much. He was very kind, very nice, very polite. But every now and then she had felt his eyes fixed upon her in an embarrassing manner, and once when she looked up, and happened to intercept their gaze, there was a look in them which troubled her not a little.

She could not understand it, and Dot Lankester was

a young woman who did not care for things she did not understand.

CHAPTER XX.

AN OFFER OF A "MOUNT."

BOB saw Dr. Lankester out at the hall door as in courtesy bound ; and for a minute or two Dot was left to her own resources. During this time she took herself seriously to task for her disinclination to be left alone with Mr. Jarrett. It really was ridiculous to mind, and it would be doubly, trebly absurd to allow him to guess that she experienced any reluctance. She had already stated her wish to accompany her father, but since he had decided otherwise, the best plan now was to try and appear totally unconcerned, and altogether at her ease. Even delicacy might be carried to too great an extent. Luckily her conscience was free. The situation had been none of her choosing, and undoubtedly the wisest course was to attach as little importance to it as possible. In this manner did she argue, endeavouring, by the aid of common sense and calm reasoning, to make light of the whole business. She succeeded so far that by the time Bob re-entered the room she contrived to smother the temporary resentment she had felt against him, and to all appearances was quiet, indifferent and self-possessed. But she did not attempt to commence the conversation, and for a few seconds a somewhat awkward silence prevailed. If Dot's conscience was at rest, Bob's was far from being so. He could not divest himself of an inward conviction that he had behaved traitorously towards his guest. Moreover he entertained an uncomfortable belief that she shared the same opinion, and in her inmost mind criticized his conduct severely. Well, he must try and make up for past misdemeanours, and do all he could to regain her esteem.

Dot had risen from her seat, and was now standing leaning with one arm against the mantelpiece, in a pose full of unconscious grace. The bright flames from the fire cast flickering shadows on her light dress and grave,

downcast face. They lit up her soft brown tresses with gleams of gold, and made the small head and slender pillar-like throat stand out in high relief against the dark oak panelling.

A thrill went through Bob's frame as he looked at her. She had no positive claim to beauty, but her air of quiet refinement, her youth, her freshness, her total freedom from coquetry, rendered her in his eyes the most attractive woman he had ever come across. He admired her immensely, and yet he feared her a little. He doubted the reception his advances might meet with. She inspired an unusual sense of self-distrust and timidity. Therefore he resolved to be more than commonly prudent, to guard against any hasty impulse carrying him away, and above all, to do and say nothing that might directly or indirectly give the alarm to her maidenly susceptibilities. Miss Lankester and Lady De Fochsey were evidently two very different types of womanhood. The same plan of procedure could not be indiscriminately adopted with them both.

At last the silence grew so prolonged that Bob was constrained to break it.

"Will you not sit down, Miss Lankester?" he said in studiously correct tones. "You will get tired of standing." And he drew the chair she had already occupied a trifle nearer.

It must be owned that Dot did not receive this suggestion very graciously. Before replying she glanced at the clock; then, with a suppressed sigh of impatience, answered:

"Yes, I suppose I may as well. The carriage can't possibly be here just yet."

Bob felt nettled by the remark. It implied a desire to escape at the very earliest opportunity.

"You seem in a most tremendous hurry to get away," he said with considerable asperity. "I am sorry that you should be so awfully bored."

Dot blushed up to the very roots of her hair.

"Oh! no indeed," she said lamely, "I'm not the least bit bored."

"Are you not? Then all I can say is, your manner belies your words. Is there nothing I can do to amuse

you? Don't you even care to look at books or photographs, since you appear disinclined to talk?"

"I don't want amusing, Mr. Jarrett. You labour under a mistake in fancying that I do."

"So you said before. But from personal observation I am rude enough to disbelieve the statement. If you were contented where you are, you would not count the minutes quite so anxiously."

"You seem to forget," rejoined Dot, with an attempt at archness, "that we country people are early birds, who become sleepy and stupid unless we go to roost at our accustomed hour."

"Am I to understand, then, that you retire to rest at half-past nine every day of your life?"

"Well, no, not perhaps quite so early."

"You are tired on this particular evening? Is that it?"

"No, not at all."

"Not bored, not tired!" said Bob musingly. "Then I can only arrive at one solution."

He waited for a moment, as if hoping his companion would inquire what it was, but as she did not speak, he went on more impetuously: "The fact of the matter is, Miss Lankester, you still persist in treating me like a stranger, from whom all manner of evil is to be expected. Do you imagine I am going to eat you?" And he turned a pair of very reproachful eyes upon her, whose injured expression seemed to render her shortcomings painfully apparent.

She gave a forced laugh, and blamed herself for having been so ridiculously prudish.

"No. I do not flatter myself that I should prove a very palatable morsel; and as for being a stranger—were you not one only quite a short while ago?"

"Yes. It is kind of you to remind me of the fact," he answered stiffly, "though I was in no danger of forgetting it." Then, determined not to quarrel with her, he added in a gentler key: "It was my fault, of course, but somehow or other when you were so good as to help me through my gate difficulty, I was foolish enough to imagine that you were a little more human and not quite so ceremonious as the rest of them."

This time Dot laughed outright. His remarks were extremely naïve, and made her begin to wonder why she had distrusted him.

"Come, Mr. Jarrett, confess. Do I look very ceremonious at the present moment?" lying back in the arm-chair with a gesture of abandonment, and resting her small brown head against the cushions, whilst her eyes shone with fun and mischief.

Both the words and the attitude pleased him, and took away his sense of soreness.

"No, I can't say that you do. But you did a little while ago, when you were in two minds about sitting down."

"And do you really think me as bad as the 'rest of them'?" mimicking his aggrieved tones.

"I shan't reply to that question, for fear my answer might offend you," responded Bob, his face beaming with delight, this sudden transition to a playful mood making the blood course like wildfire through his veins. Then, with a strong effort he controlled the desire to tell her his exact thoughts, and said hesitatingly :

"Of course you know very little about me at present, Miss Dot—I beg pardon, I mean Miss Lankester—but—but," beginning to flounder in his speech, "I should like to set your mind at rest in one particular."

"What is that, Mr. Jarrett? I was not aware my mind was uneasy."

"Yes, it is. Excuse me for contradicting you so flatly, but I can see it quite plainly. The real truth is, you are afraid of me, and—and," turning very red, "upon my soul you need not be."

The blush on her companion's face reproduced itself on Dot's.

"I'm not afraid of you—not a bit," she vowed more emphatically than truthfully, for she felt humiliated by Bob's declaration, and by the keenness of his perceptions.

"Oh! I thought you were."

She plucked up sufficient courage to ask, "Why?"

"Because you showed so very plainly your dislike to being left alone in my society."

He had been piqued by her conduct, and man-like

could not conceal his pique as a woman would have done. It might not be wise to speak out thus freely on so short an acquaintance, but for the life of him, he could not hold his tongue.

Dot, however, felt too guilty to attempt to deny the accusation. She only marvelled at his powers of penetration, having hitherto flattered herself that she had managed to disguise her sentiments pretty well. Either she must have acted her part very badly, or Mr. Jarrett must be a good deal sharper than most gentlemen.

Fortunately for Dot, Bob having secretly enjoyed the confusion depicted upon her countenance, was generous enough to start the conversation afresh, and this time in a different channel. He had no intention of pressing her too sorely. His object had merely been to let her see he was not wholly devoid of observation. She was a bad dissembler, and in his heart of hearts he liked her all the better for it. A girl who could tell stories readily, must have a flaw somewhere in her composition.

"Don't you ever go out hunting, Miss Lankester?" he inquired.

In a second, Dot's whole manner changed. A wonderful thaw set in. All the coldness and the frigidity vanished as if by magic. They were on safe ground at last, and she was her own, natural self again. The need of defence, which constitutes a maiden's armour, departed.

"Oh! yes, sometimes," she answered vivaciously. "But not very often, I'm sorry to say."

"How's that?"

"Father won't allow me to go alone, and it is only on very rare occasions that he can steal a holiday."

"Is Dr. Lankester fond of the sport?"

"He loves it, when he gets the chance. Do you know," and Dot lowered her voice confidentially, "nobody goes better than father, when he happens to be mounted on a decent horse, which, however, is not often. Every one declares what a wonderful eye he has got for a country, and how marvellously quick he is in following hounds."

"And do you go where he does?" inquired Bob with interest, though he did not like the idea of Dot's delicate frame being exposed to danger.

"I used to always," she answered proudly. "But," stifling a sigh, "the last year or two poor Mouse has failed sadly. She is very old and has quite lost her speed."

"Why don't you get another horse, then?" asked Bob somewhat inconsiderately.

She looked at him. Even the sharpest men were curiously dense in some ways.

"For the very simple reason, Mr. Jarrett, that my father is, comparatively speaking, a poor man, and we cannot afford to indulge in many expensive amusements. If we could, we should both go out hunting a very great deal more frequently than we do."

"In short," said Bob, "you have nothing to ride but Mouse."

"No, nothing, but I am very lucky to have her, and it is only when hounds happen to run really hard, and I hear her poor heart go pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, under me, and have the mortification of seeing everybody pass me by, that I can't help feeling annoyed, and envying people who are better mounted than myself. It is so delightful to be on a good horse," she continued enthusiastically, "and not always to have to think of cutting off corners, and easing up hills, and walking through ploughs. Besides, nothing puts one off one's riding more, than following some cunning old hand, who knows every gate in the country, and who pulls up at each gap in turn, to inquire of the multitude what sort of a place it is, and then either gallops swiftly away, or takes ten minutes making up his mind whether he will or will not, according to the nature of the answers received. It ruins a person's nerve."

"I should dearly like to lend you one of my horses," said Bob eagerly. "There are ever so many more in the stables than I want for my own use, and I feel sure two or three of them would carry a lady to perfection."

Dot's face brightened at the mere suggestion. She was passionately fond of fox-hunting, and of everything

connected therewith. Her love of sport was genuine, and inherited from her father, who came of a good horse-racing Yorkshire family. Bob could not possibly have held out a greater temptation. Nevertheless, she had many scruples as to accepting the offer so generously made. To begin with, it would place her under an obligation.

"You are very kind, Mr. Jarrett," she said gratefully. "More than kind, indeed, to hint at such a thing; but I do not think my father would allow me to ride any one else's horses. There is always a certain amount of risk about the proceeding, and if there was a good scent, and I got warmed up, I could not help 'going' and doing my very best to keep with hounds."

"I'll take all the risk," he answered. "Come," persuasively, "what do you say? If I can succeed in overcoming Dr. Lankester's objections, will you grant me this small favour—for it is one, I assure you—and let me have the pleasure of mounting you now and again?"

Dot hesitated before replying. It was awfully nice of him, he was quite restored to her good graces, but—ought she to yield to the temptation however great it might be, and was? What was the use of her cultivating her taste for hunting, when the circumstances of her life were such that in all probability she would have very little opportunity of gratifying it hereafter. And then Dot's imagination wandered far away.

"Well, what do you say?" Bob asked again. "Can't you make up your mind?"

She looked him straight in the face with clear and kindly eyes. She was touched by the sincerity of his offer.

"I don't know what to say, Mr. Jarrett, except to thank you for your most generous proposition."

"But that is no answer, Miss Lankester. None whatever."

"It is the only one I can give at the present moment."

"May I speak to your father? Have I your permission?"

"I—I—think you had better not." And she began twisting her pocket-handkerchief about.

But in spite of these words, Bob could see by her

manner that she was yielding. If he pressed the point only a little more he would overrule her objections; and then—what cross-country delights, what feats performed together, what long delicious rides home in the frosty twilight! His pulses thrilled at the mere thought of them. There would no longer be any question of scheming to obtain a miserable half-hour of her society. And when she was pleased and amused, and owed her pleasure and amusement to him, perhaps she might grow to care for him a little bit.

CHAPTER XXI.

BOB MAKES A BAD USE OF HIS OPPORTUNITY.

CAN even the best of men help their thoughts being selfish, especially when their passions are aroused? It is questionable. At all events, there was a leaven of self-interest in those that instantaneously rose to Bob's mind. He could not refrain from realizing that in benefiting Dot, he would benefit himself a hundred thousand times more. Consequently he grew increasingly urgent.

"I shall attack your father the very next time I see him," he said decidedly. "It's a downright shame for you not to have a good horse when you ride so well, and are so fond of hunting."

His energy and determination quite carried Dot away. She felt as if it were almost impossible to resist them, when directly subjected to their influence; for there are qualities which, when displayed by one of the opposite sex, possess a strange power of subjugating a woman, even against her better judgment. She likes to find all her objections answered, all her scruples overruled just now and again. It makes her say to herself: "Well! I have done a foolish thing, but it really was not my fault. I had no choice left me."

So instead of sticking to her colours, Dot deserted them basely, and said with a faint smile, for she was conscious of her weakness, and condemned it:

"I am afraid that if I let you have your way, you will spoil me altogether, Mr. Jarrett."

"Spoil you!" he ejaculated. "By jingo! I only wish I had the chance. Should you object to being spoilt by me, Miss Lankester?"

The question slipped out almost before he was aware of it, and then he could have bitten off the tip of his tongue, in his fear of having gone too far.

It was almost a relief, and yet—with the contrariety of masculine nature—he could not help feeling vexed as well, to find no reply forthcoming. Indeed, Dot appeared not to have heard the interrogation. Her face assumed an anxious, listening expression.

"Hark," she said, "is not that the sound of wheels?"

"No, I don't hear anything," rejoined Bob shortly, wishing the expected conveyance at the bottom of the sea.

"I am almost sure it was the carriage," she said uneasily.

"Oh! never mind if it is. It is so jolly sitting here talking, and there's no hurry."

She began moving restlessly about the room. Presently she said, unable to control her impatience any longer:

"Mr. Jarrett, I feel certain the carriage is here. Would you mind ringing the bell and asking?"

It was impossible to refuse so direct a request. Bob reluctantly did her bidding, and when the man-servant appeared, it seemed that Dot's ears had played her false. No vehicle had arrived.

"Are you sure?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, miss, quite sure. I looked out of the 'all door myself just afore I came up."

"It's very odd," she said, rising to her feet as soon as Charles had withdrawn. "Something must have happened, or else father has forgotten all about me."

"That's not the least likely," said Bob. "Daughters can't be ignored altogether so easily."

"Well, anyhow, I must be going."

He felt provoked by her persistence. It showed him plainly that he had not succeeded in setting her at ease.

"Without exception," he exclaimed, half in jest, half

in earnest, "you are the most fidgety and tenacious person I ever encountered."

"Thank you," she replied, dropping him a mock courtesy. "Anything else?"

"May I ask, Miss Lankester, how you intend to get home?"

She walked across the room, and drawing the curtains a little aside, looked out of the window. Just at first she could distinguish nothing, but after a few seconds she saw the stars shining with frosty radiance, and a big white moon illumining all the heavens with her cold and mystic rays. It might be a bit chilly out of doors, but at any rate there was no fear of rain. The night was calm and still, the lawn already whitening over with silvery hoar frost. Her resolution was taken without delay. There could be no reason why she should wait any longer.

"I shall walk."

"By Jove! No, that you shan't," he protested.

"Who is to prevent me?" a spirit of opposition rising within her breast.

"I will. If you are really in earnest about going, my brougham is of course at your disposal."

"Thank you very much," she rejoined, in tones which he could not help fancying conveyed a touch of reproach, "but it is too late—now."

Without doubt, there was an emphasis on the last word. The blood flew to his face.

"Spare me," he cried, with impetuous self-accusation. "I know quite well what a beast I have been, and that I ought to have ordered out the brougham ever so long ago."

"There was no law to render the action obligatory," said Dot coldly.

"Perhaps not, but I knew that you did not like being left here, and wanted to get away."

"You need not blame yourself, Mr. Jarrett. I stayed by my father's wish."

"Yes, but I did all I could to keep you. There! now the murder is out." And Bob gazed penitently at her. "Had I chosen, I might have helped you out of your difficulty in a second."

No doubt he had his faults, but he was a good fellow, and honest to the core. She could not feel angry with him for long, especially when he looked so contrite for what, after all, was only a small offence. Besides, it was making a mountain out of a mole-hill.

"It seems to me," she said pleasantly, "that if you have failed as a host, I have failed as a guest, so we may as well cry quits, and make our peace. Good-bye, Mr. Jarrett." And she held out her hand.

"You are not going to walk home, surely?" he said.

"Yes, I am. It is only a step, and nobody will run away with me."

"I can't possibly let you go like this," he expostulated in genuine distress. "Do wait a little longer."

"Out of the question. It has already struck half-past ten, and mother will be wondering what has become of us. She does not know that father may have to spend the night away from home."

Bob admitted the force of this objection, and accompanied his companion down the corridor that led to the hall. As he passed a hat-stand he seized his hat.

"What is that for?" asked Dot.

"To put on my head. I am coming with you."

"Oh, no, indeed, Mr. Jarrett! I can't allow you to do any such thing. You have been to London to-day and are certainly tired, and have a bad cold into the bargain."

"Excuse me, Miss Lankester, but you must let me have my own way in this. I have failed in my duty as a host once—you yourself have just said so—and I hope it may be a long time before I make a similar mistake."

Dot was in consternation. To use a vulgar simile, she felt that she had only jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire. And yet there was an air of decision about Bob which effectually prevented her from indulging in any further remonstrances. It was quite clear that whether she approved, or whether she didn't, he intended to abide by his decision. She liked him, too, in this authoritative mood. The manliness of his nature came out.

She actually let him wrap her up in one of his great-

coats, and stood quite meekly while he buttoned the buttons. He was awfully slow about it, but she did not attempt to hasten his movements. For the time being he had gained a certain mastery over her.

But when he handed her a warm shooting-cap, and insisted upon her putting it on, she once more found her tongue. He was so portentously serious that she felt bound to make light of the situation.

"I declare," she said, looking saucily up at him from under the projecting peak of her head-gear, "you have turned me into a regular man. How do I look? Like a masher?"

"Look!" he echoed, his head going from him all of a sudden, "as you always do—charming."

She turned her head away, and said petulantly:

"For goodness' sake, Mr. Jarrett, don't treat me like a fashionable young lady, to whom compliments are as the salt of existence. I hate them—nasty, insincere things."

"But they are not always insincere," responded Bob in self-defence.

"In that case, they are superfluous. And now shall we make a start?"

Bob's spirits felt thoroughly damped. He did not offer to make any reply to this speech. One thing was clear: Dot Lankester wholly differed from the majority of her sex. She was not to be approached through her vanity. A strange girl this, who grew positively angry when men professed to admire her, but how charming a one to the lucky fellow whose admiration she might deign to receive. Bob wondered if the "lucky fellow" existed, and grew miserable at the mere thought. Then he comforted himself by arguing that she was so young. She did not look a day over eighteen, and it was not likely in this quiet country village that anybody had already snapped her up. Besides, she did not seem like a girl given to matrimony, but very much the reverse. He should not take his rebuffs quite so deeply to heart if he could but make sure there were no rivals in the field. The very idea of some great, hairy man (other than himself) having the right to put his arm round Dot's waist, and kiss her little, flower-like face, filled him with

anger and disgust. An Australian might possibly be worthy of her, but an Englishman—never!

Meanwhile they walked down the drive in absolute silence.

The spreading trees with bare, black twigs formed a canopy over their heads, through whose interstices shone the darkling sky, deep indigo in hue; whilst the cold stars glittered like diamond facets, and the big moon cast sharp shadows on the path, which made the white road even whiter, when contrasted with their sombre outlines.

Night, with its still serenity, had hushed mother earth to sleep, and the stars and moon and the pure vaulted sky guarded the weary dame's slumbers. Peace descended with the mystic frost, that touched the trees with ghostly fingers and fantastically laid on every blade of grass a hoary rime which would have done credit to a fairy's web.

Peace, and silence, and solemnity—these were the characteristics of the hour, and yet Bob's poor, passionate heart, that joy or curse of human beings, beat with tumultuous beats. Scarce could he stifle his emotion. The calm of his surroundings failed to quiet it. For—and a great yearning flooded his being at the thought—he was so near to her and yet so far!

So near—that if he stretched out his hand, he could have taken hers in his; so far—that in giving the slightest expression to his sentiments, he at once raised up a barrier between them. Once as they walked along, she stumbled over some fallen stone which lay in the road, and he offered her his arm. Oh! how he longed for her to take it—to feel her little wrist quivering upon his sleeve.

He dared not speak, he only shot one mute glance of appeal from his veiled and troubled eyes.

She refused the proffered member with a stately gesture of the head.

Bob literally trembled as he walked by her side. It was ridiculous. He had never been afraid of any one in his life before. There were some who even accused him of being an audacious flirt, and yet this little slip of a girl, who was hardly more than a child, rendered him as

timid and as hesitating as a hare just startled from its form. If this was love, surely he had taken the epidemic in a very disagreeable form; and if it were not love, what else could it be?

They continued down the avenue, until they passed through the iron gates which separated the Park from the village. Emerging from the shadow of the trees a flood of brilliant moonlight greeted them, converting every homely red-brick cottage into a veritable work of art.

It enveloped Dot's girlish form in one sheet of radiance, and lit up each feature of her expressive young face. Her companion's attention was arrested by its rapt and dreamy look. If his thoughts had strayed, hers had evidently wandered also, for she never even noticed his steady gaze, or heard the sigh with which, at last, he forced himself to withdraw his eyes.

The influences of night prevailed. A spell descended upon them both, though it worked differently. *He* thought only of *her*. She?—Ah! who can travel the paths along which a maiden's fancies meander?

Soon they stood under the rustic porch of Dr. Lankester's house.

Then Dot woke up from her dream, and gave a long, soft sigh.

"Is anything the matter?" said Bob anxiously. "Are you cold?"

"Not a bit, thank you. I can't tell you how I have enjoyed the walk home."

"I'm glad to hear it," he answered, feeling flattered even in spite of the conviction that her enjoyment was not attributable to him.

"It has been such a lovely evening, and—" lowering her voice, "I was thinking——"

Of whom? He burned to ask the question, but did not dare.

She gave herself a little shake as if to shake her spirit free of some enchantment.

"It is too late to ask you in," she said, "but I hope you will come another time."

"You have only to give the invitation for me to accept it, Miss Lankester."

Then, as they were on the point of parting, her conscience smote her for having behaved a trifle ungraciously to him. If only he could be brought to understand, all would go well; but she could not offer her undivided friendship until that point had been reached. In the meantime she was sorry to have rendered his evening less agreeable than he had anticipated.

She guessed this to be the case from his altered and downcast manner.

"Good-night, Mr. Jarrett," she said frankly. "I am afraid I have proved a very bad companion. Will you forgive me all my misdemeanours?"

His face brightened instantaneously. The demand was put with such an air of pretty penitence.

"You have not got any shortcomings for me to forgive."

"Under the circumstances, you are very indulgent," she answered with a smile.

That smile was fatal. It made him forget all his good resolutions. The blood rushed up to his boyish face, and he said impulsively:

"It is pleasure enough for me to be near you, even when you don't care to talk. I should never ask for more."

And then he was frightened—frightened at the effect his words would produce. Do not laugh at him. The truest wooers are often the most bashful.

Moonbeam after moonbeam poured into the porch, as they stood waiting for the door to be opened. By their light he could see her eyes narrow, the delicate brow contract, and the whole expression of her face change. He cursed his own imprudence.

"Mr. Jarrett," she said in a constrained voice, "you expressed a wish that you and I should be friends. Please understand distinctly that I cannot undertake to remain so unless you give up the habit of making flowery speeches on every possible and impossible occasion."

"I—I'm awfully sorry," muttered Bob in abject confusion, wringing her hand in a vice-like grasp. "Good-bye, I won't do it again, and—and—I shan't forget about the horse," striding hastily away.

The horse? Did he think he could bribe her with that?

"Mr. Jarrett," she called after him, in a clear voice, "wait one minute, please. I have something to say."

"Yes," stopping short, "what is it?"

"About your kind offer—I—I can't accept it."

"You can't! Why not?"

"Because I feel convinced that it would be better for me not to do so."

And with this exceedingly unsatisfactory reply, Dot vanished into the house, leaving Bob to trudge back to Straightem Court in the worst of humours and the lowest possible spirits.

For he saw quite clearly that the fortress was not to be carried by a *coup de main*.

In his ardour he had imagined there would be no delay—his courtship would go smoothly. He would pay Miss Lankester a great deal of attention, to which she would respond in a suitable manner; then propose and be accepted. That was how the course of true love should always run, and how he had mapped it out in his own mind.

And now, instead of a swift impetuous channel, coursing madly down towards the smiling ocean of matrimony, he saw nothing but a little devious stream, blocked by every kind of impediment. His ideas had been subjected to a very severe shock.

He realized that Dot Lankester could not be "rushed" into marriage. He had been in far too great a hurry. Instead of going to work cautiously, and inspiring her first with confidence, then friendship, and finally with the desired passion, he had made a mess of the whole business, and done nothing but establish a feeling of constraint which would now take several days, if not weeks, to efface. In short, he had frightened her. He knew it by the tone of her voice and the look of her eyes. And as Bob retraced his footsteps he blamed himself bitterly for having made such exceedingly bad use of the opportunity that had been granted him.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SUNDAY CALL.

WHETHER a hapless young man be in love or not the world has to go on as usual. He must get up of a morning, eat, drink, and, to a great extent, pursue his usual avocations. The passion which consumes him is sedulously hidden from the vulgar eye as something too sacred for it to gaze upon. His sufferings are borne heroically and in silence.

A promise made to a lady, even although that lady be not the object of your affections, is entitled to respect. An honourable gentleman feels himself bound to fulfil it, whether his inclinations do or do not approve. Having pledged his word, there is no going back.

This conviction was strong upon Bob's mind when Sunday afternoon arrived. Since meeting Lady De Fochsey in the train she had occupied but a comparatively small share of his thoughts. Nevertheless, he remembered his appointment.

Consequently, he dressed himself with extra care, and, after eating a hearty lunch, set out on foot for her ladyship's house, whose locality he had previously ascertained. He had gone to church that morning in the hope of seeing Dot, but Dot for some reason or other was not present, and he felt the sacrifice had been vain, and wondered feverishly when and how he should see her again. If only he could catch a glimpse of the doctor then he might arrange a day for his daughter to go out hunting; but at present the future was shrouded in obscurity. He kept contriving all sorts of plans by which they might meet. Most successful projects in imagination, and yet ones that when he came to meditate seriously upon putting them into operation seemed to contain some element which might possibly displease Dot, and were therefore promptly discarded. Four whole days had passed since he had seen her. It appeared a miracle how people could live so close to each other, and meet so seldom. And yet

he had marched up and down the road in front of the doctor's house at least a dozen times. If this were to go on life would not be worth living.

Altogether, Bob felt thoroughly disheartened. Since his immersion in the brook he had not been well. He could not throw off the chill which he had then caught, and although he refused to take any care of himself, and pooh-poohed the idea of taking any medical advice, a sense of physical discomfort added to the despondency of his mental condition.

But the walk did him good. His way led through pleasant country lanes, where the thorny bramble still retained a few red and yellow leaves, and where bright clusters of scarlet berries peeped out from the dark hedgerows. A sharp frost had prevailed the night before. In the shade the grass was still covered by a silvery burden; but where the wintry sun rested, upon it, there the rime had disappeared, leaving behind a faint trace of moisture, which lent freshness to the herbage and appetite to the browsing cattle. As a rule the Stiffshire roads are not celebrated for their cleanliness. The rain that descends lies about in miry puddles, and takes days to percolate through the heavy clay soil. But to-day there was no need to turn up even a trouser hem. They were bleached quite white and hard, except here and there where the sun had chanced to slant down upon them with peculiar force. The air was still and sharp; the sky faintly blue, fading away to a misty grey where it touched the horizon. Every now and again as he walked along, the deep lowing of cattle, or the crisp swish of grass torn violently from its roots, broke the silence. Otherwise, scarce a sound was to be heard.

Before long Bob arrived at his destination.

Lady De Fochsey's house was well situated on the summit of a gentle incline. Though by no means large—being, in fact, little more than a hunting box—it commanded a fine panorama. Grass, grass, grass. That was what could be seen from its bay windows, added to three or four dark patches on the sky-line, which represented well-known coverts, half a dozen church steeples, and as many villages; the whole inter-

sected by rows upon rows of fences, some big, some little, but mostly the former, and all crossing and recrossing each other at a variety of different angles. A great green chess-board, somewhat irregularly marked out, but whereon all the motley crowd of players enjoyed themselves to the full. A country on which the fox-hunter's eye rested with unqualified admiration and approval, but in which the uninitiated could descry nothing except a series of big, dreary fields, bleak and bare to a degree, and destitute of all beauty save that of space.

Bob marched up a bijou drive, planted with trees that looked as if they ought to grow but either couldn't or wouldn't, and rang the bell.

Upon the door being opened he inquired if her ladyship were at home.

Receiving an answer in the affirmative, he was at once shown into a small but luxuriantly-furnished drawing-room, literally crowded with feminine knick-knacks and conceits. Books, flowers, music, bulrushes, peacock feathers, Japanese fans, screens, ornamental photograph stands, china, grotesque monsters, &c., met the eye in every direction. Last, but not least, curled up on a white fur hearthrug before the fire were two fat, wheezy pugs, with huge blue satin bows tied round their creasy necks, and, without compare, the grotesquest monsters of all.

Altogether, a room in which evidences of female folly and female refinement were curiously blended, producing a mixed impression on the acute observer.

For a few moments Bob stood with his back to the hearth—the pugs occupied the central position, and he could only secure one corner—familiarizing himself with these various details, and trying to determine where the refinement ended and the folly began. But this was a point not easily arrived at, and requiring a much greater critic on art furniture.

In justice to his taste, he did not wholly approve of all he saw. He had a man's impatience of useless lapdogs, and pugs in particular, especially be-ribboned pugs; also of flimsy antimacassars, gimcrack chairs, and little spindle-legged tables, that had the horrid knack of

over-turning on the slightest provocation. Good, solid, sensible furniture was what he liked ; not all these three-cornered, new-fangled arrangements, which blocked up a room and made people afraid to move in it. These reflections passed through his mind as he stood awaiting her ladyship's arrival. She was a long time in coming ; and, impelled by curiosity, he took to examining the various photographs so liberally dotted about.

They were nearly all portraits of gentlemen belonging to that class which Dot Lankester would probably have designated as " mashers." The same vacuous expression of self-content adorned the countenances of them all. Their hair was parted down the middle, and beautifully brushed ; their coats were tightly buttoned over their manly chests ; a pocket-handkerchief invariably protruded—presumably to let the public know that the owner possessed such an article—and in the matter of shirt-fronts, cuffs, studs, sleeve-links, watch-chains, charms, rings, gloves and button-holes, they were simply beyond reproach. As specimens of what careful and elaborate dressing can do, they were " Things of beauty, a joy for ever." Only not men. At least, so it seemed to Bob. There was an air of effeminacy about these mute reproductions of living objects which made him turn away from them in disgust. He felt an irresistible desire to divest the originals of some of their smoothness and gloss, and meet them in a fair stand-up fight.

Continuing his tour of examination, he came upon a photograph of Lady De Fochsey—the only female one in the room—which he remarked with some wonderment. She was depicted in full evening costume, extremely *décolletée*, standing beside a marble column, with both hands clasped tragically behind her head, thus boldly calling attention to the seductive curves of her graceful figure.

Bob looked long and critically at this masterpiece of the photographic art, coldly ascertaining the lady's good and bad points, and dissecting each feature with cynical composure. Lady De Fochsey's eyes were fine, her nose small and straight, her mouth passable, a trifle thin-lipped, but otherwise unobjectionable. No doubt, as the world goes, a very pretty woman ; and yet although he

admitted her beauty, it was a face that possessed no fascination for him. The expression spoilt it. It was artificial, unreal and insincere.

He had just arrived at this conclusion, when a rustling of skirts was heard outside in the passage. He glanced at the clock. She had kept him waiting exactly twenty minutes. Luckily, time was of no particular importance, else he might have felt more aggrieved than he did. The afternoon had to be whiled away somehow.

At the near approach of their mistress, the pugs began to display a slight animation outside their own immediate circle of interests, represented by the fire and the hearthrug. The youngest and slimmest half rose from her recumbent position; the eldest condescended to cease snoring, and gave vent to one or two short, snappy barks, that might mean satisfaction, but which certainly sounded more like irritation at the entry of a second intruder.

Lady De Fochsey appeared on the threshold, clad in an exquisite toilette of dark blue velvet, which set off her golden locks, azure eyes, and pink and white complexion to perfection. She had not lived twenty-eight, nearly twenty-nine, years in the world without learning the art of making the most of herself. Bob had promised to come early, and he had been even better than his word; in consequence of which, her ladyship, instead of being already seated in state to receive her Sunday afternoon visitors, found herself compelled to struggle into the velvet gown in a desperate hurry and slur over those last delicate touches of rouge, which, when artistically applied, added so greatly to her appearance. Not that the rouge had been omitted, only her cheeks were rather more hectic than usual, and consequently required a subdued light.

But her drawing-room was so arranged that this could easily be obtained.

"A thousand pardons for keeping you waiting such an unconscionable time, Mr. Jarrett," she exclaimed effusively, holding out both her white bejewelled hands with a pretty foreign air of apology. "I was just finishing a letter to a soldier cousin of mine, at the Cape, when you were announced, and thought you would be

good enough to excuse me for a few minutes. These foreign letters are always rather an undertaking. One has to cram so much news into them, and has to rack one's brains to find the wherewithal."

This letter to the soldier cousin was a most gratuitous invention on Lady De Fochsey's part, but it sounded better than telling the truth, which would have been——

"Ahem! Mr. Jarrett, I'm sorry to have kept you so long, but I had to go upstairs and dress, and my frock was awfully tight and wouldn't meet, and then, just when we succeeded in fastening it, one of the buttons went crack, and my maid had to hunt for a needle and thread to sew it on again."

Of course the soldier cousin was infinitely preferable to such a plain unvarnished tale as that. Women were nowhere if they did not surround themselves with illusion. All admiration—all love was illusion really, only of a pleasant kind.

But if Bob had been annoyed by the delay, he was courtier enough not to show his vexation, and proved quite equal to the occasion. He declared to her ladyship that he would willingly have waited all day, if only to obtain a glimpse of her.

She smiled benevolently at him, pulled down the blinds three or four feet, seated herself with her back to the light, and motioned to him to occupy the vacant place on the sofa by her side. Evidently she was determined to make amends for having detained him so long.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DEVELOPING PSYCHIC FORCE.

"THERE! Sit down, do," she exclaimed coaxingly. "You great tall men seem such a terribly long way off a poor little woman like me that I declare it's downright hard work having to crane one's neck up at you. For my part, I never can talk, unless a person be close to me."

"It assists conversation, certainly," said Bob. "I

shouldn't think, though, that anybody could have the moral courage to place any great distance between himself and so charming a lady. I know I can't." And he plumped down almost on the top of the blue velvet skirt.

"Oh! you sad flatterer," she murmured coquettishly.

"How am I to believe you?"

"By looking in the glass. Surely you see corroboration of the truth there."

"Yes, of several rather unpleasant ones," she thought to herself, but she did not say so aloud.

"And what have you been doing since we last met?" inquired Bob after a slight pause.

"I have gone through a variety of the most wonderful experiences, Mr. Jarrett; I feel as if I had only just begun to live, in the proper and enlightened sense of the word."

"Indeed! That sounds very mysterious. How did you make so remarkable a discovery?"

"Do you remember my telling you about my friend Mrs. St. John, and the *séance* that was to take place at her house?"

