On Circumstantial Evidence

Florence Marryat
ON CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.
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BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF

"LOVE'S CONFLICT," "MY SISTER THE ACTRESS," "GENTLEMAN AND COURTIER," "A CROWN OF SHAME," ETC., ETC.

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ON CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

CHAPTER I.

"UNEXPECTED VISITORS."

The old Château des Lauriers, now sunk into decay, was once the pride and glory of the city in Belgium near which it stood. It was the country seat of the Barons Van Lippen, and their children had been born and flourished there for centuries past. It was surrounded by a wood of chestnut, beech and elm trees—a dairy farm was attached to the estate—large lawns and flower gardens were laid out in front of it, and a noble avenue of a quarter of a mile in length led to its approach. The Château itself, a square white building, with innumerable shuttered windows, required a great deal of foliage to

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render it warm in appearance, and there was a time when no one would have called it cold or comfortless. But the Van Lippens had degenerated of late years, both in taste and morals. The last barons of the name found a country life and the privacy of the Château des Lauriers too monotonous for them, and had sought distraction in Paris and Vienna and other fashionable places of amusement, and their pleasures had cost the family estate dear. One by one the avenue had lost its noble trees, until a bare road full of ruts alone marked the place where it had stood; the rest of the timber followed, and the land was sold for farming purposes, until the poor old Château, shorn of all its leafy honours, remained naked and forlorn, like a square white tomb set in the midst of turnip and potato fields—a monument erected to the memory of the past. The last inheritor of the property, Baron Polycarp Van Lippen, had indeed brought his French wife there,
in an attempt to somewhat recruit his shattered income by living quietly in the country. But it had proved a failure. The fashionable Parisian lady had moped and fretted at being shut out from the world, till she had made life a misery for him and herself, and four children had been born and sickened and died there, which had disgusted Baron Polycarp with the very name of the place. So he had left it as soon as he could, and never returned again. For years it had been delivered over to the rats, the mildew and the moth. The gilded and embossed papers hung in strips from the damp walls, and fungi had sprouted in the dark cellars and flagged passages. Not a Belgian could be induced to remain in the house at night, there were so many rumours of spoken, i.e., ghosts, being seen upon the premises, and the gardener Joseph who kept the keys, and lived on the produce of the strip of ground still belonging to the Château, was the only person who
ever went near it. At last the house had fallen into such disrepair that the agent of Baron Polycarp Van Lippen wrote him word that if the place were not seen to, or let, it would tumble to the ground, and he received orders in consequence to accept the first offer made for its occupation. That offer came from Captain David Grant, a retired officer from the army, with a large family and small means. Captain Grant had done a very foolish thing. Finding it next to impossible to live upon his pay and keep a sickly wife and six children, he had left the profession and commuted for his pension, hoping to make more by commerce than he had done by glory. But an army man in business resembles a fish out of water. He has been too much accustomed to be thought for to be able to think for himself, and this lack of necessity to exercise his mental muscles renders him unfit to compete in the race for wealth, where sharpness will at any
time outwit honesty. Captain Grant shared the fate of many another retired officer. He put his money in a speculation which was warranted to produce a maintenance for his family and himself, and lost it all. Luckily for him his wife had a small income of a hundred a year, and his friends procured him the guardianship of a motherless girl to bring up with his own children—the daughter of an impecunious sprig of nobility who paid him a similar sum for her maintenance, and with these scanty means of subsistence Captain Grant emigrated with all his belongings to Revranches, near which was situated the tumbledown Château des Lauriers, which could boast of little by that time but the straggling shrubs from which it derived its name. He had had possession of it now at a nominal rent for the last ten years, and there he had reared a family of six daughters and a son, and given them some sort of an education, and kept ten persons and a couple
of servants on an income of two hundred a year.

Many people will affirm that this is impossible and ask how it was done, but they are evidently ignorant of the resources of Revranches—Revranches, the refuge of the needy and the destitute—the home of the impecunious and out-of-elbows—the sanctuary of the swindling and the shady. But even Revranches cannot produce miracles, and as the children grew up the living grew down, until it could only be called existing. Mrs. Grant reared her chickens, and ducks and rabbits, and carefully collected the walnuts and chestnuts that grew on the few trees left at the back of the Château, and made Joseph yearly plant every inch of spare ground with potatoes—but the family seldom tasted butcher's meat, nor any luxury but what they cultivated themselves. The long stone passages of the Château and the oak staircase and many of the rooms were guilt-
less of covering, and the children's rough shoes clattered up and down the place as if it were a barrack. Romanie, the Flemish maid of all work, who was stupid as an owl, and obstinate as a mule, and ran home every night at eight o'clock because she was too much afraid of the spoken to sleep at the Château, was generally engaged in washing either the floors or the clothes, or feeding the live stock, whilst Mrs. Grant toiled over her paraffin stove, trying hard to eke out her scanty supplies to satisfy the demands of twelve hungry mouths. On the evening when we first see her, she was thus employed—her face flushed with the heat and her hands trembling with weakness. She had been a pretty woman in her day, but care and anxiety and sickness had aged her before her time. Her features were livid and pinched—and her scanty grey hair was tucked away under a Belgian mob-cap. Her black gown, brown with use, fell flat upon
her attenuated figure and her back was bowed beneath the small square shawl pinned about her shoulders. Her six sturdy girls should have been taking all the trouble of housekeeping off her hands by this time, but they had been allowed to run wild from their babyhood and never thought of offering to help their mother in any way; and as for her husband Captain Grant—well, whatever he had lost, he had at heart retained, as he used proudly to observe, "the feelings of a gentleman," which meant that he expected to be waited upon and made as comfortable as he was in the days of his prosperity. Poor Mrs. Grant indeed seemed to take it as a matter of course that she was to be everybody's servant, from her lord and master down to her son and heir—her little Davie, the youngest of her numerous brood, and the most cherished of them all—Davie, who was familiarly know to his sisters as "the Toad," on account of his being so
much spoilt by his mother, and whom she was bringing up to be more like a girl than a boy. He sat in the kitchen by her side now, poring over a picture book, while she stirred and sighed and fumed over the contents of the saucepans on the stove, pushing back her grey hair every now and then to cool her heated face. It was the close of a warm day in June, the Feast of Corpus Christi, and the young people had walked into Revranches, the distance of a mile and a half, and back again, in order to view the procession. The daughters of the house were all growing up fast now, the eldest, Marian, being nineteen and the youngest, Fanny, eleven, the "Toad" being the only child who had been born in the old Château. The scanty crop of grass which grew beneath the trees behind the house, had been carefully mown by Joseph that morning, and heaped up in a little haycock, which it was hoped might bring in a few centimes,
and the loud boisterous voices of Nelly and Rosie might be heard raised in laughter as they pulled it to pieces again, and pelted each other with it. Marian was in her bedroom, renovating an old dress, and Fanny had run across the potato field to catch up her sisters Margaret and Emily, who were strolling about with their arms twined round each other’s waists. Romanie had gone over to the farm, now let to tenants, to beg for a drop of milk, and there was no one apparently to help poor Mrs. Grant by fetching her a little more wood.

“Davie, my darling,” she said coaxingly to the little puny six-year-old who sat at the kitchen table, “go down to the cellar and fetch mother a few sticks of wood. I can’t leave this saucepan or the potage will burn.”

“No,” replied the spoilt brat, shrugging his shoulders, “I can’t, I’m busy! Where’s Agnes? Why can’t she go?”

“I don’t hear Agnes anywhere. I think
she must be out too," said Mrs. Grant in a despondent tone.

"No, she isn't! She's reading on the bench there! Here! Agnes," he continued, calling in his shrill treble from the kitchen window, "mother wants more wood. Come and fetch it for her."

The girl he addressed rose slowly from her seat and obeyed the summons. She was rather a remarkable-looking young person, the daughter of an English mother and a Belgian father, and talking both languages perfectly. She was not exactly pretty, but she was striking in appearance, with something of a gipsy beauty about her and more than a gipsy's cunning. Agnes Prudhomme was, in fact, cleverer than all the rest of the Château household put together. She had been encouraged to mix with the Grant girls at first, because she made herself useful, and her widowed mother was very poor and glad to give her daughter's services in return for
her food. But Agnes had always secretly rebelled against the arrangement. She believed herself to be quite as good as these poverty-stricken English emigrants, and she only bided her time to show them that she was so. Especially was she jealous of Muriel Damer, Captain Grant's charge, who was now eighteen and beginning to be universally admired. The girls often speculated to each other how soon Muriel's father would recall her to England and what sort of a home she would have there, and Agnes Prudhomme's teeth would gnash with envy as she thought of the chances that might await Miss Damer in the future. She was discontented with her lot; she believed herself to be above it, and yet she could devise no means of bettering her condition. She hated children and hard work of all sorts, but she cherished a hope that when Muriel Damer left the Château to return home, she might take her as her lady's maid, and Agnes felt she would do
the rest for herself. For this reason she veiled her natural dislike to Muriel under a semblance of making herself useful to her; but there was no love lost between the two girls, and they intuitively knew it. As Agnes drew near the kitchen, she made a face behind the back of the "Toad," who had summoned her there.

"What is it, madame?" she asked in a meek voice as she entered, addressing Mrs. Grant.

"Only some more wood, Agnes. You will find it in the basket in the cave. The girls are all out, as usual, or I shouldn't have troubled you."

Agnes walked down the cellar steps without another word. As soon as Davie saw the matter was to be settled without any dispute, he tore after her. "Here! I'll take them! Give them to me," he said, trying to seize the faggots from her. Agnes, appearing to yield to his wishes, gave him a
good blow over the head with one of the pieces of wood, which set him off roaring.

"Why didn't you let me carry them, then?" she inquired as she walked upstairs.

"Oh! what is that? Has my darling hurt himself?" cried Mrs. Grant, meeting her at the top, regardless of the burning of her soup.

"It is only Davie who hit himself trying to wrest the faggots out of my hands, madame."

"Oh, Agnes! you should be more careful. He is so delicate. My poor boy!"

"He did it himself," replied the girl sullenly, as she turned away. But the next moment she was all excitement. "Madame, madame! there is a carriage coming to the Château."

