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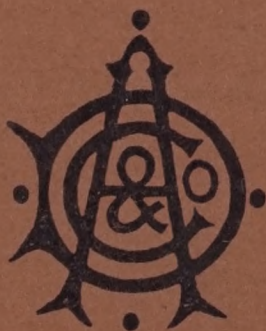
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VICTIM OF GOOD LUCK

A Novel

BY W. E. NORRIS

THOR OF MATRIMONY, MADEMOISELLE DE MERSAC, MARCIA, ETC.



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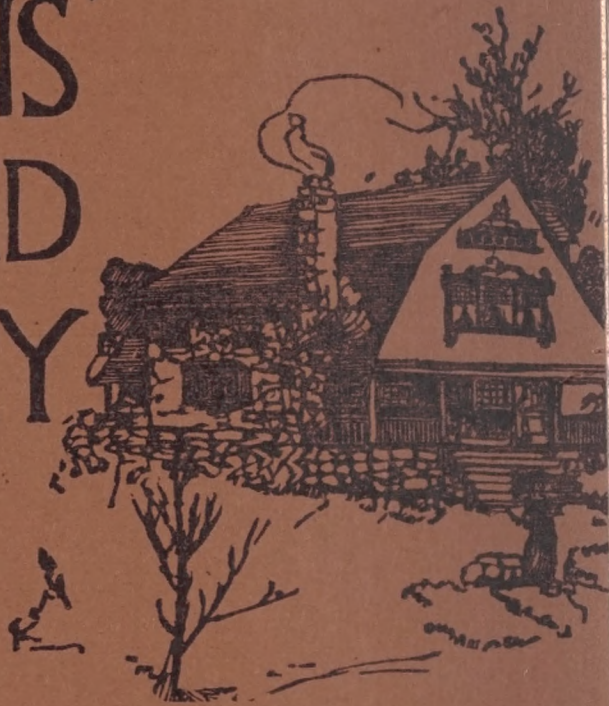
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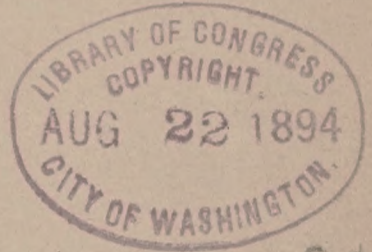
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A VICTIM OF GOOD LUCK.

CHAPTER I.

THE RECTOR OF HARBURY VALE.

THE Reverend John Dimsdale was seated in his study, one fine spring morning, wrestling with the composition of a discourse, to be delivered on the coming Sunday. Although he had for many years been in the habit of preaching without notes, it was, nevertheless, necessary that his sermons should be well thought out in advance, and he had not found that any great economy of time was effected by the abandonment of pen and paper. For he was a nervous, conscientious, irritable man—as anybody might have discovered by a glance at his high, wrinkled forehead, his bald head, his twitching lips and the long, thin fingers, which kept plucking his grey beard—and he always tried hard not to scamp his work, distasteful as a large portion of it was to him. At Harbury Vale, of which country parish in the Thames valley he had been Rector for so long that he had quite ceased to dream of possible preferment, he was accounted a very fine

preacher, and people who came from as far off as Windsor and Reading on purpose to hear him seldom went away disappointed. Probably not one in a hundred guessed how much he hated preaching. Fluency, and even occasional eloquence, he ought to have known that he possessed; but, as a matter of fact, he could not feel sure of himself. Like those self-distrustful persons who have escaped sea-sickness through a score of voyages, yet who never set foot on shipboard without an inward sinking of the heart, he had no confidence in his own invincibility, and the possibility of a disastrous breakdown was always before his eyes.

On this particular morning he was more than usually worried. "Set your affections on things above, not on things of the earth" was to be the theme of his homily, and he was conscious of being altogether out of harmony with it. The principle, of course, was sound, and might be supported by the customary commonplace reflections, but poor Mr. Dimsdale did not want to be more commonplace than he could help, and he had not, so far, been able to see his way to any original utterances. He pushed his chair back from the table, got up and began to pace restlessly about the room, rumpling his sparse hair with both hands.

"'Fret not thyself, and verily thou shalt be fed' . . . Oh, dear! what dreadful nonsense that sounds! As if any man was likely to get bread and butter unless he fretted himself . . . or even if he did! Well, there's something in that. It isn't the fretting that earns the bread and butter—it's the quiet, persistent performance

of daily duties. At any rate, one might be justified in saying so, though it does seem to me that a man may perform his daily duties in a quiet, persistent way for a great number of years and yet not know where to turn for a five-pound note at the end of them. 'The world is too much with us' . . . Yes, but that isn't always our fault. Troubles come, emergencies arise, and we have to deal with them; it's monstrous to tell an unfortunate fellow that he ought to have faith and believe that all is ordered for the best. Your daughters marry poor curates and have babies every year, and if you don't help them out, nobody will; your only son gets plucked for the army, and seems to think it rather a good joke than otherwise. It is as much as you can do to pay the weekly bills . . . and upon the top of all that, you must needs exhort your fellow-sufferers to take no heed for the morrow!"

The Rector walked to the window and rested his burning forehead upon the glass. Outside, the sun was shining brightly upon the lawn, upon the yellow crocuses and the Lent-lilies; a missel-thrush, perched upon a bare bough, was singing exultant defiance to the east wind; the horse-chestnut buds were bursting. It would have been pleasant to go out for a walk and get rid of the cobwebs, but that was not to be thought of. Work must be done first, and there was not too much time left to do it in. Naturally, therefore, the slow creak of the opening door was a sound to be resented.

It was Mrs. Dimsdale, who, with a copy of the *Times*

in her hand, had come in to say, "What do you think, John? Old Mr. Trevor is dead."

"Well, my dear," the Rector returned rather crossly, "really I can't help it if he is. *I* didn't kill him."

Mrs. Dimsdale seated herself in one of the worn, leather-covered arm-chairs and laughed. She was a stout, comfortable-looking matron, who had had her share of good looks in days gone by, and whose rounded cheeks were not disfigured by the lines with which care had furrowed those of her husband.

"But it's most interesting, you know," she protested. "Are you still up in the clouds, John? Have you forgotten who Mr. Trevor was?"

"I have not forgotten, nor am I likely to forget," answered the Rector, "what a thorn Mr. Trevor has been in the side of his bishop and of the Church. I believe him to have been honest, though bigoted and mischievous. At the same time, Elizabeth, I must ask you to postpone all discussion of his merits or demerits to some other occasion. I have my sermon to think out, and——"

"Sit down, John, and don't get into a state of mind. You know how useless it is for you to rehearse sermons when you are not in a temper for them. I can see by your face that you have come to a knot; and at such moments there is only one thing to be done—drop the subject. I am very sorry I didn't interrupt you sooner. Now I am going to read you what the *Times* says about Mr. Trevor. It is under the

heading of 'Obituary,' and they have given him three quarters of a column all to himself."

The Rector, who had long since acquired the experience which every married man ends by acquiring, sat down and folded his hands patiently, while his wife, after adjusting her spectacles, proceeded to quote the following appreciative paragraphs—

“The religious and charitable world may be said to have sustained a severe loss by the death of Mr. Trevor, J. P. and D. L., who passed away yesterday at his residence, Broxham Hall, Norfolk, in a green old age. Although the deceased gentleman took no active part in politics after the passing of the Reform Act of 1868, and resigned his seat in Parliament immediately upon the enactment of a measure to which he was strongly opposed, his name and his person have not ceased throughout the last quarter of a century to be familiar to his fellow-countrymen. Whether the frequent prosecutions with which his memory will be identified were or were not ill-advised, whether his outspoken hatred of Ritualism and his dread of the foothold obtained in England during his lifetime by the Church of Rome were exaggerated or not, are questions which are scarcely likely to be answered in the sense that he would have wished by a generation which has grown tolerant, if not indifferent, as to such matters; but it will be conceded alike by friend and foe that Samuel Trevor was a man of the strictest integrity and the most blameless personal life. Born as long ago as 1807, and educated in the tenets of the Evangelical school,

to which his father, a well-known politician of the day, belonged, Samuel Trevor imbibed, while still a young man, principles from which he never swerved until the last day of his life.'

"Then," said Mrs. Dimsdale, looking up over her spectacles, "there is a great deal about Wilberforce and Buxton and Clapham, and all that sort of thing. Also about his prosecutions of the Ritualists and the money that he spent upon them, and so forth. You can read it to yourself afterwards, if you like."

"I don't think I particularly care to read it," answered the Rector of Harbury Vale, who was a moderate High Churchman.

"No, I dare say not. Well, here is the finish of it. 'But, when all is said and done, the claims which the late Mr. Trevor possessed upon public esteem and veneration are beyond dispute. Vehement and occasionally bitter as a controversialist he may have been; his methods of testifying to the sincerity of his religious convictions may not always have commended themselves to modern approval; but his boundless generosity, his unflinching care for the sick and needy and the admirable uses to which he devoted a large fortune, of which more than half is said to have been expended by him upon good works, will, it is to be hoped, be remembered long after the somewhat vexatious proceedings which he deemed it his duty, of recent years, to institute against offending clergymen have been forgotten and forgiven.' Dear me, what a prodigious sentence! I only saw him once. He

struck me as being a particularly disagreeable old man."

"H'm! He struck a good many other people in the same light, my dear," observed the Rector, stroking his beard meditatively. "I wonder whether he has done anything for Veronica."

"Why, of course he has!" returned Mrs. Dimsdale, with a touch of impatience. "That's just it; that's why I say that his death is an interesting event. He promised to provide for her, you know."

"I think not, Elizabeth; I certainly did not understand that there had been any definite promise. Some years ago, when Mrs. Mansfield endeavoured unsuccessfully to arrange a meeting between him and his niece, he did, I believe, say that her name would probably be found in his will; but that was all. And very little, I should think, can be expected from such a rancorous old—ahem!—from so obstinately prejudiced a person as he was."

"Ah! you are such a pessimist, John! I don't mean about Mr. Trevor's character, because I quite agree with you that he was an unnatural old horror, but about Veronica's prospects. After all, she is his sister's only child."

"As he refused to hold any communication with his sister after her marriage, and as he could never be persuaded to see her only child, that seems rather a poor foundation to build Spanish castles upon," remarked the Rector drily. "May I ask, Elizabeth, whether you

expect to hear that he has constituted Veronica his sole heiress?"

"No, John, I do not; but I expect to hear that he has left her something like £10,000—I don't mind telling you that."

"I trust you will not be foolish enough to tell the girl anything so absurd. You will only lay up an utterly unnecessary disappointment for her if you do."

"I doubt whether any disappointment of that kind would affect her; Veronica cares so little about money, poor dear! But I am convinced that she will inherit a handsome sum; and so would you be, John, if you were not determined to see everything *en noir* this morning."

"If I saw the world through rose-coloured glasses just at present I should possess your highly enviable temperament, my dear, and Heaven has not so far favoured me. It is all very fine to be cheerful and sanguine, but one must have some sort of reasonable ground for feeling so, or at least so it appears to me. I know I ought to send poor Lizzie a trifle, and Martha writes to say that they have decided to put down the pony-cart, though how they are to manage without a conveyance of some kind in that lonely parish I'm sure I don't know. And here is Joe upon one's hands, and likely to remain upon one's hands indefinitely."

"Don't trouble about Joe," said Mrs. Dimsdale, placidly. "With his talents he is certain to make his way in the world sooner or later, and I don't know that his having failed for the Army is such a great misfor-

tune, after all. A military career has so very few prizes to offer.”

“And, such as they are, it would have been very strange if he had secured one of them. There I am quite with you, Elizabeth. However great Joe’s talents may be, they have never yet enabled him to carry off a prize of any description—not even a good conduct prize.”

“Well, John,” returned Mrs. Dimsdale, bristling up, as she always did when any of her offspring were attacked, “I really don’t think that you have had any cause to complain of Joe’s conduct, at all events. And you yourself have always admitted that he has twice as much intelligence as the generality of boys and young men.”

“Oh, he has intelligence, he has plenty of intelligence—coupled with eccentricity. Whether that combination is likely to be of any practical service to him is another question. For nothing can be more certain than that he will have to earn his daily bread somehow or other. I am not Mr. Trevor, remember; I am neither as rich nor as robust as he was; and when I die there will be little enough left for those whom I am bound to provide for to live upon.”

“It will all come right, John,” Mrs. Dimsdale declared soothingly; “and even if it were all going to come wrong, suffering in anticipation would not mend matters. The truth is that you want a tonic.”

“No, no!” returned the Rector hastily, for he had had ample experience of his wife’s doses, and he knew

what the effects of them generally were—"I assure you I don't want that, my dear. What I really do want is to be permitted to get on with my sermon, for which you have already furnished me with some valuable hints. One should strive to cultivate your habitual frame of mind; one should never suffer in anticipation. I am convinced of it, and I will tell the people so."

Mrs. Dimsdale rose slowly, picked up her newspaper and moved towards the door. "I only wish you would practise what you preach!" she remarked. "Then you wouldn't give yourself a headache by struggling with ideas which would come quite naturally to you if you waited for them until you were in the pulpit. I must try to find Veronica now and tell her the news."

The Rector, who had drawn his chair up to the writing-table once more, looked over his shoulder to say, "For goodness' sake, don't go and tell her that she has come into a fortune!"

"Of course I shall do nothing of the kind," answered Mrs. Dimsdale; "what do you take me for? But it stands to reason that she must be informed of her uncle's death, and that she must order mourning."

"If her uncle has left her money enough to pay for a black gown, she may consider herself lucky," murmured the despondent Rector when he was left alone.

But the prospect was not really so unsatisfactory as that; nor in his heart did he believe that it was. Something would doubtless prove to have been done for Veronica, whose claims had been virtually acknowledged by the late Mr. Trevor, although they had never

been urged either by her or by those who from her earliest childhood had given her a home.

It was now a matter of five-and-twenty years since the younger brother of the Rector of Harbury Vale had insisted upon marrying Miss Trevor, notwithstanding his lack of means, while Miss Trevor had insisted on marrying him, despite the opposition of her nearest relatives. There had been no particular harm in Cecil Dimsdale, nor any particular good. A dreamy, inefficient, amiable member of the community, he might have dawdled through life creditably enough for all practical purposes, had he possessed money enough to dawdle upon, and it was not at all improbable that he—or rather his wife—would have been provided with the requisite money if he had not, shortly after his marriage, taken it into his foolish head to do an utterly unpardonable thing. This was not the frittering away of a part of Mrs. Cecil's small fortune in absurd speculations (although the fact that he had done so was subsequently remembered against him), but his abrupt and wholly unexpected secession to the Romish communion. He might, like Moses, have broken all the Ten Commandments at a blow with more hope of ever being forgiven by his stern brother-in-law. His wife, who shared his change of faith, and possibly caused it, was well aware of that; so it must be assumed that her convictions were strong. Be that as it may, she got nothing more from the incensed Samuel, save a solemn and elaborate written anathema, nor did the extreme poverty to which she and her husband were soon reduced

avail to soften the heart of that outraged Protestant. What would have become of the luckless pair if they had not gone out in a sailing-boat one day and been capsized and happily drowned, it is impossible to say. Mr. Trevor professed to see the finger of Providence in the fate which overtook them; possibly he was not mistaken. Their child, a mere infant at the time, was taken charge of by the good people at Harbury Vale, and brought up by them as a member of the Church of England; but, notwithstanding this latter circumstance, Mr. Trevor had always declined to see the girl or to recognise her in any way. She was the child of wicked parents, he was wont to say, and those who had chosen to take the responsibility of receiving her into their family circle must accept the consequences of so rash an act. For the rest, she had a little money, inherited from her mother—about £200 a year, it turned out eventually to be—so that the Reverend John and his excellent wife did not consider themselves entitled to any thanks for feeding, clothing and educating her. Now that she was of age, she paid for her food and dressed herself out of the proceeds of her own small fortune. In one sense also she had educated herself; for Veronica Dimsdale was a young woman of marked individuality, who formed her opinions and regulated her course of study at first hand—or thought that she did so. It was, at all events, neither from Uncle John nor from Aunt Elizabeth that she had derived some of the views that she held, and the former was not free from occasional misgivings on her score. The Rever-

end John did not think it at all desirable that women should know too much, and there were sundry authors whose works he would fain have forbidden his niece to read ; but she had quietly argued the point with him, and, as he had not had the best of the argument, he had yielded with a sigh. His own blameless Lizzie and Martha and Deborah had always submitted cheerfully to the existence of an "Index Expurgatorius"; but then they were far more docile, and far less eager for information, than Veronica. That may have been one reason why he could not help finding Veronica's society more stimulating than theirs.

CHAPTER II.

VERONICA.

THE Harbury Vale Rectory is a low, straggling building, of which the white walls are almost concealed by wistaria, clematis, banksia roses, jasmine and other climbing plants. It stands among green pasture-lands; facing it, and at an almost imperceptibly lower level, flows the broad river, while woods of beech, oak and elm rise gently behind it; so that it is a charmingly pretty place in summer, a frequently flooded place in autumn and winter and an undeniably damp place all the year round. However, it enjoys the advantage of a gravel soil, which may account for the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Dimsdale had successfully reared four children, as well as a niece, during their residence at Harbury Vale, and that their doctor's bill at the end of each year never exceeded a modest total.

Of these four children the two eldest had fulfilled their manifest destiny by espousing curates. Deborah—poor, plain-featured Deborah, for whom no mate had as yet been found—still remained beneath the paternal roof; while Joe, the youngest of the flock, was also for the present at home, and was a walking testimony to the

salubrity of his birthplace. Tall, broad-shouldered and well put together, Joe Dimsdale left nothing to be desired in the matter of physique: it was a pity (or, at all events, his mother thought so) that his red hair, his freckled cheeks and irregular features, rendered it impossible for anybody to call him good-looking. But Joe himself, who had not yet begun to shave, and who, consequently, seldom examined his countenance in the glass, was very well satisfied with the body in which it had pleased Providence to locate a spirit capable of huge enjoyment. So long as there were hounds to be followed on foot (for the Rectory stables contained but one horse, and to ask that animal to jump over the most insignificant fence would have been much the same thing as asking him to win the Grand National); so long as there were rabbits to be potted and even an occasional partridge to be laid low; so long as Father Thames continued to afford facilities for sculling, canoeing and swimming, the world, in Joe Dimsdale's opinion, was satisfactory enough. Even when there was nothing else to do, there were pretty generally rats to be killed; and on this March morning Joe, assisted by the man-of-all-work and by his broken-haired fox-terrier Nipper, was engaged in killing rats, which is a far pleasanter occupation than composing sermons.

It was in the stable-yard that this necessary process of exterminating vermin was being carried out upon the most approved principles. Joe, with the eager Nipper secured tightly between his legs, was awaiting the moment for each squeaking rat to be released, in

turn, by the man-of-all work from its wire cage. The dog was doing his work admirably, the bodies of the quickly slain lay piled up in the background, and it really seemed a sad pity when only one more victim remained for execution.

“We’ve come to the last of them, Veronica,” said the young fellow regretfully, glancing up at the tall, dark-haired girl who had been a silent spectator of this scientific butchery. “He’s a fine big chap though to finish with. Isn’t he making a row about it, too!”

Veronica did not reply; but just at the critical instant, when the rat was set free, she suddenly opened the sunshade, which she had been swinging on one finger, in the dog’s face. Away went the rat; away, after a second of natural bewilderment, went Nipper in pursuit; and then there was a brief scene of excitement, terminating—as in that enclosed space it was pretty certain to terminate—in a brilliant victory for the attacking forces.

“Now, what in the world made you do that, Veronica?” asked Joe, in accents which expressed amused curiosity rather than displeasure.

“Impulse, I suppose,” answered the girl. “It wasn’t much use, was it?”

“No, but it might have been; and if it had you would have grieved me and made Nipper feel ashamed of himself and let a pestilent animal loose upon society. You should think of these things before you act, Veronica; you are far too ready to yield to your impulses.”

The girl laughed a little. She was evidently upon

terms of mutual comprehension with her companion, and saw that he was only trying to be funny because he was afraid of having distressed her. "Come down to the river," she said abruptly; "there are no rats there."

"Oh! aren't there, though!" Joe returned.

"Well, I don't so much mind in the case of water-rats; they have at least a chance for their lives. But the whole thing—everything that goes by the name of sport—is brutal and horrible."

It was impossible for Joe Dimsdale to let such a sweeping assertion as that pass unchallenged. Sincere as his affection and admiration for his cousin were, he felt bound to explain that sport is ennobling, not degrading, and he argued the point with her while they strolled across the grass towards that fence on the bank of the river where they had held many previous colloquies of a more or less desultory character. Veronica and Joe had always been friends, although they differed in temperament almost as much as they did in appearance. Veronica was one of those somewhat rare human beings who, without actual beauty of form or feature, have a personal attractiveness which defies analysis. It may have been her voice, which was low-pitched and had odd breaks in it; it may have been the clear pallor of her complexion or the natural grace of her movements that distinguished her from the common herd and caused most members of the opposite sex to pay her a homage that she did not covet; but nobody had ever had the hardihood to call her beautiful, much less pretty. She had grey eyes, which grew light or dark in

obedience to the stirring of her emotions; she had long, dark eyelashes, and, colourless though her face was, she conveyed the impression of being in perfect health. When you had said that you had said all that could be said for her in a physical sense; for her mouth was too large, her nose was of no particular shape, and the outline of her person was rather angular. Her conversation, to be sure, was interesting, because she was in the habit of saying what she thought, and her thoughts were usually original. She read a great deal; she was considered clever; Mr. Mostyn, the great poet, critic and philosopher, had not hesitated to predict that she had a literary future before her.

The same eminent authority had not felt able to use equally hopeful language with respect to Joe, whose future for the moment had become an unknown quantity, owing to his repeated failures to pass the requisite examinations for admission into the Army. Yet Joe, too, was clever in some ways, being singularly observant and often shrewd in his judgments of men and things. "But what," his father would pertinently ask, "is the use of qualities which cannot be turned to any practical account? What is the use of knowing the note of every bird that flies, and being acquainted with the whereabouts of every fox's earth within twenty miles, and being able to rattle off the pedigree of any hound in England at a moment's notice? To have acquired such information implies great diligence and a carefully cultivated memory; yet when you lay an examination-paper before the fellow and put a simple question to

him about subjects which he has been studying for months, he'll declare that he has forgotten all about it."

It was natural enough that Mr. Dimsdale should think his son very unsatisfactory, and scarcely surprising that the neighbourhood at large should find itself in sympathetic agreement with Mr. Dimsdale; but Veronica was always ready to take up the cudgels on Joe's behalf. There was scarcely a subject upon which these two thought alike; the one was prone to be poetical and visionary, the other, despite his inability to adapt himself to the conditions of his lot, was eminently practical; they had not the same friends, nor did they follow the same pursuits. Nevertheless, they understood one another, and they were under the not altogether erroneous impression that nobody else understood either of them. Thus, although they were constantly disputing, they never quarrelled; and the discussion upon which they were now engaged was conducted in an entirely amicable spirit.

"That is all very well, Joseph," remarked Veronica, resting her elbows upon the railing and swinging her sunshade to and fro above the turbid water, "but you will never persuade me that killing is not cruel. You would think it atrociously cruel if a race of creatures much bigger and better armed than yourself were to amuse themselves by hunting you to death."

"Never said it wasn't cruel, my dear," returned Joe, who had seated himself sideways upon the fence and had lighted a short black pipe; "I only said it was

necessary. Do you suppose sheep and oxen like being slaughtered for your dinner?"

"Well, you know, I did try being a vegetarian for several months, and I only gave it up because Uncle John's arguments about manure seemed to be unanswerable. I grant you that the whole scheme of Nature is cruel, and that we are bound to prey upon one another; but there is all the difference in the world between slaying to support life and slaying for the mere pleasure of shedding blood."

"Veronica," said Joe, removing his pipe from his lips and pointing it at her didactically, "I will tell you something which, being a woman, you can't know. Man is by nature a bloodthirsty animal, and unless you provide him with some legitimate outlet for his instincts, the odds are that he will play Old Harry with himself and everybody else. Of course, when I say man, I mean *men*, not abnormal beings, like your friend Mr. Mostyn and a few others, who can get along quite comfortably upon tea and toast and talk——"

"Mr. Mostyn is one of the greatest men of this century," interjected Veronica calmly.

"Very well; he is all that, if you like, and perhaps it isn't his fault that he was born a muff. But you'll allow that he is abnormal. Goodness only knows what sort of a ruffian the ordinary, everyday Englishman, such as your humble servant, would develop into if he were forbidden to kill birds and beasts and fishes in a skilful and sportsmanlike style."

"I can't quite see how you reconcile those

sentiments with your love of animals," Veronica remarked.

"I don't," answered Joe with a grin; "I leave them to reconcile themselves as best they can, like predestination and free-will and a heap of other contraries which manage to run in double harness somehow or other. All that I can tell you is that I do love animals and I do like shooting and fishing, when I can get the chance. I ain't a murderer, but if only I could have passed those blessed exams., I expect I should have liked fighting, too."

Veronica made no immediate rejoinder, but continued to gaze down reflectively at the river. Her cousin's last words had given another turn to her thoughts, and she did not deem it necessary to explain to what she was alluding when, after a time, she remarked, "It's a dreadful pity!"

"Yes, it's a pity," the young fellow agreed, "but there's no good in crying about it. I did my best—though nobody but you will ever believe I did—and I was beaten. It wouldn't make other people happier to be told how disappointed I am. In fact, I suspect I should deprive them of their only solace if I forced them to sympathise with me instead of groaning over me."

Veronica laughed. She had a loud, abrupt, but not unmelodious laugh, which she never attempted to repress, and which sometimes escaped her at inappropriate moments. "Perhaps you would," she said. "And what will you do now?"

“Well, I was thinking of a land agency. I believe it’s what I’m best fitted for. Either that or emigration.”

“Oh, I can’t let you emigrate!” exclaimed Veronica, hastily. “What should I do without you?”

“The great and good Mostyn would remain in England for your comfort and consolation.”

“Joseph, there are times when you disgust me. Oh, dear! I wish Uncle Trevor would die and leave me all his estates. Then I would make you my agent at once.”

It was at this dramatically opportune juncture that Mrs. Dimsdale, with a knitted shawl flung over her shoulders, the *Times* in her hand, and a voice attuned to the melancholy circumstances, stepped out from the adjacent shrubbery to say: “Veronica, dear, I have been looking for you everywhere. I am sorry to tell you that your poor uncle is gone. Here is the announcement of his death. I daresay you would like to see what they say about him.”

Joe produced a very large silk pocket-handkerchief and held it before his eyes, sobbing aloud. “Oh!” he moaned; “this is hard to bear! So righteous, so benevolent, so fondly affectionate to his nearest relatives! And then to be cut off, without the least warning, at the comparatively early age of eighty-something! I do think, mother, that you might have broken the sad intelligence more gently. And please, m’m, does the paper say anything about deceased’s will?”

“Don’t be indecent, Joe,” remonstrated Mrs. Dimsdale, smothering a laugh. “He really was a good man,

according to his lights—at any rate, many people thought so—and he was a connection of ours by marriage, you know. No; of course there is nothing about the will yet.”

Veronica, who had been glancing at the obituary panegyric of which a portion has already been quoted, handed the newspaper back to her aunt and remarked: “I can tell you how he has disposed of his property; Mr. Horace Trevor inherits everything.”

“Not quite *everything*, dear,” corrected Mrs. Dimsdale. “There are sure to be charitable bequests; and your aunt Julia, I believe, obtained a promise from her brother that you should receive a substantial legacy.”

“Did she?” asked Veronica, indifferently. “I don’t think I want it. I have quite as much money as I need.”

“In that case, my dear,” observed Joe, “you probably stand alone amidst the greedy inhabitants of an over-populated world. But I have always maintained that you are unique. As for me, who am no better than I should be, I trust you will excuse my reminding you of what you were saying just now, and if you should find that you have come in for a trifle of twenty or thirty thousand pounds which you don’t need, nothing will give me greater satisfaction than to relieve you of the burden.”

But even Mrs. Dimsdale’s sanguine anticipations did not rise above the half, or more probably the quarter of such a sum, and in truth there was little reason to expect that Mr. Trevor, the most obstinate and unforgiv-

ing of men, would prove to have recognized posthumous obligations towards one with whom, during his lifetime, he had steadily refused to have anything to do. Mrs. Dimsdale wrote a letter of quasi-condolence to Mrs. Mansfield, the only surviving sister of the deceased philanthropist, but received no reply, and after a few days hope died away within her breast. It was disappointing, but it was of a piece with that horrid old man's conduct (he was a horrid old man again now) from first to last. "And, after all," concluded Mrs. Dimsdale, in her optimistic way, "Veronica is certain to marry well, which will answer all the purpose. Perhaps, if she had come into a little fortune all to herself now, she would only have done something dreadfully foolish with it before she could have been stopped."

Then, one morning, a letter, addressed in a clerkly hand, was delivered to Veronica, which she opened and perused with feelings of stupefaction rather than of exultation—

"LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS, W. C., *March 18, 189-*.

"MADAM,—We are instructed by the executors of the late Mr. Samuel Trevor to inform you that, under his will, you succeed to his estate of Broxham Hall, in the county of Norfolk, together with personalty, of which the exact amount cannot at present be ascertained, but which, we may say, will probably exceed one hundred thousand pounds (£100,000). As you will, no doubt, wish to be placed in possession of further particulars, and as it is desirable that we should have a per-

sonal interview with you, may we beg that you will favour us with a call at an early date? Or, should you prefer it, our Mr. Walton will wait upon you at your present residence.—We are, Madam, your obedient servants,

“WALTON, JOHNSON, HOPKINS and Co., Solicitors.”

Veronica read the above letter through several times, with increasing bewilderment. Then she handed it over to the Rector, who had noticed the superscription, and had been surveying her inquiringly over his spectacles.

“Uncle John,” she said, “will you look at this, please, and tell me whether it is genuine or not? I hope it is only a stupid practical joke.”

Mr. Dimsdale was a good deal amused at the time by what struck him as being the oddest comment he had ever heard in his life upon a piece of extraordinary good luck; yet subsequent events led him more than once to doubt whether the late Mr. Trevor had not in truth meant to perpetrate a grim jest at the expense of sundry survivors by bequeathing money and lands to an utterly inexperienced girl.

CHAPTER III.

THE PREACHER AND THE POET.

THE following day was a Sunday, and letters are not delivered on Sundays at Harbury Vale; still, those who are in a hurry for their correspondence may obtain it by applying at the village post-office, so that the Rectory folks usually halted there on their way to church. This practice, as a rule, possessed little interest for Veronica, who seldom received a letter on any day of the week; but now she was, for once, rather anxious to hear whether there was anything for her, because she thought it not improbable that her aunt, Mrs. Mansfield, might have written. And her anticipations were verified. A thick, black-edged envelope was handed to her, a similar one was awarded to Mrs. Dimsdale, and as the party resumed its march, to the accompaniment of a noisy peal of bells, each lady perused her missive, Veronica silently, Mrs. Dimsdale with interjectional grunts and subdued expressions of approval.

Mrs. Mansfield's letter to her niece was, as the latter had expected it to be, an invitation. "Mr. Walton tells me that he must see you," this good-natured lady, who had never shared her late brother's peculiar prejudices,

wrote, "and of course I shall be only too glad to give you house-room, and to do anything that I can for you. Your position altogether is so extraordinary and so unforeseen that one hardly realises it yet, or sees what steps you ought to take; but I should think your best plan will be to stay with me until things have unravelled themselves a little and some sort of scheme can be formed for your future life. I ought to have answered Mrs. Dimsdale's letter before this: my only excuse is that I have been literally *stunned* and unable to write to anybody. As I think I told you, I think it was quite an understood thing that poor Horace was to succeed to the property, and although there had been a coolness of late between him and your uncle, I never for one moment imagined that Samuel would go to the extreme length of altering his will! I cannot help thinking that he must have done it in a moment of mental aberration, and that he would have repaired such an act of injustice if he had lived a little longer. Not that there is the slightest intention of disputing the will, or that I at all grudge you your wonderful good luck—pray don't suppose that, my dear! Still, it *is* hard upon Horace, who, if he isn't exactly a saint or a Methodist minister, has always been quite as well-behaved as other young men. However, I will tell you all about it when you come. Meanwhile, I am always your affectionate aunt,
JULIA MANSFIELD."

"Well, that disposes of one difficulty," Mrs. Dimsdale remarked, in a tone of satisfaction, as she stuffed her letter into her pocket and passed her arm through

her niece's. "Very kind and thoughtful of your Aunt Julia, I'm sure, and she writes in the nicest possible way about you. What a mercy it is that you *have* an Aunt Julia to go to!

"I have an Aunt Elizabeth who has satisfied my modest requirements pretty well, so far," remarked Veronica, smiling.

"Ah, so far! but everything is changed now. I am only a poor old country mouse, and I shouldn't have known in the least how to be of service to you under these altered circumstances;—whereas Mrs. Mansfield is a woman of the world, who will be able to tell you exactly what you ought to do. Who is this young Horace, who seems to have been disinherited in your favour? Not a nephew of old Mr. Trevor's, surely? I never heard of his having had a brother."

"Only a distant kinsman whom he adopted, I believe," answered Veronica, "but I really never thought of asking any questions upon the subject." She walked on for some yards, paying no heed to Mrs. Dimsdale's continuous prattle. Then she exclaimed suddenly: "How odd you are, Aunt Elizabeth! Why should you be so delighted at my having come into all this money? You do not profit by it—not necessarily, at least."

"That remains to be seen," struck in Deborah before her mother could reply. "From what I know of you, Veronica, I should say that the very first use to which you would put your money would be to give some of it away to your friends."

Deborah was a thick-set, red-haired little person,

much given to good works, greatly beloved by the poor of the parish and notorious in her family for the innocent indiscretion of her utterances. She was upon the point of adding something about its being more blessed to give than to receive, when she herself received a doubtful blessing in the shape of a pinch in the fleshy part of the arm from her brother, which caused her to break into a short, sharp squeal.

“Shut up, Deb!” growled Joe under his breath; and Deborah shut up with her accustomed docility, though she was unable to see what she had done to earn this discourteous command.

Mrs. Dimsdale, who was in truth a most unselfish woman, was answering that she rejoiced in her niece’s good fortune just as she would have rejoiced in the good fortune of one of her daughters. “And besides,” she added cheerfully, “we shall all come and stay with you at Broxham sometimes, if you will have us; and there will be the shooting for Joe, you know, and——”

“Oh, that!” interrupted Veronica, with a quick wave of her hand. “But, Aunt Elizabeth, aren’t you at all sorry?—not the least little bit?”

“Sorry, my dear!” ejaculated the good lady; what *do* you mean? Now don’t, please don’t, say that you are! That would be too perverse of you, and it would worry me all through the service, so that I shouldn’t be able to fix my mind upon my prayers.”

Veronica, therefore, held her peace, and they all went into church.

The Rector preached a very fine sermon that morn-

ing. It was not the one to which allusion has already been made, and which had been delivered on the previous Sunday ; but it dealt with a kindred subject, and he had chosen for his text “ How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of Heaven.” Veronica, as she always did, listened attentively to her uncle’s discourse, every word of which seemed to apply so exactly to her own case that she was inclined every now and then to think he might have dealt a little more mercifully with her. He began by confessing frankly, on behalf of himself and humanity at large, that riches are what we all desire. As a matter of theory, we may be willing to admit that there are other good things—health, for example—which rank infinitely higher ; but as a matter of practice, at least nine-tenths of us devote our brains, our energies and the best part of our lives to the acquisition of wealth. When we acquire it, if we ever do acquire it, we probably find that it has not been worth all that trouble. But the Rector said that he did not, for the moment, wish to dwell upon that aspect of the question ; what he wished to emphasise was the enormous power of money and the consequent responsibility attaching to those who possessed it. To say that wealth rules the world was, he declared, a mere truism, and he proceeded to show how the peace of Europe was now in the keeping, not of Emperors, Kings, Chancellors or Parliaments, but of certain eminent financiers whom he did not name and of whom the majority of his hearers had most likely never heard. And what was true of the world was true, he urged, of all communities,

large and small. Whether we liked to acknowledge it or not, the fact remained that we all respected a rich man—respected him not for any talent or perseverance that he might have displayed in enriching himself, but simply and solely because he was rich, because he had houses, lands, horses, flowers and other luxuries which belong only to the few. We allowed him to dictate to us upon social matters; we were gratified when he condescended to seek our friendship; we recognised him, in short, as our superior. “And so, in actual truth, he is,” added the preacher. “He can accomplish what it would be vain for us even to attempt; his power, for good or evil, is as much greater and wider than ours as the power of his Creator is greater and wider than his own; isolated by reason of a power of which it is impossible for him to divest himself, he learns—or fails to learn—the secret of that sadness which has ever been discernible upon the countenances of ‘those who bear rule and are obeyed.’”

Then, of course, it was easy to point out how the rich man, between the horns of a dilemma, was a less enviable being than he might appear at first sight. Either he realised his position, realising at the same time that he must not look for much happiness in this world, or he did not realise it—in which case his prospects for the next could hardly be contemplated without a shudder. Mr. Dimsdale had eloquence and a vibrating, sympathetic voice; he always conveyed the impression of being very much in earnest; when he had worked himself up to the requisite pitch of emotion, his subject

commonly swept him off his legs, and the ideals he was wont to set up at such times were, perhaps, a shade too lofty for human attainment. At any rate, by the time that he had made an end of explaining what a rich man's duties were, and how exceedingly unlikely any rich man was to fulfil them, one at least of his audience was disposed to add a fresh petition to the Litany—"From battle, murder and sudden death, and from a sudden accession of fortune, good Lord deliver us!"

But the fresh air and the sunshine outside, together with the somewhat irreverent comments of the Rector's only son, were not without a bracing effect upon Veronica's flagging spirits.

"I regard that sermon as a gross outrage upon good taste," Joe declared. "If he had told you in so many words that it was your bounden duty to restore the chancel and put a new roof on the church, he couldn't have expressed his meaning more plainly. I am quite ashamed of him, and, in the unavoidable absence of the reverend gentleman, I beg to offer you a full apology. Personally, I may say that, while we congratulate you upon having succeeded to a pot of money, and are convinced that you will make a wise use of it, we wish to goodness it hadn't been quite such a large pot. Because, you see, we don't want to lose you."

"Thank you, Joseph!" exclaimed Veronica gratefully; "you always know how to say the right thing."

"I can when I like," answered Joe, with quiet complacency.

"And you really will miss me a little? Aunt Eliza-

beth doesn't seem to think that my departure will cause any perceptible blank in the household."

"You know very well that you will be missed," said Joe. "I wouldn't be morbid if I were you. Take example by me. Ain't I bearing up like a man, in spite of everything? Not that I am going to stay on here without you. No, thanks! I shall be off to Australia or the Cape or the Western States of America as soon as possible."

"You forget that you are going to be my land-agent," observed Veronica, smiling.

"I am not sure that you will want one, my dear; and, if you did, I should be hardly ready to accept the situation for a year or two. But let's make the best of things. We shall meet again some day, when we are old and uninteresting, and 'when the glow of early thought has declined in feeling's dull decay.' That isn't the sort of poetry that you admire, though—and, by Jove! here comes the sort of poet whom you do admire. Farewell for the present—I'm off! There isn't room for me and him in one small meadow."

If Veronica admired the tall, spare, elderly gentleman who was sauntering towards her along the river bank, and who removed his wideawake hat, disclosing a fine crop of curly, grizzled hair, on her approach, she was by no means alone in so doing. Cyril Mostyn's niche in the Temple of Fame had been won many years before by the refined and scholarly verses which he continued to publish at rare intervals; as a critic he

was perhaps even better known than as a poet, while his social pre-eminence was all the more an established fact because he had never taken the slightest trouble to earn or retain it. At the age of fifty, or thereabouts, he was still a singularly handsome man; he knew everybody worth knowing, literary, scientific, political and fashionable, and when he occupied his comfortable bachelor quarters in London, he dined out every night of his life. Latterly, however, he had taken to spending a great deal of his time at the rustic cottage on the banks of the Thames, which he had purchased chiefly with a view to escaping the importunities of his friends.

“Have you been to church?” he inquired, in the low, mellow accents which were counted among his personal attractions.

Mr. Mostyn himself was *parcus cultor et infrequens* of established rites, having indeed written some rather cruel and incisive essays upon the subject of revealed religion; still, he was to be seen every now and then in places of worship, and he had never publicly abjured Christianity.

“Yes,” answered Veronica, “I have been to church; but I don’t think I feel much the better for it. Uncle John has made me wretched by preaching a perfectly beautiful sermon to prove the impossibility of forcing a camel through the eye of a needle. And the worst of it is that, all of a sudden and through no fault of my own, I have become a camel!”

“So I hear,” Mr. Mostyn observed, smiling and

gazing at her. "I should have congratulated you, only I felt quite sure that you would not want to be congratulated. Poor old Trevor! . . . and, still more, poor young Trevor! . . . and, most of all, perhaps, poor you!"

"Oh, it is horrid!" exclaimed Veronica disconsolately. "What *could* have made him do it!"

Mr. Mostyn shrugged his shoulders. "Lack of self-control," I suppose, he answered. "The young man is not a religious young man, and it was discovered, I believe, that he had been backing horses. Then there was a scene, and a will was made which would probably have been destroyed if there had been time. Authors are not the only people who sometimes put pen to paper unadvisedly."

"The more I think of it all," sighed Veronica, "the more plainly I see that a dreadful injustice has been done, of which I have no business to take advantage."

"But there is no imaginable way in which you can avoid taking advantage of it."

Veronica laughed. "Oh, yes," she returned; "it is as simple as one of the hard cases in *Vanity Fair*. 'A, a rustic maiden, inherits a large fortune from an aged relative whom she has never seen, and who has always treated B as his heir. B, a well-conducted young man, temporarily estranged from the old gentleman by some trifling difference, would doubtless have been reinstated, had the latter lived a few months longer. A is neither fitted for her new position nor anxious to occupy it.

What is A to do? Answer received, adjudged correct—Marry B.’”

“Well,” said Mr. Mostyn, smiling, “that would solve a difficulty, no doubt. It only remains to obtain B’s assent to the arrangement.”

“And B is an unknown quantity.”

“Not to me; I have met him several times in London. He is a nice-looking, nice-mannered young gentleman of the approved pattern, and would be quite willing to do anything that he was told, I should think, provided that it was not too unpleasant; and it is obviously superfluous to add”—— Here Mr. Mostyn spread out his hands and made a little bow. “At the same time,” he resumed, “nothing can be more certain than that, after you had lived with Mr. Horace Trevor for a few months, you would be arranging the terms of an amicable separation. Your husband, my dear Miss Dimsdale, will have to be a literary man; that happens, fortunately or unfortunately, to be indispensable, and I should be very much surprised to hear that young Trevor had opened a single book, except a sporting novel or a ‘Ruff’s Guide,’ since he left Oxford.”

“What is to be done, then?” asked Veronica.

She was in the habit of asking Mr. Mostyn what was to be done whenever she stood in need of counsel; for she had the highest opinion of his wisdom and she had been the recipient of many tokens of his good will. The advice that he gave her now, in answer to a more detailed statement of her perplexities than she had as yet vouchsafed to anybody, was certainly sound, so far as it

went. He urged her to do nothing in a hurry; he reminded her that responsibility cannot be thrown off, like an extra blanket, simply because it is more comfortable to get rid of it; and for immediate and practical questions he referred her to the lawyers.

“One does not want to be bothered about money,” he concluded; “it is a nuisance to have too little of it and a nuisance to have too much. You must expect to be a good deal bothered for the next few months; but after that, I hope, you will be able to turn your attention to more important things again. Have you been stringing any more rhymes together?”

“Yes,” answered Veronica, laughing and colouring slightly; “but I am not going to show them to you. You only praise my rubbish because you wish to be kind and encouraging.”

“No,” Mr. Mostyn assured her gravely, “I don’t do that. I never tell polite fibs upon the subject of art, which I take to be the one serious thing in this world of irony and farce and charlatanism. All that I have said to you is that your work shows great promise. Whether the promise will be fulfilled or not depends upon a variety of considerations—your sex and this necessary change in your social surroundings being, to my mind, very much against you. However, we shall see. One thing that I may be able to do for you now is to introduce you to men and women whose chief interest in life is literature. Rubbing up against them will do you good, even if you find them rather disappointing from the conversational point of view.”

“Oh, thank you,” exclaimed Veronica gratefully. “I must go now, or I shall be late for dinner. I suppose rich people don’t have to dine early on Sundays, do they? At any rate, I know Aunt Julia doesn’t, and I know she is always at home on Sunday afternoons. If you should be in London on a Sunday some time, perhaps you would look in upon us.”