"Yes, perfectly. I have the keenest recollection of it," answered Bob.

"Well, I spent the most creepy, delightful, and blood-curdling evening I ever spent in my life, and all owing to that dear man, Monsieur Adolphe De Firdusi. Do you know him by any chance?"

"Not I. Who is he?"

"Impossible. You don't actually mean to say that you have not even heard of him. Well, you *are* behind the times."

"Very likely. It strikes me one would have to be uncommonly rapid to be before them now-a-days. But with all due respect to your ladyship, you have not yet gratified my curiosity."

"Adolphe De Firdusi—isn't it a romantic name? just the sort of name you expect great things of—is the head of the powerful modern school of electrical, esoteric and spiritualistic psychology."

"Dear me! And what wonders did this first-class conjuror perform?" ejaculated Bob.

"Elevations into space, even of common objects like

a chair or a table," she responded in tones of intense excitement. "Mysterious rapping proceeding from the spirits with whom he holds communication, invisible writing, and many other marvellous manifestations besides. I confess that I went to my friend's house somewhat sceptically inclined, but I came away a complete convert."

"It's awful hard lines upon the poor spirits," said practical Bob.

"In what way, Mr. Jarrett?"

"Why, I fancy that one of the chief ideas of our mortal minds in connection with a future state is represented by repose. We associate the hereafter with rest and freedom from worry. Now, according to your friend Monsieur Adolphe, the unfortunate beings who have departed this world and gone to another, are little better off than general servants."

"Really, Mr. Jarrett. What extraordinary things you do say."

"Well, but is it not so? These poor spirits are at everybody's beck and call. A little shoeblack, cleaning his shoes in the gutter, displays mediumistic tendencies, and he may summon the celestial form; also the tradesman, also the farmer, also nine people out of ten. To me there is something revolting in the very idea."

"Ah!" sighed her ladyship. "You speak like one who does not understand. As Monsieur Adolphe truly observed the other night, ignorance and dulness of the finer perceptions are our greatest enemies. I wish you could meet him. He would soon alter your opinions."

"I doubt it," said Bob obstinately.

"Oh! yes, indeed he would. No one can resist him. He has cultivated his soul to such an extent that he is now nothing but a mass of psychic force."

"I'm afraid I'm rather dense, but will you tell me exactly what those words mean? At present they convey nothing definite to my mind."

"Dear! how sad!" exclaimed Lady De Fochsey, clasping her hands theatrically.

"Is it? I look to you to enlighten me."

"Of course, 'psychic force' means ever so many things," she explained somewhat vaguely.

"All right," interposed Bob. "I'll take that for granted."

"And it is simply impossible to go into detail, when one is treating so stupendous a subject," she went on, wishing she could but recall some of Monsieur Adolphe's long words and high-sounding phrases. "People must have faith—yes, faith first and foremost, and then it all comes to them in time."

"Again I must ask you to forgive my stupidity, but what comes, Lady De Fochsey."

"Oh! all sorts of things, as I told you before. It is so difficult to explain, but clairvoyance, and thought-reading, and—and spiritual interchanges with the souls of those who are dead."

"Very jolly if you met your dearest friend, but quite the reverse if some horrible wretch you were only too glad to get rid of kept always cropping up," said Bob. "Did you receive any messages from Monsieur Ad—I mean from the spirits."

"Yes, several."

"And what sort of messages were they?"

"Delightful ones. Hoped I was well, and looked forward to seeing me. One poor man I used to be very fond of in the olden days sent me quite a long letter; and, oh! so beautifully worded."

"It is curious that the language should be the same," remarked Bob. "Do the spirits ever make any mistakes in orthography?"

"How can you ask such a question? It's really quite shameful. I'll not tell you anything more if you talk like that."

"Oh! yes, do. I want to hear all about Monsieur Adolphe; I am an unbeliever now, I admit, but if any one can convert me, I feel sure you can." And, whether by accident or design, Bob's hand came in contact with Lady De Fochsey's, and she did not withdraw hers immediately.

"Ah!" she said, "I wish I were good at explaining things, but I'm not, although perhaps I may get to be a more worthy disciple by degrees, for Monsieur Adolphe says that if only I cultivate my powers assiduously, and run up to town occasionally for the purpose of receiving his advice, in time I——"

All of a sudden she stopped short, and fixed her eyes rapturously upon Bob, with the air of one who has just made a great and exceedingly important discovery.

"What is the matter?" he asked, feeling rather uncomfortable at being stared at so pointedly.

"Just fancy!" she exclaimed ecstatically. "You are—yes, you really are——"

"I am—I really am—what?"

"A medium, my dear boy. Oh! you *lucky, lucky* young man, let me congratulate you." And in her rapture her golden head almost sank upon his shoulder, only, as one side of her fringe felt a little loose, she had to be careful, and he profited by the opportunity to edge a few inches farther away.

"Bah!" he exclaimed contemptuously, but not politely.

"Oh! it's no use saying 'Bah!'" she rejoined. "The fact remains, and you can't help yourself. You possess strong magnetic powers. I can tell by your eyes, though I don't know yet whether you'll develop into a medium of the first or only the second order. That depends chiefly upon yourself."

"In that case I shan't develop into either."

"But you must. The process is unconscious, and it may so happen that your individual will has not much to do with it, especially if you come under the influence of a—of a——" but as she could not find the exact word, she broke off short, and said softly—"Oh! Mr. Jarrett, I am so glad, so very, very glad. This was precisely what I wanted."

"What are *you* glad about?" he asked somewhat roughly, beginning to wonder if she had gone off her head altogether.

"You don't quite understand at present, but I'll try and make it all clear to you. Monsieur Adolphe explained to me most particularly the system by which the magnetic current is transmitted. It is enough, he says, for two people who both possess spiritual aptitudes to meet once or twice a week, and sit for a couple of hours at a time holding hands, and looking steadily into one another's eyes, for them insensibly to gain power."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Bob. "What next, I wonder?"

"But the curious part is this," resumed her ladyship, with a pensive smile. "It seems that the process is greatly assisted, and the cultivation of internal force immensely facilitated, when the two mediums are of opposite sexes. For instance—a man and a woman will arrive at much speedier results than a woman and a woman, or a man and a man."

"Yes, I can understand that," said Bob, with blunt sarcasm.

"Ah! you are beginning to comprehend at last," she rejoined, in satisfied tones. "I thought you would before long. These things just require a little explanation at first starting, but they are not as difficult as they seem, between two people who are really sympathetic."

"That's comforting, at any rate."

"Very, is it not? And now, Mr. Jarrett, what do you say? Will you try?"

"Try what, Lady De Fochsey? You speak in conundrums."

"Firstly, to develop your higher nature and kill the baser."

"Is that all? And pray, how am I to set about it?"

"I'll show you. You have only to do as I tell you."

So saying she jumped up from the sofa, dragged the cover off a small rosewood table that stood in the window, lifted it on to the hearthrug, and then proceeded to place two cane chairs one on either side of it. Bob watched these operations with amazement.

"Now sit down," she said impatiently.

He did as he was told, too much mystified to venture on an observation.

"That's right, Mr. Jarrett. Give me your two hands."

"Won't one do?"

"No, I must have both."

He held them out obediently, feeling somewhat like a captive.

"Now take mine in yours—so, and press them firmly."

At this request Bob revived. He lost no time in complying with it. Indeed, he began to consider the

situation great fun. They were quite close to each other, their knees almost touched, and only the small table separated them.

But her ladyship was not satisfied yet.

"Look straight into my eyes," she said, with preternatural gravity, "and after a time tell me what you see."

"There's no occasion to wait. I see a very pretty woman," replied Bob audaciously.

"Hush! You must not speak yet. It is too soon."

"How long am I to keep quiet? I never bargained for having to play mumchance."

"You must judge by your own feelings; probably about a quarter of an hour."

"Very well," replied Bob. "But before we begin this game in earnest—for I presume it is a game—may I venture to make a suggestion?"

"Yes, if you are quick about it, but don't be long; for the conditions are favourable, and it's a thousand pities not to profit by them."

"From what I gather," said Bob gravely, "our present object is to strengthen and transmit the magnetic force which we—or rather you—believe we both possess. Now at this moment there is but one point of contact between us. The electric current passes through our hands, and our hands alone. Don't you think—I make this suggestion with all due diffidence—that if you were to put out your pretty little feet and I were to put out mine, the effect might be enormously intensified? We should then secure a negative and a positive pole."

She sighed gently.

"Yes, Mr. Jarrett, per—perhaps you are right."

"I'm sure of it," said Bob confidently.

"And now to business," she said. "Keep on pressing my hands and looking into my eyes, and if, by the end of a quarter of an hour, you begin to feel peculiar sensations, swear to describe them, as I swear to describe mine. Only don't be disappointed if we fail to produce any active manifestations to-day, since it is absolutely necessary first to establish harmonious relations."

Bob laughed heartily.

"All right," he said. "Your orders shall be obeyed."

And then, for fifteen whole minutes neither of them spoke a word.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked away industriously, and those two abominable pugs snored on louder than ever.

Now, to have free leave given you to press a pretty woman's hand, and a woman moreover not disinclined for flirtation, is a permission of which most men would take liberal advantage. To do Bob justice he was by no means backward in doing so. But squeezing hands surreptitiously and from impulse, and squeezing hands by command, are two very different things, as before long he began to discover. For when you are enjoined to continue the pressure at all hazards, then the temptation, and, *sub rosa*, sense of enjoyment, vanishes, until in the end you become only conscious of an irksome effort. If any gentleman doubts this fact, let him try the experiment for himself.

For the first five minutes Bob's fancy was amazingly tickled. He discovered that the lid of one of Lady De Fochsey's eyes drooped more than the other, that the rims beneath them were not natural, and that the eyes themselves, when critically examined, were wholly wanting in expression. But the next five minutes, he began to feel rather bored, and suffered from an irresistible desire to yawn, which desire, however, he could not gratify, being unable to withdraw his hand. The last found him growling and grumbling inwardly, and voting the whole thing "a most deuced bore." He made a mental vow, never to squeeze a woman's hand as long as he lived. The nerves of his arm had grown quite dead. At length, to his infinite relief, the quarter struck.

"Well!" murmured Lady De Fochsey, who appeared in a dreamy and semi-hypnotic state. "How do you feel?"

"Oh! awfully jolly," responded Bob, not wholly veraciously, but thankful to be allowed the use of his tongue again. "How do you?"

"Strange—very strange. I have indescribable sensations. Do you see anything?"

"Rather," he answered, his sense of the ridiculous assuming the upper hand.

"Oh! what? Tell me what."

"I see"—and he lowered his voice to a mysterious key—"visions of fair disembodied women, floating about in spirit space. Waves of ether surround them. They are free from every coarse and earthly element——"

"Yes, yes, go on," she interrupted. "This is really wonderful, especially at the first attempt. It proves that you possess most special gifts."

"One gracious form beckons me to draw near," continued Bob, still more dramatically. "She whispers that she has waited long, so long for my coming."

"Just like me," sighed her ladyship.

"Yes, just like you. She says that our communications require strengthening—that I am too far off. Ha! she bids me, with ethereal condescension, encircle her diaphanous and well-nigh invisible waist, with my grossly mortal arm." Here Bob proceeded to clasp Lady De Fochsey's tightly-laced one, the lady offering no resistance. How could she?—when he was a medium, and was producing such lovely manifestations.

"My kindred spirit," she murmured, "my kindred spirit, at last—at last." Then, abandoning herself completely to the ecstasy of the moment, she added deliriously, "Is that all?"

"Oh! dear no. Would you believe it, my spiritual adviser actually commands me to press my mundane lips to her chaste ones. She does not even recoil from the thought of possible contamination, but offers me a draught of purest nectar."

To what length Bob's audacity and irrepressible spirit of mischief would have led him it is impossible to say. Suffice it, that his arm was still round her ladyship's waist and her head was within suspicious proximity to his own, when suddenly the door flew open, and Lord Littelbrane was announced. The aspirants after psychic force started apart.

No further manifestations could be expected to take place in the presence of a third, and probably uncongenial, party. Lady De Fochsey gave a little startled

scream, and alas! alas! the powerful electric current which had been so successfully established between herself and Mr. Jarrett was rudely broken.

But that it had been established was conclusively proved by the shock felt on either side at its unexpected and inopportune rupture.

None but male and female mediums could possibly have arrived at such sterling results in so short a space of time.

If the height of clairvoyance had been reached in one single *seance*, what might not be hoped for at the next meeting?

To the earnest believer in psychology, delightful and never-ending fields of research were open. Guided and impelled by the glorious spirit, the body might take care of itself. That vile earthly thing was of no account.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNTIMELY INTERRUPTION.

It took a good deal to disturb Lady De Fochsey's self-possession; but for a few seconds after the announcement of Lord Littelbrane she was fairly staggered.

Her mind had been filled with all kinds of rare and transcendental ideas. It was uplifted and exalted in quite an uncommon degree. Her spirit was just ready to soar amongst astral planes and undertake a celestial voyage of discovery, and now, all of a sudden, she was called upon to attune herself to things terrestrial. It was like being bound by some horrid chain that rudely pulled you back to earth. Her discomfiture was increased, too, by the fact that amongst the whole circle of her acquaintance, his lordship was the very last person whose presence she expected. No thought of him had entered her head; for, although she had already spent two whole hunting seasons in Stiffshire, he had never once condescended to call, or to set foot inside her house; and this in spite of sundry friendly little invitations issued by her in the beginning.

Beyond a few stereotyped remarks out hunting, confined almost exclusively to the weather and the sport, no civilities had been exchanged between them. After a time her innate sense had told her that this was a man on whom feminine fascinations and blandishments would produce but little effect. It was wiser to reserve them for a more sensitive and emotional individual.

So she had almost given up the attempt of trying to enrol his lordship amongst the list of her admirers, and contented herself with being on speaking terms—nothing more.

Consequently she was now at a loss to understand to what the honour of this visit was due. Her brain was too distraught to divine any possible motive.

But if, for once in her life, Lady De Fochsey felt slightly disconcerted, Lord Littelbrane was a hundred thousand times more so. His notions about ladies and their behaviour were strict, not to say old-fashioned, and he had seen enough to shock him very considerably. There could be no two opinions as to the familiarity of the positions in which the parties had been surprised. If he could have withdrawn without saying a word, most assuredly he would have done so. But it was too late now to effect an escape; therefore, after an awkward pause, he advanced a little way into the room, and turning very red in the face, said :

"I beg pardon. I fear I am intruding."

At these words Lady De Fochsey called all her forces into action. She felt that the moment was critical—that, in fact, her whole character might depend upon it. A very pretty story could doubtless be trumped up at her expense, and circulated all over the hunting field. In some way or other she must account for the entire business, and in a manner, moreover, that would completely remove his lordship's displeasure. The task was by no means easy. There were a good many facts against her, but she did not despair. Her babyish blue eyes, and innocent pout, and childish speeches which professed no harm in anything, had stood her in very good stead before now. Besides, in spite of his stiffness and reserve, she did not believe Lord Littelbrane to be either a very strong or a very acute man. She thought

that it might not prove altogether difficult to throw dust in his eyes.

Therefore she held out her hand almost affectionately, and said with great apparent unconcern :

"Intruding? Oh, dear no! How could you possibly imagine such a thing, my lord? Mr. Jarrett and I were merely trying to repeat some spiritualistic experiments which I saw the other night, and which required a certain juxtaposition of the electrical forces."

She was very good at long words. She picked them up like a parrot, and introduced them regardless of their meaning. But they sounded well—learned, scientific, and so on; and, to tell the truth, his lordship was a little impressed.

"Oh! indeed," he responded. "And are these experiments confined exclusively to yourself and this——" He was going to say gentleman, but checked himself and substituted "young man," without, however, deigning to look at Bob.

She smiled up into his face with the frankness of a child.

"Of course not. We were longing for a third person to assist our efforts. Will you join us?" and she smiled even more sweetly than before.

He was mollified, but not sufficiently so to accept the invitation.

"No, thank you. I am afraid your experiments are not much in my line."

She looked at him oddly, wickedly, alluringly.

"Oh! how cruel. Won't you even try?"

"Thanks; I think not. At all events," lowering his voice, "not in the present company."

"Ah, I understand. But," shrugging her shoulders, "it was simply a case of *faute de mieux*."

"I am glad to hear it. I feared it might be otherwise."

"What! with your experience?" Then she rested her hand on his coat-sleeve, and said in a louder key, "Dear Lord Littelbranc, you must really let me initiate you into some of the mysteries of the higher life. I do not profess to be an adept, but we might try and cultivate our souls together. I feel sure there is sympathy between us."

The last remnants of his ill-humour vanished. He felt infinitely flattered and raised in his own esteem. Only he could not unbend as long as that "duffer"—that nephew of Straightem's remained in the room. He wondered why on earth the fellow did not go; and although he was not going to demean himself by talking *to* him, he might talk *at* him, and convey a pretty broad hint as to the desirability of his prompt departure.

"I think so also," he said, addressing Lady De Fochsey pointedly, "but sympathy requires a *tête-à-tête*. Don't you agree with me?"

"Ah! yes, of course. Do you hear that, Mr. Jarrett?"

Bob marvelled inwardly at her impudence—"brass" he dubbed it mentally. But he had no desire to stay any longer and he scowled at by Lord Littelbrane, so he took up his hat, and, moving towards Lady De Fochsey, said abruptly:

"Good-bye. I must be going."

"Must you really?" she asked, in accents which seemed to say, "Quite right. I think you had much better, for you have had your innings, and now should make room for another." Then, turning to Lord Littelbrane, she said:

"Excuse me one moment, my lord."

He bowed stiffly in response. Up till now he had resolutely abstained from taking the slightest notice of Bob, and desired to avoid an introduction, so he turned his back upon him and walked to the window, and stood gazing vacantly out at the green fields and browsing sheep.

Meantime Lady De Fochsey accompanied Bob to the door.

"Was there ever such an untimely interruption?" she whispered confidentially. "I declare I could have boxed his lordship's ears."

"Hush! he will hear you."

"I don't care if he does. He has spoilt our afternoon."

Bob could not help feeling rather disgusted with her hypocrisy. He was convinced in his own mind that no sooner did he leave the house than she would make up

to Lord Littelbrane precisely as she had made up to him.

"His coming was awkward, certainly," he admitted. "And I feel sorry on your account, as I fear you were placed in a rather disagreeable situation, and partly through my instrumentality."

"Oh! never mind about me, I'll soon smooth old 'Stick-in-the-mud' over. But, I say, Mr. Jarrett—Bob—I must call you Bob—Mr. Jarrett sounds so formal."

"Well, what is it, Lady De Fochsey?"

"You will keep our manifestations strictly secret, won't you? It would not be wise to mention them to an ignorant and unsympathetic public."

"Of course not," said Bob, repudiating the idea of recounting his folly. "You may trust me to hold my tongue, especially where so many universal truths are concerned."

"That's right. I knew I could depend on you; and, Bob—when will you come again?"

She might have been a girl of eighteen, proud in the possession of her first lover and confident of her powers of attraction; but her eagerness repulsed him. It wanted the charm of extreme youth.

"I really can't say," he rejoined coldly. "It depends entirely on what's going on."

"Come soon, there's a dear creature. We ought to join hands again in three or four days' time at latest, else the magnetic current may evaporate."

"Perhaps it would be just as well to let it, all things considered."

"Nonsense. You must not talk like that. To-day's sitting has conclusively proved that we are indispensable to one another. You can only rise through my instrumentality, and I through yours. We have each a mission to perform, which should render us superior to personal feeling."

"And what will be the end of it all?" he inquired with languid interest.

"End? Why, in course of time we may be able to raise the chairs and tables from their places and suspend them in mid-air. We may get to hold an ordinary pencil in our hands, and find long spirit-messages written upon

a slate; we may even see the forms of the departed hovering about our heads and whispering divine words of love and comfort. Surely you cannot entertain any doubts after the results we have obtained to-day? They were so absolutely conclusive."

"I don't know. They seemed to me to be purely mundane results at best. If they contained any divine element, the spirits must be very naughty people."

"That is because you have a mundane mind. We both have at present; but by degrees we shall grow out of all that, and disencumber ourselves of every earthly attribute."

"I doubt it," said Bob sceptically. "Earthly attributes have a nasty way of sticking."

And with that he effected his escape, and did not breathe freely until once more he found himself outside in the open air, inhaling the clear frosty atmosphere, instead of the languorous flower-laden perfumes of Lady De Fochsey's drawing-room.

"Phew!" he exclaimed, with a quick, outward breath, as if to shake off every reminiscence of his visit, "was there ever such a pack of nonsense? Really, it makes one wonder what next women will be up to now-a-days. Every new craze, no matter how foolish, finds converts amongst the fair sex."

Then he walked on a step or two, and added, with a growing sense of self-dissatisfaction:

"I wonder what the deuce Dot would say if she knew what an infernal fool I've been making of myself. I shouldn't like her to hear how I've spent my Sunday afternoon."

Meanwhile Lady De Fochsey applied herself to the entertainment of her remaining guest. He had felt annoyed by her prolonged conference with Bob, and she found him looking very cross and consequential, like a bird whose feathers have been ruffled the wrong way.

"Ten thousand pardons," she exclaimed in her prettiest and most penitent manner. "That young man promises to develop into a dreadful bore. He has fastened himself upon me, and really I hardly know how to get rid of him."

This was an entirely new aspect of affairs, and one infinitely more pleasing to Lord Littelbrane.

If what she stated was true, and she was being persecuted by an impudent stranger, he was more or less bound to step in and protect her from further inconvenience.

"You are much too good-natured," he said, "and should not allow yourself to be imposed upon."

She sighed, and drooped her eyes in a timid, feminine fashion that she knew how to assume on occasions.

"Ah! Lord Littelbrane, your advice is excellent, no doubt; but what is a poor single woman in my position to do? She does not like to be downright rude, and yet on the other hand she is more or less at the mercy of every man she comes across."

"How did you first get to know this Mr. Jarrett?" he asked, seating himself in the place recently occupied by Bob.

"I met him out hunting. You remember the day he tumbled into the brook?"

"Do you mean to say that he had the impertinence to speak to you?"

"I dropped my hunting crop and he opened a gate for me. I was obliged to say thank you!"

"And on the strength of that the fellow has actually had the cheek to come and call. Well! I never."

She did not contradict him, and left his lordship under the impression that Bob had forced his acquaintance upon her. It was a little mean, perhaps, not to tell the truth, but it saved an infinity of trouble; and really, if one were to try and stick up for all one's friends in their absence life would become a perfect burden. To be nice to them when they were present was the extent of what she could undertake.

"And what about this spiritualistic business?" inquired Lord Littelbrane suspiciously. "Did your friend Jarrett start the idea?"

"Well, no, not exactly. I proposed it at first in fun, and because I did not know what on earth to do with him. And then as you might have seen—but really I hardly like to tell you."

And she turned her head away coyly, and gazed pensively at one little slippered foot.

"Yes, yes, go on," entreated her companion, whose curiosity was thoroughly aroused.

"Well, then, the young man grew shockingly familiar. I was just going to ring the bell and bid the servant show him out, when you came in. You may imagine my feelings of relief."

This was a very strange story, concocted on the spur of the moment, but stranger still, Lord Littelbrane believed it. From that instant he saw before him a beautiful and injured woman, whose natural modesty had been grossly outraged.

"Next time I meet the brute I'll punch his head," he exclaimed vindictively, knowing, however, that he would do no such thing, except by deputy.

"Oh! No, indeed, my lord, you must not be so fierce. Mr. Jarrett misconducted himself a little certainly, but then you see he is a medium, and mediums are always entitled to a certain licence."

"H'm! And pray how do you get to be a medium?"

"In a great many different ways."

"Do you think you could make me one? I should rather like to acquire a few privileges in your case."

"I don't know. I've never had the chance of ascertaining whether I could or whether I couldn't."

"Will you try, Lady De Fochsey?"

He spoke so gravely that she suspected some serious intention.

"With pleasure, my lord, provided you really wish it."

CHAPTER XXV.

LADY DE FOCHSEY CHOOSES BETWEEN HER WORLDLY AND SPIRITUAL LOVERS.

LORD LITTELBRANE had come there that day charged with a desperate purpose, and bent on fulfilling a design which he had only formed after long self-communing and inward cogitation. The presence of Mr. Jarrett—

the pose in which he had discovered him—had shaken his intention, but not wholly destroyed it. An explanation had, however, been forthcoming, which he considered satisfactory. The lady was to be pitied, not blamed, as in his haste he had imagined. A dear, pretty, little good-natured thing, who required some one stronger than herself to guide and direct her through the shoals of life. A woman who was sweet and guileless as an infant, a very child in nature, and whose faults proceeded entirely from too kindly and unworldly a disposition.

This was how he summed her up, after half an hour's conversation and after some fifty or sixty eye-glances, lip-pouts, shoulder-shrugs, and hand-touches. It takes quite an ordinary Delilah to defeat a Sampson, and Lord Littelbrane was no pillar of strength. The very seclusion in which he had lived, his reluctance to mix freely with the sex, rendered him all the more credulous and unsuspecting. Taking a wife was very much the same as taking an awkward fence out hunting. He did not like the necessity. It put him in an awful fright; still, once it became patent that the thing must be done, it was wiser to go through with a good grace.

And now he found his courage rising. She was so very sweet and gracious—nay, almost caressing.

He cleared his throat, and, with a preparatory cough, said :

"Ahem ! Lady De Fochsey, I wish to consult you on a delicate matter, but before doing so will you grant me a favour ?"

"Why, most certainly," she answered, surprised by the solemnity of his manner.

"Thank you. I thought you would. Will you give me your views on matrimony ?"

"On matrimony !" she echoed, fairly astonished at the demand.

"Yes, I should like to hear your ideas, if you have no objection to stating them."

"Do you mean my own personal experiences, Lord Littelbrane, or the opinions that I have formed in a general way ?"

"I should like both, but the former for choice.

What I want to arrive at is this : Do you, or do you not, approve of marriage, looking at it not emotionally, but merely as a philosopher ? ”

“ What a peculiar question. Of course I hold with matrimony as an institution. Women would fare even worse than they do without it.”

“ Have you fully considered the responsibilities connected with the state ? ”

“ To what responsibilities do you refer, my lord ? ”

“ At the present moment, chiefly to those incurred by parents towards their offspring.”

“ Oh ! I don’t pretend to have any experience in such matters,” she said lightly. “ You see I was lucky enough to avoid bringing a tribe of children into the world.

“ You never had any ? Not even one ? ”

“ No, never, I am thankful to say.”

“ Excuse me, Lady De Fochsey, but were you not disappointed at failing to perpetuate the family name ? ”

She burst out laughing. This cross-examination appeared to her so utterly absurd, and it had not yet dawned upon her what he was driving at.

“ Really, Lord Littelbrane,” she said, still striving to control her mirth, “ I did not consider the family name of so much importance as all that, and it would have driven Sir Jonathan simply mad to have had a squalling baby in the house.”

“ Strange,” he murmured, eyeing her critically from top to toe. “ Any one would have said that you were formed by nature to be the mother of a healthy and numerous family.”

She was not over and above pleased at the turn the conversation was taking. She told herself it was coarse—very coarse. As a charming woman she had no objection to being admired, but not as a peopler of the world.

“ Does your ladyship enjoy good health ? ” he went on, not noticing her displeasure, and still pursuing his own train of reflections with a stolid perseverance that was one of the chief attributes of his character.

“ Yes, very, thank goodness. I’ve never been ill in my life. But why this sudden interest ? ”

"Young, strong, handsome, and the owner of an admirable constitution," he exclaimed, as if speaking his thoughts aloud. "Where can I find a more suitable mate, or one more likely to furnish me with an heir? Age, looks, temper—everything is right."

"Good gracious! Lord Littelbrane. What on earth are you talking about?"

"The time has come for an explanation, Lady De Fochsey." And as he spoke, he rose from his seat and began pacing restlessly up and down the room. "It is important that I should marry and obtain a successor, otherwise the family title and estates pass into unknown hands."

"What a misfortune," she exclaimed, with an irrepressible touch of satire.

"Of all the ladies of my acquaintance," he went on boldly, warming to his subject at last, "you are the one whom I consider most fitted to assist in procuring the desired result. I am a plain-spoken man and like coming to the point at once. My age is forty-six, and I have twelve thousand a year. Will you be Lady Littelbrane?"

So saying he stopped short, and looked hard at her ladyship with his small colourless eyes.

For the second time that day she experienced a genuine movement of surprise. Lord Littelbrane's proposal, however flattering it might be to her vanity, was totally unexpected. He had not paved the way for it in the least. Moreover, this brusque style of courtship did not recommend itself to her ideas. They—as we already know—were high-flown and romantic.

Besides on this particular afternoon her soul was still steeped in the vague and exquisite rapture produced by the recent *séance*. Mystic influences intoxicated it. If he had appealed to the more lofty and spiritual side of her nature, he might have had a chance; but there was something revolting and grossly material in the notion of being invited to marry a man for the express purpose of furnishing him with a son and heir. Added to this, she had no natural love of children. The sight of a baby did not throw her into tender rhapsodies. On the

contrary, the little ugly, puckered, red-faced things only inspired her with aversion. All the affection she had to spare was already concentrated upon her darling pugs. In short, Lord Littelbrane's proposal could not possibly have been couched in more infelicitous terms. The very words "children and parental responsibilities" made her shiver. And then, he was so abominably grave. His face would have reflected credit upon an undertaker, and won him golden opinions as a hired mourner at a funeral. She dearly loved a man with a little dash and "go" about him, even if he *did* require keeping in his place every now and again. During the whole time of Mr. Jarrett's visit she had never once felt dull. But, on the other hand, Lord Littelbrane was a wealthy nobleman, and occupied a fine position. If she married him she would be able to snub all those people who had shown her the cold shoulder during her widowhood. To do so would afford infinite satisfaction. No doubt he offered many advantages from a worldly point of view. Even spiritual exaltation could not entirely shut her eyes to that fact. And then she looked at him. Looked critically and dispassionately at his little undersized figure; his bloodless face, with its covering of wizened-up skin; his sandy hair, and weak, watery eyes. He was very insignificant; in fact, downright ugly. The sort of man she disliked. Nevertheless, one short hour ago she might have taken him, and put up with his personal appearance; but at the present moment her whole being vibrated in response to the ecstatic conviction that she was deeply, desperately in love, and at last had fallen victim to the long-sought and vainly-courted passion of which she had read so much in novels, and seen so little in real life.

Already she felt like a heroine of romance. Bob's brown eyes and bright glances had penetrated her impressionable heart, and henceforth she told herself that she could never, never wed any but a medium in search of the eternal verities.

How rapturous and yet how lofty had been the sensations conjured up by that too brief *séance*. And now she was requested to sacrifice all these grand, heroic feelings—feelings which seemed to lift her into an

altogether purer atmosphere—in order to bring a young Littelbrane into the world.

Faugh! the vulgarity and the gross materialism of the proposition clashed with all her finer instincts, and even rendered her impervious to her own self-interest. The excitement of her mood was such that it repudiated the commonplace idea of getting married and having children. She rose from her seat, smoothed down the front of her dress (a habit of hers), and said:

"My lord, you do me great honour; nevertheless I cannot become Lady Littelbrane."

He was too utterly amazed to be offended. Such a reply had never entered into his calculations.

"Why not?" he asked incredulously. "Have you any reason for saying no?"

A mischievous smile played round the corners of her mouth.

"Because it is just possible I might disappoint your expectations."

He looked at her, much as he would have looked at some thoroughbred mare.

"I am inclined to think not, Lady De Fochsey."

"Well, whether I should or whether I shouldn't, I am afraid to run the risk."

"There need be none as far as you are concerned."

"What?" she exclaimed satirically. "Not when Napoleon the Great offers the honour of an alliance? Pshaw! my lord, I know what men are too well to believe you."

He was rather flattered at being compared with so famous a man. He smiled.

"I do not think you quite realize what you are refusing," he said with quiet confidence.

She made no immediate reply. Indeed, she began to think that, arrogant as they sounded, there might be some truth in his words. She had got a little nearer earth again in the last few minutes, and the extreme assurance of his manner impressed her more than she cared to admit.

"Perhaps not. It is just possible you may be right there," she said uneasily.

"However," he continued, taking up his hat and stick,

"I shall not look upon your decision as final. No doubt my proposal has come upon you as a surprise. Think it over. In a month's time I shall ask you again to be my wife, and expect then to receive a different answer."

And with this curious speech he departed, feeling very much more intent on gaining Lady De Fochsey's consent than when he had first entered the house.

Opposition lent a zest to the pursuit which had hitherto been wanting.

He was not in the least downcast, as many men similarly situated might have been. He possessed far too good an opinion of himself to believe for one moment that the lady of his choice was in earnest. His mind could not realize any woman refusing him seriously.

Being somewhat unprepared for so great an act of condescension on his part, it was quite natural that she should require a little time to get accustomed to it. This was how he construed her rejection of his suit.

As for himself—well—he did not profess to be a very ardent wooer. He was marrying from principle, and from principle alone. That was why, unlike the rest of mankind, he could look round calmly, and select a partner according to his theories of selection and maternal aptitude. But under these circumstances he was not in a hurry. He felt none of the passionate impetuosity of youth, and had no objection to wait until her ladyship had become thoroughly familiarized with the greatness and importance of her mission in life.

Of her ultimate acquiescence, he entertained no doubts whatever.

When Lord Littelbrane had gone, Lady De Fochsey sat for a long while lost in meditation. By this time her mood was no longer so exalted as it had been immediately after Robert Jarrett's departure. The phantasies of her brain were growing dimmer and vaguer.

Already an inward voice whispered uneasily that she had done a foolish thing in refusing Lord Littelbrane.

"What has a woman of your age got to do with love?" the tormentor kept on saying. "Are you not past all that folly?"

The thought made her feel quite hysterical. It was such a cruel, cruel question to emanate from one's own secret consciousness, that it set her off laughing and crying by turns.

The pugs were disturbed in their slumbers, and barked in melancholy chorus.

Thank goodness! to these dear, discreet confidantes she could confess the tumultuous passions that tore her heart in twain. Throwing herself full length on the hearthrug she embraced them fervently, almost as if they, too, had been mediums, and cried aloud:

"Oh! Doodie, Oh! Snoodie, my sweet darlings! Pity your poor mistress, for she is most dreadfully in love, and has actually refused a coronet and twelve thousand a year. My pretty ones, what do you say to that?"

Doodie and Snoodie curled their tails, blinked their eyes, and licked their black shiny lips as much as to say:

"We think our 'poor mistress' has taken leave of her senses altogether; but it don't much matter to us, as long as she will retain them sufficiently to keep up a good fire. As for love—it's all nonsense. Comfort's the thing to go in for. Food, warmth, drink, then sentiment can be dispensed with."

Unfortunately Lady De Fochsey was unable to obtain a clear insight into the sagacious minds of Doodie and Snoodie. If she had, she might have seen that materialism there reigned supreme. No gracious spirit-forms of departed pugs affected the serenity of the living.

But their mistress, as she lay with them clasped in her arms, kept on wondering what further delicious manifestations might have taken place if only Lord Littelbrane had not appeared when he did.