Such an event was unheard of. Poor Mrs. Grant turned white with surprise.

"It is impossible, Agnes! Who would come here in a carriage? It must be going to Sainte Marie."
"Oh, no! It has long passed the turning. It is coming straight along this road. There is a lady and a gentleman in it. I can see them quite plainly. Now they have stopped to question Margaret and Emily, and they point this way. There is no doubt of it, Mrs. Grant. The voiture is coming to the Château."

"But I can't see any one," cried Mrs. Grant in despair. "I am so untidy. And will they want anything to eat? Oh! who can they be? It must be a mistake."

"Perhaps," said Agnes Prudhomme with a sudden intuition, "it is somebody for Miss Damer."

Mrs. Grant sunk into a chair, half paralyzed with fright.

"You are right—I feel sure of it," she gasped, "and Captain Grant is away at the club; and Muriel, where on earth is Muriel?"

"I met her on the Ramparts as I came"
home," piped the "Toad," "walking with Athol Fergusson."

Agnes's dark cheeks flushed crimson with unaccountable annoyance, but Mrs. Grant did not appear to notice it.

"Now, here's a nice business," she said feebly; "every one from home and no one left to receive these strangers. Isn't Marian to be found?. Couldn't you call in Margaret and Emily, Agnes?"

"It is too late, Mrs. Grant. The carriage is close to the gates. You go upstairs, madame, and make your toilette, and I will let them in myself."

"But we're out of tea, Agnes, and these English visitors always expect tea. And I'm not sure if we have sufficient coffee either. Romanie was to have fetched some as she went home to night."

"Never mind, madame, leave it to me. As soon as I have let them in, I will run over to Madame Sylvestre and borrow some
coffee.” And reaching down a rusty key that hung on a nail in the passage, Agnes Prudhomme, having first seen Mrs. Grant nervously climb the spiral oak staircase to the upper story, walked down the weed-grown drive to unlock the Château gates. These gates, which were the most imposing portion left of the old building, were always kept locked, not from fear of burglars where there was nothing to steal, but to keep out the pigs and sheep that were occasionally turned into the potato and turnip fields. The young ladies of the family seldom troubled themselves to open them. They either climbed over the top rail or took a flying leap over the tiny stream (scarcely more than a ditch) that skirted the strip of kitchen garden, thereby much discomposing their mother’s ducks, and sometimes coming in for a wetting themselves. Captain Grant, with his “gentlemanly feelings,” was the only member of the Château household who
would stand outside the gates in any weather until his wife or Agnes or Romanie had run through the soaking rain to let him in. And more than once on such occasions had Agnes Prudhomme longed to throw the key away in the long grass, and compel him to stand outside for ever, or lower his dignity by emulating the activity of his daughters and climbing over the gate. When she reached it on the evening in question, the carriage had already stopped outside, and at a respectful distance, for the Belgian cocher knew the incapabilities of the narrow drive too well, and would not venture to take his vehicle inside. A fine-looking, middle-aged man was peering through the iron fretwork of the gate, and a lady, very youthfully attired, was seated in the carriage, addressing questions to him which it was impossible he could answer.

"Colonel de Crespigny! those girls must have misled us! This can't be the place!"
Now, can it? It is only a farm. The earl would never have allowed Muriel to live here. Would he, now? Is it likely? Hadn’t we better tell the cocher to drive on?"

"Let me make some inquiries first," replied the gentleman. "Here is a young woman coming from the house. It is certainly a most desolate-looking abode—more like a hospital or a maison de santé than a dwelling-house, but perhaps Lord Rhylton never saw it. Does Captain Grant live here?" he continued, as Agnes came up to the gate and placed the key in the ponderous lock.

"Yes, monsieur, but he is not at home."

"Is Miss Damer at home?"

"No! monsieur, but Mrs. Grant is."

"Then we must see her. Kindly open the gate and let the carriage drive in."

"I will open the gate for you, but the voiture cannot come through, as there is no room to turn."
"It is the right house, Miss Rutherford," said the colonel, addressing the lady in the vehicle, "but you will have to get out here and walk up to it."

"Walk through that mass of dirt and cinders!" exclaimed his companion with an air of disgust. "Why, the ducks and fowls are running all over the place. I had no idea poor Muriel lived in such a hole. What can Rhylton have been thinking of to put her with such a beggarly family?"

"Hush! This may be one of them," said Colonel de Crespigny, who seemed to have more delicacy than his friend. "As we are here, the sooner we dispatch our errand the better. Let me help you to alight," and giving Miss Rutherford his arm he led her up to the front door of the Château. Agnes Prudhomme surveyed them walking before her with great curiosity. Miss Rutherford might have been any age from forty to sixty, but she was dressed like a girl of sixteen,
in a cream-coloured muslin with innumerable frills and a broad-brimmed hat, covered with nodding grass and poppies. Her companion was a tall, well-built and muscular man of about fifty, fashionably attired and with a face that would have been handsome, but for its look of cunning and sensuality. Agnes was wondering what relation they could bear to Muriel Damer, as she ushered them into the bare comfortless apartment which was ironically termed the drawing-room, where the gilded paper had been replaced by whitewash, and a table with a faded cloth on it and a few old books and some dozen chairs in different stages of "rickets" represented the furniture. Miss Rutherford sank down on one of the seats with a look of intense disgust, as she desired Agnes to inform Mrs. Grant that Miss Damer's cousin had called to see her on particular business. Mrs. Grant, who had managed with shaking hands to tie a wisp
of dirty lace round her neck and smooth her faded hair under a somewhat smarter cap, was ready waiting her summons to the drawing-room and lost no time attending to it. Her apologies for everything around, including herself, were so profuse and so feeble that Miss Rutherford cut her short in the midst of them.

“I dare say you are surprised to see us at so late an hour, Mrs. Grant, but the fact is we intended to call on you to-morrow, but I received news to-day that compels me to start for Paris by the early train. I have been travelling this summer, with a niece and my—my friend, Colonel de Crespigny; and Lord Rhylton, who is a cousin of mine, begged that I would see you on the subject of Muriel Damer.”

“Lord Rhylton,” repeated Mrs. Grant with a look of perplexity.

“Ah! I forgot! You have not yet heard of the change in Mr. Damer’s affairs, and
indeed it was to break it to you that I called in person. My cousin Damer has not been a very good correspondent, I am afraid, Mrs. Grant. His first wife's death made him quite a bachelor again and he concerned himself very little about his daughter. In fact, he would not have known what to do with her in England. But now, things are quite altered, and he is anxious to have her at home again. By the death of his uncle and cousin, Mr. Damer has come into the family title, and is now the Earl of Rhylton, and last week he was married to the Honourable Mrs. Seton, so that there is no further necessity for dear Muriel—Lady Muriel Damer as she has now become—to remain abroad." Miss Rutherford mouthed the grand names as though they were something good to eat, and indeed, they did sound rather imposing; but poverty-stricken Mrs. Grant heard but one thing—that they were suddenly to be deprived of half of their
income. She went white and red and yellow by turns, as the truth broke upon her, and had considerable difficulty in keeping back her tears, and her visitors could not but recognize her distress.

"I am afraid the news comes rather unexpectedly to you," remarked Miss Rutherford presently.

"It does indeed! We have had dear Muriel with us now for ten years and regard her as one of our own daughters. I thought Mr. Damer—I mean Lord Rhyton—would certainly have given us a little more warning of his intentions."

"His lordship would be the last person to do anything that was unfair, Mrs. Grant. He desired me to say that his solicitor would forward Captain Grant the half-yearly allowance for his daughter as usual. But Lady Muriel is now eighteen and it is time she was introduced into society, and no one could do it more fittingly than her step-
mother, who has a young daughter of about the same age. I have been staying in Brussels, Mrs. Grant, and came over to Revranches expressly to tell you this. As I am going on to Paris, Lord Rhylton thought it would be an excellent opportunity for me to take Lady Muriel there at once, and renovate her wardrobe before she returns to England. Therefore—if it is all the same to you—my friend Colonel de Crespigny will call for her by ten o'clock to-morrow.

"To-morrow!" echoed Mrs. Grant, with a look of dismay.

But Miss Rutherford was beginning to be tired of Mrs. Grant's sentiment, and to suspect that her chief grief for Muriel's departure lay in the fact that she took her money away with her. So she answered briskly:

"Yes! to-morrow! You have had her for many years and it is our turn to see a
little of her now. But where is the dear child? Has she been told of our arrival?"

"Has Lady Muriel Damer returned yet?" inquired Mrs. Grant in a voice like a funeral knell to Agnes Prudhomme.

"No, madame," replied Agnes, who had been standing in the ante-room all the while.

"Then go, Agnes, and ask Davie to run down to the Ramparts and see if he can find her and send her home—and get some coffee for this lady and gentleman."

"Very good, madame," said the girl as she left the room, her heart burning with envy and jealousy the while.
CHAPTER II.

AGNES PRUDHOMME.