The great man graciously promised to do so. It was pretty well understood among Mr. Mostyn’s fashionable friends that he did not expect to be invited to anything except dinners, and that his presence even at a dinner-party was a favour which demanded suitable acknowledgment; but Veronica Dimsdale was privileged. He had a sort of paternal affection for her, and allowed her to take liberties which children may take with their parents, literary and other.

CHAPTER IV.

VERONICA MAKES INQUIRIES.

THE Honourable Mrs. Mansfield was a well-preserved widow of between fifty and sixty, with whom life had gone as smoothly as she had permitted it to go. Absolute unbroken smoothness is, no doubt, repellent to human nature, as being far too monotonous and affording none of those contrasts which enable us to determine whether we are contented or the reverse at any given moment; so this fortunate lady, who had neither husband, nor children, nor monetary worries, nor bad health to distress her, had felt bound during many years to seek out grounds of dissatisfaction for herself, though she had been sometimes hard put to it to discover them. Her brother Samuel, to do him justice, had always been ready to oblige any fellow-creature who might be suffering from lack of causeless annoyance, and there had been frequent differences, attaining almost to the dignity of quarrels, between him and Mrs. Mansfield; but now poor Samuel had departed for scenes where bickering is presumably unknown, and notwithstanding the comfortable little legacy of five thousand pounds which he had bequeathed to his "beloved sister Julia,"

the latter would have been inconsolable had he not displayed the most considerate inconsideration by disposing of the bulk of his property after a fashion which was enough to make any sensible woman wring her hands in despair. It really was rather hard, at her time of life, to be saddled with the care of a girl who was decidedly odd, probably wilful, and quite obviously unfitted to stand alone. One must not shirk such duties, distasteful though they may be. One cannot turn one's back upon one's poor sister's child. One must look forward, with such courage as can be mustered, to endless troubles and vexations. One must expect no thanks, and perhaps very little success; one must endeavour not to think evil of the dead, and to assume charitably that Samuel, when he did a perfectly idiotic thing, was not altogether responsible for his actions. This was what Mrs. Mansfield was saying to herself as she sat before the fire in her pretty drawing-room in South Audley Street awaiting the advent of the niece whom she had summoned. She knew that Veronica was odd, because she had already had the girl to stay with her once—on that occasion when her well-meant attempt to effect a reconciliation between the uncle and niece had fallen through. She anticipated trouble, because—since it was evident that the heiress could not dispense with a chaperon—the finger of fate seemed to point unmistakably towards the person upon whom that function must devolve. And she was dreadfully distressed because poor Horace Trevor, whom she had always liked and tried to befriend, was left out in the cold,

without, in reality, having done anything at all to deserve such treatment.

All this did not prevent her from warmly embracing the tall, sable-clad girl who was shown into the room just as it was becoming dark enough to ring for lamps.

“My dear child!” she exclaimed, “I am so delighted to have you with me again! Come and sit down and have some tea; you must be perished with cold after your railway journey in this bitter wind!”

Veronica surveyed the pretty old lady, whose hair was drawn up high above her forehead, whose diamonds flashed in the firelight, and whose slim fingers continued to clasp her own after they had both seated themselves. She had not yet quite made up her mind whether she liked Mrs. Mansfield or not. Certainly, Aunt Julia had been kind, and had written her affectionate letters from time to time; but her kindness had not been of the practical order displayed by the good people of Harbury Vale, nor was there any reason to suppose that the new order of things was welcome to a lady who had always seemed to acquiesce philosophically enough in the sentence of banishment pronounced upon the child of erring parents.

“Aren’t you disgusted?” she asked presently.

“Oh, not with *you*, dear!” Mrs. Mansfield replied, laughing a little. “Of course, I do think it is rather a pity—as much for your sake as for anybody’s.”

“So do I, I am sure!” agreed Veronica. “Still, we may perhaps hit upon some means of putting matters a little more straight than they are at present. I want

you to tell me all about Mr. Horace Trevor; you said in your letter that you would."

Mrs. Mansfield declined to do that upon the spur of the moment. She declared that neither she nor the injured Horace nor anybody else had ever dreamed of attaching the smallest blame to a palpably innocent supplanter, and that, upon the whole, it was a case of least said soonest mended. But later in the evening she was induced to become more communicative. Sitting in the drawing-room with her niece, after a little dinner which had been admirably cooked and served, and in the course of which she had felt moved towards a certain sympathy of intercourse, she narrated the story of the difference that had proved so terribly expensive to the late Mr. Trevor's reputed heir.

"It really was too ridiculous!—the sort of thing that nobody in the world except Samuel would ever have wasted a second thought upon. As if all young men didn't bet occasionally! But you know what he was—or rather, perhaps, you don't know. Next to Roman Catholics, I believe, he looked upon gamblers and what he used to call 'Sabbath-breakers' as being about the most hopelessly wicked beings on earth; so when it transpired that Horace had been to the Grand Prix last year, and had, unfortunately, backed the horse that didn't win into the bargain, there was a fine fuss. Of course, there had been rows before, and for my own part I didn't expect that this one would have more serious consequences than the others, although, now that one comes to look back, it certainly did lead to a rather

more prolonged estrangement. You see, Samuel, when he was put out, had a way of saying the most grossly insulting things in Christian phraseology; and Horace, good-tempered as he is, was sometimes provoked to retaliate. He tells me he did use the expression ‘damned hypocrisy,’ which he ought not to have done; still, I am bound to confess that I myself have more than once accused my brother of the same thing—minus the adjective.”

Veronica broke into one of her abrupt fits of laughter, in which Mrs. Mansfield, after a moment of hesitation, joined.

“Not that it is any laughing matter for poor Horace,” the latter observed ruefully.

“What is he like?” Veronica asked.

“Well, he is a nice, clean-looking little fellow, with short brown hair and grey eyes, and no moustache; there are dozens and dozens of them about. It seems to me that men weren’t turned out so exactly after the same pattern when I was young; but perhaps that is a fallacy.”

“I didn’t mean in appearance,” said Veronica.

“Oh, as far as character goes, I think he might be placed very near the top of his class; though I don’t say that that is the very highest class of all. Personally, I have no particular love for immaculate youths; I like them to be just a bit naughty, as long as they are gentlemen; don’t you?”

“I like them to be gentlemen,” answered Veronica, “and I like them to be of some use in the world—or, at least, to try.”

“Well, my dear,” returned Mrs. Mansfield, a little sharply, “Horace would have been of great use in the world if he had been allowed to become a country gentleman—which is what Nature intended him to be. So far, he really hasn’t had a chance. Samuel forced him to resign his commission in the 23rd Hussars because he said that cavalry officers were a godless crew; then he kept him for several years kicking his heels about in London without any occupation; and now, at last, he cuts him off with a miserable legacy of ten thousand pounds, which, he says in his will, is equivalent to an allowance of five hundred pounds a year; though everybody knows that four per cent. is the very outside that can be obtained upon reasonable security!”

“What *could* have made him put me in Mr. Horace Trevor’s place?” ejaculated Veronica, meditatively. “Did he by any chance think that Nature had intended me to be a country gentleman?”

“My dear, I can’t tell you what he thought. He may have had some qualms of conscience about the way in which he treated your poor mother, or he may have nominated you simply because he was in a rage, and because he couldn’t think of anybody else. Most likely he knew that if he left Broxham to me I should immediately hand the place over to Horace. But really, when one begins attempting to account for the actions of such a man as Samuel was, the imagination reels!”

Veronica nodded, and asked no more questions that evening. At breakfast the next day, however, she

stated quietly that she was going to Lincoln's Inn Fields to see Mr. Walton, as she had not quite made up her mind what to do about her inheritance.

"I don't know that there is very much to be done about it, except to take possession of it when it is handed over by the executors," Mrs. Mansfield said; "and Mr. Walton will call here, if you write him a line. It would be more to the purpose to decide how and where you are to live in future."

"But that will have to depend a good deal upon what Mr. Walton says. I think I had better go to his office; I shall be more sure of securing his undivided attention there."

"When I was young," observed Mrs. Mansfield—"I am sorry to keep on using that phrase, but it is perpetually being forced upon me—it would have been considered most improper for a girl of your age to go off into the City all alone."

"But it isn't considered improper now."

"No, it isn't considered improper now. In some ways you are curiously modern, Veronica; I noticed that when you were here before, and I can't think how you arrived at modernity, living down in the depths of the country. Something in the general atmosphere of the age, I suppose. Well, if you never do anything worse than hunt up a musty old lawyer in his lair, I shall not feel entitled to remonstrate with you."

So presently Veronica was borne in a swift hansom to Lincoln's Inn Fields, where she was received by a tall, elderly gentleman, who at once set to work to ex-

plain the various provisions of his late client's testament.

"I am sure you have made it all most beautifully clear," Veronica said, after several fruitless attempts to check the flow of his discourse, "but what I more particularly wanted to ask you was whether you know my uncle's real motive for disinheriting Mr. Horace Trevor."

"Well," replied the lawyer, smiling; "I believe that he did not approve of young Mr. Trevor's habits."

"But are young Mr. Trevor's habits so very objectionable? I have heard nothing against him so far, except that he sometimes bets, and that he once went to the races on a Sunday."

"As far as I am aware, you could not have heard much more than that against him. I have known Horace Trevor from his boyhood, and I should say that very few young men in his position could show so clean a record."

"Then you agree with me that he has been abominably ill-treated?"

"I would rather not express any opinion as to that, Miss Dimsdale. I think he has been exceedingly foolish, and I have often told him so. Knowing what Mr. Trevor's religious views were, he ought to have had the common sense to abstain from running counter to them; and he has nobody but himself to blame for what has happened. I say nothing about the payment of his debts; the amount was trifling on each occasion, and we all know that young men with expectations are apt

to be thoughtless and extravagant. But why the deuce—why in the world, I mean—he must needs attend a race-meeting on a Sunday, when every other day of the week was open to him, passes my poor powers of comprehension!”

“Oh, I like him all the better for that,” Veronica declared. “If he didn’t think he was committing any sin by spending Sunday in that way, he was quite right to have the courage of his opinions. I only wanted to find out whether there was the slightest excuse for his having been deprived of his inheritance. As it is, I shall probably restore it to him. I suppose that can be done quite legally?”

“Oh, yes! you can legally dispose of your property in any way that you may think fit,” answered Mr. Walton, looking rather amused.

“Then perhaps you will kindly undertake the business for me when the time comes. I cannot give you positive instructions just yet, because I don’t think I ought to act in a hurry, and, in any case, I think I should be justified in keeping part of the money for myself. I believe my uncle meant to leave me something, and I have quite decided to retain a certain amount—ten thousand pounds would be enough, I should think—in order that I may help out a young cousin of mine, who has failed for the Army, and whom we propose to send now to a gentleman farmer to study agriculture, so that he may be qualified for a land-agency some day. That, of course, will entail expense; and I have other claims upon me besides.”

“I see,” answered the lawyer gravely. “Ten thousand pounds is a good deal of money; still, you might, under all the circumstances, assume that your uncle intended to bequeath as much to you. Your purpose, then, as I understand, is to hand over the residue of the personalty and the whole of the real property to Horace Trevor?”

“I believe that is what I ought to do; but, as I tell you, I cannot speak quite positively to-day.”

“I hope,” said Mr. Walton, “you will excuse me for remarking that you are the most extraordinarily unselfish person I have ever met during a tolerably long experience of my fellow men and women.”

“I can quite understand your thinking so,” answered Veronica; “but the truth is that I have no wish at all to be rich. It might be my duty to give up the property to Mr. Horace Trevor, even if I wanted to retain it; but, as a matter of fact, I don’t. It would be far more of a burden than a satisfaction to me.”

“Such as it is, my dear young lady, I am afraid you will have to make the best of it,” the lawyer returned, with a short laugh. “The wishes of the testator can hardly be set aside with propriety simply because they do not happen to accord with your own. Moreover, there is another small obstacle which you seem to have overlooked: you have still to reckon with Horace Trevor.”

“You think perhaps that he would not accept the property as a gift from me?”

“I don’t think about the matter; I am perfectly

sure that he would not. And I may add that no gentleman would or could do so.”

“I don’t see that at all,” said Veronica. “It is a simple question of putting wrong right, and he must know that it is. As for the testator’s wishes, it is absurd to imagine that he ever meant that will to stand. By tearing it up I am only doing what he would have done if he had lived a little longer.”

“Unfortunately, there is no method of ascertaining that. Meanwhile, the property is not yours to deal with; so that you will have time for reflection.”

He rose as he spoke—meaning, perhaps, to convey a hint that his time was of value—and held out his hand. “I am sure, Miss Dimsdale,” he said, smiling, “that a little reflection will convince you of the impossibility of carrying out your present idea. You will have to hit upon some more feasible scheme for impoverishing yourself.”

Veronica went away with an uneasy impression that she had made a fool of herself, and had seemed anxious to earn a character for unselfishness upon very easy and inexpensive terms. Nevertheless, the lawyer had not convinced her. She still felt that she must not profit by an accident, and that Horace Trevor must, somehow or other, be reinstated in his rightful position. The only question was how this was to be contrived, in the face of conventional prejudices the cogency of which could not but be acknowledged.

CHAPTER V.

THE INJURED INNOCENT.

VERONICA returned to South Audley Street in time for luncheon, and found a smart, military-looking old gentleman in a tightly buttoned frock-coat seated with her aunt. This was Mrs. Mansfield's brother-in-law, Lord Chippenham, who had succeeded to the family title and estates somewhat late in life, after rising to the rank of Lieutenant General and achieving a sufficiency of renown in sundry of those small wars which afford opportunity to the modern British soldier. He was now sixty-five years of age, and looked a good ten years younger, being blessed with a fine constitution, a cheerful temper, and a set of features which had once upon a time worked havoc with the hearts of susceptible ladies. Even in his grey old age he continued to be very fond of the society of the opposite sex, preferring the young and pretty ones to those whose faces showed signs of wear and tear, but displaying the most amiable politeness to all. He shook hands with Veronica, and began calling her "my dear" at once.

"I am one of your poor uncle's executors, you know," he announced, "and I hear you have just been

seeing the other. I was upon the point of saying I wished I was one of your trustees, but that would have been hardly true, for it's no joke, upon my word, to be a trustee! In my opinion, trustees ought to have been appointed, all the same. Well, well! let us hope that it will be all right. And how did you get on with old Walton? Found him rather a formal, cut-and-dried old chap, I daresay."

"No; I don't think I noticed that he was that," answered Veronica, upon whom Mr. Walton's personality had not produced a very strong impression one way or the other. "But he snubbed me a good deal."

"You don't say so! Well, my dear, I'll promise not to snub you, though I'm afraid I shall have to refer you to Mr. Walton upon all matters of business, which he understands much better than I do. Most likely the truth is that he wasn't half pleased about your uncle's will, and that may have made him a little short in his manner."

"He cannot be more displeased with it than I am," said Veronica disconsolately. "Did you ever before meet with the case of a person who had been enriched against her will, and who would give a good deal to resuscitate the man who had enriched her for the sake of arguing the point with him?"

Lord Chippenham really couldn't say that he had, and seemed to be a little sceptical as to whether he was in the presence of such a case now. "You'll come to it," he declared encouragingly, with a subdued chuckle. "There are worse misfortunes than having more money

than you know what to do with. As for argument, I suspect that if you could call my poor old friend Trevor back from his grave for that purpose, you would soon wish you had left him alone. You might argue with him till you were black in the face and you wouldn't convince him that he could possibly make a mistake. Argument was his strong point—or, at least, assertion was. I have never known Trevor's equal for dogged, persistent assertion."

"If he was capable of asserting that it was wise, or even reasonable, to leave an estate to me, he was capable of asserting anything!" Veronica exclaimed.

"He was," agreed Mrs. Mansfield, with melancholy conviction; "there can be no doubt that Samuel was capable of asserting anything and everything. Also the contrary of everything."

Lord Chippenham enjoyed his luncheon, as well as the conversation of the girl whom he had expected to be an uninteresting country bumpkin. Both were excellent of their kind, and both had that spice of originality which is so welcome to a man who is getting on in life and has seen and tasted most things. What tickled his fancy about Veronica was not so much her professed reluctance to become a rich woman (in which he scarcely believed) as the direct simplicity of her speech and her evident disinclination to accept advice from anybody. It was clear that, whatever might happen, she would take her own line and stick to it, regardless of the prejudices or reproofs of those about her, and this struck Lord Chippenham—who, it must be

remembered, was no longer young—as a new departure in feminine eccentricity. However, if she was not eager for advice, she was very keen about acquiring information, and after luncheon was over, she returned unceremoniously to the dining-room, where he had been told he might smoke a cigarette, for the purpose of putting a few questions to him in the absence of an embarrassing third person.

“Oh, dear! yes,” answered the old gentleman, in reply to the first and most important of these. “Known him ever since he was a young subaltern; and a very smart young subaltern he was, too!—as fine a young fellow as ever stepped, I should say. Though his best friends—and he has any number of friends, let me tell you—would hardly pretend that he was likely to set the Thames on fire. But there’s no satisfying some people. As for poor old Trevor, he was the kind of man who would have picked a quarrel with a stone wall. He would have quarrelled with me years and years ago, only I wouldn’t let him; and you may depend upon it, my dear, that he would have quarrelled with you if you hadn’t had the great good luck never to see his face.”

“One always hears things too late!” sighed Veronica. “I would not have failed to force myself upon him if I had had the slightest suspicion that he entertained a misplaced affection for me. I suppose he is very angry and disappointed—Mr. Horace Trevor, I mean.”

“Horace Trevor,” answered Lord Chippenham, “is the best-tempered man in the world. Disappointed he

may be—who wouldn't be in his place?—but I doubt whether he is angry."

"I think," observed Veronica, "that I may very likely hand the Broxham estate over to him. It ought unquestionably to be his."

"Oh, you can't do that," said the old gentleman, laughing.

"You mean that he would consider such an offer an insult?"

"Well, yes; it would be an insult. Moreover, the property without the money would be rather a white elephant. A hundred thousand pounds sounds like a large sum; but I can assure you, my dear, that you won't find it so much as you may think. Poor Trevor was a wealthy man once; but he muddled away his money upon Church missions and Ritualist prosecutions and one thing and another, and land, as I dare say you know, is an expensive luxury in these days. I am by no means sure that I should care to take Broxham as a gift myself. However, that is neither here nor there. You and I may have our own opinion as to your uncle's wisdom and justice, but what has been done can't be undone. We must accommodate ourselves to circumstances, that's all."

Perhaps the same notion may have suggested itself at the same moment to both malcontents; for their eyes met, and they broke into a simultaneous laugh. The one method of pleasing everybody and undoing what had been done was so ludicrously apparent! They did not, of course, carry indiscretion to the length of put-

ting their thoughts into words; but Lord Chippenham presently departed in so cheerful and benevolent a frame of mind that, instead of making for the military club where he was wont to enjoy an afternoon rubber of whist, he turned in at another and somewhat smarter establishment, and inquired for Mr. Horace Trevor.

He was soon greeted by a young man, dressed in deep mourning, whose appearance corresponded so exactly with the succinct description of it given to Veronica by Mrs. Mansfield that it is needless to say anything more about him except that he had a remarkably pleasant smile.

“Still in London, General?” this injured but by no means despondent-looking individual said.

“Where else should I be?” returned Lord Chippenham. “If you know any better place than London to be in at this impossible season of the year, you would do me a favour by letting me hear where it is. Besides, I’ve had matters of business to attend to. Come into the smoking-room; I want to talk to you.”

And when he had ensconced himself in a comfortable arm-chair, he resumed: “Well, my dear boy, I have been lunching with Julia, and I have seen the heiress. All things considered, I think we may certainly congratulate ourselves. Strictly speaking, she isn’t exactly what I should call a beauty; but she is quite a lady, and she looks distinguished—yes, distinguished is decidedly the word. Clever, too, I should imagine from the way that she talks, and quick at seeing things. In short, I’m convinced that she’ll do.”

“Oh, well—that’s all right,” responded the young man vaguely. “I am glad she is presentable, though it doesn’t make much odds to me what she is like.”

“My dear fellow, it makes all the odds in the world to you seeing that she is your future bride.”

“The deuce she is!” ejaculated the future bridegroom, staring blankly at his elderly mentor. “Who on earth told you that, General?”

“Come now, Horace, don’t pretend that you have never thought of such a thing! It occurred to me as soon as I heard the will read, and so it did to Julia. Also, I suspect, to the young lady herself, who, I may tell you, is full of remorse for having cut you out.”

“Oh, but that was no fault of hers,” returned Horace hastily, “and I’m sure it never entered into my head to blame her in any way. I do trust you and Aunt Julia haven’t been telling her that she ought to make amends by marrying me out of hand!”

“Do you set us down as born fools?” asked Lord Chippenham. “We aren’t advocating indecent haste or anything of that sort; only we have the common-sense to see that the very best thing that could happen would be for you two to take a fancy to one another. And there’s no reason that I know of why you shouldn’t. Anyhow, you had better go round to South Audley Street and judge for yourself. Your Aunt Julia was complaining that you never go to see her now.”

Horace Trevor had always been accustomed to address Mrs. Mansfield as “Aunt Julia,” although in reality she was no more his aunt than the defunct

philanthropist who had for so many years posed as his benefactor had been his uncle. He had a genuine regard for her and a grateful recollection of the frequent occasions on which she had undertaken to make his peace with her exacting brother. If he had been somewhat remiss about paying his respects to her of late, this was because he did not wish to listen to lamentations over what could not now be helped. He had, of course, behaved like a fool; he had not been as conciliatory as he might have been; he had argued when it would have been just as easy, and a great deal more sensible, to remain silent; he had not chosen to clear himself from imputations for which there had been very little real ground. But all that was over and done with, and what was the good of grumbling? Horace Trevor had always been of opinion that a man ought to preserve his independence; he had acted in accordance with his convictions (for he did not think that the payment of a few trifling debts by his uncle constituted any surrender of them) and he had been charged a heavier price than he had anticipated for the privilege. It only remained for him to grin and bear it, and, having an ample stock of good humour to draw upon, he had accomplished both feats creditably enough. It certainly had not occurred to him that his misfortune was in any way remediable; still less had he contemplated rendering the late Mr. Trevor's will of none effect by the simple expedient of espousing Miss Veronica Dimsdale.

He felt no inclination to do so now—in fact he was

quite determined not to do so; but Lord Chippenham's remarks had stimulated his curiosity a little, and he thought he would rather like to see the girl. He also thought that he would like to have an opportunity of making it clear to her that he was neither jealous nor covetous. He could well understand that the poor girl might be troubled with scruples, and he had no difficulty in realising how Aunt Julia, with the best intentions in the world, would foster and encourage these. He pictured Veronica to himself as a simple little maiden, prone to be influenced by the suggestions of her elders, and liable to be made unhappy by their displeasure. Now, one does not, if one is a good fellow in the main, want an unoffending girl to be made unhappy, even though she has stepped into a pair of shoes which were constructed for one's own feet, and were likely to prove a trifle too large for her to wear with comfort.

On the following afternoon, therefore, Mr. Horace went his way to South Audley Street, prepared to be very nice and friendly and to make everybody comfortable. He was very far from being a conceited young man; but he did flatter himself that he had the knack of setting people at their ease, and he had every excuse for so believing. As a matter of fact he had pleasant manners, and, being fond of his fellow-creatures, was universally beloved by them. Even old Mr. Trevor had probably loved him, while sternly disapproving of him. At all events, there could be no question as to the sentiments entertained for him by Mrs. Mansfield, who

jumped up when he was shown into her drawing-room, and greeted him with effusion.

“My dear boy,” she exclaimed, “this *is* good of you! You know that Veronica Dimsdale is here? . . . staying in the house, at least. She isn’t at home just now, I am sorry to say, which is most unfortunate. I wanted you so much to see her!”

“Well, I called to see you, you know,” Horace remarked, with partial truth.

“Then all that I can say is that you have called to see a deeply disgusted old woman. I can’t get over it, Horace. . . . I really can’t! . . . and if we were not assured that purgatory is a fond thing, vainly invented, I should feel far from confident as to poor Samuel’s state.”

“Oh, you’ll get over it,” said Horace cheerfully; “I have already. Now let’s hear about the heiress; the General was praising her up to the skies yesterday.”

Mrs. Mansfield might have been imprudent enough to imitate Lord Chippenham in that respect if she had not detected a half-amused, half-apprehensive look in Horace’s grey eyes which warned her against a too speedy betrayal of her schemes. As it was, she only said, “Oh! Veronica is charming. Not quite your style, perhaps; still, charming in her own way. I don’t suppose it will be very long before some good man relieves me of all further responsibility for her.”

“I don’t suppose it will. Broxham is worthy of the attention of good men—not to mention bad ones.”

“Ah! but I mean she will be married for her own

sake. Tastes differ, you know. Of course, as I say, she isn't the sort of girl whom you would be likely to admire."

"I admire all sorts," declared Horace, who was not in the least taken in by this rather transparent diplomacy; what makes you think that I shouldn't appreciate your Veronica? I thought you were so anxious for me to meet her."

"So I am," answered Mrs. Mansfield; "and so is she, poor thing! For naturally she cannot help feeling that you owe her a grudge, and she wants to be assured that you don't. I only meant to say that she is not at all like the class of young women with whom you are in the habit of flirting. The chances, I am afraid, are that you won't hit it off with her."

A few leading questions extorted from Mrs. Mansfield the confession that she herself had not as yet been brilliantly successful in hitting it off with her niece, whom she pronounced to be an incomprehensible mixture of docility and self-will.

"She has evidently been very well educated, but I doubt whether she has been very well brought up. She seems to have been accustomed to take her own way as a matter of course, and she won't discuss things. She either yields or she doesn't. More often than not, I suspect, she doesn't. When I told her that it wasn't quite the proper thing for her to go to the National Gallery this afternoon all by herself she wanted to know why. I said she might be insulted; but she declared that she really couldn't believe that, and off she went

without more ado. Yet it stands to reason that she *may* be insulted."

"Oh, I expect she'll be all right," said Horace easily. "I have never been in the National Gallery myself, so I don't know what sort of people frequent that place of amusement; but I should imagine that they would be a highly respectable lot. Besides, I understand that she doesn't shine conspicuously in the matter of personal beauty."

Mrs. Mansfield said rather crossly that that wasn't the question. "I suppose the General has been telling you that she is plain: he calls everybody plain who hasn't a little mouth, and big eyes, and a perfectly meaningless cast of countenance, like the beauties of his boyhood. Times have changed since then, and, unless I am very much mistaken, Veronica will have as many admirers as she can possibly want before she is much older."

The problem was to arouse Horace's interest and predispose him in Veronica's favour, without hinting at the possibility of his doing anything so eminently satisfactory as to fall in love with her. Mrs. Mansfield, more judicious than her fellow-conspirator, was alive to all the risks attendant upon plain speech, and when, on the expiration of half an hour, the young man, after glancing at his watch, said he must be off, she did not feel able to congratulate herself upon having advanced far towards the attainment of her purpose.

But in truth she had been more successful than she supposed; and the proof of this was that when Horace

Trevor left South Audley Street, he bent his steps unhesitatingly in the direction of Trafalgar Square. He said to himself that really, when you came to think of it, it was a scandalous thing never to have been inside the National Gallery; and he also said to himself that it would be rather amusing to try and discover which of the dowdy females whom he expected to encounter there was Miss Veronica Dimsdale.

He was not, however, destined to increase his very scanty acquaintance with the pictorial art that day; for he reached his destination only in time to find that the doors were about to be closed and that everybody was coming out. He lingered for a few minutes at the entrance, watching the people as they emerged, and presently his eye fell upon a tall young lady in black, who, he at once made up his mind, must be no other than his fair supplanter. All doubt as to her identity was removed when, after looking about her in obvious perplexity, she addressed the attendant constable.

“I can’t remember whether I ought to turn to the right or the left,” she said, in a clear contralto voice.

“What address, M’m?” the policeman inquired.

“That’s just the stupid part of it!—the name has gone out of my head. It’s South Something Street—Mrs. Mansfield’s. But I suppose you wouldn’t know who Mrs. Mansfield is.”

The policeman admitted his ignorance, and suggested reference to a Post-Office Directory, which, he said, would probably be obtainable at any neighbouring

shop; but at this juncture Horace judged it appropriate and permissible to intervene.

“I think you must be Miss Dimsdale, are you not?” he said, stepping forward and taking off his hat. “I have just come from your aunt’s house in South Audley Street, and I shall be very glad to show you the way there, unless you would rather that I called a hansom for you. My name is Trevor; you have heard of me, I know.”

The girl did not seem to be in the least shy or awkward. He noticed that, just as he had noticed already that her voice and manner bore the stamp of good breeding, and he was very much pleased when she held out her hand and exclaimed with a smile: “What a lucky chance! You are the very person whom I most particularly wanted to see. I wonder whether you would mind walking part of the way home with me?”

He made the only reply that could have been made, but his sincerity in making it was so unmistakable that Veronica felt drawn towards him at once. Indeed, there were not many people who did not take a liking to Horace Trevor at first sight. So these two paced along Pall Mall East, side by side, and the policeman, gazing benevolently after them, remarked to the door-keeper that they made what he should call a ’andsome couple.

CHAPTER VI.

A FRIENDLY COMPACT.

“I AM sure,” Veronica began, “you must heartily wish I had never been born. Don’t trouble about protesting, for if I were you I should certainly feel just as you do; only I think you must admit that I am not in any way answerable for what has happened.”

“Of course you’re not,” the young man declared.

“That is really my sole consolation. As I never even saw my uncle, and only once in my life had a sort of indirect message from him, I can’t be accused of having exercised undue influence. I have always understood and always believed that he hated me for my mother’s sake. I attached no importance to that message, which came through Aunt Julia, and which was to the effect that I should get something when he died. In fact, it seems to be tolerably certain that at the time he only meant to leave me a small legacy. Oh, if he had but dropped down dead there and then how much better it would have been!”

“You aren’t over and above grateful for benefits received,” remarked Horace, with an amused side-glance at his companion.

“I have nothing to be grateful for. My benefactor threw me what he couldn't take away with him, not because I was myself but because I wasn't you. He has placed me in a most uncomfortable and embarrassing position, and it appears to me that he hasn't been even commonly honest. I suppose it was quite an understood thing that you were to succeed him, was it not?”

“Oh, dear, no!” answered the young man. “I certainly expected that he would make me his heir, and so did everybody else; but I can't say that he ever committed himself to a distinct promise. On the contrary, he threatened scores of times to cut me adrift if I didn't mend my ways.”

“Were your ways so very bad, then?” Veronica inquired.

“Upon my word I don't think they were; but they weren't his ways, and so we had perpetual rows. I'm bound to confess that I wasn't very respectful to him; he used to talk such—well, he's dead now, and perhaps it wasn't really humbug. But it sounded uncommonly like it.”

“He objected to your betting, I suppose.”

“Oh, he objected to everything; you couldn't please him, and it wasn't much use to try. My own belief is that if I had joined the Salvation Army or become a total abstainer, he would have found something to object to in that.”

“I daresay,” observed Veronica reflectively, “you wouldn't tell me if he had had some more serious ground of complaint against you than I know of. Of course, I

couldn't expect you to tell me. And yet it seems almost necessary that I should ascertain, by some means or other."

"I don't quite understand," said the young man, opening his grey eyes rather wide.

"And it is so difficult to explain! Perhaps you wouldn't mind just answering me in general terms if I asked you what sort of a life you have led—whether it has been what is commonly called a fast life, for instance?"

Well, this was rather an odd question for a young lady to put, and although Horace was not offended, it made him feel unwontedly shy. Who is to know what young ladies understand by "fast"?

"You need not," Veronica went on, by way of setting him more at his ease, "feel afraid of shocking me. Girls know many more things than they are supposed to know, and I have read a good deal, and I am neither deaf nor blind, in spite of having lived all my life in a country parish. I don't want to catechise you; I only want, if I possibly can, to account for my uncle's conduct."

"I am afraid it would puzzle you to do that without having known him," Horace answered, laughing. "All I can tell you is that he was the queerest-tempered man I ever came across. Nothing that he did ever surprised me, and I wasn't at all surprised when I heard that he had altered his will after our last scene. However, I may say with a clear conscience that the worst offence I ever committed, in his eyes, was going to the races on a

Sunday. I don't claim to have been a saint; but I haven't any reason to accuse myself of dissipation or hard drinking, or anything of that sort. In fact, I should think you could see for yourself by looking at me that I haven't."

Veronica, without concerning herself in the slightest degree about the circumstance that they were walking down Pall Mall in broad daylight, and were attracting a certain amount of notice on the part of the passers-by, scrutinised his healthy, honest countenance and smiled at him."

"Thank you," she returned; "it is very good of you to have answered me so frankly, and I quite believe what you say. One can only conclude, then, that my uncle was a sort of religious maniac, and that he ought to have been deprived of the management of his own affairs. After all, the way in which he treated my father and mother supports that theory. At the same time, I must own that I myself have rather a prejudice against men who are neither particularly bad nor particularly good—men whose only object in life is to amuse themselves, and who never dream it is any business of theirs to leave the world a little better than they found it."

"Meaning me?" Horace Trevor inquired.

"Ah! I don't know. I might mean you. That's just the question. I need hardly tell you that what I should like to do would be to transfer this Broxham estate to you without delay; but, you see, it is rather an important step to take. I think, perhaps, I ought to

satisfy myself first that you would try to make as good a use as you could of the property."

Horace burst out laughing.

"I beg your pardon," he said, perceiving that she was a little affronted. "I ought to be ashamed of myself for being so rude, and I am really grateful to you for your generous intention. Only, you know, the thing couldn't be done. In the first place, I couldn't rob you of your property; and in the second place, a will which was made with the deliberate purpose of cutting me out of it couldn't be annulled."

"I shouldn't feel the smallest compunction on that score," Veronica declared. "We agreed that the man was not sane enough to make a will at all."

"Well, you said so; I don't remember agreeing with you. Uncle Samuel was quite as sane as most of us, I expect. Please don't bother yourself any more about the matter. It's awfully kind of you to have thought about me at all, and I'm very glad we have met. I don't see why we shouldn't be friends, do you?"

"I should like nothing better than to be a friend of yours," was Veronica's satisfactory response. She added meditatively, after a moment, "In some ways you remind me a good deal of Joseph."

"I often remind myself of him," the young man replied gravely. "That is, if you allude to the Patriarch."

Veronica broke into one of her abrupt laughs. "I was alluding to my young cousin, Joe Dimsdale," she said. "He is very unlike you in appearance, because

he has red hair, and he has never dressed smartly, or wanted to dress smartly, in his life; but I think you would get on together all the same. You are fond of hunting and shooting, I presume."

"I am very fond of hunting," Horace answered. "Of course I do shoot, but I can't pretend to be much of a shot. However, nothing in the shape of sport comes amiss to me."

"Nor it does to him. Personally, I rather disapprove of sport, though I know you would justify it by the same arguments that he uses."

Like George III., who, in his simplicity, had never supposed that the Bible stood in need of an Apology, Horace Trevor had not until now thought of seeking any justification for pursuits which have received the sanction and approval of centuries. More in sorrow than in anger he said he did hope Miss Dimsdale was not a Radical. "I haven't met a great many Radical women," he admitted, "but those whom I have come across have been more than enough for me. Awful beings, with their hair cut short or parted on one side, who made speeches from platforms and wanted to repeal—well, pretty well everything! I am sure you can't belong to that hideous crew!"

Veronica replied that she did not at present contemplate making any change in the arrangement of her hair, but that she was endeavouring to bring an unprejudiced mind to bear upon all subjects. As she marched up St. James's Street she was proceeding to unfold, with considerable emphasis and appropriate

gesticulation, the reasons that she had for doubting whether the slaughter of innumerable grouse and pheasants is an ennobling form for dexterity to take, when the approach of a tall, elderly gentleman, with a badly brushed hat and an exquisite Marshal Niel rose in his buttonhole, caused her to interrupt her harangue.

“Oh, here is Mr. Mostyn! How delightful!” she exclaimed, holding out her hand to the newcomer, who greeted her in an affectionate, fatherly fashion, and nodded to her companion.

“I have only just run up for a couple of days,” Mr. Mostyn announced; “please don’t tell anybody that you have seen me.”

There were a few people (and Horace Trevor chanced to be one of them) who thought that the great man’s terror of being run after was just a trifle exaggerated, and that, in any case, there was no need for him to proclaim it quite so persistently as he did. But Veronica, knowing how great Cyril Mostyn really was, always took him with the utmost seriousness.

“I suppose we ought not to keep you standing on the pavement, where you are visible from the windows of all these clubs,” she said anxiously. “Are you very busy, or could you, do you think, find time to look in at South Audley Street before you go back to the country?”

Mostyn smiled and shook his head. “I am afraid I can’t manage it,” he answered; “to tell you the truth, I have every single hour engaged. Still, I might stay an additional hour or two in London if I were very particularly wanted. Am I?”

Veronica, after biting her lip reflectively, felt unable to assert that he was. What he meant, of course, was that he would be willing to give her his opinion of Horace Trevor. But she would not upset his plans upon so frivolous a pretext as that, and, after all, he probably knew nothing more about the young man than she herself did by this time. That reminded her of Horace's presence, which she had forgotten for the moment, and she said: "Oh! by-the-way, you have met Mr. Trevor already, haven't you?"

The two men made the customary inarticulate murmur, and exchanged a few remarks referring to common acquaintances; after which there did not seem to be any special reason for prolonging the interview.

"I shall tell your uncle and aunt that I have seen you and that you are looking remarkably well," Mostyn said, as he took leave of Veronica. Then he added laughingly, in an undertone, "Don't be too hasty about solving that Hard Case in the manner that you suggested; such solutions are much more apt to result in blanks than prizes."

When Veronica and her escort had resumed their walk, the latter asked in a dissatisfied tone, "Do you like that chap?"

"Oh, you certainly do resemble Joseph!" Veronica exclaimed; "he has asked me the very same question in the very same voice again and again. Yes, I like Mr. Mostyn very much, and I admire him even more than I like him. So would you, if you had read his writings."

"I have read some of them," Horace said; "they

were a bit over my head, I suppose, for I must confess that I found them rather tough work. I have no doubt he is a genius, though. Only don't you think he is a little too conceited about it?"

"Most certainly not," declared Veronica. "You can't be conceited when you are as big as that; vanity is one of the defects that belong to little people."

"Well, perhaps it isn't conceit then; perhaps there's some other name for the complaint when it attacks people of his size. But, whatever it may be, he has got it, and I can't help thinking that he would be improved by being cured of it. What did he mean by the 'hard case' which he was so anxious to dissuade you from solving?"

"I have a great mind to tell you," answered Veronica. "Yes, I don't see why I shouldn't; it may help us to be comfortable and friendly together if I do. He was only referring to a mild joke that I made just before I left home. I said my dilemma was very much like one of those which are published every week in *Vanity Fair*, and that the obvious way for the embarrassed young woman to make amends to the ill-treated young man whom she ousted was to marry him. There is no harm in my mentioning this now; because, after talking to you, I feel quite certain that you will never wish to marry me, and though I like what I have seen of you very much, I am just as certain that I shall never wish to marry you. I shouldn't wonder if other people were to try to arrange a match between us——"

“Oh, they will,” interrupted the young man; “they have begun already.”

“I suspected as much, and really one can't blame them. But from the moment that we have made up our minds not to oblige them they won't be able to give us any annoyance worth speaking of. I hope you don't mind my talking like this. You were saying just now that you wanted to be friends with me, and I want above all things to be friends with you. In the absence of some mutual understanding and compact, that might be made difficult for us, you see.”

Horace laughed and answered, “All right.” His acquiescence was a shade less cordial than it might have been, had he been less unequivocally informed that Miss Dimsdale could not regard him as a possible husband. Certainly, he had no ambition to become her husband, while her proffered friendship was welcome to him; but it is a part of the inborn perversity of human nature that we resent having our disabilities thrust upon our notice, however palpable they may be.

“And now that that is settled,” resumed Veronica cheerfully, “let us discuss the question of the Broxham estate in an amicable, sensible spirit. Lord Chippenham says that the estate without the money would not be worth having; but——”

“Oh, bother Lord Chippenham!” broke in Horace impatiently. “He may say what he pleases; but he knows as well as I do that it is absurd to talk about your resigning your inheritance. Please believe, once for all, that nothing—absolutely nothing on earth—

would induce me to accept an acre of land or a shilling of money from you.”

“Well, you needn't lose your temper over it,” said Veronica reprovingly.

Horace declared that he had not lost his temper—never lost his temper. At the same time, he must decline to be bullied; and the last words he spoke to his companion, after leading her to Mrs. Mansfield's threshold, were: “Now mind, if we are going to be friends, there is just one subject which we must agree to avoid for the future.”

CHAPTER VII.

DOLLY CRADOCK.

MRS. MANSFIELD was delighted to hear that her niece had already made acquaintance with Horace Trevor, and even more delighted when the circumstances under which the acquaintance had been formed were related to her.

“What in the world could have taken Horace to the National Gallery, of all places!” she ejaculated.

“I don’t know; I quite forgot to inquire,” answered Veronica. “Now that you mention it, I suppose it was rather an improbable spot for a man of his tastes to be discovered in; though, to be sure, he was not in the building itself. He was standing on the steps outside with a policeman and a number of others.”

Mrs. Mansfield smiled and abstained from further interrogation. Without being an especially pious woman, she firmly believed in the constant intervention of an overruling Providence, and it seemed to her that Providence had taken the matter in hand.

Most providential also did it appear to her that from that day forth Veronica showed every disposition to be reasonable and tractable. At the outset there had

been no sort of certainty that the girl would prove so; she had declined to discuss further arrangements, had spoken as though the question of her taking up her residence at Broxham were too remote to be worth considering, and had generally conveyed the impression that she meant to do just exactly what she might think fit—a tone which no girl with a properly qualified *duenna* ought to assume. But now, as Mrs. Mansfield was very glad to be able to inform Lord Chippenham, there were distinct signs of a change for the better.

“Everything is working out much more satisfactorily than one could have ventured to hope,” she told her brother-in-law, about a week later. “It has been decided that I am to go down to Broxham with Veronica in the autumn, by which time, Mr. Walton says, she can take formal possession of the place; meanwhile, she is to stay on here as long as she likes. And I must say for her that she is not at all difficult to entertain. Perhaps I ought not to let her go about by herself quite as much as she does; but nowadays that sort of thing is the fashion, and it isn’t as if there were the slightest fear of her coming to grief in any way.”

“And what about our young friend Horace, who has already come to grief a good deal more than he has deserved?” inquired Lord Chippenham. “Is there any nope of his redeeming former false steps?”

“The very greatest hope, I should say,” answered Mrs. Mansfield complacently. “He drops in, upon one pretext or another, almost every day, and Veronica and he talk together as if they had known one another all

their lives. Oh, yes! I believe he is really smitten—though, between ourselves, I hardly expected such luck. Delightful as she is, and fond as I am of her, I can't call dear Veronica exactly pretty; and beauty—as you know as well as anyone—remains the one thing that men insist upon in women.”

The experienced warrior chuckled and said, “Oh! we ain't so particular as all that; we can put up with trifling physical imperfections, if we are properly managed. Especially when it's a question of marriage, and when the lady has a substantial property of her own. Besides, I call Miss Veronica an exceedingly nice-looking girl myself.”

Horace Trevor, as it happened, entertained a similar opinion, although Mrs. Mansfield would have been grievously disappointed if he had explained to her how it was that he came to be upon such excellent terms with her niece. He certainly could not and would not have paid such frequent visits to the house in South Audley Street, had there been a possibility of his motives being misconstrued by one of the ladies who dwelt there. As for the other, it was both agreeable and convenient to put her off the scent.

“I can't be thankful enough to you,” he was pleased to tell Veronica, on one occasion, “for having taken the bull by the horns and said you would see me jolly well hanged before you would think of marrying me. If you hadn't done that, I should always have been afraid that you might suspect me of wanting to make up to you.”

“Oh, I shouldn't have suspected you!” returned Veronica, laughing. “You are not the sort of person about whom one could ever have suspicions—they would be certainties one way or the other. I doubt whether you have it in you to deceive an intelligent child of five years old.”

“Oh, well, come! I'm deceiving Aunt Julia and the General, at all events,” protested Horace, rather resenting this charge of obvious integrity.