Her mind was a disordered chaos, in which worldly and spiritual lovers were grotesquely jumbled up, now one, now the other gaining a short-lived preponderance. Still, she had had so many of the former that on the



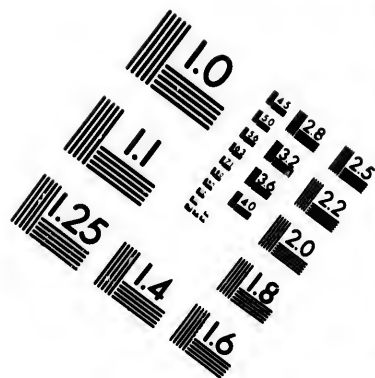
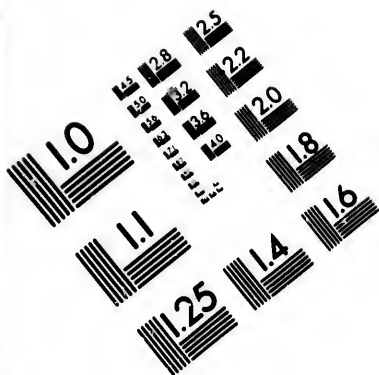
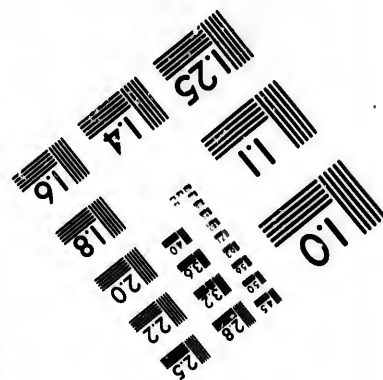
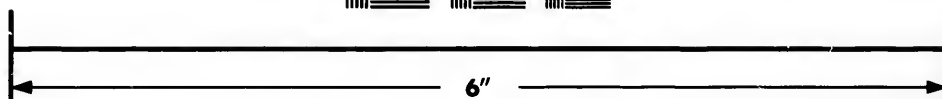
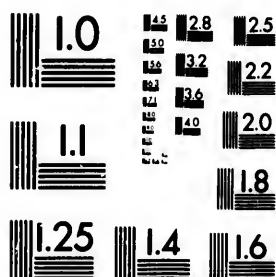


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whole she preferred the latter. A spiritual embrace was not only very exciting, but also delightfully novel. Exhausted sensation took a fresh lease of life when brought into communion with psychological converts. Spirit-wooing was so refined, so chaste, so exquisitely chivalrous.

There was nothing the least prosaic about it—not like Lord Littelbrane's love-making. His mode of courtship had been laconic and commonplace to a degree.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DIVINITY'S MOTHER.

As Bob walked in the direction of home his thoughts, curiously enough, did not dwell much on the events that had taken place during his visit to Lady De Fochsey. They rebounded from her ladyship to Dot Lankester. It was strange how all the higher longings within him, instead of responding to the advances of his spiritual affinity, were attracted in an entirely different direction. He was disgusted with the part he had more or less been forced to play, and felt as if he had behaved traitorously towards his real love.

Four whole days had now elapsed since he had seen her. He began to fear she must be ill, and wondered, although the hour was somewhat advanced, whether he could not concoct some excuse for calling at Doctor Lankester's house, and perhaps obtaining a peep of his daughter.

Thus thinking, he quickened his stride, and walked steadily on, until within about half a mile of the village. Then, all of a sudden, as he turned a sharp bend in the road, he saw no less a person than the doctor himself immediately ahead.

This was indeed a piece of good luck, for even if he failed to catch a glimpse of Dot, he was sure to hear some news of her, and learn the reason why, in spite of all his endeavours, they had not met.

He soon overtook his neighbour, who was walking at

a leisurely pace, like one enjoying the Sabbath repose, and who expressed his pleasure at their meeting.

"How do you do, Mr. Jarrett?" he said, shaking hands cordially. "I see that, like me, you have been tempted by the beauty of the afternoon to take a constitutional."

"Yes," replied Bob, "I thought a walk would do me good; but I confess to having had an object. I have been calling on Lady De Fochsey. Do you know her by any chance?"

"No, we have never met, except in the hunting field, where I have seen her occasionally, but not often. She is not one of our regular residents."

"Oh! indeed. And when do you hunt again, doctor?" inquired Bob, thinking a good opportunity had presented itself to attack the subject of Dot's accepting a mount.

"I'm not quite sure. It's very difficult for me to form plans beforehand. They are so liable to be upset at the last moment. But if I can possibly manage it I hope to get out on Wednesday."

"Let me see, where do they meet?" said Bob. "My memory is so bad that I have forgotten."

"At Pilkington Hill side, in the very best part of the whole country. That's why I'm anxious to keep the day clear if I can. We generally have a good run from there. The Pilkington foxes are nearly always a wild, straight-running lot."

And Doctor Lankester's mild face lit up with the enthusiasm of a genuine sportsman.

"Does—does Miss Lankester accompany you?" inquired Bob, a trifle confusedly.

"I hope so. She has been away from home the last few days, staying with a friend the other side of the county."

"Oh!" said Bob, trying to appear indifferent. "I thought I had not seen her about."

"That was the reason; but the child comes back on Tuesday, and I should like to arrange a treat for her if I could. You don't know what an awfully keen sports-woman Dot is, Mr. Jarrett."

"I can quite imagine it, if she takes after her father," said Bob with a smile.

"Well, I suppose these things are hereditary," admitted Doctor Lankester. "At all events, Dot inherits her love of sport from me, for her mother does not know a horse from a cow. However, the child is a true chip of the old block, and it is a pleasure to see her out hunting. She enjoys herself so thoroughly. The only thing is it makes me wish I could afford to mount her decently."

Dr. Lankester had altogether dropped his professional manner, and apparently enjoyed nothing better than talking about his daughter, of whom he was evidently as proud as he was fond.

Now was Bob's chance; he could not possibly have had a better.

"I—I wanted to ask you something," he said, blushing like a schoolgirl.

"Indeed! What is it? If I can be of any assistance to you, I shall be only too glad."

"It's a favour," said Bob, turning a shade more crimson than before.

"I'm delighted to hear it, because, in that case, the probabilities are the request is something I am in a position to grant."

"Thank you, awfully, doctor; I only want you to say yes."

His companion smiled. Bob's simplicity was a refreshing contrast to Captain Straightem's hauteur.

"You forget," he said indulgently, "that I still remain in ignorance as to your wishes."

"Well, the fact is," Bob blurted out in reply, "I have a great many more horses in my stables than I can possibly ride——"

"Then you're a very lucky man," interrupted the doctor playfully.

"Yes, but if you would only allow Do—I mean Miss Lankester, to take one whenever she wants to go hunting, it would be conferring a downright obligation upon me. There, that's what I wanted to say."

Doctor Lankester gave no immediate reply. Coming from an almost total stranger he was touched by the

kindliness of the offer. In twenty years Captain Straightem had never made a similar one.

"Well, what do you think of my idea?" asked Bob anxiously. "You won't refuse, will you?"

"Upon my word, Mr. Jarrett, I hardly know. It is awfully kind of you to suggest such a thing, but I scarcely feel justified in allowing Dot to profit by your generosity."

"It would be uncommonly nice to give her a real good mount for Wednesday," urged Bob persuasively, "especially if she knew nothing at all about it till she got to the meet."

Dr. Lankester's countenance showed that the proposition was one which recommended itself.

He was devotedly attached to his daughter, and the mere thought of giving her pleasure proved a great inducement to accept Mr. Jarrett's offer.

"I think Dot would go off her head with delight," he said. "*How* she would ride if she were really well mounted. I should like you to see her follow hounds just for once, Mr. Jarrett." And his face beamed with paternal pride.

"I hope to see Miss Lankester follow hounds not once, but many times," Bob rejoined; "and, as I said before, it will be an act of charity to keep my horses at work."

"There are not many ladies in these parts who can beat Dot across a country," went on the doctor, feeling that he had secured a sympathetic listener, and in his innocence never once suspecting Bob might have an ulterior motive. "Although I say it—who shouldn't—she *can* ride. I know no prettier sight in this world than to see Dot coming over a fence."

"She's a pretty sight anywhere," said Bob, under his breath. Then he added aloud, and in tones of perfect satisfaction, "Come, that's settled, and we need not discuss the matter any more. How do you go to covert, doctor?"

"We generally ride, provided the distance is not too great."

"In that case, if you and Miss Lankester will jog out to the meet on Wednesday, Kingfisher shall be

there in readiness, and my groom can then change the saddles."

"A thousand thanks. That will suit us capitally, and I do hope, for Dot's sake, we may have a good run, if only to give her a chance of proving herself not wholly unworthy of your kindness."

"Pray don't talk about kindness," said Bob, colouring up to the roots of his hair. "The boot is on the other leg, really."

"Ah! that's your nice way of putting it."

"Not at all. I can't tell you, doctor," and Bob's face grew suddenly grave, "how lonely I am all by myself in that great big house. I long for companionship, and if you and your family would only treat me as a friend, instead of as a stranger, you would be conferring a real benefit."

Doctor Lankester was moved by this appeal. He had conceived a great liking for the simple and straightforward young fellow, and only Bob's superior social position had prevented him from showing it more fully. Now his heart was completely won.

"We shall all appreciate having a neighbour in you," he said heartily. "And if we are to treat you unceremoniously, you must treat us the same, and, whenever you are dull or out of spirits, consider our house your home. And, as a beginning, you had better come in now and drink tea with my wife, who will thoroughly enjoy a chat. For here we are," pulling up before the identical porch beneath which Bob had stood gazing at Dot's pure profile only a few nights previously.

The young man gladly accepted this invitation. He had nothing whatever to do until dinner-time; and, in spite of Dot's absence, his curiosity prompted him to take the present opportunity of seeing her home and surroundings. They would surely speak to him of her in some form or other.

He also believed that if he could but succeed in establishing a friendship between himself and Doctor and Mrs. Lankester, it would materially assist his cause hereafter. There was nothing like having the parents on one's side to start with. Their goodwill might prove an enormous gain, and greatly facilitate all future meetings.

Mothers were proverbially kind to eligible young men who appeared to fancy their daughters, and Bob entertained every hope of enlisting Mrs. Lankester's sympathies. A quiet half-hour's confidential conversation would at least afford a chance of making a favourable impression, which he should take care to increase later on.

So he followed the doctor into a small but cheerful and cleanly-papered passage, and shortly afterwards was ushered into the presence of Dot's mother. He had looked upon her with reverence, as a being to be admired and distantly adored, in virtue of her quite too charming daughter. And she disappointed him.

Had he not been so young and so foolish he might have known that such would surely prove the case. For when does a middle-aged woman ever come up to a man's expectations? He can always find a flaw in her somewhere, if so disposed. His imagination had pictured a gentle, fragile, ethereal-looking old lady, with silvery locks, and a white Shetland shawl, and a sweet musical voice. In reality, he saw a stout, rotundly-shaped personage, with black beady eyes, rosy cheeks, and several chins, who spoke in a sharp staccato voice, and who, against his will, impressed him with an idea of vulgarity, and of belonging to a lower class than did her husband.

Mrs. Lankester was clad in a black silk dress, very shiny at the shoulder-blades. Her head was covered by a gorgeous erection of lace and bright blue ribbons, and round her fat red neck hung a long gold watch-chain. The first glimpse proclaimed her fondness for meretricious adornment. At least, so Bob decided. As for any resemblance to Dot, well, when she began to speak, it relieved him to find that there was none. They had not a single trait or feature in common. All the girl's refinement and gentility evidently came from her father. She owed none of her charms to the maternal side.

Mrs. Lankester received him most graciously; nevertheless, there was something about her which he did not like, though he would have been at a loss to define what that something was. Her exaggerated civility produced an irritating effect upon his nerves, and seemed

too great to be real. There was too much fussiness in her manner and in her effusive speeches. He preferred Doctor Lankester's homely method of offering hospitality. But that good man remained singularly quiet in the presence of his better half, of whom it was easy to see he stood in considerable awe. He soon left the room, pleading as an excuse, that he had some business to attend to, and the lady was not ill-pleased to find herself alone with her guest. The doctor always would prose on so about medicine and science, and things that nobody cared a bit about. She should extract far more from Mr. Jarrett in his absence.

Meanwhile the tea had been brought up, and she pretended to be very busy among the cups and saucers.

"Sugar?" she inquired presently, with an ingratiating smile, and holding up a lump between the tongs, and thrusting it almost under her visitor's nose.

"If you please, Mrs. Lankester."

"*And cream?*" laying an emphasis on the words, which called attention to the fact of cream and not milk being offered.

"If it is not troubling you too much," said Bob amiably.

"Oh! don't mention the trouble; it's a pleasure."

Seated *vis-à-vis* his hostess and furnished with a cup of boiling tea, which could only be drunk in spasmodic sips, and which was far more painful to the palate than comforting, Bob now, for the first time, summoned up sufficient courage to inquire after Dot.

"And so your daughter is away from home, Mrs. Lankester?" he said.

"Yes, she left early on Wednesday morning. In fact, the day after she and her father dined with you."

"Don't you miss her most dreadfully? I'm sure I should if I had such a child," said Bob, his imagination running riot.

"Oh! yes, of course," responded Mrs. Lankester, in tones which gave the lie direct to the assertion. "But then, you see, Mr. Jarrett, we poor mothers of families have got to get used to losing our offspring."

"Do you mean that they take husbands unto themselves?"

"Exactly. You've hit the right nail on the head."

"And is Miss Dot going to get married?" he asked with considerable perturbation.

"Now, now, how you do jump at conclusions, to be sure! I never implied such a thing; I merely meant to say that I suppose she will some day, when the right man turns up."

"And hasn't he turned up yet?"

"Not in my opinion. Bits of boys without a halfpenny to bless themselves with are no good whatever, and the mistake is encouraging them, as I have impressed upon Dot since her childhood."

CHAPTER XXVII.

MATERNAL TROUBLES.

Bob gave a sigh of relief at this announcement. He felt as if some deadly weight had been removed from his heart.

"She's sure to marry pretty soon," he said decidedly.

"She may or she may not," answered Mrs. Lankester, looking at him with her sharp black eyes. "I don't mind telling you that my eldest daughter made a very bad match indeed, thanks to her father's weakness in giving his consent; and I've no intention of allowing Dot to do the same, that is to say"—drawing herself up consequentially,—“if I have any voice in the matter.”

"Quite right," said Bob, highly approving of this decision, since he saw that it shut the doors to numbers of penniless candidates.

"You see, Mr. Jarrett," continued Mrs. Lankester in her most confidential manner, "poor Matilda was simply sacrificed. She fell in love with a young engineer who had only a hundred and fifty a year, and Doctor Lankester, instead of sending him to the right about, actually encouraged the marriage. With what result? There is poor dear Matilda now, at five-and-twenty, living in some frightful, unhealthy African village, from which she may never live to return, and with three little bits of children

on her hands. Can you conceive of anything more dreadful or more trying to my maternal feelings?"

"But perhaps she is happy, Mrs. Lankester. If so she would make light of enduring a few hardships for the sake of being with her husband."

"Oh! don't talk to me of her husband. Every time I hear his name mentioned it makes me mad to think what a fool Doctor Lankester was, not to send him off with a flea in his ear. But I shall take pretty good care not to let Dot throw herself away in a similar manner, however much she may be backed up by her father."

And as she spoke Mrs. Lankester's countenance assumed such an obstinate expression that Bob immediately caught himself pitying her more unworldly and tender-hearted spouse, and wondering how many Caudle lectures he had already been treated to on the subject of Matilda's *mésalliance*. But he kept his speculations secret, and said soothingly:

"I think you have no cause for alarm as regards Miss Lankester. She is sure to make a good marriage, possibly a brilliant one. But perhaps you are too ambitious."

"Oh! dear no, Mr. Jarrett. You are quite mistaken there. I would let her marry anybody who had a sufficient income."

"And what do you call a sufficient income, Mrs. Lankester? Fifteen thousand a year?"

That was precisely the amount he had inherited from his uncle.

"Two would satisfy me. But there—" breaking off short, "what's the use of talking? Young men with money and on the look out for a wife are scarce in this part of the world: and even a few hundreds are not to be picked up in a hurry."

"I thought there were any number of hunting bachelors in Stiffshire," said Bob.

"So there are. But they don't count, though lots of them are aggravatingly rich."

"Indeed! Why not?"

"Because their heads are stuffed full of nothing but horses and hounds, and they think far more of a yearling filly than they do of a young lady. I begin to despair of

Dot's finding a husband down here." And Mrs. Lankester sighed audibly.

"She must have one, of course?" said Bob, with a touch of satire lost upon his listener, whose extreme worldliness repelled him, although he could not help feeling amused by it.

"Of course. What is a young woman to do if she remains single? She's a perfect nobody, and has no position whatever. Besides, Dr. Lankester can't afford to leave either of his daughters a fortune. He's not at all a rich man, and of late years he has been far from strong."

"Never fear," said Bob confidently. "Miss Dot can do quite well without a 'dot'—no joke intended."

"Ah! that's all very fine, but seriously, Mr. Jarrett, what disturbs me so much now-a-days is the tribe of women one meets with wherever one goes. There are a great many more in existence than there are men, and things have got to such a pass in our country, that the fact of the matter is there are not enough husbands to go round. Some of the girls are bound to get left out in the cold, whether they like it or not."

"Then I should ship them off to Australia," said Bob, laughing heartily. "A batch of nice, rosy English young ladies would be immensely appreciated out in the bush."

"One can't send a girl off to a foreign country all alone," said Mrs. Lankester, receiving the suggestion quite seriously. "Besides, Dot is so young yet, that I think she should be allowed to have a chance first, though Heaven only knows how she is ever to meet anybody worth marrying down here."

Mrs. Lankester's anxiety to get rid of her daughter, and the way in which she appealed to him, tickled Bob's fancy not a little. A lady of greater refinement would have concealed her object better, and treated the whole matter more artistically. Instinct told him that in his love's mother he should find a powerful ally, who would advance his cause by every means at her disposal. And, though he might not much like the woman, this was of vast importance. It was an immense relief, too, to ascertain that practically the field lay open, and that none other had laid siege to Dot's affections.

Consequently, the more piteously Mrs. Lankester bewailed the scarcity of eligible suitors, the lighter-hearted he grew. Everything appeared satisfactory, as far as he was concerned.

"You mark my words," he said gaily, "some stranger will come pouncing down on Miss Dot when you least expect it, and carry her off before you have time to recover from your surprise."

"I hope so at any rate. But are you really in earnest, Mr. Jarrett?" looking at him with eyes which seemed to pierce his innermost thoughts.

"Yes, quite. Your daughter is much too charming to remain a spinster, even in this country, where there is such a sad insufficiency of the masculine creature."

"And you are not joking?" she said pointedly.

"You really mean what you say?"

"Of course I do; I never was more serious in my life."

"Why, Mr. Jarrett," she exclaimed playfully, "I shall begin to think you are a little bit 'gone' on Dot yourself." And an unctuous smile spread slowly over all her roseate countenance.

It was a hazardous speech, but there was a look in his face which emboldened her to make it, and made her heart beat fast with a hope that surpassed even her highest ambition.

He blushed furiously, but did not attempt to deny the insinuation.

Suddenly she leant forward and said with almost motherly solicitude:

"I hope we shall see you very often, Mr. Jarrett, although we have no fine house, or good cook, or old wines to offer as an inducement."

"I don't care two straws about such things," he said hastily.

"No? Well, then, I shall no longer feel afraid to make you heartily welcome whenever you like to come. Even a pot-luck dinner we could manage, if you are not particular."

"There never was anyone less so. You seem to forget, Mrs. Lankester, that I was not born in the purple, and have only lately inherited my fortune."

"It's a relief to find you have not inherited Captain Straightem's manners as well as his money," said the lady vindictively. "I can't abide those stuck-up, supercilious people."

"I hope you don't think me 'stuck-up'?" said Bob.

"Not a bit. That's why I like you."

"I am glad your first impressions have been favourable, Mrs. Lankester."

"La! Mr. Jarrett, I feel as if we were quite intimate already, and can almost imagine I had known you all my life. I should no more have dreamt of telling your uncle about Matilda's marriage, and my hopes for Dot, than of flying. But you are what I call a real neighbour, not a make-believe."

"I hope to prove myself one," he said.

"You have done that already; but if you wish to do so still more, you might take compassion on that poor girl of mine, every now and again when you have no better employment. She leads a dull life at best, and a little *young* society would do her all the good in the world."

He understood perfectly what she intended to convey by this petition. Her vulgarity was intense, but fortunately her wishes coincided with his own, so that he felt no difficulty in complying with the request.

Only he could not help thinking that it was very disgusting of a woman to throw her daughter at a man's head quite so plainly, simply because she knew he was well-off. For of his real character Mrs. Lankester could know positively nothing. She might have been sacrificing her offspring at the shrine of a monster, for aught she was aware.

Had he been in Dot's place he should have resented such conduct fiercely, and he fancied now that he could divine the reason of her coldness and reserve. No doubt the mother's many lectures on matrimony had revolted her pride, and caused her to assume that sternly defensive demeanour which in his heart of hearts he both admired and respected.

He told himself that he should not have liked her so well if, instead of exhibiting the same simple, child-like

nature as her father, she had taken after Mrs. Lankester.

That lady inspired him with an antipathy which he was at a loss wholly to account for. Her amiability struck him as unreal, her good humour as forced.

But he was extremely ungrateful to harbour such thoughts, whilst she sat there, smiling at him across the table and confiding all her maternal troubles, as if he had been her bosom friend and on terms of the greatest intimacy.

When at length he arose to take his leave, he was conscious that she had somehow contrived to establish a kind of secret understanding, the purport of which was much to this effect :

"You admire my daughter ; you can't hide that fact from me, try what you will. Very well. Don't be afraid. The girl has arrived at a marriageable age, and it is high time she was settled in a home of her own, and off my hands. You can make up to her as much as ever you like. I shall take care that you have every opportunity given you."

Bob naturally enough was delighted with his visit, though not perhaps equally so with his future mamma-in-law. He foresaw that the probabilities were he should like her better before than after matrimony, and caught himself wondering how she might be prevented from paying too frequent visits at the Court.

No sooner had he left the room than Mrs. Lankester popped her head out of the door and called in a sharp excited voice :

"Dr. Lankester. Come here, I want you !"

"Yes, Emma, what is it ?" he inquired, emerging from his laboratory in shirt sleeves and slippers.

"That young man is in love with Dot. You mark my words."

"What young man ?" he inquired mildly, having forgotten the very existence of his late visitor.

"What young man ? Why ! Mr. Jarrett of course, and I tell you he's awfully spooney already."

"Nonsense, Emma. You women are always taking ridiculous ideas into your heads."

"Oh ! indeed ! I take ridiculous ideas into my head,

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MATERNAL TROUBLES.

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do I? I, who am the only one who has a grain of sense in this house. Thank you, Dr. Lankester, thank you."

"Pshaw!" he muttered impatiently, threatening to withdraw. "Can't a poor young fellow even set foot inside our doors without your having designs upon him?" And he commenced a retreat.

"Don't go. I've something to say to you," his better-half exclaimed authoritatively.

"You generally have, my dear," he responded with a sigh of resignation.

"Yes, but this is something very special—something that may affect your daughter's future welfare, and secure her fortunes hereafter."

"Out with it, then. Every woman should make a point of checking all tendency towards verbosity. The sex have a natural inclination to use half-a-dozen words where one would do."

"How rude you are! But about Mr. Jarrett——"

"Well, what of him? Has he been doing or saying anything very startling?"

"You know what a terrible muddle you made in poor Matilda's case——" unheeding the demand.

"That's according to one's individual way of thinking. Matilda may not be rich, but she's very happy, and money is not everything in this world."

"It's a great deal, though. And supposing Matilda's husband were to die to-morrow, where would she be? Should not you have to keep her and the three children?" looking at him contemptuously.

This interrogation was so unanswerable that Doctor Lankester took refuge in silence. He generally said as little as possible when the partner of his bosom began an argument, knowing from bitter experience that otherwise it was apt to prove interminable.

"All I want is this," continued Mrs. Lankester. "You've had your own way with one daughter, and failed signally, let me have mine with Dot."

"I don't understand you. And God knows I don't want to have my own way in anything that is not for the child's good."

"You are very dense. Leave me to manage Mr. Jarrett, and don't attempt to interfere."

"But, Emma——"

"No, let us have no buts. You are not called upon to volunteer confessions, even if there were any to make. All I ask you to do is to hold your tongue."

"I fear there may be some deception," he said, yielding a reluctant consent.

"Deception, indeed! And pray what do you take me for, Doctor Lankester? That is a pretty word for a man to use to his own wife. It's as good as telling her that she's a downright liar."

"Emma, I do wish you would not use that word. It's unladylike in the extreme."

"Story-teller, then, though it's too absurd to be so particular, when you have just told me to my face that I am capable of playing all sorts of mean tricks."

"I'm sure I never said anything of the sort," said the poor doctor apologetically.

"You insinuated it, John. Yes, and in the most unkind and brutal fashion. And all because I asked you to maintain a discreet reserve where your own daughter is concerned. It really does not signify to me who Dot marries, not a bit; but don't lay the blame at my door if she ends by being a pauper, and has not even so much as a roof over her head after your death."

And so saying Mrs. Lankester flounced out of the room, leaving her husband in a state of wild bewilderment as to what the discussion really meant, and for what particular reason he was sternly forbidden to allude to certain innocent facts in Mr. Jarrett's presence.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MORBEY ANSTEAD MEET IN THEIR CRACK COUNTRY.

A LARGE and fashionable host assembled at Pilkington Hill-side to greet the Morbey Anstead hounds in their crack country. Every town and village within a radius of twenty miles had apparently poured forth its con-

tingent. Many arrived by train, but more reached the fixture on smart, galloping hacks, whose fore-legs seemed warranted to resist the trying influences of Macadam. About a quarter of a mile from the covert was a road where each fresh arrival congregated, and this road was literally crowded with horsemen, grooms, spectators and vehicles of every description, from a smart four-in-hand containing a batch of officers from the neighbouring town of Stiffton, to a diminutive, yellow-painted donkey cart, the owners of which were standing up on the wheels in order to obtain a more elevated point of view.

Huntsmen and hounds were evidently the chief attraction to the natives. Burnett was surrounded by a bevy of meanly-clad, good-natured foot-people, who watched his proceedings, and those of his canine tribe with intensest interest, and uttered remarks amusing from the very ignorance they displayed. Altogether the scene was a brilliant one, rendered gay to the eye by the numbers of scarlet coats and snowy leathers, which offered a pleasing contrast to their background of grey-green grass and neutral-coloured hedgerows, that stretched far away towards the horizon. A few gleams of sunshine would have rendered it still more imposing, and given warmth to the surrounding landscape; but the day was dull and still, with a quiet grey sky, and just a bite of frost in the air.

What wind there was came from the east. Though not strong it was cold in quality, and made the horses round their backs and whisk their tails in a manner not wholly agreeable to nervous riders. The Field were in a particularly cheerful and sanguine mood. Even the Mutual Adorationites were a shade less sad than usual, and not *quite* so chary of speech. By a remarkable coincidence, everybody had apparently made up his or her mind that the day was one destined to prove productive of a good run. Even Burnett seemed hopeful, and declared there was every appearance of its being a scenting morning, which statement still further increased the expectations of his followers.

Bob had taken care to arrive early. He sported "pink" for the first time, and felt very fine in his new clothes. Already he wondered at himself for ever having

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descended to elastic straps. Looking back, even Charles' ill-concealed derision appeared perfectly justifiable. His thoughts, however, were full of Dot, and he was glad not to differ from his neighbours for her sake. He would not have liked her to consider him a guy. He left home quite a quarter of an hour sooner than was necessary, because he did not desire to miss the pleasure of seeing her face when first she became aware of the fact that she was to ride Kingfisher instead of Mouse.

Consequently, he took up his station at the junction of four roads a little way removed from the crowd, whilst his pulses throbbed with feverish expectation. Meanwhile Kingfisher was safely domiciled in some farm buildings close at hand.

Fortunately for the impatient young man he had not to wait long.

Before many minutes had gone by, he recognized a certain sturdy dun cob, advancing at a brisk trot, and bearing on her back a slender, feminine figure which set his heart a-beating even whilst yet a considerable distance off.

Dr. Lankester accompanied his daughter. He was mounted on a short-legged, compact, flea-bitten grey mare, with a big body, strong quarters, and a lean head and neck, which gave her a real business-like and "varmint" appearance. In fact she looked a hunter all over; and the way she pricked her ears at sight of the hounds, champed at her bit, and quickened her stride, proclaimed a decided preference for chasing the fox rather than jogging soberly along the roads from one patient to another. Her rider appeared transformed. From a quiet, rather melancholy individual, he had changed into a vivacious and enthusiastic sportsman, who sat his horse like a centaur, and whose heart was evidently in the work.

"Hooray! Here you are!" exclaimed Bob, colouring with pleasure, and raising his hat to Dot. "How do you do, Miss Lankester? Has your father been telling you as you came along of the terrible plans we have hatched in your absence?"

The tone of his voice reassured her.

"No," she said smiling, "What plans?"

The fresh air and the sharp exercise had tinted her face like a wild rose.

"I will leave Doctor Lankester to explain ; for if you don't approve of our conspiracy, you will forgive him more readily than me."

She turned towards her father with a look of bewilderment in her clear eyes.

"Papa," she said. "What does Mr. Jarrett mean?"

"Well, Dot," he replied, "the fact is, our kind friend and neighbour has insisted upon your accepting a mount for the day. So jump off old Mouse, my girl, and we will set about changing saddles at once."

A sudden flush of pleasure rushed to her cheeks, and dyed them a vivid crimson. Bob would not have lost the sight of that involuntary expression of delight for a great deal. It sent an answering thrill of rapture running through his veins, and was all the reward he wanted. No words could have conveyed half so much.

And Dot, taken completely by surprise, did not give herself time to think. Besides, if her father had sanctioned the proceedings, it was absurd for her to entertain any scruples. Red letter days were scarce. Surely she would be a fool not to profit by one when she got the chance.

Some such thoughts flashed for a moment through her brain, and she exclaimed cordially :

"A mount for me? Oh! Mr. Jarrett, how good of you. I feel as if it were impossible to thank you enough."

But Bob had vanished. Without waiting to hear what Dot would say he had gone off in search of Kingfisher. He re-appeared however, very shortly, accompanied by a groom leading the proud animal destined to carry Miss Lankester.

She jumped lightly to the ground without further delay, and stood holding Mouse's bridle with her small, gloved hands, whilst her saddle was being transferred from the one horse to the other.

A little, slender bit of a thing she looked ; not exactly short, but very slight and girlish, and with a wonderful pair of clear, intelligent eyes, through which her whole nature seemed to shine.

So Bob thought as he gazed at her, but Dot's attention was fully engrossed by Kingfisher.

The chestnut was a real beauty, and a thorough gentleman in appearance—long, low, and symmetrical, with a blood-like head, small sensitive ears, and a neck strong, yet pliant as a piece of whalebone. He stood about fifteen-three, on good sound limbs, short from the knee downwards, whilst his sloping shoulders denoted speed and comfort to the rider, his great, long muscular thighs and well let down hocks, immense jumping capability. Dot was quite sufficiently well versed in horse-flesh to take in her hunter's good points. As for Doctor Lankester, who, like all Yorkshire men, was a heaven-born judge, he stood and looked him over with the eye of a "connoisseur," and even then found it hard to detect a fault.

"That's something like a hunter," he exclaimed approvingly. "Clean bred, yet up to weight, and as nearly perfect in shape as man could wish for. Dot," turning to his daughter with a pleased expression, "it will be your fault, my girl, if you do not show a good many of us the way to-day."

Dot gave a little, silvery laugh, which rang out musically on the still air.

"I'll do my best at any rate, father. But it takes a very first-rate performer to flourish his heels in Sugar-loaf's face."

"Aye, aye, that's so," said the doctor, playing with his mare's fine mouth. "But all the same, if I'm not very much mistaken, you'll have the legs of me to-day."

When all was in readiness, Bob, after first apologizing for his inexperience, offered to mount the girl, but her father's hands were already clasped, and she put her foot inside them with the confidence of long use. In another second she was firmly seated in the saddle, and gently taking up the reins, leant forward and patted Kingfisher's glossy neck.

"Nice old man," she said in cooing accents. "You and I must soon make friends."

As she moved off towards where the hounds were located, her slight figure, with its shapely shoulders and small, round waist sitting firm and erect, although it

yielded gracefully to every movement of her horse, Bob thought that in spite of the patched habit, and its threadbare seams, which again had attracted his notice, he had never seen a much prettier sight in his life. She was so trim and neat, and her sweet little face peeped out from under the brim of her pot hat like some bright, fresh, wholesome flower, that held its head up straight, and knew none of the sin and misery that goes on in this vale of tears.

He gave a few final directions to his groom about taking Mouse back to her own stables, and was just about to follow Doctor Lankester and his daughter, when a voice close behind said unceremoniously :

"Hulloa! Bob. How are you?"

Startled by the familiarity of the greeting, he looked round and perceived Lady De Fochsey, who in her scarlet coat and white waistcoat, reminded him somewhat of a monkey on a barrel-organ.

"Good-morning," he responded politely, trying to smother a slight feeling of annoyance at her presence, and the off-hand mode of address, which distinctly intimated that she looked upon him as her own peculiar property. "Nice day this for hunting."

"Yes, very, though I shouldn't wonder if it rained later on. By the way, would you mind piloting me? I always like knowing I have some one to rely upon, and really, Captain Springerton has taken to jumping such tremendous places, that I told him only the last time he was out, it was really impossible for me to follow him any longer."

This request placed Bob in a dilemma. He had never bargained for having to take charge of her ladyship in the field, and was rather alarmed by the proposition. To begin with, he had not the very faintest notion whether she went well to hounds or not; and moreover, on this particular day, he had promised himself the pleasure of keeping near Dot Lankester, and of seeing how Kingfisher carried his precious burden. Instinct told him, that if he acceded to his spiritual affinity's demand, it would seriously interfere with this programme. She was not a lady to brook any rival.

"Upon my word," he answered diplomatically, "I

should be only too glad to assist you in any difficulty, but I am not an experienced sportsman, and really don't pretend to know enough about hunting to undertake the delicate task of piloting a lady across country."

"Oh! never mind that, Bob, you're too modest by half. Besides, there's no occasion to go so desperately hard. Indeed I'd rather not as far as I am concerned. These tremendous big fences only scratch your face, and pull all your clothes to pieces."

"It don't much signify about my face being scratched," he rejoined ungraciously, "though of course a lady's is different. Only if hounds run, one is bound to try and be with them."

"Oh! if one turns up at the checks it does just as well. For my part, I prefer sticking to the roads—they give you so much better opportunities."

He made a wry face, but had not courage enough to ask, to what sort of opportunities she referred, though in his own mind he summed them up by a single word—flirtation.

"I give you fair warning," he said, striving to conceal his impatience at being separated from Dot, "that I am not a fit person to pilot a lady."

"But, Bob—I want to talk to you. I *must* talk to you, in fact."

"What about, Lady De Fochsey? Can't you say what you've got to say now?"

"Impossible! How can you ask such a question, especially after all that happened the other day? Is there no more magnetic sympathy between us? Has it entirely evaporated?"

"I'm sure I don't know," he responded sheepishly. "I never exactly understood what magnetic sympathy meant."

"You seemed to have a pretty good inkling of it last Sunday afternoon at any rate, but it appears to me that you have retrogressed since then."

"Yes, I am afraid I have. I am not conscious of much improvement."

"Have you made no progress whatever, Bob?"

"It seems not. At least according to your way of thinking."

"Alas! Neither have I, and it proves to me conclusively, that the latent possibilities within us cannot be developed singly, but require mutual assistance. We must repeat our experiments, and lose no time in doing so, else what powers we already possess will fade away, owing to the weakening of the electric current. Tell me, Bob," sidling up close to him, "when may I expect you? I shall take care this time, that our *séance* is not interrupted, just when we are obtaining important results."