She walked out at the back of the house and took her way through the little wood of chestnut and walnut trees to where Madame Sylvestre lived, on the farm which had been once a part of the Van Lippen estate. There she found the stout Flemish serving-wench Romanie, leaning over the wooden gate that separated the grounds, chattering in her uncouth tongue with a farm hand and quite unmindful of her employers at the Château who had sent her there for milk. Agnes sent her flying back with the jug in her hand and a sharp word in her ear, for if Agnes could speak only two or three languages perfectly, she seemed to be able to scold in all, and with Flemish she had been familiar from a child.
Romanie feared her (young as she was) much more than she did her mistress, for Mrs. Grant was the sort of woman who might have lived fifty years in a country without acquiring its language, and was at the mercy therefore of her Flemish attendants. But the tone in which Agnes Prudhomme reproved Romanie that evening was unnecessarily severe, and was the emanation of her own envious and malicious feelings. *Lady Muriel Damer!* As she walked back to the Château with the borrowed coffee her teeth ground together as she pronounced the name, over and over again, until it seemed to leave a bitter, acrid taste upon her tongue that caused her to turn aside and spit upon the ground, as if that action would mitigate her rancour. She could hardly contain herself for jealousy. Muriel Damer, with whom she had associated almost on equal terms, an earl’s daughter, to be taken to Paris—that unattainable but dearly-desired heaven of delight—and thence
to London to be introduced into society, whilst she, for no fault of her own, was condemned to a life of servitude and monotony in Revranches. The girl could have screamed aloud in the intolerance of her envy. She did indeed give vent to her passions in some way, for she startled the wood-pigeons that were just cooing each other to sleep in the tall fir trees and sent them reeling once more into the still summer air. "Fools! Brutes," exclaimed Agnes, as their soft tones sounded on her ear and seemed to mock the fury of her spirit, "to be content with such a life as this," and then she flung herself headlong on a wooden bench, and for a moment gave vent to her feelings in a flood of angry tears. That moment sealed her fate. Before she recovered herself a footstep sounded on the pathway, and Colonel de Crespigny stood beside her. It was not without a motive that the colonel had followed her into the little wood. He had made a cigar the excuse to the ladies to
go out for a few minutes into the open air, but he had not been unmindful of Agnes Prudhomme's presence in the ante-room, and her appearance had attracted him. Colonel de Crespigny was nothing if he were not a sensualist. He lived but to gratify his senses in every possible way, and his taste lay particularly amongst the lower orders. He did not care much for women whose intellect made him aware of the deficiency of his own. The *bizarre* gipsy-like beauty of Agnes attracted him. Her tangled mass of brown curls and dark cunning eyes, and wide red-lipped mouth, conveyed an idea of wickedness, and Colonel de Crespigny, like a few others of his sex, was more attracted by vice than by virtue. Agnes was young—only the same age as Muriel Damer—but there was a world of possibilities in her glance, and of coquetry in her actions, and the colonel thought he would like to see a little more of her. But he little expected to find her on a
garden bench abandoned to some unknown grief. The sight broke down the barriers between them quicker than a year of prudence would have done. "My dear child," exclaimed the colonel as he hastened to her—Colonel de Crespigny was always extremely paternal in his first advances to young girls—"what is the matter? Have you hurt yourself?"

Agnes felt ashamed for a moment to have been discovered by a stranger when she was not mistress of herself. She looked up at him half angrily, but the glance of admiration with which he regarded her flashing eyes and crimson cheeks soon mitigated her first wrath.

"No. I am not hurt," she answered, sitting up, "but I am very sorry to hear that Miss Damer is going to leave us."

"Is Lady Muriel so great a friend of yours, then? Are you one of the Misses Grant?"

"Oh, no, monsieur! I do not belong
to the family. I am called Agnes Prudhomme. But I have known Lady Muriel ever since she came here, and I have always hoped that when she left us she would take me with her as her companion and maid, and that we should go to London together.”

“And are you so very anxious to see London, then?”

“Oh! yes, monsieur! above all other things. My mother is an Englishwoman. She came over to Revranches as governess in some gentleman’s family, and married my father, who was in the carved oak trade. But he died years ago and left us almost destitute, and I am forced to earn my living. But to earn it here and in this way. Bah! it is not living—it is a prison—a purgatory! I would as soon be in a convent at once.”

“Then you have no taste for becoming a nun, Agnes.”

There was no need of an answer. Agnes had only to lift her eyes to his to assure the
colonel that her proclivities did not tend that way.

"And you want to go to England and be Lady Muriel's maid! Well, I don't see why it should not be accomplished! Where is the difficulty?"

"Do you think you could help me, monsieur?" demanded the girl boldly, for something in his manner made her bold.

"I will do my best, certainly. Is Lady Muriel anxious to take you with her?"

"I am not sure, but if she had been going to England by herself I think I could have coaxed her to take me too. But this lady coming—this Miss Rutherford——"

"Oh! I understand. She is the supposed stumbling-block. Well, I have a little influence with her, Agnes, and I will try what I can do to persuade her to gratify your wish. But if she should be obstinate—and ladies are obstinate sometimes, you know"
—perhaps I may be able to manage it by myself."

"You, monsieur!" exclaimed Agnes, staring at him.

"Yes, I. Oh! you needn't open your pretty eyes quite so wide with astonishment. I am not going to propose that you shall be my maid (though if I might keep one, I should never wish for a prettier than yourself), but I have several lady friends, and amongst them all I daresay I can find you a home. What do you say? If Lady Muriel does not take you into her service will you accept a situation that I find for you?"

"Monsieur, I should be only too grateful. It is the dream of my life to get away from Revranches."

"Well, your looks should prove your fortune, my dear, for you are pretty enough for anything, and those eyes of yours would turn the head of any man. Here is my card with my club address. When you want my assist-
ance, write to me there, and I'll see what I can do for you."

"Oh, monsieur is too good. I will take the utmost care of his card," replied Agnes as she dropped it into her pocket. At that moment Romanie came flying from the Château to say that madame demanded her coffee.

"The coffee!" exclaimed Agnes, starting to her feet. "I had forgotten all about it! Monsieur will say nothing of this indoors," she continued hurriedly, tapping her pocket significantly, "for if I do not leave with Lady Muriel there may be some difficulty about my getting away."

"I understand, and I will keep the secret," replied Colonel de Crespigny, as she ran away from him to make the coffee.

Miss Rutherford was getting very impatient, not to say rude, before it appeared. Mrs. Grant was still her sole entertainer, for though the daughters of the house had returned, they had all slunk up to the bedroom.
story, and nothing had yet been seen of Captain Grant, the "Toad," or Lady Muriel Damer.

"Isn't it very extraordinary, Mrs. Grant," inquired Miss Rutherford, "that it should be nearly nine o'clock, and Muriel has not come back, or is it the custom in Revranches for young ladies to run about by themselves up to all hours of the night?"

"Oh! no," replied her unfortunate hostess with a sickly smile. "You mustn't think so badly of us as that. But this is a very quiet place, you see, and the dear girls have been accustomed to run about it since they were children. They know every one in Revranches, and are perfectly safe. But it is unfortunate that dear Muriel should be later than usual this evening. I have sent my little boy after her, but the Ramparts extend for some distance and they may not meet."

"And Captain Grant—is he also in the
habit of running about the Ramparts until midnight?” demanded Miss Rutherford sarcastically.

“I am almost afraid to say when he will be home, either. Of course, if you had given us any warning of your visit, he would have made a point of meeting you; but he usually spends his evenings at the Revranches Club with the other English gentlemen, and sometimes they do not break up till late.”

“Well, it is impossible that I can stay here much longer,” said her visitor peevishly, “for my niece is expecting me back at the hotel; and we have a great many preparations to make before we start for Paris. Therefore I think we had better return to Revranches, and my friend Colonel de Crespigny will call here for Lady Muriel at ten o’clock to-morrow morning. You said you would do me this favour, didn’t you, colonel?” she added in a much sweeter tone to her travelling companion.
"With all the pleasure in the world," replied the colonel, bowing.

"But, Miss Rutherford," pleaded Mrs. Grant in a distressed voice, "consider. Ten o'clock to-morrow. How is it possible for me to get Lady Muriel ready to accompany you in so short a time? She has no clothes to wear, except her convent uniform. It was her papa's wish that she should be educated with my girls at the Convent of the Ursulines at Steinbock; and the pupils there are not permitted to wear anything but black and white. Lady Muriel's attire is quite unfit to go into society with."

"Nonsense, my good lady. She will see no society but ours till she gets to Paris, and there Lord Rhylton has commissioned me to get her everything she may require. So please make no more excuses, but see that my little cousin is ready in time to accompany Colonel de Crespigny whenever he may call for her. Is this one of your daughters?"
continued Miss Rutherford as Agnes Prudhomme handed her a cup of coffee.

Mrs. Grant’s pale cheeks flushed pink with annoyance, and she put on a dignified air. “Certainly not, Miss Rutherford. That is my servant, Agnes Prudhomme.”

It was Agnes’s turn to flush now, as she darted an angry glance towards her employer.

“I have always understood that servants received wages,” she interposed saucily, “but you have never paid me any, madame.”

“Agnes, it is not your place to take any part in the conversation. Please to remember who you are,” returned Mrs. Grant with mild deprecation. The girl did not speak again, but she directed a look of significance towards Colonel de Crespigny, which did not pass unnoticed. As he passed out of the door a few minutes afterwards, in the wake of Miss Rutherford and Mrs. Grant, he managed to stoop towards her and whisper:
“Good-bye, pretty one. I will do my best for you, and if I fail, write and tell me where to address you.”

“Bon soir, monsieur,” replied Agnes with a demure courtesy, but a glance that spoke volumes.

As soon as she found herself alone again with her companion, Miss Rutherford was loud and emphatic in her denunciation of everything concerning the household at the Château.

“My dear colonel, did you ever see such a place in your life? Why, you might have scraped the dirt off the windows and floors, and the disorder of it! If it were not so big, it would be for all the world like an Irish cabin. The passage was full of ducks and fowls as we came away. I can’t think what Rhylton can have been thinking of to have left Muriel there for ten years. She cannot have had enough to eat. I believe the whole family have been living on her allowance.
And I quite tremble to think what the dear child may be like. One cannot fancy that woman, Mrs. Grant, being fit to bring up any girl—a poor, weak, nerveless thing."

"Yes, but a lady, notwithstanding all her disadvantages," observed the colonel.

"But imagine a young girl of eighteen allowed to go about without any chaperonage. It is shocking. Rhyton has not come into the title a day too soon. What might not have happened had she been left there much longer?"

"Lady Muriel is certainly quite old enough to return to her father's care. Did you notice that young girl who brought in the coffee?"

"A dark creature, with curls and an impudent face? Yes; I saw her."

"She was in the garden crying when I strolled out with my cigar, and she told me that Lady Muriel has promised to take her to England as her maid, and she is most anxious
to go. She seems a nice-spoken, lady-like girl, and I suppose her little ladyship will require an attendant. Would it not be as well to give her the place?"