But in truth he was about as honest and simple a young man as could have been found in England, and that was one reason why Veronica had conceived a strong liking for him. The more she saw and heard of him (and she kept her eyes and ears open) the more she became convinced that his prospects had been marred without legitimate excuse, and that he must, by some means or other, be reinstated in the position which was his of right. How this was to be contrived she could not yet determine; for she had reluctantly come to the conclusion that her original idea of retiring in his favour without more ado would have to be abandoned. She herself saw no reason why he should not accept a property that she did not want; but the objection to such a course appeared to be so cogent in his and everybody else's eyes that any further attempt to combat them would be a sheer waste of time. What she vaguely hoped for was that at some future date the transfer might be effected with less difficulty. All sorts of things might happen. She might, for instance, marry some rich man, who would not care about being bur-

dened with an additional estate, and in that case, what could be more natural than that she should pass it on to her cousin? For she had already, by Horace's request and with Aunt Julia's approval, begun to speak of the young man as her cousin and to address him by his Christian name.

In those days—felt by her to be a sort of transition period, during which there was nothing to be done but to await the progress of events—Veronica found life pleasant enough. Although, in consequence of her recent bereavement, Mrs. Mansfield was declining all invitations, she did not deem herself precluded from receiving her friends, of whom she had a vast number: and it seemed to Veronica, who was accustomed to a very different method of existence, that there was a perpetual stream of people entering or leaving the house in South Audley Street. Many of these were politically or otherwise notorious. It was interesting to watch them, to listen to their talk, and to note how extremely ordinary were the ideas to which they thought fit to give expression. Statesmen, fine ladies, artists, musicians—all these were to be met with in Mrs. Mansfield's drawing-room or at her dinner-table; and Veronica, with a strong curiosity respecting the interminable Human Comedy, and considerable natural aptitude for discerning its lights and shades, enjoyed scrutinising them and trying to discover what they were really like when off the stage. Moreover, if Aunt Julia's friends were not conversationally brilliant, or did not care to show themselves so, they had singularly pleasant, easy

manners. They did not look half bewildered, half offended if you chanced to tell them what was in your mind at the moment, as the dwellers around Harbury Vale had been wont to do; their mental horizon was evidently less restricted than that which encircles country neighbourhoods; added to which, they were exceedingly kind and anxious to do all in their power to amuse a raw rustic. The truth, no doubt, was that Veronica herself was amusing, besides being an heiress; so that it would have been strange if she had not achieved popularity. As a fact, many people took a more or less disinterested fancy to her, and were glad to afford her opportunities for enlarging her knowledge of contemporary social developments.

But of all her acquaintances she liked Horace Trevor far the best. Now that they understood one another (or, at all events, understood one another with regard to one essential point), their intercourse assumed a character which was in every way agreeable, and even stimulating. That is to say, that Veronica endeavoured to make her society stimulating to Horace, because she thought that he rather required a touch of the spur, and she found him a most docile disciple.

“Clever I shall never be,” he confessed modestly one day, “and I’m not sure that I always agree with everything that you say; but I’m quite sure that you are quite right in telling me that I ought to improve my mind, and I do read regularly every night now after I go to bed, until I fall asleep.”

“And how long is that, upon an average?” Veronica inquired.

“Well, it depends a little upon the author, but I’m getting on. I know quite a lot of things now which I should never have troubled my head about if you hadn’t put me on the track.”

“Any seeds of personal ambition beginning to germinate yet?”

“H’m! not many, I’m afraid. But I’m ready to admit that I have wasted my life hitherto, and I would try to do something more useful with it for the future if I only knew how.”

How, indeed, was he to render his future life useful to the community at large or of any great value to himself? An ex-cavalry officer, who is too old to take up a new profession, and who has just money enough to live without a profession, is scarcely a promising subject. But Veronica’s fixed idea was that he was to become a landed proprietor some day, and after that it would be comparatively plain sailing. For the time being, there was much satisfaction to be derived from the influence which she unquestionably exercised over this well-meaning young man, while it was at once a pleasure and a convenience to have his escort to theatres and other places of public entertainment.

“I don’t think we show any disrespect to poor Samuel’s memory by going to a theatre sometimes,” Mrs. Mansfield said. “It is true that he wouldn’t have approved of it, but then what *would* he have approved of?”

Not, it must be assumed, of a match between the disinherited Horace and the enriched Veronica; and, since Mrs. Mansfield's object in going to the play was to foster that scheme, she reflected that she might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. At the bottom of her heart she was old-fashioned enough to entertain some misgivings as to the propriety of showing herself at a burlesque or a comic opera within so short a time of her brother's death, but she told her conscience that the end justified the means.

What vexed her a good deal more than her conscience—a fairly well-trained one—was likely to do was the conviction which forced itself upon her one evening that she had adopted an unfortunate means of arriving at her end.

She was sitting, as usual, in the background of a box, the more conspicuous seats of which were occupied by Horace and Veronica, when the door was abruptly flung open to give admittance to a young lady in a sable-trimmed opera-cloak, who accosted her with the engaging *sans-gêne* characteristic of a moribund century.

“How are you, Mrs. Mansfield? I saw you from the other side of the house, and I thought I would look you up between the acts.”

“How do you do?” returned Mrs. Mansfield, in a tone of annoyed resignation. “I don't know how you could have seen me; but I suppose you mean that you saw Horace.”

The new-comer laughed. “Well, yes,” she answered,

as she seated herself; "I divined you. "It wasn't to be imagined that he could be at a theatre with a young person of unquestionable respectability and without his aunt. The young person is the heiress, I presume?"

She did not trouble herself to lower her voice, which was of a clear and rather hard quality. Both Veronica and Horace looked round, and the latter at once rose, holding out his hand.

"Have you come up for the season, Miss Cradock?" he inquired.

The lady addressed nodded. "Awfully sorry to hear of your sell," she was kind enough to say; "but I always warned you of what would happen if you didn't look out. What a duffer you were to let that old curmudgeon quarrel with you!"

Dolly Cradock prided herself upon her disregard of conventional usages. Most of us find it necessary to our comfort to pride ourselves upon gifts which we either do not possess or should be a great deal better without. This tall, well set-up, and somewhat muscular-looking girl, who had a fine figure, a clear complexion, an abundance of bronze-coloured hair, and a set of features to which not much exception could be taken, save that her jaw was rather too heavy for beauty, might have rested satisfied with what Nature and circumstances had done for her. Only in that case she would have been ordinary, and it must be assumed that she did not desire to be ordinary.

Horace, uncomfortably conscious of Veronica's vicinity, answered hurriedly, "Oh, that's all right. May

I introduce you to my cousin, Miss Dimsdale—Miss Cradock.”

“Didn’t know Miss Dimsdale was your cousin,” the irrepressible Dolly remarked, stretching out a tan-gloved hand to Veronica; “I always understood that you were one of those thrice-blessed mortals who have absolutely no surviving relations. Mrs. Mansfield don’t count, because she is only your aunt by courtesy, and that doesn’t give her the right to be discourteous, like some people’s aunts. I wish all mine were in Abraham’s bosom, I know!”

“My dear girl!” remonstrated Mrs. Mansfield.

But Miss Dolly was not in the habit of paying heed to remonstrances. She now proceeded to monopolise the conversation, criticising the first act of the play which they had witnessed in a spirit of candid impartiality, and displaying incidentally a remarkable acquaintance with the private lives of certain actresses concerned therein, until the entrance of Lord Chippenham created a diversion.

This left her free to devote her whole attention to young Trevor, to whom she said: “Well, and how are you? Bearing up pretty well?”

“Oh, I’m bearing up,” answered Horace. “I say, I wish you wouldn’t mind being a little bit particular about what remarks you make before Miss Dimsdale. She’s—she’s——”

“An *ingénue*? I shouldn’t have supposed so to look at her; she strikes me as being uncommonly self-possessed. Upon the whole, I rather like her looks, and

I think I will cultivate her acquaintance. Just go round to the Framptons, who brought me here, and tell them I shall not be back until after the next act, will you? You can keep my place for me."

Horace obeyed not very willingly; for he knew that Dolly Cradock sometimes said outrageous things, and he had of late began to form entirely new ideas upon the subject of what constitutes feminine attractiveness. But he had no need to be alarmed. Miss Cradock could suit herself to her company when she chose, and Veronica was almost as much pleased as amused by the frank speech of this fresh acquaintance. Dolly put a number of questions, obtained the information for which she asked, and gave in return a rapid and perfectly truthful sketch of herself and her belongings.

"Poor as church mice, and over head and ears in debt," said she. "But somehow or other we manage to hang on from year to year and keep more or less in the swim. How it's done I'm sure I can't tell you, but it *is* done. As for me, I am beginning my third season of anxious looking out for the rich man who ought to have married me, and who hasn't turned up yet. Your cousin, as you are pleased to call him, would have done very nicely, but, of course, he is out of the question, now, poor fellow!" added Dolly, with a sigh.

"You can't make me feel more apologetic or more ashamed of myself than I do already," Veronica remarked.

"Oh, I don't suppose you owe him any apology—though I must say I envy you your good luck. Im-

agine waking up one fine morning to discover that one was wealthy and entirely independent! If I were in your shoes, nothing on earth should ever induce me to marry."

"Very likely I never shall," answered Veronica; "but as for being independent, that seems to be scarcely possible. I can't live alone."

"Why not? Who is to prevent you, from the moment that you are of age? All that you have to do is simply to declare your intention of pleasing yourself, and then let them rave. I sometimes adopt that system, even though I'm not independent, and I find it answer very fairly well. Still, for the present, you are not so badly off in being chaperoned by Mrs. Mansfield, who is an old dear. Mrs. Mansfield, I was just saying to your niece that you are an old dear."

The recipient of this graceful compliment did not look precisely enchanted; but Lord Chippenham, who thought Miss Dolly great fun, bent forward, laughing, to ask, "And what am I, please?"

"Oh! you're another; everybody knows that," the young lady answered. "Only you wouldn't be any use as a chaperon; you are much too frisky and flighty for such a position."

She went on chattering through the next act, to which she paid no attention whatever, and when Horace reappeared to conduct her back to her friends, she not only took him away with her, but retained him for the rest of the evening. This behaviour it was which so exasperated Mrs. Mansfield that she could not help ejacu-

lating, while she and her niece were being driven home-wards: "That girl grows more and more vulgar every day! And she has no business to be, for she is a gentlewoman by birth."

"She promised to come and see me when she could find time," Veronica remarked. "There is something about her that I like. It is a pity that she puts on that manner."

"It isn't put on; she has never had any other manner that I can remember. Although, as I say, she becomes more objectionable as she becomes older."

"Horace did not seem to object to her," Veronica observed, after a pause. "Was there ever anything between them?"

"Oh, *dear*, no!" answered Mrs. Mansfield, with unnecessary emphasis, "nothing beyond a mere flirtation, such as he has had with dozens of others. His going off with her as he did to-night was entirely her doing, not his. And I always think that men who have had plenty of flirtations make the steadiest husbands. It is so much better that they should go through what has to be gone through in that way before than after marriage!"

"I daresay it is," agreed Veronica, laughing a little to herself in her corner of the brougham.

She was wondering whether Miss Dolly Cradock might not turn out to be a valuable ally. That that young woman would scruple to accept a wedding-gift of a fine estate did not appear likely, and if (as a slight

change in the expression of her face when she began to talk about Horace had seemed to hint) she was really attached to him, and he to her, an arrangement satisfactory to all parties might yet be arrived at. This, however, was of course only a pleasing vision.

CHAPTER VIII.

COMPLICATIONS.

MISS CRADOCK did not lose much time about redeeming her promise to call in South Audley Street. She walked in, dressed in a riding-habit, one morning while Veronica was busy over the voluminous weekly epistle to which the denizens of Harbury Vale Rectory looked forward, and announced that she had come to lunch.

“It occurred to me all of a sudden in the Park,” she explained, “that I would rather feed with you than with my own people, who are in a ruffled condition to-day owing to some row with our best tenant, who says he can’t pay his quarter’s rent; so I sent my old gee home and here I am.”

“I am so sorry that Aunt Julia has gone to spend the day with an old friend at Hampton Court Palace,” answered Veronica. “Can you stand a *tête-à-tête* luncheon with me?”

“The very thing I should like of all others,” Dolly declared. “Mrs. Mansfield is a nice old woman, and I am very fond of her—much more so than she is of me—but on the present occasion I am quite clear that I prefer her room to her company.”

And in fact it soon became evident that Miss Cradock would not have been nearly as interesting or as entertaining as she was in the presence of an elderly third person. During luncheon and afterwards she talked incessantly, and if her talk was for the most part purely egotistical, that was no drawback to it in the estimation of her hearer, who asked nothing better than to obtain some insight into the character of the potential Mrs. Horace Trevor. Many ladies, no doubt, would have been bored to death by Dolly Cradock; for loud, slangy girls, though less common than they used to be, are still common enough, and the type has ceased to be amusing; but for Veronica it had the advantage of novelty. Besides which, she had made up her mind to like Dolly.

“I have been thinking,” she remarked, “after listening with some wonderment to a vivid description of certain riotous proceedings at a country house in which the narrator had recently played a prominent part, “that perhaps you might be persuaded to come down and stay with me at Broxham, when we go there in the autumn. I am afraid I can’t promise that you shall meet people who will throw tables and chairs at your head, because I don’t know any people of that kind, and probably Aunt Julia’s friends have more sedate habits; but you might give us a trial. Horace says he will come as soon as there are birds to be shot.”

“You may expect me,” was the decisive and satisfactory reply, “and I won’t do anything to make you or your guests sit up. One can’t play the fool without assistance, and I’m sure I should get none from Mr. Tre-

vor, who seems to have turned over a new leaf under your tuition. He has a tremendous respect for you, you know."

Veronica laughed. "In what way has he turned over a new leaf?" she asked. "Were the past pages of his life such very bad reading?"

"Oh, no; he has always kept pretty straight, I believe. Only he used to be a cheery sort of fellow and ready for any fun that was going. In a perpetual funk of that canting old uncle of his, though. And then to think of his having fallen out with the old hypocrite and lost everything, after all! Doesn't it just show what idiots men are?"

"Well, it shows that some men are very simple and honest," answered Veronica. "I like Horace all the better for not having been too subservient, don't you?"

"No, I certainly don't," Dolly returned. "I see no sense in cutting off your nose to spite your face; I call that a very weak thing to do. However, he has been sufficiently punished in all conscience, poor fellow!"

These last words were spoken so ruefully, and the drooped corners of Dolly's mouth seemed to intimate in so unequivocal a manner that punishment had not fallen upon Horace Trevor alone, that Veronica was strongly tempted to make reassuring propositions there and then. But she refrained. She was weary of talking about surrendering Broxham and being laughed at for her pains; if the thing was to be done at all, it must evidently be done after some slower and more diplomatic fashion. So she only remarked, "Well, the

least I can do is to serve him a good turn, if I ever get the chance."

"I daresay he will give you the chance," observed Dolly, rather drily.

"Oh, I don't mean in that way," said Veronica, replying to a speech which had not been made, "that arrangement can never come off, because we are both of us opposed to it. But there are other ways in which I may be able to help him when the time comes, if he is not too proud to accept my assistance."

"Are there? I can't imagine what they can be. If he were a woman he might accept a big cheque—I should, I know, and say thank you for it—but men aren't allowed to do such things."

With this statement of Miss Dolly's personal amenability, Veronica had to rest satisfied; for now the dialogue was interrupted by the entrance of a visitor, who, it appeared, had insisted upon coming upstairs, notwithstanding Mrs. Mansfield's absence from home.

"I thought I might venture to ask for you," Mr. Mostyn explained, smiling pleasantly upon his young friend; "it is so seldom that I have an hour to spare, and I undertook to bring you the latest reports from Berkshire."

Veronica said what was polite and veracious, was duly informed that there was no particular information to be given respecting her relatives, and then introduced the great man to Miss Cradock. That the great man should never have heard of Miss Cradock before was, of course, not surprising; but it gave Veron-

ica something of a shock to notice that the mention of her distinguished visitor's name elicited no further homage from Dolly than a blank stare and a slight bow.

"Mr. Cyril Mostyn," she could not help repeating under her breath, thinking that she might have been imperfectly heard.

"Yes: I know," answered Dolly, in a loud voice. And then, turning to the light of modern English literature: "Write a bit, don't you?" she asked.

"I must confess to having written a bit," Mr. Mostyn replied, much amused. "There are even moments when I am afraid that I have written a bit too much."

"Ah! I daresay. It must be a horrid grind, I should think."

"I often find it so," Mr. Mostyn admitted.

"Still, if you make money by it, it's worth doing, I suppose. I have sometimes thought of writing a sporting novel myself; sporting novels pay well, they tell me. But you don't go in for that sort of thing, do you?"

"No," answered the poet and critic, "I don't go in for that sort of thing. I am sorry to say that I don't possess the requisite knowledge."

"You don't look as if you did," Miss Cradock remarked candidly. "Well, I must be off, Veronica, dear—may I call you Veronica, by the way? I want a hansom."

She departed presently, after taking an affectionate leave of her hostess, whom she led as far as the door,

with voluble assurances that she would come again soon.

Veronica felt bound to offer some apologies for her friend; but Mr. Mostyn did not seem to have been at all affronted.

“You think me a hero,” he remarked, “because I have climbed to the top of the tree in a calling which you happen to admire; but the huntsman of the Quorn, whose name has probably never reached your ears, is an infinitely more important personage in the eyes of that young lady. And why not? I can do some things which he cannot do, but it is equally certain that he is my master in others.”

“You might say the same of a chimney-sweep,” observed Veronica.

“And in circles where chimney-sweeping is looked upon as a fine art I should hardly be accused of mock modesty. But I did not come here to talk about myself; I came to talk about you—or, rather, to ask questions about you. Do you know that it seriously alarmed me to see you walking in the street alone with young Trevor? All the more so because, when I mentioned the circumstance to your aunt Mrs. Dimsdale, she at once jumped to conclusions which she seemed to think a subject for congratulation. Your other aunt will naturally hold the same views; so that, unless you are prepared to stand very firm indeed, you may soon drift into a situation which I shudder to contemplate.”

“There is no fear of that,” answered Veronica. “I like Horace Trevor extremely, but I could no more

think of marrying him than of marrying the Pope, and I am glad to say that he feels just in the same way about me. We talked it over the very day when we met you."

Mr. Mostyn raised his eyebrows and laughed. "It must be admitted that, for a poetess, you are an exceedingly practical person," said he.

"I only wish I were," sighed Veronica; "that is if a practical person means a person who knows how to put her wishes into practice. And don't call me a poetess, please; it hurts my feelings."

"The dictionary," returned Mr. Mostyn, "defines a poetess as a female poet, and a poet as one who has written a poem. I am ready to maintain in the face of the world that you have written a poem, and the fact that I recommended you to burn it is neither here nor there. We versifiers have at least one point in common with the phoenix, that if we ever rise to immortality at all, it is probably upon the ashes of our former selves that we do it."

"I shall never rise to immortality—nor even to notoriety—nor even to publication," said Veronica. "You know that quite well."

Mr. Mostyn smiled indulgently. "No," he answered, "I don't know that. I am a little afraid of it I own, because, as I think I told you once before, riches are a terrible obstacle in the way of literary success. Your friend is quite right; we work for money, and if we didn't require money we should do very little work."

“You will never make me believe that your poems were written for sordid reasons,” Veronica declared.

“Not altogether; but I should certainly have written more of them if they had proved more remunerative. As it is, I write more prose than I ought to do just because I find prose remunerative. After all, there are but two inducements to undertake the labour of composition—ambition and the necessity of earning one’s daily bread in one way or another. The first is very soon satisfied; the other is almost sure to remain as a wholesome stimulus to literary men of small income until the end of their lives. Because I doubt whether even the authors of sporting novels ever realise sums large enough to be worth investing. For you, therefore, the question is one of ambition, pure and simple, and it will not take you long to discover that a woman with a large fortune may make herself famous by easier and speedier methods than by publishing a volume of poems.”

“I have not the slightest desire to be famous,” said Veronica, impatiently; “I don’t wish to waste my life, that is all. What have I done that you should deluge me with cold water in this way?”

“You have committed the almost unpardonable offence of being exceptionally lucky,” Mr. Mostyn replied, laughing. “You really must not grudge your friends the small consolation of pointing out to you that your position has its drawbacks as well as its advantages. But so long as you abstain from the fatal step of espousing your so-called cousin, I shall not de-

spair of you. Now, may I see what you have been scribbling since you came to London? For I know you must have been scribbling a little."

She had, in fact, been scribbling a little, and she was presently persuaded to submit her crude efforts to the scrutiny of a competent judge, who did not deal over-mercifully with them. He was, however, both kindly and straightforward—as, to do him justice, he always was, when treating of such subjects—and she had no reason to doubt his word when he assured her that she had made progress.

"You will make yourself heard of yet," he declared, "always supposing that you continue to think it worth your while to do so. And, between ourselves, it *is* worth while to do anything well, whether a reward in the shape of coin or celebrity is forthcoming or no."

That was more like the language that Veronica wished to hear; but when she reverted to the topic of her burdensome wealth and her anxiety to shake it off her shoulders, Mr. Mostyn had very little comfort to offer her. It was evident that he had no great faith in the sincerity of such murmurs; he could not be brought to treat her grievance seriously, and when he went away, he left a somewhat dissatisfied disciple behind him.

Later in the afternoon Horace dropped in, and was pleased to accept a cup of tea. He had just returned from Sandown, where he had had a very successful day, he announced.

"I thought," said Veronica, in reproachful accents,

“that you were going to abjure betting. You can’t afford it, you know.”

“Well, that depends,” answered the young man good-humouredly. “I can’t comfortably afford to lose, it is true; but I can do very well with a few wins, and I feel quite like a capitalist this evening.”

Veronica shook her head. “You might have felt like a bankrupt, I daresay,” she rejoined. “You would have done much better to stay in London and come to luncheon here. You would have met Miss Cradock if you had.”

Horace looked slightly uneasy. “Did you invite her or did she invite herself?” he inquired.

“I believe she invited herself; but I was very glad to see her, and I hope to see more of her.”

“She really is a good sort,” Horace said half apologetically; “though you might not think so at first. Did she allude to current reports about us?”

“About whom? What reports do you mean?”

“Oh, I only thought she might have chaffed you; she is no respecter of persons, and I believe she would chaff the Queen if she got the chance. It’s all over the place, you know, that you and I are going to be married.”

“I did not know it was all over the place,” answered Veronica, frowning thoughtfully; “I don’t think I quite like it. Who can have been spreading such reports?”

“Oh, Aunt Julia and the General, I suppose. It doesn’t matter, does it?”

“I don’t like it,” repeated Veronica. “We ought to be honest, I think, and I shall tell Aunt Julia to-night that she must not cherish any hopes of the kind.”

“I trust you won’t do that,” said Horace; “you will let yourself in for no end of worry if you do. As it is, don’t you see, we can be friendly and comfortable together; but there will be a finish to all comfort as soon as Aunt Julia hears that we don’t mean business.”

“I can put up with a little discomfort.”

“I am not so sure of that, and I am quite sure that *I* can’t. Not with discomfort of that sort, anyhow. I couldn’t stay with you at Broxham, for instance.”

“Oh, you must come to Broxham. Miss Cradock has promised to come.”

“Ah! that settles it, then. The Broxham partridges and pheasants will have to be shot by somebody else this year.”

And although he was begged to be more explicit, he refused to make any further revelations, merely saying that it didn’t signify, and talking persistently about the people whom he had met at Sandown until Mrs. Mansfield came in to relieve him of conversational difficulties.

Upon the whole, it seemed to Veronica that nobody was at all inclined to help her out of her own difficulties, which showed signs of becoming increasingly complicated.

CHAPTER IX.

VERONICA IS HIGHLY COMPLIMENTED.

AFTER giving the subject full consideration, Veronica decided against informing her aunt in so many words that the project of undoing the perverse deeds of the late Mr. Trevor by means of a matrimonial alliance was one which could never be carried into effect. So far as she herself was concerned, she would greatly have preferred a straightforward course; but there were other people to be thought of, and Horace's point of view was, after all, comprehensible enough. He wanted to be upon intimate, cousinly terms with the girl who had supplanted him; but he did not want to be worried and bothered, nor could he attempt to explain to people incapable of understanding what he meant that he was too much of a gentleman to fall in with their ideas. He would, therefore, simply absent himself—a thing which he must on no account be allowed to do. His expressed reluctance to meet Dolly Cradock needed no explanation, and it was entirely to his credit that, being now too poor to think of marrying, he should shrink from close association in a country house with one whom, under happier circumstances, he might have

asked to share his fortunes. But it was clearly indispensable that he should visit Broxham, and that he should meet Dolly there. Moreover, Veronica herself was too fond of him, and too sincerely interested in him, to contemplate the loss of his companionship with equanimity.

All these cogent arguments led her to make a compromise with her conscience. She did, indeed, tell Aunt Julia that she had been much annoyed at hearing of a ridiculous rumour to the effect that she was engaged to her cousin; but when Mrs. Mansfield rejoined, laughing, "Oh, my dear, that was certain to be said; it isn't of the slightest consequence," she pursued the subject no further. It was not, she thought, necessary to protest that under no conceivable circumstances could such a rumour be justified by the event. Nor did she make any reply to her aunt's subsequent ejaculation of "Dolly Cradock, of course, has been repeating gossip to you! The truth is that she herself would have been only too glad to marry Horace when everybody thought that he had expectations; but she would never have had the chance."

As to the accuracy of this latter assertion, Veronica had her own opinion; but of course she kept it to herself. She likewise kept to herself all reference to the scheme of which an outline existed in her prophetic mind. At least, Aunt Julia would not be able to say that any encouragement had been given to her own scheme, or that the persons concerned therein were responsible for its predestined failure.

Having arrived at that comforting conclusion, Veronica felt free to leave the future alone and enjoy the present—which was, in truth, very enjoyable. It is no bad thing to have plenty of ready money, to be provided with entertaining and diversified society. When to this is added a congenial and deferential companion, in the person of a young man whom you have every hope of moulding in accordance with your ideas of what a young man ought to be, you must indeed be hard to please if you are not satisfied. During the weeks that followed Veronica was very well satisfied indeed. Everything seemed to be going as smoothly as could be expected. Aunt Julia was only too glad to keep her in London as long as she cared to stay; Mrs. Dimsdale, after some hesitation, had consented to let her defray the cost of Joe's agricultural tuition in the house of a gentleman-farmer, with whom it had been arranged that he should take up his residence; Mr. Mostyn looked in from time to time and spoke words of encouragement which were not, perhaps, to be taken too literally, but which were pleasant to listen to. The only question which gave rise to some harassing misgivings was whether, after all, Dolly Cradock was quite worthy of Horace. For there was no shutting one's eyes to the fact that Dolly was vulgar-minded, and increased intimacy with her rendered it impossible to imagine that her influence upon her future husband could be of an elevating nature. However, people must be allowed to choose for themselves in such matters, and Veronica felt tolerably certain that Horace's choice had been made. She was all

the more certain of it because he took such pains to avoid meeting Miss Cradock, and because he could by no means be induced to talk about her. His one wish, apparently, was to spend as many hours as possible with the girl who had despoiled him of his inheritance, and, as may be supposed, it was not Mrs. Mansfield who was inclined to baulk him of facilities for gratifying that wish. Veronica, knowing the true state of the case, could not help finding this a little amusing.

“What are you going to do to-morrow?” she asked him one Saturday afternoon when he was, as usual, sitting beside her at the tea-table, Mrs. Mansfield having (also as usual) retired into her own sanctum to write letters.

He replied that he didn't know; he had rather thought of looking in at Tattersall's.

“Ah, but I mean in the morning,” said Veronica. “You ought, of course, to be going to church somewhere; but I am afraid that you don't always remember to go to church. Why not come to St. Paul's with me? They are doing Schubert in F, which is well worth hearing, and perhaps the sermon may be worth hearing too.”

“It *may* be; one never knows,” assented Horace in a somewhat despondent tone. “But,” he added more cheerfully, “I shall be delighted to go anywhere with you. I find that I am beginning to like all the things that you like; so that there's a chance of my even appreciating the music, ignorant though I am.”

Appreciation can hardly exist without knowledge,

but it is, fortunately, within the capacity of us all to admire what is beautiful, although we may not be able to specify our reasons for so doing; and perhaps it was because Horace Trevor's powers of admiration were very great that he thoroughly enjoyed the service to which he was duly conducted on the following day. He had never heard anything of the kind before—his previous experiences of Church of England services having been of a severely Protestant order—and, to tell the truth, he would have been puzzled to say at any given moment precisely what was taking place. Nevertheless, his emotion was stirred by the really exquisite rendering of a composition which cannot but appeal to everyone who has even an uncultivated musical ear: the pealing organ, the sweet treble voices, the subdued solemnity of the whole scene, the sense of space and remoteness in the heart of the vast city touched something within him which is generally known by the name of the devotional instinct. He said to himself that that sort of thing made him feel good—it may be that the occasional side-glances which he stole at his companion, who had evidently forgotten his vicinity, made him feel still better. In these days women are doing their very best to persuade us that they are neither better nor worse than we ourselves; but the illusions—if, indeed, they be illusions—of centuries die hard, and probably there will always remain a sufficient supply of simple-minded male creatures who, like Horace Trevor, will cling to the old theory of angel or fiend. And it was in very respectful and deferential accents that that

young man addressed Miss Dimsdale when they left the Cathedral together.

“I don’t wonder at your being fond of sacred music,” he said; “one can see that it is really sacred to you.”

“Well, Schubert is,” answered Veronica, who did not quite take his meaning; “but there are plenty of masses which are distinctly secular.”

“You would say your prayers just the same, though, whether the music was secular or not,” persisted Horace Trevor. “You were saying your prayers this morning.”

“You weren’t, then?”

The young man shook his head gravely. “Haven’t done such a thing for years, I’m sorry to say. I had more than half a mind to begin just now; but then I thought what’s the use of making believe? It would only have been because of—because of you, don’t you see!”

Veronica did not look as much shocked as he had expected her to be. “There is no use in making believe, certainly,” she assented, with a slight laugh. “Do you mean that you are a sceptic?”

“Oh, dear, no,” answered Horace, who, oddly enough, was himself quite shocked at the question; “only a sinner.”

“I doubt whether you are a very heinous kind of sinner, and many excellent men are more or less of sceptics. There is Mr. Mostyn, for instance——”

“Oh, it don’t matter what *he* is!” interrupted

Horace; "I ain't going to take him for my model. What we all ought to be is what you are."

"How overjoyed Aunt Julia would be if she could hear you making such fantastic assertions!" exclaimed Veronica, laughing aloud. "Don't look so cross; I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, but really I am not what you take me for; it is only the music that has gone to your head. Besides," she added more gravely, "Christianity doesn't consist in saying prayers."

"What does it consist in?" Horace asked.

"I am going to lunch with one of the Canons, who ought to be able to tell you, if anyone can," answered Veronica. "Come and be introduced to him. He is a dear old man—a friend of Uncle John's, and he will be charmed to see you."

It did not occur to Veronica that there was anything startling or out-of-the-way in thus presenting herself at the house of her uncle's friend, attended by a strange young man; nor was that eminent divine as scandalised as his wife would have been if he had had one. He was an amiable, hospitable, and somewhat absent-minded old bachelor, in addition to being a distinguished theologian; Veronica's matter-of-course explanation that she had brought a hungry cousin with her appeared to him to meet all the requirements of the case, and he accorded a kindly welcome to Horace, whose spiritual hunger he was not invited to assuage in the course of the ensuing hour.

As for Horace himself, it must be owned that the unconventional character of the whole proceeding was

not without a certain exhilarating effect upon him. There did, to be sure, exist a perfectly clear convention between him and Veronica, by virtue of which he was where he was, and which entitled him to say "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*" to all and sundry whom it might concern. Still, he was, after all, a young man and she was a young woman, while their relationship was a fiction pure and simple. One cannot entirely ignore such circumstances—unless, indeed, one is so singular and admirable a mortal as Veronica Dimsdale—and his mind dwelt upon them a good deal more than upon religious difficulties while he sat in the dim old dining-room listening to a conversation which related chiefly to matters of which he had little personal knowledge. He was surprised to find how much Veronica knew, how well up she was in statistics, and how capable of discussing the social problems of a great city with one whose earlier and more active years had been spent in an East-End parish.

"Do you know," said he, as they walked slowly away from Amen Corner in search of a cab, "I am beginning to think that the old chap who made a rich woman of you was no fool. You will spend his money more sensibly than he did, and a very great deal more sensibly than I should have done if it had come to me."

"I am glad you think so," answered Veronica. She added, after a pause: "I only hope you will always do me the justice to think so."

"I shall always think that whatever you do is right," returned the young man, with conviction.

That sounded like a rather bold assertion to make; but Veronica said nothing in depreciation of it. She was conscious of being in some respects Horace's superior; she wanted him to look up to her, and indeed hardly saw how his future happiness was to be secured upon any other terms. She therefore permitted him, without contradiction, to praise her wisdom and unselfishness in glowing language until the sight of a solitary hansom caused her to interrupt his eloquence.

There are not too many hansoms to be met with in the City on a Sunday afternoon; so that you must take what you can get. Otherwise, Horace, who had not a Londoner's comfortable conviction that one horse is much the same as another, would probably have allowed that particular vehicle to pass unhailed.

"Mind his heels!" said he, as Veronica stepped in; and, sure enough, two resounding bangs upon the dashboard gave immediate justification for his warning.

"Is he going to kick?" asked Veronica, while Horace, after calling out the address to the driver, seated himself beside her.

"Yes, I expect so," answered the young man, who looked a little perturbed. "Shall we let this fellow go and walk on until we meet another?"

But Veronica answered, with a laugh, "Oh, no! that would be too humiliating. Besides, a hansom isn't like a dog-cart. There would be a great deal of kicking to be done before we could be touched."

That was all very fine, but a hansom is an awkward conveyance to get out of; and they were no sooner off

than Horace heartily wished that he had been more peremptory with his companion. The animal was young and fresh; he did not seem to be well accustomed to his work, and, what was worse was that the driver was evidently afraid of him. After about five uneasy minutes—during which Veronica had been placidly contemplating the long vista of the Strand—the very thing happened which her more watchful neighbour had been inwardly dreading. A sudden gust of wind swept across the street, blowing a scrap of newspaper before it, just under the horse's nose. Up went the brute's heels, down went his head, and the next moment he was tearing off towards Charing Cross at a pace far too good to last.

It is never very pleasant to be run away with, but perhaps the most disagreeable time and place that could be selected for such an experience would be a London street on Sunday. Horses seldom bolt in a crowd, and even when they do, their career cannot last long; but this excited beast had nothing in front of him, except a couple of omnibuses, with both of which he just missed colliding, and the only question was how far he would run before the inevitable smash occurred.

“Sit tight!” exclaimed Horace. But, indeed, there was nothing else to be done, unless it was to get down into the bottom of the cab, and this measure of precaution he was in the act of enforcing upon Veronica when he was abruptly shot out into the roadway, preceded by his hat, which somebody obligingly picked up for him. The horse had slipped and fallen heavily; the shafts were broken; the driver was lying insensible

upon the pavement, and Veronica, neither frightened nor hurt, was stooping over the man, surrounded by a rapidly increasing crowd. Horace, after satisfying himself that she had really sustained no injury, was for withdrawing her from the throng at once, but to this she could in no wise be induced to consent. Not a step would she stir until a couple of policemen had arrived upon the scene, and the horse had been got upon his legs again, and a stretcher had been procured for the luckless cabman; nor would anything serve her then but to join the procession, which was presently set in motion for Charing Cross Hospital, where she insisted upon awaiting the verdict of the house-surgeon, which was, fortunately, a favourable one. Then she took the name and address of the sufferer, said she would visit him again on the morrow, and promised that his wife and children should be provided for as long as might be necessary.

All this was doubtless no more than what obedience to the dictates of common humanity enjoined; but there is no known method of determining what people actually are or do. They and their conduct are, for all practical purposes, what they appear to us to be, and it appeared to Horace Trevor that Miss Veronica Dimsdale was a woman of quite extraordinary courage and benevolence. On the way to South Audley Street he told her so with rather more emphasis, perhaps, than the occasion called for; insomuch that she laughed heartily at him, although his praise was not displeasing to her.

“I am getting my share of compliments to-day,” was her concluding remark, as she took leave of him on the doorstep. “At this rate, I shall soon realise your ideal of absolute perfection. And yet if I ever beg you to grant me a small favour the chances are that you will regret your inability to do what you are asked.”

“Try me,” said Horace.

“Well, perhaps I will some fine day. Now I must go in and relate my adventures to Aunt Julia, who will at once add a storey to the castle in the air upon the strength of them.”

Horace walked off in a meditative mood. He himself was unconsciously laying the foundations of a castle in the air, and had been so occupied since the morning; but, to do him justice, he no sooner discovered what he was about than he promptly stopped operations.

“Hullo!” he exclaimed aloud, “this will never do! A nice peck of trouble I shall land myself in if I don’t look out! Luckily, it isn’t too late to pull up, and pull up I must before I begin to run down the hill. Henceforth, my dear Veronica, we won’t see quite so much of one another.”

He paced on for some little distance, with a rather rueful countenance, and then relieved his feelings by a second audible ejaculation—for he was crossing Grosvenor Square at the moment and there was nobody within hearing—

“What beats me is how the General, who has a pretty quick eye for good looks, can have described her

as no beauty! If he had seen her sitting in that handsome cab, as cool as you please, with death staring her in the face, he would have altered his opinion, I suspect. However, it's nothing to me whether she is lovely or plain. No! if there is a certain fact in the world it is that that must never be anything to me."

CHAPTER X.

AN INCOMPLETE EXPLANATION.

IT is very hard luck to lose your heart to a girl whom you cannot possibly marry: worse luck by a long way—such, at least was Horace Trevor's opinion—than to lose a fortune through her. But he consoled himself with the reflection that he had not lost his heart yet; he was only in some danger of doing so. As to the impossibility of his ever marrying Veronica, that was manifest. The thing was impossible, not so much because he had honourable scruples about enriching himself in such a way as because she would most assuredly refuse him were he insane enough to propose to her. Moreover, she would consider, and rightly consider, that he had played her false. A compact had been entered into, and it must not be departed from, happen what might.

What seemed more than likely to happen, unless immediate steps were taken to avert the calamity, was that her natural acuteness would enable her to detect a state of things which ought to be concealed from her. Horace, therefore, made up his mind to take immediate steps; and perhaps it was by way of inaugurating a fresh

departure that he betook himself forthwith to South Kensington to call on Lady Louisa Cradock.

On arriving at his destination, he found, as he had anticipated, a number of hilarious persons of both sexes gathered together; for Lady Louisa was always at home on Sunday afternoons, and her daughter's friends were accustomed to make themselves so under her roof. She herself was a faded, careworn little woman, whose dress resembled her carpets in respect of being threadbare, and who never exerted herself to entertain anybody. It was Dolly's business to do that, and Dolly was generally considered to be immensely entertaining. Horace himself had always hitherto concurred in the general opinion; but then Miss Dolly had not hitherto been entertaining at his expense, as she now saw fit to be.

"Well, you *have* got a nice pair of broken knees on you!" was her jocose greeting. "That ought to be a good twenty pounds off your value—which isn't what it used to be, anyhow."

Horace glanced down, and for the first time perceived two large muddy patches upon his trousers, which he vainly attempted to rub off with his hand.

"Never mind," resumed Dolly, "it looks respectable, after all—shows you have been to church. One of those Ritualistic places of worship where there are too many services to leave time for scrubbing the floor, I suppose! And I'll lay two to one in half-crowns that I name the person who took you there. What a pity that you should have taken to pious

practices too late in the day! But perhaps it isn't too late—eh?"

"Piety hadn't anything to with it; I've been pitched out of a hansom," answered Horace rather gruffly; for he was conscious of an amused and rather inquisitive audience, and he did not at the moment care about being chaffed upon the subject of his intimacy with Miss Dimsdale.

But of course there was no escape for him. He was made to give a full account of the manner in which he had spent the day, and Dolly's comments on his narrative, if humorous, were not of a nature to please him. He began to see what had not struck him before, that he ought not to have exposed Veronica to the more or less ill-natured gossip of lookers-on. Mrs. Mansfield, who anticipated an engagement, could afford to allow him privileges which he had had no business to claim; but since there was to be no engagement, and since he had known all along that there was to be none, his conduct had certainly been thoughtless. Now he had to submit to the banter of Dolly Cradock and her friends, his denial that there was anything in the shape of flirtation between him and the lady whom he persisted in calling his cousin being naturally taken for what it was worth. There had, however, been at one time something almost more pronounced than a flirtation between him and his present tormentor, and in his simplicity he could think of no better way of stopping her mouth than attempting a renewal of it.

"I think you at least might spare me this sort of

thing," he took occasion to say to her reproachfully in a low voice, under cover of the temporary diversion created by the entrance of a fresh visitor.

Dolly shrugged her shoulders and made a grimace. "Don't apologise," she returned. "The wind has changed; you are quite right to shape your course accordingly."

But I am not shaping it in *that* direction, and I wish you wouldn't talk as if I were. I know well enough that the wind has changed, and I can't—well, I can't look forward to things which I might have looked forward to once upon a time; but I do assure you that neither my cousin nor I are dreaming of what you mean, and I don't want to be annoyed by false reports."

"But really, my dear friend, it doesn't make the slightest difference to me whether the reports are false or true."

"I suppose not," answered Horace, with a rather hypocritical sigh; "only it would be kind of you to discourage them. At this rate I shall soon have to give up all my female friends. Some of them I mustn't visit lest I should be supposed to be a fortune-hunter, and others I have felt bound to avoid because I have become such a hopeless detrimental."

The odd thing about this palpably insincere explanation of the fact that he had latterly neglected his duty towards a certain lady friend was accepted. If Dolly Cradock had really wished to marry her quondam admirer, she might have been less easily convinced; but

she had no idea of linking her fate with that of a hopeless detrimental. Her only feeling in the matter had been one of slight mortification that another should bear away what had once been a prize, and she was not unwilling to make-believe a little for the sake of securing a cheap triumph. So she added compassionately—

“Poor fellow! Well, you sha’n’t be accused again of wanting to do the only sensible thing that there is to be done, under the circumstances. But it isn’t necessary to cut old acquaintances because you yourself have been unfortunate enough to be cut out of your inheritance. Give us credit for not being so desperately eager to jump down your throat, and look us up sometimes, as you used to do before the superior Veronica took you in hand and tried to elevate your taste.”

It was close upon dinner-time when Horace quitted a house which he had esteemed in former days to be one of the cheeriest in London. If his taste had now become so elevated that its inmates and habitués had ceased to attract him, that, he felt, was scarcely a matter for self-congratulation. He must seek amusement somewhere or other, but certainly not in South Audley Street; and the worst of it was that he doubted very much whether amusement was obtainable for him elsewhere. However, he was determined to try—the more so because he had a genuine liking for Dolly Cradock, notwithstanding her lack of refinement.

During many successive days, therefore, both Mrs. Mansfield and Veronica were made to wonder what in

the world had become of him. The former ended by growing seriously uneasy; the latter, though a little piqued, said to herself that nothing was more easily to be accounted for than his absence. Of course, he had his own friends and his own pursuits, neither being identical with hers, and if she had been able for a time to wean him from these, that only showed how good-natured he was. Besides, she really did not want to have him always following her about. Much as she liked him, she could quite conceive the possibility of having too much of his society, and could quite forgive him for having had, apparently, too much of hers. This was what she said to her aunt, who suspected that there had been a quarrel, and whose persistent queries were sometimes troublesome to evade.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, Mrs. Mansfield had other sources of information, from which she learnt that Horace had been seen every morning riding in the Park with Dolly Cradock; and, putting two and two together, she came to the conclusion that the best thing she could do was to write a somewhat peremptory note requesting the young man to come to luncheon, as she had matters of business upon which she wished to consult him. The summons was dutifully obeyed, and the matters of business (which referred to the investment of some money, a subject as to which Horace's opinion was of no value whatsoever) did not take long to dispose of. Then the good lady, who had listened to his observations with a great show of deference and attention, said she must write to her bankers and brokers at once, and begged

him to talk to Veronica in the drawing-room for a few minutes while she finished her letters.

Now, Veronica, as it chanced, was not best pleased with the way in which he had behaved during luncheon. Certain symptoms—a visible embarrassment of manner, an unnatural loquacity, a careful avoidance of her eye—which had appeared to his hostess to indicate nothing more than that nervous apprehension which a young man who has unhappily fallen out with the girl of his heart may be expected to display, were open to quite another interpretation, and it was in this latter light that Veronica had been disposed to view them. Consequently, her features did not relax when he came into the room smiling, and said—

“I’ve been sent in here to talk to you. Poor old Aunt Julia! she ain’t a diplomatist of the very first water, is she?”