He felt more and more embarrassed. Her eagerness was difficult to deal with.

"Really," he said, in shuffling tones that were most unusual to him, and wishing to goodness he had the moral courage to put an end to this tomfoolery once and for all, "it's almost impossible to fix any exact time."

"Are you so very, very busy?" she asked sarcastically.

He reddened. The tone of her voice brought home an uncomfortable sense of evasion.

"Well, yes, I am. The fact is, Lady De Fochsey," setting his jaw as if he were going at some impenetrable bull-finch, "I can't cultivate my 'latent possibilities' until my terrestrial affairs have been placed in some order."

"But why not combine the two? The development of your psychic force would enable you to attend to mere mundane business with far greater ability."

"I fear that it cannot be done. I am not so sanguine as you."

She turned a pair of reproachful blue eyes full upon him.

"Oh, Bob," dropping her voice almost to a whisper, "you are dreadfully unkind. I could not have believed that you would have treated me like this."

"Like what?" The rose, whose fragrance he had not been strong enough to withstand, was beginning to show thorns.

"You seem to ignore my sufferings altogether."

"We will hope that they are not very terrible," he said, trying to banter her out of her sentimental mood.

"But they are; and oh! Bob, we should not have

needed many more *séances*. Half-a-dozen or so would soon have rendered us independent of hand-joining. It is only the preliminary stages that are perhaps a little tedious, and when people are born mediums like yourself, they have certain obligations towards their fellow-creatures which it is downright wicked to ignore."

And she looked at him tearfully, for she had not foreseen this refractory spirit.

The distressed expression of her countenance produced the intended effect. Bob relented somewhat.

"Well, well," he said temporizingly, "there's time enough yet. We will wait till a frost comes, and then see what can be done in the way of spiritual and magnetic improvement."

She was going to make some reply, but at this precise moment, Lord Littelbrane, not seeing Bob, rode up to her side, and the young man profited by the opportunity to effect an immediate escape. He at once cantered off in pursuit of the Lankesters, who had joined the hounds.

Two minutes afterwards his lordship gave the signal for the proceedings of the day to commence, and, accompanied by a whole crowd of foot-people, Burnett moved off at the head of a huge procession, and trotted briskly across half-a-dozen grass fields which separated the covert from the road.

Kingfisher had not been out hunting since his late accident, and consequently was very fresh. When the good horse saw his old friends, the little beautiful, white and tan ladies in front of him, and felt the soft, elastic turf under his hoofs, he whinnied with delight, and in the exuberance of his spirits, bounded high into the air.

"You are not frightened, are you?" said Bob, a little anxiously to Dot Lankester.

Her whole face was aglow with pleasure.

"Frightened? Oh! dear no. I like it. You've no idea, Mr. Jarrett, what an exhilarating sensation it is to feel a good hunter under one when you've only been accustomed to inferior animals. I don't think I ever was on such a horse," caressing Kingfisher's silky mane, an action which provoked another playful buck, and a little ringing laugh from Dot.

"I never thought he'd play the fool like this," said Bob resentfully.

"He's only light-hearted, Mr. Jarrett, and so am I," she called out gaily in reply.

Seeing her so cool and undisturbed both in seat and in nerve, Bob began to feel reassured, especially as Doctor Lankester made as light of Kingfisher's vagaries as did his daughter, and evidently entertained no fears on her behalf.

So Bob concluded that his alarm was groundless. Nevertheless he stuck to Dot's side until the covert was reached and a general halt proclaimed. Having mounted the girl he persuaded himself easily enough into the belief that it was more or less his duty to look after her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A REGULAR "CLINKER."

AN expectant silence fell upon the hard-riding division of the field, whilst hounds were drawing the celebrated covert, known by the name of Pilkington Hill-side. Every sound made these eager Nimrods prick up their ears, and the shrill whistle of a distant train, striking suddenly on the air, was momentarily mistaken for a view halloo, and created quite a remarkable commotion, though one of short-lived duration.

Whilst less enthusiastic sportsmen stood lighting up cigars and whiling away the time in desultory conversation, the more ardent spirits threaded their way dexterously through the crowd of horses, and stationed themselves opposite a five-barred gate, at a point where they considered the fox was most likely to break covert. They stood there like sentinels, ready, however, to dart off in pursuit directly Pug made an attempt to face the open. Scarce a sound did they utter, except an occasional oath, when some fidgety animal sidled or kicked, and so caused his rider to fall back and lose a place or two, besides provoking a general feeling of irritation.

But the minutes went by, and Reynard did not show

himself, as was confidently anticipated. Not even a whimper burst from the throats of his enemies, and naught could be heard, save the steady crashing of twigs and grasses, as the hounds poked about among the thick undergrowth and thoroughly investigated every likely spot. Now and again, one would steal out into the field, and there pause to take breath, before recommencing her labours. By-and-by others might be seen gazing disconsolately around, as if to give notice that they were quite as much disappointed as their human friends and allies at the way events were shaping.

Consternation now began to spread amongst the ranks. Jaws dropped, faces looked glum. Pilkington Hill-side blank?—and blank thus early in the season. What could the owner have been about, or what excuses had he to make for so disgraceful a state of things? He was too fond of shooting by a great deal. He was not half a sportsman. He ought to have cut down some of the undergrowth. It was ridiculously thick. The best hounds in the world might not succeed in finding a fox under such conditions, &c., &c. We all know the sort of things that are said on these occasions. There must be a scapegoat, and he is nearly always the proprietor, who, poor man! nine times out ten, feels the non-discovery of Pug far more keenly than the whole field put together, and needs not their reproaches to inflict a still deeper wound on his already lacerated feelings. Presently a rumour circulated to the effect that a tribe of starlings had visited the covert at the close of the last hunting season, and foxes in consequence had refused to make a home of Pilkington Hill-side, though the owner had done his best to encourage their presence.

Even then, until the very last moment, no one would believe that Pilkington actually held no specimen of the vulpine race. But when a quarter of an hour had elapsed, melancholy confirmation was given of the fact. Burnett blew his horn, and slowly at his summons, the reluctant hounds crept out and came clustering around him with wistful yellow eyes, which seemed to say: "Don't be angry with us. It was not our fault. We did our best to find him, but he was not there."

A short consultation now took place between huntsmen

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and master. The almost unprecedented event of Pilkington not furnishing the desired article had upset their calculations. Although the chance of a find was believed to be slight, it was now determined to call upon a long, narrow osier bed, lying close by, at the foot of the hill on which the company were assembled. So the field moved on, with hopes somewhat dashed by their non-success, and by the almost certain prospect of a long jog to the next covert. Whose was the blame, they knew not, but they felt injured and aggrieved. Hounds were perhaps more reasonable than bipeds. At all events they did not despond, and were soon at work, drawing steadily and well.

Five minutes passed without result. The spirits of the company sank to zero. Such a grand scenting morning as it seemed, too, and by the afternoon all the conditions might have changed. Was there anything so unfortunate? Since Captain Straightem's death a spell of ill-luck had attended the hunt, and appeared likely to continue. So these giants of the chase bewailed themselves, like so many fretful and pampered children, who have not learnt to put up with the buffets of fate. Then, all of a sudden their whole mental attitude underwent a transformation; for from a dozen canine throats there came ringing out the deep, familiar music, which soon increased in volume, and made the echoes resound to its melodious notes. How cheering, how inspiring they were to that sad multitude! Every face beamed, the lines of every mouth relaxed in a satisfied smile. Already their anticipations proved correct, and scent was good at all events in covert. Reynard took one swift turn up and down the whole length of the osier bed, hoping by so doing to baffle his pursuers; but they were hot and keen, and left him little peace. Very shortly, finding the position untenable, he resolved to trust to his lissome limbs, and without further hesitation set his mask straight towards the open, boldly despising cowardly tactics. His long, red body, with its bushy brush could be seen stealing over the grass at a rapid rate. A hundred pairs of eyes viewed him, and half a score of manly voices simultaneously uttered a loud "Gone forrard away." If anything could have per-

suaded the fox to make haste, those shrill demoniacal yells would have done so. They alone were sufficient to strike terror to the vulpine heart, and convince its owner of the necessity of exertion.

Quick as lightning hounds dashed out of covert, and getting away close at their fox's heels, flung eagerly forwards, without once stooping to the scent. But at this juncture so critical to the interests of sport, those who ought to have known better, pressed and flurried the little ladies to such an extent, that they caused them to throw up their heads, before having had a chance of fairly settling to the line.

"Hounds, gentlemen, *please*," pleaded Burnett half angrily, half imploringly. "For goodness' sake don't ride a-top of 'em. Steady there, steady."

Momentary as was the check that ensued—indeed, hardly worthy of the name—it had its use, since it gave Reynard an advantage, of which he promptly availed himself. A little breathing room was desirable, if only to choose his route and the best mode of effecting an escape. And now the fun began in earnest. Hounds, after their brief uncertainty, raced ahead with a vigour delightful to behold. Over the huge hundred-acre field sped the pursuers, like an avalanche let loose, scattering in every direction; some making off for the roads, some for the nearest gate, and others boldly pointing their horses' heads towards an extremely high and formidable-looking stake-bound hedge, through which the flying hounds had already disappeared. It was a "snorter" at starting, as more than one good man and brave seemed to think. Horses, too, like their masters, require warming, and prefer a reasonable impediment to begin with. Fortunately there was no time to look and crane for those who would be with hounds. It was a case of harden your heart or lose your place, perhaps for the whole run.

Doctor Lankester, Dot and Bob had been fortunate in getting away well, and were riding all in a cluster, only a few lengths behind Burnett, who, in order to keep within sight of his hounds, was sending his horse along with a right good will.

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his limbs, was mad fresh, and pulled so hard that it was just as much as his rider could do to hold him. The fence was a big one, especially for the first, on an unknown horse. As they sailed down at it, it looked even bigger, the take-off side being ornamented by a very wide and deep-cut ditch, into whose depths had been stuffed sundry recently-cut twigs from the newly-plashed hedge. A stiff binder ran all along the top, as thick round as a man's wrist. He who had fashioned this formidable man-trap was evidently an adept in the art, and knew how to defy hunters as well as long-horned, broad-browed oxen. Anyhow, he could not have devised a much more efficient stopper. But Kingfisher felt so wonderfully game and eager under her that Dot never hesitated for a moment. She judged, and judged rightly, that all the gallant horse wanted was to be close up with hounds, and in a position where he could see them constantly.

Burnett rode first at the fence, but his horse got a little too near the ditch, and in consequence just toed the top-binder, which, not yielding an inch, caused him to pitch heavily on landing, though his practised and powerful rider soon recovered him. Kingfisher, wild with excitement, almost tore the reins out of Dot's hands. His proud spirit could not brook the sight of one of his own race in front of him. The girl tried her very best to steady him, but was not successful in the attempt. As the next best thing, she gave him his head entirely, resolving not to hinder if she could not help.

Oh! he had misjudged his distance. His stride was wrong! A horrible sensation of calamity made her heart stand still. He was bound to fall. Not he!

As soon as he saw that black fringe of twigs under his feet, he put in just one little step, and the next moment gave a glorious bound and landed light as a chamois on the opposite side, clearing those ugly binders by at least half a foot.

The warm blood surged back to Dot's heart in a triumphant wave, and elated all her being. She no longer mistrusted her horse, but, on the contrary, felt a wonderful confidence in him.

"Well done, Dot!" Dr. Lankester shouted out approvingly, as Sugarloaf landed within a few yards of her. "That was a nasty fence and no mistake. It is astonishing how many people have been choked off already."

His words were true, for numbers were still coasting up and down, in search of a more practicable place, letting the precious minutes slip by rather than risk their necks over so uncompromising an impediment. Even when a fox *is* found, he does not always afford unmitigated pleasure to the majority.

Meantime Bob, after seeing Dot safely over, followed her example without delay. His horse made a magnificent fly, but the rider did not adhere to his saddle quite as closely as might have been desired by an observant critic. However, the trio were now together again, and felt well pleased with their performance, especially when they noticed the very select company of which they formed a part. It had become evident that this was no day for shirking.

Hounds were gliding along the green pastures at racing pace—mute, but intent on murder—and those who would be with them must take fence after fence, exactly as it came, without losing a single second in search of the convenient gate. Even when they came to a deep-ploughed field, which stretched the girths of many a gallant steed, the scent still held good—too good some of the poor horses would have said, whose sides were panting and whose nostrils were distended, till their outline formed an acute angle, beneath which the scarlet membrane showed clearly.

"Take a pull, Dot; take a pull," shouted the doctor, as his daughter careered past him like an arrow shot from a bow. "It's very heavy going, remember."

"I would if I could, father, but I can't. He's so desperately keen, and I can't hold him," she called back in reply.

Dr. Lankester glanced at the chestnut's beautiful thoroughbred form, with its cast-iron muscles and long, sweeping stride, which covered the ground with the ease of machinery, and nodded his head reassuringly. There was not much fear of harm befalling her on such a horse,

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Dot's feather-weight seemed nothing to Kingfisher. He had been accustomed to carry close upon fourteen stone, and he simply revelled in the difference. This slight, brave girl was one after his own heart. Her delicate handling was even superior to his late master's, and did not interfere with his sensitive mouth. Could he but have given his testimony he doubtless would have agreed with the well-known authority who stated "that there wouldn't be many falls if there were no bridles." Nine times out of ten it is the men themselves who are responsible for their mishaps, since they expect an animal to jump held hard by the head—a sheer impossibility.

Creak, crack, crash! Half-a-dozen resolute riders charged the next fence in line. It proved to be a blind double into a road, and was productive of many noisy scrambles, and still noisier objurgations as horses floundered into the near or far ditches. Again Dot would have preferred to pull Kingfisher up to a trot and make him go slowly, but being more or less at his mercy she was forced to let him take it in his own fashion.

And his majesty pleased to fly the double, instead of popping on and off the bank. But he flew it in brilliant form, though he rather over-shot the mark, since neither his rider nor himself was prepared for another fence leading out of the road, over which the pack had sped with almost undiminished speed. In fact he was so taken by surprise that for the first and last time in his life he almost refused. Almost, but not quite!

For the generous blood of the Darley Arabian which flowed through his veins recoiled at such an act of cowardice, especially when hounds were running hard, as in the present instance. Quick as lightning he changed his mind, and hopped over like a stag. Tō Bob, who followed close in his wake, no sign of hesitation was visible. That brief moment of indecision remained a secret between Kingfisher and his rider, and one of which he already felt ashamed as he galloped swiftly on.

But Dot was more and more delighted with her steed, and leaning forward cooed words of soft encouragement

in his ear. So far the line had been an uncommonly stiff one, and that double into the road caused almost as much "grief" as the starting fence. Dot saw no less than five riderless horses gallop past her, and, uncharitable as it may sound, the sight increased her satisfaction, for it was impossible to help feeling that she had succeeded where others had failed; although she was fully alive to the fact that the merit of the achievement belonged almost entirely to the finished performer on which Mr. Jarrett had been good enough to mount her. Was he among the fallen? She hoped not. He deserved a better fate. No, close up galloped his good brown hunter, whilst Sugarloaf's white face was creeping along steadily but surely. Both Mr. Jarrett and her father had surmounted the difficulties of the double, and helped to swell the numbers of the little but resolute band now left with hounds. They were not many; only about a dozen as far as she could tell, and she was the only lady.

Dot's pulses throbbed with pride; this was indeed a red-letter day in her existence.

CHAPTER XXX.

"IF YOU MEAN LEAPING, DON'T LOOK LONG."

REYNARD, still finding himself hotly pursued, and beginning perhaps to feel a little beat by the pace, now bore away to the right, making for that beautiful, level grass country which spreads like a green spring-board between Worthington and Crackley.

Fences here were of a fairer character and, to experienced hunters, rendered easy by the good, sound turf that formed such admirable taking-off and landing. No need to do follow-my-leader now. With a few exceptions half-a-dozen practicable spots presented themselves in every hedge, and the leaders sailed over each successive obstacle without drawing rein. For the space of ten minutes it was more like steeplechasing than hunting. As they raced side by side horses laid back their ears,

and evidently enjoyed the emulation as much as did their masters.

To Dot, the relief of being able to stride along was immense. She could now let Kingfisher gallop, and rest her over-strained arms, the muscles of which had for some time past been quivering under the unaccustomed tension. The gallant horse stretched out his neck and snatched gaily at the bit. A real fast thing was what he revelled in, and he felt satisfied at last. With his fine blue eye fixed on the leading hounds, and turning of his own accord, to the right or to the left, exactly as he saw them bend, he maintained a forward place throughout.

Between Dot and himself a complete sympathy was by this time established. He had long since realized that she meant "going," and would neither irritate his mouth nor baffle him at his fences, and she, on her part, had discovered his pulling arose solely from keenness and extra anxiety, and that he was in all respects a most brilliant and clever hunter. The worst of it was, she could not help breaking the tenth commandment, and wishing he were her very own; for when other horses were falling to the rear, and holding out signals of exhaustion, it was such a delightful and intoxicating sensation to feel that Kingfisher could easily maintain his speed without distressing himself in the slightest degree, since whilst his companions were galloping he was only cantering.

This knowledge added still more to Dot's elation. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks were adorned by a warm flush that made them very beautiful to look at, and her small mouth opened in panting ecstasy. Oh! this was glorious. The enjoyment of a lifetime seemed compressed into these fleeting minutes. She felt a different being, transported out of her usual, quiet, humdrum self. Such a run made one believe that life was worth living, and was a rich and inestimable blessing for which people themselves were to be blamed if they did not enjoy. Danger! Who thought of danger when the blood coursed like wildfire in one's veins, and one's whole being thrilled with the rapture of the chase? How strange that same rapture was, too, when one came to

reflect upon it. All the host of horsemen and women, all the staff and retinue and expense, all the emulation, the heart-burnings, the ambition, the short-lived triumphs and long-remembered disappointments, just for a little red animal. Wherein did the attraction and fascination consist? It was a species of madness, but a madness more insidious and exciting than any known pleasure. The sense of pure animal enjoyment was so great. And yet when the day was done, when the fever had cooled and the chase over, what gain did it bring? what profit to the mind? Very little, if the answer were given truthfully. Bumps and blows and bruises to the body, and naught, or next to naught, to the brain.

Some such thoughts flashed through Dot's mind as she continued her victorious career and tried to analyze the strength and keenness of her emotions. But it was no time for introspective reflections. Another fence loomed ahead, and she promptly had to abandon them. There was a burning scent on the grass. The pace increased until it became something terrific, and the company rapidly grew more and more select. A hurried, backward view revealed a tail nearly a mile in length, and the fields were dotted with black and scarlet specks, labouring along as best they could, and riding that hardest of all hard rides—a stern chase.

Those immediately with hounds might have been counted on the fingers of one's two hands. On the left was Burnett, his horse showing unmistakable symptoms of having had enough. In his rear, a gallant cavalry officer, and a hard-riding farmer, mounted on a wonderful screw, that for several seasons past had scoffed at three and four hundred guinea hunters, with their sound limbs too good for use, and their big bodies full of thirty-three shillings a quarter oats. To the right, trying hard to maintain his pride of place, yet with the pace all the time against him, Doctor Lankester cut out the work, and continued to make a gallant struggle on his good grey mare. But her elevated tail and drooping head showed that her bolt also was nearly shot, unless an opportune check took place soon to enable her to get her wind. Sugarloaf was fast, but not a racer, and she had been asked to go at topmost speed for the last twenty

minutes; only her stout heart had kept her in the van so long. A solitary attendant followed the doctor's fortunes, a lad of sixteen or seventeen, riding a thoroughbred horse with a pedigree a yard long, who was being qualified for hunt steeplechases, and who, in spite of having embraced mother earth, was still to the fore.

The central group consisted of Bob Jarrett and a remarkably select contingent. Served by the excellence of his nag, the former had for some time past gallantly shown the way to his immediate division, which consisted only of Dot Lankester and two well-known members of the hunt. Bob was riding a young blood-hunter of very superior quality, else he could never have held his own.

But what he wanted in experience he made up for in "pluck," and Dot could not help admiring the lion-hearted manner in which on one or two occasions he led the whole field. Courage always appeals to a woman. There are few things for which she entertains a greater liking and respect. Let her once convict a man of cowardice, and she never thinks the same of him again. He may be ever so nice, in a hundred different ways, but henceforth she invariably views him with a certain amount of contempt. Bob's nerve won him golden opinions from Dot, and once or twice her smile of approbation made his heart beat fast with rising hope.

And now, this bold, stout-hearted fox, finding that as long as he kept to the grass his enemies pressed upon him closer and closer, resolved to make one last bid for his brush. He therefore tried the effect of a little dodging. No doubt he was pretty well done, and therefore hailed the close proximity of a village with thanksgiving. A few ingenious turns and twists might baffle his mortal foes even at the eleventh hour.

So he carefully wended his way through gardens and farmyards, past cottages and barns and outhouses. Yet the shelter he sought he could not find. None seemed entirely safe, not even that old, hollow tree standing in an orchard, whose roots had formed many little tortuous tunnels under the brown earth. Possibly, spades and fox terriers flashed across his mind's eye,

Nevertheless, he succeeded in embarrassing his pursuers, and in obtaining a few minutes' respite. Just five-and-forty minutes after he had left the osier-bed, hounds threw up their heads, and looking uncertainly about them, came to a sudden halt within one field of Smallborough village. Horsemen flung themselves from their panting steeds, and critically examined scratched legs and spur-marked sides, holding the bridles in their hands so as to be able to remount at any moment. But the poor nags seemed in no hurry to renew their exertions—quivering tails, heaving flanks, outstretched necks, told a sad tale of distress in the majority of cases.

Meantime, hounds were feathering about in several directions, with noses and sterns both busy. Burnett let them try to puzzle it out, but they failed to take up the line. Then, with a ringing cheer and a "huic forrard, forrard, my beauties!" he lifted them, and made a scientific cast, whilst his followers watched the proceedings without moving, and wondered how the dickens it was, that in ten good runs out of a dozen, those infernal roadsters invariably contrived to turn up just when they were *not* wanted, and did the greatest possible amount of mischief. Helter-skelter, gallop-gallop, here they come, clattering over the stony macadam at topmost speed, and with a ruthless disregard for joints and sinews. Such a noise as they made too. A regiment of soldiers would have appeared silent as mice in comparison.

Of course they headed the fox. That was a foregone conclusion, for was there ever a roadster who didn't? But to this fact the whole tribe are contemptuously indifferent. They don't go out to *hunt*, but to *gallop*. Not on the grass, mind you. Not over the spacious green fields where they could do little harm. No; they are afraid. They might come across mole-hills, or rabbit-holes, or even have to jump, an idea which makes the blood in their veins run cold. Only on the road do they feel safe from all such horrid possibilities, and therefore to the road do they cleave, like limpets to a rock. But we will give the mighty army of roadsters their due, and to do them justice, they can *talk*. Not one of the number who has not some marvellous experiences to record, and who is not supremely satisfied

with his individual performances. Perhaps it is only natural that the men who have jumped every fence as it came, without shirking, who have imperilled their limbs, if not their necks, and made acquaintance with mother earth in her hardest and most disagreeable form—namely, when she rises up and greets you between the eyes—should harbour a contemptuous hostility against the spiritless babblers who come swarming around the moment all danger is over.

But by this time Burnett had succeeded in hitting off the line of his fox. Whilst trotting down a road the hounds suddenly stopped, and one by one, creeping under a stiff, hog-backed stile, once more threw their tongues in deadly fashion, which made all the dismounted gentlemen leap to their horses' backs, tossing away just-lit cigars and half-tasted sandwiches. Perhaps they would not have been in quite such a hurry had they known what a formidable obstacle awaited them.

Their ardour had cooled a little, and few of the horses displayed much spirit. They would have preferred some extra minutes' repose, but it was not to be. In spite of the pace, Reynard had still a fair share of life left in him.

Nevertheless, that same hog-backed stile was by no means a pleasing prospect to tired-out animals still catching at their breath. Yet there was not any other egress, the fence on either side being quite seven feet high, and as thick and solid as a stone wall. The thing had to be done, but nobody liked to attempt it first. Even Burnett paused, though the exhausted condition of his horse rendered the delay not merely wise, but imperative. If only hounds would check. But, no; they stole ahead with renewed confidence, every now and again one or other of them giving tongue, and all their bristles up, as if their fox were quite close in front.

Doctor Lankester was a brave man, and, in spite of his forty odd years, had nerves of iron. His blood was up. Sugarloaf happened to be particularly good at timber, and she had in a measure regained her wind. His daughter and Mr. Jarrett were among the little anxious throng who blocked the roadway. (The roadsters had already galloped off.)

Dot knew the meaning of that keen sparkle in her father's eye, accompanied by a sudden contraction of the brow. It signified business.

"You are not going to jump it, are you, papa?" she inquired with some uneasiness.

"Yes," came the resolute reply. Then, looking round, he sang out, quoting the Australian poet, poor Adam Lindsay Gordon, for whose verses he entertained a great admiration:

"Look before you leap if you like,
But if you mean leaping, don't look long,
Or the weakest place will soon grow stiff,
And the strongest doubly strong."

"Give me a little room, there's good fellows," he wound up persuasively.

And with that he went at the stile.

A tremendous rattle. Sugarloaf hit all round, but the pair were over with a scramble. Doctor Lankester looked back to see who would follow his example. It was a very awkward leap after so long and fast a run. Still, was *nobody* coming?

Yes, there was one, and one moreover of his own kith and kin. He shuddered and closed his eyes. The girl inherited her father's spirit, but he had rather she had been less brave. He tried to call out and tell her not to come, but Dot had already started.

She set Kingfisher resolutely at the stile, and just touched him with her hunting crop.

Bob uttered an exclamation of alarm, which immediately changed to one of admiration, for the noble hunter, getting his legs well under him, bounded with the lightness and springiness of a fawn over the stiff, unyielding timber, giving a playful grunt of satisfaction as he landed. Dot patted his swelling neck enthusiastically. He was a king among hunters.

"Oh, you beauty! You are a real ripper!" she exclaimed, using a slang expression for want of any better to convey the full warmth of her sentiments.

Bob felt he should despise himself if he were outdone by a woman, but more especially by such a slight delicate-bodied little thing. Besides, he could not bear

to let her out of his sight. His love was rapidly becoming a vehement passion.

Therefore he also rode at the stile, but he went at it a little too fast, and giving his horse a job in the mouth, flurried him unnecessarily. As a consequence, Paragon caught the top bar with both knees, and executed a complete somersault, for some little time lying quite motionless where he fell.

When Bob rose from the ground he found that Dot had pulled up, and was looking commiseratingly down at him, with an air of anxious pity disquieting her sweet young face.

"Oh, Mr. Jarrett!" she cried, "are you hurt?"

"No, not a bit," he answered cheerily. "Don't wait for me; I'm all right, and hounds are still running. I shall be in at the death yet. You go on."

As he turned to put his foot in the stirrup—Paragon fortunately having stood still after his fall—Bob suddenly became aware of the fact that a pair of very blue eyes were staring at him from the road with an exceedingly scornful and outraged expression. Their owner wore a scarlet jacket, and had arrived on the scene just in time to witness Dot Lankester's bold jump and Bob's unsuccessful attempt to follow suit.

"You'd have done much better if you had taken my advice, and stuck to the roads," she called out sarcastically, and with no evidence of concern at his mishap.

"I don't think so, your ladyship, though I admit that it's all a matter of opinion."

"Who's your friend?" she rejoined, in a tone which made his blood boil.

But he ignored this interrogation altogether, and galloped off in pursuit of the hounds, who were quite a couple of fields ahead, gaining inch by inch upon the failing quarry, whose aim was now evident to those acquainted with the country.

As his last resource, poor Pug was gallantly trying to make for some earths about two miles distant from Smallborough, in whose safe depths many a hunted fox had ere now saved his brush. Would he reach them or would he not? If he did, should he find them open or closed? How his vulpine heart must have beat with

anxiety. For the answer to this question meant life or death to him.

The poor little red animal was very, very weary. His beautiful brush was all dragged and soiled, his limbs were stiff, his body damp with perspiration.

Hounds, horses, men, all were against him, and yet for the best part of an hour he had defied them with indomitable energy.

Surely he deserved his life. If foxes must pay the penalty, then let the bad ones go, and leave the good, straight-running, stout-hearted fellows for another day.

They are not so plentiful that we should slay them willingly, or rejoice when we do so. Courage, even in the much-maligned "thief of the world," merits some recognition. A good fox plays a desperate game, and if he wins, none should grudge him the victory. In any case, the pains and terrors of death have been anticipated.

"Only an animal," say some. "It does not matter whether it suffers or not."

Perhaps so; yet how know these good folk, with their narrow-minded positivism, that man differs from the brute creation as greatly as they flatter themselves? There are some very strange points of similitude; amongst others the burden of pain which every living thing has to bear, and which incontestably connects beast and biped. Life is painful, so is death, to all creatures created by God.

The hunted animal straining every nerve to escape from his tormentors, may not possess a soul, according to our sense of the word, but yet he *feels*.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RUN TO GROUND.

DOT LANKESTER for one, had no wish to see the poor fox killed. Her tender heart recoiled from any approach to cruelty, and, much as she delighted in the fun, the

movement and excitement of hunting, the final obsequies always brought a sense of depression, not wholly free from disgust. Her sympathies were invariably with the slain, not the slayers. If the chase could have been conducted without destroying life, she would have liked it even better than she did, for she never could bear to witness the tortured creature's dying struggles, or the subsequent dismemberment of his stiffened body. Well and pluckily as she rode to hounds, she was essentially feminine by nature, and had all a true woman's sympathy with and compassion for suffering in every shape or form.

Therefore it was an intense relief to her feelings when, too closely pressed to reach the earths already spoken of, Pug, to the infinite disappointment of huntsman and hounds, succeeded in gaining the shelter of an unsuspected drain, running across one corner of a large grass field. For several minutes previously the eager pack had raced him in full view of the scarcely less eager field. Horses and men alike caught the enthusiasm of their canine friends. The air rang with different cries proceeding from many throats, human and otherwise. Twice old Merrylass, always foremost in the fray, and leading by a good couple of lengths, snapped at him, and almost rolled him over. Despair lent him fresh fleetness of foot, but such supreme effort could not be maintained. It seemed any odds against the fox. Fifty seconds more, and they must have had him, when suddenly he disappeared from vision.

A dismal howl burst from his thwarted foes, as with hanging tongues and open jowls, they gathered round the small aperture through which their prey had squeezed, but which would not allow of the passage of their larger bodies. They felt themselves baffled when most they deserved success, and took the disappointment sorely to heart, as their angry and excited baying testified.

Once more horsemen dismounted, and horses opened their heated nostrils to the refreshing breeze, and stood panting, whilst the white foam on their sides and necks gradually hardened and grew stiff. Then watches were produced from waistcoat pockets and compared minutely.

After some consultation, it was agreed that this fine run, including the slight check at the commencement, and the longer one in Smallborough village, had lasted exactly one hour and a half; the first forty-five minutes at racing pace, the remainder slower, but still sufficiently fast to tax the powers of most ordinary hunters. Of the stoutness and gallantry of the fox there could be no two opinions, since Burnett was confident he was the same animal that had been viewed away from the osier-bed. Even those most murderously inclined admitted that so gallant a fellow deserved his life; but huntsmen are proverbially a bloodthirsty race, actuated by few sentiments of pity, and Burnett was no exception to the rule. His humanity was completely subordinate to the love he bore his hounds, and he could not bear to see his darlings deprived of their due. The better they had hunted, the more they merited reward. They deserved blood, and blood—if it were possible—he was determined they should have, and for himself another mask to hang up over the kennel door.

Therefore one of the whips was immediately despatched to borrow spades and a terrier. He shortly reappeared on the scene, accompanied by a small army of idle men and boys, who had gleefully sallied forth from Smallborough in order to watch the chase, and who now set to work with a will at either end of the drain, which they sought to enlarge. As is usual on such occasions, every one had either an opinion or advice to offer. After a while, the proceedings, being unattended by success, grew wearisome to a degree. No amount of digging could persuade Reynard to bolt. He altogether declined a fresh contest, preferring to endure a martyrdom of terror rather than face that row of cruel, wide-open mouths, with their hot breath and sharp white teeth.

When over half-an-hour had gone by, and some significant grumbling began to be heard amongst the best subscribers to the hunt, Burnett was at length reluctantly forced to give the fox up.

It was too soon to go home, so, though hounds and horses had had pretty well enough, Lord Littelbrane resolved to draw again; a decision which met with the approval of the majority.

When this was finally settled and people began to move off, Dot, who had been talking to some friends, rode up to Bob's side and said :

"Mr. Jarrett, I come to you for instructions."

"What about?" he replied. "I hope you do not look upon me as a mentor."

"Oh! dear, no; but as I am riding your horse I do not like to keep him out longer than you think fit. Therefore will you tell me honestly if I ought to go home?"

"And will you tell me in the same frank and candid spirit, whether you yourself are tired?"

"I? Not a bit. I mean," endeavouring to be strictly truthful, "only a very little."

"And you would like just to see what hounds do, of course. Come, Miss Lankester, confess."

"Well, yes, I should; if you don't mind about Kingfisher."

"Mind? Why should I mind? As for as I can judge he is fresher than any other horse that went through the run. He makes nothing of your weight."

"I don't think you could do the horse any harm by staying out a little longer, Dot," here interposed her father, who had overheard the above conversation. "Lord Littelbrane has given Burnett orders to draw Rapthorne, which is all on our way home, and if the hounds don't find there, they are bound to jog back in the direction of the kennels. So let's be starting. Our horses have got cold enough as it is. That tiggling-out work is always detestable."

Hounds and huntsman now made a fresh move, followed by a procession, considerably diminished since the morning, though what it wanted in quantity it made up for in quality, those who remained to test the further fortunes of the day being mostly good men and true.

Burnett let the hounds proceed at a leisurely pace. They still seemed tired after their recent exertions, and a bit down-hearted at the escape of their fox, on whom they had surely counted. Neither did the old hunters present appear to approve of this new call on their powers. After being at fever-heat their blood had got thoroughly chilled, from standing about so long in the

cold afternoon air, and many of them seemed very stiff and weary, their morning ardor having entirely evaporated.

Bob had been looking about for his second horseman, who, up till now, had failed to put in an appearance, but just as the cavalcade was jogging slowly along through Smallborough, and the public-houses were being besieged by a thirsty host for beer, or anything they could produce in the way of drink, he spied him issuing from a back yard, and immediately changed horses.

Paragon had probably sprained himself when he fell, for he was now quite lame, and Bob felt only too glad to get off his back, since nothing is more trying to the feelings of a humane man than to be forced to ride a tired and halting animal. That irregular bobbing up and down of the ears is a most unpleasant sight to tender-hearted people.

By the time Bob had scolded his groom for not having come up with the others, given him strict orders not to take Paragon out of a walk, and made friends with his fresh steed—a very handsome bay, with rather a wicked eye—he had fallen some little way in the rear of his companions. He was just emerging from the yard where he mounted, with the intention of making up lost ground, when, to his infinite discomfiture, he found himself suddenly accosted by no less a person than Lady De Fochsey. He smothered an exclamation of annoyance.

Nemesis seemed to pursue him in the shape of this woman, and he blamed himself a thousand times for ever having been such a weak fool as to give her encouragement, when he knew quite well in his own heart that she was, and always would be, absolutely indifferent to him. But he would take precious good care how he did so again. He wanted none of her specious entanglements and artificial love-making. He might, perhaps, have forgiven her for being silly, but he could not forgive her for being a bore. Oh! if Lady De Fochsey could have read his thoughts!