"My dear colonel," cried Miss Rutherford tartly, "what are you thinking of? My cousin Rhylton gave me no orders about maids, and if he had, I wouldn't engage an inexperienced, pert-looking girl like that. And indeed, between you and me, I am not at all sure that Muriel will have a maid to herself. You mustn't forget that if Rhylton has the title, his wife has the money, and may not be disposed to spend too much of it on her step-daughter. I expect Miss Seton and Muriel will have to share a maid between them. Fancy that Belgian girl having the impudence to address you on the subject."

"It wasn't her fault, I assure you. I found her in tears and demanded the reason. It seems a pity a girl like that shouldn't have a chance of bettering her position. She seems
much above it, and tells me she has associated with Lady Muriel and the Misses Grant since they were children."

"Then that's all the more reason they should part now," returned Miss Rutherford sharply, for she did not approve of the colonel's championship of Agnes Prudhomme. "If they have been brought up together, she would never keep her place as a lady's maid. But really, colonel," she continued, more affably, "I shall have to look after you if you go playing knight-errant in this way to any distressed damsel you may chance to encounter. You will make me jealous. I shall think you have got tired of looking after me."

"You will never do me that injustice, I hope," replied Colonel de Crespigny, his bold eyes beaming almost as fascinatingly as if his vis-à-vis had been twenty instead of fifty; "but when we get to Paris, I fancy our positions will be reversed, and it is you who will have to look after me."
He spoke the truth there, for the secret of his travelling in company with Miss Rutherford and her niece Lina Walford, was that he had but lately come into a large fortune and retired from the army, and was entirely ignorant of the ways, manners or language of France and Belgium. Miss Rutherford, who had been accustomed to live on her slender pittance wherever it was cheapest—who had shivered in German boarding-houses all through the winter, herded with the art students in Italy, and occupied the meanest floor in a pension the other side of the Seine in Paris—was an able cicérone and knew every step of the trottoir she had so often walked over. Colonel de Crespigny had therefore found it very convenient to cross the Channel in her company, and had not been backward to pay his way, by various little offerings such as ladies love; but unfortunately, Miss Rutherford mistook his attentions for a feeling of a warmer nature.
Let us say at once that Miss Rutherford had been much in the habit during her long lifetime, of mistaking gentlemen's attentions, and that, after many failures, she still considered herself an eligible object for matrimony. She quite believed that the colonel had fallen a victim to her fascinations, and was only waiting the moment when he should make his intentions plainly known. She considered his age and appearance and income all most suitable to herself, and never stopped to consider that a handsome man in the prime of life, with a princely fortune, might require some one younger and fresher to fill the place of his first wife. For Colonel de Crespigny was a widower, with two grown-up sons, of whom he was very much ashamed and whose existence he never mentioned unless obliged. He considered himself quite as juvenile in his way as did Miss Rutherford, and was really such a general lover of the sex that he could make himself agreeable to
all, without doing much violence to his own feelings. He did so on the present occasion with such success, that by the time they reached Revranches, Miss Rutherford was whispering and giggling to him as if she had been seventeen, and the subject of Agnes Prudhomme was no more mentioned between them.
CHAPTER III.

ON THE RAMPARTS.

The Ramparts of Revranche extended from Sainte Marie on the one side to Bois Gilbert on the other, and formed at all times the favourite walk of the residents in the city. They were cool in summer and high and dry in winter. They were sheltered to the rear by the outlying buildings of Revranche, and in front of them flowed the placid canal, fringed with long grass and bulrushes, upon whose bosom every now and then came floating ponderous barges, laden with wool or wheat, whilst a sturdy Flemish cart horse tramped along the towing-path, and helped them on their way. It was here that Lady Muriel Damer lingered, all unconscious of the equivocal good fortune in store for her, whilst
such important events were passing at the Château. It was a glorious summer evening. The dusk had hardly fallen at nine o'clock, and none of the loiterers on the Ramparts were surprised to see her, sitting on the wooden benches, or strolling up and down the broad pathway in company with Athol Fergusson. The sight had been familiar to them at intervals for a twelvemonth past, and they all considered it quite a settled thing that Miss Damer and Mr. Fergusson were some day to marry each other. Muriel thought of it too, in her girlish way, but it was too remote a contingency to assume very substantial proportions in her eyes. In fact her whole future was a mystery to her as her life had been, and whenever she tried to speculate on what might happen, she felt as if she were looking into the dark. She was a graceful girl with a slight willowy figure, which even her ill-cut and ill-becoming conventual dress was unable to spoil, although it showed it off
to the worst advantage. From beneath the brim of her old-fashioned black straw hat her fair hair fell in loose wavy curls halfway down her back. Her face was oval and her complexion rather pale, but her large grey eyes were luminous with hidden feeling, and her mouth was full of passion. She was clinging to the arm of Athol Fergusson with a very confident air of possession, whilst he looked down upon her upturned face with the deepest love apparent in every feature of his own. He was little older than herself, being only twenty-two, but he had already passed through a furnace of affliction that had added ten years to his age—not in appearance but in feeling. His father, Mr. Fergusson, had been a very wealthy man, a great landowner, and a well-known member of the Jockey Club and frequenter of the turf. His home had been lapped in luxury, and his children brought up to want nothing that they had set their
hearts upon. But in the midst of their utmost prosperity—when Athol, the only son and heir, had just entered a military college and the two daughters were being educated in Paris—the sword of Damocles which unknown to themselves had been suspended above them by a single hair for many years past, descended without warning and destroyed all their happiness at one blow. Mr. Fergusson lost everything of which he had been possessed, even to his wife's jointure, on the racecourse, and cravenly shot himself to avoid the disgrace which must ensue, leaving it all to be borne by his unfortunate widow and orphans. By the kindness of his uncle, Sir Robert Fergusson, Athol continued at college to pursue his studies for the army, whilst his mother and sisters retired to Revanches and maintained themselves by teaching. Muriel had been their pupil for singing, and so an intimacy had sprung up between her and Athol, during the young man's half-
yearly visits home, which had culminated in a sort of engagement between them, recognized, however, by no one but themselves. But whatever Muriel's intentions may have been, Athol Fergusson was thoroughly in earnest. He loved the girl with all the strength of his nature and never dreamt of making any other woman his wife. His was a very serious nature too, one that had thought and suffered deeply, and there was a grave expression in his dark blue eyes, like a summer cloud above the Lake of Como, that seemed to tell the tale. He had had but one thought before he met Muriel, how he should soonest make money to relieve the necessities of his mother and sisters, but now was added to it the fonder desire to make a home for this girl who had wound herself about the very tendons of his heart, and for whom no one seemed to care but himself. He loved her and she loved him, and his nature was too pure and earnest to suppose
that such a love could end in anything but marriage, even if they had to wait for years before accomplishing it. What were years, or life itself, to lovers? *To love* was, in his young and ardent estimation, to love *for ever*.

"And so," said Muriel with a smile and a sigh, "the important event is really over, and you have passed your examination! How pleased Mrs. Fergusson must be."

"Yes," he answered with another sigh, "the papers arrived this morning, and I have passed with honours."

"And yet we both sigh! Aren't we stupid, Athol?"

"Oh, no! darling, it is but natural. To pass with me, means to pass away. I shall be gazetted to the Horse Artillery and may have to leave England, and have no opportunity again of seeing Revanches or you. Is that not sufficient to make me sigh?"

"But if you are not gazetted to the army, you will never get on. You must look at
it in that light," said Muriel practically. "And if you don't get on——"

"I shall never be able to marry my dear little wife," said Athol, kissing her—they were alone now, the Ramparts being almost deserted. "Oh, yes! don't be afraid. I have not forgotten that; it is the only bright spot I have to look forward to. But the prospect of parting now makes me very, very sad, Muriel."

"Is it certain you will go away?"

"Almost. I am bound to take whatever they choose to give me. My uncle, Sir Robert, has generously offered, in case of my being appointed to a battalion in England, to make me an allowance of a hundred a year, but (dearly as I should like to be near you) I would rather be independent at once and live upon my pay."

"But your uncle is very rich! Why shouldn't he allow you something? A hundred pounds a year would be nothing to him."
"Next to nothing, certainly; but, Muriel, I must try and help my mother and sisters a little. You cannot think how hard they work nor how poorly they live, and I could not do that with any comfort on another man's money. And then there are my poor father's creditors. It has been the dream of my life to be able to satisfy their claims, if only in part."

"But you will never be able to marry at all at that rate," pouted Muriel. "I shall be a horrible old maid long before you have accomplished one half what you design to do."

"Oh, darling, don't say that; you make me feel so wretched," replied Athol fervently. "You don't know how I shall save and screw to pay off something of these heavy debts that hang like a weight upon my heart. And then my poor mother! She has suffered so terribly, and her health is failing so fast. I should feel as if God would forsake me if I ever forsook her."
Muriel hung her head, and something very like a tear stood in her eye. But it was a tear of wounded vanity. She thought that Athol prized his relations above herself.

"What is the matter, Muriel?" he demanded, when silence had reigned between them for a moment. "You are not offended, dearest, surely, at what I have said. You cannot suppose that the claims (even of my mother) can come before those of my promised wife. But you will help me, won't you, and be the most economical of little housekeepers, for my poor mother's sake?"

"It strikes me," said Muriel slowly, "that with such a drain upon you, it would be very silly to think of marriage."

Her words were perfectly true, but they struck chill to her lover's heart.

"My darling girl," he exclaimed, "don't cast a doubt upon our marriage, or I shall lose all my courage. What have I been working for, if not for that? It cannot be
yet. It may not be for many years; but you will wait for me, Muriel, will you not? You have promised that you will wait for me."

"Oh, yes, indeed I will," she answered warmly, for her heart was more firmly wedded to Athol Fergusson than she was aware of herself. "Why, aren't we as good as married already? Look at my wedding ring, sir," she continued playfully, as she held out a slim finger, adorned with a twisted gold ring, for his inspection. "Didn't you put that on six months ago, and make me promise I would never remove it until you could replace it with a real one? And I never have, Athol. It has been on my finger night and day since, and it will remain there till we are married."

Athol Fergusson took the girlish hand in his, and raised it to his lips.