“As far as that goes, I don’t know that you are quite in a position to criticise her,” Veronica observed drily. “Your thoughts are generally written upon your face in tolerably plain characters.”

Horace came to a standstill and said, “Oh, I hope not!”

“I wouldn’t entertain that hope if I were you; it will never be anything but a very forlorn one. After all there is nothing to be ashamed of in having a speaking countenance, and I have always liked you for being unable to conceal your thoughts. At the same time, I wish you didn’t have such thoughts!”

The young man being now quite sure that his secret

had been detected, dropped into a chair and answered sorrowfully, "I am awfully sorry, Veronica, but I can't help them, you know."

"Can't you? Well I suppose it is natural to men to be vain and—horrid. For the last two or three days I have had a dawning suspicion of what it might be that kept you from coming here as usual, and now I know. I shouldn't be telling you the truth if I didn't say that I am disappointed in you. However, we won't quarrel over it."

"I wish with all my heart that you hadn't guessed; but don't you think I was right to stay away, Veronica?" pleaded poor Horace humbly.

"I certainly do not think that your reason for staying away was a good one, and I can't understand why you should harbour delusions which I have never done anything at all to encourage. You don't seem to have much belief in my word; but surely you might believe that I am speaking the truth when I assure you that if you were the only man in the world, I should not marry you!"

"Since you say so, no doubt it is so. Thank you for putting the case in such a forcible way," answered Horace, with a shade of resentment in his voice; for indeed assurances of that kind can hardly be made palatable to their recipient, however salutary they may be.

"Very well, then; let us drop the subject, and begin again where we left off. It is most disagreeable to be forced into saying what I have had to say; but

you will allow that you have only yourself to blame for it. You ought to have known better."

Horace ruefully admitted that he ought. "But I don't know about beginning again where we left off," he added; "it isn't so easy to forget things, even though one may be quite willing not to mention them any more."

"Oh, nonsense!" remarked Veronica, laughing. "If I am ready to forgive and forget, it can't be asking too much of you that you should do the same. Especially as you have nothing on earth to forgive. You have made a mistake, and you confess that it was a mistake; that is enough. Let us consider the whole incident wiped out and say no more about it. Now tell me, what you have been doing with yourself all this long time."

Horace did his best to appear friendly and unconcerned; but it was scarcely within the power of mortal man to help feeling a little bit sore, or to help showing that he felt so. He had not expected Veronica to divine what he himself had ignored up to the moment of their last parting; yet, since she had divined it, a little more sympathy and a little less *brusquerie* would not have been out of place, he thought. Why was he to blame for having fallen in love with her? If he had so far forgotten their respective positions as to propose marriage to her, that would have been quite another thing. So the dialogue that followed did not at all resemble previous dialogues held between him and Veronica, and perhaps, in the course of it, he dwelt rather more than

was absolutely necessary upon the circumstance that he had seen a great deal of the Cradock family of late; when a man has just been informed that if he were the sole representative of his sex upon the surface of this planet, one woman at least would never deign to look at him, he is not unnaturally disposed to hint at the existence of other women less hard to please.

Veronica, for her part, seemed to be, and indeed was, much interested in all that he had to tell her. She spoke with magnanimous approval of Dolly Cradock, encouraged him to be more communicative, and shook hands with him warmly when Mrs. Mansfield came into the room with her bonnet on, which he took as a signal for him to rise.

“I hope,” said that well-meaning lady, as soon as he had departed, “that you have contrived to put poor Horace into better spirits; he looked quite ill and unlike himself at luncheon, I thought.”

“Oh, I don’t think there is very much the matter with him,” answered Veronica, laughing, “and I am sure he will always be like himself. He has no sort of aptitude for being like anybody else.”

Nevertheless, she confessed to herself, after she had begged to be excused from accompanying her aunt to a musical tea-fight, that she had not until now known exactly what Horace was like. She had supposed him too simple, too unsuspecting, above all to modest to fall into so preposterous an error as that to which she had understood that he had owned; it did not increase her respect for his intelligence that he should have deemed it neces-

sary to protect her from wholly imaginary danger and absent himself lest his fascinations should prove too much for her fortitude.

“But, never mind!” was the reflection with which she finally dismissed the unpleasant episode from her thoughts. “I told him I would forgive and forget, and I must be as good as my word. I think, too, that I must have made him feel rather foolish. The main thing is that we are still friends, and, with ordinary luck, I ought to be able to arrange matters so that he shall be squire of Broxham before another year is out. When once that business has been settled, we can go our several ways, and I daresay we shall not meet often again; for, somehow or other, I don’t feel as if I should ever care to be very intimate with Dolly Cradock.”

CHAPTER XI.

ENOUGH OF IT.

IF we were all of us able to perceive the tolerably obvious, the world in which we live would proceed along its appointed course much more smoothly than it does; wars would be less frequent, party government would have to be abolished, lawyers would have to join the ranks of the unemployed and harmony would reign in private life. But, on the other hand, existence would perhaps become a somewhat dull and uneventful business; and this thought may serve in some measure to console people like Horace Trevor and Veronica Dimsdale, who contrive to misunderstand one another where no misunderstanding ought to be possible. Veronica might have had sense enough to realise how extremely unlikely it was that a young fellow whose natural modesty she had recognised from the first should be seized all of a sudden with the panic which she had imputed to him, while Horace should have known that, if she had really guessed the state of his feelings, she would have dealt more gently with him; but neither of them was capable of bringing an unbiased judgment to bear upon the circumstances, and

thus they became estranged, notwithstanding their ostensible amity. When they met, they were to all outward appearance as good friends as ever; but they did not very often meet, nor was their intercourse of the old confidential kind.

“Give them time,” the experienced Mrs. Mansfield said to her brother-in-law, who was growing impatient, and who wanted to know what the deuce the young folks were waiting for; “they have had a little tiff, but they have made it up again, and we can’t do better than leave them to play out their comedy in their own way. After all, it is early days yet.”

“I don’t know what you call early days,” grumbled Lord Chippenham; “I know we are getting within sight of the time when we shall all have to leave London, and I want this business to be settled before the end of the season.”

Mrs. Mansfield also would have been glad to be relieved of further anxiety upon the subject; but she had found out that Veronica was not a very easy person either to lead or to drive, and she did not want to spoil a promising scheme by injudicious meddling. The wisest plan, she decided, was to allow her niece plenty of liberty, to ask no questions and make no visible efforts to attract Horace to the house. It might likewise not be amiss to arouse the young gentleman’s jealousy a little, should such an incentive prove manageable. With this end in view, she neglected no opportunity of throwing the heiress into the society of those who were only too eager to make the acquaintance

of heiresses; and if this stratagem was not crowned with any great success, so far as Horace was concerned, it had at least the effect of causing Veronica to appreciate him more highly by comparison with his neighbours.

“What would become of our faith in human nature if one were condemned to spend all one’s days in the fashionable world!” she mentally ejaculated, after an elderly widower and two gay young bachelors had displayed the most unbounded faith in her own nature by kindly offering to share their fallen fortunes with her. “Not one of these men can know anything at all about me, except that I am rich, and evidently that is all they care to know. The more I see of these people the more I admire Horace for having remained an honourable little gentleman in spite of them. The only wonder is that, instead of sheering off when he took it into his silly head that I was becoming too fond of him, he didn’t hasten to profit by such a stroke of good fortune!”

But Horace, for weal or for woe, had ceased to be among her intimates, and—whether in consequence of that fact or not—London society had ceased to interest her. She told Mr. Mostyn, who had been amiably instrumental in making her known to sundry celebrities who were not precisely fashionable, that she was tired of it all and wanted to be out of it.

He laughed, and replied, “I have been waiting for some time to hear you say that. It is necessary to look closely into things; but, unfortunately, very few things

will bear looking into, and very few people are as big as they appear to be from a distance. Never mind! there is a good time coming, when you will be able to survey all this as a whole, and when it will furnish you with ideas—inspirations even.”

But Veronica did not see how it could possibly do that. All that can be said about the pettiness and cynicism of the so-called great world and the littleness of great men has been said scores of times already; her soul yearned for the green meadows and the pleasant, wholesome sights and sounds of the Thames valley; she was, in short, thoroughly homesick, and painfully aware that she no longer had a home.

It was while she was in this dissatisfied frame of mind—which was all the more dissatisfied because she could not have said precisely what was wrong with her—that she was taken, one afternoon, by her aunt to call on Lady Louisa Cradock. She had already exchanged visits and a few unmeaning words with that rather dowdy and forlorn lady, of whom she had retained no distinct impression, and when she was ushered into a drawing-room where several old women were seated, she did not feel it her duty to take any part in their commonplace conversation.

Mrs. Mansfield, whose income had not suffered from agricultural depression, who could afford to employ an expensive dressmaker, and was a good deal more *dans le mouvement* than they were, cheered them up with her brisk talk, reminding them, it may be, of happier days gone by and exciting their interest by personal

anecdotes, picked up in circles which they had ceased to frequent. Veronica sat a little apart, scarcely listening to them, yet moved with a vague pity for the poor old souls, who had lost all that they really cared for on earth with the loss of those two most essential advantages, youth and money. Their voices, as well as their remarks, were pitched in a minor key. They seemed to feel—what was probably the case—that they had no further *raison d'être*. Soon they would be dead and buried, and there was no reason to suppose that any one of them would be missed. Meanwhile, they pricked up their ears and a certain animation became perceptible upon their withered countenances when they heard that the Duchess of A had publicly cut Lady B, on account of her behaviour with the Duke; or that Lord C was said to have actually married Miss D, the notorious music-hall singer.

It was very hot weather. The windows were open and the sun-blinds drawn down. Outside there was an uninterrupted roar of distant traffic, which somehow deepened the effect of profound melancholy produced upon Veronica by this tittle-tattle. The world is so tremendously busy, and time is rushing on at such a headlong pace: those who are not hard at work are at least hard at play, and to be stranded on the brink of the flowing current seemed to her to be about the saddest thing that could happen to anybody. It was terrible to think that a day might come when she too would sit, useless and forgotten, in a drawing-room, with nothing better to do than to gossip about people

whom she did not even know, save by repute. Suddenly a loud outburst of laughter, followed by a babble of young voices, rose from immediately beneath her feet.

“That won't be quite so depressing as this, anyhow,” she thought; and, jumping up, she said to Lady Louisa, in her abrupt way, “I am going downstairs to see Dolly for a few minutes; I can hear that she is at home.”

Veronica had already more than once visited Miss Dolly in the den which that young woman had appropriated for her exclusive use, and which would have probably been her father's study if Mr. Cradock had not been a submissive old gentleman who spent most of his time at his club. She made her way thither unhesitatingly now, having received a friendly assurance that she would always be welcome, and opened the door without knocking. Then she paused on the threshold, wishing that she had been less precipitate, and angry with herself for having done a stupid, clumsy thing.

The air was thick with blue clouds of cigarette-smoke; Dolly herself, lolling in a deep arm-chair, was smoking; so were two smartly attired young men, one of whom was seated upon the table swinging his legs; so was a third, who, as soon as he recognised her, pitched his cigarette out of the window and looked caught. The laughter which she had heard when she turned the door-handle had been quenched by her entrance. The two strangers were staring at her interrogatively, and Horace, with whom she felt quite irate,

had the appearance of wishing very much to follow his cigarette. But Dolly was not easily put out of countenance.

“Come in,” she said; “sit down and make yourself comfortable. No use to offer you tobacco, I suppose. Now, Tommy, go on with your story.”

The young gentleman addressed slid off the table and began to look for his hat. “Tell you the rest some other day,” he answered; “it’s about time for me to be off now.”

It took him some minutes to make his adieux and to murmur a few parting jocularities in Miss Cradock’s ear, while Veronica, who had not sat down and was feeling far from comfortable, awaited his exit. But at length he went away, taking his friend with him, and then the intruder was able to apologise.

“I am very sorry to have broken up your party,” she said, in a voice which she could not keep from sounding constrained and annoyed. “I ought to have known better than to bounce in upon you in that way, and I will never do such a thing again, I promise you.”

“Oh, we don’t mind, if you don’t,” returned Dolly, with a laugh and a glance at Horace, who, for his part, seemed to mind a good deal; “the only misfortune is that you have been shocked. Not so shocked as you would have been if you had heard the end of that story; still, quite shocked enough. What can I say? There is really no blinking the fact that I do enjoy a cigarette occasionally.”

“It would be no business of mine if you enjoyed a

pipe," returned Veronica, not very civilly; "but I wish I had not prevented you from enjoying the conclusion of your friend's story. As you know it already, you had better impart it to Mr. Trevor, who must be dying of curiosity. I will go upstairs again and join the old ladies."

Of course she was not allowed to do that. She was made to sit down and talk until Mrs. Mansfield sent a servant in search of her, and during the ensuing ten minutes she recovered her equanimity sufficiently for all needful purposes, so far as Dolly was concerned. But Horace, much aggrieved at having been spoken of as "Mr. Trevor," had effected his escape without so much as shaking hands, and what added not a little to Veronica's vexation was that she should have shown in so unequivocal a fashion how displeased she was with him. What right in the world had she to be displeased with him? Why should he not smoke cigarettes and listen to highly flavoured stories in the company of one whose tastes were in harmony with his own, and who, it was to be hoped, would some day bear his name? "I could not have behaved more like an utter idiot if I had been jealous of the girl! And no doubt he thought I was," reflected Veronica furiously, as she sat beside her aunt in the carriage and endeavoured to preserve an aspect of unruffled calm.

She did not mention that she had seen Horace, not wishing to be questioned upon the subject, nor did Mrs. Mansfield ask her whom she had met downstairs. It was rather a relief to be gently remonstrated with

for having quitted the drawing-room so abruptly and to be told that Lady Louisa had thought it odd of her.

“It is best not to be odd,” Mrs. Mansfield said; “people notice it, and they don’t like it. In Dolly Cradock’s case it doesn’t perhaps matter; she has chosen to take up the line of being eccentric, and if she marries at all, I suppose she will marry somebody who likes that sort of thing. But you, my dear, are a very different kind of person, I am thankful to say, and you do yourself harm when you disregard the conventionalities.”

This mild lecture, which was prolonged, with occasional breaks, until South Audley Street was reached, engrossed Veronica’s attention just enough to keep the tears out of her eyes, and a letter, addressed in a straggling, schoolboy hand, which she found on her entrance, served the same desirable purpose. It was delightful to hear from Joe again, and still more delightful to learn, after the envelope had been torn open, that he was at home for a holiday.

“The man with whom I have been living in Lincolnshire has got a couple of children down with the measles,” Joe wrote, “so I have been packed off, lest my precious life should be endangered. I am having a fairly good time of it at the old place, but it isn’t a bit like home without you. Why don’t you run down for a little and refresh yourself with a dose of rustic simplicity, like Virgil and Horace and other great poets, including the melodious Mostyn, who tells us that you are not yet wedded to town life? As I have

often assured you, my dear, you would be wedded to me, if only I were a year or two older, and, after all, I don't know why we should let a mere question of age stand in our way. Think it over before you commit yourself to some other Johnny of less unimpeachable character. Anyhow, return for a time to your faithful and disconsolate—JOE.

“P. S. — I am walking a foxhound puppy—a perfect beauty. It would be well worth your while to come down here, if only to see him.”

“I will!” exclaimed Veronica, who had perused the above epistle in the seclusion of her bedroom. “I know they will be glad to have me, and I shall be more than glad to get away from this.”

Without more ado she marched downstairs and announced her intention of returning to Harbury Vale forthwith. “I want a change,” she informed her astonished aunt; “all my business transactions with Mr. Walton have been brought to an end long ago, and it doesn't seem to be necessary that I should enter into possession of Broxham yet awhile. So I have made up my mind to forget for six weeks or a couple of months that I am a squire, with all sorts of disagreeable responsibilities upon my shoulders. You can remind me of them when we meet again, later in the year.”

Mrs. Mansfield could elicit nothing further than that from her: she had seen enough of London for the present; she wanted to go back to the country, and to the country she meant to go. It was all very well to say that in days gone by young people did not

take up so peremptory a tone, and to point out that it is scarcely respectful to a duly constituted duenna to form plans without even consulting her. But what, after all, is to be done with a lady who is of age, who is her own mistress and who proposes to take her own way? Veronica was conciliatory, grateful and affectionate, but firm: there was evidently nothing for it but to let her go, to be thankful for her assurance that she looked forward to welcoming Horace to his old home in September and to congratulate oneself upon being free to resume the course of one's own quiet, comfortable little existence during the summer months.

“I must say that you are very upsetting,” Mrs. Mansfield felt it due to herself to remark. “Still, I suppose Mr. and Mrs. Dimsdale may be trusted to take care of you until the autumn, and, as I shall not be wanted, I think I will go to Marienbad and Switzerland.” And to herself she added: “It will do Horace no harm to be shown that he isn't indispensable. Perhaps, too, it is just as well, upon the whole, that the engagement should not appear to have been brought about with too much precipitation. Of course her going off in a hurry like this only means that they have had another small squabble.”

CHAPTER XII.

HORACE CUTS A POOR FIGURE.

HORACE TREVOR, as he walked away from Lady Louisa Cradock's house after that unlucky encounter with Veronica, was a seriously mortified young man. He could imagine so well what Veronica must be thinking of him! In fact, she had shown pretty plainly what she thought by taking no direct notice of him, and by her disdainful remark that he was probably eager to be regaled with the conclusion of a scandalous anecdote. And really he had done nothing to merit her displeasure or contempt; on the contrary, he had, as it seemed to him, behaved as an honourable man from first to last. He had not wanted to fall in love with her; he had done what in him lay to conceal from her the fact that that misfortune had befallen him; he had agreed with her that the subject should be ignored between them thenceforth and for ever. Why was he to be scorned instead of pitied? Certainly he could have wished that she had not found him smoking and laughing in Dolly Cradock's sanctum, and he had been aware of not looking particularly like a disconsolate lover at the moment; but she did not want him to look

like a disconsolate lover, he supposed. At least if she did, it was rather unreasonable of her.

All this Horace said to himself with a view to recovering the cheerful countenance of which he had been deprived; but it did not help him very much towards that desirable end. Of course, he had a right to choose his own company and amuse himself in his own way; but the distressing part of it was that Veronica had for some time been striving to inoculate him with a taste for better company and more refined amusements, that he had shown himself an apt disciple and that he had reverted to former habits immediately on discovering that she had no notion of ever being anything more than his friend. Naturally, her conclusion would be that he had been deceiving her all along. At the same time, it was too bad of her to have jumped to such erroneous conclusions, however natural they might be. Thus the downcast cogitator wandered from one cause of complaint to another; and the upshot of them all was that he was a confoundedly unlucky fellow, that he wished to goodness that he had never set eyes on Veronica Dimsdale and that he would go out to Colorado, or whatever the name of the beastly place was, and be a cowboy—hanged if he wouldn't!

In this very fractious mood he remained for several days, during which he took care to see no friends, save those of his own sex, and was far from civil even to them. But it was difficult to be surly with Lord Chippenham, who hailed him, one afternoon, in Pall Mall, and for whom an ex-cavalry lieutenant could not help

retaining a respect akin to that which schoolboys who have grown bald or grey-headed always feel for a former head-master. So when the General hooked him by the arm, saying, "Walk down with me as far as Westminster, my boy; I've got to go and record my vote against that crew of Radical wiseacres that calls itself a Government," there was nothing for it but to comply with a good grace, although what was coming might be guessed in advance. Lord Chippenham led his captive past the Duke of York's column and down the steps into the Mall, discoursing upon the defenceless state of these islands, and then attacked a question of more pressing personal interest.

"I don't see the good of shilly-shallying," he declared, "and I tell you plainly, my dear fellow, that to my mind you are behaving almost as much like an ass as the Prime Minister. Julia Mansfield may say what she likes, but when a thing has to be done, the sooner it's done the better: who knows what may happen while you stand shivering on the brink? Why haven't you proposed to that girl yet, eh?"

"Well, I don't know that it is one of the things that have got to be done," answered Horace; "in point of fact, I should say that it was one of the things which are precious unlikely to be done."

"Don't talk such nonsense! Haven't I been watching you both for weeks?—and was I born yesterday? It's very evident to me that you have fallen in love with the girl—and a devilish sensible thing to do too! Now, how long do you imagine that you will be

allowed to go on dancing attendance upon her without speaking out? How long——”

“But I’m not dancing attendance upon her,” interrupted Horace.

“You have been, anyhow; you won’t deny that, I suppose. There’s such a thing as letting one’s opportunity slip, and there are plenty of men who ask nothing better than to take your place, let me tell you, young fellow. Come, now! Be a man or a mouse. What are you afraid of? If you have taken it into your head that she is likely to refuse you, you have taken an uncommonly silly notion into your head; I don’t mind saying as much as that to you.”

Horace thought for a moment of mentioning the reasons which must always render it impossible for him to offer marriage to the heiress of the late Mr. Trevor; but he decided to spare himself the nuisance of an unprofitable discussion, and only remarked that he was not so cocksure of success as all that.

“Well, hang it all, man! you can but try,” returned Lord Chippenham. “If you fail, you will fail, and there will be no more to be said; but I shall have a poor opinion of you if you let Miss Veronica leave London without having had the chance of saying whether she wishes to accept you or not.”

All the rest of the way to the House of Lords he enlarged upon the folly of quarrelling with your bread and butter in a style most exasperating to his hearer, who at length exclaimed—

“Very well, then! If I propose and get my

answer—which will be No—perhaps you and Aunt Julia won't bother me any more about the matter."

He really did, in his wrath and irritation, intend to carry out that crazy project. After all, why not? Veronica already knew all that there was to know and already despised him. The mere fact of having to repeat what she had said before, in answer to a formal proposition which had not been made before would hardly trouble her, while it would free him from the importunities of officious relatives. Moreover, he was in one of those naughty tempers which make us childishly anxious to seek the deepest depths of humiliation. "You despise me, do you?" he was saying to himself, in effect. "All right, then, you shall have something to despise me for."

Off he went, therefore, to South Audley Street, with a quick, resolute step, and although his heart may have sunk a little as he ascended the well-known staircase in the wake of the butler, he promised himself that he would not leave the house before he should have received the slap in the face which he courted.

"This," remarked Mrs. Mansfield, rising and holding out her hand to him, "is a kindly act which I scarcely ventured to hope for. I had made up my mind that I should see no more of you now that Veronica has left me."

"Veronica left you!" ejaculated the young man; "you don't mean to say so! Has she gone for good then?"

“ Well, she doesn’t return to me until the autumn, when I am to chaperon her at Broxham, I believe. For the present she has gone to her uncle and aunt at Harbury Vale. I thought you knew.”

“ No,” answered Horace slowly, as he dropped into a chair, “ this is the first I have heard of it. Wasn’t it rather a sudden move on her part ? ”

“ Yes, rather ; but she is a sudden sort of person. I daresay you may have noticed that.”

Horace made no rejoinder. His sensation was in reality one of immense relief, but he looked sufficiently dismayed to satisfy Mrs. Mansfield, who took a malicious pleasure in his apparent consternation. She judged it appropriate to remark : “ Veronica has an old head upon young shoulders ; it hasn’t been in the least turned by her change of fortune or by the admiration of which, as you know, she has had a good deal. Or, perhaps, you don’t know, for we have seen so little of you lately. Next season, when she will be out of mourning and will have grown accustomed to her position, no doubt she will have an even larger selection of suitors to choose from. I shouldn’t be at all surprised if she has left London now just because she is not quite prepared to make her choice yet.”

“ Ah ! very likely,” said Horace abstractedly.

He was wondering within himself what Veronica’s real reason could have been for vanishing away without a word of farewell. He did not flatter himself that she cared enough for his friendship to have gone off in a huff ; yet she would surely have wished him good-bye if

she had not meant him to understand that he was in her black books.

“ I wonder at her not having told you she was going. I supposed that she had at least written you a note,” Mrs. Mansfield remarked placidly. “ You have been such good friends all along, in spite of her having, in a sense, robbed you ; and it has been such a pleasure to me to see your intimacy.”

“ She has not robbed me in any sense whatever,” returned Horace, a little tartly. “ As for friendship—well, as you told me at the first, of course she isn’t at all my style, and we were hardly likely to develop into bosom friends when it came to be a question of intimacy. Not that I don’t like her very much, and I am sorry that it will be another twelve months before I see her again—that is, if I am still in England twelve months hence.”

“ My dear boy,” exclaimed Mrs. Mansfield, rather alarmed by this veiled threat, “ what are you talking about? You surely don’t contemplate emigrating or doing anything insane of that sort! And you will certainly see Veronica again in September. She counts upon you to come to Broxham for the partridge-shooting, and so do I. I should never forgive you if you were to leave us in the lurch. Just think of it! Shooting-parties there must be ; and how are two helpless women to make them go off without assistance?”

Horace laughed. “ Look here, Aunt Julia,” said he ; “ I know perfectly well what you are driving at, and I have known it ever since you began to play the

game. In fact, I may as well tell you that I was sent here by the General this afternoon for the express purpose of proposing to Veronica. She would have refused me, of course, and I thought that, after that, you and he would leave us in peace. Now, I do want you to understand quite clearly that she would never, under any circumstances, consent to marry me. Unless that much is understood I would rather be shot myself than help your friends to shoot the Broxham partridges. Will you take my word for it that the match is out of the question?"

Mrs. Mansfield was by no means a stupid woman, but she was scarcely clever enough to feel certain of the response which she was expected to make to this appeal. What she thought it, upon the whole, best to say (in view of the paramount importance of securing her nephew's presence at Broxham in the autumn) was: "Horace, I will be honest with you. I did very much wish and hope that Veronica might take a fancy to you; you must admit that it would have been a most fortunate thing on all grounds if she had. Still, as you are so sure that it can't be, I won't worry you any more about it—and, indeed, I have always been afraid that you were not quite intellectual enough to please her. Never mind! What can't be cured must be endured. Come to Broxham as her friend—or rather as her cousin—and I can promise you, on her behalf, that you shall have the warmest of welcomes."

Nothing could well have been more satisfactory than the young man's reply. He said he should be

glad to be welcomed on those terms. He added that, knowing the place so well, he might probably be of some use to Veronica and her guests, and he looked as crestfallen as his aunt could have wished. Nevertheless, from Mrs. Mansfield's point of view, there had been some lack of prudence in taking him so promptly at his word. Had his sentiments been those which were not unnaturally imputed to him, a snub would doubtless have served its purpose; but since he had not the faintest intention of ever asking the heiress to be his wife, that allusion to his intellectual inferiority was a little unfortunate. It caused him to say to himself, when he left South Audley Street, after promising to keep himself free from engagements until a date for his visit to Broxham could be fixed, that he had been a perfect fool to imagine that even friendship between him and the superior Veronica was a possible thing; it caused him to suspect that she must have laughed at his innocent endeavours to educate himself up to her level, and to resolve that there should be no renewal of such endeavours. It likewise caused him to reflect that in friendship as well as in love there must be some sort of equality between the parties, and that the Dolly Cra-docks of this world were much more in his line than the Veronica Dimsdales. If Dolly had had a thousand a year of her own the chances are that he would have proceeded straightway to place his hand and heart at her disposal, by way of proving his sense of the general fitness of things.

Dolly having nothing of her own, and having never

made any secret of the fact that her future husband must be a wealthy man, he was preserved from doing anything quite so silly as that; but he solaced himself by frequenting resorts where he was pretty sure of meeting her, and he was downright sentimental in the language which he employed when—as not unfrequently happened—he and she were left to say to one another what nobody else could overhear. Now Dolly, whatever may have been her failings, was assuredly not a sentimental person; she fully recognised that there is all the difference in the world between the poetry of love and the prose of matrimony, and although Horace Trevor, with the Broxham estate and £100,000 or so invested in safe securities, would have suited her well enough, she had no more notion of espousing the actual Horace than of taking a flying leap from the parapet of Westminster Bridge. Yet it is not necessary to have a hard heart because one is blessed with a clear, sane understanding, nor was there any reason at all why the young man's quasi-amorous speeches should not sound very pleasantly in her ears. She believed that he was genuinely in love with her, which is always an agreeable sort of belief to entertain, and was in her case justified by the circumstance that a great many other impecunious young men were, or professed to be, in the same sad predicament. Moreover, he had as good as told her that he was.

Thus it came to pass, after a time, that the soft influences of a moonlight night—supplemented, it may be, by those of a good dinner and excellent champagne

—brought about a scene between this pair which had better not have taken place. They had been dining with a large party at one of those river-side club-houses which have sprung up of late years, and the gardens of which may have witnessed more than one scene equally undesirable from the subsequent point of view of the persons concerned therein; they had wandered away from their friends, they were contemplating the broad, silent stream, and they had been lamenting, as it was extremely natural to do, that following up the bright track shed upon it by the full moon would never lead them to the traditional pot of gold of which they both stood so much in need.

“What would you do with it if you got it?” Dolly asked. “I don’t mean a wretched little pipkin, containing twenty spade-guineas, or anything of that sort, but a good solid fortune of, say, half a million?”

“I should give it to you,” answered Horace, without hesitation.

“What, unconditionally? I don’t for one moment believe that you would; but I can assure you that, if you did, you would never see a single penny of it back again.”

“Oh, well, there would be conditions attached to the gift, of course—one condition, at least. You would have to take me with it.”

Dolly Cradock was really an extremely handsome girl, and just then she was looking her very best. At the moment he spoke he was almost, if not quite, sincere.

“Ah,” she answered, with a touch of bitterness, “that is a mere detail. Everybody who knows me knows that I should take a hunchback or a cripple who had half a million of money to offer me. Beggars mustn’t be choosers.”

“But supposing that you weren’t a beggar, and supposing that you *could* choose?” Horace asked, drawing a little nearer to her.

“That’s quite another question; I don’t see why I should answer it.”

“I don’t see why you shouldn’t; we are quite alone, and I am not very likely to repeat anything you may tell me, Dolly.”

“Not to the blameless Veronica?”

“Why to her of all people in the world?”

“Only because, a few weeks ago, you were thinking seriously of marrying her, and because in all probability you will be thinking of it seriously again a few weeks hence.”

“I never thought, seriously or otherwise, of doing any such thing,” Horace declared indignantly.

“Oh, yes, you did; *I* don’t blame you. As I said just now, beggars mustn’t be choosers, and I myself am bound to be as mercenary as you. As a rule, I feel tolerably resigned to my fate—and so do you, I suspect,” added Dolly, with a half-smothered sigh.

Is it necessary to record what happened next? Eavesdropping is an ignoble occupation, and if it be our ill-fortune to surprise any two of our acquaintances in a compromising attitude, we instinctively turn and

flee. Everything leads the present narrator to believe that Miss Dolly Cradock had been kissed by gentlemen who had no sort of excuse for thus saluting her before that evening when Horace Trevor was betrayed into saying things which he did not really mean, and it may be safely assumed that her indiscretions weighed lightly upon her conscience; but there is no need to dwell upon an episode in which the hero of this story cuts a poor figure, and we may pass on to the words of unexceptionable wisdom with which the interview was brought to a close.

“Now we won't play the fool any more,” Dolly said briskly; “I'm sorry for you, and perhaps a little bit sorry for myself too; but we shall both of us be all right again in a day or two, if not sooner. This has been merely a pretty little *intermezzo*, if you please; it is not to have any consequences, and it is to be forgotten with all possible dispatch. Go and see whether they aren't putting the horses in.”

Horace had been saying things which he did not mean; but Dolly, to do her justice, seldom erred in that way. Shortly afterwards she took her place upon the box-seat of the drag which was to convey them back to London and was driven by an elderly widower of large means, to whom she made herself most agreeable. Horace listened to her wonderingly, while tardy repentance and shame gained the mastery over him. Put it how he would, he could not but feel that he had disgraced himself. He did not love Dolly; he did not in his heart believe that she cared a brass farthing for

him; and although Veronica would never know that he had been false to her, and would also not care a brass farthing if she did, the fact that he had been false remained. "It's time for me to be off," was his conclusion. "I really can't look that girl in the face again to-morrow, as if nothing had happened, though I expect she will be able to keep her countenance easily enough. I shall go to Ireland and fish."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE NEW ORDER OF THINGS.

“AT the present moment,” remarked Veronica lazily, “I am perfectly happy, comfortable and contented. I wonder how many other people there are now in this country who could say the same thing—or would, if they could!”

“The population of the United Kingdom is, I believe, thirty-eight millions odd,” answered Joe. “Probably we shall be making a liberal allowance if we estimate that twenty persons out of the lot are as highly blessed as you are, and have the decency to acknowledge it. Sorry I can’t include my own name in the select band, but a *proxime accessit* is as much as I feel justified in allowing myself. I want but little here below, only I want just a little bit more than I have got.”

The boat in which they were seated lay motionless and half hidden by tall rushes in a quiet backwater of the river; overhead the August sun was blazing out of a cloudless sky. Veronica, reclining beneath a white sunshade upon a pile of cushions, was enjoying that delight in mere existence and absolute idleness which is so seldom granted to us northern islanders, while her

cousin, clad in flannels, with his sleeves rolled up and his elbows upon his knees, was placidly smoking the short pipe which was rather more often between his lips than it ought to have been at his age.

Veronica laughed. "What makes you such a thoroughly satisfactory companion, Joseph," said she, "is that you are so unsophisticated. Now, if you had been mixing in good society ever since the spring, as I have, you would have felt it simply imperative upon you to swear that the actual situation was a sort of foretaste of Paradise."

"Do you suppose that anything would make me talk such rot as that to *you*?" asked Joe disgustedly. "If you want to be flattered and humbugged you had better send for some of your smart London friends, or telegraph for old Mostyn, who always has a large surplus stock of sugary speeches on hand. From me, my beloved Veronica, you will never hear anything but the truth; and the truth is that I am jolly glad to be sitting here and talking to you again."

"Well, didn't I tell you that you were satisfactory? Only I wish you hadn't said that you wanted more than you had got, because that reminds me of the quantity of things which I want, and am not at all likely to get—and my object was to put them out of mind for the time being."

Joe shook his head. "I fear, Veronica," said he, "that you did not profit as you might have done by last Sunday's discourse. In all my experience I have never met with anyone who preached the duty of taking

things easy more persistently than the rector of this parish, and I may add that I have seldom met anyone who practised it less. However, that is neither here nor there. What are all these things that you want so badly, if one may ask?"

"Perhaps I ought rather to have said that there are things of which I want to get rid," answered Veronica; "but never mind. I am rid of them temporarily, at all events."

"Now, look here, my dear girl," said Joe impressively, "don't you go ridding yourself of your landed estates, whatever you do. Think of others. Think of me, for example, and of the bitter disappointment that it would be to me to be debarred from shooting your coverts when the time comes. I have nothing to say against a compromise, mind you; I have told you, ever since you came back and I heard your account of that chap Trevor, that in my opinion you couldn't bestow your affections more worthily than upon him. Then you would feel that you had behaved handsomely, the property would be his as well as yours, and everybody would be pleased. Because I don't think so meanly of you as to imagine that you would ever consent to become his wife without stipulating that I should be invited to Broxham whenever there was a big shoot on."

This time Veronica did not laugh. "Unfortunately, that compromise is out of the question," she said; "Horace Trevor and I are quite of one mind as to the impossibility of it."

"Oh, you have talked it over together, then?"

“Yes, we talked it over, and we agreed that our mutual liking was not of the kind that could be made to do. Besides, there are other obstacles. I don’t know how I am to manage matters so as to do the best that I can for you all, and you have completely destroyed my comfort by introducing the horrid subject. Pull me down stream again, and let us talk about something else—foxes or badgers, or what you please. Wasn’t it to the badgers’ earths that you and Nipper went off before breakfast this morning?”

Joe had plenty to say upon that engrossing topic, and was quite willing to comply with Veronica’s request. He never forced her confidences, being well aware that she generally ended by telling him almost everything, and having a much more real sympathy with her perplexities than his speech betrayed. She, on her side, knew that she could rely upon his comprehension and sympathy, but she also knew that Joe had too much common sense to approve of her despoiling herself of her inheritance in favour of Dolly Cradock, and that was why she had not mentioned Dolly’s name to him. Indeed, as she had avowed, her one great wish was to forget for a while the complex burdens which had come upon her together with what everybody still persisted in calling her extraordinary good luck. She would have to take them up again soon; during those few weeks of summer she desired to ignore them and to revert to the old days when she had been less envied and a good deal less unenviable.

But to put the clock back is a feat which has never

yet been accomplished by man or woman with any perceptible effect upon the passage of time, and although Veronica tried very hard to persuade herself that she was unchanged, her uncle and aunt were always at hand to point out to her what a fallacy that was. They were kindness itself to her, those good people, and they had also—after some protest—allowed her to be kind to them in a pecuniary sense, which was a comfort so far as it went. But it would have been worse than useless even to hint in their hearing at her fixed determination to resign the estate which had been bequeathed to her, and it was always rather a sore point with Veronica that they were willing to acquiesce with such alacrity in her departure from the home of her childhood.

“Well, you see, my dear,” Mrs. Dimsdale said, in answer to some tentative reproaches which were addressed to her on that score, “it is very much the same thing as if you were going to be married, and naturally I have always hoped that you would marry. I am sure I have felt it as a horrid wrench when our own girls have left us; still, one knows that it is what Providence intended them to do, and that children can’t be children for ever. One thinks of their happiness, not of one’s own.”

“Only the difference between them and me is that I am not going to be married,” objected Veronica.

“Oh, you are going to be married,” returned her aunt, laughing. “Perhaps, if you were to make a point of it, I could even tell you the name of the man whom you are going to marry.”

That closed Veronica's lips and the conversation. The unanimity with which all who took an interest in her had decided that it was her manifest destiny to become Mrs. Horace Trevor almost made her wish that Horace himself was less obstinately recalcitrant. The only dissentient voice had been that of Mr. Mostyn, and the moral support of Mr. Mostyn was not just then available, the poet having crossed the Channel to refresh himself by communings with French men of letters, among whom he was highly esteemed. Harbury Vale, therefore, was not what it had been in days of yore, nor could all the making-believe in the world render it so; and when Joe left for Lincolnshire, in order to obtain practical experience of harvesting operations, Veronica was not disinclined to bring her own holiday to an end.

It turned out, however, that her new home could not be prepared for her reception at quite so early a date as had been anticipated. Mrs. Mansfield, who was already at Broxham, and who had most kindly undertaken the management of all necessary details, wrote to say that there was still a great deal to be done, and that the partridges would have to remain unmolested, she feared, until the end of September. "Of course, I shall be delighted to have you with me, dear, if you care to come at once; but I am afraid it would be dreadfully dull for you, because we can't ask people to stay until the bedrooms have been made tidy. Poor dear Samuel lived so much alone latterly, and I have been obliged to dismiss the housekeeper, who had become so rude and independ-

ent that I am sure you would never have been able to stand her. As for Horace, he has had an invitation to a Scotch deer-forest, which he says he could not resist; but he promises to be with us for the first of the covert-shooting. So please do as you like about coming here; only don't think yourself bound to lend me a hand, for, troublesome as it is, I can do very well without help, and I should like you to have a more pleasant first impression of the place than you would get if you were to see it in its present dismantled condition."

Veronica rightly interpreted this as a meaning that Mrs. Mansfield was revelling in the choice of upholstery and did not wish to be interfered with. Accordingly, she remained where she was, being made heartily welcome to do so, although her Aunt Elizabeth could not help expressing some surprise at her indifference respecting a very important matter.

"I really do think I should want to see my own furniture before I bought it—not to speak of engaging my own servants!" the good lady exclaimed.

But Veronica knew that neither furniture nor servants would be hers for long, and her wish was to shorten as far as might be the prelude to the pre-arranged domestic drama. She had rehearsed it all in advance—Horace's arrival, which must be speedily followed by that of Dolly Cradock; the opportunities that were to be given them for coming to a mutual understanding, the temporary despondency of the lovers, and then her own more or less graceful retirement. With a little management success ought to be her reward; but she

was impatient to begin, and it would be time enough for her to step upon the stage when the curtain should be ready to rise.

It was through a curtain of mist and rain that her eyes at length beheld the large and substantial, but not very imposing mansion of which she was the mistress. A solid stone-coloured house, with a Greek portico and a number of bow windows, encircled by a rather meagre flower-garden, standing in the midst of a level park where there were some fine trees, and hemmed in on all sides by distant woods—this was what she saw as she was driven rapidly from the station in the carriage which had been sent to meet her on that stormy autumn evening, and she said to herself that she would, at least, be able to resign that residence without a single pang of regret. It was not in the least beautiful, and it did not look like the sort of place to which one could ever become much attached. However, when the carriage drew up at the door, and she was admitted into a spacious, well-lighted hall, where a cheerful wood-fire was blazing, and where busts, tall Oriental vases, Persian rugs and Japanese screens had been arranged in an artistic fashion, she had to admit that Broxham was a good deal more attractive within than without. And the affectionate embrace of Aunt Julia, who came out to greet her, followed by Lord Chippenham, was pleasanter than the respectful, furtive scrutiny of the butler and the footman, who relieved her of her wraps. Perhaps the servants regarded Mrs. Mansfield, who had engaged them, as their mistress, rather than the young

lady from whom they had been told they were in future to take their orders; and certainly Mrs. Mansfield appeared to have made herself very much at home, having, as she presently informed Veronica, invited one or two people, besides Lord Chippenham, "just to keep the place warm for you."

"I hope you don't mind, dear," she added. "You won't find any of them at all troublesome to entertain."

Veronica did not mind in the least: on the contrary, she was extremely grateful to her aunt for having so ably replaced her, and she expressed her gratitude while she was being led into a comfortable library where half-a-dozen ladies and a couple of young men were grouped round the tea-table.

"Oh, I have done nothing," declared Mrs. Mansfield, who nevertheless thought that she deserved some thanks. "I have only got rid of some of poor Samuel's impossible old retainers, who had already been fully provided for in his will and who didn't care to stay. And I have pulled the furniture about and spent a little of your money—that is all. I think you will find everything in tolerably good order, and now that you have come, I am delighted to surrender the reins of government to you."

But it soon became evident that that surrender would be far from delightful to her; nor was she called upon to make it, save nominally. Veronica sat at the head of the table and held a long obligatory conference with the agent and the bailiff on the following morning; but it was Mrs. Mansfield who saw the house-

keeper after breakfast and drew up the programme for the day. She said: "Perhaps I had better continue to look after things for you until you have shaken down into your place," and she was assured that the longer she was kind enough to do so the better her niece would be pleased.

It is not certain that Veronica, who had clear ideas of the duties belonging to every station of life, would have been equally complaisant had she looked upon herself as being in any real sense the proprietress of the Broxham estate; but since she meant to turn her back upon it at the earliest possible opportunity she was only too glad to make Aunt Julia happy by self-effacement. Meanwhile, she had a pleasant enough time of it for the next ten days. The house, if not magnificent, was comfortable and home-like; there was a charming old walled garden within easy reach of it where one could wander and explore without being thought neglectful of one's guests; Aunt Julia's friends, of whom several relays arrived and left during the above-mentioned period, were very nice easy-going sort of people, who rose late in the morning, seemed to be satisfied with a drive in the afternoon, and entertained one another. As for the men, they were out shooting all day long; Lord Chippenham took charge of them pending the advent of Horace, who was expected to make his appearance from Scotland shortly. That Horace, when he came, would act as the *de facto* master of the establishment was evidently taken for granted by its inmates, both permanent and temporary. Indeed, so far as grooms, gamekeepers,

beaters and other outdoor dependents were concerned, he had, it seemed, acted in that capacity for some years past.

He arrived late one evening, looking very well and sunburnt, and Veronica noticed at once, with great satisfaction, that he had discarded the embarrassed and somewhat sullen manner which had provoked her during the latter part of her sojourn in London. This she took as a sign that he had now realised the absurdity of the misgivings as to which he had then pleaded guilty, and that he was ready to meet her once more upon the old friendly footing. Such was, in truth, his laudable intention and desire. Months of fresh air and hard exercise had done so much for him that he was able by this time, as he believed, to put a good face upon unalterable facts. Veronica most certainly was not for him; he had been a deplorable idiot to fall in love with her, and a still greater idiot to let her discover his idiocy; but he had now come to his senses, and he hoped to make it quite clear to her that her friendship was all that he asked. Of Dolly Cradock and the circumstances under which he had parted from her it has to be confessed that he had thought very little indeed in the course of an enjoyable summer and autumn. It is the destiny of these light-hearted young ladies to be forgotten as readily as they are wont to forget, and had not she herself said that an episode upon which it was not altogether pleasant to look back was to have no consequences?