But her ladyship also nourished a grievance, and felt she had a crow to pluck with her quondam friend. He had been singularly inattentive throughout the day, and being both piqued and indignant, she wanted to know the

reason why her spiritual affinity had not responded more readily to the advances graciously made him. Were they of too delicate and impalpable a nature? She could hardly believe it.

Though caring for hunting more on account of the society than the sport, Lady De Fochsey went fairly well at times, especially when she wished to impress an admirer with her powers of equitation. She had been quite ready to do this in Bob's case, had he but given her a chance and displayed just a little consideration; but that stake-bound fence was a size too big, and choked her off at starting. As well as she could, she had sedulously striven to keep an eye upon the young man, but her jealousy had not been fully aroused until she witnessed his attempt to follow Dot Lankester out of the road and over the stile. Having scuttled round by a gate, and the concluding portion of the run being over a comparatively easy country, she had ridden the line after a fashion.

True, forty or fifty people going first, contrived to divest the fences of much of their stiffness, but still her ladyship was near enough to hounds to be able to see what the leaders were about. And each time she looked she saw her medium—her affinity—her precious psychological educator, riding with that little, insignificant snip of a girl on the chestnut horse.

Who could this young person be? She—Lady De Fochsey—had not the slightest knowledge of her, had never even noticed her out hunting before, though of course had it not been for Mr. Jarrett's absurd conduct, there was no reason why she should.

The young person—it pleased her to designate her enemy thus—evidently moved in a humble social sphere. She was a nobody. Why? Oh! because of her "get up." The tail of Dot's habit-body (Lady De Fochsey never had an opportunity of seeing the front) was cut in a fashion quite four years old, and moreover it was ornamented by four buttons below the waist instead of two; a thing which, in the eyes of a lady who wore "pink," stamped the owner at once. Every woman in society knew that four buttons had gone out ever so long ago, indeed that they had never met with approval amongst the *élite*. Dot's habit proclaimed her insignificance.

All the same, Lady De Fochsey scented a rival, and was agitated by the mere suspicion of Mr. Jarrett's proving indifferent to her own charms. It would be beyond a joke if, when for the first and last time in her life she had fallen desperately in love with a man, because she recognized in him certain lofty attributes which harmonized with her own nature, that man were to have the audacity and the inconceivable bad taste to get up a flirtation with another woman right under her very nose. The thing must be inquired into, and immediately.

"Well! Mr. Jarrett," she exclaimed with forced amiability. "I have hardly had a word with you to-day."

He bowed. "No, your ladyship. Hounds have kept us otherwise employed."

"Ah! those hounds. I don't know whether to feel angry with them or not. But, no matter. Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Exceedingly, up to the present moment."

"You have friends staying with you, have you not?" she inquired, as they trotted on at a brisk pace.

"Oh, dear, no," he answered, thrown off his guard. "What made you think so?"

"Isn't the beautiful being staying at Starightem with whom you have been riding about all day long, to the total exclusion of your other acquaintances?" She could not help infusing a little vinegar into the interrogation.

"I have hardly any acquaintances except yourself, and really," reddening to the roots of his hair, "I do not know whom you mean by the 'beautiful being.'"

"Oh! nonsense, don't pretend to be so innocent. You know quite well that I'm talking about that little dowdy girl, in the funny old-fashioned habit, which looks as if it belonged to some antediluvian period."

Bob bit his lips, but made no reply. To tell the truth, he was too much annoyed to speak, unless absolutely obliged. But his companion left him no peace.

"Who is she?" she persisted, bent on satisfying her curiosity.

"She is, what every woman is not," he rejoined shortly, "a lady."

It was her turn to colour now. The words might have meant nothing, but she did not exactly like them, especially coming from him.

"Oh! of course," she retaliated, with a toss of her head. "One takes that for granted, but even if she is a lady, I suppose so remarkable a fact, and one I should never have guessed without being told, does not prevent her from having a name."

"No, naturally it does not."

"Well? dear me, how tiresome you are, what is it?"

"Lankester," said Bob with extreme reluctance, wishing he might sink into the earth, or she might sink into the earth, so as to put an end to this odious and embarrassing cross-examination.

"What!" exclaimed Lady De Fochsey sneeringly. "The wife of the little doctor who rides so hard, and who, now I come to think of it, lives in your village?"

"No, not the wife, the daughter."

"The daughter. But, my dear Bob, that's ever so much worse."

"I really can't see why," he retorted, beginning to lose his temper.

"Can't you?" A flirtation with a married woman in so humble a sphere may be ridiculous, but it is not likely to have any serious consequences."

"I don't know what you mean by 'serious consequences,'" he said angrily.

She lifted up her head and looked him straight in the face.

"Bob," she said impressively, "I think you know me well enough by this time to be aware how thoroughly I have your interest at heart."

"I'm sure you are very good," he mumbled sheepishly, not knowing exactly what to say in return.

"Not at all, but I intend to presume upon our friendship to give you some sensible advice, which I hope you will take in the same spirit as it is meant."

"Thanks, you are awfully kind, Lady De Fochsey; but really, I'm not particularly fond of advice."

"Never mind, it's for your good."

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CHAPTER XXXII.

BOB AND HIS KINDRED SPIRIT FALL OUT.

"ADVICE generally is for one's good, in the opinion of the giver, though not always in that of the recipient," he said plaintively.

"Now, look here, Bob, if you don't look out, you'll end by making a fool of yourself."

"Thank you, Lady De Fochsey. Is that what you wanted to say?"

"Partly, but not entirely; I wish to bring the fact home to your mind. You have evidently taken some sort of silly, boyish fancy to this young person whose name is Lankester——"

"Miss Lankester," he interrupted sternly.

"Well, Miss Lankester, if you like it better," she resumed, a little frightened by his tone; "we need not quarrel about a mere matter of nomenclature. But what I intended to say was this: It won't do," looking at him fixedly; "you'll have to give it up."

If she had been a man, he could have struck her. As it was, he made a powerful effort, and curbed his wrath sufficiently to say with what was meant for biting sarcasm:

"I'm much obliged to your ladyship, and if all advice were like yours its frankness would atone for its singularity. But allow me to state that it is quite uncalled for."

"Bob, Bob, don't be so foolish and stiff-necked."

"I may be foolish, but I am not stiff-necked."

"Yes, you are—both. You are falling into a regular trap, and wilfully shutting your eyes to facts."

"*Trap* is a very strong word to employ."

"It may be, but it's the only one that correctly expresses the state of affairs. Those people are making a most shameful set at you, especially the girl—little, impudent minx!"

"No such thing," he said indignantly. "You are very much mistaken there."

Her ladyship gave a superior smile, which seemed to say, "Tut, it's absurd to deny the truth. You can't deceive me; I'm far too sharp." Then she said with ever increasing animation:

"The fact of the matter is, Bob, you are new to English life, and don't understand all the petty plotting and scheming that goes on in our country villages to secure a rich young man with twelve or fifteen thousand a year, for a husband. No doubt it would be a very excellent thing for Miss Lankester, the doctor's daughter, to become Mrs. Robert Jarrett, and mistress of Straightem Court. But looking upon it impartially, would it be quite so excellent a thing for Mr. Robert Jarrett? There can be but one answer to that question. Certainly not. Mr. Jarrett would lose by the connection, and do himself an infinity of harm. This is a very fastidious neighbourhood. Fortune has placed you in an elevated position, but if you wish not to disgrace that position, and to get on in the county, you must marry some one of birth, belonging to your own station, instead of the first little nobody who happens to take your fancy. Bob, dear Bob," laying her hand on his horse's mane for a second, and looking coaxingly up into his face, "I don't think you ought to have much difficulty in finding a suitable person, if you are really and truly desirous of getting married."

He was by no means a vain man, yet as he bashfully turned away his head, so as to avoid her winning glances, he could not prevent certain embarrassing thoughts from flashing across his brain. If he were not very prudent in his conduct, this woman was quite capable of getting him into a most horrible mess almost before he knew what he was about; she was so artful, so insinuating, so—so *snake-like*. He was fiercely vexed, too, at having his secret dragged to light and dissected in this ruthless manner. Had he been sure of Dot's sentiments, it might not have mattered so much, but as things were, it was insufferable hearing his affairs discussed.

"I don't care twopence whether I get on in the county or not," he said irritably. "And as for getting married—surely one may speak to a girl without being immediately accused of making love to her."

"I said that this Miss Lankester was making love to you."

"Then, Lady De Fochsey, you said what was not true, and I must ask you not to repeat the remark."

"Hoity, toity! What a temper we've got, to be sure. It strikes me the 'beautiful being' has played her cards uncommonly well, to have produced so great an impression in such a short space of time."

Lady De Fochsey was aware of the fact that in letting her jealousy get the better of her prudence, she was only losing ground, but she could not help herself. She was too angry and too mortified to be wise.

"You don't seem to understand," said Bob, trying to allay his companion's suspicions, "that it is but natural I should feel gratefully inclined towards the only people who have shown me any civility since I set foot in Stiffshire."

Here was an opening of which she promptly took avail.

"Oh! Bob! how can you say such a thing? Have not I shown you civility, and—and——" lowering her voice to a caressing whisper—"would not I show you ever so much more, if only you would let me? It is you who are stand-off, not me."

"There's a great difference between being stand-off and being too gushing," he replied with downright brutality, feeling that this must be put a stop to at once if he would retain his liberty of action.

The remark incensed her beyond measure, proving as it did, that she had completely failed to produce any permanent impression.

"I suppose you mean to imply that I am too gushing, because I was foolish enough to think you a kindred spirit. Let me assure you, I have quite recovered from the delusion." And she drew herself up and looked at him with flashing eyes; for this last observation of his had offended her past forgiveness.

"Indeed, Lady De Fochsey, I had no intention of hurting your feelings."

"Pooh! my feelings" (hysterically). "What do you care for them? Go to your doctor's daughter, since you have the bad taste to prefer her to me. I shall rise high

in the astral plane, but you—you will sink, dragged down by your low connections, and in all probability reappear in some future existence as a donkey or an ape. That will be your fate, and one most richly deserved, for you possessed possibilities of ennoblement, and refused to develop them; opportunities of psychic culture were given you, but your base, sensual, material nature triumphed over the diviner elements, and you proved yourself unworthy. Good-bye, Mr. Jarrett; I have done with you forever. Some day, when my free and emancipated spirit is soaring in waves of ether, yours will be prisoned in a low, bestial form, degraded and debased by your own fault, and by your wilful insensibility to elevating influences."

And so saying, the outraged and "charming" woman rode swiftly away, leaving her companion in a state of utter bewilderment. What had he done to provoke her wrath? Again and again he tried to assign a reason. He could not believe that jealousy alone was responsible for such extraordinary behaviour, and finally fell back upon the conclusion that most decidedly she had a bee in her bonnet. Well! he had got rid of her at any rate, which was something, though he was sorry an actual rupture should have taken place. Still he scarcely blamed himself. Her ladyship's conduct from first to last had been eccentric, embarrassing and impossible. Was it his fault that he could not respond to her advances, or profess a belief in all the spiritualistic shams she employed, as a cloak to sanctify her flirtations? He hardly thought so. Anyhow a good hunting run of three quarters of an hour soon caused him to dismiss the matter from his mind—at least temporarily.

When the chase was over, and the Lankestes turned their horses' heads towards home, he immediately followed suit. He was beginning to feel almost like one of the family, and the day's sport had done a great deal to consolidate friendship on either side.

In Doctor Lankester's presence, the conversation could not assume a very personal character and almost as if she were conscious of this fact, Dot chatted away with unusual freedom and gaiety.

"Are you coming to our Hunt steeplechases Mr.

Jarrett?" she inquired, after every incident of the two runs had been fully discussed with retrospective satisfaction.

"What races?" he asked, making the question an excuse to sidle close up to Kingfisher.

"The Morbey-Anstead meeting. It comes off at the end of next week."

"This is the first I've heard of it. You see how remiss I am in the county news. Are you going by any chance?" glancing shyly at her.

"I haven't an idea. It depends so much upon papa. But I should like to go immensely."

Bob made no immediate reply. He was maturing a most delightful plan which, at her words, seized strong hold of his imagination, and opened out fresh opportunities of meeting.

"Look here, doctor," he said after a bit, "you and your daughter and Mrs. Lankester had much better come to these races with me. It's no use going in separate traps when we live so close to one another. There's a big old omnibus in my coach-house, which would be just the thing for a day's outing, and of course I'll provide lunch, drink and all the rest of it. Eh! what do you say to the proposition?"

"An excellent one, as far as the Lankester family are concerned," replied the doctor heartily, who by this time had conceived a wonderful fancy for Bob, and accepted this offer of hospitality without any feelings of false pride.

"I think I can answer for Dot, and as for myself, next to a day's hunting, there's nothing I like more than a day's steeplechasing, if only I can leave my patients."

"That's settled, then," said Bob. "Miss Dot," turning to the girl, "I count upon you not to forget the arrangement, or to throw me over at the last moment."

"Very well, Mr. Jarrett," she replied, thinking how kind and good-natured he was. "I shall endeavour to prove that your confidence is not misplaced. But you will spoil us if you go on at this rate."

They continued their homeward journey until the red-brick houses of Straightem village peered through the misty twilight. The moment had come to part. Bob reluctantly held out his hand. The doctor wrung it

warmly. His wife's statement was quite forgotten, therefore he could behave naturally.

"Good-bye, Jarrett," he exclaimed. "I am sorry this pleasant day has come to an end."

"And so am I," rejoined Bob; "but I hope we shall spend many similar ones in each other's company. Good-bye, Miss Dot," with the blood surging to his cheek. "Have you also enjoyed yourself?"

"Immensely," she replied enthusiastically. Then, feeling that she could not let him go without expressing her gratitude in more orthodox form, she added in tones full of genuine emotion:

"I shall look to to-day all my life, and I only wish, Mr. Jarrett, that I could thank you properly for your kindness, but that is impossible; nevertheless, believe me, I appreciate it none the less."

"Tut! Don't make me feel uncomfortable by exalting an ordinary act of friendship into one of generosity. And look here, Miss Dot, now that you have made Kingfisher's acquaintance, and he has proved himself worthy of the honour of carrying you to hounds, I want you to take him whenever you like. From this moment consider him yours, to do exactly what you please with; I shan't ride him this winter."

"Oh! but, Mr. Jarrett, indeed you must. Why! he is your best horse."

"All the more reason for you to have him. He will stand in my stables, because he is used to them, and I have promised old Matthews never to part with him actually; but whenever you want to go hunting, even if your father cannot come, just send me word and Kingfisher shall be ready."

As she looked at Bob's honest face, and with a pang of pain noted the admiration shining from his eyes, the tears insensibly welled up into her own. She was deeply touched—more even than she liked to let him see.

"Mr. Jarrett," she said, in an undertone not meant even for her father's ears, "you are too good. Don't think me ungrateful, but, indeed—indeed—I cannot ride Kingfisher any more."

"Why not?" he asked in surprise. "Don't you like him?"

"Oh! yes. It's not that. He's simply perfection. But—but—" growing more and more confused.

"What is it, then? You need not be afraid to tell me, surely."

"There--there is a reason," she said, turning as red as a rose, "but I can't mention it just now. Some day perhaps you shall know." And with this she was gone.

He smiled. A feeling of exultation took possession of him. He thought he understood the workings of her mind. She was proud, and did not like placing herself under an obligation. He approved of her independent spirit. In her place, he told himself, he should have acted the same. After Lady De Fochsey's insinuations, had she appeared the least eager to attract, or anxious to get what she could out of him, then his respect and his admiration would have received a blow. As it was, he believed in her thoroughly. With that face, and those eyes, she could not be anything but pure and innocent. Evidently, she did not realize as yet how much in earnest he was. That was quite clear.

But it would be very, very pleasing to his feelings, teaching her gradually, and from day to day, to rely upon him, to look up to him as her natural stay and support, until at last she fully understood that all he had in the world, himself, his house, his horses, his fortune, were hers, to do exactly what she liked with.

Since Mrs. Lankester had as good as told him there were no other candidates in the field, he had begun to think that in time he could persuade Dot, dear, darling, plucky little Dot, to care for him as he cared for her. Only he must not attempt to hurry her. He had seen the mistake of being too precipitate. And so he went home, and sat thinking of his love all the evening, recalling her looks and words, and counting the days till the Morbey-Anstead steeplechases.

That had been a happy thought of his, taking the Lankesters; for even if the doctor could not get away from his professional duties he felt pretty sure he might count on Mrs. Lankester. And for Dot's sake he would have put up with half-a-dozen stout, elderly mothers, and paid them assiduous attention, however much they repelled him secretly.

By which it will be seen how hopelessly in love he was, and how far this earthly passion had separated him from his spiritual affinity in the shape of Lady De Fochsey.

The fair widow revenged herself by riding home with Lord Littelbrane, and gauging that nobleman's psychological aptitudes, as a consolation for previous disappointments.

But though she applied various test conditions, she failed to discover that he possessed any mediumistic qualities. Not only was his lordship *not* magnetic, but worse still, during a seven mile ride, which presented numberless openings, he proved himself to be slow, wanting in dash, and insufferably commonplace.

As for his theories and prosy platitudes, she was sick to death of them already.

But for all that, she thought it would prove a splendid punishment for Mr. Jarrett if she became Lady Littelbrane, and ignored his existence ever after.

Her ideas were not exactly high, in spite of dear Monsieur Adolphe's tuition.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A FASHIONABLE STEEPLECHASE MEETING.

THE Morbey-Anstead steeplechases had for many years past been held on a level piece of ground, the property of Lord Littelbrane, situated only about three miles distant from the town of Stiffton, and known by the name of Stiffton Flats. It was intersected by a running stream which meandered through rich, grassy meadows, and during wet weather it frequently overflowed its banks. This brook, slightly widened, and its take-off side guarded by an artificial fence, had to be jumped twice by those horses that took part in the races.

Looked at from the point of view of a pedestrian, the course was a very fair one. From first to last it did not present a single obstacle such as might not be jumped with hounds every time they ran hard. It was nearly all grass, and beautifully level, save for a slight ascent at the

finish. Yet those who knew Stiffton Flats well, and were in the habit of riding over them year after year, were unanimous in the opinion that more horses came to grief there, or else failed to get round the course, than at almost any other hunt meeting in the kingdom.

Neither was the reason far to find.

Had the Morbey Anstead steeplechases come off in the spring, or during a period of drought, no country could possibly have been more delightful. But who can count on a cessation of rain during the months of November and December? It required only a comparatively small amount of moisture to render those flat, low-lying pastures extending on either side of Skelton brook sticky and holding beyond conception. After a few fresh showers the water was wont to lie about in pools in the furrows, where it was no uncommon thing for it to remain the greater part of the winter.

Horses and riders knew from bitter experience the detaining properties of that stiff clay soil; but to the uninitiated all seemed fair, flat and green. Sportsmen from afar laughed at the fences, and declared emphatically that they would not mind a bit riding over them themselves; but they generally altered their tone before the day was over, and they saw how much "grief" was caused by these same innocent-looking obstacles, more especially after the first two miles were left behind.

Amateur jockeys, busy galloping and preparing their horses, had prayed for fine weather for days past; but as usual it had been a week of "depressions." Driving rain and boisterous winds came sweeping across the Atlantic, until at last the heavy weights, looking in despair at the sodden state of the ground, prophesied with melancholy prescience that they might just as well keep their horses in their stable, instead of exposing them to ignominious defeat.

But however bad the weather, not to be present at the county steeplechases was a departure from Morbey-Anstead manners and customs, of which no one dreamt seriously for a second.

In truth, this long-established meeting was a most popular one with all classes of society. Invariably fixed to take place on a non-hunting day, it was patronized

not only by the mutual Adorationites, but also by the Quornites, the Cottesmore and the Belvoir, and even by followers of the more distant Pytchley, Atherstone, and North Warwickshire hunts.

It was, in short, a social gathering of hunting people, who assembled from all parts of the midland counties. Fashionable Melton was well represented, and sent forth numerous well-known members of the aristocracy, including a foreign prince, an English duke and a whole host of minor celebrities. From every country house within a radius of many miles there issued beautiful women, big of bust and small of waist (by the way, how is the combination produced so frequently on horseback?) clad in the tightest of Hühne and Busvine habits, the smartest and most fanciful of vests, and the most diversified and eccentric of hats. Some went in for low crowns, some high—very high, and with a perfectly marvellous nap. Some wore wide brims, some narrow, but *when stylish*, they were nearly always a few sizes too small for the owner's head, and were jauntily perched a-top of a lovely blonde or dark fringe, as the case might be, and then kept on by a cleverly pinned veil whose black spots lent lustre to the complexion, making soft cheeks softer and large eyes larger.

Amongst these fair equestriennes, however, could be seen specimens of a totally different type of sportswoman, though it must be owned that they were in the minority. The strong-minded ladies who hunted their five or six days a week as regularly as men, were evidently indifferent to appearances. They could be distinguished by rusty skirts that had already done much service, by loosely-flapping covert coats, opening in front over a horse-cloth or bird's-eye waisicoat, by worsted gloves, old roomy boots, tightly-plaited hair (no fringes) and pot hats.

They went in exclusively for comfort, not fashion or show; and if the day turned out wet proved their sense; but on the other hand, if Phœbus shone out and condescended to light up the scene with his bright rays, then it must be confessed that they did not appear to advantage beside their smarter and nattier sisters. As for the lords of creation they displayed so many marvellous checks, that one wondered at the ingenuity of the human brain

to produce such astonishing combinations. Tall men wore little checks, and small men wore big ones—the biggest they could find—and strutted about like bantam cocks, trying, since nature had been unkind, to make themselves remarkable by the clothes on their back. And they certainly succeeded, looking like miniature chess-boards, in their Scotch tweeds and heather mixtures. But as long as the *genus homo* was pleased with number one, it did not much signify, and certainly could not affect the cynical critic.

Now, amongst other institutions, fashion—that powerful yet insipid goddess—had elected that at the Morbey-Anstead steeplechases it was “the thing” to ride, not drive. Consequently very few vehicles were to be seen in comparison with other race-meetings.

Not more than a dozen filled the stewards’ inclosure as a rule, and the majority of these were occupied by elderly ladies, whose riding days and figures were both gone, and who amused themselves by watching through their field-glasses, who was the strange young man riding with dear Anna Maria or sweet Susan Jane.

By the younger members of the community, both male and female, it was considered “chalk” to drive, though if questioned as to the reason, it is open to doubt if anybody could have given one. As far as seeing the races themselves went, those occupying elevated box seats possessed a decided advantage over their equestrian brethren.

In the one case, you could sit comfortably with a rug round your legs, your card in your left hand, and your field-glass in your right, and take uninterrupted stock of the company and the proceedings in general. But in the other, you first had to contend with a fidgety horse—why is even the quietest animal ever foaled fractious on such occasions?—then gallop madly down to the water-jump, by which you lost the start, then as madly back to the winning-post, where you arrived just too late to see the finish, and had not an idea how the race had been run, or what had won, until you asked your neighbour, and he asked somebody else, who in turn appealed to a third party, when eventually the desired information might or might not be obtained.

Then you clapped each other on the back—figuratively speaking, of course ; it would have been vulgar to do so in reality—and exclaimed, “Ha ha, capital race, capital finish. There’s no doubt that riding is the only way to enjoy a steeplechase. That’s the beauty of this meeting. You see such a lot.”

As a matter of fact, whether you did, or whether you didn’t, signified very little, when once fashion had dictated that you were to prance about the course on high-mettled hacks and display your figure and your equestration to the public at large. It was “the thing.” What need to analyze whether you were comfortable or uncomfortable, at your ease or the reverse? There are no such willing slaves as English people, nor any other race with such sheep-like propensities. If one bondsman bends his neck to the yoke, then they all must needs do the same.

It is possible that had Bob been thoroughly acquainted with Stiffton Flat habits, he too would have yielded his independence and ridden instead of driven to the races. But being new to the mother country’s ways he ordered out his deceased uncle’s big, roomy omnibus, piled the roof up with brown, straw-lined hampers containing good things to eat and to drink, seated himself inside and drove off to fetch the Lankesters, without having the least suspicion how greatly he was violating Morbey-Anstead manners and customs.

It had several times occurred to our hero that if only Doctor Lankester would walk about the course when they arrived, which with his sporting tastes he was sure to do, and if only the old lady would elect to remain within the four sheltering walls of the omnibus, that then he and Dot might occupy the box-seat and have an uncommonly good time of it. This was how the artful fellow reasoned.

Just as he started the sun shone out, and caused patches of clear blue sky to break up the heavy masses of dark grey cloud that almost filled the heavens ; but in spite of its cheering influence, he did not feel thoroughly happy until he had made quite sure of his guests, and Dot, looking very pretty and pleasant, was seated by his side, whilst Doctor and Mrs. Lancaster occupied the seat opposite.

The latter lady was magnificently and carefully attired for the occasion. She wore a purple silk dress, a Paisley shawl, and a bonnet which would have put many a garden to shame, so crowded was it with gay and many coloured flowers, mounted on green india-rubber stalks, which kept bobbing about with each movement of the wearer's head. Every time she looked at Bob and Lot she smiled encouragingly at them, and in a way which, to the girl at least, was peculiarly irritating.

She was terrified lest Mr. Jarrett should discover the meaning of those bland nods and maternal grimaces, which seemed to her quite shamefully apparent.

So they drove on, along the country roads, past villages and homesteads, and through the flourishing little town of Stiffton, with its tortuous, old-fashioned streets, well-to-do inns, prospering shops, and venerable church, up whose grey walls the ivy clung, and whose square tower formed a landmark for miles around. A clean, bustling little town, full of life and animation on this particular morning, as flies rattled past from the railway station, and huge open conveyances offered to deposit pedestrians on the course for the modest sum of fourpence a head. Before the hotels paced ready-saddled horses, waiting for their riders to appear, and behind each curtained window peeped out the innocent faces of little children, and the more curious ones of their mothers or nurses.

Such was Stiffton. As good a specimen as you could meet with of a thriving hunting town. Such sleek, fat tradesmen, and such innumerable villas nestling on every height, told a tale of prosperity, rare in this our nineteenth century.

When Bob's omnibus neared the entry to the race-course, a little delay occurred, owing to his not being possessed of an inclosure ticket. To tell the truth, he had never given the matter a thought.

But Mrs. Lankester was quite put out at the discovery. She had set her heart on being among what she styled "the nobs."

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Jarrett, that you actually have not got a ticket?" she asked, with considerable asperity, too bad an actress to conceal her displeasure.

"No," he replied, "I am sorry to say I have not."

"Why on earth did you not ask for one?"

"For the very simple reason, Mrs. Lankester, that I did not know who to ask. Besides," throwing back his head with an independent gesture, "I hate begging for favours."

"Quite right," murmured Dot sympathetically.

"Pooh! Where's the favour?" responded Mrs. Lankester in a louder key. "In your position you have a *right* to a steward's ticket. Captain Straightem always had one, that I know for a fact."

"Very probably, but then he was a resident in the county, whereas I am a new comer, and moreover have had nothing to do with the races."

"You'd better let us in," said Mrs. Lankester persuasively, trying the effect of an appeal to the man at the gate. "This is Mr. Jarrett—Captain Straightem's nephew. Nobody will say anything, I'm sure."

Anxious to conciliate as far as lay in his power, the man appealed to Lord Littelbrane, who at this juncture appeared on the scene, accompanied by General Prosieboy and another Mutual Adorationite, one Captain Greenby, by name.

Before Bob could prevent him, he went up to the noble proprietor of the course, doubtless thinking to curry favour with both parties.

"Beg pardon, my lord," he said, touching his hat respectfully, "but will you kindly furnish me with instructions? I am at a loss how to act."

"What about, Parkins?" returned his lordship in surprise. "You have your orders."

"Yes, my lord, but I fear there has been some mistake. It appears that Mr. Jarrett, of Straightem Court, has not been provided with an inclosure ticket."

"Well, what of that? Why the dickens should he be?"

"Am I to let him in, or not?"

"No, certainly not," thundered his lordship in reply. "I'm surprised at you, Parkins. I should have thought after all these years you would have known your business better than to come to me with such a demand. The King of England himself should not go inside our county inclosure without a ticket."

Whereupon he gave his horse an angry touch of the heel, and moved on.

"The idea!" he exclaimed, turning indignantly to his companions, "of having that low fellow in among us. Why, it's enough to put one off one's food altogether."

General Prosieboy and Captain Greenby both assented, though the former mumbled vaguely that he wondered where the deuce they were going to get luncheon, and wished inwardly that Lord Littelbrane had had the sense to follow Mr. Jarrett's example, and bring plenty of supplies in a comfortable shut-up-trap, rather than depend upon the hospitality of his neighbours, which might or might not be forthcoming at the requisite moment. Meals ought not to be trifled with in General Prosieboy's estimation. They were important things, and if you were docked of one, it was a serious loss. Had he been quite sure where and with whom he was going to lunch, he would have felt decidedly easier in his mind. But he had a distinct recollection of being invited to refresh his inner-man on a former occasion by a noble earl, who offered him nothing more substantial than a packet of dry sandwiches, and who *folded up the paper and string* when he had finished this light repast, and then politely tendered him, in order to assuage his thirst, half a glass of cherry, doled out from a pocket flask. That luncheon was still green in the general's memory, and even now gave him the shudders when he recalled it. The mere sight of Bob's well-filled hampers inflamed him with gastronomic longings.

But he was far too much of a sycophant to express his real sentiments, especially when he felt pretty certain they would not meet with favorable reception, so, resolutely averting his eyes from that highly-laden omnibus roof, he burst into a forced laugh and said:

"I wonder what the devil that fellow Jarrett means by coming to our Morbey-Anstead races in this tinkering style. Surely he has horses enough in his stable to be able to pull one out on an occasion like the present."

"Perhaps he thinks a four-wheeled conveyance safer than pony-back," suggested Captain Greenby, who with stiffly waxed moustache and squared elbows was riding a sprightly little hog-maned animal, only a few sizes larger than a full-grown donkey.

"No, I'll give the man his due. He ain't afraid,"

chimed in Lord Littelbrane, whose sense of justice, though limited, was strong. He can't ride one little bit—rolls about all over the place, and is nearly off at every fence, but he has got the pluck of the old gentleman himself."

"Pshaw! He'll soon come back, he'll soon come back to the level of the rest of 'em," murmured General Prosieboy disparagingly. "Nobody ever keeps the ball a-rolling for more than a season or two in this country, and the harder they go at first, the sooner they collapse as a rule. Look at 'Crashing Jimmy,'" naming a well-known member of the Hunt; "the very sight of a fence settles him nowadays, and yet what a bruiser he was at one time."

Meantime Bob had succeeded in finding a place for his carriage just outside, though not within, the magic ropes which separated the *elite* of half-a-dozen hunts from the so-called "outsiders." The winning-post was not twenty yards off. The omnibus faced the rails, and both he and Dot, troubling themselves little about social distinctions, did not allow them to interfere with their pleasure, and were perfectly satisfied. Not so Mrs. Lankester.

As already seen, in coming to the races under Mr. Jarrett's sheltering wing she had imagined she should have a place amongst the regular county people. She had pictured to herself the delight of being able to nod triumphantly to her friends and acquaintances from the superior altitude of the stewards' inclosure. The reality was a bitter disappointment, and she could not refrain from venting her displeasure upon Bob.

"Really, Mr. Jarrett," she said, speaking in acrid tones, "I must say that I don't think you have managed matters at all well."

Bob winced. His mamma-in-law was beginning to assert her rights a little soon.

"Indeed Mrs. Lankester. I am sorry you should be of such an opinion."

"No, not at all well," she continued. "For what's the use of living in a great big house, and having ever so much money, if you go and stick yourself down among a parcel of nobodies, instead of being with the swells, as you ought to be. I call it downright foolish."

"Oh, mamma, don't—please don't," gasped Dot piteously, her face suddenly turning the colour of a peony. "Mr. Jarrett has been so kind, and surely, *surely* it is not for us to find fault. Why, we should not be here at all were it not for him."

His heart went out towards her. He would have given anything to kiss her sweet, eloquent lips.

"Never mind, Miss Dot," he said, looking at her with a reassuring smile. "No doubt Mrs. Lankester is quite right in what she says. She must forgive my blundering for once, and next year, if we are all alive and well, I hope she may have the satisfaction of seeing us in the inclosure, where, according to her opinion, we ought to be now."

That one little word "us" restored Mrs. Lankester's good humour as by a miracle. For, she argued, Mr. Jarrett might so very easily have said "*me*." But "us" was comprehensive and significant in the extreme; it meant your daughter and I, and a happy family party. At all events, she would do all she could to promote the match. So the cross, dissatisfied expression vanished from her face, and she said very winningly:

"I hope so also. And now, Mr. Jarrett, don't you think that you and Dot had better go and have a look at the fences before the races begin? Doctor Lankester has been gone some time."

"Won't you come, too, mother?" said her daughter, detecting a maternal artifice, and resenting it accordingly, for had she not received a long lecture on the advantages of matrimony previous to starting?

The green stalks, with their burden of artificial flowers, waved backwards and forwards dissentingly.

"No, dearest, I am far too afraid of getting my feet wet."

"Then I'll stop with you, mother."

"Oh, dear no! Never mind me, child. I'm accustomed to being left alone. Mr. Jarrett, carry her off; but oh, Dot, before you go, just take one look at old Lady Fraserburgh's bonnet. Did you ever see such a thing? It's not fit for a housemaid. There is not a single flower or feather upon it, and they tell me that flowers, especially, are all the rage nowadays."

Dot and Bob walked off together. The girl went reluctantly, but she was afraid to offer any opposition for

fear of rendering her mother's scheming too apparent. But in her heart of hearts she felt bitterly ashamed. It was such a horrible, humiliating thing for any modest-minded young woman to be thrown at a man's head in this barefaced fashion ; and the more you liked the man, the more you respected and esteemed him, the worse it was.

What, too, could be more awful than having to blush for your own mother ? All Dot's sense of ladyhood had been already shocked repeatedly. But to show her distress in any way was only to make matters worse. So, with a sobered manner, and most of her pleasure gone for the day, she walked by her companion's side, striving hard to conceal how greatly she was vexed and annoyed by Mrs. Lankester's remarks.

CHAPTER. XXXIV.

AN AMATEUR FINISH.

A FINE, sympathetic insight seemed to have revealed to Bob that her mother had contrived to put Dot out, therefore he sedulously avoided the subject of the inclosure ticket, and did all he could to restore her serenity. He behaved very well indeed, more like an elder brother than an admirer, and did not attempt to pay her a single compliment, or to make one flowery speech.

The girl was grateful, and appreciated the delicacy of his conduct. As a proof, she exerted herself to amuse, and, as they walked down the course, pointed him out a few of the celebrities whom she knew by sight.

"Do you see that handsome middle-aged woman on the black horse?" she exclaimed, as a buxom lady of some eight and thirty summers passed by, laughing and chatting to her male attendant.

"Yes, who is she?"

"She is Mrs. Long-Langley, a siren who is said to have broken more hearts than any woman in England, and who even now, though no longer as young as she was, contrives to captivate every man she comes across."

"Either the men must be very weak, or their hearts remarkably brittle," answered Bob, who, in his present love-lorn condition, had eyes but for one. "I don't see anything in her at all."