"And such a rubbishy ring as it is, too," he murmured. "It is not good enough for
this dear hand, but it was the best that I could manage, Muriel. Some day perhaps I may be able to give you a better one. They say it is unlucky to wear a ring upon the wedding finger before you are married, but I can believe in no ill luck whilst you are faithful to me, Muriel."

"Of course not! It is all nonsense. But I wonder what I shall say if papa ever sends for me home again, and asks me what this ring means?"

"Has he sent for you?" demanded Athol with sudden interest.

"Oh, dear, no! I haven't even had a letter from him for the last three months. Captain Grant is thinking of writing to his solicitor. He says something must be the matter."

"I don't think so. You would have heard fast enough in that case. But it is very strange, Muriel, that Mr. Damer should have left you here all these years, isn't it?"
"Why, what could he have done with me, Athol? I have no mother, and papa lives at his club. I could not have kept house by myself."

"But now you are a woman you could keep house for him."

"Perhaps he likes his club better, and I am not at all sure that I should like him! Bessie Ralston, who came over last year to stay with the Churchills, met him several times in London, and she says he is an ugly, scraggy little man, with a huge nose."

"But, my dear child, can't you remember your father? How long is it since you met?"

"Years and years. He has only seen me twice since I came to Revranches, and that is ten years ago. Once I was sent to him in Brussels for a couple of days, and once to Paris for a week, but he didn't seem to care anything about me, and he was out all day, and I remember I was very glad to get home again."
"But he surely will not leave you here for ever?"

"I hope he will, Athol; that is," said Muriel shyly, "until—until you come and take me away."

"My own darling! How I wish I could take you away at once. But we shall have to get Mr. Damer's consent first, and sometimes, Muriel, I feel so afraid that he will never give it."

"But why? You are a gentleman, and you cannot be more."

"But I am so poor, dear Muriel. When Mr. Damer sees you, he may think you ought to make a better match than an officer with nothing but his pay."

"Then I hope he never may see me. And if he attempts to part us, Athol, I will leave him and run away to you, and then you will be obliged to marry me, that is if you would."

"Wouldn't I?" cried the young man in
an ecstasy of affection, squeezing her to him, and thinking what a treasure the love of such a pure-minded, noble heart would be.

"And if my father neglects me much longer," continued Muriel, "I think I shall be quite justified in taking the law into my own hands, for if it were not for you, Athol, I don't think I could stand the life at the Château. Really, it is too dreadful! I didn't perceive it whilst I was a child, running all over Revranches as I felt inclined. I was too hungry then to care what I had for dinner, so long as there was enough to eat, but now that I am grown-up, I feel quite differently, and the common food and the dirt and disorder sicken me. Do you know," she continued, lowering her voice, "that sometimes we do not have meat on the table for days together; nothing but potage and fromage, and I am often quite hungry when I go to bed at night."

"Oh, Muriel," exclaimed Athol, who was
still quite young enough to sympathize with such a privation, "Mr. Damer ought to know of this. He cannot be aware of the way in which you are treated. I have always understood that he makes the Grants a handsome allowance (for Revranchez) for your maintenance, and it is a shame that you should not even be fed properly."

"But that is not all, Athol. Papa allows Mrs. Grant *carte-blanche* for my clothes, but I never have a decent thing to wear, for before they are half worn out she passes them on to Margaret or Emily, and leaves me with only one dress or cloak for myself. I am sure I have worn these old things for nearly a year," said the girl, with a nervous little laugh, twitching at her scanty black skirt.

"My pretty Muriel, who ought to be fed and clothed like a princess if she had her dues, it is too bad," replied Athol Fergusson, "and I feel half inclined to write to your
father myself about it. Only that might make him take you away from Revranches at once, and I should lose you for the remainder of the vacation. Am I not selfish, Muriel?"

"Not at all. I couldn't bear to go away whilst you were here, Athol. I'd rather live on dry bread and come out and walk with you on the Ramparts every evening, than live in a palace whilst you were in Revranches. How could I be happy anywhere without you?"

"My own sweetheart!" exclaimed the young man as he bent over her again and kissed her rapturously. They were startled from their position by a loud laugh, and Muriel sprang apart from her lover to encounter a Belgian girl, Sylvie Brissot, who went to school at the same convent as she did.

"Good-night, my friends," called out Sylvie in her own language. "A pleasant time to you. Do you know that it is half-past nine,
Muriel? The good mother will wonder what has become of her stray lamb.”

"Half-past nine!" echoed Muriel in astonishment. "Why, I thought it was eight o’clock that sounded just now from Saint Jacques. Athol! I must go home, or they will be locking up the Château.”

"Then I will see you across those dark fields,” he answered as they turned their steps in the direction of the Château des Lauriers. As soon as they had left the last estaminet behind them and entered the road full of ruts and inequalities which had so tried the patience of Miss Rutherford, Athol Fergusson threw his arm around Muriel’s slight form and bent down his face to hers whilst he whispered a thousand promises of love and fidelity into her ears, which she was not slow to respond to and reiterate.

"Kiss me once more, dearest,” he said as they stood together outside the Château gates. “Put your arms round my neck and
swear you will be faithful and true to me until I can make you my wife."

"Oh, Athol! I have said it so often. You know that it is true. Why should you want me to say it over again?"

"I don't know, Muriel. I feel sad to-night. I have a kind of foreboding that there is trouble for us in the future. And if it comes, I shall feel the happier to remember that you have sworn, under any circumstances, to remain faithful to me."

"You frighten me, Athol! But indeed it is all fancy. You know you will have to go away and it makes you melancholy. But your vacation lasts for four weeks more. We shall have many pleasant walks on the dear old Ramparts yet. But if it will please you, I swear—yes, Athol, I swear that nobody but you shall ever be my husband. Oh, how could you think such a thing of me, after the long, long time that we have loved each other?"
"I did not doubt you, dearest, believe me—and if I had, your oath has made me quite happy again. We belong to each other now, Muriel—remember that, whatever may betide; for I too swear with you in the presence of God, that no other woman shall ever be my wife. So Heaven bless you, dear," said Athol Fergusson with a solemn gravity far beyond his years, as he tenderly laid his lips upon her forehead, "and keep you in every way. Shall I help you over the gate, Muriel, or will you ring?"

"No, Athol; there is a plank in the grass out there. Throw it across the ditch and I'll be over in no time. Once more good-night," and with a last kiss the young lovers parted, although Athol did not leave the spot until she had turned on the doorstep and waved her hand to him by the dim light of the oil lamp which hung above the portal. There was no need for Muriel to knock or ring for admittance. The doors of the Châ-
teau always stood on the latch until they were barred for the night, and in another moment she had burst in upon the family party at supper. They were all assembled there, even down to little Davie (who had never gone farther than the bridge, from which he had amused himself by throwing stones into the water, in his search for Muriel), but they had not commenced the meal, and a profound gloom seemed to have settled on every one. Mrs. Grant was whining and sniffing into her handkerchief; the girls were huddled together whispering in the corners; and Captain Grant (who had just returned from his club, where he indulged in games of halfpenny whist during the evenings) was walking up and down the room in a state of unusual perturbation.

"I said something was wrong; I was sure something was wrong," he was reiterating as Muriel appeared; "but to keep
us in the dark in this way for three months and then to take the girl away without any warning is disgraceful, perfectly disgraceful."

"What is disgraceful?" asked Muriel, standing on the threshold.

"Oh, here she is! Oh, mother, do tell her," burst simultaneously from the daughters, who were dying to see how Muriel would receive the wonderful news of her exaltation to the peerage.

"Oh, Muriel! My dear child—Lady Muriel, as I should say," exclaimed Mrs. Grant, "such a wonderful thing has happened."

"Yes, Lady Muriel!—Lady Muriel Damer!" echoed Margaret and Emily and Fanny, dancing round her.

Muriel looked utterly perplexed. She had never been told that her father had the remotest chance of coming into the earldom. It is doubtful if she had ever heard there was a title in her family, so much had she
been left to her own thoughts and the protection of the Grants; and the words used by her adopted sisters conveyed no meaning to her ears.

"I don't understand you," she answered smiling. "Is it a joke? Are you all laughing at me?"

"Hold your tongues, girls," said Captain Grant authoritatively. "It is my business to inform Muriel of the news we have just received."

"Nothing unpleasant I hope, papa," she answered (for she had always called Captain Grant "papa" with the other children) as she went up to him and touched his arm.

"Well, my dear, it may be pleasant for you, but it is quite the reverse for us. A lady called here this evening—your aunt, I believe——"

"No, no, David; her father's cousin, Miss Rutherford!" corrected Mrs. Grant.

"It's all the same," he returned impa-
tently. "Your father's cousin came here, Muriel, to tell us that Mr. Damer has lately come into the family title—I suppose you knew there was a title in your family, Muriel?"

"No, I didn't," she said shaking her head. "No one ever told me."

"Well, your father is now the Earl of Rhylton and he was married again last week to a lady called the Honourable Mrs. Seton, and they are on their honeymoon trip to Italy."

"My father is married again!" repeated Muriel in surprise. "Oh, I'm sure I shan't like that. I wonder what she is like."

"I believe she is (or was) a great beauty, and I daresay you will be very happy with her. So now you understand why you are Lady Muriel Damer."

"But how can it alter my name?"

"It does, my dear, and it will alter you in many ways beside. But I have not told
you all, Muriel. Lord Rhylton's orders are, that you leave us to-morrow morning, to go with Miss Rutherford to Paris."
CHAPTER IV.

A WARNING.

At these words Muriel, who had displayed no emotion on hearing that her father had gained an earldom and a new wife and herself a title, gave a loud cry of dismay, and, rushing forward, fell on her knees beside Mrs. Grant and buried her face in her lap.

"Oh, no, no!" she exclaimed as she commenced to sob violently. "I cannot—I will not! Oh, mamma, don't send me from you!"

"My dear child," replied Mrs. Grant, beginning to cry too, for they were all genuinely fond of Muriel (except Agnes), "what can I do? Do you suppose we would let you go if we could help it? But against your father's will we have no remedy.
I entreated—I implored Miss Rutherford to give us a little more time to get accustomed to the idea, but she was inexorable, and Colonel de Crespigny is to call for you tomorrow morning at ten o'clock. I shall have barely time to pack your things."