“And what have you been doing all this long time?”

Veronica wanted to know, when he crossed the long drawing-room to seat himself beside her after dinner on the evening of his arrival.

“Well,” he answered, “I expect you would say that I have been doing nothing. I have been yachting a little, and I have been fishing and shooting. That’s what you call sheer waste of time, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know; it just depends upon whether there was any better use for you to make of your time, and I should hardly think that there was. Besides, I have been absolutely idle myself; so that it doesn’t become me to condemn my neighbours.”

“I should have thought you would have been as busy as a bee,” said Horace, looking admiringly round him. “You have beautified this old barrack out of all recognition. How do you like the place, now that you have taken possession of it?”

“Oh, pretty well,” answered Veronica, “but the beautifying has been Aunt Julia’s work, and of course Broxham can never seem like home to me. I have no associations with it, as you have. You will find any number of humble friends eager to welcome you tomorrow, and I do hope that, in charity to me, you mean to stay a long time. I have already had to promise faithfully that you will hunt from here this season.”

Horace laughed and made a grimace. “I shall have to explain to these good folks that times have changed, I see,” said he. “I’ll stay a week or two for the covert shooting, if you’ll have me; but as for hunting, that’s

another affair. 'To begin with, I haven't anything to ride.'"

"I was to tell you that every care has been taken of the dun horse and the little bay, and that they are both of them in first-rate condition."

"Glad to hear it; but they are your horses, not mine, remember."

"That doesn't seem to be the general opinion. Uncle Samuel bought them for you, I am told; and even if they are legally my property, they are of about as much use to me as a pair of giraffes would be. So please take them away, if you want to take them away, though we shall all feel rather hurt by your choosing to hunt in another country."

Horace could not afford to hunt in any country; but he did not want to keep on alluding to his poverty, and, as a matter of fact, the temptation held out to him was a very hard one to resist. Therefore, he only said, after a pause. "But I can't *live* here, you know, Veronica."

"But you can stay here sometimes, as you used to do," she returned. "You have only to substitute me—or rather, Aunt Julia—for Uncle Samuel, and from all that I hear, the change will be a change for the better in some respects."

Horace did not contradict her. Later, it would no doubt be necessary to explain that he could not accept such unbounded hospitality; but for the moment he was unwilling to make difficulties. Besides, to tell the truth, he did think that it would be rather jolly

to have just three or four more days with the old hounds.

So all this was as satisfactory as possible, and it only remained to summon Dolly Cradock forthwith.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WISDOM OF JOSEPH.

WHICH of us, if we lived in a Palace of Truth, would not have to confess, to his shame, that there have been moments when he has rejoiced to see the retreating backs of his best friends? One's best friends, animated by the best intentions, have, unhappily, a way of sometimes behaving very like one's worst enemies; and it was, therefore, with heartfelt relief that Horace Trevor heard Lord Chippenham say—

“Well, my dear boy, I am sorry to have to make a bolt for it just as you arrive, but I was due on the other side of England a week ago, and I have only remained at my post because Julia begged me to do so until you came to relieve guard.” He added significantly, “I hope and trust that she will have some good news to send me about you before long. I don't want to interfere; you must settle it among you in your own way, but what the dickens is the object of this delay is more than I can understand.”

Horace took very good care not to enlighten him. One great comfort was that his impatience did not appear to be shared by Mrs. Mansfield, who maintained a

discreet reserve and loyally kept her promise of troubling her nephew no further, although it was easy to perceive that she had not abandoned all hope. Mrs. Mansfield, indeed, had the wit to realise that if the young man could only be kept long enough at Broxham, the situation would become such that there would be practically only one way out of it.

But this was a view of the matter which suggested itself neither to Horace nor to Veronica. Each being very far from comprehending the other, they speedily dropped back into their former pleasant relations, which could not possibly have been resumed, had they been less blind, and for some little time, at all events, they failed to notice that everybody with whom they were brought into contact regarded their ultimate marriage as a foregone conclusion. Horace and the other men who were staying in the house shot all day and every day; in the evenings there were but few opportunities for private intercourse, and when Veronica did happen to get him alone for a few minutes, she generally profited by the occasion to consult him upon some point connected with the management of the property which she hoped to transfer to him before he should be much older. It was encouraging to find that he took a keen interest in such questions; nor did she ever neglect to mention how profoundly uninteresting they were to her.

Deferred hope had, however, to be submitted to a little longer; for Dolly Cradock, who had been promptly communicated with, wrote to say that she would not be available just yet. "I have a few engagements

which promise rather too well to be sacrificed," she explained; "but I will be with you before the frost sets in, unless the climate plays us some nasty trick. My love to your cousin Horace. I hear he is having a rare time of it at Broxham, bossing the whole show and inviting whole squads of men to be entertained by you. Tell him not to go away before I come, and to find me a mount of some sort. I will say for him that he knows something about horses, but I don't believe much in his shooting. Still, I dare say his friends help him to make up a respectable bag, and he must enjoy giving orders where he used to receive them. I hope he reads family prayers morning and evening in obedience to the traditions of the house; or do you undertake that part of the business?"

Veronica did not deliver the above message, nor did she think it necessary to inform Horace that she expected the pleasure of a visit from Miss Cradock. She had an impression—which happened to be perfectly correct—that he would not like her having invited Dolly to meet him. For her own part she found this country-house existence, which gave her all the advantages of proprietorship without its worries and responsibilities, much pleasanter than she had anticipated. It was enjoyable in itself, and seemed to afford a fitting sequel to her London experiences. From the moment when she had come so unexpectedly into her inheritance there had been a sense of unreality about everything that had occurred to her which had not been without a certain charm. It had been rather like reading a novel or a

play, which may temporarily excite one's emotions but which has nothing in the world to do with one's actual life. Some day soon she would shake herself free of it all and consider practical plans for the future; at present there was no occasion for her to trouble herself in that way.

What gave her great satisfaction was that Joe, who had obtained leave to absent himself from his agricultural studies for a fortnight, and who journeyed down from Lincolnshire in November, struck up an immediate and fast friendship with Horace. She had not left the future to take care of itself so absolutely but that she had felt certain qualms of conscience respecting Joe, and she was most anxious that the young fellow should be upon terms of intimacy with the coming owner of Broxham Hall. It was, accordingly, very consolatory to be assured in emphatic language by one who had the highest confidence in his own judgment that Horace Trevor was one in a thousand; while it was perhaps even more agreeable to hear Horace's own verdict upon a youth who, notwithstanding his many admirable qualities, could scarcely be called prepossessing in appearance.

“That is a capital boy!” Horace said. “He knows a lot, and he isn't a bit conceited about his knowledge either. A first-rate huntsman was lost when he came into the world as the son of a country parson, I can tell you. I took him over to the kennels yesterday and I was simply amazed at the way in which he picked out the best hounds. He didn't require to be told which of

them were straight—and, between you and me, they ain't all of them straight."

"They might all of them be as crooked as rams' horns for anything that I should know by looking at them," answered Veronica, laughing; "but I think I can generally tell whether a man is what you call 'straight' or not, and I am sure that epithet applies to Joe. I am so glad you appreciate him. You know I always told you that he was like you."

"Oh, he's my superior by a long way," said Horace seriously, without noticing the implied compliment. "That is, except as regards horsemanship—which he'll soon learn. Going to be a land agent, he tells me."

"Well, we hope so. In fact, I daresay he would be mine, if——" Veronica paused for a moment, and then added, "If I hadn't got one already."

"Sutton is a good man," remarked Horace, meditatively; "but he isn't as young as he used to be, and he is well enough off to live upon his income. I should think that his shoes might be vacant by the time that our friend Joe is ready to step into them."

That was so exactly what Veronica had wanted him to say that she had much ado to refrain from thanking him. She felt that if only she could see some prospect of Joe's being adequately provided for, the rest would concern herself alone. Your friends may think you an idiot for throwing your money into the sea or bestowing it upon a hospital, but they can not with any justice reproach you for doing as you please with your own.

But although, upon the whole, things seemed to be moving smoothly towards the desired climax, and although Horace continued to behave in every respect as she would have wished, it did, as time went on, dawn upon her that his actual position under her roof was open to misconstruction. Hints ended by reaching her ears; servants' gossip was inevitably reported to her; visitors, in the innocence of their hearts, made arch or facetious little speeches; finally, the Vicar's wife, a foolish, harmless old creature, who often dropped in to discuss parochial matters, must needs ask point-blank whether the wedding was to take place in Broxham or in London. Veronica astonished her very much, but obviously failed to overcome her incredulity, by replying that the wedding alluded to was not going to take place anywhere. She said—

“Oh, my dear Miss Dimsdale, if that is really the case, I am very sorry to hear it—very sorry indeed. And so, I am sure, will everybody else be. If you will forgive a woman who is old enough to be your mother for saying so, it was hardly fair to treat the poor young man as you have treated him unless you meant what we all supposed that you did.”

That ignorant rebuke was all the more provoking because it was certain to be echoed by Aunt Julia and Lord Chippenham, not to mention the rest of Veronica's little world. “I can't be thankful enough,” she said to herself rather impatiently, “that there is a Dolly Craddock in the field. But for her, I really believe I should be driven to marry Horace against his will. I wish she

would make haste about coming here—this can't be allowed to go on much longer.”

Horace, for different reasons, was rapidly approaching a similar conviction. Knowing that it was quite out of the question for him to ask Veronica to be his wife, and having heard from her own lips that he would most assuredly be rejected even if he did, he had long ago decided that his incipient love for her was a sentiment which must be nipped in the bud; and what with fishing, yachting, and shooting, he had, as he fondly imagined, pretty effectually nipped it. But he ought never to have been so imprudent as to yield to Aunt Julia's solicitations and establish himself upon his present footing at Broxham. What had been the result of this misplaced confidence in his self-control; of this uncalled-for playing into the hands of officious well-wishers; of this valorous determination to fall in with Veronica's own wishes and look as if he liked it? Why, simply that the bud had burst into full bloom; that, instead of being a little in love with her (as he had been with many others before her) he now worshipped the very ground she trod upon; that every day and every hour he was in danger of betraying himself, and that more than once he had surprised himself in the criminal act of wondering whether, after all, he was bound as an honourable man to abandon all hope. To have reached the point of contemplating what he and she had agreed to regard as a moral impossibility was more than perilous; it must be taken as a sign that the only course remaining open to him

was to flourish a clean pair of heels in the face of temptation.

Now, it came to pass that one afternoon, when he was in rather low spirits and had been inwardly debating with himself what plausible excuse he could make for abruptly taking himself off, Joe and he went out together for an hour of desultory shooting. It happened that there was just then a break in the flow of Mrs. Mansfield's guests; the coverts were to be left undisturbed for a time; nobody's amusement had to be catered for; and Horace, true to the resolution which he had formed of avoiding Veronica's society as far as was consistent with politeness, quitted the house immediately after luncheon, accompanied by his young friend, who was always ready for sport in any shape or form. After knocking over a few rabbits, they proceeded to some marshy ground, where Joe brought down a couple of snipe cleverly enough; but Horace, never at the best of times a first-class shot, missed everything, and was at length seriously remonstrated with by his companion.

“Do you mean to go on like this?” Joe inquired in sorrowful accents. “Because, if you do, it seems to me that we may as well get back home and play billiards. Not that you're fit to play anything in your present condition. What's wrong with you, if one may make so bold as to ask?—liver or mental distress?”

“I have never been conscious of having a liver in my life,” answered Horace. “As for mental distress—

well, you're old enough to understand that I must have reasons for being a bit worried at times."

Joe scrutinised the other's perturbed countenance for a moment with a whimsical expression upon his own, and then, withdrawing the cartridges from his gun, deliberately sat down upon the trunk of a fallen tree.

"We won't shoot any more; we'll smoke a quiet pipe," said he. "I'm old enough for anything, and wise beyond my years, as you may have noticed. In fact, I have heard you admit as much. Well, such is my wisdom that, without requiring to be told, I know perfectly well what is the matter with you."

"You do, do you?" returned Horace, with a rather dreary, incredulous laugh, as he obeyed the self-confident youth's invitation.

"I do. Moreover, I don't claim any great credit for the discovery, which might have been made by anybody with eyes and ears and a moderate amount of telligence. It isn't that you are a poor man instead of being a rich one, as you naturally expected to be by this time: it isn't that you are beginning to kick against a false position——"

"Yes, it is!" interrupted Horace.

"Kindly allow me to finish my remarks. I was going to say that it is simply that you have lost your heart to the very person whom of course you ought to marry, and that you daren't tell her so for fear she shouldn't believe you. Now, that is sheer foolishness, and——"

“You cheeky boy! What do you mean by lecturing your elders and betters in this way?” interrupted Horace again, though in truth he was not very sorry to be furnished with a confidant. “You are not altogether wrong, I’ll allow; but you don’t know quite as much as you think.”

“I shall be pleased to listen to anything more that you may have to tell me upon the subject,” answered Joe blandly.

Horace needed no pressing. Without wasting time or words over it he unfolded his lamentable case, relating how Veronica and he had agreed at the outset to be friends and nothing more; how, in spite of that agreement, he had found himself falling in love with her; how she had at once discovered his unwilling treachery, and had let him know in the plainest terms what she thought of it; how he had valiantly attempted to conquer a hopeless passion, and how he had, for the second time, ignominiously failed. “So you see,” he concluded, “I must get out of this before I make an even greater fool of myself than I have done already. And I’m sorry for it, because I know there will be a fuss with Aunt Julia, and most likely I shall have to confess the whole truth.”

“Best thing you can do,” observed Joe laconically. “You haven’t confessed the whole truth yet, you know.”

“What do you mean?” asked the other staring. “I have confessed it to Veronica, at all events.”

“ Oh, no ; that’s just what you haven’t done. You have never asked her to marry you.”

“ Of course I haven’t. For one thing, I don’t want to marry her, and for another thing, she has told me, without waiting to be asked, that she wouldn’t marry me if I were the only man in the world.”

“ Ah ! but in cases of this kind the best of women tell fibs. They feel bound to do it, just as they feel bound to say that they wouldn’t have accepted an invitation to dinner which hadn’t reached them. Now, look here, Trevor : I don’t set up to be much of an authority upon falling in love ; the whole thing seems to me to be rather rot and to make people unfit for decent society while it lasts ; but I suppose it is a calamity which is sure to come upon us all sooner or later, and when it attacks me I hope I shall have common sense enough to go straight to the young woman and tell her what is the matter. She may object to red hair, in which case I shall know where I am and wish her good morning ; but I shan’t be quite such a muff as to turn tail without firing a shot. As for your not wanting to marry Veronica, you had better tell that to somebody who has been more lucky than your humble servant and has obtained a commission in the marines. What you really mean is that you are afraid she will think you want her money, not herself—which is a precious poor compliment to pay to her understanding. You may take my word for it that if Veronica refuses you, it will be only because she doesn’t care enough for

you to be your wife. But I don't myself think that she will refuse you."

"My dear boy, you know nothing at all about it," said Horace.

"That's what remains to be seen. Anyhow, I've given you the soundest of sound advice. There's nothing disgraceful in falling in love with an heiress, and, as far as I can make out, very few men think that there's anything disgraceful in marrying an heiress without falling in love with her; but upon my word, I think it's rather disgraceful to slink off silently because you funk an accusation which no woman in her senses would be likely to make. *Dixi!* Now we'll go home before we catch colds in our heads. By-the-way, there's just one more thing which I had better warn you of, perhaps. When Veronica accepts you—as she will—the odds are that she won't give her real reason for accepting you. You mustn't mind that; it's only another little way that women have, and after you have been married a few days, she'll own that she wasn't absolutely candid about it at the time."

CHAPTER XV.

VERONICA'S REPLY.

No man can give clearer proof that he possesses a well-balanced mind than by showing himself ready to listen to the opinions of his juniors, who may not be experienced as he, yet may quite possibly be more acute; and it is noticeable that the greatest generals, statesmen, and other leaders of their fellow-mortals have always displayed this modest toleration. Only dull people are under the delusion that they necessarily become more clever as they grow older. Horace Trevor, therefore, being modest enough to believe that he was very dull indeed, thought it quite upon the cards that Joe Dimsdale might take the right view of the situation (at all events in so far as it behoved him to fire a shot before running away), and he would have been glad to pursue the subject as he strolled homewards with his juvenile but sapient adviser. But Joe, who had said all that he had to say, preferred to discuss the best means to be adopted for discouraging the use of barbed wire—a very serious question, as to which he had ideas of his own and desired to promulgate them. He said—

“What you have to make up your minds to is that there must be no difficulty about the damage fund. Of course claims are sent in for turkeys that never were hatched and gates and hurdles that never existed, but it is a good deal cheaper to pay what you don't owe than to have your neck broken and your best hounds killed. It isn't a bit of good to tell farmers that hunting brings money into the country; you must have a civil word for each of them when they come out and you mustn't ask too many questions about their losses. Once get them on your side, and you won't be bothered with that murderous wire, the inventor of which, I grant you, would be flayed alive if he got his deserts.”

To these and other sage observations of a like nature Horace returned an absent-minded assent. His eyes were wandering hither and thither across the grey, level landscape, as if in search of something, although he had no conscious anticipation of discerning the tall feminine figure which presently came within the range of his vision. But when he saw that it was really Veronica who was approaching them—and who, as a matter of fact, was on her way home from the village, after fulfilling one of her duties by visiting the poor—he was seized with an absurd panic and would fain have taken to his heels. After what had passed, it seemed to him that he must at once act upon the advice that he had received; so he said hurriedly: “Stick to me, there's a good chap! I ain't ready yet.”

Joe stared, and then burst out laughing, but he had no time to give the required promise—or, at any rate,

he didn't give it—before Veronica was within earshot and raised her voice to enquire what sport they had had.

“Middling, my dear, only middling, I am sorry to tell you,” he replied. “Trevor is no use this afternoon, and it saddens me to shoot with a man who is no use; so we're toddling home, although the light will last for a good three-quarters of an hour more.”

“I am glad of that,” remarked Veronica, drawing nearer and joining them; “I am always glad when the poor birds get off, even if it only means that they will live to die another day. Why can't you shoot at glass balls or clay pigeons? They are quite as difficult to hit, aren't they?”

“A pigeon-shot is one thing and a game-shot is another,” answered Joe didactically. “You might just as well say that it is as difficult to write prose as poetry, by way of putting the extinguisher upon all poets—and I daresay strength would be given me to bear it if you did extinguish the lot. Now, I'll tell you what it is, Veronica: you know you can't convert me, because you have so often tried, without a shred of success. Suppose you bring your powerful arguments to bear upon Trevor, who has an open mind—because he isn't really fond of shooting at all—while I nip back for half an hour and see whether I can't bring conviction home to a few more snipe.”

The faithless young reprobate strode off then and there. He even had the impudence to glance back over his shoulder with a wink at the comrade whom he had

thus basely left in the lurch, and who gave a great gasp of despair.

But Veronica, innocent of this by-play, was very willing to let him depart in peace. During the earlier part of the afternoon she had been thinking that she ought to let Horace know how completely their amicable understanding had been misinterpreted by the general public, and this appeared to be as good an opportunity as another for setting him upon his guard. However, she had not yet hit upon an easy and natural method of leading up to the subject when he forestalled her by blurting out—

“I say!—I’m afraid I shall have to leave you before long. I’ve enjoyed myself awfully, and I’m sure you have done all you could to give me a real good time of it; but—but, in fact, I find it won’t do!”

“I hope,” said Veronica, her face clouding over a little, “that you are not going back to the old ridiculous mistake that you made in London.”

“Oh, well, if you call it a mistake!——”

“It *was* a mistake,” Veronica asserted, rather fiercely; “you might accept my word for that, I think. Surely I ought to know!”

“I don’t doubt your word; I never doubted it for a moment,” returned Horace. “As far as that goes, I am not sure that I ever made the mistake you mean. Still, you know——”

“I know that everybody assumes we are either engaged to be married or going to be engaged, and I was going to speak to you about it. It is very unpleasant,

and, for some reasons, I should not be at all sorry if you were to go away soon. Only there are other reasons which make me wish that you could stay a little longer."

"I'm useful, I suppose," said Horace, a trifle bitterly. "Aunt Julia is never weary of telling me how useful I am. Well, goodness knows I ask nothing better than to be of use to you. All the same, I doubt whether it's quite honest, and I'm beginning to feel that it's quite impossible to keep up this pretence."

"I am with you there," agreed Veronica more composedly. "I think it has gone on long enough, and we should have done better never to let it begin; but what is to be done? Shall I speak to Aunt Julia or will you?"

"I don't care a brass farthing what Aunt Julia may believe or wish for," the young man returned. "You don't seem to understand what I mean. The intolerable thing to me is that I have been keeping up, or trying to keep up, a pretence with *you*. Upon my honour, I wouldn't have come here when you asked me if I hadn't thought it would be all right; but—it isn't all right, Veronica, and I ought to have known that it wouldn't be. I'm very sorry for it, that's all I can say. After all, I don't see that I am so very much to blame."

Veronica stood still, and wonderingly took stock of her agitated companion. His fatuity seemed almost incredible; yet if he did not mean that he was still solicitous lest her maiden affections should have been bestowed upon one who was unable to reciprocate them, it was difficult to comprehend what he did mean.

“What *are* you talking about?” she asked at length.

“I suppose you know,” he answered; “it is the old mistake, as you are pleased to call it. My idea was that, after having been away all this time, I should be able to do as you wished and behave as if nothing had happened; but really it’s more than flesh and blood can stand! We shall still be friends, I hope—why shouldn’t we?—but I can’t stay under your roof and eat your bread any longer. At any rate, not for the present. I can’t let you suppose that I have changed, or shall ever change. Joe has been favouring me with his advice this afternoon, and I believe he is right. I ought to propose to you in due form and be rejected in due form. Then it will be only the natural and proper thing for me to go away and remain away until—until you marry some other fellow.”

“I can’t imagine,” said Veronica loftily, “what reason Joe can have had for giving you such advice as that. Why is it necessary for you to be rejected, and why should it be necessary for you to propose to me?”

“Only because I love you,” returned Horace, turning rather red in the face (for he thought she might have been a little more kind to him, considering the painful predicament in which he was placed). “I take it that most people would consider that a sufficient reason.”

Veronica started away from his side with a quick gesture of dismay.

“Oh, Horace!” she exclaimed, “you don’t really mean that, do you? What a dreadfully unfortunate complication it would make if it were true!”

“Mean it!” he returned, a little resentfully. “As if

you didn't know that I meant it! Didn't you tell me so in London, when you said that you were disappointed in me, and that we were to consider the whole incident wiped out, and all that? Well, the long and the short of it is that I have done my best to oblige you, and that I haven't succeeded. You are the only woman in the world for me, Veronica, and you have told me already that if I were the only man in the world you wouldn't marry me. All you have to do now is to say that again, and I'll be off to-morrow morning. It is better for you and better for me that the truth should be put into plain words which can be repeated to other people. Then everybody will feel that there is no more to be said."

"But, indeed, there is a great deal more to be said," Veronica declared. "You have so taken me by surprise that I hardly know how or where to begin; and if I did not thoroughly trust you—however, I am sure I may trust you. It was I who made a mistake in London. I thought, when you spoke, that you were alluding to something altogether different. I thought—was I really wrong?—that the woman whom you would marry, if you could afford to marry her, was Dolly Cradock."

"Dolly Cradock!" ejaculated Horace scornfully; and the fact is that, at the moment, he had no recollection at all of those tender passages by the light of the moon which had been recorded against him.

"Yes; I certainly thought so, and I have based all my projects upon that presumption. She is coming here soon, and I may as well tell you now that I counted upon her to help me in bringing about my

heart's desire, which is to see you established where you ought to be—as master of all this land. Don't interrupt; I quite understand that you wouldn't accept it as a gift from me, but you might have been induced to accept it—at any rate, I hoped you would—as a sort of marriage-portion, without which you would have had to relinquish her. And now the relinquishing will have to be done by me, for I must give up my scheme. Oh! there is no need for you to tell me that. You would never have said that you loved me unless it had been a fact—only it is a most unfortunate and vexatious fact.”

Unquestionably it was, and Horace could not but feel it to be so, although he deemed it due to himself to explain quite clearly to Veronica that under no imaginable circumstances could he have consented to deprive her of an acre of the land upon which they were standing. He wound up a forcible statement to that effect by remarking—

“I don't know what extraordinary notions you can have taken into your head, or what you can have supposed that I have been driving at all this time; but I am glad, at least, that you don't doubt my love. Most girls would have suspected that I had been a humbug from first to last, and that the property was what I had had my eye upon all along; and I shouldn't have been entitled to reproach you if you had been like most girls. But, of course, you aren't,” he concluded with a sigh.

Veronica walked on for some twenty or thirty yards without speaking. “So this was what you meant me

to understand that day when you came to lunch in South Audley Street!" she ejaculated at length—and, somehow, the explanation was not wholly unpleasant to her. "What an ungrateful wretch you must have thought me!"

"Oh, no, Veronica; I didn't think that," he answered, laughing a little; "it was hardly a case for gratitude, was it? But I confess that I did think you were rather more severe with me than I had deserved. One can't very well help these things, you see, and as soon as ever I realised my danger, I tried to give you a wide berth. What, of course, I had no business to do was to come here; but, as I said before, I honestly believed it would be all right. And now I can't help agreeing with Joe that the most straightforward plan is to speak out. You refuse me, I take myself off, and there's an end of it."

"Did Joe assume that I should refuse you?" Veronica inquired.

"Well, no; to tell you the truth he didn't. He is only a boy, and you can no more expect him to look at the matter from our point of view than you can expect it of Aunt Julia and the General, who are old and more or less sensible. Naturally, he sees what they see—that our marriage would make things very comfortable all round."

"But that is just what I have always seen myself," observed Veronica reflectively. "I treated it as being out of the question because I was persuaded that you really cared for Dolly Cradock; but if you are sure—

quite sure—that it is not so, it would make a difference.”

“A difference!” gasped the young man, who could hardly believe his ears. “Oh, Veronica, is it possible—do you actually mean that you could care for me enough to marry me?”

Veronica smiled. “Why not?” she asked. “I care a great deal for you—more than I do for anybody else, I think, except, perhaps, Joseph. Ah! but stop a moment!” she continued, as Horace let his gun slip from his grasp and made a sudden attempt to seize her by both hands. “Hear me out before you make up your mind to accept all I have to offer. I am not in love with you; I don’t even know what the sensation means. Yes, you may look incredulous, but it is a fact that I have never been in love in my life, and although I dare say no man of my age is in the same case, probably a good many girls are. It would be better if I could say that I have lost my heart to you; but there is no use in saying what is not true. Can you be satisfied with a promise that I will try to be a good wife to you and that I like you well enough to be extremely happy with you?”

It is doubtful whether such terms have ever yet been rejected by an ardent lover. Who does not hope for the best and feel a slight complacent confidence in himself when he is assured that he has no rival? What might have given Horace pause was the reflection that the other party to this somewhat one-sided bargain was just the sort of person to disregard her own wishes and

interests; but one cannot think of everything at a moment's notice, and there was only room in his mind for an immense thankfulness. The woman whom he adored was willing to marry him!—what remained but to execute capers and indulge in demonstrations which had to be promptly checked?

Veronica said that there must not be anything of that kind, please. This was not a love-match—at any rate, she could not personally regard it in that light yet—and she hoped he would be kind enough not to alter his demeanour towards her in any way for the present.

“I am very glad that you care for me, and very much flattered,” she declared, “for the looking-glass tells me every morning how few attractions I have; but I can't make myself feel what I don't feel. You must have patience with me.”

Horace did not hesitate to affirm that his patience would be found equal to that of Job. It never occurred to him to ask why, under the circumstances, she should consent to become his wife; nor, oddly enough, did he make any allusion to the money and lands over which he would now exercise the rights of mastership.

In this last particular, however, his instincts were probably sound. Veronica knew very well that he was not actuated by sordid motives, and she would most likely have been hurt if he had thought it needful to enter a plea of “Not Guilty.”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE UNDESIRABLE GUEST.

A JOYOUS and exultant woman was Mrs. Mansfield that evening. She said to herself, and she took pen and paper henceforth for the purpose of saying through the post to Lord Chippenham, that she had known quite well all along how it would be. Nothing had been required except a little judicious management and masterly inaction, both of which excellent methods she ventured to think that she had employed with success. Veronica, no doubt, was a difficult subject for experiment, and Horace (by reason of his exaggerated conscientiousness) not so easy as the general run of young men; still they had both been made to walk along the track marked out for them by Providence, and, for all her natural modesty, she could not but recognise that Providence had found in her a valuable auxiliary. But in speaking to the bride-elect she was careful to abstain from any approach to boastfulness.

“You have made your own choice, my dear, and in my opinion you have chosen most wisely,” was all that she said, after the embracings appropriate to the occasion had been gone through. To which Veron-

ica responded demurely, "I was sure you would think so."

"No one knowing Horace Trevor as well as I do could help thinking so. Even poor dear Samuel did not contrive to make him turn out badly; although, with the restrictions that were placed upon him, he might have been expected to run as wild as the son of an Evangelical clergyman. You will have one of the very best husbands in England, Veronica, and I only hope you appreciate your good luck. The one thing that I should make so bold as to recommend—because it is always best that the husband should be master—is that you should transfer your estate to him on your wedding day. But of course you will do as you please about that."

Veronica fully intended to act in the manner suggested, and she had no doubt at all that her future lord and master would prove a kind one. To be sure, she was not in love with him, nor was she able to regard him with any special veneration; but these were trifles in comparison with the really important and most fortunate fact that he had become enamoured of her. To have turned her back upon so grand an opportunity of undoing the mischief wrought by a perverse testator would have been nothing short of criminal folly. Moreover, she was quite fond enough of Horace for all practical purposes. She did not intend to take her cue from him in matters of opinion, nor, she imagined, would he be so unreasonable as to expect that from her. On the contrary, it was far more likely that his opinion

would be modified and influenced by hers. But she was more than willing to make him a wedding present of her landed property, while she thought it would probably be as well to hand him over three fourths of her personalty into the bargain. Some proportion of her income it would be advisable for her to retain, on account of Joseph and of the good folks at Harbury Vale.

The good folks at Harbury Vale wrote to congratulate her in language which bore all the impress of heartfelt sincerity. "In every respect suitable and desirable," was the comment of the Reverend John, who added that nothing would give him greater satisfaction than to officiate at a ceremony for which no date had as yet been appointed. Mrs. Dimsdale, for her part, called Heaven to witness that what she had been hoping and praying for ever since her dear niece had first been removed from her care had come to pass. "And it was impossible to feel any confidence about it, because I knew that you would never be swayed in the least by considerations of expediency, dear, and that nothing would induce you to marry a man whom you do not love."

If this last assertion caused Veronica to wince for a moment, it did not shake her faith in the wisdom of the course to which she was committed, and she had the comfort of being cordially approved of by Joe, for whose judgment she had more respect than she had for that of her aunt.

Joe was about to return to Lincolnshire, having

reached the end of his holiday. Before leaving he thought it incumbent upon him to say a few serious words to Veronica, although he had up to that moment fallen in with what was evidently her wish, and had treated her engagement as a mere foregone conclusion and a subject for occasional good-humoured chaff.

“Don’t overdo it, you know,” said he. “It’s all very fine, this refusal to make a fool of yourself and this determination to behave just as before; but Trevor, you must bear in mind, is a matter-of-fact sort of chap, and if you go on impressing upon him at every turn that you have only a lukewarm sort of affection for him, who knows whether he may not end by believing you.”

“But he does believe me!” Veronica declared. “Not, of course, that my affection for him is lukewarm, which it isn’t, but that it is not the kind of affection which would ever lead me to make a fool of myself. That is perfectly understood between us, and we are quite satisfied that it should be so.”

“So you are pleased to say; but you see, my dear Veronica, I have had the advantage, which Trevor hasn’t had, of knowing you from your youth up, and you can’t deceive me. I suppose it is just possible that you may be deceiving yourself; but the real truth is that if Trevor were to throw you over now, you would be inconsolable. Consequently, as I said before, I wouldn’t overdo it if I were you.”

Veronica was much amused by this solemn warning; yet subsequent self-examination revealed to her the fact

that it would go a deal against the grain with her to surrender Horace to somebody else—to Dolly Cradock, for instance—and this was really quite a pleasant discovery. It did not, indeed, show that she was in love; but it seemed to show that she was by no means so indifferent to her privileges as she had fancied herself.

In truth, Horace was so scrupulous in refraining from any assertion of his own privileges, so amenable, so willing to accept whatever position she might be pleased to assign him, that common gratitude compelled her to favour him with a larger share of her company than she might have granted had he been less diffident. Their conversations were scarcely those of lovers, but their conduct appeared to lookers-on to be all that is customary in the case of two persons so situated, and they were very happy together, discussing plans for the future and arranging how Horace was to get himself placed on the Commission of the Peace as soon as possible and create other occupations for himself, since he had no ambition to enter Parliament. By tacit mutual consent Dolly Cradock's name was not introduced into these colloquies; but one morning the post brought Veronica a communication from that young lady, who had by no means forgotten the invitation which she had accepted, and who gave notice of her imminent arrival. Veronica put this missive into her pocket and went out to the stable-yard in search of Horace, who was generally to be found there after breakfast. When she joined him he was anxiously examining the back of the dun horse, which had been slightly touched on the

previous day, and it was some minutes before she could secure his undivided attention. This gave her time to reflect how different his tastes were from her own and what a much more intelligent interest her correspondent would have taken in the information which he imparted to her than she could affect. But, after all, he knew that as well as she did, and certainly he did not look in the least overjoyed when she mentioned casually, as they walked away, that Dolly Cradock was coming.

“Dolly Cradock!” he ejaculated, with a dropped jaw. “What on earth does she want here?”

“Well, I asked her, you know,” answered Veronica. “Don’t you remember my telling you that I had asked her?”

“Oh, yes; I think I do recollect your having said something about it; but I hoped—at least, I thought it was only a sort of vague general invitation.”

“It was as precise as possible; and she means to hunt, and she expects you to mount her, too. I forget whether I told you that.”

“No, you didn’t tell me that. Well, she can have the bay; there isn’t anything else for her. One comfort is that she does understand horses and that she can be trusted not to kill them—which is more than can be said for nine women out of ten. All the same, I rather wish she wasn’t going to favour us with the light of her countenance. I suppose she has heard—eh?”

“Oh, yes; she has heard,” answered Veronica, laughing a little. “It seems to me that every man, woman, and child in England has heard by this time.

Anyhow, it is no fault of Aunt Julia's if a single person remains in ignorance."

"And what does she say about it?" the young man inquired, with a somewhat apprehensive glance at his betrothed.

"Nothing worth repeating," replied Veronica—for the truth was that Miss Cradock's comments had savoured of impertinence, and that she had been the least bit in the world put out by them. "What is there to be said to people who are engaged to be married? Anybody who could invent an original remark, appropriate to the occasion, might dispose of it at a profit, I should think."

Horace did not press his question; but, after a pause, he observed meditatively, "Dolly Cradock isn't a bad sort in her way; only I can't imagine that you and she will ever hit it off together."

"Perhaps we shall not try very hard," Veronica returned; "it is rather more important just now that you should hit it off with her—and I know that you can do that. In fact, I was so certain of it a short time ago that I fully intended you to marry her and live happily ever afterwards."

Horace uttered an exclamation of reproachful protest; but he did not feel quite comfortable, nor was he at all eager to enlarge upon this particular topic. Sundry episodes recurred to his memory—episodes which he had cheerfully dismissed to the limbo of forgotten and more or less deplorable things, just as a penitent who has been absolved by his father-confessor ceases to vex

himself over whitewashed peccadilloes. But, now that Horace came to think of it, it did not seem so certain that he had received absolution. He might even be made to ask for it, which would be most unpleasant. Why, he wondered, had he been such an infernal ass; and to this query echo only returned the usual unmeaning and uncivil response.

However, he really might have known Dolly Cradock better than to fear that she would put forward claims which could not be upheld for a moment. As he himself had said, she was "not a bad sort," and his esteem for her was much enhanced by her demeanour towards him when she arrived. For she shook him cordially by the hand, gave him joy, and appeared to have retained no inopportune reminiscences of riverside scenes or moonlit gardens. She only indulged in one remark of which the taste struck him as a little doubtful.

"You are prepared for a few days with the hounds and me while your liberty lasts, I hope," she said, standing in the hall, where a group of Mrs. Mansfield's guests had formed itself round her. "What are you going to do about hunting after you have entered the estate of holy matrimony? Will Veronica make you drop it, or will she insist upon trying to follow you? It has generally to be the one thing or the other in cases of this kind, I notice."

Veronica hastened to reply that it was going to be neither the one thing nor the other in her case; and then, as it was time to dress for dinner, Miss Cradock was conducted upstairs to her bedroom.

A few of the neighbours had been bidden to dinner that evening, and a good many more had been invited to join an informal dance at a later hour. Mrs. Mansfield had opined that something ought to be done in the way of mild festivity; so this entertainment had been decided upon, Veronica assenting—as, indeed, she was always ready to assent to any such proposition of her aunt's—although dancing did not happen to be a form of relaxation which had any charms for her personally. Of late years dancing has been going rapidly out of fashion, and good dancers, as some of us who are no longer young used to know to our sorrow, were never at any time too plentiful in this favoured land. Still, there have always been a few here and there, and of this select band Dolly Cradock was a survivor. As for Horace, he could get along well enough when he had a capable, resolute partner and plenty of space; so that he quite distinguished himself on the occasion of Miss Dimsdale's first effort at county hospitality. If it was not with his arm round Miss Dimsdale's waist that he earned this well-merited distinction, he was in no way to blame for that. Veronica walked through two sets of Lancers and spent the rest of the evening in conversation, as did the majority of those whom she was exerting herself to entertain. Why, she reasonably asked, should one make oneself and everybody else uncomfortable by attempting feats which one is powerless to perform?

Why indeed! That was just what Dolly Cradock happened to be thinking at the time, and she did not

acquit her hostess of having erred prodigiously in the above-named respect, notwithstanding Veronica's abstention from performances in which she herself excelled. Dolly flattered herself that she was no mean judge of men, and she foresaw that nothing save the most extreme discomfort could come to her poor friend Horace Trevor from the alliance which it had pleased other people to arrange for him.

But she was kind enough not to tell him so. She had sat next to him at dinner, and her behaviour had been of a nature to reassure him completely. Dolly may or may not have been a good judge of men; but it is certain that Horace was a very poor judge of women, or he never would have jumped to the conclusion that his perfidy had been so readily condoned. As it was, he laughed inwardly at his vanished apprehensions, saying to himself that of course there had been no serious meaning in what had taken place some months before, and that Dolly had probably never given the subject a second thought. He therefore felt free to dance with her as often as she pleased—which was the whole evening through.

“This is what I call thoroughly jolly!” he remarked, during an interval of violent exercise. “An empty room, a first-rate floor, music not so bad, and the very best partner I have ever had in my life—I don't know what more one could want.”

“Poor little man!” said Dolly compassionately; “it doesn't take a great deal to make him happy, does it? Not that I shouldn't be fairly well contented myself if

this place belonged to me—or was going to belong to me. I suppose, by the way, that it *is* going to belong to you?”

“Oh, well, it is going to be my home anyhow,” answered Horace hesitatingly.

“H’m!—the dogs and cats of the establishment might say as much as that. One can’t expect to get everything in his world, though, and I daresay you will be kindly treated so long as you behave yourself. You are a good deal better off, at all events, than some unfortunate fellows who have had to marry for money and who have been driven to espouse shrewish old vixens.”

“But I am not marrying for money,” Horace felt constrained to return; “I would have married Veronica—that is, if she would have had me and if I could have afforded it—under any circumstances.”

“Honour bright?” asked Dolly, raising her eyebrows slightly.

He nodded, and was rather pleased with himself for having had the courage to be so explicit; although as a matter of fact, it would have been both wiser and more considerate on his part to let his neighbour’s insinuations pass unheeded.

“That is capital!” she returned, with much cheerfulness. “Now it only remains to drink your health in the best liquor obtainable upon the premises. Take me into the supper-room and I’ll do it.”

It was in the supper-room that Mrs. Mansfield’s attention was first drawn to what she could not but regard as the manœuvres of a young lady who had not

been invited to Broxham by any wish of hers. She was not best pleased with what she saw, and later in the evening she frankly said as much to Veronica.

“I can’t conceive,” she remarked with some impatience, “why you should have wanted to have that girl here; I don’t like her ways of going on at all. She was drinking champagne out of tumblers after all the people had gone away, and I should not be surprised to hear that she was in the smoking-room with the men now.”

Veronica replied that she had seen Miss Cradock, who at the time presented every appearance of being perfectly sober, into her bedroom; and then, as Mrs. Mansfield still looked dissatisfied, she inquired smilingly, “Are you afraid of her eloping with Horace?”

That—or something like that—was precisely what Mrs. Mansfield was afraid of; but of course it would not have done to say so. Therefore, she merely shrugged her shoulders and observed: “Well, I hope you have not asked her to stay more than a week, at the outside. For poor Lady Louisa’s sake, I have always tried to be kind to her; but really there is never any knowing what she will do next, and I can’t say that I think her a desirable guest.”

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. MOSTYN GETS HIS FEET WET IN VAIN.

DOLLY CRADOCK, despite the not unmerited character which she enjoyed for being a gay and wild young woman, had a head upon her shoulders quite as well furnished with brains as the majority of heads, and the last thing but one that she would ever have thought of doing would have been to elope with anybody, while the very last would have been to elope with a man who had only five hundred a year, or thereabouts, to live upon. Consequently, Horace was in no immediate danger of being spirited away from Broxham and honourable engagements by her. At the same time, she did not relish the sensation of being jilted, nor did she appreciate the honesty with which one who had practically avowed himself her lover the other day now coolly informed her that he was the lover of his destined bride. It did not even seem to her to be proved that the assertion was honest, while she was perfectly certain that it had no business to be. Horace Trevor in love with a blue-stocking who did not care for sport in any form, and who knew nothing of the set to which he had always belonged, nor of its ways!—the thing

was preposterous upon the face of it. If he was not a rather impudent sort of liar, he must be a portentous fool, and in either case self-respect seemed to render an aggressive line of policy excusable.

Aggressive measures, however, were not assumed by Miss Dolly with any ill-humour, open or latent. All she did at the outset was to take rather more pains than usual to be agreeable to everybody, while exhibiting in a strong light the accomplishments which she possessed and which Veronica did not. And for this purpose the scene and circumstances were highly propitious. If Dolly Cradock shone anywhere it was in a country-house, and her value in that capacity had always been recognised by anxious hostesses, many of whom are apt to be hard put to it to find entertainment for the friends who honour them with their company. Mrs. Mansfield, to be sure, did not recognise Dolly's value at all, but that did not prevent Mrs. Mansfield's guests from finding her great fun, nor could it be denied that she was wonderfully successful in enlivening a party which might have been a trifle dull without her. Some people are not amused by comic songs or daring recitations (Veronica, for her misfortune, was one of them); still, the fact remains that most people are, and Miss Cradock was an adept in that particular branch of art. Moreover, she could ride any horse that you liked to put her up on, and she could shoot with almost unflinching precision. The latter acquirement might be called unfeminine if anything were unfeminine in these days; but nothing is, and Dolly, to use her own graceful ex-

pression, could "wipe the eye" of Horace's most self-satisfied young companions.

"I do not know," Mrs. Mansfield said to her niece with quiet exasperation, "whether Horace proposes to buy a double-barrelled gun for you; but you seem to be anxious that he should be attended by one of your own sex when he goes out shooting; and, perhaps, all things considered, two would be better than one."

"The pheasants would think so, no doubt, if I were the second lady," answered Veronica, laughing; "but I am sure Horace wouldn't, and I am even more than sure that I shouldn't. What would happen to me and to those around me if I were entrusted with firearms, I shudder to imagine! Now, Dolly, I believe, is a perfectly safe neighbour in or out of covert."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" said Mrs. Mansfield. "I must confess that I should not feel quite so confident about that in your place; but I suppose I had better not interfere."

"I don't see how you can," returned Veronica serenely. "You can hardly forbid Dolly to shoot, and you will certainly never persuade me to endanger the lives of unoffending fellow-creatures in that way."