"Don't you? Then you are an exception to the rule, for her admirers are legion. The gentleman riding by her side—the stout one, I mean, in the frock-coat—is the Duke of Breezycourt. It is said that he would marry Mrs. Long-Langley to-morrow, if Mr. Long-Langley were out of the way."

"Why, she looks old enough to be his mother," exclaimed Bob, taking another look at the captivating equestrienne. "I would as soon fall in love with my grandmother. What *can* constitute the attraction?"

"Dot laughed. Even the nicest of women is not displeased at hearing one of her own sex disparaged, at least where appearances are concerned. There is a natural rivalry amongst them."

"You are evidently less susceptible than the Stiff-tonians, Mr. Jarrett. But people who know Mrs. Long-Langley intimately declare that she possesses a most wonderfully fascinating manner. And now I want you to look at somebody else—somebody who, personally, I admire infinitely more."

"And who might that be?" inquired Bob. "I am curious to learn your taste at any rate."

"Turn to the left, then, and you will see Lady Norman just coming on the course, driving a pair of wonderful bay horses. Make haste, or she will have pulled up. There!" as Bob's eyes roved in the desired direction, "did you ever see such steppers? It is a pleasure to watch them move."

"They are magnificent, certainly. But who is this Lady Norman? Has she a history also?"

"Yes, but it is a very sad one. Her husband is mad—not mad enough to be shut up, but he does the most extraordinary things, and takes the funniest fancies into his head. One is, that he is always falling in love with actresses and queer sort of people, which, of course," said Dot innocently, "must be very distressing to Lady Norman. But she behaves like an angel, and forgives all his escapades. People say that she loves him in spite of

everything, and that her life is miserable in consequence. Poor thing! I am sorry for her."

Bob's interest was aroused. He withdrew his eyes from the spirited bay horses, and looked at their driver. He saw an extremely beautiful, calm, sad face, whose look of settled melancholy touched his heart. It was easy, even for a stranger like himself, to tell that Lady Norman was far from being a happy woman.

Thus time passed away, and both Dot and Bob were so interested by all they perceived going on around them, that they were quite astonished when the jockeys in their silk caps and jackets began to appear in the paddock, and commenced making preparations for mounting their respective steeds.

This was a signal that the first race would shortly be run, therefore the two young people made the best of their way back to the omnibus, where they found Mrs. Lankester still busily inspecting old Lady Fraserburgh's bonnet, through an ivory-glass grown yellow with age.

"I never was more disappointed in my life, Dot," she murmured in her daughter's ear. "I thought to see such a fine show of bonnets, and really, there ain't one to compare with mine." Then she profited by Bob's turning to give a few words of direction to his man, and added eagerly, "Well, how have you been getting on?" Dot was thankful to escape the necessity of replying, owing to Mr. Jarrett's suddenly asking her mother at what time she would like luncheon, which, fortunately, diverted her attention.

"Won't you come outside, Mrs. Lankester?" he inquired, when this important matter had been settled.

"No, thank you, Mr. Jarrett, I'm afraid of the cold air. But make Dot go. She loves to see the races, and to tell the honest truth, I don't care much about them one way or the other."

Dot was rapidly gaining confidence in Bob; his conduct was so delicate; besides, she began to feel that she would rather be alone with him any number of hours than sit and listen to her mother's speeches; they were so very, very trying, and irritated her so fearfully. Both pride and shame were roused by turns. So she scrambled up on to the box seat, and Bob seated himself

by her side, but before many minutes had passed Dr. Lankester joined them, puffing a little, from the pace at which he had walked. "They are making Albatross favourite," he said, "but the course is awfully heavy, and, in my opinion, he won't stay home when the pinch comes. He's too slack in the loins for my taste."

"What do you fancy, papa?" asked Dot. "You generally manage to select the winners."

"Well, I've got a sneaking liking for Dauntless. He may not show quite so much quality as Albatross, but for all that he's a real good stamp of hunter and the public have had the sense to make him second favourite."

"Have you backed him, doctor?" inquired Bob, who had not cared to leave his companion in order to visit the betting ring. Moments spent alone with Dot were far too precious to be thus wasted.

"Only for five shillings, just to give me a little interest in the race. I never invest large sums. Firstly, because I can't afford it, and secondly, because one's bound to lose in the long run."

As he finished speaking, the six competitors who were to take part in the race came trotting down the course some two or three hundred yards. Then, turning sharp round, they cantered back again at half speed, the bright jackets of the jockeys flashing past like meteors, and for a second bewildering the eye. Even to the uninitiated, it was clear that Captain Greenby's Albatross was the gentleman of the party. But he was an aged horse, and carried the top weight, having, in years past, won over the very same course, in consequence of which he had to put up with a penalty of seven pounds. A horse might be ever so good, and yet fail to catch the judge's eye with twelve stone thirteen on his back, especially when the "going" was as bad as to-day. The hypercritical, too, took exception to Albatross's feet, which were remarkably small, and almost asinine in conformation, whereas Dauntless's broad hoofs seemed more calculated to cope with the mud and the clay. He was of a bigger, stouter make altogether, and, being only five years of age, his impost was but eleven stone twelve. Thus there was exactly fifteen pounds difference between the two horses; a difference which many of the knowing ones thought fatal.

But Captain Greenby, who rode Albatross himself, was extremely confident of winning, and advised all his friends to back his mount, in spite of the gallant grey having to carry lumps of weight in comparison with every other animal in the race. Mayfly, Sir Roger, Gamecock and Kildare were youngsters, who had yet to win their laurels between the flags. Kildare, in particular, came with a high reputation from over the water, and was a son of Solon on the sire's side, and of old Camilla on the dam's. But, beyond that he had been seen to give his owner a couple of nasty rolls out hunting, when first he appeared to covert side, nothing much was known of him. Still, he had the makings of a good horse about him.

At length the flag was dropped to an excellent start, and the six competitors all cleared the first fence in beautiful order, skimming over it without touching a twig. It was a pretty sight to see one after the other take off exactly right, and land as lightly as cats. Neither did the second obstacle produce "grief." On streamed the noble animals, until they neared the water-jump, which, although of no very formidable dimensions, caused Mayfly to refuse.

She whipped round so sharply that her jockey was within an ace of flying over her head, an action which he greatly resented, and again and again he drove her at the brook with a vigour and a persistence both highly creditable, but nevertheless, quite ineffectual. Mayfly laid back her ears, and swerved before she came within yards of that obnoxious streamlet. The spectators, meantime, had been so much interested by the contest going on between man and horse, that they had almost forgotten the race itself, especially as the five remaining horses had disappeared into the distant country.

When they again could be seen the pace and the heavy ground were already telling their tale. Only Dauntless, Albatross and Gamecock remained to the fore. Kildare had either fallen, or else been pulled up, when his rider perceived that his chance was hopeless, and Sir Roger, though he still plodded wearily on in the rear, was almost half a field behind the leaders, whose girths he stood but little chance of reaching, unless all three failed to keep upright.

A hundred yards more and it became evident that Gamecock's bolt was shot, and that the issue lay between the two favourites, Albatross and Dauntless. The former struggled nobly under his heavy weight, but both horses were dead beat, and there seemed little, if anything, to choose between them. And now a most singular scene took place, and one such as might not be witnessed in a lifetime; in fact, it required to be *seen* to be *believed*.

On, on they came with heavy labouring stride. Dauntless was first on to the racecourse. But he was so done, that after brushing through the last fence, he stood stock still for a few seconds on landing. This conduct on his part enabled Albatross to gain an advantage.

But he, in his turn, was equally exhausted, and he could hardly raise a canter. Mad with emulation and disappointment, the rider of Dauntless, by whip and spur, set him going again. That brief halt, short as it was, had enabled the poor horse to get a whiff of fresh air. It served him in good stead now, and probably turned the balance in his favour. He began to make up for lost ground.

Albatross's jockey made a vigorous call. Then he committed that great mistake of nine amateur riders out of ten, and attempted to use his whip. As he raised his hand aloft, the horse stopped to nothing, and within half-a-dozen strides of the winning post Dauntless overhauled his opponent, and by a desperate effort managed to secure the judge's hat by a short neck.

Two seconds afterwards, and both horses relapsed voluntarily into a walk, and from a walk to a stand. Even when they had sufficiently recovered to move leisurely towards the paddock, a veritable cloud of steam enveloped them, which issued from their nostrils in spasmodic streams, and robbed the precious air of half its freshness. Great drops of perspiration rolled down from their foreheads to the ground, and their outstretched necks and heaving flanks warned those who were destined to follow in their footsteps what they might expect. Albatross had run a good game horse, and though beaten he was not disgraced; but when his master dismounted, he asked himself somewhat ruefully, whether the race repaid him for having taken so much

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Meantime, so great had been the excitement occasioned by this uncommon *finale*, that nobody had paid much attention to the weather. But now, the vast host of smart gentlemen and ladies on horseback were all at once disagreeably forced to take it into their consideration. The sky became overcast, the sun—which had shone fitfully throughout the morning—disappeared sullenly behind a spreading mass of leaden cloud, and presently a few great drops of rain caused the wary to cast an anxious eye around in search for shelter. The wind, too, arose, and whistled and howled through the hedge-rows and the tops of the trees, until it sounded like angry waves dashing themselves against the sea-shore, and then receding with a baffled roar.

As previously mentioned, the truly fashionable throng had come to the races in gala array, determined to spend a long and happy day, and had no convenient carriages to retire to in case of an emergency like the present. Darker and darker grew the clouds, until at last down came the rain with merciless severity. There is rain and rain. A mild steady dribble is nothing when contrasted with a chilly torrent, that cuts the very skin on your cheeks and freezes the marrow in your bones.

The rain which now descended was of this latter character—fierce, cold, and penetrating to a degree. Horses refused to face it, and turning round with one accord, stood with their backs to the bitter wind, presenting a row of trembling quarters and tucked-in tails.

In five minutes every one was more or less wet through. Even treble Melton could not stand it. The ladies conducted themselves bravely, as they always do on such occasions, but all the same they looked thoroughly unhappy in their tight and saturated habits, which outlined each fair form with the clinging austerity of a bathing-gown.

Those people who are in the habit of patronizing local meetings, where covered stands are all but unknown, and carriages or tents offer the only refuge in bad weather, will appreciate the difference produced in a few minutes

by sunshine or storm. On Stiffon Flats, one short quarter of an hour ago, all was bright and gay. The ladies and gentlemen on horseback, in their smart clothes and glossy hats, galloped briskly up and down, and lent animation to the scene. Gipsy women prowled from carriage to carriage, and made themselves generally objectionable, red-coated runners, accustomed to hunt on foot with the various packs, strove to gain a few honest pence by selling race-cards; negroes sang, acrobats tumbled, Aunt Sally and the three-card trick drove a lively trade, oranges and cocoanuts were freely disposed of, as also were sticks of coloured rock and gingerbread nuts. Bookmakers shouted out the odds until they were hoarse, jockeys enveloped in covert coats, with their silk caps looking like bright dots in the crowd, wound their way through the multitude, and in the paddock, dainty, sleek-coated horses walked leisurely around, or else lashed out impatiently at their too ardent admirers, until they forced them to keep at a respectful distance from their nimble heels.

All was life, bustle, movement and good-humour.

Now, a ghastly change had come over the scene. One could hardly realize it was the same. The racecourse was black with dripping umbrellas, that resembled so many overgrown mushrooms turned mouldy by decay. What carriages there were, were mostly open, and presented a similar spectacle, slightly diversified by waterproof rugs; whilst as for the aristocratic throng on horseback—the flower of half-a-dozen hunting fields—the male and female “mashers” of Stiffon and all the surrounding country, if ever people looked thoroughly wretched, miserable and uncomfortable, they did. The rain had taken all the pride out of them. Their glory had departed, at all events for that day; and when shorn of all the pomp and majesty of purple and fine linen, they stood revealed as mere ordinary human beings, neither better nor worse than their neighbours. Even a Stiffonian cannot rise superior to crumpled collars and a limp shirt front. Our washerwoman has a great deal to do with producing the semblance of a gentleman.

CHAPTER XXXV

"I WOULD GIVE MY LIFE TO SERVE YOU."

To make matters worse, the rain came on exactly at two o'clock, when an hour had been allowed between the first and second races for luncheon. Every one felt more or less hungry. But how were folk to eat, drink and make merry when it was pouring down in buckets, sending horrible, cold dribblets from the brim of your hat along your spine, reducing your linen to a pulp and coursing from the tip of your nose like a water-spout?

A few wise people galloped off home without more ado, but the majority, having arranged for a day's pleasuring, were obliged to wait until the bitter end. Trains ran inconveniently, and specials were not to be obtained until quite late in the afternoon, when all the fun was supposed to be over. But what fun? The good-natured and cheerful optimist, though ill at ease bodily, prognosticated that the weather was sure to mend shortly, since it was quite too bad to last. The pessimist growled back in reply, that he didn't care a hang whether it did or whether it didn't, since he was wet through already and could not possibly be in a worse plight.

In short, folk were full of compassion for themselves; so full, that they had little to spare for the poor horses, who cowered and winced before the fierce blast in a truly pitiable manner, their glossy coats stained dark by the wet, which trickled down in large drops from every part.

While all this was going on without, many were the envious glances cast at that snug little quartette seated comfortably inside Mr. Jarrett's capacious omnibus, and discussing a whole row of good things spread out appetizingly on the cushions. Even Mrs. Lankester's attention was completely diverted for the time being from her neighbour's bonnet to Bob's champagne, which she appeared highly to relish judging from the number of

times she plied her glass and allowed it to be filled without remonstrance. The strings of her tongue became gradually unloosened, and her company manners were laid aside.

"Now, I call this jolly!" she exclaimed, smacking her fat lips, and smiling unctuously at Bob. "Eh? What do you say, Mr. Jarrett? though I needn't ask, for you and that girl of mine look as happy as sand-boys."

Dot almost hid her face in her plate. But Bob could see her little pink ear grow pinker and felt for her distress. He foresaw that his mother-in-law was likely to prove a thorn in the flesh.

"Thank you, Mrs. Lankester," he rejoined composedly. "I'm pretty comfortable. One always does feel better when one has had something to eat and drink."

"Just so, just so. Your champagne is capital for keeping out the cold. That's why I'm taking a little extra."

"Have a drop more then." And Bob poured out another bumper.

Mrs. Lankester sipped it with relish.

"Lor! how miserable the swells look!" she ejaculated triumphantly, giving a coarse laugh of content as the Duke of Breezycourt and Mrs. Long-Langley rode by, wearing much the same appearance as if they had stood under a pump and been well soused.

"I wish I could take them all in," said kind-hearted Bob. "I feel so sorry for the poor ladies."

"I'm very glad you can't Mr. Jarrett. They would not let us into their inclosure when we wanted, and now we score over them. That's as it should be."

"I should not like to have you for an enemy, Mrs. Lankester."

"Oh! no fear, you never will. On the contrary," looking significantly at Dot, "I am in hopes that we may be the best friends later on. By-the-way, do you admire Mrs. Long-Langley?"

"No, not particularly. She has the remains of a fine woman, but art has been too evidently employed to preserve them.

"That's just what I say. I can't see any beauty in her whatever."

"You forget, my dear," interposed Doctor Lankester with his genial smile, "that good looks are apt to be effaced when exposed to such a downpour. Where is the carmine of those lovely cheeks? Where the straight and pencilled brow, the ruddy lip and golden locks? Faded and gone, or if not quite gone, at all events converted into little coloured rivulets that scarcely heighten the general appearance."

Bob laughed heartily.

"Why, doctor!" he exclaimed in a bantering tone, "I had no idea you were so cynical."

"If there is one thing on the face of the earth I detest, it is a painted woman. She is such a horrid, vile, false sham."

"There I am with you," answered Bob. "Try a glass of that claret. I can recommend it as being something extra good; or do you prefer port?"

While they were doing full justice to the viands spread out before them, and waxing merrier and more colloquial as the bottles grew empty, Bob suddenly saw a sight which roused him to compassion.

With their backs turned towards the quarter from whence the wind came, and almost facing the omnibus, he spied Lord Littelbrane and General Prosieboy standing in dismal silence side by side.

Who can describe the wretched appearance presented by these two unfortunate gentlemen, but more especially by the elder one, who, owing to his advanced years, was highly susceptible to the cold and the wet. With collar turned up, hat crammed down, shoulders shrugged, and head bent forward on his chest, his venerable beard transformed into a variety of little water-spouts which coursed down his clothes, and with his red old face, positively purple from exposure, there sat General Prosieboy—a miserable object indeed. Bob's kind heart melted on the spot. He was not one to harbour malice, and he forgot that this man was his enemy, and had insulted him in every possible way. He remembered only that he was a human being, past the prime of life, and at the present moment evidently suffered from keen physical discomfort. "Do as you would be done by." This was what flashed through his mind.

In an instant he had left the omnibus, and was battling his way through the driving rain and slipping about on the saturated soil as he vainly strove to make haste.

"Get off! get off!" he said hurriedly. "You must be simply perished. Come into my 'bus and have a bite of something to eat and a glass or two of liquor to warm you up. Here, my man," addressing a half-starved looking individual, who stood prowling about, evidently in search of a job, "hold this gentleman's horse."

Oh, what a heavenly invitation!

For an instant the general thought it was an angel's voice sounding so sweetly in his ears. The next, he looked round and saw the man he had called a duffer and an outsider, a rank bounder, and every vituperative name in his vocabulary, standing close beside him, gazing up into his face with a pair of compassionate brown eyes, so clear and honest that they seemed as if they knew no guile.

To do General Prosieboy justice, as their glances met he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. Here was an enemy prepared to heap coals of fire on his head. He positively yearned to accept Bob's timely and hospitable offer, but if he did so the sacrifice would be immense, for how could he continue to abuse him hereafter? Even he was not quite mean enough for that.

But he was scarcely a free agent. If he followed his inclinations and profited by Mr. Jarrett's invitation, what would Lord Littelbrane say? There lay the difficulty, which was greatly increased by his companion's presence. Should he be upbraided and condemned as a base seceder from the ranks of the Mutual Adorationites? Would he be branded as a traitor to his order, a turncoat and a renegade?

He glanced uneasily at his lordship, who maintained an impenetrable front, and whose countenance was as impassive as a mask. He could glean nothing from its stolidly frigid expression.

Just then a furious gust of wind and rain combined almost carried their horses off their legs, and caused them to sidle up against the coach of the — Lancers, a regiment whose existence Lord Littelbrane had seen fit

to ignore, and had never called on. A regular rivulet ran off the roof, and almost swamped the unhappy horsemen.

Abject and pitiful as might be General Prosieboy's conduct, the bodily discomfort which he was enduring conquered every remaining vestige of pride. If the devil himself had made him a similar offer he would have accepted it at that moment, when the horrid moisture penetrated to his neck, his back, his thighs, and sent icy shivers, suggestive of rheumatism, sciatica and lumbago, through all his substantial frame.

"Thank you," he said to Bob, dismounting as speedily as his wet clothes would permit of. "It has turned out a most miserable day, and I shall be glad to avail myself of your hospitality."

"That's right," exclaimed Bob cordially. Then in a lower tone he added, "Won't his lordship come also? It is so very stormy and disagreeable."

Lord Littelbrane overheard the remark, but he, at least, was consistent. In his heart of hearts he despised his friend's weakness, and felt secretly angered by it. No amount of wet or cold should succeed in making *him* depart from his principles. Corporeal misery should not induce *him* to quite his colours. He would stick to them through thick and thin, and at all events show a good example to this unworthy and degenerate M.A.

"No, thank you," he said in his most lordly and stiffest manner; "I'm not so susceptible to a little rain as General Prosieboy, and prefer to remain where I am."

Then he looked at the dripping and trembling old man with a contempt which he did not attempt to conceal, and muttered in an ill-pleased undertone, "I'm surprised at you, Squasher!"

It needed a great many glasses of Bob's champagne, supplemented by a tumbler of stiff brandy and water, to restore that distinguished warrior's equanimity. He felt depressed and degraded, and if it had not been for the drink, which was uncommonly good, and served without any stint, he never could have survived so crushing a reprimand from the head of the Mutual Adorationites.

But little by little, as he grew more comfortable, his dignity returned. The generous wine flowed through

his veins, and chased away that disagreeable sensation of whipped hound. After all, a man might take a little luncheon with a fellow on emergency without being obliged to have much to do with him hereafter. The fellow might be dropped directly he was no longer useful, and put back into his place gently but firmly. It only required tact.

The general was a fine old man. In his cups he was apt to grow pompous, and he so far conducted himself as a M. A. that in spite of the temptations by which he was assailed, he never once condescended either to slap his host on the back, dig him in the ribs, or even to call him Jarrett, much less Bob. In fact, he addressed him as seldom as possible, and when he did, it was always from the heights of his own superiority. His manner was both patronizing and offensive. The truth was, he was afraid to unbend for fear of incurring Lord Littelbrane's displeasure, and so fell between two stools, and conciliated neither his enemy nor his friend. Both despised him, and worse still, he despised himself, and was painfully conscious of the fact.

He sat there, eating away at Bob's pigeon pie and *pâté de foie gras*, and swallowing inconceivable quantities of his Grand Monopole and Château Lafitte, but he did not make the least effort to render any return in the way of politeness or conversation. As for the ladies, they came in for little favour. But then, the Mutual Adorationites never did say much, even among themselves. It was not their way. No flow of small talk was at their command, and they kept the few ideas they possessed for very rare and special occasions, such as when Mr. Tag-rag-and-bobtail rode over a hound, or the hunt subscriptions failed to realize the accustomed figure.

"Well," exclaimed Dot, when at last, the rain having almost ceased, General Prosieboy rode off to catch his train, after first mumbling some very ungraceful and incoherent thanks, "it's not for me to abuse your guests, Mr. Jarrett, but of all the odious, stuck-up, disagreeable old gentlemen I ever met, I really think General Prosieboy is entitled to the prize."

"I think so too," said Bob soberly; "I can't make him out at all."

He was more vexed than he chose to admit at finding every effort of friendship on his part so steadily and rudely repulsed. For although the general had accepted his hospitality, and broken bread, so to speak, at his table, he knew quite well that he had only done so under pressure, and remained as much his enemy as heretofore. This was discouraging in the extreme.

"I'm afraid there must be something altogether wrong about me," he said almost tearfully to Dot, directly they found themselves together again. "Something wholly unlike other people."

"Why, Mr. Jarrett. What on earth do you mean?"

"I don't get on at all. Not one bit. Nobody seems to like me, try what I will," he returned despondently.

"Don't say that. It is not true."

"I wish it were not the case. But even you, Miss Dot, only tolerate me."

"No such thing, Mr. Jarrett. You are quite mistaken there."

"Ah! I know better. You don't care for me and I care for you."

She blushed and remained silent. Her heart told her the accusation was true.

"I wish you would tell me where I fail," he went on, after a slight pause. "Because then"—and his voice trembled—"I might try and improve."

She felt dreadfully sorry for him, and yet was afraid to show her sorrow too plainly, for fear of setting fire to a volcano. His manner, more than his words, revealed how deeply he was moved.

"Nonsense," she said firmly. "It's those nasty, narrow-minded, empty-headed people who want improving, not you. Why," and her soft face kindled into sudden enthusiasm, "you are worth the whole lot of them put together. I should like to know how long it would have been before Lord Littelbrane or General Prosieboy asked *you* to come in out of the rain, supposing the conditions of to-day reversed. Don't vex yourself about what such people say and do, Mr. Jarrett. They do not deserve a thought, and are simply beneath you in every way. You are a king in comparison."

It was not often Dot spoke at such length, or with so

much earnestness. But she was indignant at the treatment Bob had received.

And if anything could have comforted him, her speech did. He turned two moist and grateful eyes full upon her.

"God bless you, Miss Dot, he said huskily. "I'm all right again now, for as long as you don't consider me a brute I don't care two straws what anybody else thinks."

"I—I like you awfully, and so does papa," she cried impulsively, carried out of her reserve, and trying only to console him for the slights he had received.

His face flamed into colour. His whole soul seemed for one second to flash through his eyes.

"And I like you too. You know that I do. I would give my life to serve you."

They were simple words, but the way in which he said them made the blood rush to her heart in a guilty wave. How was she ever to make him understand the difference between loving and liking, without wounding his kindly spirit? "He ought to know—he ought to know." That was what she kept telling herself during the homeward drive.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BOB RECEIVES A SEVERE SHOCK.

A MONTH passed away, and at the end of it Bob was painfully conscious of the fact that, in spite of the increased intimacy existing between himself and the Lankester family, he had made but little real progress in his suit.

He and Dot were very good friends, but nothing more. He never could get any further. She was always pleasant, and when they met, which he contrived should be often, appeared pleased to see him; and yet, whenever he made the slightest endeavour to approach the subject lying so near his heart, and consuming it with anxiety, she invariably managed to evade it, and to turn the conversation into a totally different channel.

It was vexing in the extreme to find that directly he

touched upon sentiment she drew in her horns at once, like a sensitive snail desiring to escape hurt. Hard as he had tried, every day rendered it more evident that he had completely failed to reach Dot's heart. And fully realizing this, he grew both depressed and discouraged, and asked himself a thousand times what was the reason of his unsuccess. Another thing puzzled him. As the weeks passed away he began to notice a difference in Dot. Unfortunately it was not one to inspire fresh hope, and it kept his mind in a state of tension.

She gradually lost the sweet serenity and gentle cheerfulness which had hitherto been her chief characteristics. The quiet monotony of her life no longer seemed to satisfy her. She was often grave and preoccupied. When in repose, the little, sweet, babyish face would assume quite a serious expression. Something appeared to trouble the girl, and once or twice Bob fancied that this trouble originated from her not being altogether happy in her home.

Now that he had seen more of Mrs. Lankester and his first impressions instead of growing weaker had only become confirmed, he did not wonder at such being the case.

Mother and daughter were so unlike. The one so coarse and narrow-minded, the other such a perfect little lady in every thought and feeling.

He made various essays to induce Dot to confide in him, but this she steadily refused to do. Still, although she never made any complaint, or acknowledged she had cause for unhappiness, he contrived to gather that her mother was trying to force her into some course of action against which her whole nature revolted. As to what it might be he could only make vague guesses, and torture himself in the process. He had a kind of an idea that Dot did not like him, and that Mrs. Lankester wanted to make her marry him against her will. The mere notion rendered him sad, and yet he could not help thinking that there was a good deal of truth in it. Such a supposition, if correct, would quite account for Dot's reserve. The greater the pressure put upon her, the more natural her coldness and gravity, and good God ! just to think of the girl he cared for, the girl he loved to distraction and

almost idolized, being pestered into giving a lukewarm consent to their marriage! Deeply as his affections were involved, he would rather bid her good-bye for ever than feel that she was being rendered miserable through his instrumentality, and being goaded to commit a sin from which her pure, innocent soul shrank back in horror. Dot's eyes were clear as mirrors. It was a delight to look deep into their transparent depths. But would it not be a pain rather than a pleasure to see them cloud over at his approach; exquisite agony to feel his embraces passively endured, instead of returned? Bob's poor, hungry heart clamoured for reciprocity. Toleration alone could not satisfy it. Here, alone in a foreign country, far from his kith and kin, with expectations disappointed and illusions crumbling one by one to the ground, he yearned for sympathy and companionship with an aching, insatiable yearning, which seemed to eat into the very vitals of his being.

No doubt the weather was in great measure responsible for the settled gloom that was gradually stealing upon him and rendering his spirit weary and joyless.

Since the end of November, protracted frost had interfered sadly with hunting arrangements. Frost, accompanied by a bright sun overhead, and a clear, if cold blue sky, acts as an invigorating tonic both on mind and body, but frost ushered in with a low grey haze, settling weird-like on the ice-bound earth, and occasionally diversified by cruel winds and sleeting snow, produces an exactly opposite effect, and runs the human barometer down to zero. At such seasons all the world is apt to look dark and drear. Nature varies and man varies with her. He sympathizes with her sombre moods, rejoices in her bright, sunshiny ones.

Neither was Bob's health good at this time. It, like his spirits, had succumbed to climatic influences, though he would have scorned to admit the fact, considering it, like all strong, young and healthy man, a derogatory one. But the cough, contracted when he had tumbled into the brook, had now become chronic, and although he made light of it, and refused to take any precautions against the treacherous English climate to which he was not accustomed, it nevertheless had a debilitating effect upon his general system.

He longed to get out hunting again, if only as a means of diverting his thoughts from Dot, whose image was continually present in his mind, and prevented him from sleeping at night. In short he lived in a state of fever; but the self-control exercised till the present time was too great to be continued. He felt a crisis was at hand, and that before long, whether his cause were hopeless or the reverse, he must speak out, and have an answer one way or the other. It was better to know one's fate than let one's manhood waste away in torturing suspense. Matters stood thus, when the hated and detested frost at last began to show symptoms of giving. First it rained, and the drops froze as they fell, then it snowed, then rained again; a cold miserable down-pour; but though the thaw was a very half-hearted one, it restored to the roads their normal amount of mud, and roused hope in the breasts of fox-hunters, who came scurrying down from town in hot haste, or else forsook "rocketers" and rabbits with scant ceremony. But disappointment awaited these eager Nimrods. A fiat came forth from the kennels, which, although perfectly just in itself, created as much grumbling as such fiats always do—to the effect that another day must elapse before the ground would be in a fit state to admit of pursuing the fox.

When Bob was informed of Lord Littelbrane's decision, he resolved to run up to London, having certain business matters connected with the estate to attend to. On reaching the station, he found that a train leaving the metropolis at an early hour had just arrived. Having some little time to wait, he began walking up and down the platform, when, to his great surprise, he suddenly perceived Dot Lankester, clad in a neat striped petticoat, a well-fitting black jacket, and a small felt hat with a red wing.

His heart gave a big leap and went thump against his side. He was on the point of going up to speak to her, when he received an unpleasant shock, which seemed to bring his whole internal mechanism to a stand-still. And yet, the sight that disturbed him so much was a very simple one, and by no means calculated to upset his equanimity so entirely.

He saw a tall, well-built young man, with a fresh com-

plexion and fair hair, jump out from a third-class compartment, and he heard Dot utter a sudden exclamation of delight, which caused the blood to mantle in her cheek.

That was all ; but, then impelled by an overpowering curiosity, he advanced a few steps, and saw something more—something that he would have given the whole world not to have seen.

That tall young man—impudent, ill-mannered fellow—after a slight and embarrassed hesitation, stooped down and actually *kissed* Dot's upturned face with an air of horribly familiar proprietorship.

"You got my letter, I suppose?" he said interrogatively. "But I need not ask."

"Oh ! yes, Will," she replied, her eyes bright with a light that Bob had never seen there before, and which did away with any doubts he might have entertained as to their owner's coldness of disposition. "That is why I am here."

"I thought you would come to meet me, when you knew I was passing through."

"Naturally ; but oh ! Will, I feel so wicked."

"Wicked ! Pooh ! nonsense," he said shortly. "What's there to feel wicked about ?"

"Mother does not know I've gone to see you."

He made a wry face, and Bob, looking on, instinctively distrusted this young man, whose manner appeared to him to be forced and unnatural.

"No, I suppose not. But, I say, Dot, let's come into the waiting-room. It's jollier there than here. My train does not go on for another quarter of an hour, and," with a sudden flush, "I've ever so much to tell you ; something that you are bound to know sooner or later."

"What is it, Will ?" she asked, alarmed by the gravity of his tone. "If it's bad news, don't be afraid to tell me. "I'll try and bear it."

And with that, she slipped her hand through his arm in quite a lover-like manner, and looked up into his face, with oh ! such a smile, and Bob, watching the proceedings with absorbing interest, felt a sharp pain shoot through his heart, just as if it had been stabbed by a knife. Ah ! the agony of that moment, and the revelation it brought.

He slunk away with an icy, sick sensation stealing all over his frame, and catching at the very breath in his lungs, as it sought to force an exit. His brow was damp, his legs trembled beneath him. What did it mean? Was he mad, or dreaming some horrible dream! Will, Will—how he hated the name! who *was* Will? this man, whom Dot came to meet at a public railway station, and who greeted her with such strange familiarity. He had known the Lankesters now for some time, but he had never once heard his name mentioned. Of that he was positive. He might be Dot's brother. For a moment Bob breathed again. But no, if this were so, surely she would have spoken of him just as she spoke of Matilda, and of Matilda's children. And if he were not her brother? A mist rose before his eyes. He clutched at a column to steady himself. The world seemed so curiously unreal, so hazy and strange.

Then a sudden thought flashed across his mind with the vividness of certain death. Might it not be that Mrs. Lankester had deceived him when talking about her daughter, and he had made a cruel mistake from the very beginning?

Yes, yes, he knew it was so, and yet he struggled against the belief. He thrust it from him fiercely, vehemently, with the energy of despair. But in vain. The conviction grew and strengthened, and refused to be banished.

All the time the train in which he was seated kept gliding through quiet green fields dotted with resting sheep and browsing cattle, whilst it whirled past snug homesteads, nestling amongst yellow corn-ricks, and swept by picturesque villages, with red chimneys clustering round some tall grey steeple, the miserable young man kept saying to himself:

"Now everything is explained. This was Dot's secret—the cause of her coldness and reserve. She was head over ears in love with somebody else before ever I crossed her path."

And then, in his anguish and his despair, he ground his teeth with impotent passion, and the veins on his forehead swelled till they stood out like whip-cord, whilst the storm within him raged strong.

Oh! the misery, the mockery of life! Was it for this that he had come to England? Just to get a brief glimpse of happiness, and then to lose it for ever, and realize that the highest good vouchsafed to man on earth was denied him? Oh! it was cruel, cruel.

Why had they not told him at once, before he had grown to love her with such power and intensity? The disappointment would have been comparatively slight. Why had not those who knew how matters stood warned him in time, and so prevented the mischief? This deadly hurt might have been spared him. A little frankness and foresight would have averted the evil. But no doubt it was nothing to them—and he laughed a bitter laugh—nothing to anybody if he fell desperately in love with a girl who was already another man's property. They would only sneer, and say he was a fool for not finding out how the land lay sooner.

He did not blame Dot. No unkind thought crossed his mind in connection with her. He exonerated her entirely. She had done all that modest maiden could do. Looking back, he saw now quite clearly how from their very first meeting she had discouraged any symptom of sentiment, and steadily repressed all display of tender feeling.

But her father! her mother! Aye, her mother!

Mrs. Lankester was the one who had thrown dust in his eyes, who had egged him on by every means in her power, and who, he felt convinced, was bent on securing him as a husband for her daughter. She had purposely practised concealment. He was as sure of it as he was of his own existence. So he raved all the way up to town. But after awhile his passion spent itself. It left him shaken to the innermost depths of his being, but calmer, juster. He even tried to argue against the evidence of his own senses.

After all, it was just possible he might be mistaken. Perhaps Will was a cousin. Girls were often very fond of their cousins in an innocent confiding way. But no, Dot's look of ineffable content destroyed the supposition. No girl could look at a man like that unless she were thoroughly in love with him. It was useless trying to explain away facts just because they had dealt a death blow to his hopes.

There was not much to be done under the circumstances. But one thing he could do; namely—know the worst. He would keep silence no longer. The passion that consumed his heart should find an outlet once, even if it must remain mute ever after. Thus he resolved.

But it would be too late to see Dot that evening on his return from town. The anguish must be endured for yet a few hours more. On the next day, at the earliest possible hour, he would seek an interview.

Then, on a sudden, he remembered with a species of grim satisfaction, that Mrs. Lankester was confined to her room by rheumatism. He should see Dot alone, thank God! and he knew her well enough to feel convinced that from her lips, if not from her mother's, he should hear nothing but the truth. Dot's statements could be absolutely relied upon. *She* would not deceive him.