"Miss Rutherford, Colonel de Crespigny!" reiterated Muriel looking up through her tears. "But who are they? I never heard of them before."

"Oh, it's all right, my dear; there is no doubt of that. Miss Rutherford is your father's cousin, and the colonel is a friend of hers: a fine, handsome-looking man too."

"Late of the 84th Rioters," interposed Captain Grant, who was a walking Army List, "gazetted in 1860, retired in 1884; must be fifty or thereabouts. One of his sons is in the 26th Rangers, the other in the Indian Staff Corps. Yes, there is no doubt about it; it's a genuine thing."

"But why," demanded Muriel with quiver-
ing lips, "why, if my father is in Italy with his new wife, must I leave Revranches directly: why cannot I remain here till he returns to England? There is no one for me to go to. Oh, papa, do write and ask him to let me stay with you for a few weeks longer."

"My dear girl, it would be of no avail, even if I knew the earl's present address. You hear what mamma says, that she pleaded for a little delay, but they had arranged everything before they called here."

"Everything," echoed Mrs. Grant, "even down to the time of starting. So now, dear Muriel, all you have to do is to eat your supper and get to bed as soon as you may. Agnes and I will look after the packing."

"I cannot eat anything—my heart is breaking," cried Muriel in another burst of tears, as she broke from them and sought the refuge of her own apartment.
"Poor darling! How bitterly she feels it," said Mrs. Grant with her handkerchief to her eyes. "I expect she will often sigh, in the gay life she is going to lead, for the peace of the old Château. Agnes, go after Lady Muriel, and see if you can help her, and if she refuses to come down stairs again, persuade her to go to bed. And now, children, take your supper, for we must all be up early to-morrow morning."

Agnes Prudhomme lighted the little pétrole lamp and obeyed her mistress's orders cheerfully. It afforded her the opportunity she had been longing for, to speak to Muriel privately, about taking her to England. But she found the girl indisposed to listen to anything but the wild regrets of her own heart. She was lying across her pallet bed, in an abandonment of grief, sobbing as if she had lost everything in the world. The spectacle filled Agnes's breast with genuine surprise. An earl's daughter! going to Paris and London,
and crying as if some great misfortune had overtaken her. It was inexplicable.

"But, mademoiselle," she said (for Agnes sometimes addressed the young ladies by their Christian names, and sometimes as if she were their servant), "surely, all these tears are not for leaving the old Château. Ah! if I had but the good luck to be going too. You would not see me do anything but laugh. Fancy, mademoiselle, you are going to Paris! Picture to yourself the shops, the boulevards, the theatres—all the delights of that heavenly place, and you will soon realize the folly of crying over this stupid, piggish, out-of-the-way old Revranches."

"Oh! Agnes," replied Muriel lifting her stained and swollen face from the pillows, "it is not only because I am going to leave Revranches that I shed tears; indeed it is not for Revranches at all—it is—it is because of poor Athol."

"For Monsieur Fergusson," exclaimed
Agnes with well-acted surprise, although she had known well enough why. Muriel wept.

"Oh! mademoiselle, a gentleman like Monsieur Fergusson can go anywhere. Doubtless he will follow you to Paris. It is the business of the men to follow the women, and you will see him again before long. I would not cry for that if I were you."

"Ah! Agnes, you do not know everything. There are more difficulties in the way than you think of. Athol and I love each other, oh! so dearly, but he is not rich, you know, and we must wait, perhaps for many years, before we are married, and in all that time what am I to do? If I had stayed here, I should have seen him sometimes, but now that I am going away we may never, never meet again."

Agnes had tried to look sympathetic during this confidence, but she had not felt so. It had long been a great cause for jealousy with her, that Muriel had won the heart of
the handsome young Englishman, whom she had tried to attract herself in vain, and she was maliciously glad to think that they would be parted. But her answering words contained the very essence of comfort.

"Mademoiselle, surely you are doing Monsieur Fergusson a great wrong by such a doubt. Of course you will meet again. Depend on it, he will make lots of money—a brave, handsome, clever gentleman like that—and then he will find you out and pour it all at your feet. Oh! mademoiselle mustn’t cry for that. The future contains nothing but happiness for her. I am sure of it."

"But, Agnes, how can I let Athol know that I am going away? Ten o’clock tomorrow morning. It is so horribly soon. And when we parted at the gate this evening, he said—poor darling!—that he had a kind of foreboding that trouble was coming for us. And it has come sure enough."

"You must write to him, mademoiselle."
"And you will give him my letter, Agnes, will you not, and explain how it was that I could not see him again?"

"Yes, if I am here—and if not, we will post it."

"Why do you say, if you are here, Agnes?" demanded Muriel.

"Ah! Muriel—miladi, as I suppose I must say now—have you forgotten your promise to take me to England with you as your maid?"

"Did I promise it?" said Muriel wearily, "but that must have been when I thought my father would come himself to fetch me, and I could talk to him about such things. But now I feel quite alone and friendless. I am going out into this strange world, Agnes, as if it were a wilderness, and Athol and Revanches were the only home that I had ever known."

"But won't you speak for me to Colonel de Crespigny, mademoiselle, when he calls for you to-morrow morning?"
"I don't know. I cannot promise. How can I begin at once to talk to a strange man about such things? It is all so hurried—so entirely without warning. I don't feel as if I quite knew what I want, or do not want."

"Love does make us very selfish as a rule," observed Agnes with sententious impudence, as she turned away and busied herself with emptying Muriel's chest drawers. Her companion did not fail to notice her manner, but remembered that she needed her help to convey her last farewell to Athol Fergusson.

"Don't be hard on me, Agnes," she answered gently, "for I am very, very unhappy. But I will mention your name to my cousin (I promise you that), and if I am to have a maid, perhaps it may be managed that you shall get the place. And you will take a letter for me to Mr. Fergusson as soon as ever you can, to-morrow, won't you, Agnes?"
and tell him—tell him how utterly wretched I was to go away.” Here Muriel broke down again, but presently rising with an effort, wrote a blistered scrawl, full of vows of love and fidelity, to Athol Fergusson, promising to write to him and let him know her address, and inclosing a little seal with a cupid engraved on it and the motto “Toujours” (the only thing she had to give him), as a parting present. She had barely time to confide the packet to Agnes’ keeping, when Mrs. Grant and her boisterous daughters came upstairs and after having packed Muriel’s scanty wardrobe in a box, persuaded her to retire to rest. But the poor child could not sleep. Visions of the unknown future that lay before her, and regret for the life she was leaving behind, combined to keep her awake and grieving, until her sobs disturbed Mrs. Grant also, and brought the weak-minded but kindly-hearted woman to her bedside to try and soothe her grief.
"Why, Muriel, my dear, is it possible you are still awake? What will you look like to-morrow morning if you continue to cry like this? Indeed, my dear, you will make yourself ill. You must try to be more composed. It is very sweet of you to regret parting with us so much (and we have all loved you very dearly, Muriel); but perhaps Lord Rhylton will permit you to come back and see us sometimes—that is, if you do not grow too fine to wish to revisit our poor, humble home."

Lady Muriel was somewhat weak in character, and easily led, but she was honest, and her foster mother's speech made her feel guilty. She knew she was not grieving to leave the old Château des Lauriers, nor the discomforts of which she had justly complained, and she could not accept the merit which was not her due.

"Dear mamma," she said affectionately as she sat up in bed and laid her aching head.
on Mrs. Grant's shoulder, "you have all been very kind to me, and this is the only home that I have ever known. I should have been sorry, under any circumstances, to leave you and the girls, and to go out into a world of which I am so ignorant and a little afraid. But I am not crying only for that. This sudden departure is a terrible grief to me because—because—"

"Because what, my dear? Surely you have no secrets from me."

"I have had—not quite a secret though, because you have known that we were great friends, and always walked together—"

"Are you alluding to young Fergusson, Muriel?"

"Yes, mamma! but I have never told you yet, how fond we have grown of each other, and that I have promised to marry him as soon as ever he is able to keep a wife."

"To marry Athol Fergusson! Oh, my dear child, that is an impossibility. It can never
be. You must put it all out of your head at once. A promise from a girl like you, and without your father’s knowledge, goes for nothing. You will have forgotten all about such nonsense three months hence.”

“Indeed, Mrs. Grant, I shall never forget it, for I love him as dearly as he loves me. Besides, why should it be impossible that I should ever marry him?”

“Because he is a pauper, my dear, and has no expectations of any sort. His poor mother was lamenting over it to me only the other day. She mentioned that very fact that her son would never be able to marry, because he will have nothing but his pay, and may have to support her as well as himself. You see, Muriel, the daughters may get husbands who would object to having their mother-in-law in the house, and it leaves very little chance for poor young Athol in my opinion.”

“Still, I mean to wait for him,” said Lady
Muriel stoutly; "I have promised and I will keep to it. Besides, I love him, and I shall be wretched without him," she cried relapsing into tears.

"Muriel! be warned by me," said Mrs. Grant solemnly, "and don't think of marrying a man who has no money. Just look to what I have fallen. Ah! my dear girl, innocent as you are of the world and its ways, I am sure you have found out for yourself that we are not in the position we should be. And yet I married with fair prospects. Captain Grant was an officer on good pay, and we expected it to increase every year. But a large family and sickness weighed us down, until we could not possibly exist upon it with any comfort. Then—in an evil moment—my husband sold out of the army and lost all his money in speculation, and brought me down to this. You see what my life is, Muriel. I am no better than a servant, and I have not a servant's strength to
compete with labour. And how do you suppose it will end. A few more years at the most of this drudgery, and I shall sink into the grave, and be thankful to have rest even there, from the miseries that a poverty-stricken marriage has brought upon me. Oh, Muriel, be wise, and cast away all idea of marrying Athol Fergusson, for even if you remain faithful to him (which is very doubtful), I am sure his lordship will never sanction your making so poor a match."

"But I love him, and I will marry no one else," reiterated Muriel. "If papa won't consent to it, I will wait till I am twenty-one, and then I will run away with Athol and no one will be able to separate us. You forget, mamma, that I am eighteen," continued the girl drawing herself up, "I am not a child like Fanny. I am a woman and I know my own mind perfectly on this matter and am resolved to have my own way."