Even if she had been a little jealous of Dolly, she would have been far too proud to adopt the precautions at which her aunt hinted; but why should she be jealous? Jealousy implies the existence of sentiments from which she was happily exempt. Horace was perfectly welcome to select the associates whom he

preferred, and it would have been a very bad beginning to grudge him the liberty which she had every intention of claiming for herself. For all that, she could not help being conscious of the inferiority which it was Dolly's amiable object to render obvious to her and others. Inferiority is, after all, a relative term—as most terms must needs be in a world of compromise—and who is to say whether a learned personage who cannot handle a gun ought to rank above or below an unlettered crack shot? The standard must be fixed by common consent? Perhaps so; but the verdict of the majority will not convince the minority, and sometimes the important matter is to have the minority—be it but a minority of one—on your side. Every now and then Veronica was forced to admit to herself, with some misgivings, that the future lord of Broxham had chosen a wife perilously unlike himself in all her habits and predilections.

Miss Cradock made no secret of the fact that such was her personal opinion.

“What I can't in any way account for,” she frankly told Veronica, “is your having consented to run in double harness with Horace Trevor. One understands his wanting to marry you. Without flattery—and I am not much of a hand at flattering anybody—there is nothing so very astonishing in that. But why, when you might have remained your own mistress and taken your own line, you should have deliberately yoked yourself to a man with whom, as far as I can discover, you haven't a solitary taste in common is one of those mys-

teries which I should like to hear explained—if you didn't mind explaining it.”

Veronica said she was afraid it must continue to be a mystery, and suggested that the generality of marriages are apt to be mysterious to bystanders; but in her own heart she acknowledged that the candid Dolly spoke with the voice of common-sense. Mutual love is a sufficient reply to all objections; but in the absence of mutual love, what have married people to fall back upon save community of interests? Thus it began to dawn upon her that she had committed herself to an enterprise which might not prove altogether simple in the working out.

But of those incipient doubts and hesitations she was careful to breathe never a word to Horace, whom it took some little time to discover that she was not in quite such good spirits as she had been. He himself was so entirely contented with the existing state of things, so relieved to find that Dolly cheerfully acquiesced therein and so grateful to her for her acquiescence that it did not occur to him to trace any connection between her advent and Veronica's altered looks. He only thought, with a sudden twinge of compunction, that he had perhaps been rather less assiduous of late in his attentions to his betrothed, and he innocently asked whether anything of that kind was the matter.

“Because if it is,” he added, “I'll chuck the shooting at once. They don't really need me now, and I'd a thousand times rather be with you. Only, you know, I didn't want to be a bore, and I thought, if you had any

wish for my company, you would be sure to say so. I ain't much, but I'm better than nobody, and now that I come to think of it, it must be precious dull work for you, sitting at home all day with the dowagers."

Veronica laughed and thanked him, but said that he must not imagine himself indispensable. The dowagers, she declared, gave her no trouble at all. Besides, she really saw scarcely anything of them, being left, for the most part, to her own company, of which she had all her life been accustomed to enjoy a large measure.

"And even if I were tired of myself, I should have a treat to look forward to," she continued; "for I am glad to say that Mr. Mostyn is coming to us for a few days."

"Oh, *he's* coming, is he?" said Horace, without any enthusiasm. "Do you know, Veronica, I don't much like that chap."

"I am quite aware of it," answered Veronica, still smiling. "It is your misfortune, not your fault, that you don't, and although I am sorry for it, I won't attempt to convert you. I suppose it is scarcely possible that we should like the same people. If it comes to that, I don't know that I very much like Dolly Cradock."

Horace nodded reflectively. "I shouldn't expect you to like her," he agreed—"shouldn't very much wish it either. All the same, she suits me well enough. She is—how shall I put it?—a companionable sort of girl, you see."

"Exactly: she is companionable for those whom she suits, and so is Mr. Mostyn. When one doesn't happen

to suit people, their companionship has to be dispensed with, that's all."

Horace thought this a little unkind; but he held his peace and went his way, saying to himself that all women—even Veronica—were subject to occasional fits of fractiousness, when the best plan was to leave them alone.

Mr. Mostyn, on his arrival, had no such reason to complain of his hostess, who showed herself duly sensible of the honour conferred upon her. It was not in everybody's house that the great man cared to put himself to the inconvenience of staying, and even Mrs. Mansfield (although she would never have known that he was great unless everybody had told her so) understood that special orders must be given to make him comfortable. Accordingly, a little sitting-room was prepared for his private use, in case a fit of inspiration should suddenly attack him, copies of his latest works were placed in conspicuous positions upon the drawing-room table, and his fellow guests were implored just to glance through them, if they had not done so already.

But Cyril Mostyn was not really a conceited man—or, at least, if he knew his own value, he did not in the least expect it to be recognised by the average inmates of an English country house, and he was very well able to adapt himself to his company. Although he had never cared for field sports himself, he could talk easily and by no means ignorantly to those who did; so that he won some grudging approval even from Dolly Craddock, to whom it pleased him to address a liberal share

of his conversation, notwithstanding her disrespectful bluntness.

“You are not quite such a muff as I took you for,” she was kind enough to tell him. “You seem to have heard things, if you haven’t seen them; and I daresay you would be different if you could.”

“You may take that as an indisputable fact,” answered Mr. Mostyn suavely.

“Personally,” continued Dolly, “I don’t see the good of being a man at all when one neither hunts nor shoots nor plays games; but, after all, I suppose there must be a good many like you.”

“Not among the educated classes, I believe. Still, there are a few, and we serve a number of useful, unobtrusive purposes. May I ask whether your just disdain extends to women who neither hunt nor shoot nor play games?”

Dolly shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t think it is a particularly good plan to mate them with men who are really men, if that is what you mean,” she answered. “But needs must when the devil drives! Situated as he is, poor Horace Trevor had hardly any alternative, you see.”

“But Miss Dimsdale—had she no alternative?”

“Ah! that’s another pair of shoes. If I had been in Veronica’s, I should have done what she has done willingly enough; but as she is wearing them herself, I expect they will begin to pinch her before long. She may even have to kick them off—who knows?”

“Well, yes; she may. When is the wedding to take place?”

“In January, I believe, bar accidents. Oh, the wedding will take place right enough. I was only wondering how long they would manage to live together afterwards.”

Mostyn smiled and changed the subject. He had a fastidious ear, and he was no more anxious to hear the things which he knew Dolly was going to say than he would have been to listen to the hideous discords of an itinerant musician. As, moreover, he had already obtained from her all the information that he was likely to obtain, he had no further reason for monopolising so fascinating a lady, and he soon resigned her to younger and more congenial company.

But he had a word or two to say to Veronica—a word or two which he felt that he must say, as her friend and as an adviser who possessed a certain amount of influence over her. On the following afternoon, therefore, he asked her to take him for a walk round her dominions, and she was all the more ready to comply with this request because she knew very well that she would have to explain herself to him sooner or later. For some time past there had been frosts and dry weather, under the malign influence of which the ground had been growing harder and harder, but now the wind had found its way round to the west, the sky was obscured by low, level clouds with a promise of rain in them which had not begun to fall yet, and Miss Cradock had at last gone off to see what the hunting

of the neighbourhood was like, mounted on the little bay horse and escorted by the bay horse's owner. Veronica said—

“Isn't it a comfort to think that everybody is provided with amusement now—that we can do just what we like until dinner-time!”

“It would be,” answered Mostyn, who was walking beside her across the softened turf of the park, “if there were any imaginable need for falling back upon negative comforts; but why deliberately create such a situation for yourself?”

“I haven't created it for myself, it has been created for me,” answered Veronica quickly. And then: “Oh, I know you think I am doing a foolish thing, but just consider for a moment! Feeling as I do about it all, shouldn't I have been infinitely more foolish to resist my obvious destiny?”

She went on to relate exactly how it had come about that her destiny had been rendered obvious to her, disguising nothing, telling what she believed to be the simple truth, and affirming that she was in no way dissatisfied therewith. The comfort to which she looked forward was, she declared, far from being negative: it was positive and it was assured.

“You think so?” returned her counsellor, with a melancholy, sceptical smile; “you really think that you will be comfortable, spending your whole life with a man whom you not only do not love—I grant you that that in itself does not exclude all possibility of comfort—but to whom you will always have to suit

your conversation, if you want him to understand what you mean? He is in love with you? That may be; but the emotion of which you are thinking is invariably and inevitably transient, and at the end of—shall we say two years?—you will be wishing with all your heart that you had left him to his natural affinity in the person of Miss Dolly Cradock.”

“I don’t think I shall; but, anyhow, the thing couldn’t have been done. For, whatever his feelings may be two years hence, he does not wish to marry Dolly now; and unless he had wished to marry her, and had allowed himself to be over-persuaded by her (which was what I rather counted upon) he would never have accepted the property from me.”

“I may be very dense,” remarked Mr. Mostyn; “but I cannot see why it is essential that this property should pass into his hands. Setting one calamity against another, it strikes me that Mr. Horace Trevor’s comparative poverty would be a somewhat less terrible thing than the sacrifice of your entire existence. And that, you may be sure, is what your marriage will mean. The young man is a decent enough young man; but you cannot possibly imbue him with your tastes, so that your one and only chance of happiness will be to assimilate his.”

“If that is so, I must try,” said Veronica unflinchingly.

“It certainly is so, and my belief in your self-sacrificing capacity is so strong that I daresay you will end by accomplishing the feat. Only I cannot at all understand the necessity for it.”

Since he did not understand, in spite of its having been quite clearly explained to him, there was no more to be said. A good deal more was, however, said in the course of a long, devious walk, and Veronica would have felt more grateful to her mentor than she did if she had only known how very much Mr. Cyril Mostyn disliked getting his feet wet. As it was, she felt rather disappointed in him and vexed with him—especially as she could not but admit that he was, to a certain extent, right. Theoretically, of course, there must be give and take between married people; but practically, the wife must give and the husband take, and in cases where the contrary system is adopted the wife is apt to entertain uncommonly little respect for her husband. The moral of which was that the future Mrs. Horace Trevor had better learn to ride forthwith.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOLLY IN HER GLORY.

HORACE TREVOR'S little bay horse (for that the little bay horse belonged to Horace and not to Veronica, who had paid legacy duty in respect of his value, was now no longer disputed) was one of those animals which, without being in the least vicious, required a good deal of riding. He had, as some horses and most ponies have, an exaggerated sense of humour, and was past-master of all those well-known equine practical jokes by means of which the unwary rider can be suddenly exhibited to his friends in the most unexpected and mirth-provoking attitudes. His favourite trick (when prolonged bucking had failed) was to swerve and rear simultaneously, a manœuvre which often resulted in a satisfying success; but he had many other strings to his bow, and as soon as he had accomplished his object he would stand still, instead of attempting to get away, cock his ears, and gaze at his prostrate adversary with an air of puzzled concern, as if wondering what in the world the man could be about, while he was inwardly shaken by a silent horse-laugh. Horace, who knew his little ways—had, indeed, only too good

reason to know them—would never have thought of describing him as a suitable mount for a lady; but, on the other hand, to have described him as unsuitable would have been to render Dolly's intention of riding him unalterable, so he merely warned her of what she had to expect and awaited results.

These were of a nature to fill him with genuine admiration. On the way to the meet the little bay horse played every card that he possessed, and played each one of them in vain. Whether it is easier or more difficult to stick to a side-saddle than to a cross-saddle is a question as to which opinions differ, but certain it is that not many men could have maintained their position upon that mischievous beast's back as firmly as Miss Cradock maintained hers, while fewer still would have kept their temper as she did under extreme provocation. She did not lose it even when she saw that hostilities were inevitable; she only remarked, "Well, I think this has gone on long enough now," and settled down to a struggle, out of which she came completely victorious. For some minutes she had to sit tight and use her hunting-crop and spur with considerable vigour; but, in the end, her opponent, finding that he could not get rid of her, and being at heart a good-humoured creature, shook his head, acknowledged himself beaten, and bore no malice. After that, there was no further trouble with him.

"I must say for you that you *can* ride!" was Horace's flattering comment upon the issue of the battle.

“Didn’t you know that before?” returned Dolly composedly.

But in truth she was not ill-pleased that he admired her, nor unconscious of being admirable. If she wanted him to draw comparisons—and, naturally enough, she did—the occasion could not have been better suited to her purpose. Was it to be expected of her that she should neglect to make the most of it? Moreover, Fortune favoured her so far that a fox was found in the first covert drawn, and gave them a capital run of an hour and twenty minutes before being killed in the open. Horace, whom she followed, was with them from start to finish, and although she subsequently thought fit to pooh-pooh the country, as presenting no difficulties worth speaking of, it had not been everybody who had cared to ride as straight as she and her pilot had done. It is true that her mount was both quick and clever, and that he seldom (unless he was interfered with) indulged in eccentricities while hounds were running; still, he bore an unenviable reputation, and his rider was made the recipient of many well-deserved compliments.

The Master, a rather crabbed old fellow, who, as a rule, hated women in the hunting-field, addressed her with what for him was quite unwonted civility, after instructing the huntsman to give her the brush.

“Very glad to have met you at last, Miss Dimsdale,” said he. “Hope we shall often see you out with us now. You’re evidently accustomed to something better in the way of sport than we can show you in

this shooting county; still, we do our best—we do our best.”

And then he looked as if some acknowledgment of the very fair sport they had already enjoyed would be welcome and appropriate. But Miss Cradock was nothing if not sincere.

“Oh, I knew it couldn't be up to much,” she answered coolly. “But I have seen worse, and I am rather agreeably disappointed so far. I am not Miss Dimsdale, by-the-way—no such luck!”

“Oh!—beg your pardon, I'm sure!” returned the old gentleman, rather taken aback; and perhaps for a moment he was not sorry that this very self-possessed young woman was not the permanent neighbour for whom he had taken her. But he speedily recovered his good-humour, and after Horace had introduced him to Dolly by her proper name, he remarked with a gruff laugh: “I wouldn't for the world breathe a disparaging word about the bride-elect, Trevor; but, upon my life! now that I have seen Miss Cradock go as she has gone to-day, I feel more than half inclined to echo her words when she told me that she wasn't the lady in question, and say, ‘No such luck!’”

If this was not precisely a happy speech, he thought it was, and he rode off, chuckling contentedly, while Dolly shot a demure, amused glance at Horace, who looked the other way. Personally, he did not in the least wish Veronica to hunt, being well aware that she had qualities which more than atoned for certain deficiencies; yet no doubt many people would think it a

pity that she did not, and he experienced a sort of annoyed, vicarious shame on her behalf when he had to explain to various farmers and others who had fallen into the same mistake as the M. F. H. had done, that his future wife was not a sportswoman.

Well, if she had been the keenest sportswoman that ever sat in a saddle, she would have had few opportunities of gratifying her tastes in a neighbourhood where vulpecide was openly and shamelessly practised. This, at least—or something equivalent to it—was what Horace, being in a quarrelsome mood, saw fit to affirm before the afternoon was over. For two coverts had been drawn blank, although the hounds had been taken thither by invitation, and the light was beginning to fail, and whether it was worth while to persevere under such dispiriting conditions seemed to be quite an open question. Dolly, when it was put to her, answered at once in the negative.

“How many miles home?” she asked. “Eight or nine, I suppose? Then let’s be off. We shall do no more good to-day, and you look so sulky that the only treatment for you is take you home and put you in the corner.”

Horace signified his entire willingness to be taken home, and apologised for looking sulky; but she laughed and declared that he must be forgiven. “One has one’s little reasons for sulking every now and then, and I can guess what some of yours are.”

“Well,” said Horace, “I do think it is rather too bad for a man to write and say that he wants his coverts drawn on a particular day, and then——”

“ Oh, it’s a great deal too bad, and I am sure you will never do such a wicked thing when you have coverts of your own ; only that doesn’t happen to be the cause of your black looks, my friend. Come, be reasonable ! You can’t have coverts or anything else in this world without paying a certain price, and as you didn’t think the price too high when you concluded your bargain it doesn’t become you to murmur now. The neighbouring hawbucks won’t appreciate Mrs. Trevor ; but, after all, what does that matter when you yourself appreciate her so profoundly ? ”

Horace was not so much struck by the impertinence of this speech as astonished at Dolly’s penetration in having read his thoughts. “ How did you know that I had anything of that sort in my mind ? ” he asked wonderingly.

“ I am so awfully clever that I divined it. Well, I suppose I ought to be sorry for you ; but I can’t say that I am. Why should you expect to be allowed to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds ? ”

“ I don’t expect any such thing, and I certainly don’t want anyone to be sorry for me, ” returned Horace, with unwonted acrimony. “ My own humble opinion is that most fellows would envy me. What more could a man ask for than to be accepted by the girl whom he loves and who, as he very well knows, is a thousand times too good for him ? I can assure you that I wouldn’t change places with any man in England ! ”

He thought it as well to put things strongly, be-

cause Dolly really deserved no mercy after having been so impertinent as to pity him; but she merely remarked, without any apparent annoyance, "Ah! so you are pleased to assert."

"Well, it is the truth."

"Is it? But then you don't invariably stick to the truth, do you? I seem to remember your having told me something which one hopes wasn't the truth just before you left London in such a hurry."

This was horribly unpleasant; and the worst of it was that she was absolutely within her right in saying unpleasant things. Her taste might be open to question; but that did not alter the fact that she was entitled to reproach him, nor could he deny that he had behaved badly to her. For a moment, as he splashed along by her side through miry byways and between black hedgerows, he thought of reminding her how she herself had decreed that the episode to which she alluded was to be forgotten with all possible despatch; but that seemed an ignoble plea to take shelter behind, and he preferred to say boldly—

"I'll tell you the truth now, anyhow. I was down on my luck that evening; I was pretty angry with myself, and—and other people; I felt sure that Veronica would never look at me; and so——"

"And so you thought you would make love to me, as a *pis-aller*? How flattering that would be, if it were really the truth! But what preserves me from tumbling off my horse with shame and mortification is that I don't believe a word of it."

Horace drew in his breath and gazed piteously round the darkening horizon, as if in search of some adequate rejoinder; but neither earth nor sky nor any of the living creatures that came within his ken could help him out of his dilemma—which was, indeed, an unusual one. To convince a lady that you have always adored her, although you may not always have appeared to do so, is a task which may be approached with some reasonable degree of confidence; but to persuade her (when she is not inclined to take your word for it) that, notwithstanding your having once declared your love for her, you never entertained any sentiment of the kind is not so much a difficult undertaking as a species of brutality which cannot even be attempted. Horace, therefore, hung his head and held his peace, while Dolly resumed composedly—

“No; I don’t believe it; and, as I don’t, why shouldn’t I allow myself the satisfaction of saying so? You need not feel in the least alarmed, though. *Je suis bonne diablesse*; I don’t care to make mischief; and no indiscreet revelations of mine shall prevent you from leading your chaste Veronica to the altar. Only I should have had a rather higher opinion of you if you had not tried to humbug me.”

Horace still felt himself hopelessly unequal to the occasion; all he could do was to mutter feebly: “I ain’t a humbug—never was called a humbug before in my life!”

“You are called by that name now, and if you don’t like it—you can do the other thing,” returned his com-

panion pitilessly. "In justice to you I'll allow you credit for having tried to humbug yourself; but it won't do, dear boy, and I strongly suspect that you know it won't do. Take example by me, and look things straight in the face. If I had been the owner of Broxham it is as certain as anything can be that you would have asked me to marry you; and if you had been the owner of Broxham it is not at all unlikely that I should have consented to marry you. But Broxham belongs to somebody else, and the consequence is that other arrangements have to be made the best of. By all means make the best of them; I only beg of you not to pretend that your match is a love-match. Moreover, as a mere friendly suggestion, I should advise you not to turn sulky because your future wife is not all that you would like her to be."

Horace was so far provoked into forgetting his good manners as to ejaculate emphatically, "She is everything that I should like her to be—absolutely everything! And that I am prepared to swear."

"My dear friend, why perjure yourself? If you swore until you were black in the face, you would not alter hard facts. Personally, I like Veronica very well, a great deal better than I like most of the girls of my acquaintance—who are a baddish lot, between you and me—but when you ask me to believe that you will ever be quite comfortable or at your ease with a woman who doesn't know how to ride, you ask for a little more credulity than I have in stock just at present. If it comes to that, there is her side of the question too, you

know. Most likely she will never be quite comfortable with a man who reads nothing except the sporting papers and the Racing Calendar.”

Now, it so chanced that this highly plausible forecast of probabilities fell upon an ear which it had not been intended to reach quite so directly. After having accompanied Mr. Mostyn back to the house and left him to go upstairs and change his socks, Veronica had wandered forth again, partly because she was restless and partly because she wished to be alone, and so it had come to pass that, strolling further and further in the twilight, she had arrived at the high wooden palings by which her park was encircled. Here she paused and, leaning against the trunk of a rugged elm, set to work to cross-examine herself. This, if undertaken in a conscientious spirit, is always a long business, and she was still far from having reached the end of it when the sound of horses' hoofs in the distance caused her to desist. Nearer and nearer it came, and when she was able to make sure that two horses were approaching her at a walking pace, she drew correct inferences. Her intention was to hail the returning equestrians, who must needs pass within a few yards of her, and inquire what sport they had had; but for the reason above mentioned, her intention was not carried into effect. It was no fault of hers that Dolly Cradock's voice was clear and penetrating, nor could she help overhearing something which it was not altogether agreeable to her to overhear. Having thus unintentionally played the eavesdropper, she did not feel that

the moment would be well chosen for breaking in upon an interesting discussion, so she let them ride on, and slipped noiselessly away across the grass, in order that she might not catch Horace's reply.

For the rest, she could easily imagine what his reply would be, and, since she did not doubt his loyalty, there was no need to speculate upon the subject. What seemed to her to be a far more important question to consider was whether Mr. Mostyn and Dolly Cradock were not, from their respective points of view, entirely in the right. Oil and water will not mix; a sporting man and a woman imbued with literary tastes, as well as heterodox ideas respecting *feræ naturæ*, can hardly be said to have been made for one another, and perhaps, as a general thing, they ought to be warned against attempting to set up house together. But in this particular instance there were complications. The sporting man really did love the literary woman; it was so expedient as to be almost essential that he should marry her, and she herself felt it to be her clear duty to marry him, if she could by any means reconcile it with her sense of what was right to do so. Moreover—but this may have been irrelevant and illogical—she was conscious of a strong disinclination to abandon her scheme at Dolly's bidding. "It is for me that he cares, not for her," she said to herself, "and he knows quite well what I am and what I am not. He has made his choice with his eyes open."

In this way the resolution which Veronica had formed earlier in the afternoon took firmer and more

definite shape—a shape so definite, indeed, that she greatly astonished her betrothed by taking him aside, after dinner, to say abruptly: “Horace, I want you to teach me to ride.”

“With all the pleasure in life,” he answered; “the only thing is that you will have to get a horse before you can begin.”

“Couldn’t I have the one that Dolly was riding to-day?”

“The bay?—oh, Lord, no! he would kill you to a certainty. There are precious few women, I can tell you, whom I should like to see upon that little brute’s back.”

“I suppose there are not many women who ride as well as she does; still, I am not afraid of horses, and there is no reason why I should not learn. Anything can be learnt.”

“Yes—in time,” answered Horace; “but one does not pick up the horse that one wants every day. However, I’ll look out for you.”

“That means that I may have to wait weeks or months, whereas I want to make a start at once. Couldn’t I begin upon your big horse, if you won’t let me have the other?”

Horace looked dubious. “The dun is quiet enough,” he answered; “a child might ride him in a snaffle—that is, if the child didn’t mind being run away with for a bit—and all you would have to do would be to sit upon his back. But, as far as I know, he has never carried a lady, and you can see for yourself that that

isn't his mission in life. What has made you take this sudden fancy into your head, Veronica? Would you mind waiting until—until we are married and settled down? Then we could go to work systematically, you know, if you still wished it."

"I will ride the dun horse to-morrow," said Veronica decisively. "I am sure I shall come to no harm if you go with me and tell me what to do, and I should very much mind waiting. As for sudden fancies, you ought to know that they are the prerogative of my sex, and that no sensible man ever dreams of asking us to account for them."

Perhaps Horace had sufficient sense to be able to account for this one; at all events, he thought it best to offer no further opposition and ask no more questions.

CHAPTER XIX.

PRIDE HAS A FALL.

IT was, of course, quite out of the question for Veronica to ride the dun horse on the following day, and Horace would have been obliged to explain to her why it was out of the question, had not all need for discussion been obviated by the lucky circumstance that she did not possess a riding-habit. This gave time to profit by the assistance of a competent and good-natured lady who was always ready to mount any animal that might be offered to her, and the result of a few preliminary canters was so far satisfactory that Dolly pronounced the dun's back as safe a means of locomotion as an old woman's bath-chair, though, perhaps, scarcely as comfortable a one.

“He won't do anything,” she assured Veronica. “As far as I can discover, he hasn't a trick of any sort or kind in him, and he takes quite kindly to a side-saddle. Only he is rather a free goer, and you will find him pull you a little. However, I daresay that by the time your habit comes, I shall have got him to understand one or two things which have hardly dawned upon him yet.”

Veronica had to submit to some patronising counsels from that quarter, and to say "Thank you" for them. She was sensible enough to perceive that it could not be otherwise, although she would fain have dispensed with Dolly's help—perhaps even with Dolly's presence at Broxham altogether. But her guest said nothing about leaving, nor could the hint which Mrs. Mansfield was avowedly anxious to convey be considered for one moment permissible. Mrs. Mansfield was a good deal vexed about her niece's whim, and told her as much without circumlocution.

"It does seem so very gratuitous?" she exclaimed. "If one can't ride one can't ride, and there's an end of it. What is the use of parading one's incapacity, in addition to risking one's neck? Nothing is more stupid than showing yourself to a man in a thoroughly unbecoming light, except showing him that you are jealous; and your idea of the way to increase Horace's admiration for you is to kill both those birds with one stone."

Veronica knew that it would be mere waste of breath to disclaim the motive ascribed to her: at the bottom of her heart, indeed, there lurked an uncomfortable suspicion that she could not have done so with absolute truth. However, she was now fully committed to a course which had been somewhat over-hastily decided upon, and she was not to be turned aside from it by a tardy realisation of the fact that everybody was pretty sure to misunderstand her and laugh at her.

Mr. Mostyn, at all events, was a more or less consolatory exception. He understood, or professed to under-

stand, well enough what she was driving at, and he did not laugh at her, although his valedictory remarks were neither encouraging nor meant to be so.

“Do you know why the sublime is said to be next door neighbour to the ridiculous?” the poet asked her on the morning of his departure. “It is only because the consequences of sublime actions are so often and so patently inadequate. I told you, the other day, that you might very likely succeed in the attempt which you are bent upon; but what a price you are going to pay!—and what a poor little success it will be at best! At the risk of making you angry, I must confess to a hope that, after all, you will not succeed, and that these heroic efforts to stifle yourself may give you a choking sensation which you will find unendurable. I shall continue to cherish that hope until I hear that you are actually married. It will be time enough then to sing a requiem over my defunct poetess.”

Now there is really nothing in the least incompatible between poetry and horse exercise; but the truth was that it did require a rather bold flight of imagination to picture Horace Trevor as the admiring husband of a poetess, and although Veronica had never dreamt of laying claim to the latter designation, there were occasional moments when she felt that the atmosphere of Broxham—supposing it to remain unchanged—might become somewhat difficult to breathe. But would it remain unchanged? That was the question to which she was less prepared to return a decisive answer than she would have been a short time before. For it was begin-

ning to dawn upon her that docile though Horace was, he would perforce continue to like people and pursuits separated from her by an impassable gulf. Meanwhile, she proposed to make a bold leap at the gulf, and every day her hopes of clearing it grew fainter. Had Aunt Julia, after all, been so very far wrong in cautioning her against unnecessary humiliation? The cobbler is in no way ridiculous so long as he sticks to his last, but as soon as he takes it into his head to play at being an athlete, hilarity on the part of bystanders becomes excusable, and it struck Veronica that in her case hilarity was taking time by the forelock. In that respect, however, she wronged her friends, who were only a little curious to see what would happen to her, and were not ill-naturedly amused at her courage and obstinacy. It was no fault of theirs that, knowing a good deal more about horses than she did, they foresaw what was probably in store for her.

“If I were you,” said Dolly to Horace, in the course of one of those prolonged confidential colloquies which Veronica watched with mixed feelings, “I should take a leading-rein. She won’t know that it isn’t the usual thing unless you tell her, and I don’t for one moment believe that she will be able to hold that horse.”

“All very fine,” grumbled Horace; “but you know what the bay is. He would begin to play the ass at once when he saw what was up, and that would start the other. I wish to goodness Veronica would consent to wait until I get a proper mount for her!”

Horace and Dolly were once more upon terms of

comfortable amity. He had made no further effort to persuade her that he was really in love with his future bride and had never been in love with anybody else, nor had she distressed him by referring again to an episode which he was anxious to bury in oblivion. As she herself had said, she was *bonne diablesse*, while he, on his side, was ever ready to ignore the disquieting elements in a given situation.

The rapidity with which orders can be executed when money is no object is quite extraordinary, and Veronica's habit arrived before the education of the dun horse had been well taken in hand. She was so set upon carrying out her purpose forthwith that Horace's pleas for a little longer delay were not even listened to; only an hour or two before embarking upon an adventure of which it was impossible to predict the consequences, she suddenly bethought herself of the advisability of making her will. This, with the aid of the instructions contained in "Whitaker's Almanack," she accomplished to her own satisfaction, leaving the whole of her landed property and the half of her personalty to Horace, while the remaining moiety, subject to sundry trifling legacies, was to be divided between the Rev. John Dimsdale and his son Joseph. Then she got the butler and the footman to witness her signature, arrayed herself in a garb to which she was not accustomed and which felt rather queer, and descended the staircase, calmly prepared to encounter Fate.

It was not altogether pleasant to find that all the people who were staying in the house had congregated

together under the porch to see her start; but she betrayed no annoyance, and only offered up a brief inward prayer that she might be placed in the saddle without an unseemly scramble. Horace, as it happened, was at the same moment silently breathing the selfsame aspiration, and perhaps the fervour of his desire lent additional strength to his muscles; for he successfully achieved a feat towards the performance of which he received no help from his unskilled burden. The horse stood like a rock, manifesting no impatience while Veronica was being shown how to hold her reins; and presently the pair got away, walking quietly down the drive, to the satisfaction, it may be hoped, of onlookers, who had possibly expected to witness something a little more exciting.

“That’s all right,” said Horace, with a sigh of relief. “Now we won’t go off the road until we are well out of sight.”

“Are we going off the road?” asked Veronica, thinking to herself what a very large and powerful animal a horse was and how exceedingly difficult it must be to manage him.

“Not unless you like; only, perhaps, it would be as well just to take the bounce out of them. You see, these horses aren’t much accustomed to hacking, and they’ll go quieter after they have had a bit of a gallop. I thought we might take them across the common; you can’t very well come to grief there. You don’t feel nervous, do you?”

“I don’t think so,” answered Veronica truthfully. “I

feel rather funny, but I am not frightened that I know of. Shall I be run away with?"

"Yes, very likely; but don't lose your head and don't pull him. He's a knowing old bird, and he'll take very good care not to hurt himself."

Veronica trusted that he would take equally good care not to hurt her; but this, she presumed, must depend upon whether she could maintain her position on his back, which at present seemed a somewhat dubious proviso. Meanwhile, he walked soberly along, taking no notice of the capering bay, while Horace, scrutinising her anxiously, explained that she was holding her hands all wrong and sitting in the wrong place. After a time she wearied of these minute instructions, of being told what she ought to do in every conceivable emergency, and of the many bad accidents which had occurred in the presence of her instructor as a consequence of careless riding.

"If you go on much longer in this way," she said, laughing, "you will make me believe that nobody except a thoroughly experienced rider should ever mount a horse. Yet I suppose there must have been a beginning even to your knowledge and Dolly Craddock's."

"Oh, well, I began on a pony when I was a youngster," answered Horace, "and so, I should think, did she. Besides, she is as hard as nails; it doesn't hurt her to tumble about." He added, after a pause: "The great thing is to have confidence."

"And I can't be accused of lacking that," observed

Veronica, "or I shouldn't be here. Are you wishing that I were anywhere else?"

As a matter of fact he was, but he feared to offend her by confessing it. He answered very diplomatically: "You know well enough, Veronica, that I always wish to have you with me."

"Even when you are pursuing the fox? I hope you understand that that is what I am trying to qualify myself for."

Horace did not look precisely enchanted. "If you can learn to ride you can soon learn to hunt," he answered hesitatingly. "But why should you? You don't like it, and what is the use of doing things that one doesn't like?"

Alas! there is very little use in attempting to do them; and if everybody realised that simple elementary fact this world would not be nearly as full of failures and disappointments as it is. But Veronica was not in the mood for philosophic reflection. She said rather doggedly: "I have quite made up my mind that your wife must be a hunting woman."

"Yes, I thought that was what you were driving at," observed Horace, in a vexed tone, "and it's the greatest mistake that ever was! I don't say that I shouldn't be glad if you were fond of sport; but when I know that you aren't, and never will be——"

A discussion which was opening somewhat ominously was here cut short by the abrupt and involuntary withdrawal of one of the parties to it. Horace had unthinkingly turned off the road on to the edge of the long and

wide common whither they were bound, and the moment that the dun horse felt turf under his feet away he went, with a keen enjoyment of the rushing, moist wind, with a strong desire to stretch his legs and without the slightest consideration for the wishes of his temporary mistress, whom he had long ere this discovered to be a factor of no importance in the afternoon's amusement. The little bay flung up his heels and squealed, but was not permitted to follow in the wake of his stable companion. Horace, knowing that he could do no good and that the horse was not likely to do any harm, was satisfied to keep the fugitives well in sight and was properly ashamed of himself for being shaken with irrepressible laughter at the way in which the one was playing cup-and-ball with the other. As he had anticipated, the old horse ran in a wide circle, slackening his pace as soon as he had had enough of it; Veronica lost her breath but not her seat, and by the time that Horace was able to rejoin her, no trace of a smile was discernible upon his concerned countenance.

“Why didn't you stop him?” she gasped rather reproachfully.

“Well, it wouldn't have been quite the easiest thing in the world to do. Besides, it wasn't necessary; you rode with great judgment.”

“Please don't insult me,” said Veronica.

“But you did really! If you had tugged at his mouth, he might have given you some trouble; but you had the good sense to leave him alone, and he'll be all right now, unless—that is, I'm sure he will be all right

now. I am afraid that he must have shaken you a great deal, though."

"He has shaken me until I feel like a whipped-up egg," answered Veronica, laughing rather disconsolately; "still, here I am, which is a very wonderful thing to me. Do they always throw people about like that when they gallop?"

Horace was going to say, "That depends upon the people," but thought it better to substitute, "That depends upon the horse. I knew you would find his paces rather rough at first; but one soon gets accustomed to that."

Veronica could not imagine it possible that she would ever become accustomed to so violent a mode of progression; yet, as a matter of fact, she did feel a good deal more at home after the second, and much quieter, gallop upon which Horace insisted; for the dun horse was really a good-natured beast, besides being at heart a somewhat lazy one. Therefore, since he was in company, and since he had asserted his supremacy, he was graciously pleased to accommodate his pace to that of the bay. Then came a brief trot along a stretch of sandy road, which was so dreadfully uncomfortable that Horace's pupil begged to be allowed to postpone that branch of her instruction to the next lesson, and they dropped back into an easy walk. However, she was not ill pleased with her performance, so far—considerably better pleased, if the truth must be told, than he was. Never in his life had he met with anyone so absolutely ignorant of the art of equi-

tation, and she quite took his breath away when, after they had turned their horses' heads homewards, she coolly remarked—

“Oh, by-the-way, there is one thing more that I want to do—I want to jump a fence of some sort.”

At first he would not hear of her attempting what there was so very little reason to suppose that she could accomplish; but when she grew peremptory he yielded, fearing to affront her, and saying to himself that, after all, it is a simple enough thing to sit upon a horse's back. So he selected a low bank, with a narrow ditch on the hither side of it, and, having told her exactly what to do, put the bay at what, in his estimation, was an extremely modest obstacle.

It certainly appeared to be so; and Veronica, watching him as he popped over it, thought that the process looked perfectly easy and rather nice—only she had not quite taken in his meaning when he had warned her that the dun horse jumped big. That wise and well-meaning animal, realising what was required of him, cocked his ears and followed his leader at his own pace, which was a rather quick one. Then, all of a sudden, and long before he had been expected to do so, he hurled himself up into the air. Veronica was conscious of a most extraordinary and sickening sensation—of a tremendous jolt. And after that, the next thing she knew was that somebody had had a fall. She was not quite sure that it was herself until earth and sky had ceased whirling madly around her; but when she did recover her senses she became aware of a

fact even more disconcerting than that she had been pitched over her horse's head—namely, that she was in the presence of a group, composed of Dolly Cradock, Horace, and two other young men, all of whom were gazing at her with countenances of almost unnatural gravity.

“Please laugh, if you want to laugh,” were the first words that she uttered. “I should roar with laughter myself if this had happened to one of you.” And she could not help adding inwardly, “Oh, how I wish it had !”

But the good manners of the company proved equal to the demand made upon them, and nobody so much as indulged in a smile. One of the young men hastened to assure her that their having witnessed her discomfiture was a pure accident—they had gone out for a walk, because there was nothing else to do, and had had no idea of meeting her and Trevor. Horace was full of solicitude and unwilling to believe that she had not hurt herself at all; while Dolly rated him roundly for his stupidity.

“It was all your fault,” she declared. “What did you want to go larking over hedges and ditches for? If Veronica had broken her neck you would have deserved to be put on your trial for murder. One would think you were a tailor out for a bank holiday !”

That was all very well, and Horace's omission to plead the justification for his conduct which he might have pleaded was a thing to be as grateful for as one could manage to be; but the humiliation was none the

less complete. Veronica was, indeed, able to insist upon being placed in the saddle again, but she had to submit to be led home, the truth being that she had had more of a shake than she cared to admit. Dolly and her friends very considerably continued their walk, and little conversation took place between the affianced pair until the house was reached—for Horace's anxious inquiries and reiterated apologies were scarcely answered. But when Veronica was lifted to the ground, she said rather forlornly—

“I am afraid it won't do, Horace; I am afraid it will never do.”

“Well,” said he diffidently, yet with an air of subdued relief which did not escape her, “I am almost afraid it won't, dear. Of course, you might try again with another class of horse, but——”

“Oh! I shall not try again,” she answered, as she turned and left him.

CHAPTER XX.

VERONICA CHANGES HER MIND.

IT is one of the interesting peculiarities of our mortal nature that we are all of us apt to be dreadfully ashamed of things which reflect no real discredit upon us, while we can sit down comfortably enough under accusations which ought to make us very angry indeed. Veronica Dimsdale, who had no sins worth speaking of to reproach herself with, would have accepted with philosophy and indifference any charges which it might have pleased Aunt Julia's and Horace's friends to bring against her moral character; but she found it a hard matter to forgive them for having seen her absurdly thrown from the back of a horse who had only done what she had asked him to do.

Yet they were very kind and lenient with her. They scarcely alluded to her mishap that evening, nor were they unfeeling enough to make any inquiries after her aching head and limbs. Mrs. Mansfield, to be sure, remarked: "Well, my dear, all I can say is I hope this will be a lesson to you!" but everybody else seemed to understand how crestfallen she must be, and that it was a case of least said soonest mended. Perhaps this very

forbearance on their part vexed her almost more than open, good-humoured ridicule would have done—so impossible is it to give satisfaction even to the best of women when she has quarrelled with herself!

But was there any occasion or excuse for quarrelling with Horace? Not, of course, for quarrelling with him, Veronica thought; but for breaking with him there might be, and she was more than half inclined to believe that there were, sufficient reasons. The words of wisdom spoken by the experienced Mostyn had germinated in her mind and were beginning to bear fruit; the equally wise observations of Dolly Cradock, which she had involuntarily overheard, could not but have some weight with her; she perceived, not only that she would never be able to participate in Horace's pursuits, but that he did not at all wish her to do so, and she asked herself whether it was too late even now to abandon an impracticable scheme.

One thing which made her feel that it was impracticable, and that he might very possibly agree with her in deeming it so, was his uneasy, half-apologetic demeanour in her presence and the evident alacrity with which he quitted her side to join Dolly Cradock and the other young people. This, had she but known it, was neither more nor less than the reflection of her own manner, which was constrained, and of which he did not know what to make. He was aware that he had, somehow or other, offended her, but, having a clear conscience in the matter, and fearing lest he should put his foot into it more deeply by questioning her, he fell back

upon the system—not a bad system in itself—which he had always adopted in his dealings with an incomprehensible sex and left her to come round at her leisure.

Thus for three days a breach which could hardly be called a breach at the outset went on widening at a pace much more perceptible to one of those between whom it yawned than to the other. Veronica still felt sure of Horace's good faith, but she felt a good deal less sure than she had done that he was not deceiving himself. What was so obvious as to be beyond dispute was that he was awkward and silent with her, whereas he was merry and talkative with Dolly, of whose society he never appeared to weary. Moreover, setting him and his wishes aside, did it not behove her to consider herself a little? "If I could have hunted with him and managed to like the people whom he likes, I might have played my part fairly well," she thought, but I doubt whether I have it in me to 'stifle myself,' as Mr. Mostyn says: I am too angular to fit into this sort of life, and perhaps it is almost as silly of me to attempt it as to try riding a horse over a bank."

Well, at any rate, Dolly was not destined to outshine her in the latter respect just then, for now a hard frost set in, with low, black clouds sailing up from the north-east, which presently broke over Broxham in those small feathery flakes hated by all men in this temperate clime. Russian and Canadian winters have their good points and bring their amusements with them; but snow in England is an accursed thing, coming upon us

unawares, depriving us of all forms of outdoor exercise and too often rendering us snappish with our fellow-sufferers. Veronica was not exactly snappish; but she retired to the library and read all day long by herself, while disconsolate sportsmen sat in the smoking-room and used language unfit for the ears of refined persons.

However, there was one person in the house who was not so refined but that she could endure to listen to a few profane words, uttered under so great provocation. What she could by no means endure was to be deprived of male companionship; so she assembled them all in the billiard-room, where they played pool during an entire afternoon, and where, to judge by the shouts of laughter which were audible from time to time even in the remote quietude of the library, she was successful in raising their spirits. Veronica paused in her reading every now and then to listen to them, and thought to herself, "How infinitely better it would have been if that horse had broken my neck for me! Then, about a year hence, Dolly would be here as mistress of the establishment, and all manner of troublesome complications would be averted."

Not having had her neck broken, it only remained for her to make the best of troublesome complications, and the more she thought about it all the less sanguine did she feel of receiving any help from those for whose sake she had almost decided to cancel existing arrangements. As for Aunt Julia and others less directly interested, they would of course make her life a burden to her, but she would have to bear that. They certainly would not

be sorry for her, so she felt at liberty to bestow a good deal of pity upon herself, while she sat gazing at the blurred, dreary landscape, and listening to those irritating periodical outbursts of hilarity which reached her from the distant billiard-room.

In the meantime, she had not been so completely forgotten as it suited her mood to assume. Horace, who had been enjoying himself pretty well, but who could not help thinking that she must find it a little bit slow to be left all alone for so many hours together, would have been only too delighted if she had seen fit to join the pool-players; but as she did not do so, and as he supposed that that sort of thing was not very likely to amuse her, he took advantage at length of having been knocked out of the game to slip quietly away and see whether he could be of any use.

“Shall I disturb you if I come in?” he asked humbly, after opening the library door and inserting his head through the aperture.

“Not in the least,” answered Veronica. “On the contrary, you are the very person whom I was wishing to see; and it is getting too dark to read.”

“Well, I’m glad you were wishing to see me,” said Horace cheerfully, as he advanced and drew up a chair beside hers. “I wasn’t sure that you would be, though I needn’t tell you that I have been wishing to see you all the afternoon.”

“Really? I should have thought, by the noise you have been making, that you were tolerably satisfied with what you had got.”

“Have they been kicking up an awful shindy?” asked Horace. “It wasn’t me—it was the other fellows and Dolly Cradock. You can’t keep them from bear-fighting when a lot of them get together like that. And I must say that Dolly is rare sport,” he added, with a retrospective snigger.

“I have no doubt of it,” answered Veronica drily; “she is as much in her element here as I am out of mine. Nobody, I am sure, will ever accuse me of being rare sport.”

“Oh! of course you’re different,” assented Horace.

“Altogether different, and, unfortunately, I always shall be. I have realised that now, and I ought to have realised it sooner.”

“But, good gracious! you don’t want to be like her, do you?” asked Horace.