Bob spent a restless, wakeful and miserable night. Sleep obstinately refused to visit his tired eyelids. Coloured lights, kaleidoscopic in shape and variety, danced beneath them, and still further fatigued his tired brain. His cough harassed him, and rendered him hot and feverish. Thought, that horrible nightmare of active minds, effectually prevented any ease. He tossed and tumbled between the sheets, and counted the slow, interminable hours, until at length dawn brought temporary unconsciousness. When he arose next morning he felt ill, both bodily and mentally. During the last month or six weeks his nerves had been kept in a state of perpetual tension. Now they were sur-excited and utterly unhinged. The unexpected apparition of Will had proved too much for them.

Out of doors everything was in unison with his feelings. The thaw—such as it was—still continued. The sky was grey, so also was the earth, a leaden mist, weird, ghostly, phantom-like seemed to descend from the one and to exude from the other. It wrapped a sodden shroud around the landscape; the trees were black, and shining with a moisture which trembled between ice and water; patches of dirty honeycombed snow lay about in all directions. Occasionally, some loosened clod would come slipping down from the roof with a dull thr

disintegrated particles splashed against the window panes. Oh ! the misery, and chilliness, and dreariness of it all ! The desolation that it conveyed ! Bob sighed as he gazed around him, at the big empty house, the wide park, the dripping shrubs, and the melancholy plantations. These things were very beautiful in their way, but they wanted sun. He missed the brightness and the warmth of an Australian winter.

How strange it seemed, to think that Christmas Day was close at hand. He wondered what his mother and Belle and the little ones were about. What an age since he had seen them. How much he had lived and suffered in the time. He could hardly believe that this Bob Jarrett was the Bob Jarrett he had known in former days ; such an utter change had come over him. Once he had been a high-spirited, happy-go-lucky young fellow, and now—

Into his aching heart suddenly surged a great, wild longing to see his mother, to feel her cool lips pressed to his, to hear her gentle voice bidding him go forth and be of good cheer.

"Oh ! mother, mother !" he cried aloud, in the bitterness of an anguish too great for many words, "how I wish that you were with me at this moment."

Nevertheless he went out to meet his fate like a man, and the little maid-servant who answered Doctor Lankester's front door bell had not the least suspicion that every nerve and every pulse possessed by Mr. Robert Jarrett, of Straightem Court, was quivering like a girl's, when she led him into the house and preceded him up the narrow staircase, to which by this time he was well accustomed.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LOVE BEFORE MONEY.

Bob was unceremoniously ushered into Dot's presence, without the girl being asked whether she were at home to visitors or not. The maid-servant had, for some time past, looked upon him as one of the family, and felt

flattered by the attentions he was paying her young mistress.

In anticipation of a *tête-à-tête*, he had carefully prepared a little set speech, which he hoped would not only conceal his excessive nervousness, but also pave the way to asking that important question, "Who is Will, and in what relation does he stand to you? Is he your brother, your cousin, or your lover?" which he was dying to put.

But directly he saw Dot he forgot all about his immediate intentions, and thought only of her, and what he could do to serve her. For she had been crying, there in the drawing-room, all alone by herself. His heart grew big at the thought of her distress. A pair of very red eyes, set in a piteous little pale face, unmistakably proclaimed that she was in trouble.

So suddenly had he come upon her that it was impossible to attempt any evasion, as she seemed to realize, for with evident embarrassment she advanced to meet him.

"Why, Miss Dot!" he exclaimed in agitated tones, her emotion proving communicative, "what on earth is the matter with you?"

There was something so sympathetic and concerned in his way of making the enquiry, that for all answer she sat down on the nearest seat, and hiding her face in her hands, burst into a perfect storm of tears. Her slight frame was shaken by sobs, which no effort appeared able to suppress.

The sight of such grief as this simply maddened him, and rendered him oblivious to every consideration of prudence or self-control. His one instinct, one desire, was to comfort her.

In an instant, he was down on his knees by her side, his hat and stick rolling on the floor, whilst, unconsciously almost, a nervous arm stole round her waist—that slender waist which he had so often longed to encircle, and wondered whether he ever should.

"Dot, Dot! my darling, my own dear little woman, don't cry, sweet one. I can't bear to see you in this state. What is it that vexes you?"

"No—no—nothing. P—please—get—up, Mr. Jarrett."

"I can't. I won't. Oh! Dot," and he tore her hands from her face and devoured them with passionate kisses.

"You must know how things are with me—you cannot have been blind all this time. Dearest, give me the right to take care of you, and love you. I will move heaven and earth to make your life happy, and keep all trouble from you. Tell me what your sorrow is, and let me share it." The words were spoken at last. He clenched his teeth, and waited to hear what answer she would give him. A shudder ran through her frame. She tried to push away his arm with gentle force.

"Don't, Mr. Jarrett, please don't. You—you mustn't."

"Mustn't!" he cried, with bitter pain. "Oh! Dot, I can't help myself, for I do love you so dearly."

"Hush, pray don't speak so." And she put out a warning hand. But she might just as well have tried to stop a mountain torrent in its impetuous course.

"It's too late to tell me to keep quiet," he went on, with growing passion. "I can no longer remain silent."

"Indeed—indeed it would be best," she interrupted.

"Perhaps so, but one cannot always stop to choose the wisest course, even if one would. Dot, I am desperate, and must have an answer. Surely you can say yes or no."

"Why do you insist on giving yourself so much pain?" she asked sadly.

"Because, as I have said before, I love you, and have loved you ever since the day you came trotting down the road, and opened that beastly gate for me. Of course you have not thought of me. All this comes as a surprise, but I will wait, Dot—wait years until you get to care for me a little bit, if only you will promise some day to be my wife. Darling, say that I have a chance."

His eloquent words, full of passionate sincerity, recalled her to herself, and to the gravity of the situation. With an effort she recovered her composure.

"Mr. Jarrett," she said in a voice that tried hard to appear steady, looking at him with dim, compassionate eyes. "I am so dreadfully sorry—I—I hoped you would never put this question to me, for alas! I cannot answer it as you wish."

There was a moment's silence. Then he staggered to his feet, and looked wildly round the room. "You cannot," he ejaculated. "Then there must be a reason, and my suspicions are confirmed."

She hung her head, but made no reply.
 "Dot, for heaven's sake, don't keep me any longer in suspense. This is a matter of life or death to me."

"What is it you wish to know?" she asked almost inaudibly.

"I happened to be at the railway station yesterday morning, and I saw you. You met a young man there; he kissed you, and you seemed pleased that he should do so. Is he"—and his utterance grew thick—"is he anything to you? I do not seek to pry into your affairs from idle curiosity, but I think I have a right to an answer."

The colour flamed up into her face, but she answered with quiet dignity:

"You shall have one, Mr. Jarrett. The gentleman you saw is my affianced husband. We have been engaged to each other for very nearly three years."

"Why did you not tell me this sooner?" The words burst from him hoarse and inarticulate.

"How could I?" she replied mournfully, "when my own parents refused to sanction the engagement."

"And you care for this man? Dot, for Heaven's sake, tell me the truth."

"Yes, I love him better than my life. I would sacrifice everything in the world to be his wife."

At this answer, Bob's senses grew dim. The room suddenly swam before his eyes. A sound as of mighty waves dashing against the shore deafened his ears. For several seconds darkness descended upon his brain and literally paralyzed it with a hideous and oppressive power. He grasped at the back of a chair for support. The world, life, Dot Lankester, appeared like an indistinct dream. It was some time before he recovered sufficient consciousness to be aware that she was speaking to him and looking up into his face with anxious, frightened eyes.

"Oh! Mr. Jarrett. Are you ill? What is wrong? What—what have I done?"

He took no notice of her interrogations. His mind could contain but one thought.

"Is there no chance, Dot, none whatever? Can nothing alter your decision?" he asked in a subdued, unnatural voice, which sounded strange even to himself.

The tears rushed to her eyes. An overpowering pity

filled her being. He was so honest, so good and unselfish, so worthy of love, and yet—she had none to give.

"No," she said softly but firmly. "I cannot raise false hopes. I have tried very hard to make you understand how things were. Of course when we first met, it did not matter and there seemed no special reason why you should be told about Will. But afterwards, when I began to suspect that you liked me, then, although I was not sure of the correctness of my suspicion, I did my very best to impress upon your mind the fact that some barrier existed between us. If I had spoken out, as perhaps I ought to have done, you might have considered me forward, presumptuous and conceited. It appeared to me immodest to make sure of a man's love before he had himself declared that his affections were engaged. I was placed in a dilemma, so held my peace, though I now feel I have been bitterly to blame." And once more the tears threatened to overflow their soft-fringed boundaries.

"No, Dot," he said sorrowfully. "You could not have told me the truth more surely and impressively than you did. Only, you see, I refused to take warning in time. I do not wish to accuse any one, but your mother, some weeks ago, certainly led me to believe that you were heart-whole; she even regretted the scarcity of eligible young men in this part of the country."

"If you knew mamma as well as I do, you would not have paid any attention to what she"—began Dot, but she checked herself suddenly, and blushed as red as a rose. Her young voice rang with an unconscious scorn, which revealed more than any number of condemnatory speeches. A long pause ensued, Bob's brows were knit. He was evidently recalling his first interview with Mrs. Lankester, and no very pleasant memories resulted.

Dot was the first to speak.

"Mr. Jarrett," she said at length, "I, for one, have never wilfully deceived you, but all the same, some little explanation is your due. You think you have been badly treated in this matter."

"Not by you," he interposed. "Never for one instant by you."

"If not by me, then by my relatives. It comes to the

same thing. Have you patience to listen to a long story? If so I can render some few points clear that now very naturally puzzle you."

"Patience!" he retorted with keen misery, "when this is the last time I may ever be alone with you again. Oh! Dot, I resemble a miser counting his money. Every moment spent in your company is like precious gold. Would that your story would last as long as there is life in this wretched body!"

She put her finger to her lips, gently rebuking the desolate and rebellious spirit he displayed, yet the heart within her was very sore, and swollen with compassion.

He had been such a true, staunch friend to her, and she liked him so much; she so thoroughly appreciated his many sterling qualities, and the kindness and simplicity of his nature. Fate, and fate alone, had brought into her horoscope somebody else before she had ever had the chance of meeting him. Otherwise the issue might have been very different. Mr. Jarrett was rich, a splendid match in every way for the daughter of a humble village doctor. And Will was poor; so poor that he could not afford to keep a wife, and might not be able to indulge in such a luxury for many years. Without being worldly, she knew enough of the world to realize all the advantages offered by an alliance with Mr. Jarrett, of Straightem Court. Yet no thought of disloyalty to Will found even a temporary dwelling place in her mind, although since their last meeting a horrible suspicion embittered her very existence. She wished she had a twin sister exactly like herself in outward appearance, but infinitely more deserving in every other way, so that Bob could marry her and be comforted. "The pity of it, the pity of it." That was her predominating feeling. Such a waste of valuable affection—an affection calculated to make any girl supremely happy—thrown away in a wrong direction. Love, so precious and so holy, when genuine as in the present case, showered upon one who had not the power to return it. Everything at cross-purposes, everything wrong. This was how Dot felt. Bob had paid her the greatest compliment a man can pay a woman. Instead of filling her soul with joy, it had steeped it in sadness. All she could do to alleviate his sufferings was

to give him her fullest confidence, and hold nothing back. Absolute frankness on her part might perhaps render things a little less hard to bear on his. It might console him somewhat to learn that he had never had a chance of gaining her love, since her troth was plighted long before he had ever set foot in England, or dreamt of inheriting his uncle's property. If she had been brave and done violence to her feelings sooner, then he might have been spared much pain. She made a sign to Bob to be seated, then drawing her chair close beside him, she began in a low but clear voice :

"Did you happen to notice a grey stone house, just outside Smallborough, standing some little way back from the road, that day you were good enough to mount me on Kingfisher?"

"You mean the quaint, old-fashioned house with an apple orchard? Yes, I remember it well."

"It was inhabited some few years ago by one Mr. Barrington and his wife and children. In those days they were comfortably off, and Mr. Barrington lived the life of a country squire. The oldest boy, Will, when quite a child, displayed a perfect passion for surgery."

"*Your* Will, Dot?" interrupted Bob.

"Yes," reddening, "my Will." Then she added under her breath, "My Will that was; pray God he is so still. When he was eighteen," she continued in a louder key, "my father, partly through friendship and partly because Will's presence was an additional source of income, took him to live with us as a gentleman apprentice. At that time I was fifteen years old, but I had known Will ever since my childhood. We had had many a romp together, and he always distinguished me from the other girls in the neighbourhood, and declared that I was his little sweetheart, and should marry him some day. When he came to live with us, and we saw each other constantly, our affection ripened. On his twenty-first birthday he went to my parents and asked them to give their consent to his courtship. To make a long story short, we were formally engaged."

"And how old were you?" asked her listener. "You look such a baby, even now."

"Just a few days over seventeen. Will and I had one

week's perfect happiness, and then bad times came for both of us. His father woke up one fine morning to find himself ruined through the absconding and malpractices of a fraudulent trustee. Instead of poor Will receiving an income, he had now to work for his living in earnest, and congratulate himself on having adopted a profession. I hardly like to repeat all that then took place in our family. Suffice it, that my mother, who as long as she thought Will's people were rich, quite approved of the marriage, and in fact had done her best to promote it, now suddenly turned round and refused to sanction our engagement."

"That was awful hard lines upon you," murmured Bob.

"Yes, it was, for she insisted upon my giving Will up, and having nothing more to say to him."

"And did you?"

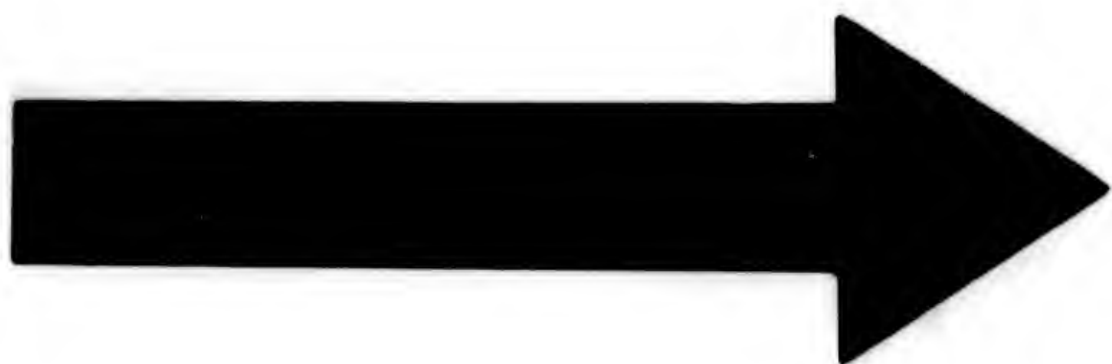
"How could I? People can't change like that simply because they are told to. You can order a good many things in this world, but you can't order a loving heart to transfer its allegiance."

"Aye, that's true," sighed Bob regretfully.

"I could no more desert poor Will when he was in trouble, and most needed sympathy and encouragement, than fly," continued Dot warmly. "I refused flatly to obey my mother's bidding. Then came scenes, horrible to remember. We have never been quite friendly since."

"Did not your father take your part? He seems so fond of you."

"Yes, in a way. He was far from approving of my mother's conduct, but he did not dare say much, on account of Matilda, whose poverty is always thrown in his face. Neither did he at all like the idea of a long engagement, likely to last for years. In short, the marriage was broken off, only Will and I vowed when we wished each other good-bye, that we would be true and faithful, and never, *never*, NEVER marry anybody else." Dot here tried hard to suppress a sob. She could not tell any living being the new trouble that weighed so heavily upon her spirits. Her short interview with Will had left her sadder than before. He seemed to have become estranged, and to be concealing something from her.



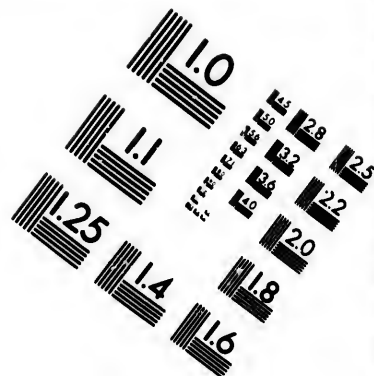
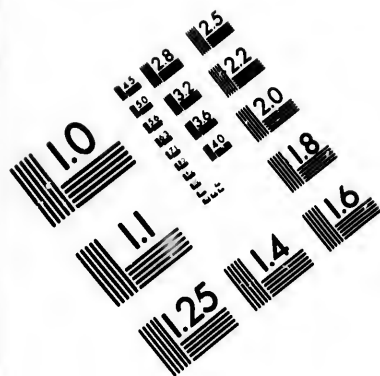
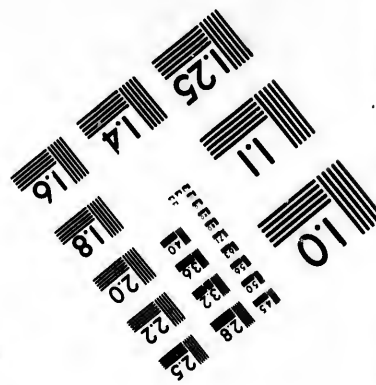
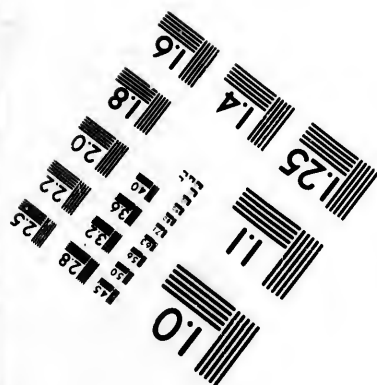
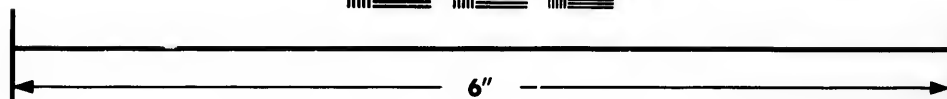
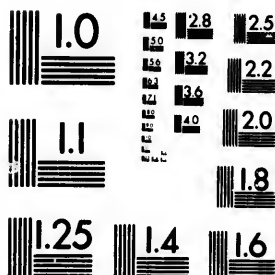


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"And were your father and mother aware of this resolution?" asked Bob.

"Oh! dear, yes. Papa did what he could to help us by getting Will a minor appointment at one of the big London hospitals, which at all events enabled him to keep himself. As for my mother, she refused to allow the poor boy's name to be mentioned in her presence, and so you see—you see," said the girl, breaking down completely, "that was how you never came to hear anything about him. But mother was not as much to blame as you seem to think, since although I considered myself engaged, she did not."

Bob had grown paler and paler during the above recital. It effectually quenched any last remaining hopes, and made his cup of bitterness overflow. Dot's love was evidently no mere idle fancy, but a deep-rooted passion, which neither opposition nor distance had been able to overcome. That fortunate Will! What if he were penniless? He envied him from the bottom of his heart, and would gladly have changed places with him, had it been possible.

"Do you understand?" said Dot, wondering at his continued silence.

"Yes," he said in a hoarse, constrained voice, "I understand, and there is nothing more to be said. I only beg pardon for my folly."

"Don't call it folly," she returned. "It is 'kismet.' We mortals have really very little power over the march of events."

"What were you crying about when I came in?" he asked abruptly.

She flushed crimson. It was impossible to reveal the distracting thought that tormented her, and which was the real cause of her present disquietude.

"It seems that one of the people in the village saw me at the station yesterday. Will was only passing through on business. I had not seen him for a whole year, and he wrote and begged me to meet him; and oh! Mr. Jarrett, I could not help doing so. I knew if I asked mamma's leave she would not give it, so I went without. She was dreadfully angry, and said such cruel, cruel things."

Dot could not tell the whole truth ; and it was easier to account for her red eyes in this way than in any other.

"What sort of things?" inquired Bob, not trusting himself to look at his companion.

"She went on about my giving Will up, and called him a pauper and horrible names, which made my blood boil, and then she wanted me to promise to——"

"Marry me, eh?" he said grimly. "Well, go on," he continued, as Dot turned scarlet. "Had you any other cause of trouble, or was that the sole one?"

"Is it very wicked to wish for things one can't have?" she rejoined innocently.

"I don't know; but if it is, I am a veritable fiend at this moment."

"I do so wish I had five thousand pounds."

"Five thousand pounds! Why, what would you do with such a sum?"

"Give it to Will, of course. He has a splendid opening. An excellent practice has been offered to him in one of the suburbs of London, which is worth between four and five hundred a year, but the present practitioner would have to be bought out, and this is just what Will can't do."

"Is there no chance of his getting the money, or of his father helping him?"

"No, none, whatever. Mr. Barrington can't, poor man, even if he would. We had a long talk about it yesterday, and put our heads together, but neither of us could see our way in the least. Will says this practice would be the making of him, and that it is absurd for people to think of marrying without a proper income."

"Was he always so wise?" inquired Bob.

She hesitated a moment, and then with a sudden burst of tears said, "No, not always. Once upon a time he never seemed to care about the money part of the business, but he does now."

"And was that what you were crying about, Dot?"

"Yes, I suppose so. What with one thing and another, I felt regularly out of sorts this morning."

Bob stood up, as if to go. A wild, insensate joy surged up into his heart when he heard that a very real obstacle existed, which would prevent the girl becoming Will

Barrington's wife, at all events for a considerable time. Delay meant a chance still. *He* might profit by the young people's difficulties. The next moment he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself for harbouring such a feeling. Was this his love? this his devotion?

What a poor, base, selfish passion was that which refused to rejoice in the happiness and welfare of its object. How mean and unworthy of an honest man. A flush of self-abasement mantled in his cheek.

"Dot," he said, "answer me one question, though it is absurd my asking it. Do you care very much for this Will of yours, so much that you feel as if you could not live without him?"

She looked up into his face. The solemnity of his manner awed her.

"Yes, Mr. Jarrett, that is exactly how I do feel. You are not angry with me, are you?"

"Angry? No; why should I be angry simply because the love of as dear and honest a girl as ever walked this earth is not for me? Only I wish to goodness that Will had never been born."

"He came first," she said simply. "I knew him long before I knew you. I can't help myself now."

His sense of rectitude admitted the plea. There was no gainsaying its truth.

"Yes," he said, "he came first, lucky beggar. That's where the mischief lay. And now I am going. Good-bye, Dot, dear, may God bless you, and send you health and happiness."

The tears trickled down her face. There was something in her heart which she scarcely understood, and which she suppressed as treason to Will.

"Good-bye, Mr. Jarrett. You will let me be your friend still, won't you? I—I—shall see you sometimes?"

"Yes, most certainly. But I think I shall go away for a bit—at all events until I have got over this." Then he took her hand in his, and added hastily, "And I say, Dot, don't be low-spirited. Look at the cheerful side of things, there's a dear. I feel certain they'll all come right in the end." And with that he was gone, leaving her to wonder what special quality enabled him, when he suffered so cruelly himself, to draw a veil over his own disappoint-

ment, and seek only to comfort her. She realized that he had even higher attributes than she had given him credit for. The pleasant, upright, straightforward, yet withal somewhat simple and unpolished youth was capable of real heroism. She felt that had it not been for Will's prior claims, she could never have sent him away. But Bob's heart as he walked towards home might have been made of lead.

Every hope that had ever nourished it, and caused it to beat fast and slow by turns was now finally crushed. He felt as if his life were at an end. All the joy and the physical enjoyment of life had vanished. What were wealth and position without Dot to share them?

Henceforth there was nothing to look forward to, nothing to strive for, nothing to live for. He looked up abstractedly at the sky. It was grey and sombre. But not greyer or more sombre than his thoughts. He glanced at the cold earth, enshrouded in spectral mist. It was drear and gloomy. But not drearier or gloomier than seemed his future.

How the wind blew, and souged through the leafless trees! How it penetrated to the very bones, and defied even the warmest clothing.

And out in Australia the sun was shining, the cattle were straying over the brown ground, panting for shade, and his mother was probably at that very moment basking in the verandah with the little ones around her. Oh! the sun, and the warmth, and the peace. How he longed for them all. With Schopenhauer, his weary soul cried out for "the blissful repose of nothing."

And then a chilly blast opposed his progress, the rain came sleeting down, and he coughed. That cough reminded him that the body has inherited a heritage of pain. Through his back, through his chest and his shoulder-blades there stole a dull aching sense of discomfort, which came as an aggravating accompaniment to his mental misery, just as if the one were not enough without the other.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

JUMPING MUDDYFORD BOTTOM.

FORTUNATELY, unhappy thoughts, like everything else on this earth, are subject to the law of finality. Before long, Bob's meditations were interrupted in an altogether unexpected fashion.

As he turned in at the gate of his own park, the blast of a horn fell upon his ears, waking echoes that had slept silent for many a day; and a few minutes afterwards he found himself overtaken by the whole of the Morbey-Anstead Hunt, who chased their fox into his shrubberies, and pursued him hotly, until the hounds became perplexed by the number of fresh animals that sprang up. The rain now came down in torrents, discharged with icy force from a lowering cloud overhead. So fierce was this shower that it caused a halt in the proceedings, and people with one accord began to look about for an available place of shelter.

"Won't you come in? You had much better all come in," cried Bob, addressing friends and foes alike. "It's not a bit of good standing out there and getting wet through. Come in, come in, and welcome."

So hearty was the hospitality offered, and so intensely disagreeable the weather, that a considerable number of people gladly responded to his invitation. One set the example to the other, and very soon there was quite a crowd of men and women inside the spacious hall of Straightem Court, tossing off Bob's brown sherry with evident relish, and nibbling daintily at sandwich or biscuit. The servants had not had such a bustling up for many a year, and were amazed at so heterogeneous an influx of visitors, the majority of whom their late master would not have condescended to talk to, much less ask beneath his roof. "Quantity, but not quality," sneered the pompous butler to his satellite, as he passed him bearing a loaded tray of empty glasses. As for Bob, it cheered him to see

human faces around. It was far better than coming home and finding the place empty, and having nothing to do but sit down and think over the events of the morning. He tried to drive away thought by moving about among his guests and personally attending to their wants, and he won the hearts of all the farmers present by ringing the bell and ordering up some very choice old port for their especial benefit and wishing good luck to agriculture. But he looked in vain for Lord Littlebrane. His lordship was as obstinately stand-off as on the never-to-be-forgotten occasion of Stiffton Flat races. Neither could he discern General Prosieboy, which caused him some slight wonderment, for he had made a pretty correct estimate of that gentleman's character.

However, he would probably have felt consoled for his absence had he been aware of the fact that the gallant old warrior was at that very moment imbibing a glass of stiff whisky and water in a covered yard at his (Bob's) expense, and exchanging witticisms with the under-housemaid.

Ladies are proverbially brave, and Lady De Fochsey, not calculating on quite such a day, had gone out hunting with the rest. Stiffshire was a county that offered but few resources for the stay-at-homes. Those who did not follow the chase led lives of absolute stagnation; and a frost was terrible, for all the idle young men went posting off to London immediately, and there were none but old fogies left to talk to.

Now her ladyship's smart scarlet jacket, with its white facings, light waistcoat and etceteras, had cost the best part of sixteen guineas; as a consequence she entertained a great regard and veneration for it. Having sallied forth without a covert coat, she was in considerable trepidation at the thought of the beautiful, extra-fine cloth stretching, and the entire garment thus becoming too large. It fitted without a wrinkle at present, but what might be the result if once it got wet through? This was the first reason she had ventured to appear in "pink," and so far she had been fortunate enough to escape any drenching rain. The scarlet came out as fresh and bright as ever, and filled her every time she wore it with an impression of her own good looks, which

to a naturally pretty woman was eminently agreeable and gratifying in the extreme.

But to-day the weather threatened to rob this much-prized garment of all its brilliancy. After her last somewhat unfriendly parting with Mr. Jarrett, she had resolved in a fit of petulance to have nothing more to say to him. There was a point when running after men became a nuisance, and did not repay the inevitable trouble. If, in spite of all his aptitudes, Bob refused to act the part of "kindred spirit," why, then she must look about her and find one elsewhere. It was a vulgar saying, but a true, that there were "as many fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

It was quite possible to establish psychological relations with some individual more responsive, and altogether endowed with finer sensibilities. Mr. Jarrett was good-looking, but horribly matter-of-fact. He looked at things from quite a vulgar and material point of view.

In spite of such reflections, when her ladyship saw several of her friends and acquaintances march boldly into Straightem Court, after first leaving their horses in the spacious stables, she put her pride in her pocket, and followed suit. The scarlet jacket was more important at this juncture than dignity; already there were great dark splashes upon it, and she could almost fancy that the waist had begun to expand.

So she jumped hastily to the ground, threw her reins to the nearest groom, and entered the house without more ado. Her theory was, that woman should always be chameleon-like in nature, since in the first place circumstances forced her to be adaptive; and in the second, it gave her such an enormous advantage, when she could present many fronts to her natural enemy—man. Nothing disconcerted him so much as blowing hot and cold by turns.

When Bob saw who the new arrival was, a smile spread over his features.

"Lady De Fochsey!" he exclaimed in tones of unmistakable gratification, "this is indeed kind. I thought you had made up your mind, after our last meeting, to join the majority, and cut me dead."

She looked a little embarrassed at this speech, but turned it off with a laugh.

"You were a very foolish, headstrong boy, but I dare say you have grown wiser by this time, and at any rate, I intend to give you another chance," with a pretty arch smile.

"I'm delighted to hear it. I could not bear to think we had quarrelled."

"It was your own fault," she said, sipping at a glass of sherry which Bob had just handed her. "But as a proof of my magnanimity I give you your choice. What is it to be, war or peace? Decide either way you like." And she made a little coquettish grimace, quite thrown away upon the person whom it was intended to captivate.

"Oh! peace, peace," he murmured hurriedly; "I am far too miserable at the present moment to care to be at loggerheads with any one."

She raised her eyebrows in astonishment, and looked at him keenly and critically. As she did so, she was struck all at once by the altered expression of his countenance, which made it appear almost ten years older. His despondency and dejection were so great that he did not even seek to conceal them, as most certainly he would have striven to do later on. A deep soul-weariness prevents good acting.

"Why, Bob," she ejaculated, falling back into the familiar style of nomenclature first adopted, "what on earth's the matter with you? You look all to pieces."

"I look what I am, then."

"But what's wrong? What are you miserable about?"

"No—no—nothing," he stammered in return; "at least, nothing that I care to talk of."

"Is it money?"

"No."

"Business?"

"No."

"Family worries?"

"No."

"Then it's love as a matter of course. It can't possibly be anything else."

He tossed off a glass of wine, but made no reply. She, however, needed none.

"I suppose the 'beautiful being' whom I chaffed you about the other day is at the bottom of this tremendously

tragical affair, eh?" she resumed insistently. "Has the young person not been kind?"

Bob still maintained an obstinate silence. It was torture to have his freshly-inflicted wound so mercilessly probed by a cruel female hand. He writhed like a captured bird caught in a net.

"Come, it's not very civil of you to decline to answer a question made by a lady. How is she?"

"How is who?" he asked irritably, goaded into speech at last.

"Why! your little friend in the patched habit—the doctor's daughter; or if you want it put clearer, the girl you were carrying on with so outrageously."

The blood flew to his brow. Indignation made every muscle quiver.

"I presume you mean Miss Lankester! and as for carrying on, as you call it, I'm not carrying on at all."

"Oh! aren't you? Since when have you come to your senses, pray?"

"Since half-past ten o'clock this morning, if you must know the precise hour."

"Well, I'm glad you've escaped from that exceedingly forward and immodest young woman. And all I can say is, that the way she ran after you out hunting was really quite disgusting."

"She didn't do anything of the sort," he retorted angrily. "And please don't slander her."

"I'm not slandering her; nasty, sly little thing, though I'm sure she deserves it."

"Yes, you are, and if you want to hear the truth of the matter, I'll tell it you, rather than stand by and hear Miss Lankester abused."

"Well?" said her ladyship interrogatively, making no attempt to conceal her curiosity.

"Miss Lankester, instead of behaving in the manner you assert, happens to be already engaged, and won't have a word to say to me. There!" And Bob clenched his teeth in anguish.

She shrugged her shoulders with a truly provoking gesture of incredulity. That a person in the exceedingly humble position of a country doctor's daughter, should stick to any pre-formed engagement, when she had the

chance of securing Mr. Jarrett, of Straightem Court, surpassed her comprehension altogether. Her mind could not realize the possibility of so tremendous an act of folly.

"Pshaw! What's the good of telling me such nonsense as that. I really wonder where you expect to go to."

But again he relapsed into silence. Her lively sallies could not succeed in rousing him from the dejection in which he was steeped. This fact dawned upon her by degrees. She began to be aware that something was very seriously wrong with him. Now that there was no longer any question of rivalry she could afford to be generous and sympathetic. Besides, men were often caught on the rebound. If he had not been so good-looking, she would not have troubled herself about him one bit, but as it was, she could not help feeling interested in his sorrows—imaginary or otherwise.

"Bob," she said with increasing kindliness. "Am I to understand that you have proposed to this little insignificant girl, and that she has actually refused you?"

He turned sharply away. Her eyes seemed to sear him like scorching flame. Why could not she leave him alone? What was it to her, whether he had asked Dot Lankester to be his wife or not?

"Lady De Fochsey," he said with a petulant gesture, "you are of course at liberty to draw any conclusions you may choose from our conversation. I can only say that the subject is a painful one, and I would feel obliged by your not discussing it. I—I"—breaking down suddenly—"am very unhappy."

She might be foolish, but apart from her vanities and coquetry, she was by no means a bad-hearted woman. Moreover, she felt that she had pressed him a trifle ungenerously. His utter despondency caused her to experience a sensation of genuine emotion, such as she had not felt for a long time.

How nice it must be to be loved like this. How happy it would make her to inspire so real a passion.

There was something artless and engaging about him; simple perhaps, yet withal different from other men of her acquaintance. His youth, too, appealed to her. Ever since she had turned five-and-twenty she had developed a strong partiality for boys. Candour and innocence were refreshing from their very rarity.

"Look here, Bob," she said, "you and I may have had our little differences, but I'm not one to bear malice, and if you feel low-spirited, and in want of sympathy and consolation, why then," giving his hand a gentle pressure, "you know where to come."

A lump rose up in his throat. He was much too wretched to care to avail himself of the invitation, but he felt that it was kindly meant. And a little kindness goes such a long way when one is in trouble. In a curiously husky voice he said, "Thank you," and then hurried away to the nearest window, where he stood for several seconds resolutely forcing back a certain moisture that dimmed his eyesight. Lady De Fochsey had never been so near converting him into a medium capable of receiving and transfusing electric force, but her success was due to human sympathy and not to spiritualistic agencies. A break in the sky, a gleam of sickly light, and an abatement in the rain now caused those within doors to hurry out in search of their horses.

Directly his guests showed symptoms of departing, Bob went upstairs and hastily donned hunting attire. He might as well go out as stay at home; moreover, he felt in a mood when, to ride recklessly at a certain number of big fences, and to gallop at full speed across the green pastures would act as a sedative and bring relief to his overwrought nerves.

He had previously ordered Kingfisher to be got ready. He had never yet been on his back, having, up till today, religiously reserved his best horse for Dot; but now—and a wave of bitterness flooded his spirit—what was the use of any longer keeping him for that purpose? After what had passed, he felt nothing would ever induce her to ride him again, and place herself under an obligation. He remembered her original reluctance, which of course would henceforth be intensified.