"I am very sorry to hear it, my dear," re-
plied Mrs. Grant with a sigh, "and I only hope Lord Rhylton will not think that Captain Grant and I have encouraged you in such a piece of folly. I had no idea that Mr. Fergusson liked you better than he did the other girls. I thought you were all friendly together, and I am grieved to find that, in your case, it has gone further. Pray make the earl understand that we had nothing whatever to do with the matter."

"Yes, yes; if he should ever ask me, of course I will; but, mamma, you will be kind to poor Athol for my sake, won't you? You will ask him to the Château and talk to him of me and give him a little comfort, for I know he will be so very miserable when he hears that I am gone."

"No! Muriel, my dear, you mustn't ask me to do it, for I couldn't. If he had been your friend only, it would have been different; but what you have told me now puts it entirely out of the question. I must be
prepared (in case the earl calls me to account for this) to say that I never knew of or encouraged it."

"Oh, mamma! you speak as if I had committed a crime."

"Poverty is a crime, my dear, for it leads to crime. When it comes on us like an armed man, all we can do is to fight it as best we may, but if ever you feel inclined to rush into it, Muriel, of your own accord, think of me, for God's sake, and of all the misery you have witnessed here, and turn your steps deliberately the other way."

Mrs. Grant was so unusually decided as she said these words, and her careworn, anxious face looked so full of pain, that Lady Muriel shrunk within herself, frightened at the fancied glimpse she had taken into the future.

"Oh, don't talk of it any more now," she exclaimed wearily; "I don't want to think of it. I can only realize that I am going
away from dear Revranches and that I may never, never see it again."

Mrs. Grant consoled her as well as she was able, but Muriel slept no more that night, and when the bright June morning broke, she was a blot upon it, with her swollen eyelids and white tear-stained cheeks. Yet Colonel de Crespigny on first beholding her, thought she was one of the loveliest girls he had ever seen, and wondered how such a handsome, graceful daughter could belong to the high-shouldered, pigeon-breasted, ugly and awkward Earl of Rhylton. The first thought that struck him as Lady Muriel came shyly forward to greet him was that he should have liked to know her mother.

The colonel was very punctual, and as he explained that he had received directions to take his charge straight to the railway dépôt to meet Miss Rutherford, there was nothing to be done but to carry Muriel's solitary box to the voiture and bid her their
last farewells. Agnes Prudhomme stood by while these went on, with something very like a frown upon her countenance. She had caught the admiring gaze with which Colonel de Crespigny had received Lady Muriel, and imagined she had outstripped her in his estimation. But as soon as he thought that he was unobserved, the colonel drew nearer to her side.

"And so it is not to be this time, Agnes?" he commenced.

"So it appears, monsieur. I spoke to Miladi Muriel last night about it, but she said she could do nothing without asking you or Miss Rutherford. And you have forgotten all about me, doubtless."

"Indeed! you do me wrong. I broached the subject to Miss Rutherford as soon as we got clear of the Château gates, but she has received no directions about engaging a lady's maid, and is afraid to take the responsibility on her own shoulders. I ex-
pect you will have to depend upon me after all, Agnes."

"I will accept any situation monsieur is good enough to find for me."

"Then you will soon be suited, and indeed I think I know the very place for you. Wait till I return to England next month, Agnes, and you shall hear from me. Where shall I address you?"

"At the Poste Restante, Revranches, monsieur," replied the girl hurriedly as Lady Muriel turned towards them.

"Good-bye, Agnes. I am sorry you cannot come with me. It would have seemed like carrying away a bit of the old home to the new one;" and then she laid her hands on the girl's shoulders, and kissed her on the cheeks. "Adieu! ma chère, and you won't forget what you promised to do for me—will you?"

"Trust me, mademoiselle," returned the girl, "I will do it as quickly as you would
have done it yourself. It is quite safe with me."

And then, with one more embrace all round, and a longing desire to wrench herself away and run to Athol, Lady Muriel Damer suffered Colonel de Crespigny to lead her to the voiture, where she flung herself down upon the seat in an agony of despair.
CHAPTER V.

LADY MURIEL.

Her travelling companion did not attempt to speak to her until she was somewhat calmer. But as they left the fields that surrounded the Château behind them and approached the town of Revranches, he ventured to lay his gloved hand very gently upon hers and say, "Try and compose yourself, dear Lady Muriel. In a few minutes we shall be at the dépôt, and Miss Rutherford will be very grieved to receive you like this. She has your happiness so much at heart."

"I don't know her," sobbed Muriel childishly.

"But you soon will, and you ought to have known her long ago, for she is your father's first cousin. Miss Walford is travelling with
us too—a young lady not much older, I imagine, than yourself—so we shall be a charming parti carré in Paris, just the right number to go about to theatres and exhibitions together. Are you fond of the theatre, Lady Muriel?”

“I have never been to one,” she answered, drying her eyes vigorously with her handkerchief.

“Never been to one!” echoed Colonel de Crespigny with surprise. “What a treat there is in store for you! How you will enjoy it! I have promised Miss Rutherford to take her the round of the Parisian theatres.”

“Are you her cousin too?” demanded Muriel, who was beginning to feel interested in her new acquaintance.

“I am not, I am sorry to say, else I should be able to claim some sort of relationship to yourself. But I am an old friend of the family. I knew your father, Lord Rhylton, when he was a boy, but I never had the plea-
sure of seeing your mother. I was in India during the time of his first marriage."

"And my new mamma, the lady papa has just married, do you know her too?" asked Muriel eagerly.

"Very well. I have known her for several years."

"Oh, do tell me what she is like," said the girl, sitting straight upright and forgetting all about her tears.

"She is very handsome, and some time ago she was considered a great beauty. But she is no longer young. Her daughter, Miss Seton, must be twenty. But she is very rich, and she looks a countess every inch of her."

"I am glad she is rich," said Lady Muriel naively. "I suppose papa married her for that, for it is a terrible thing to be poor. If he had been rich, I am sure he would not have left me all those years at the Château des Lauriers."
"Have you been unhappy there, Lady Muriel?"

"Not exactly, but somehow I wish I had left it years and years ago," she answered with a sigh.

Colonel de Crespigny was very sharp where matters of the heart were concerned, and he guessed at once that Lady Muriel's sigh was connected with some person in Revranches dearer to her than the uninteresting family at the Château. But he was not so impolitic as to allude to it. He merely said:

"It certainly was not a suitable place for you to be brought up in, and were Lord Rhyton to see it, I am sure he would say so too. However, that is all over and best forgotten. You will never be placed in such a position again. You are a grown-up young lady now, and will be able to do pretty well as you please."

"Do you really think so?" asked Muriel with a brighter look.
"Certainly I do. Lady Muriel Damer, living in her father's house, will be a very different person from little Muriel Damer running about the Château des Lauriers. Don't you agree with me? Why, life has but just opened before you, Lady Muriel, and you have every prospect of a long and healthy one in which to have all manner of enjoyment. I envy you, upon my soul I do. But here we are at the dépôt, and there is Miss Rutherford's voiture just in front of us. Allow me to help you," and as he gave her his hand in alighting, Muriel (who until that moment had jumped in and out of carriages without any offer of assistance) descended to the ground like a grown-up woman, and felt ten years older for the proceeding. Her eyes were dry now and her voice steady, but she looked a very quaint, old-fashioned little figure as Colonel de Crespigny presented her to Miss Rutherford.

"Here is Lady Muriel Damer," he said,
"and you had better take her into the salle d'attente, while I settle with these thieving cochers."

"Oh, my dear child," cried Miss Rutherford effusively, as she embraced her young relation, "and so this is really you. Why, how tall you are—taller than Lina or myself, I do declare—but you are sadly pale. Well, well, we will soon remedy that. You must feel quite at home with us, you know, dear, until you join your papa, for I am your very own cousin, and Lina is my niece, so that we are one family after all."

Muriel thought it very funny at first to be claimed as a cousin by an old lady with sharp features and lines all over her face, and she looked with astonishment from Miss Rutherford's pink cheeks and dark eyebrows and abundance of hair to her juvenile attire and the gay scarlet poppies nodding over the brim of her hat. She did not know how to make the two things agree, but she had no
time for speculation, for Lina Walford was kissing her on the other side, and the two ladies between them bore her off to the waiting room and assailed her with a storm of remarks and inquiries.

"Are you not very glad, dear, to get away from that terrible old Château and those dreadful people, the Grants? Are you not longing to see your father again and Lady Rhylton, and to settle down in London? Shall we not have a delightful time in Paris, with dear Colonel de Crespigny, who is so good and kind to us; and don't you anticipate the pleasure of visiting the theatres and the Louvre and all the exhibitions? And oh, you sly, sly puss, are you not anxious to change that horrid conventual dress for some pretty fashionable costume that will make all the men fall in love with you as soon as they see you?"

Lady Muriel did not know what to answer to such very searching questions. She had
been brought up in such a simple country fashion, that the vivacity of her new friends confused and puzzled her, and made her shrink in herself. She blushed when Lina talked of her having lovers, and her lip trembled and the tears rose to her eyes, for the allusion recalled the thought of Athol; but she was too proud to show her emotion before strangers, and with a strong effort she choked them back again and only looked foolish and ill at ease.

"Don't talk such nonsense, Lina!" exclaimed Miss Rutherford, though she had joined in the conversation herself. "Our little cousin is not used to such frivolity. You forget she has been educated at a convent and is much steadier than yourself. But you will try and be happy with us, Muriel, will you not?—and great friends with Lina, or Rhylton will regret that he intrusted you to my care."

"Oh, indeed I will, and I am sure I shall
be happy,” replied Muriel smiling, for she could smile again by this time. Everything around her was so new and interesting, and she began to feel so curious about the great outside world which she had never yet peeped into.

In another minute the colonel was amongst them again with his hands full of railway tickets, and in the bustle of looking after her belongings, and being seated in the train, Lady Muriel Damer had parted from Revanches and all the surroundings of her childhood before she had realized that they were passing away from her.