“No, I can’t honestly say that I do; but I wish, for your sake, that I were more like her in some respects. However, since that is impossible, we won’t talk about it. Horace, I am going to say something which I am afraid will distress you at first; but try to hear me out patiently, and try to believe that it is distressing to me, too, to be obliged to say it. I have been thinking things over during the last few days, and I have come to the conclusion that I did very wrong to accept you. It isn’t your fault, and perhaps it isn’t so very much mine, that we are hopelessly ill-suited to one another; still, there is the fact, which is obvious to everybody, and we had much better recognise it at once than

wait until there is no remedy. Now, what I want you to understand is this——”

“I understand,” interrupted Horace, “that you want to throw me over. That is enough, and more than enough! What have I done, Veronica?”

“Nothing that I have the slightest right to complain of or that you have any cause to reproach yourself with. It is I who have done things—or rather left them undone. I should always leave them undone if I were to marry you, and you would always have to keep on making allowances for me—which would be frankly intolerable! I know this ought to have been said before, and I know I am treating you badly, in a certain sense. All I can say is that I should be treating you much worse if I allowed our engagement to go on. Don’t try to persuade me that it is not so; if you do, you will only force me to say that I must break the engagement off on my own account.”

“If that is the truth I think it ought to be said,” returned Horace, looking very grave and unhappy. “You can’t expect me to thank you for jilting me or to agree with you that you are doing it for my good.”

“I suppose not. Very well, then; let it be taken for granted that I have changed my mind. Only you must not think that I care less for you than I did when I thought that I could be your wife.”

“You told me at the time that you did not love me,” remarked Horace disconsolately.

“Exactly so, and that is just why I cannot marry you. I still think that it need not have been an insu-

perable objection, if we had had anything at all in common, just as our having nothing in common would not have mattered, if we had been really in love with one another ; but as things are——”

“ At least you can't doubt that I really love you, Veronica ! ” broke in Horace. “ I always hoped that you would come to love me, too, in time. It didn't seem so utterly impossible. ”

“ I am sure you mean what you say, ” answered Veronica ; “ but people don't always know their own minds — am I not a proof of it ? We won't talk of what might have been, though ; the future, not the past, is what we have to consider, and you can still make my future comparatively smooth for me, if you choose. ”

“ Of course I should choose to do that, if I could, ” answered Horace rather coldly ; “ but as my future is to have nothing to do with yours, I don't quite see how I can. ”

“ Well, I will tell you. Before I went out riding with you the other day, it suddenly occurred to me that I was running some risk of coming to an untimely end, and that it would be a most unfortunate thing if I were to die intestate. So I made my will, and, naturally, I left this place to you. ”

“ Under the circumstances, that was a natural thing to do, no doubt, ” answered Horace, since she seemed to expect that he should say something.

“ It would have been natural under any circumstances. You know what my feeling is about Broxham. It ought not to belong to me ; I have never regarded it

as really belonging to me, and even if I had, I should take the first opportunity of getting rid of it; for I don't like the place, and don't mean to live here. Now do you understand how you may make my path easy for me and help me to face the fury of Aunt Julia?"

"Can't say I do."

"Oh, I think you do, Horace! You would rather not accept a gift from me? Well, I wouldn't ask you to accept it, if it were really a gift; but it is nothing of the sort, it is merely an act of restitution. Don't let us argue about it—we both of us know so well all that there is to be urged for and against the arrangement!—let us simply agree that the thing is to be done and never say another word about the matter. Then perhaps we may be friends again—which is what I most long for."

"I am afraid you will have to long in vain, Veronica," returned Horace rather grimly. "I can't prevent you from throwing me over, and, after what you have said, I mustn't try, but I am not going to pretend that I feel particularly friendly towards you. As for taking your property off your hands, you need not have the slightest fear of my arguing such a preposterous question as that. If you are bent upon getting rid of it, I dare say you may find some accommodating person without advertising for him, only I can assure you that he won't be found in my skin. Now I must say good-bye; I shall pack up and be off this evening. The sooner I am out of this the more comfortable it will be for everybody."

She could not let him go like that; yet a quarter of an hour of earnest entreaty and lucid setting forth of all the circumstances proved of no avail to shake his determination. When at length he was asked to say whether it was not the truth—"the honest truth, which you may confess without offending me in the least"—that he now cared more for Dolly Cradock than he had when he hastily engaged himself to a girl so much less in sympathy with him, he declined to answer the question.

"You can think just exactly what you please about that, Veronica," said he; "if it makes you any happier to imagine that I can be passed on to somebody else now that you don't want me, by all means imagine it. The only thing that had to be made clear was that you don't want me, and that has been made as clear as daylight by this time."

"You will live to marry her, and you will live to thank me for having left you free to do so," Veronica declared decisively. "What I have to do now is to see the lawyers and find some means of transferring this place to you with your will or against it. To that you had better make up your mind."

Horace, with a slight, disdainful gesture, remarked that it was getting late and that he would just have time to catch his train. "I shall leave a message for Aunt Julia to say that I have been telegraphed for," he added, as he moved towards the door; "I don't want you to be exposed to any annoyance that can be avoided, and white lies are permissible on these occasions. The

next time you see your friend Mr. Mostyn, please tell him, with my compliments, that I fully understand how much you and I have to thank him for. And, perhaps, if nobody else will relieve you of Broxham, you might offer the place to him. He is such a true friend that I shouldn't wonder if you were to find him willing to oblige you."

These last words, which were spoken with considerable bitterness, caused Veronica, after she was left to her own reflections, to regret that she had introduced Mr. Mostyn's opinion into a fruitless discussion; but that, after all, was a mere drop in the ocean of her regrets, and she did not dwell upon it. Horace, to be sure, had not behaved quite as generously as he might have done; yet she was fain to allow that he had not behaved unlike a gentleman. He had accepted his dismissal; he had not been unduly reproachful; he had been entirely within his right in refusing either to admit or deny his affection for Dolly Cradock, and he had also, alas! been within his right in scouting the material amends so clumsily proffered to him.

"I had to do what I have done," said Veronica to herself, mournfully; "but I have done it in the worst possible way, and what is to be the end of it all I can't see yet. Mr. Walton must manage it for me somehow, and in the meantime I must submit uncomplainingly to the dreadful things which Aunt Julia is sure to do and say."

CHAPTER XXI.

MUSA CONSOLATRIX.

READERS who are blessed with good memories may recollect that they were first introduced to the Reverend John Dimsdale when he was seated in his study on a sunny, windy morning, wrestling with the difficulties and discouragements unhappily inseparable from the labour of composition; and no one who is acquainted with the monotonous routine of working lives, whether lay or clerical, will be surprised to find him occupied in the same way, at the same hour and in the same place, exactly twelve months later. A year, it is true, makes a greater or less difference to us all. Things happen; births, deaths, or marriages occur; the bodies which we are compelled to carry about with us advance a few steps on their slow progress towards decay; but the land must be tilled, soldiers and sailors must be drilled, the law must be administered, sermons must be written so long as weary labourers continue to draw the breath of life, and it may be surmised that sermons do not become easier to write when a man has, many years ago, said all he has to say. To be sure, he can keep on repeating what he has said scores of times before, and most preach-

ers adopt this simple plan, but Mr. Dimsdale, who had a troublesome conscience, wanted to find new words in which to clothe old thoughts, and since he could not find them, he was rumpling his hair and plucking at his beard, as of yore, when his wife came in to substitute one form of torture for another.

“John,” said she, seating herself comfortably close to the writing-table, “I want to have a little talk with you about Veronica.”

Mr. Dimsdale sighed, pushed back his revolving chair, turned, so as to face the disturber of his already disturbed reflections, threw one leg over the other and remarked, “My dear Elizabeth, the talks that we have had for some weeks past about Veronica have been neither little nor few. If you do not know what my views are, I can only say that I despair of being able to give them any clearer expression.”

“Well, John,” returned his wife good-humouredly, “I daresay I am dull; but the fact is that I don’t know a bit what your views are. I know that you have backed her up all through this foolish, vexatious business; but why you have done so and how long you think that it can go on is just what I do *not* understand.”

“Yet it seemed to me that I had explained my position,” observed the Reverend John, with impatient patience. “The girl breaks off an engagement which was a source of satisfaction to all her friends, her reason for breaking it off being that, on fuller consideration, she finds that she does not love the man enough to marry him. I cannot disapprove of that, although I may re-

gret that the discovery was not made earlier. She proposes to make her estate over to Horace Trevor, who, very properly and as a matter of course, refuses it. I thought the plan a ridiculous and impracticable one, and I told her so; but I really cannot disapprove of an impulse which strikes me as generous. Her aunt—rather cruelly and unnecessarily, in my opinion—chooses to quarrel with her; and, as she cannot very well live all alone in a large country house, she asks me to give her shelter. Considering what are our obligations to Veronica, you can hardly, I should think, have expected me to refuse so natural a request, and I am quite unable to see the use of teasing and worrying her now that she is here. If that is what you call backing her up, no doubt I have backed her up. You ask how long I think it is going to last. Really, I have not the faintest idea; nor can I tell with any precision what you mean by ‘it’!”

“Why, the present state of things, of course. Say what you will, John, it is absurd for a girl with all her money to bury herself alive in a country rectory. Such an arrangement can’t be permanent; and, fond as I am of Veronica, I do feel that she ought to be brought to her senses. It is useless for me to speak to her—she sets me down as worldly and heartless and all the rest of it—but a few words from you would carry some weight; and really it is your duty to say them. Some decision as to what her future is to be *must* be arrived at soon.”

“Is there any particular reason,” inquired Mr. Dimsdale wearily, “for our arriving this morning at a

decision which, so far as I can make out, we have no power at all to enforce?"

"Don't talk as if you were on the bench, John, and as if it were a question of whether the girl was to be sent to a reformatory or committed for trial. I only wanted to tell you that I have had a letter from Mrs. Mansfield—a very kind and sensible letter, too—in which she says that she wishes to make it up again with Veronica and that she will be glad to chaperon her through another season."

"So be it! Veronica's consent must be obtained, though."

"Just so; and I hope you will tell her that it is her duty to consent. Marry she must—I am sure you will agree with me there, John—and as she is determined not to marry poor Mr. Trevor, the sooner she selects somebody else the better."

This sounded so very like truth and common sense that Mr. Dimsdale had nothing to urge against it. Undoubtedly Veronica, situated as she was, would do well to marry; undoubtedly she ought to accept the olive-branch held out to her by her Aunt Julia; so he said that, if he might now be permitted to get on with his work, he would do what was required of him as soon as his niece came in.

Veronica, in accordance with what had become her daily habit, had gone out for a long, objectless walk. The want of an object, both for her walks and for her existence, had weighed heavily upon her since her return to Harbury Vale, and now, as she wandered

along the river-bank, she was wishing with all her heart that she had been spared an inheritance which had brought her nothing but worry and vexation, besides estranging her from those with whom she would fain have maintained friendly relations. The wrath and disgust of Mrs. Mansfield she had anticipated and could forgive; but to be roundly told by Mr. Walton that she was quite the most hopelessly silly young lady whom it had ever been his misfortune to encounter had been a little trying, while Horace's obstinate refusal to play the part assigned to him almost made her repent of what she had done. Perhaps, after all, she had been hopelessly silly—though no respectable solicitor should have permitted himself to use such language. Perhaps, if she had been hopefully wise, or even wise without being hopeful, she would have let matters take their course—made the best of a bad business, and recognised the fact that in this world nobody must expect to get exactly what he or she wants. And the worst of it was that, with the exception of poor old Uncle John, who always tried to be fair, there was not a single person to understand her or sympathise with her in the smallest degree. Even Joe, upon whose comprehension and fidelity she had implicitly relied, and to whom she had rendered, by post, a full account of her actions as well as of the motives which had prompted them, had been most disappointing. Her long letters to him had only elicited curt and very unsatisfactory replies, which had rendered it only too evident that he shared, without expressing them, the views of Mr. Walton. Finally, Horace had

answered a despairing epistolary appeal, addressed to his club, by a note which she had already perused several times, but which she now drew from her pocket and read again, just to keep alive the feeling of justifiable resentment which it had provoked.

“Dear Veronica—I have received your letter and the communication which your lawyers say that they were instructed to make to me on your behalf. I am sorry that you should have thought there could be any use in giving such instructions or writing such a letter. On my side I cannot see that there would be any use at all in my repeating what I have said so often before. What your opinion of me can be I know no more than I know what I have done to deserve it; but least said soonest mended. I saw Aunt Julia the other day, and managed at last to persuade her that the time has come for her to stop shedding tears over spilt milk. I do trust that the subject may now be dropped for ever.

“Always sincerely yours,

“HORACE TREVOR.”

Now, that really was not at all a nice sort of response to make to two closely written sheets of affectionate entreaty, and it just showed the difficulty of taking any man's measure before subjecting him to a severe test. Mr. Mostyn, indeed, had divined what Horace was at a glance; but then Mr. Mostyn was so abnormally acute! Mr. Mostyn, unhappily, was away from home, having taken himself off to Italy to avoid the cold weather; so

that his moral support also was wanting to one who stood in sore need of it.

“How I wish he would come back! Then, at least, I should feel that I had one friend left!” sighed Veronica; and hardly had she breathed the words when, with truly dramatic promptitude, her revered poet stood before her, his soft felt hat in his hand, his curly grizzled locks stirred by the wind, and a smile of greeting upon his lips.

“I am in advance of the swallows, you see,” said he. “It is shameful to abandon Italy for England at a time of the year when Italy is delicious and England detestable; but *che vuole?* I was seized with a sudden attack of home-sickness, and the only cure for that malady is to make straight for home.”

“Blessed malady and blessed cure!” exclaimed Veronica. “It isn’t everybody who has a home to make for, and I am sure very few people could count upon as heartfelt a welcome as I have at your service. I was just longing for you when you appeared, like a god out of an osier-bed.”

“Dear me!” said Mr. Mostyn, raising his eyebrows; “it is lucky I am not twenty years younger.”

“It would indeed be most unlucky if you were, because, in that case, I might hesitate to confide all my woes to you. I have been doing terrible things—partly in consequence of your advice, it is true—since we parted.”

“So I understand. Not that I think them terrible, or that I repent in the least of my advice.”

“ You have heard all about it, then ? ”

“ Well, I have heard that that impossible matrimonial scheme has been abandoned. Is there anything more to be told ? ”

“ Heaps more ! ” answered Veronica emphatically. “ The abandonment of a scheme which, I quite agree with you, was an impossible one, is the very least of my troubles—not a trouble at all, in fact; the dreadful thing is that it hasn’t brought about any of the results which ought to have followed.”

She went on to relate how completely her benevolent designs had been frustrated by the perversity of those for whose benefit they had been formed, while Mr. Mostyn, listening with a kindly, tolerant smile, nodded his head encouragingly every now and then.

“ Oh, well ! ” he said, when she paused, “ I don’t see that you have so very much to make yourself miserable about. From my point of view, you have done a great deal better than might have been expected. There were a good many dangers before you, you see—the deceitfulness of riches, out of which you seem to have escaped triumphantly; the voluntary surrender of your highest aspirations, upon which you were bent when I saw you last; even the sacrifice of your inheritance, which, in my humble opinion, you have no right to hand over to the first comer. Oh, yes! you have done very fairly well, and such incidental bothers as the displeasure of your relations will soon be lived down. At all events, you remain your own mistress and can order the course of your own existence.”

“Yes, there is that,” agreed Veronica hesitatingly. “To some extent I am at liberty, no doubt. But what is to become of Horace?”

“I do not know him well enough to venture upon a prophecy, and, honestly speaking, his destiny does not interest me. Yours, on the other hand, does; and that is why I am in hopes that you have a few pages of foolscap to show me.”

Veronica gave her shoulders a jerk and thrust her hand into her pocket. “It is rubbish,” she said; “nobody knows better than I do what rubbish it is. Still, you had better see what I have scribbled at once and have done with it. If I made you beg for a sight of it you might think it was something superior to mere schoolgirl’s doggerel, and then you would be all the more disappointed.”

Mr. Mostyn took the little bundle of manuscript extended to him and ran his eye over one page after another without speaking. Presently he produced a pencil and made a few rapid corrections.

“This is not doggerel,” he said at length. “As far as it goes, it is good—very good, even; only you will write far better when metre and rhyme have become your servants instead of your masters. What I want you to understand is that it is worth your while to persevere, and I hope you know that I should not say that unless I could say it conscientiously.”

In matters pertaining to art he was invariably conscientious, and the brief, lucid homily which he went on to deliver was of value to his pupil in more ways than

one. By the time that he took his leave of her, after appointing her a task to perform and submit to him on a given day, he had so far infected her with his own quiet enthusiasm that the troubles which had looked so large half an hour before now seemed to her to have been reduced to their true insignificant proportions. A poetess she hardly expected to become; but she thought there perhaps might always lie open to her a haven of refuge and oblivion from the calm shelter of which she would be able to smile at ephemeral cares. In truth, that is why artists ought to be happy people, and very generally are so, despite their vehement protestations to the contrary.

Thus, on her return to the Rectory, she was quite in a fit frame of mind to receive the representations of the Rector, who had possessed himself of Mrs. Mansfield's conciliatory missive and waved it at her persuasively, while pointing out how much family quarrels are to be deprecated.

"I ask nothing better than to be friends with Aunt Julia again," she declared, "and I know very well what good reason I have given her for losing all patience with me; but as for going through another London season under her protection, that is a very different thing. To her it could only be a disappointing thing, because I have made up my mind now to live and die an old maid, and to me it would be a weariness of the flesh, because I have seen all that I want to see of fashionable life. But, of course, if I am in your way or a trouble to you here, I will go."

Mr. Dimsdale combed his beard with his long fingers, moved restlessly about the room, and began: "My dear Veronica, the very least thing that we can do, in return for your generosity to us, is to give you a home——"

"If you talk like that," interrupted Veronica, "I shall leave to-morrow."

"Well, well, my dear, I know what you mean, and I trust that I have acted rightly in accepting your help, though I cannot always feel sure about it. But what I was going to say was that it is almost imperative upon you to marry, and that you ought not to neglect occasions of meeting some possible husband. You must, I take it, eventually reside upon your estates, and a single woman of your age who attempts to live in that way necessarily finds herself confronted by a thousand obstacles."

"All of which," remarked Veronica, laughing, "can be obliterated by a few strokes with a pen. My estates will not trouble me long; because I intend to transfer them to some other luckless, or lucky, person."

"But the other persons, as I understand, won't have them."

"One other person won't; but I have a second string to my bow—even a third, and perhaps a fourth. Now, Uncle John, you know human nature so well—for you could not preach the sermons you do unless you knew it—must be well aware that people are not so desperately disobliging as all that. Why, you collected as much as three pounds four shillings and twopence for the victims

of an earthquake last week; and can you doubt that somewhere or other there is a kind soul to be found who will accept several thousand acres of earth that is never likely to quake, rather than leave it as a burden upon the hands of a distressed fellow-creature."

"This is trifling, Veronica," said the Reverend John, shaking his head. "But at all events, you will write a pleasant letter to your Aunt Julia, will you not?"

"Oh, yes! I will write her a pleasant letter," answered Veronica, "as soon as I have satisfied the cravings of an enormous appetite. Now may I have some lunch, please?"

CHAPTER XXII.

JOSEPH IS WILLING TO OBLIGE.

WHO would not wish, for choice, to be at peace with all the world? Judging by the law reports and the telegraphic despatches from foreign capitals which enliven our breakfast-tables every morning, there must be quite a large number of persons who prefer a different state of things; but to judge people by their utterances is almost always a mistake, and perhaps we should come nearer to the truth if we were to assume that our neighbours were made of very much the same clay as ourselves. Now, nothing can be more certain than that we, the writer and readers of these words, are and always have been satisfied with a recognition of our bare rights—are even, it may be, willing to dispense with some of these for the sake of a quiet life. Veronica, therefore, who was not at all more unreasonable than the rest of her sex, gladly accepted Mrs. Mansfield's overtures, and despatched so amiable and humble a reply to South Audley Street that her reluctance to quit rural scenes for the moment was overlooked. The next post brought a second letter from Aunt Julia, conceived in a spirit of true kindness and forbearance.

“ My dear Veronica ” (she wrote), “ I entirely agree with you in thinking that the less we say for the future about what is now past and cannot be helped the better. Perhaps I spoke rather too sharply to you before we left Broxham, and if I did, I can only say that I am sorry ; but you must admit—and I am glad to see you *do* admit—that I had very great provocation. As for quarrelling with those whom I love, it is a thing that I never have been able to do, though they have generally tried their best to make me, and you may be sure that when you come to London you will find no difference whatever in me. Horace, who called here a day or two ago, is, I am glad to tell you, in his usual health and spirits, and laughed most good-humouredly at the idea that he cherished any unfriendly feeling towards you. There are very few men, I should think, who would so readily pardon a girl for having made them look ridiculous ; but of course, as everybody says, Horace can afford to display generosity. Universally liked and admired as he is, he has the consolation (if he wants any) of knowing that his friends’ pity is bestowed rather upon you than upon him, and, after all, it isn’t as if he would ever have the slightest difficulty in making a really brilliant match. At the present moment, I know of more than one—however, this will hardly interest you ; I only wanted you to understand that the self-reproach of which you speak in your letter, and which I can’t call unbecoming, is no longer necessary.

“ By the way, I hear that there is every probability of a marriage being arranged between your friend Dolly

Cradock and Mr. Hornblower, the well-known M. F. H., of whom you may have heard. He is a widower and not very young, but has plenty of money, I believe; so it sounds suitable. Personally, as you know, I never could endure the girl's vulgarity, and Horace, good-natured though he is, must have found her a dreadful bore during her interminable visit to you; but no doubt she has good qualities which I am not clever enough to discern, or you would not have taken such a fancy to her."

Mrs. Mansfield concluded what was meant for a very astute composition with many expressions of goodwill, and Veronica, reading between the lines easily enough, was both amused and satisfied. That Dolly Cradock was about to espouse a wealthy old gentleman she believed no more than she did that Horace was hesitating as to which out of a number of possible brilliant matches he should make; but it was a comfort to be told that she was no longer in disgrace, and she kept Aunt Julia's written statement, foreseeing that a time might come when it would prove useful for purposes of quotation.

For the present, at any rate, there was nothing to be done but to await events and make the best use that could be made of Mr. Mostyn's benevolent instruction in the art of poetry. These were bestowed upon her by the great critic without stint. Scarcely a day passed on which he did not either stroll up to the Rectory or appoint a meeting-place with her elsewhere; and although he was somewhat chary of his praise, he gave her sufficient encouragement to make her happy.

"All this," he told her one day, "is only schooling;

and the reason why there are more public failures in literature than in any other branch of art is that most people embark upon it without any preliminary schooling at all. You must not think of putting these early efforts into the fire; for the ideas are good and will be of use to you later. But the form is not quite right yet. Have patience, and a time will come when you will be able to see your poems in print and rejoice that they have been printed. I know at least one unfortunate poet who suffers acutely from the contemplation of his juvenile essays."

"As if my very best could ever approach your very worst!" exclaimed Veronica.

"My worst is about as bad as anything can be, and my best is no more than tolerable. If I am remembered at all after my death it will be for my criticisms upon other men's work, which are more careful than the general run of English criticisms. But to speak the plain truth, my dear Miss Dimsdale, neither you nor I have it in us to be really great. What we can do, and what we are doing, is to educate ourselves, so that we may be able to distinguish great things from small. The task is a tedious and difficult one; but it is worth undertaking. Indeed, I often doubt whether anything else in the world is worth undertaking."

This seemed to be putting the case rather strongly; but some exaggeration was permissible to a man whose aims were so lofty and who was so admirably free from all sordid taint. He applauded Veronica's indifference to wealth, assuring her that what the majority of man-

kind believe to be of such vast importance has very little to do with the actual meaning of life.

“One takes things as they come and shapes one’s course accordingly,” he said. “Responsibilities cannot be altogether evaded; but, with a just sense of proportion, they can soon be reduced to their proper level. When you have written a sonnet in which I am unable to pick a hole, you will have gone a long way towards fulfilling the object of your existence; somebody who has not your special gifts must be paid to see that no holes can be picked in the management of your estates.”

Veronica asked whether it would not be a simpler and better plan to endow somebody else with a special gift of the estates which she did not want; but Mr. Mostyn replied, with a smile, that that plan struck him as lacking simplicity.

“You have already tried to put it into practice,” he remarked, “and you have had an opportunity of observing consequent complications. My advice to you is to attempt no further experiments in that direction, and to stick to what cannot any longer fairly be called experiments. By this time next year you will be looking at poetry and prose from such a totally different point of view that you will scarcely recognise yourself.”

It might be so, Veronica thought; but she did not quite see why, even if she were destined to become a second Mrs. Browning, the Broxham property should be less of a white elephant to her. Profoundly as she admired and respected Cyril Mostyn, there were moments when his language seemed to her to have an artificial

ring, and when she longed for five minutes of the sober common-sense of Joe Dimsdale—or even of Horace Trevor. Not that she really wished to see Horace again. He had forfeited all claim upon her regard by the very rude and unfeeling reply which he had made to her letter—a reply, moreover, which had dispelled any lingering doubt that she might have entertained as to the nature of the regard which he had once professed to feel for her. But Joseph—although he, too, had exhibited himself in a somewhat disappointing light of late—was less unpardonable; and a very great as well as wholly unexpected pleasure it was to see his tall, loosely knit figure advancing to meet her when she was returning one evening from her accustomed riverside haunts.

“You dear old boy!” she exclaimed, holding out both her hands to him with a cordiality which she could not repress, though she knew that he hardly deserved it. “What has brought you home?”

“Great Northern Railway to King’s Cross, and Great Western from Paddington,” replied Joe. “Likewise filial duty; likewise a long-cherished wish to tell you what I think of you, my dear. I found that I could be spared for about ten days, so I thought a little holiday might be good for me and others.”

“It is good for me, at all events, to see you again,” Veronica declared. “That is, unless you are going to scold me. But I hope you will not be so foolish.”

“I shall not be so foolish, Veronica. What is the use of flogging a dead horse—or a dead donkey either, saving your presence? You have been and gone and

done it now, so that scolding would serve no good purpose, would it?"

"None whatever," answered Veronica, placing herself at once in a mental fighting attitude; "so please don't fulfil your threat of telling me what you think of me. I have no wish to hear."

"The worst of it is," remarked Joe, lighting his pipe with much deliberation, "that I don't quite see my way to talk to you at all without expressing my sentiments. Added to which, I don't know of any reason why I shouldn't express them."

"Surely you might allow me to take them for granted! You think what everybody else, except Mr. Mostyn and Uncle John, thinks; you have no patience with me for having upset a comfortable, convenient arrangement at the last moment, and you are not at all disposed to give me credit for having done what I did simply because it was unavoidable. I might have expected you to be a little more generous and a little less dense; but never mind. One comfort is that I need not apologise to you, since you will be in no way a loser by what has occurred."

"Dear me! Who would ever have suspected you of having such a shrewish temper? Man and boy, I have known you, I may say, all my life, Veronica, and this is the first time that I have heard you make a really nasty speech. But I am not offended. I can feel for a young woman who has every reason to be ashamed of herself and who falls back, as women always do, upon abuse when she is conscious of having no defence to offer."

“ Joseph, you are trying to make me lose my temper, and you might spare yourself the trouble, for you will not succeed. I am not going to be put upon my defence by you, nor have I said anything in the least abusive. Now let us change the subject. I hope you have been getting some shooting in Lincolnshire lately.”

“ It is kind of you to hope so, my dear ; but shooting comes to an end on the same date in Lincolnshire as in the other parts of England. Consequently, I have been devoting my whole time and attention of late to the study of agriculture, as per agreement ; and I trust you will not have cause to regret your liberality in providing me with the means of completing my education.”

Veronica thought this last allusion so cruel and in such bad taste that she had much ado to keep the tears out of her eyes. She walked on for some yards before she could trust sufficiently to the steadiness of her voice to remark—

“ Well, if I have made a nasty speech to you, you have made a very nasty one to me now. So we may cry quits.” And then, letting her dignity go by the board, “ Don't *you* turn against me, Joe !” she exclaimed beseechingly ; “ I have so few friends left !”

“ Portrait of one of 'em,” returned Joe, tapping himself on the breast. “ Now, Veronica, you know very well that I shouldn't turn against you if you had committed a murder, instead of only having tried to cut your own throat ; but I must say that you are a bit aggravating. I daresay you will have the grace to admit that you have kicked up all this dust about noth-

ing when I tell you a piece of news which only reached me yesterday. I have the pleasure to inform you that a marriage has been arranged, and will shortly take place, between Miss Cradock and an old chap of the name of Hornblower, who has lots of tin and keeps any number of horses. What do you think of that, my dear?"

"Oh, I heard from Aunt Julia that there was a probability of that engagement," answered Veronica indifferently. "I think that, as she says, it sounds suitable; but I don't know why you should have thought it was likely to have any special interest for me."

"Come, Veronica, this is hardly fair upon an old pal, from whom you used to have no secrets once upon a time. You don't expect me to believe that you weren't madly jealous of Miss Dolly Cradock when you broke with Trevor, do you?"

"I am sorry to say, Joseph," answered Veronica, "that I can expect nothing reasonable of you in your present mood. I certainly did hope and think that Dolly and Horace would marry, because I am sure that they are fond of one another; but I suppose the truth is that they are both too selfish to face poverty, and unfortunately they cannot be persuaded to accept comparative riches. As for jealousy—but it really isn't worth while to protest against such accusations. As you know, I never pretended to be in love with Horace. At first I thought that I could marry him without being in love with him; but afterwards I found that I couldn't, and so I was obliged to break off the engage-

ment. That is the long and the short of the whole business.”

Joe looked a good deal disconcerted. He had evidently anticipated that the intelligence which he had probably journeyed to Harbury Vale for the sole purpose of imparting to his cousin would have a very different effect upon her, and Veronica was not ungrateful to him for his well-meant interference. It was, however, necessary to make him recognise that he had been under a complete misapprehension, and, after hearing all that she had to say, he was fain to acquiesce sadly in accomplished facts.

“And what do you propose to do now, Veronica?” he asked at length.

“That is just what I was going to tell you, and that is just where I hope I may count upon your help, Joseph. Of course, if I could have made over Broxham to Horace Trevor, I should have preferred to do so; but it is now quite certain that he will not take the property from me, and it is quite as certain that I can't retain it with any comfort to myself. Therefore I wish to transfer it with as little delay as possible to the person who would inherit it if I were to die to-morrow; and you are that person, Joseph. It is true that you are rather young; but you know something about the management of an estate by this time, and you like a country life, and you can't possibly have the same objections that Horace has to relieving me of my burden.”

“Well, no,” answered Joe, consideringly; “I can't plead those objections, certainly.”

“And after a time you will marry, and perhaps I shall be godmother to one of your children, and I shall come and stay with you sometimes.”

Joe nodded. “It all sounds very nice and very practicable,” he agreed.

“Then let us look upon it as settled. You have no idea what a weight you have taken off my mind!”

“Stop a bit,” said Joe, knocking the ashes out of his pipe against the heel of his boot and taking some time over the operation. “Of course you are making me a very handsome offer, Veronica, and I don’t deny that the life of a country gentleman would suit me rather better than any other; still, a step of this kind ought not to be taken without considering ways and means, and I doubt whether I could afford to live at Broxham even if the place belonged to me. It’s a big house, you see, and from what I heard when I was with you there I am afraid the rent-roll isn’t as big as it ought to be.”

“Oh, but I will provide the means as well,” said Veronica. “At least, I will, unless you object to taking money from me.”

“That will simplify matters,” observed Joe. “No, I don’t object to taking money any more than I do to taking land: after all, you are only giving me what you don’t want. How large a sum will it be?”

“Well—it shall be sufficient; I don’t think I ought to say more until I have consulted Mr. Walton,” answered Veronica; for the truth was that she had hardly expected to find Joe so businesslike, and she could not help feeling a little disappointed in him.

“Quite right,” answered the young fellow, nodding approvingly. “If this thing is to be done at all it must be done in cold blood, and we must both of us know what we are about. Meanwhile, we had better keep the project to ourselves in case it should never come off. Don’t you think so?”

Veronica had no doubt as to that, nor was she unwilling to agree to Joe’s further suggestion that they should now dismiss the whole subject from their minds.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DOWNFALL OF AN IDOL.

To decide in haste is almost always to repent at leisure, and Veronica was not wholly exempt from an experience which few men and still fewer women escape. In vain she told herself that her determination to resign Broxham had been consistent and well considered; in vain she pleaded with her conscience that she had used every possible effort to do what was right in her surrender of the property, and that it was no fault of hers if in this particular case right had proved, through obstinacy and perversity, to be left. Conscience, not less obstinate and, perhaps, not less perverse, persisted in asserting that Horace Trevor was an injured man.

“But not by me!” Veronica returned, tossing uneasily upon her bed at an hour when she ought to have been fast asleep. “How can I help his having fallen to the ground between two stools? Why did he try to sit upon both? Why did he make me believe that he loved me when it was as evident as could be that he really cared for Dolly Cradock? If he is disappointed, now that she has shown herself in her true colours, he

has only himself to blame. What more could I do than beg him to take the place off my hands? As he chose to refuse, and refused rather rudely too, I was obliged to make the best of a *pis-aller*."

Conscience declined to be silenced by such excuses, and, after many unavailing repetitions of them, Veronica, being a tolerably healthy young woman, adopted the most conclusive of all arguments by allowing slumber to overpower her.

On the following day, however, she could not refrain from partially letting Joe into the secret of her misgivings. She did not hint at any desire on her part to retract her offer—that, she felt, would be hardly fair, especially as the young fellow did not seem to think that she could be contemplating such a course—but she did confess that she felt rather sorry for poor Horace.

"Well, yes," answered Joe; "he has certainly got the worst of it all round. Being sorry for him won't help him, though, and as you can't give him what he wants, you had better not worry yourself with thinking about him any more."

"It is all very fine to talk like that," returned Veronica, rather sharply; "but how can I help worrying myself? I know I was perfectly right to release him from his engagement, and I don't for a moment suppose that he would wish to renew it now, if it could be renewed——"

"Rather not! A man who would give a girl a second chance, after having been treated as you treated

him, would be a most consummate ass; and Trevor isn't an ass."

"I never said he was, Joseph, and I wish you wouldn't interrupt. But although he may be well rid of me, it is rather hard upon him to have lost what he ought to have inherited from Uncle Samuel—not to speak of having lost Dolly Cradock."

"Brought up in a pious household, as you have been, Veronica," remarked Joe, "you must be familiar with David's hasty assertion that all men are liars. He ought never to have said such a thing, and I won't degrade myself to his level by declaring that all women are humbugs. Still there is no denying that most of them are, and very sorry I am to find that you belong to the majority. You know as well as I do, and probably a great deal better, that although that Cradock girl might perhaps have accepted Trevor if he had proposed to her, he never did propose to her, nor ever thought of doing such a thing."

"I know nothing of the sort," returned Veronica. "What I do know is that he couldn't afford to marry a poor woman, and that she couldn't afford to marry a poor man."

"Rubbish! He has never cared a brass farthing for any woman but you, and you don't improve your case by pretending to doubt that. Them is my sentiments, Veronica; and I regret that they should make you so red and angry."

A little red in the face Veronica might have been, but she was not angry, as her next words, which were

spoken in quite a mild, diffident tone of voice, proved. "Have you seen him or heard from him," she asked, "since—since that horrid time?"

"I have had one or two letters from him," answered Joe; "but I burnt them, because it isn't fair to remember all that a poor chap writes when he is down on his luck. He'll get over it, you know—everybody gets over everything in time—and then, of course, he'll wonder why he should have made such a fuss about such a trifle. The loss of a nice property is no trifle I grant you; but that couldn't be avoided. Trevor is such a good fellow that I daresay he will be glad to hear of his loss being my gain."

"You cannot," observed Veronica, after a pause, "be more convinced of his being a good fellow than I am; and if he has any regrets, as you seem to think that he has, I am sure mine must be quite as keen as his, and will last as long. Perhaps, when you write to him again, you will tell him that, Joseph. I suppose it is just possible that he may believe it."

"It is possible: I shouldn't say that it was altogether likely. But this is very unprofitable talk. What's done can't be undone, and the only thing for us to do now, as sensible people, is to make the best of existing circumstances. If I am to take this property off your hands, Veronica—and really, if it is not to go to Trevor, I think it might as well go to me as to anybody else—we ought not to lose time about seeing your lawyers and making some definite arrangement. The most satisfactory plan, I think, would be for me to be

present at the interview. Then I should hear exactly what the estate is worth, and I could state pretty nearly how much additional income I should require in order to enable me to do as you wish."

"Very well," answered Veronica, trying not to think what a deteriorating influence wealth, or the prospect of acquiring it, exercises upon all human beings. "Ought we both to go up to London, then?"

"I should say so. Mrs. Mansfield will give you houseroom for a night or two, I suppose, and I know a fellow who will put me up at his rooms, if I ask him. I shall make some excuse to my fond parents, and you may as well do the same; because there's no use in telling them what is up until the thing is settled, one way or the other. The lawyers, you see, are sure to raise all manner of difficulties, and you yourself may alter your mind."

"I shall not alter it in this instance," answered Veronica. And she felt constrained to add: "I did not think you would be so hard and unsympathetic about it all."

"Did you expect me to plump down upon my knees and burst into tears of gratitude? Now, look here, Veronica; you have done a lot for me, and I'm not ungrateful for benefits received; but when you wonder at my not thanking you for what you propose to do now, you should bear in mind what you are asking of me. I shall be called a robber; my own people will think pretty meanly of me, though they may be glad that I am provided for; I shall let myself in for no end of

bother, and what shall I get in exchange? A big house, a comfortable income, and fairly good shooting? But I have no fancy for big houses, and my shooting has improved so much of late that I shall always be sure of as many invitations as I can accept. Upon my word and honour, I would far rather be a land-agent than a landlord. Consequently, if I see my way to consent to your proposal, I shall consent simply and solely in order to oblige you. As for sympathy, you mustn't demand it of me just at present. You haven't behaved in a way that I can sympathise with, Veronica, and that's the truth."

Veronica did not care to justify herself. She was not pleased with Joe, and was all the less pleased with him because, from a common-sense point of view, his censure was merited. However, there was at least one person—apparently there was only one—who could appreciate what her difficulties had been, and who even approved of the manner in which she had dealt with them. So that when, shortly after the above conversation had taken place, Mr. Mostyn was announced, his reception was of the warmest character.

"I was longing for you!" his pupil exclaimed. "Let us go out into the garden, if you don't mind; I want to abuse everybody, except you, with plenty of space and fresh air round me."

The weather was mild and sunny, so Mr. Mostyn, who only loved fresh air so long as there was no unpleasant nip of east wind in it, smiled and assented, remarking that the human race, with the one honourable

exception which she had mentioned, would find no enthusiastic champion in him.

“This world,” said he, while he carefully picked his way across the moist lawn beside the swiftly stepping Veronica, “is inhabited by beings of whom many are cruel, most selfish, and nearly all stupid. Every now and then it is a relief to abuse them, although the best plan, generally speaking, is to accept them for what they are and keep one’s temper. What particular miscreant has been rousing your ire to-day?”

Veronica led the way to a somewhat damp and mouldering bench, upon which she threw herself down before replying discontentedly: “Oh, I don’t know, after all, that I ought not to rail at myself instead of at other people. Perhaps it is my own fault that everything goes askew with me.”

The poet followed her example, after tucking his coat-tails under him. “This mean,” he observed, “that your relations have been urging you to reconsider your decision and to beckon Mr. Horace Trevor back again.”

Veronica said it did not mean that, but she confessed that the one of her relations whose support, or at least comprehension, she had counted upon had not answered to her expectations. “And it makes me feel as if I should have done more wisely to leave things as they were and marry Horace. He would have been kind to me, and I should have tried not to interfere with him, and I daresay the failure wouldn’t have been so complete as my actual failure is.”

“I must be allowed to demur to the assertion that

you have made any actual failure," returned Mr. Mostyn, smiling. "You are depressed and irritated to-day, as we all are sometimes, but that feeling will pass off. If you had carried out your scheme of marrying a man who is essentially prosaic, your depression and irritation would have become chronic, not occasional. I speak of what I know; for, like you, I am blessed or afflicted with the invariable poetic temperament, and it has taken me all my life to reduce it to a state of partial discipline."

"Perhaps you are right," answered Veronica dubiously; "but you differ from me in being a man. I suppose men can endure loneliness better than we can."

"Well, it is more tolerable to be alone than to be forced into uncongenial company; but why should you be alone? Just now you did me the honour to except me from the general condemnation. I don't know that I deserve such a compliment; but I am sure that the more chances you give me of deserving it the happier I shall be. Perhaps also you might in some very slight degree increase your own happiness by letting me see you oftener."

Veronica expressed the gratitude that she felt in language which doubtless flattered the poet's vanity, accustomed though his ears were to flattering speeches. "But," she added, "in spite of all your kindness and friendliness, you can never prevent my life from being a lonely one. For one thing, even if you don't grow tired of me and my feeble little attempts at rhyme, I shall so seldom see you! Only when you happen to be

down here, and perhaps not then, for I am beginning to understand that this cannot be my permanent home."

Mr. Mostyn rose and walked away for a few paces. Then he returned and stood looking down upon Veronica with kindly, compassionate eyes. "You are hardly more than a child," he said, "and I am almost an old man. Yet one knows of cases in which crabbed age and youth have managed to dwell together in contentment. Veronica, will you give me the right to live with you and take care of you until one of us dies? Don't mind laughing at me, if the suggestion strikes you as irresistibly comic."

It did not strike Veronica in that light—on the contrary, it brought the tears into her eyes—but she said at once that she could never accept an offer so obviously inspired by pity. "Only I shall always be proud to remember that you have done me this great honour," she declared; "it will be something to think of when I am inclined to doubt—as I know I often shall be—whether anyone has ever regarded me otherwise than with a sort of amused scorn."

Her lover (for such he boldly asserted himself to be) resumed his seat beside her, took her hand, and explained very gently and quietly how far she was from entering into his meaning. He would have spoken long ago, he said, but had been restrained by the not unnatural diffidence which beseemed a man old enough to be her father. Even now, he hardly liked to tell her of his doubts—his repressed hopes—his absurd and unwarrantable jealousies. All he could venture to offer

her was protection, appreciation, a tender and respectful sympathy. If these could by any means be made to suffice, they should be hers at a word.

Veronica almost felt that they might be made to suffice. She had, it was true, broken off a previous engagement on the specific ground that marriage without love was an experiment too dangerous to be essayed; but then she very well remembered having told Horace at the time that she could and would have married him if they had had anything in common, and with Cyril Mostyn she had more in common than with any other man of her acquaintance. Moreover, protection and appreciation—especially protection—seemed to her to be the very things of which she stood most sorely in need. So, after a moment or two of silence and self-interrogation, she made the reply which had, perhaps, been expected of her.

“And of this, at any rate, I can feel sure,” she added with a smile, “that you are not offering to marry me for the sake of my money. I don’t know whether I could have felt sure of that if you had been anybody else.”

“I hope I need not tell you,” rejoined the poet, “that to me money appears to be about the most contemptible of the many false gods which poor humanity has set up for itself.”

“Yes, I know you think so; all your writings show it; and it is a point upon which you and I are absolutely agreed. Anyhow, my husband’s riches will be very little if at all increased by me; for I may tell you,

in strict confidence, that I have now arranged to bestow the Broxham estate upon my cousin, Joe Dimsdale, and as he will require additional means in order to keep up the property, I have promised that he shall have as much as I can spare of my income into the bargain. Then I am more or less pledged to help dear old Uncle John; so that if I reserve a few hundreds a year for myself that will be all I shall be able to manage."

"My dear girl," remonstrated Mr. Mostyn, laughing, "your Quixotry would be admirable if it had not the drawback which attaches to all Quixotry. Of course such a programme is out of the question; your cousin could never agree to it."

"But he *has* agreed to it."

"Is it possible? Then I am afraid that I must say that *I* cannot agree to it. I should be ashamed of myself if I were to consent to such a suicidal act on my wife's part."

"Perhaps you would be right," answered Veronica reflectively; "I can understand your feeling in that way. Only, you see, the act will have been committed before I become your wife."

Mr. Mostyn shook his head, still laughing. "I assure you that it will not! I must save you from yourself, as well as from your friends, and I beg to say most distinctly that our engagement must be contingent upon your undertaking not to sign away an acre of your land or a shilling of your fortune."

He really meant it, although it took Veronica some little time to realise that he was speaking seriously.

What shocked her beyond measure was that, at the end of a somewhat warm discussion, she extracted from him an avowal for which she had been wholly unprepared.