Oh! how sad it was, to find all one's dreamings, dreams and not realities, to see the airy structure of hope and love, so skilfully constructed in the chambers of one's mind, crumble away at the first unexpected stroke. What a blankness and dreariness remained behind when all the picturings of the imagination proved vain and could never be attained. How brightness turned to

darkness, pleasure to pain, and youth to premature old age. Life was very, very cruel ; despair its key-note. So he mused as he mounted his horse.

A minute or two later Burnett sallied forth from the wash-house, where he had taken refuge, and calling to his hounds to follow him, trotted out on to the lawn, where he was soon joined by the entire field. By this time there was not much chance of hitting off the line of the hunted fox, so it was resolved to draw sundry plantations within the precincts of the park. A small spinney was first called upon, which immediately furnished a fine, white-tagged old fellow. Judging from his behaviour he appeared to be a stranger, for, unlike the home-bred article, he showed no disposition to linger, but at once set his mask straight for the open.

Owing to the recent frost, the weather, and various causes, the Field was a much smaller one than usual, and all those who meant "going" could do so to-day, and had no excuse for lagging behind. Even the starting rush for the nearest available gate was comparatively mild, and no one got blocked for more than a few seconds. Consequently, everybody possessing the inclination secured a good start. A chorus of melodious music filled the air. From deep-throated followers burst the familiar sound which cheers the heart of every thorough sportsman. Hounds dashed out of the spinney and flashed across the greensward like a silver comet.

What mattered then the wind and the rain, when two-and-twenty couple were racing ahead, throwing their tongues joyously and flinging after their quarry with glorious dash and resolution? Who cared then if the sky were grey or blue, the atmosphere dry or moist, the wind chilly or the reverse? Every mind, human as well as canine, was concentrated on the chase. A look of determination stole over men's features. They set their jaws, tightened their reins, settled themselves in their saddles, and prepared to ride hard in defiance of cold and wet. In another minute they were out of the park and into the fields beyond. Here the fun began, for Reynard was evidently determined on putting roadsters to confusion, and chose a bee line across country.

Big, the fences round Straightem village were always,

but to-day they seemed even bigger than usual, or else this crafty pug had a better notion of baulking the enemy. Without hesitation he led his foes straight down to a yawning bottom, with a thick-set fence on the near side, and a positively ghastly gully on the off. The line of pursuit was checked. A more awkward obstacle could not well be imagined. In the annals of the Hunt it was recorded that no man had ever cleared Muddyford Bottom at this particular spot.

With muttered execrations, the leading horsemen—Burnett amongst the rest—pulled up and looked round for a place where, with a crawl, a splash and a lucky scramble, they could get in and out.

Bob had two advantages over his companions. He was a stranger and did not know the country, and he was reckless—at all events on this particular day. To break his neck out hunting seemed to him just then the highest good that was left to him in life. He courted death, though death, like a shy maiden, is apt to refuse too ardent a wooer. The bigger the obstacle, the more eagerly did Bob welcome it. It did not matter what evil befell him, now that Dot had given him his *congé*. Of any effect he was likely to produce he did not think for an instant. He was much too miserable to care any longer for other people's opinions.

His face was drawn, his eyes wild and bloodshot. Those who noticed his appearance whispered that he had been drinking heavily, but this was a libel. He might not be over sane, but at all events liquor had nothing to do with his insanity. It was unrequited passion that rendered him oblivious to personal danger, and lent him a courage bordering on madness.

Anyhow, whilst his neighbours were casting up and down the Bottom, and hounds were rapidly disappearing from vision, though their keen notes came floating backwards to the ear—for the ladies were garrulous to-day—he took Kingfisher sharply by the head, turned him round, and rushed him at the formidable gulf.

The good horse was only just out of his stable, and as fresh as paint. He needed no second invitation, especially with the pack stealing away in front of him. Besides, it required an exceptionally awkward place to stop

darkness, pleasure to pain, and youth to premature old age. Life was very, very cruel; despair its key-note. So he mused as he mounted his horse.

A minute or two later Burnett sallied forth from the wash-house, where he had taken refuge, and calling to his hounds to follow him, trotted out on to the lawn, where he was soon joined by the entire field. By this time there was not much chance of hitting off the line of the hunted fox, so it was resolved to draw sundry plantations within the precincts of the park. A small spinney was first called upon, which immediately furnished a fine, white-tagged old fellow. Judging from his behaviour he appeared to be a stranger, for, unlike the home-bred article, he showed no disposition to linger, but at once set his mask straight for the open.

Owing to the recent frost, the weather, and various causes, the Field was a much smaller one than usual, and all those who meant "going" could do so to-day, and had no excuse for lagging behind. Even the starting rush for the nearest available gate was comparatively mild, and no one got blocked for more than a few seconds. Consequently, everybody possessing the inclination secured a good start. A chorus of melodious music filled the air. From deep-throated followers burst the familiar sound which cheers the heart of every thorough sportsman. Hounds dashed out of the spinney and flashed across the greensward like a silver comet.

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him. Other horses might find Stiffshire tax their powers, but it was not often that he failed to prove equal to the occasion. But best of all, his heart was in the right place.

He made a magnificent bound, and did not attempt to refuse. Only when he saw what an abyss confronted him on the landing side, he jerked his hind-quarters round with a desperate effort. Even then he dropped both hind legs, and threw Bob right on to his neck. For a second it was touch and go whether he would fall or not, but he was as active as a cat, and making a gallant struggle, recovered himself, and was up and away in less time than it takes to tell of.

For once, Muddyford Bottom had been fairly jumped. It measured four-and-twenty feet across, and so much was it dreaded that not another soul ventured to follow Bob's example. He was alone with hounds, and gained an advantage which throughout the run none succeeded in wresting from him.

The Mutual Adorationites gnashed their teeth with impotent rage. They could not produce a Nimrod to compete with the much abused and despised "outsider," whom, without even knowing, they had seen fit to condemn. Not one of their number could touch him. He showed his back to the whole crew, lords, generals and captains, and in some quarters there was glee, in others, tribulation.

Meantime, Bob pursued his victorious career. His blood was literally on fire. A wild, hot glow pervaded his entire frame. He was scarcely conscious of his own actions. It still seemed to him as if he were trying to battle his way out of some dark nightmare which oppressed his spirit with a maddening intensity. He kept his eyes vacantly fixed on the leading hounds, and took little or no heed of the intervening fences. Kingfisher was left to negotiate them as he pleased, and perhaps for that reason jumped all the more perfectly, for he dearly liked having his head and not being interfered with.

And now it came on to pour again mercilessly. In five minutes the rain had penetrated through every portion of Bob's coat. But he had never even noticed

it. He was impervious to outside considerations. The chaos of his brain refused external detail. Even excitement could not altogether chase away despair, though it lightened it for the time being.

Had he been riding any other horse but Kingfisher, he must have "come to grief" a dozen times over. As it was, his escapes were marvellous. Oxers, bullfinches, break-neck timber, nothing could stop him. Where the hounds went there went he, himself and steed seeming to possess supernatural powers.

That run is famous to this day in the chronicles of the Morbey-Anstead Hunt. *The Field* and the *County Gentleman* wrote such glowing paragraphs about it, that it is needless to describe it minutely. Even those who most felt their defeat admitted that one man had the best of it throughout, and that this fortunate and much-to-be-envied individual was Robert Jarrett, Esq., of Straightem Court.

When, after fifty five panting minutes, Bob pulled up his foaming horse, and held the dead fox aloft, amid a circle of clamouring hounds,, whilst he waited for Burnett to make his appearance, he little dreamed of the glory he had gained, or the reputation won. Nevertheless, during those few sweet moments, he *almost* enjoyed himself and forgot Dot. But not for long.

When the fun was over and the excitement at the end, then the internal force evaporated which had hitherto sustained him. A sick, weary, deadening feeling stole over his frame. He had but the one horse out who had earned undying fame, but the gallant animal was done to a turn, which was not to be wondered at, seeing that having received no orders to the contrary, Matthews had watered and fed him as usual. And now Bob patted Kingfisher mechanically on the neck, and turned his head towards home.

Hunting was a first-rate sport. No one relished it more than he did—but, after all, hunting was not Dot, and without Dot life had lost its flavour.

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He felt it now, for the warmth which had animated his blood while the run lasted had slowly given place to a deadly chill.

He shivered as he rode under the dark trees of the avenue, and heard drop after drop roll to the ground. When he got into the stable yard, he was so stiff and so numbed that Matthews had to help him to dismount. His hands and feet had lost all sensation.

"Take a warm bath, sir, take a warm bath, and 'ave a drop of something hot to drink," counselled the old groom, as his master stood and trembled. "It's been a mortal cold day, and you've got a regular chill on you."

But Bob, instead of listening to good advice, insisted on loitering about, until he had ascertained that Kingfisher was none the worse for his exertions.

"I should think myself a very poor sort of sportsman, Matthews," he said, "if I looked after No. One before looking after my horse."

Matthews smiled approvingly. The more he saw of Bob the better he liked him.

"There's a many gentlemen," he said, "in this country who rides well, but there be mighty few who considers their 'osses afore themselves. Times 'as haltered since I was a boy. But now go and get changed, do-ee. What am I here for except to see after the nags?" Upon which, Bob entered the house.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A PARTING BEQUEST.

THE next day Bob was seriously ill; so ill that he was obliged to send for Dr. Lankester to come and see him in his professional capacity. He had had no rest all night, a sharp pain in his side, accompanied by an unusual difficulty in breathing, having quite prevented his getting any sleep. During the long hours of darkness he jumped the Muddyford Bottom a hundred times in imagination, whilst every formidable fence cleared during that never-to-be-forgotten run appeared photographed upon his brain with the distinctness of a miniature.

Dr. Lankester found him sitting cowering over a blazing fire in the smoking-room.

His eyes were bright, his cheeks unnaturally flushed, his skin dry and parched; yet, in spite of these and other feverish symptoms, he complained of an intense feeling of chilliness.

"You say you have a pain in your left side?" asked the doctor.

"Yes, dreadful. It's just like a knife running through one."

"H'm! And you experience difficulty in breathing?"

"I do. Once or twice during the night I thought I should have been suffocated."

"Are you hot and cold by turns, or do you feel cold all the time?"

"Now you mention it, I get awfully warm every now and then."

"Ah! I thought so. You will have to be careful, my dear boy, and do exactly as I tell you."

Although Dr. Lankester was far too experienced in his profession to alarm a patient needlessly, his grave countenance showed that he did not at all like Bob's appearance. Acting with medical authority, he ordered him back to bed at once, recommending warmth and quiet. He saw these orders obeyed, and remained some little time giving instructions to Charles, who was appointed to wait upon the invalid.

"What a fuss about nothing," exclaimed Bob, trying to speak cheerily. But though he professed a great disdain of coddling, he was glad to be forced to lie still, since he realized that he was considerably worse than he chose to admit. Dr. Lankester gave him no choice, but put him on the sick list there and then, and in his heart of hearts he thankfully submitted.

After a while the doctor took his leave, saying he would send round some suitable medicine and look in again later on.

He was as good as his word, for towards evening he once more visited Straightem Court, and stayed there over an hour, personally seeing that all his directions had been carried out. This having been done, he was distressed to find Bob worse instead of better, and the

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suspensions which he had entertained earlier in the day now received the fullest confirmation. He no longer doubted what his friend's malady was, and therefore took it upon himself to give the necessary orders.

Entirely on his own responsibility he telegraphed to a well-known London institution for a trained nurse to be sent down the first thing the next morning. He knew now that the young man's illness was no passing indisposition, but likely to prove a serious affair, requiring the greatest care and attention. Bob's lonely position filled him with compassion, and he was determined, individually, to do all he could for him.

When he reached home he said as much to his daughter. Mrs. Lankester had gone to dine with a relation, and was not expected back till the evening.

"I'm afraid our friend Jarrett is in a bad way," he concluded, after giving Dot a detailed account of his patient's condition. "I don't like the look of things at all. He doesn't know it, but he has got a weak chest naturally, and our English climate has played the bear with him."

"Oh! papa," cried the girl, alarmed by the gravity of her father's manner, "remember how good he has been to us. Don't let us leave the poor young man alone in that great, dreary house. Can't we have him here and nurse him?"

"He is scarcely in a fit state to be moved at present. Besides, your mother is not a good one with illness in the house. It fidgets her and puts her out."

"True, but I can't bear to think of his having no one but servants to look after him."

Her father smiled approval. She had inherited his warm heart.

"You don't consider me of much good, that's quite clear, Dot. Will you feel satisfied when I tell you that it is my intention to sit up with Mr. Jarrett to-night?"

"You! Oh! papa, that is kind of you. But is he very bad, then?"

"I'm afraid so. He is in for an attack of pleurisy, which threatens at any moment to assume a dangerous nature. It seems he went out hunting yesterday and got wet to the skin."

"But he was here," she cried impulsively. "He did not leave me until eleven o'clock."

"I don't know how that may be, but the lad told me himself he had gone with the hounds and caught a regular chill. Dot," with a kindly look stealing over his face, "we must pull him through if we can."

"Oh! yes, yes; of course we must. Only it all seems so sudden, and I can't realize that he is ill. But you will want a nurse. Why should not I be his nurse?"

"I have already telegraphed for one."

"May not I help? I should like to if I might." And she looked up with a pair of pleading eyes.

"You shall later on, Dot; but just now I want you to stay at home and tell your mother when she comes back where I am spending the night, so that she need not be under any alarm."

Two or three days passed away, and in spite of every care and all conceivable remedies, the patient showed no signs of improvement. In vain did Doctor Lankester prescribe opium and calomel and apply mustard poultices; they proved powerless to subdue the disease. Another doctor was called in, but he entirely approved of the treatment already adopted, and beyond one or two trifling suggestions had no advice to offer. Meantime Doctor Lankester was beginning to entertain grave fears for the result, and redoubled his attentions. What puzzled and distressed him most was the feeble vitality possessed by this apparently strong, healthy young man; Bob seemed to have so little recuperative power, and so small a share of that physical clinging to life which is a characteristic of nine human beings out of ten. He could not help thinking that something lay heavy on his mind.

Before long Bob became delirious, and then the good doctor guessed at the cause. He was deeply touched when he learnt how great was the invalid's affection for his daughter. He would have welcomed him as a son-in-law for his own sake, quite apart from any worldly considerations, having contracted a great liking for the young man. Now he could only show his good-will by devoting all his spare hours to him.

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pain had left him, but he seemed frightfully weak, and totally unable to rally. Unless some change speedily took place, he foresaw that death from exhaustion was imminent.

On the morning of the eighth day, as he was sitting in the sick room, he was startled by seeing Bob's eyes fixed earnestly upon him, with an expression of fully restored consciousness, which boded well.

"Doctor," he said feebly, "tell me the truth ; I can bear it. Am—am I going to die ?" and his eyes looked larger and solemn than ever.

Doctor Lankester made a vain effort to speak, but a lump rose up in his throat, and when he tried to give a consolatory answer his voice failed him.

"You need not trouble to tell me what I want to know," continued Bob after a slight pause, during which he had narrowly watched his companion's countenance. "After all it was a foolish question."

"There—there may be a chance yet," faltered the doctor in return. "You seem better to-day."

"Do I? I'm sorry for that. The truth is, I don't care to go on living."

"But, my poor, dear friend, you are so young to think of death as a refuge from trouble."

"That may be. But some young people feel as old as the hills and long for rest, and I am one of them. Can't you—can't you understand ?"

"Yes," huskily, "I think so. I wish it might all have been different."

"Thank you, doctor. Thank you for saying those words. I always felt that I had a friend in you. But don't be angry with—with Dot," turning red as he pronounced the girl's name. "It was not her fault."

"No, I suppose not. These things can't be helped."

"And you see, if—if she had grown to care for me, she would have been sorry now, and as it is"—with a wan smile—"nobody is much the worse. Dick will step into my shoes when I am gone, and the only person who will really feel my loss deeply will be my mother. Poor, dear old mum ! I wish I could have seen her again just to tell her not to mind."

"Hush ! Bob, don't talk like that. You may pull

through yet," cried Dr. Lankester. "My belief is you could if you would. It's your infernal indifference to life that keeps you back in my opinion. If only you had something to look forward to you would pick up in no time."

"I believe I should," answered the patient with quiet conviction. "But that's not likely."

Doctor Lankester's mouth was twitching. His eyes were full of tears. He could no longer hide his emotion, and rose as if to leave.

"Are you going?" said Bob. "If so, I wish you would do me a favour."

"Of course I will. What is it?"

"I want you, please, to send to Stiffon for a solicitor, and tell him to drive over here at once."

"Yes, Bob. Anything more?"

The colour flamed up into the young man's cheeks.

"Doctor," he said hesitatingly, "do you—do you think Dot would come and see me? I should so like to speak to her once more."

"She shall come, but on one condition. You must not excite or tire yourself."

Whereupon Doctor Lankester hurried out of the room, too much overcome to continue the conversation. Any sudden emotion might prove fatal to the patient in his present condition; on the other hand if Dot could inspire in him a wish to live, he was of opinion that Bob might still be saved. Yet how was he to induce his daughter to transfer her affections from one man to the other? The task seemed beyond his power, even were it right to attempt it. The issue must lie with God. Bob was closeted for a whole hour with the lawyer, and when Doctor Lankester re-entered the sick room, he was surprised to find him considerably stronger and more cheerful. Strange to say the exertion appeared to have done him good, and his mind was evidently easier than it had been for some time past.

"Now, please, fetch Dot," he called out impatiently, directly his medical adviser approached.

"Have you not done enough for to-day?" rejoined that gentleman. "Don't you think it will be wiser to wait till to-morrow?"

"Perhaps so, if I could make sure of there being one

pain had left him, but he seemed frightfully weak, and totally unable to rally. Unless some change speedily took place, he foresaw that death from exhaustion was imminent.

On the morning of the eighth day, as he was sitting in the sick room, he was startled by seeing Bob's eyes fixed earnestly upon him, with an expression of fully restored consciousness, which boded well.

"Doctor," he said feebly, "tell me the truth; I can bear it. Am—am I going to die?" and his eyes looked larger and solemn than ever.

Doctor Lankester made a vain effort to speak, but a lump rose up in his throat, and when he tried to give a consolatory answer his voice failed him.

"You need not trouble to tell me what I want to know," continued Bob after a slight pause, during which he had narrowly watched his companion's countenance. "After all it was a foolish question."

"There—there may be a chance yet," faltered the doctor in return. "You seem better to-day."

"Do I? I'm sorry for that. The truth is, I don't care to go on living."

"But, my poor, dear friend, you are so young to think of death as a refuge from trouble."

"That may be. But some young people feel as old as the hills and long for rest, and I am one of them. Can't you—can't you understand?"

"Yes," huskily, "I think so. I wish it might all have been different."

"Thank you, doctor. Thank you for saying those words. I always felt that I had a friend in you. But don't be angry with—with Dot," turning red as he pronounced the girl's name. "It was not her fault."

"No, I suppose not. These things can't be helped."

"And you see, if—if she had grown to care for me, she would have been sorry now, and as it is"—with a wan smile—"nobody is much the worse. Dick will step into my shoes when I am gone, and the only person who will really feel my loss deeply will be my mother. Poor, dear old mum! I wish I could have seen her again just to tell her not to mind."

"Hush! Bob, don't talk like that. You may pull

through yet," cried Dr. Lankester. "My belief is you could if you would. It's your infernal indifference to life that keeps you back in my opinion. If only you had something to look forward to you would pick up in no time."

"I believe I should," answered the patient with quiet conviction. "But that's not likely."

Doctor Lankester's mouth was twitching. His eyes were full of tears. He could no longer hide his emotion, and rose as if to leave.

"Are you going?" said Bob. "If so, I wish you would do me a favour."

"Of course I will. What is it?"

"I want you, please, to send to Stiffton for a solicitor, and tell him to drive over here at once."

"Yes, Bob. Anything more?"

The colour flamed up into the young man's cheeks.

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"Perhaps so, if I could make sure of there being one

for me. Oh! Doctor Lankester, if you knew how badly I want to see her you would not refuse my request."

His words contained a touching pathos, which went straight to the good doctor's heart. He would have given half he possessed to insure for Bob not one but many to-morrows; the sick man was so gentle and patient. He recognized with such docility and submission that life was but nature's plaything—a toy to be broken up at any moment, and hurled into the unfathomable abyss of eternity. He repined not, neither did he bemoan his hard fate. He was content to go—content to leave the cold, pitiless earth, the winter snows and summer sunshine, content even to part from his beloved; because she was not *his* beloved, but another's.

Only a little common tragedy every day played out to the bitter end by men and women possessing loving and tenacious hearts. As Dot had truly said, "Oh! the pity of it. The pity of it."

Quarter of an hour afterwards, the girl entered Bob's presence. He had altered so much in these few days that she hardly knew him, and the change shocked her to such an extent that she was seized with a fit of trembling. For his sake she had determined to be brave and composed. What were her bravery and composure worth, since at one sight of the invalid they vanished?

The tears trickled down her cheeks, and she bowed her head and sobbed aloud.

Her emotion affected him deeply.

"Dot," he said in a quavering voice, "don't cry, dear. There's nothing to cry about."

"Oh! Mr. Jarrett, I—I can't help it. I meant to behave well, indeed I did."

"Call me Bob, will you? I should like to hear you call me by my Christian name just for once, and," with a spasm of pain, "I don't think Will will be jealous."

"Hush!" she cried, in an altered voice, "don't talk of Will."

"I must. It is for that purpose I have sent for you. The other day you told me that you wanted five thousand pounds——"

"Oh! Mr. Jarrett—Bob, pray don't think of my foolish words."

He raised himself on one elbow, and looked at her.

"Dot," he said, "I hope you believe that I love you well enough to serve you."

"Yes, yes, indeed. I don't deserve such love as yours."

"If it pleases me to make you a gift of five thousand pounds, and to render you and Will happy, you won't refuse me, will you? It is the last favour I may ever ask."

To his surprise, she flung herself down by the bedside, and began sobbing as if her heart would break.

"Dot!" he said in alarm, "what have I said? What have I done?"

"Oh!—you—you are—so good. Your generosity—touches me—to the quick. But—I—I—cannot take this money. Besides," she added despairingly, "it is of no use to me?"

"Why not? Are you too proud even to accept this small gift from me?"

"Proud! No, but I am crushed and miserable. Love, faith, honor, everything seems unreal and a delusion, and the ideals I have raised, the god's before whom I have bowed down and worshipped, prove brazen images that topple down at a touch." And her eyes shone fiercely.

"Dot, what do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"Bob, you said you were my friend. I wonder whether you will understand me? I have suffered the pains of purgatory for five whole days, and never spoken of them to a soul. Now I feel as if I could keep my sufferings to myself no longer, and must talk to somebody. Five thousand pounds," and she laughed hysterically. "You give *me* five thousand pounds! How noble, how generous, how good! But what is it for? what is it for?"

"To enable you to marry Will," he said steadily as he could, for the force of her passion shook him.

She drew in her breath with a sharp, hissing sound, and when she spoke next it was in a cold, constrained voice.

"Will will not marry me. He is married already."

At these words, the life-blood seemed to come tingling and surging back through Robert Jarrett's veins. It was as if an electric shock had been administered, which

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He put out his hand in sympathy, and she clasped it nervously, bowing down her head, until he could feel the hot, salt tears dropping one by one upon it.

"Dot, dear," he said presently, "tell me how this came about. You need not be afraid of me."

She stooped her lips to the hand which she held in her own, and kissed it with a sudden impulse.

"I loved him so," she said brokenly, "I thought him so good, and true, and noble. . . . I would have stuck to him all my days, and not minded how poor he was, or—or what I did for him. And now it seems as if it were n—not Will I had cared for all these years, but some poor, contemptible thing, who w—when he got weary of my blind adoration had not even the courage to tell me so. But that is the way with us poor foolish women. We put our lovers up on such high pedestals, that they come tumbling down with a crash, and shatter our weak hearts to pieces."

He let her ramble on as she liked, knowing that before long she would tell him all. He saw her smarting under the first cruel pains of disillusion, of wounded pride and outraged affection. It was only natural that she should pour forth her piteous tale incoherently, and he lay back on his pillow, uttering a soft word of sympathy now and again, and trying to prevent the mad joy that possessed him from becoming too apparent. He felt that it was indecent—nay, selfish, yet would he have been mortal had not his brain reeled with intoxication at the thought that, should God spare his life, he might now win Dot—Dot, whose sweet feminine disposition revealed itself in every word!

This was the sum and substance of her tale.

For months past Will's letters had grown rarer and shorter. The girl treasured them up, and never wearied

of making fresh excuses for the writer, though her woman's instinct told her that his love was no longer the same as formerly. Time and distance had cooled its ardour in a marked degree. But she struggled against the conviction, as would do any tender trusting girl in her place, and flew to meet him at the railway station, full of fluttering hope and sweet forgiveness. At the first touch of his lips she felt that some subtle alteration had taken place, that in short, an estrangement, though none of her making, divided them. He had hinted at confidences, at news which it was imperative to break, and yet maintained a torturing reserve. His talk had been chiefly about the new practice, and how it was to be acquired, and he succeeded in impressing Dot with a notion that it was her duty to find the requisite five thousand pounds, and that if she failed in doing so, the engagement between them must be considered at an end.

"Will said he should find the money if I didn't," sobbed poor Dot, through her tears; "that a man had no right to spoil his whole career on account of an early attachment, and hinted that there was somebody else willing to marry him at a moment's notice."

"The brute!" ejaculated Bob indignantly. "Just fancy any man being such a fool as to throw away a treasure like you."

Dot sighed and wept.

"I loved him so—I loved him so," she repeated piteously. "But he was not what I had thought or he never could have acted as he did. If he cared for me really, it would have been impossible to him to marry another woman, simply because she had a few thousand pounds and I had not. It is a terrible shock to discover the worthlessness of a person you have looked up to since your childhood. I feel as if I should never recover from it. See, here is the letter he sent me five days ago, every word of which is branded on my memory in characters of fire."

Bob, though tired, managed to read the contents, which were as follows:

"Dear Little Dot,—When I met you at the railway station you looked so pretty and were evidently so glad to see me, that I could not bring myself to tell you

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certain things which you had a right to know. I am a poor devil who has to gain his own living, and who cannot afford to marry the girl of his choice. Those five thousand pounds of which we spoke were essential to my career. I knew that I could not look to find them with you, and so—and so (you will think me a beast, and God knows I feel like one) I became engaged to a wealthy widow, several years older than myself, who for some rhyme or reason, appeared to have taken a great fancy to me. When you get this, all will be over and I shall be married to her. Dot, can you—will you forgive me?—Yours in heart still, WILLIAM BARRINGTON."

"The cur!" ejaculated Bob contemptuously. "He is faithful, neither to the woman he professes to love, nor to the one he has basely married for her money. Don't be angry with me, Dot, for saying so, but I think you have had a lucky escape."

She made no answer. Was it possible that he was right? She could not admit the fact just at present, though her aching heart cried out that it had been cruelly and treacherously deceived.

"This Will Barrington never could have been worthy of you from the beginning," continued Bob. "A man capable of writing such a letter as that is a poor, mean-spirited hound."

"If only he had trusted me," said Dot bitterly, "and told me the truth, I think I could have forgiven him everything, but now—now," and her voice shook, "I have not only lost Will, but all my faith and belief in human nature as well; so much has gone that never can come back."

Bob gave the hand he still held in his own a gentle pressure.

"My dear, my love," he said, "you have indeed been cruelly treated, but don't fall into the mistake of thinking that all men are blackguards, and incapable of a true affection. Dot, darling, if you would let me try to restore your faith in man, I should very soon get well. It is you I want, you, without whom life is unendurable."

The tears gushed afresh from her eyes. What was this feeling stirring her heart? Had she turned traitor so soon? "Don't ask anything of me now," she cried out

in alarm. You must give me time—you must give me time."

A radiant smile lit up Bob's pale face. Something in her tone and manner made him hope. "I will be very, very patient, and wait even as Jacob did for Rachel."

She drooped her head and did not speak.

When Doctor Lankester returned from his rounds some half-an-hour later, he found Dot crying softly to herself and the patient fast asleep. He felt his pulse and turned to the girl with a look of inquiry.

"Why, Dot!" he exclaimed, "what treatment have you been pursuing? Robert Jarrett is a different man already. He has managed to turn the corner and will live."

She just glanced up at her father; then turned her blushing face away.

How could she speak to him of the strange revolution going on within her bosom? How tell him that a new love was springing up from the very ashes of the old?

But perhaps Dr. Lankester understood without being told.

CHAPTER XL.

CONCLUSION.

FROM that day Bob mended rapidly. He had something to hope for now—a new object in life. Nevertheless two months went by before he regained his usual health, and then Doctor Lankester strongly advised his leaving England whilst the cold spring winds lasted. After much conversation, it was ultimately settled between this pair of friends that Bob should return to Australia, in order to wind up his affairs there, and escort his mother and sisters to their new home. But before going on so long a journey, he felt he must speak to Dot; she had been very shy and quiet of late and yet the small grain of hope that had been planted in his heart whilst he lay so ill, had gone on growing ever since.

About a fortnight prior to his departure, he sought her out.

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About a fortnight prior to his departure, he sought her out.

"Dot," he said, "I am going away."

"Yes," she answered in faltering tones, "I know that."

"Have you nothing to say to me before I leave?"

"What can I say?" she demanded with evident embarrassment.

"You told me once that—that I must give you time. I have tried and am trying very hard still to be patient; but Dot, dear, if you can speak one little word before I leave England, or give me the least encouragement, you don't know how happy it would make me."

She was trembling all over.

"What—what—do you want?"

He advanced a step nearer, and held out his arms with infinite yearning.

"I want you to tell me truly if you think you can ever get to care for me a little bit? I don't mean just yet. I have no right to expect that; but after a while—even a long while if you like it best—is there any chance of my being able to win you?"

He stopped abruptly, and for a few seconds she maintained absolute silence.

Then she began twitching at the corner of her pocket-handkerchief, and at last in a very subdued way, as if heartily ashamed of herself, said almost inaudibly, "I don't know what you will say to me. You will think me a most horribly capricious, changeable person, in short no better than a weathercock, but—but—"

"But what, Dot? For God's sake speak out, and let me know the worst."

The small, sweet face broke up into smiles, a dear little dimple showed on the rounded chin, and the clear, frank eyes looked straight into his, with an expression which made his heart beat fast. "You have won me already. I care for you a very great deal as it is."

Here was an astounding discovery. Bob could hardly believe his senses.

"And Will?" he cried sceptically, "what about him?"

The colour flew to her cheeks, dying them a vivid crimson. He meant no reproach to her constancy, but she construed it as one.

"I knew you would think poorly of me," she resumed humbly and apologetically. "I think poorly of myself,

and often wonder if it is I—I, Dot Lankester, who have changed so much in such a short space of time. You have a perfect right to doubt the sincerity of my affection. Appearances are all against me. Perhaps some girls can continue to care for a man they no longer respect and esteem. I could not. It was not the actual Will Barington I loved, but an ideal raised by my imagination. I see it now, though at the time I suffered tortures. Bob, I am not really changeable and inconstant, though probably you believe so, and if, in spite of the past, you care to make me your wife, I will do my best that you shall not regret it."

Bob was wild with delight. In the first ecstasy of his love, he vowed he would put off going to Australia, and spend the summer at Straightem Court. But Mrs. Lankester suggested a plan which positively fired his brain. "Why not," she said, "get married quietly, and take Dot out with you as a surprise to your mother and sisters. There's not the least reason for any delay." The good lady went on the principle of striking when the iron is hot.

Bob hailed this idea rapturously. Of course, Dot said No, when it was first mooted to her, and equally, of course, the ardour of her lover and the united wishes of her parents succeeded in removing her objections. "Why not? Why shouldn't she be happy, and see a little of the world when she got a chance?"

She found it impossible to answer that question, or to resist the pressure put upon her.

So they were married without any fuss or ceremony, and a few days afterwards started off for Australia on their honeymoon. Of their various adventures *en route* it is unnecessary to speak. Suffice it that Dot completely won the hearts of her new relations, and after a delightful stay in Bob's old home, the whole party, with the exception of Dick, who was comfortably installed in the farm, returned to Straightem Court.

Before people had fairly got over the astonishment occasioned by Mr. Jarrett's wedding, there came another which surprised them still more. Lord Littelbrane conducted Lady De Fochsey to the hymeneal altar, thus administering a death-blow to the already disorganized Mutual Adorationites. Shortly after this event, his

lordship was so shocked by the behaviour of some of his satellites, who actually left their cards on Mrs. Jarrett, and vowed she was a very pretty, charming woman, that he resigned the mastership of the Morbey-Anstead hounds in disgust. But he was still more annoyed when Bob took them, and by the end of his first season effected a complete revolution in the manners and customs of the Hunt. The new master soon became exceedingly popular with all classes, encouraged the presence of strangers, was civil and pleasant to everybody, and quite put Lord Littelbrane's nose out of joint.

But that unfortunate nobleman had other causes of dissatisfaction. As the years rolled on, he became a thoroughly unhappy, dissatisfied and henpecked man, who hated and feared his wife, without daring to give vent to his sentiments in her presence. He had indeed made an unlucky venture, for sad to say, Lady Littlebrane disappointed expectation; no son and heir appeared to continue the aristocratic race, and his theories of selection turned out no better than theories generally do.

By some strange, horrible and capricious freak of Nature, the long thought of and deeply pondered combination of beauty and birth, health and rank, youth and talent, failed to produce the desired results. No little sweet, shrill voices sounded in the Littelbrane apartments, no childish feet could be heard pattering down the long corridors.

Year after year his lordship's hopes faded away, and the Castle became the scene of many marital squabbles.

For Lady Littelbrane did not improve with age. She grew sharper of tongue, shorter of temper, more restless, frivolous and vain. She filled the house with fast young men, mostly of the parasitic order, and carried on bare-faced flirtations with them under the very nose of her unhappy lord, whose notions of social decency were terribly shocked by such conduct. But it was useless expressing disapproval. His wife could master him, and knew it; so that he got very little domestic peace.

His chief pleasure consisted in creeping out to dine with old General Prosieboy whilst she was entertaining some of her gay acquaintances at home.

Sad to relate, that staunch warrior had made friends

with the Mammon of Unrighteousness, although after a bottle of wine he would still converse fluently about the departed glory of the Mutual Adorationites.

For their sun was on the wane. The M.A.'s, indeed, almost ceased to exist. The majority had gone over to the enemy, and pretty Mrs. Robert Jarrett made many converts amongst their ranks. Her kindliness, cheeriness and sweet simplicity were hard to resist. Even the ladies, who at first turned up their noses at Dot, as "a little country doctor's daughter," were forced in time to admit that she was "quite a nice, refined and altogether unobjectionable person."

And Bob? Our honest, outspoken, manly, rough Australian of the big heart and unpolished manners?

It may please some to hear that he was very happy with his little wife, and that they both considered their good fortune should make them extra tender to others less lucky than themselves.

There is not such another pair of match-makers in the county.

What between looking after his estate, his hounds and his children, Bob has plenty of good honest employment, which saves him from sinking down into a mere selfish and luxurious Sybarite, intent upon nothing but gratifying his own wants and wishes.

Possibly the sharp lesson he received from a small section of English gentlemen on his first arrival in England, though not pleasant at the time, had a salutary effect, and taught him that even in the mother country there are a good many things not worthy of imitation. He may have learnt that to be kind and charitable, unselfish and unaffected, makes a man a finer gentleman than the possession of smart clothes, a bitter tongue, and an inordinate opinion of I—I—I.

THE END.

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