“I should be sorry to see you despoiled,” said he; “but I must confess that I myself do not wish to be despoiled either. I am am not more greedy than my neighbours—possibly even a little less so—but I am not less subject to the material conditions which govern our lives here below. I am, in fact, a comparatively poor man, and I feel no inclination at all, at my age, to double my expenses for the sake of enriching Master Joe Dimsdale.”

“Then,” said Veronica firmly, “I cannot be your wife.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Not if you remain obdurate, I am afraid. Can you not understand that life is prose, and that poetry is only the pleasant illusion which helps us to forget for a time what we actually are?”

“Oh,” murmured Veronica, aghast, “how small you are!”

She had imagined him great, and was proportionately disappointed and disgusted; but, in truth, there was no more ground for her disgust than there had been for her illusion. As a poet Cyril Mostyn was relatively great; as a critic he was positively so; viewed from a moral standpoint, he was of about the average size and weight. He was justified in boasting that he was not more greedy than his neighbours, for he had never treated his art as a means of making money nor

even deigned to court that popularity which commands large sales; on the other hand, he was rather self-indulgent, and had no notion of giving up small luxuries for the sake of a sentimental idea. This, stated with such elegant periphrasis as the occasion seemed to demand, was what he strove to render intelligible; and, although he met with scanty success, he went away without appreciable loss of self-esteem.

Veronica, for her part, sought the seclusion of her own chamber in a frame of mind bordering upon despair. Many human beings, Mr. Mostyn had said, are cruel, most are selfish, and nearly all stupid. He himself, it appeared, deserved a place in each of the former categories; she was by no means certain that he ought not also to be included in the last. And the rest of them were like him—even Joe, who had shown such a business-like determination to take as much as he could get.

“If I have had one disinterested friend in all my life,” sighed Veronica disconsolately, “it has been Horace Trevor, and he will never be my friend again.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

JOB'S COMFORTERS.

“So you and Joe are to go up to London together to-morrow, I hear, Veronica,” remarked Deborah Dimsdale cheerfully, a few days later. “I am very glad you have made up your mind to leave. Not, of course, that we shall not miss you; but it can't be good for you to stay moping here, and you look so pale and miserable. It isn't as if you had plenty of occupations to take you out of yourself, as I have.”

Deborah, who had been visiting the poor of the parish, had returned from her ministrations with a fine colour and an empty basket. There was not much to make the present or the future bright for this poor, insignificant, unlovely little person; but she took life as she found it and had no complaints to make, as Veronica noticed, with some envy and a little compunction.

“I shall not be away for long, you know,” the latter observed; “I have to interview the lawyers and the dressmaker, and Aunt Julia has kindly offered to take me in for a couple of nights or so; but my business will soon be transacted.”

“Oh, I don't expect to see you here again before the

summer," returned Deborah, laughing; "when once you are in London you will stay there, and all these foolish misunderstandings will be cleared up, I hope and believe. You never speak to me about yourself, Veronica, and I don't venture to ask questions; but, of course, I have heard the whole story, and now that that tiresome Miss Cradock has been disposed of, I am sure you and Mr. Trevor will make it up, like sensible people. Stupid as I am supposed to be, I *have* had some experience of lovers and their ways of going on. There was a very similar case to yours in the village last year. Betts, the baker, you know, and Sally Miles, whom he has since married. I always told Sally that, if she would only have patience, all would end well; and, sure enough, that pretty girl at the Seven Stars whom he took it into his silly head to run after jilted him for a commercial traveller; after which——"

"The analogy would be perfect," interrupted Veronica, "if I had been forsaken by Mr. Trevor and if I were going up to London to meet him. The only respect in which I differ from Sally Miles is that her ambition was to marry, whereas mine is to remain single."

But Deborah knew a great deal better than to believe that, and signs were not wanting that other members of the household shared her amiable anticipations. It was just as well not to undeceive them or to insist too much upon the necessity which had arisen for holding a consultation with Mr. Walton. When the results of that consultation should be divulged, there would, no doubt, be some protests and lamentations; but these would be

curtailed by the knowledge that they came too late—probably also by a little irrepressible joy at Joe's good fortune. If Veronica was disposed at this time to form somewhat cynical appreciations of her fellow-creatures, it must be owned that she was not wholly without excuse.

One small consolation was that Joe had now become much pleasanter and more like his old self. By mutual consent, Veronica and he had ceased to discuss the future, leaving that and all questions connected with it to be dealt with in the unemotional atmosphere of Lincoln's Inn Fields, and reverting, just for these few days, to old familiar habits, which must perforce be shortly abandoned for ever. This was made more easy by the departure of Mr. Mostyn, who had left home, and who, it was understood, had gone to seek refreshment in those Parisian literary circles which he always declared to be essential as an occasional corrective to insularity.

"If that beggar would have himself naturalised as a Frenchman at once, I don't think Great Britain would be much the poorer," Joe remarked, strolling leisurely towards home with Veronica, after a satisfactory morning with the ferrets; "what you can see in him to venerate so respectfully has always been a mystery to me."

"I cannot help admiring his work," she answered; "I don't admire him personally quite as much as I once did."

"Oh, you've found him out at last, eh?"

"I suppose so; one ends by finding everybody out."

At least, one finds that very few people are exactly what one took them for."

"One does indeed!" said Joe. "At the same time, I must confess that I never took your friend Mostyn for anything but a wind-bag. How and where did you contrive to stick a pin into him?"

Veronica did not at first feel that she would be justified in answering the question; yet she knew Joe to be thoroughly trustworthy, and she had been wont to admit him into her full confidence in days gone by, and her present sense of isolation weighed so heavily upon her that at length, after binding him to secrecy, she made up her mind to relate what had passed between her and her dethroned demi-god.

"Don't you think it was disgusting of him?" she asked in conclusion.

"Well, if you come to that," answered Joe impartially, "no, I don't. When a man offers to make a certain bargain, he isn't bound to accept a totally different one. I grant you that *you* would have been disgusting if you had agreed to marry that fellow upon any terms, and I was very much afraid that you would agree to marry him until I heard, to my relief, that he had decamped."

"You don't mean to say, Joseph, that you ever expected him to propose to me!"

"Strange to relate, Veronica, that is just what I did expect, and have been expecting ever since you became a full-blown heiress. Luckily for you, there is every prospect of your soon ceasing to be a temptation to

poets and others. I flatter myself that if I step into your shoes I shall not run the same risks. It will take an uncommonly clever woman to persuade me that she is enamoured of my personal charms."

"There is such a thing as being too suspicious," remarked Veronica, not best pleased with his tone.

"I am quite willing to take your word for that, my dear. You ought to know. The mistake which some people are apt to make is in suspecting those whom they ought to trust and trusting those whom they ought to see through. Now, Trevor, for instance, is a man who can be trusted through thick and thin, and——"

"I never distrusted him at all," interrupted Veronica impatiently. "You don't or won't understand why I had no choice but to break off that unfortunate engagement; and there is no use in talking any more about it. I thought you agreed with me that bygones had better be bygones."

"Of course I do," replied Joe. "Only it isn't a bad plan to bear bygone errors in mind. Then, perhaps, one may be preserved from making a fool of oneself a second time."

One does not always get a second chance of doing so, nor could Veronica feel as confident as she would fain have felt that she was not about to make a fool of herself in a new direction. However, Joe did not seem to be troubled with any misgivings upon that head. On the way up to London, the next day, he spoke freely to his travelling-companion of the life which he pro-

posed to lead when Broxham should have passed into his hands.

“I shall have to keep a part of the house permanently closed until I marry,” he observed. “Marriage, of course, is inevitable—rather a bore; but there’s no help for it. I shall look out for some sensible young woman who understands housekeeping; but I daresay I sha’n’t find her for a year or two, and in the meantime the furniture must take its chance of moth and dry rot.”

“Poor Aunt Julia!” interpolated Veronica, with a sigh; “she did so throw her heart into the furnishing!”

“Poor thing! Well, I might let her have it at a valuation if she cared to take it away, because I sha’n’t be using the rooms. For some time to come the house must be a bachelor establishment; but I shall do what I can to improve the property and I shall take care to keep the shooting up.”

“Will you ever ask Horace to shoot with you, do you think?” asked Veronica, with an effort.

“Oh, yes; I won’t fail to ask him. Why not?”

“Won’t it be rather painful for him?”

“I shouldn’t wonder if he did find it a bit painful just at first, but one gets accustomed to all sorts of funny things. And he has no quarrel with *me*, you see.”

“I hope he has no quarrel with me either.”

“H’m! he must be something very like an angel in human form if he hasn’t. That’s a forbidden subject though, isn’t it?”

Veronica was of opinion that, so far as Joe was concerned, it had better remain forbidden ; but she wished very much that she could see Horace and conclude a treaty of peace. Rudely and unfairly as he had hitherto met her advances, she longed to renew them and even to offer the apology which perhaps, after all, he had some title to exact. At the bottom of her heart there had always lurked a faint hope that he would permit her to redress her wrongs, and now that that was no longer possible, her anger against him was fast melting into compassion.

When the train reached Paddington, where Mrs. Mansfield's footman was in attendance upon the platform, Joe said : " I wouldn't mention to your aunt what has brought you up to London, if I were you. She'll only want to argue with you, and it's as well to be able to put a stop to argument by announcing that it comes a day too late. I assume, of course, that you have quite made up your mind."

" Oh, yes ! I have quite made up my mind," answered Veronica.

" Because if you haven't, please say so ; you won't disappoint me, I can assure you. Only I would rather not state in the presence of your lawyers that I am prepared to accept the property, subject to certain conditions, and then be informed that you have thought better of your plan. That wouldn't place me in quite the most becoming possible attitude for the portrait of a gentleman, you see."

“You need not be under the slightest apprehension,” replied Veronica, a little coldly.

“All right; then I’ll call in South Audley Street for you about half-past ten to-morrow morning. I think you said you had made an appointment with Mr. Walton for eleven o’clock.”

Veronica said she would be ready at the hour named, and took leave of her cousin with as much cordiality as she could bring herself to display. This practical, hard-headed young man was not the boy who had been her friend in old days; he was not even the Joe with whom she had gone out ferreting twenty-four hours ago. But boys, unfortunately, grow up into men, and friendship is a word of elastic interpretation, and the less one expects of one’s fellow-mortals, the less likely one is to be troubled with headaches and heartaches.

To plead that she had a headache (as, in truth, she had) was one method of disarming the hostile criticism of Aunt Julia; and it seemed to be a tolerably successful method, for that ill-used lady was really very kind and forbearing. She made much of her niece, forcing her to lie down upon a sofa, insisting upon the immediate administration of homœopathic remedies, and heroically abstaining from any reference to the breach between them which had now been closed. Only, as was but natural, she had one or two questions to ask, which, after a time, she apologised for putting.

“I don’t want to bother you, my dear,” said she, “and, of course, if you have made no plans yet you cannot tell me what you are going to do; but it would

be convenient to have some sort of idea of what is required of me. Please don't say 'Nothing,' or I shall think you are still angry with me."

"I never have been angry with you, Aunt Julia," answered Veronica, sincerely enough. "I have given you reason to be angry with me, I know; but I don't see how I could have helped that. And how could I possibly say that I required nothing of you, after inviting myself to stay with you? As for plans, I think I must wait a little longer before I can speak of them. For the present, all I have to do is to see Mr. Walton to-morrow about some matters of business and to do a little shopping; so that I shall not need to inflict myself upon you for more than two days."

"But you will come back to me later, Veronica? Really there is no other course open to you that I can see. And something ought to be done about Broxham. If you don't want to live there the place must be let, I suppose—though I should hate to think of strangers inhabiting the poor old house!" added Mrs. Mansfield plaintively.

"I am afraid I could not make up my mind to live there," said Veronica, thinking it as well to pave the way for the distressing announcement which would have shortly to be made.

"Yet you must live *somewhere*, my dear. However, I renounce all attempt to influence you; my only wish is to be of service to you in any way that I can. I suppose you do receive some reports from Broxham? You are not leaving the servants to do exactly as they please?"

“Oh, no; I get constant letters,” answered Veronica, smiling; for she thought it very unlikely that Aunt Julia had taken no measures to assure herself of that fact.

After this there was a pause, which was broken by Veronica's inquiring, “Have you seen anything of Horace lately?”

“Yes; he was here a few days ago. Quite well, and full of engagements, as usual. Horace is always so immensely in request. I warned him that you were coming, so that he might not drop in again until the coast was clear.”

“But I thought you said he harboured no feeling of resentment against me.”

“Nor does he, dear fellow! I was thinking of you rather than of him. I felt that a meeting would be so very awkward for you!”

“There must be a little awkwardness the first time we meet, I suppose,” answered Veronica; “but we are almost sure to meet again some day, and I would much rather get it over at once and have done with it. Besides, I want to tell him how sorry I am for all that has happened.”

“Wouldn't that sound a little ironical, dear? I mean, he might take it in that way—or he might think it rather bad taste. I will ask him to dine to-morrow, if you really wish it—though I doubt whether he would be able to come—but I should advise you to leave well alone.”

Veronica made no rejoinder, and presently Mrs. Mansfield resumed—

“I presume you have heard that Dolly Cradock’s engagement to Mr. Hornblower is announced. Poor Lady Louisa is in the seventh heaven, and Horace says he means to buy her the handsomest wedding present he can afford. I daresay he feels relieved, for she certainly did try very hard to ensnare him—as if he ever would have looked twice at her!”

“You considered her quite dangerous at Broxham, I remember,” Veronica could not help remarking.

“Oh, not as a rival! I only thought, and I think still, that she did a good deal towards reconciling him to the little disappointment which was in store for him. The truth is that you made far too sure of him, Veronica, and that is always such a mistake. I tried to warn you at the time; but you would not listen to me, and now you see! However, one can but hope that all has fallen out for the best, and I do trust that you won’t distress yourself any more. You are looking anything but well, dear, I am sorry to see.”

Now, it did not need any extraordinary clearness of vision to fathom the depths of this innocent and pellucid diplomacy. Mrs. Mansfield evidently misunderstood the nature of her niece’s repentance, and flattered herself that by applying the spur to certain well-known feminine characteristics she could yet contrive to renew a repudiated compact. But although that much was obvious, it did not follow that she had misstated facts. It might very well be the case—indeed, it probably was the case—that Horace was not inconsolable; it was also by no means unlikely that, should his forgiveness be en-

treated, he would leap to Aunt Julia's erroneous conclusions. Upon the whole, therefore, Veronica reluctantly decided that her idea of seeking an interview with him must be abandoned. After all, it would, perhaps, sound a little ironical to say that she was sorry, and to inform him in the same breath that she no longer had it in her power to make substantial amends for the injury that she had done him. It was impossible to foresee how he would receive such an announcement, or what he would imagine that she could mean by it. The unhappy thing, the irremediable thing, was that, as Joe had truly observed, poor Horace had "got the worst of it all round."

CHAPTER XXV.

JOSEPH'S HOST.

MRS. MANSFIELD alarmed Veronica a good deal at breakfast the next morning by proposing to accompany her to the lawyer's office.

"I know how independent you are, dear," said she; "but I really cannot feel that it is quite right for you to be roaming all over London alone, and as you choose to go to Mr. Walton, instead of sending for him—which I should have thought would have been rather more fitting than that he should send for you—I may as well take this opportunity of consulting him about some small affairs of my own, upon which I wish to have his opinion."

"Oh, but indeed you must not think of doing that!" protested Veronica. "It always gives you indigestion to go out immediately after breakfast, you know, and, of course, Mr. Walton can come to you at any time. I will give him a message if you like. As for me, I shall not be unattended; my cousin, Joe Dimsdale, who travelled up with me yesterday, has promised to call and take me to the City. He—he has business there himself."

Mrs. Mansfield, who was secretly desirous of finding out what her niece's business with Mr. Walton might be, persisted for a few minutes, but finally had to give in, and was fortunately free from any suspicion as to the nature of Joe Dimsdale's business. She ended by remarking—

“I suppose you won't be very long; I understood that everything connected with your succession to the estate had been wound up, and surely Sutton is the proper person to deal with leases and all that sort of thing. What is the use of having an agent unless he takes such burdens off your shoulders.”

“There are some things which I think I ought to go into myself,” answered Veronica disingenuously; “but I doubt whether I shall have to trouble Mr. Walton after to-day.”

“Well, at all events,” observed Mrs. Mansfield, giving utterance to the thought that was in her mind before she could stop herself, “Mr. Walton may be trusted to prevent you from doing anything rash or foolish. Indeed, there isn't very much that you *can* do now.”

Veronica burst into one of her sudden, irrepressible laughs. She was not in a particularly merry mood; but the contrast between this misplaced confidence and the dismay with which Aunt Julia would subsequently learn of what rashness and foolishness she was still capable overpowered her for the moment. Luckily the entrance of the butler, who came to announce that a young gentleman was waiting for her at the door, enabled her to take to her heels without giving the ex-

planation which Mrs. Mansfield's open eyes and mouth demanded.

"Jump in, Joseph!" she said, as she hurriedly entered the hansom beside which her cousin was standing. "Make haste, or we shall have Aunt Julia starting in pursuit. It has already begun to dawn upon her that I am up to no good."

"Leave her to me," returned Joe placidly; "I'll undertake to say that no old woman shall divert your humble servant from his purpose. When I once make up my mind to a thing I pretty generally contrive to carry it through."

Veronica thought that on the present occasion it was rather more a question of her mind and her purpose than her companion's, but she said nothing, and before they had been driven very far on their way it appeared that even the self-complacent Joe was not infallible.

"Confound it all!" he ejaculated suddenly, looking up from the pages of a note-book which he had been consulting. "Here's a nuisance! I say, Veronica, will it matter if we keep that old lawyer chap waiting a short time?"

"I don't suppose he will like it," answered Veronica; "but we shall be sure to find him at his office up to five o'clock in the afternoon, I believe. What is the matter?"

"It's awfully stupid of me; but I have got to see a man this morning, and if I don't go at once I shall miss him, because he was to leave town at half-past eleven. Would you mind waiting for me? I shan't be

more than twenty minutes or half an hour at the outside."

Veronica did not mind waiting, but she did rather object to returning to South Audley Street, and when she suggested that she might sit in the hansom at his friend's door Joe declared decisively that that wouldn't do at all.

"I'll tell you what you might do," he said suddenly; "you might come to that chap's rooms where I'm staying and wait for me there. He always breakfasts at his club, so you'll have the place to yourself; and, even if he should turn up before I come back, it won't matter. He knows all about you."

Veronica assented more readily than most young ladies would have done to a proposal in which she saw nothing out of the way. Joe's host, she presumed, would be willing to give her shelter for a quarter of an hour, and she very much preferred being indebted to him for so ordinary an act of civility to risking a renewal of her conversation with Aunt Julia. For the rest, she was not at all likely to encounter that unknown gentleman. The snug little bachelor's apartment in the neighbourhood of St. James's Street into which she was presently conducted by Joe was, as he had anticipated that it would be, untenanted; and after she had been left there with an illustrated paper to while away the time, she amused herself by speculating upon what manner of man the usual occupier of the premises might be.

Evidently a sporting man, to judge by the prints,

crayons, and water-colours with which the walls were covered, and which represented hunting and racing scenes alone. Nevertheless, a man who was not without refined tastes, nor even destitute of literary culture; for the furniture showed signs of having been carefully selected, the colours were subdued and well-assorted, and upon the tables lay quite a large number of books such as sporting persons seldom trouble themselves to open. Some of these, it was true, looked suspiciously new, while the leaves of a few had not even been cut; but a book-marker was sticking in "Sartor Resartus," and that this work had been honestly perused, not merely skimmed through, was plain from the rumpled condition of its pages. Veronica picked up the volume and glanced at it with a smile, remembering how, in the days when Horace had been eager to profit by her instructions, she had placed it upon her list of books to be read, and how he had confessed that, although he found Carlyle splendid in certain passages, there were others over which he had cudgelled his brains in vain to discover what the writer was driving at. Poor Horace! he had always been modest, always sincere, always ready to give people whom he did not understand credit for knowing more than he did—which could hardly be said with truth, for some of the authors with whose productions he had been invited to make himself acquainted. As much, assuredly, could not be said for Mr. Cyril Mostyn, a copy of whose "Essays on the Literature of the Victorean Era" lay close at hand. Still, it was rather presumptuous of Joseph's friend to have

disfigured this standard work by scrawling a gross caricature of the famous poet and critic upon the flyleaf, and to have stigmatised the well-weighed exordium by scribbling "Conceited ass!" in pencil on the margin.

"This young gentleman wants taking down a peg," said Veronica to herself. "I almost wish he would come in, so that I might ask him what he means by it."

As if in answer to her hasty aspiration, the street door was slammed at that moment, and a step was heard ascending the staircase.

"Oh, here he comes!" thought Veronica. "Well, I shall certainly tell him that there are more conceited asses than one in the world, and that, whatever Mr. Mostyn may be in private life, his writings at least are entitled to respect."

But she said nothing of that sort when the rightful owner of the room which she had invaded and the book which she held in her hand stood before her, every feature of his face expressing the most profound amazement. What she did say was, "Good gracious! Do *you* live here?"

"Of course I live here," Horace Trevor replied. "But—but——"

"But you would be glad to know what *I* am doing here, I suppose," suggested Veronica, recovering her self-possession, as it dawned upon her that she had been made the subject of a wily stratagem. "It was Joe who brought me; he wanted me to wait a quarter of an hour for him somewhere, and he never mentioned you were the friend with whom he was staying. No doubt he

has done this on purpose, and I am sure he meant kindly. Indeed, it really was kind of him, for I was most anxious to see you again, Horace."

Horace did not look as if he had experienced any similar anxiety.

"Won't you sit down," he said stiffly. "I daresay Joe will be back presently. Of course, I shouldn't have come in if I had had the least idea that you were here."

"I will not be quarrelled with," returned Veronica resolutely. "I am quite ready to beg your pardon, if you think I ought—in a way, I think so myself. But you must know how miserable it has always made me to have supplanted you, and if you have any sense of justice at all, you cannot help admitting that I have tried my utmost to make restitution."

"And goodness knows," exclaimed Horace, "I have tried my utmost to convince you that there never was or could be any question of restitution in the matter! You wouldn't speak in that way if you knew how—how—well, I can't find any other word for it—how offensive it is to me!"

"Offensive is not a very pretty word to use, I must say," remarked Veronica, colouring slightly; "but, however offensive I may be, I am determined not to be offended; and if you won't take the estate, Horace, and don't wish to take it—as I quite believe that you don't—why should you go on being angry with me?"

Horace bit his lip and made no immediate reply. At length he remarked: "I don't know whether you

are capable of imagining yourself in my place—I suppose you aren't, or you would never have asked such a question. But don't you think it would make you a little bit angry if the man whom you love best in the world were to take it for granted that he could atone for having kicked you downstairs by offering you pecuniary compensation?"

"That is neither a fair nor a true way of putting it," Veronica returned. "You required no compensation for having been released from a woman who, as you and Dolly Cradock knew very well, could never have been formed into the sort of wife whom you ought to marry. It never entered into my head to offer you compensation. All I begged of you was to take the property which was already yours by rights, and which I myself care so little about that, in default of any other claimant, I have decided to make it over to Joe. Perhaps he has told you that he and I have come up to London for that purpose."

Horace nodded. "Yes, he told me last night what you were contemplating. I must confess I was surprised and sorry to hear of it. However, it is no affair of mine."

"It ought to be; only you won't allow it to be. You mean, of course, that you are sorry on my account, and that you think I am acting foolishly. That is what everybody will think, and I am quite prepared for censure and ridicule, and even scolding. But I don't see why I should be deserted by my friends because I am going to be poor, instead of rich, and I did hope

that you would consent to be one of my friends, in spite of all."

"I am sure," answered Horace, a little softened by this appeal, though he was fully alive to its absurdity, "there can be nobody living who can be more anxious to serve you than I am, Veronica, and I wouldn't for the world have you think that I want to sulk; still, when you talk about friendship—well, honestly, I don't see how that is possible between you and me. Anyhow, I am certain that I could never be friends with your husband."

"But I haven't got a husband."

"You will have one soon. Unless, indeed, he is choked off by this sudden surrender of your fortune to a third person, as he very likely will be; for if ever there was a man who knew on which side his bread was buttered, it is the great and good Mr. Cyril Mostyn."

"If you have heard anything about Mr. Mostyn," said Veronica, "you must have heard that he has already been choked off, as you call it. Joe had no business to repeat that to you, though, after promising to hold his tongue."

"Joe hasn't mentioned the fellow's name to me. I wasn't so blind that I couldn't see what his little game was, and I am glad, for your sake, that he has given it up. All the same, I should like to take a running kick at him—which he deserves."

"I don't think that he deserves such treatment," said Veronica, laughing, as a rapid vision of Mr. Mostyn being propelled into space by the application of one of

Horace's shooting-boots flashed before her. "He is no worse than everybody else. Everybody, except, perhaps, you and me, takes a very practical view of life when it comes to be a question of pounds, shillings, and pence. That is one reason why we ought to be able to shake hands."

Horace heaved a sigh. "Oh, I am ready to shake hands, if that's all," he answered.

"Only you won't forgive and forget."

"Yes, I will. At least I'll forgive. I won't forgive that fellow Joe, though—never was so disappointed in a boy in all my life! My opinion is that he ought to be ashamed of himself, and so I've told him."

"But he is only taking Broxham to oblige me."

"Yes; that's what he has the impudence to say. But I can't quite swallow that story. He wouldn't have found shelter under this humble roof if I had known what his errand was, I can tell him! And, not content with collaring the land, he demands a big sum down in hard cash besides, I understand."

"Of course it sounds grasping," agreed Veronica; "but, as a matter of fact, the place can't be kept up without a sufficient income. I remember Lord Chippenham telling me that I should not find the whole fortune I had inherited at all too much."

"And do you mean to say that you are going to bestow all your fortune upon that young rascal?"

"Not the whole of it; I explained to him that I couldn't do that. We are going to talk things over

with Mr. Walton now, and see how much can be spared."

"It is easy to foretell how this will end," remarked Horace lugubriously; "you will make a pauper of yourself, and nobody will thank you. Oh, Veronica, why couldn't you let things be! I am not good enough for you, and you don't care for me—that's an answer, of course. But at least I could have given you a home and protection; and certainly no one will ever love you more than I do."

"But are you quite sure that you do love me, Horace?" asked Veronica gently, after a pause. "Aunt Julia says——"

"Aunt Julia be hanged! I will tell you this, Veronica: I am as sure of loving you to my dying day as I am that it will never be in my power again to ask you to be my wife. No; not even if, by any possibility, you should change your mind and come to care for me. For, as you say, one is bound to take a practical view of the pounds, shilling, and pence question, and my income is only just enough to keep a bachelor alive upon."

Veronica had seated herself in Horace's arm-chair, and was pressing her finger-tips together thoughtfully. There was something which she wanted to say—something which she had only at that moment realised that she ought, perhaps, to say. Yet it seemed doubtful whether she would not do a great deal better to hold her peace. The young man, meanwhile, had walked to the window, and was standing with his back turned towards her, staring out into the street.

“Horace,” she began at length timidly, “I should like you to know the whole truth. I still think I did right to set you free! I still think that, if only Dolly Cradock could somehow have been put into my place, you would have been far happier with her than you ever could have been with me: I still see—I can’t help seeing—that we are not suited to one another. But I know—and, if you will believe me, I never did know it until now—at least, not for certain, I have only had occasional sort of suspicions that it might be so—I know now that I should have been happy with you, in spite of all.”

Horace darted back from the window like a hare, and stood before her with dilated eyes of amazement. “Veronica,” he stammered, “do you know what you are saying? Do you really mean——”

“Oh, no; not that!” she answered, jumping up hastily and placing the chair between her and her interrogator; “pray don’t imagine that I have changed my mind once more, and that I want to undo what has been done. Only I felt that I must tell you that—that——”

“That you love me, Veronica!”

“I don’t think I was going to say quite that,” answered Veronica, still edging away; “but it doesn’t really matter. You must see yourself that, whatever you may wish for the moment, and however anxious you may be to do a dreadfully foolish thing, that chapter is closed. I can’t go back from my word to Joe; I can’t keep the property which I have promised to give up to him.”

“Let him take it, and welcome!” cried Horace; “I’m sure *I* don’t want the place, if you don’t, and—I say, Veronica, I wish you wouldn’t run about the room like that; you make me so giddy I can’t speak!”

“It isn’t in the least desirable that you should speak until you can talk rationally,” answered Veronica; “but I will stop running about if you will be good enough to stand still and listen to me for one moment.”

Horace at once became rigid and motionless. “All right,” he answered; “I’m listening. Only it’s sheer waste of time to repeat that we are not suited to one another. Let me remind you of what you said that afternoon in the library at Broxham. Our having nothing in common wouldn’t have mattered, if you remember, according to you, so long as we were in love with one another.”

“I may have said so, though I can’t recollect it; but let me remind you of what you said not five minutes ago. It was never to be in your power again to ask me to be your wife, even if I came to care for you: because there wouldn’t be money enough.”

“Ah, but when I said that I made sure that you never would care for me. And, look here, Veronica—of course we should be awfully poor; but by putting our means together—and surely you have a right to keep a few hundreds a year for yourself—we should

have enough to live upon. Are you so afraid of poverty?"

"Not for myself, perhaps; but I should be very much afraid of it for you. How long would you be happy, do you think, without even a horse to ride?"

"I should be happy," answered this infatuated young man decisively, "just as long as you were. Happiness for me means being with you, Veronica—that and nothing else. Of course, I'm fond of hunting, and you're fond of—well, poetry and literature and all that; but if I were told that I should never have another day with the hounds after marrying you I shouldn't wince—upon my word and honour I shouldn't. I'd pay that price and a longer one, too, without thinking twice about it. I wonder whether you would pay the price of living in a small house upon small means with an ignoramus who prefers a page of Jorrocks to all the volumes that Mr. Cyril Mostyn has ever turned out!"

Veronica looked at him with a smile, and he read in her eyes the answer which she still hesitated to return verbally. He advanced a few paces towards her, and this time she did not draw back. She only murmured, "I know it is all wrong! It is clean against reason and common-sense!"

"That's just the beauty of it!" cried Horace exultantly; "nobody will be able to accuse us now of marrying for any reason at all except the best of reasons."

And during the half-hour that followed it never

occurred to either of these self-engrossed persons to wonder what had become of Joe Dimsdale, or to recollect the serious inconvenience to which a busy solicitor is apt to be put when his clients fail to keep their appointments.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FELICITATIONS.

JOE mounted the stairs very slowly, making a good deal of unnecessary noise about it, and met with great apparent difficulty in turning the door-handle. This youth may have had his faults; but it must be acknowledged that he was dowered with a foresight and discretion beyond his years. When he at length succeeded in effecting an entrance, Horace and Veronica were seated some little distance apart, and had the air of having been engaged in polite conversation. The former started up, shook his fist, and grinned; though he could not help looking a little foolish.

“You young ruffian!” he exclaimed. “What do you mean by playing me such a trick as this, eh?”

“My dear Trevor,” answered Joe, composedly, “that strikes me as a somewhat superfluous question. What I meant by it is precisely what has come of it—neither more nor less than that. As a general thing,” added Joe, modestly, “I know what I mean; and what I mean I do. Sorry not to be able to say as much for certain other folks who shall be nameless.”

Veronica rose and walked quickly across the room towards him, stretching out her arms.

“Dear Joseph!” she exclaimed, “you were right all along, and I wish I had listened to you, instead of thinking that I knew better. And now—oh, how can I thank you!”

“Hi! Stop!—don’t do that!” shouted Joe, jumping back in much alarm. “I have a sincere respect for you, Veronica, but I don’t want to be kissed, thanks. That sort of thing isn’t done any longer in the best families, as you must be aware. In these days salutes are only bestowed upon people who aren’t blood relations.”

“You shall not be embraced, then, you rude boy!” returned Veronica, laughing. “I suppose there is no offence in my telling you that you are a darling, though. If you hadn’t played us this trick, as Horace rather ungratefully calls it, I don’t know what would have become of me! Perhaps I should never have found out that I wished to marry Horace, and almost certainly I should never have married him.”

Joe raised his eyebrows, dropped the corners of his mouth, and whistled. “Hullo!” he ejaculated, “this is serious, this is! A reconciliation was all very well, and any little trouble that I may have been put to in bringing it about I should be the last to grudge, but a marriage—well, I don’t know so much about a marriage. I daresay you have settled it all very comfortably between you; but I should like to know what part I am expected to play in this touching final scene.”

“Why, the part that you have accepted, of course,” answered Veronica. “Did you think that I was going

to display my gratitude by telling you that, after all, I had decided to keep Broxham for myself?"

"I must own that it wouldn't have surprised me if you had, Veronica; the situation, you see, isn't what it was. At the same time I must say that in my opinion a bargain ought to be a bargain, and although I was very anxious to see you and Trevor friends again, perhaps I shouldn't have acted quite as I have done if I could have foreseen what advantage you would take of my little stratagem. How was I to foresee it when you both assured me again and again that you had done with one another forever? You may say that I ought not to consider my own selfish interests; but——"

"But indeed, Joe," protested Veronica, in a distressed voice, "we never for a moment contemplated breaking faith with you. Did we, Horace?"

"I am quite sure *you* never did, at any rate," answered Horace, conscious that he had been unable to give his cordial approval to her plan of self-spoliation, "and your wishes are mine."

"H'm!" grunted Joe, glancing from one to the other and stroking his chin meditatively; "I wonder whether you realise what this means, you two. I warned you from the first, you know, Veronica, that an estate without an income would be no good to me, and by the time that I have relieved you of what will be strictly necessary, you will be a poor woman, I am afraid. Mind, I sha'n't complain if you decide to be off your bargain; I only say that half measures will be useless."

"I am not dreaming of half measures," Veronica de-

clared. "I know well enough that I shall be poor, and I *want* to be poor! So does Horace. I doubt whether he would have had anything to say to me if I had remained rich."

"Really? Well, this ought to convince you, at all events, that he is a rather better chap than you took him for. Likewise it shows that even the very best judges may sometimes be deceived in a man. I must own that, after the way in which Trevor jumped down my throat last night, I should never have supposed that he wanted you to be poor. Why, there was hardly a bad name in the English language that he didn't throw at my head!—and all because of my readiness to do you a favour!"

"Oh, well; we needn't go into that," said Horace, reddening a little. "I thought at the time that you ought not to have taken advantage of Veronica's determination to impoverish herself; but circumstances alter cases, and, as I told you just now, her wishes are mine."

"So I may take it that we have your full assent to the proposed arrangement?" observed Joe interrogatively.

Horace nodded. "Certainly you have," he replied.

"That's all right, then. What a funny thing that you should have become so indifferent to wealth all of a sudden and that I should have developed such a clear appreciation of its value! This is the result of falling in love, I suppose. Heaven grant that, when my time comes, I may not find it quite so expensive a luxury! Well, Veronica, how soon will it suit you to look up the patient Walton?"

“This moment, if you are ready,” answered Veronica with alacrity.

“I’m afraid we can’t go now. Just look at the clock, and you will see that by the time we could reach Lincoln’s Inn Fields the good man would probably have gone out to get his lunch somewhere, cursing you for your unpunctuality. No; you had better make a fresh appointment with him, accompanied by a suitable apology; and, talking of apologies, this seems to be about as appropriate a moment as another for you and Trevor to go down upon your knees and beg my pardon.”

“What for?” asked Horace, who, to tell the truth, was not best pleased with Joe’s bantering tone.

“He wants to know what for, if you please! Here’s a nice sort of a fellow to have for a friend! It never strikes him that he has been insulting me grossly by believing that I have been in earnest all this time; he doesn’t give me credit for having a particle of honesty or decency in my whole composition! I don’t so much wonder at Veronica; I have more than once had occasion to notice before now that, for a clever woman, she is quite amazingly devoid of ordinary intelligence. But I really did hope that you knew better, Trevor, than to mistake a young man of hitherto unblemished character for a highway robber. My one consolation is that I have had a brilliant success. You can’t get rid of your property now, and neither of you can go on any longer indulging in ridiculous suspicions about the other. Now beg my pardon, please, and I’ll try to forgive you.”

As a matter of course, both Horace and Veronica declared that this would never do. They were quite willing, they said, to humble themselves in the dust before their benefactor, they even admitted that they had to some extent misjudged him; but they were clearly of opinion that the existing arrangement could not now be cancelled. There were many good reasons why it should be maintained, and these they proceeded to state, while Joe, having asked permission to light his pipe, threw himself down in an easy chair and listened with exemplary patience.

“Have you quite done?” he inquired at length.

“Yes, I believe so,” answered Horace; “if you don’t understand by this time what my position is, I can’t hope to make you.”

“Anything more to say, Veronica?”

Veronica signified that she also had exhausted her stock of convincing arguments.

“All right. Then let me tell you, my good friends, that I’ll see you at Jericho beyond Jordan before I comply with your cool request. I have already had the honour to inform one of you that I have no personal ambition to become a landowner, and what you propose to do is simply to thrust responsibilities upon me which properly belong to you, in order that you may have the right to swagger about your disinterestedness. Much obliged, but I don’t see it. It doesn’t make the slightest odds to me whether Broxham belongs to Mr. or Mrs. Horace Trevor. You had better fight out that question between you. All I know is, that it will never be the

property of Joseph Dimsdale, Esquire. At the same time, if you feel that you owe me some substantial acknowledgment of my services—and not to affect mock modesty, I must say that I think you do—you might bear in mind what my real ambition is. As a land-agent, I believe that I should do justice to myself and my employers, and old Sutton is getting past his work. Put me into old Sutton's berth, my dears, and all shall be forgiven. I accept your apologies, and I think that what you have gone through will serve as a lesson to you not to behave like absolute fools for the future."

They could hardly have escaped falling under that condemnation, had they offered any further resistance, and the condemnation (if such it be) which their friends and acquaintances did not fail subsequently to pass upon them of having been at once too wise and too weak to hold out against the force of circumstances was a thing to be borne with philosophy. Each knew what to think of the other; so that it was scarcely a subject for profound unhappiness that sundry persons should declare themselves incapable of knowing what to think. Mrs. Mansfield, at all events, was not numbered among these bewildered outsiders.

"If you expect me to express the least astonishment, my dear," she said tranquilly to Veronica later in the day, "I am afraid I must disappoint you. I foresaw that you would come to your senses soon; and very much indebted you ought to feel to that young cousin of yours for having given you this opportunity. As

for dear Horace, he has behaved quite admirably throughout. Some people may call him lucky; but I shall always think the good luck is all on your side."

A somewhat similar opinion was entertained and enunciated by Miss Dolly Cradock, who spared half an hour from the purchase of her trousseau to call in South Audley Street and congratulate her reaffianced friend.

"There's no use in fighting against destiny," she was pleased to say; "if there were, I daresay I shouldn't be the future Mrs. Hornblower, and I daresay you wouldn't be the future Mrs. Trevor, my dear Veronica. But I don't complain of my destiny, and I'm sure you have no reason to complain of yours. It would have served you right to be taken at your word; but then, again, it would have been rather rough on him to be cut out of the estate. Don't try riding to hounds with him, though—if you'll accept a word of advice from a sincere well-wisher—and don't make him yawn his poor head off by reading poetry to him. Give him plenty of tether and you'll find him as good a little man as there is. The whole secret of matrimony, you may depend upon it, is to give as much as you can and take all you can get."

A much more gracefully worded form of felicitation reached Veronica from Paris, whence Mr. Cyril Mostyn wrote to give utterance to the mixed feelings with which he had heard of his pupil's last change of plans. A suggestion of mild melancholy pervaded a composi-

tion of which the phraseology left nothing to be desired, and which was in all respects a model of good taste. The writer evidently recognised that the time for warnings and remonstrances had gone by; he accepted the inevitable without indiscreet inquiry or comment; his good wishes were quite paternal in tone and were marred by no faintest allusion to the circumstances under which he had parted from his fair correspondent; if an under-current of misgiving was perceptible in his harmonious periods, it was not of a nature to cause offence.

“For a man of my age,” he remarked, “life can have no further surprise, illusions, or disillusion, in store; but to you, who are as yet upon the mere threshold of experience, it is probable—even, I fear certain—that troubles will come. Then you will instinctively fall back, as I have done many and many a time, upon art, the one unfailing, inexhaustible consolation. Then you will, perhaps, call to mind a few of the technical hints which it has been the greatest privilege of a veteran to convey to a neophyte. Is it too much to hope that then also you will think not unkindly of one who will ever remain your sincere and attached friend?”

Well, it was easy enough to think kindly of Mr. Mostyn, although, in Veronica's opinion, his technical instruction was very unlikely to be utilised after the fashion referred to. That she could ever stand in need of any other consolation than Horace could give, her she did not believe, and that, even if she should, she would find it in the exercise of an art with which she

had but played, seemed to her in the last degree improbable. But nobody's life can be written while he or she lives; and Veronica, having a sound constitution, may be expected to live for a great many years yet.

THE END.

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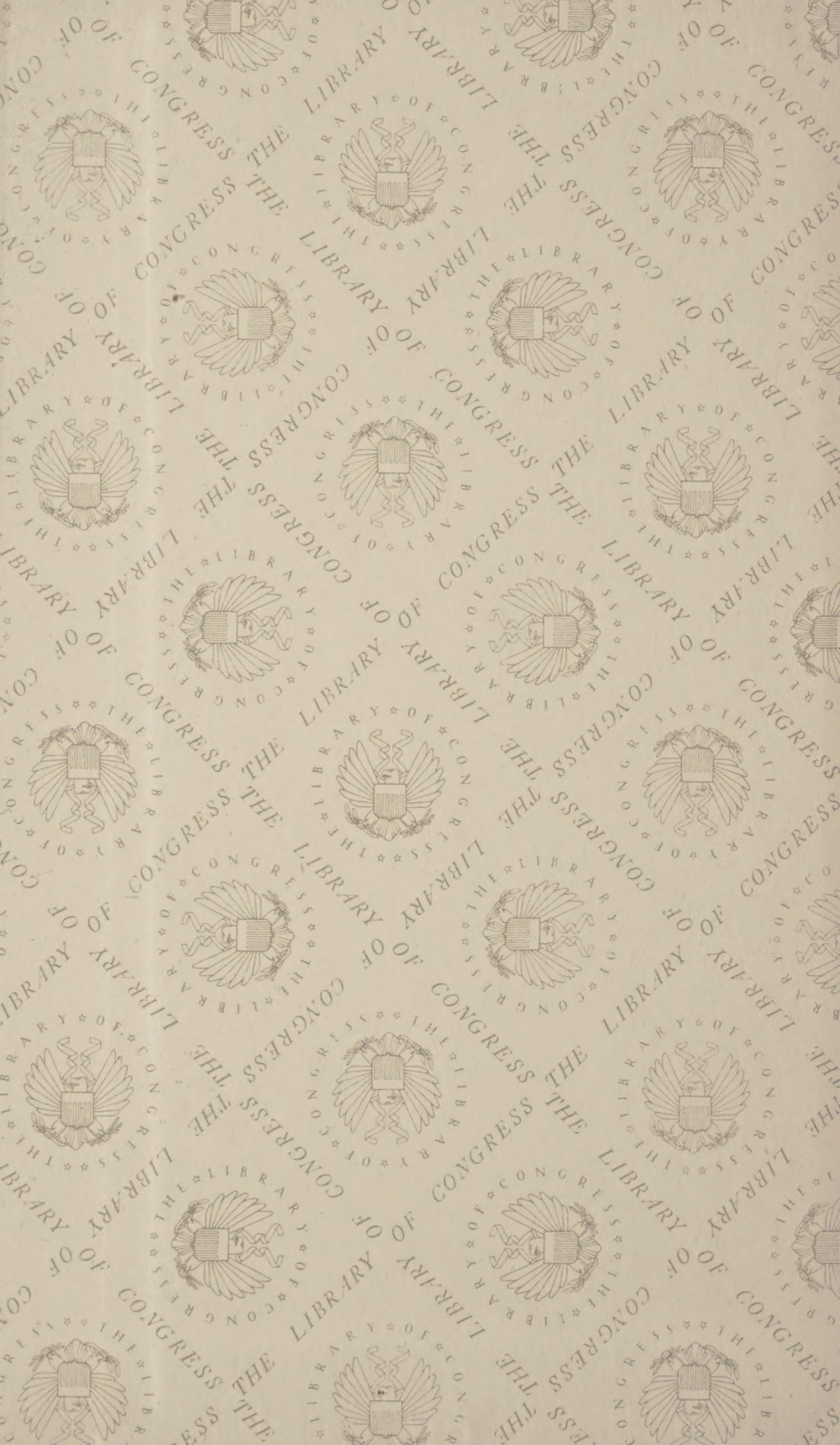
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