From that moment her life became so entirely altered, that she could never link the two halves together again. It seemed indeed as if she had stepped out of one existence into the other, and that a broad gulf divided them, over which there was no repassing. As she had suddenly, from being a commoner’s daughter, become a lady of
title, so did she pass from a retired home and scholastic duties into a world of fashion and amusement, and it was enough to turn the head of any girl. It was not that as soon as she joined the party to Paris, she loved Athol Fergusson less, or desired to think less of him, but they gave her no time to think at all. Miss Rutherford and Miss Walford talked so incessantly of what they had seen, and what they were going to see—of what they had done, and what they were going to do—that Muriel's brain became quite confused, and she was willing only to sit by and listen. She soon found that it was expected that she and Lina were to be companions to each other, and leave Miss Rutherford and Colonel de Crespigny to themselves. For some inexplicable reason these two were always supposed to sit side by side in a carriage, or at a dinner table, and if the party split into half for walking or driving, Muriel invariably found she was
left behind with Lina Walford. Not that she grumbled at it, for she was indifferent both to the colonel and Miss Rutherford, and she found Lina a pleasant and lively companion. Miss Walford was a typical young lady of the nineteenth century. She knew everybody and everything—had read books that her grandmother would have hesitated to open, and was *au fait* with subjects that have (until lately) been held to be fit only for medical disquisition. She was *petite* and a brunette, in age from twenty to twenty-four, in experience from forty to sixty. She had had more lovers than years, and fell out with them as rapidly as she fell in love with them. As may be imagined from this fact, she had little sentiment in her composition, and laughed at the idea of any woman proving a martyr to the tender passion. Lina had not been many days in close companionship with Lady Muriel Damer before she found out that she had a secret
grief, and that it was connected with some lover left behind at Revranches. The discovery did not in the least surprise her. What could a girl do with herself in such an unexciting, dead and alive, sepulchre of a place like Revranches, unless she fell in love? But a lover who could not be displaced at a moment's notice, to make way for new dresses and mantles and hats, for mornings spent in the picture galleries, or at the Bon Marché, and evenings at the theatre or in the Bois, was a revelation to Lina Walford and ended by rousing her curiosity. For, after the first days of excitement were over, Muriel's thoughts reverted very tenderly to her absent Athol, and she fell into a state of deep depression. Her new costumes ceased to interest her—she sat, distraite and inattentive, even at the feet of Sara Bernhardt, in the Porte St. Martin, and sauntered through the Louvre, with her thoughts and her eyes
alike fixed on anything but the pictures.

"My dear Lina! what can be the matter with her?" said Miss Rutherford in confidence to her niece. "She is positively melancholy. She cannot possibly regret that tumbledown old pigsty at Revranches, and those detestable Grants. Has she told you nothing?"

"No, auntie, she has never alluded to the subject, but I have guessed it has something to do with a young man. Have you noticed the ring she wears on her engaged finger?"

"I think I have, but surely the child cannot consider herself engaged to any one. Who could she be engaged to?"

"You must ask me something easier, auntie, but she never takes that ring off her finger night or day. I noticed it once when we were in bed together, and told her she would spoil the shape of her hand if she did not remove her ring, but she said she
had worn it for twelve months, and nothing would induce her to take it off again. What do you think of that, auntie?"

"My dear Lina, you must get the truth out of her as soon as possible. Use a little diplomacy, my love. Be sympathetic, but let me have the whole story as soon as may be, for it must be put a stop to. Lord Rhylton would never forgive me if I didn't crush all such nonsense in the bud. He is quite determined that Muriel shall make a good marriage (as he writes me to-day), and is delighted to hear she promises to be so handsome. And he is right, too, for the poor child has no money of her own, and I doubt the amiability of Lady Rhylton as a stepmother."

"I'll worm it all out of her, auntie. You may depend upon that," replied Lina, and in effect she had heard the whole story of Muriel's love for Athol Fergusson before many days were over her head.
What chance had Muriel against the strategy of such a little woman of the world as Lina Walford? The poor child stood in need of sympathy, and Lina was so sympathetic. She wanted counsel, and Lina (apparently) had passed through just such an ordeal herself. Above all she longed for a friend and confidante, and Lina wooed her confidence so sweetly that her secret was gone from her before she knew it. And then when it was once confessed to her girl friend, what a comfort it was to tell her everything—how handsome Athol was, and how good. What an excellent son and brother. What a clever scholar. What a thorough gentleman in every way, with such strong views of right, and hatred of everything that was mean, or dishonest or wrong. Muriel, with glowing cheeks and tear-suffused eyes, expatiated on the many excellencies of her young lover, whilst Lina listened and forbore to make a single remark that should stem
the current of her confidence. At last she had heard everything, and Lady Muriel went on to entreat her assistance.

"And now, dear Lina, you must see why I am so unhappy. I had to leave Rev-ranches without even bidding him adieu, and I am afraid he will think me unkind. I would have written to him last week, for I promised in the letter I left behind me to let him know my address as soon as I was settled, but I never go out alone and I was afraid you would see his name on the envelope and question me about it. But now I feel much happier, because you understand my difficulty and will help me through it."

"Of course I will," said Lina heartily. "In fact if you will trust me with the letter I will post it. I wouldn't tell auntie, if I were you, Muriel. Old ladies don't understand these matters, they have forgotten all about them. I have never told her of one of my lovers, and I've had scores of them."
"But I don't think Cousin Amelia has forgotten all about them,” replied Muriel laughing, “for I'm sure she makes love to Colonel de Crespigny quite openly. I caught her holding his hand on the sofa yesterday.”

“I daresay,” returned Lina carelessly. “They are supposed to be going to make a match of it some day, you know. Not that the colonel's attentions to her are any proof of it, for he makes love to everybody. But that has nothing to do with the matter. If you write your letter I will see it posted.”

“Oh, thank you, Lina. You have taken a weight off my mind. Athol will be longing to hear from me. Oh! dear, oh! dear! I wonder how long it will be before we meet again? Months and months, perhaps years.”

“You will have had any number of lovers meantime,” laughed Lina.

“Lina!” exclaimed Muriel, in a tone of horrified incredulity.
"You will, my dear, take my word for it. Why, this is only number one. You don't imagine that a pretty girl like yourself is going through life with one lover."

"But I have promised to be true to Athol. I am going to marry him," replied Muriel.

"When?"

"Oh, I can't say 'when.' It must all depend on his promotion in the army. But when he is a captain I daresay he will be able to afford to keep a wife."

"Do you know how long it takes to make a captain in the British army, when a man has no money to purchase his steps with, Muriel? I do, because I happen to have fallen in love with a 'sub.' once, and it was all explained to me. An officer may remain at the bottom of the ladder till his hair is grey, unless there is a war, and he stands his chance of being shot like the rest."

"Oh! Lina, don't talk like that. You frighten me," said Muriel tearfully. "But
however long it may be, I must wait for Athol, because I am pledged to become his wife."

"Well, dear, I hope you'll enjoy it; but I would just have one or two flirtations meanwhile, if it's only to keep your hand in."

Lina laughed heartily to see Lady Muriel's look of horror at the proposition, but she kissed her the next moment to make up for it, and her words were forgotten as soon as uttered. Not so with Muriel's own. They were all repeated to Miss Rutherford on the first opportunity until that lady was au courant of the whole affair.

"Now I don't want to tell Rhylton about this, and bring down his wrath upon poor Muriel's head, Lina," she answered, "and there is no need for it, for the poor dear child has done no wrong. She has only been amusing herself, and a season in town will drive it all out of her head, only it must not go any further. If it is checked
now, it will die a natural death. Let her write her letter and confide it to your keeping, and then bring it to me, Lina, and we'll burn it together. Silence kills a fancy sooner than anything else, and if it is correct that this young man is going out to India with his regiment, why, there will be an end to it. It's ridiculous, my dear! it could never come to anything. A girl without a sixpence marrying an officer on his pay! What would it end in? A ménage like that terrible Château des Lauriers, the very remembrance of which makes me shudder."

"Of course, auntie, and nobody with any sense would have thought otherwise, but Lady Muriel is very simple! She has the most old-fashioned ideas about love and marriage you ever heard! She makes me scream with laughter, sometimes."

"Knock them out of her head as fast as you can, Lina. It's the kindest thing you
can do for her. She will have a splendid opportunity to make a good match next season, for the Rhyltons will launch out well, I expect, for Miss Seton's sake. And I hope dear Muriel will take advantage of it, for Lady Rhylton's temper is so uncertain, I don't know how they'll agree. But Muriel looks quite different in her Parisian costumes and with her hair properly dressed—almost handsome at times. What do you think, Lina?"

"It doesn't much signify what I think, auntie," returned the girl, who was pretty enough herself to be able to afford to be generous; "it's what the gentlemen think! I know Muriel gets stared at enough wherever we go, whether we're walking on the Boulevards, or driving in the Bois, and Colonel de Crespigny said yesterday that he thought she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen."

"The colonel!" reiterated Miss Rutherford,
reddening violently; "you must be mistaken. I don't believe it."

"It's true, auntie, upon my word. Not very complimentary to me, was it? but I stood the affront with equanimity because I really don't care what an old widower with two grown-up sons thinks about me, or doesn't."

"Lina! you're growing pert, and I don't like your manner at all. Whatever you may think of our friend Colonel de Crespigny, he is a very fine man, and has a princely fortune, and there are very few young ladies who would not be glad to jump at him."

"I daresay, auntie. Let them jump! I have my eye fixed on my own prospects (as you know) in quite another direction, so I shall never interfere with any of the colonel's amours. But, with regard to this letter, auntie. If I bring it to you, you must promise me not to read it, because I like Muriel too well to allow that."
“Lina, what do you take me for?” cried Miss Rutherford, with virtuous indignation.

“Come, auntie, you know you’ve done it once or twice before, and with respect to some people’s letters, I might say nothing; but Muriel is so thoroughly in earnest (just at present, that is to say) that it would seem a shame to pry into her secrets.”

The upshot of this conversation was that a few days after Miss Walford brought her aunt a thick letter, closely sealed and addressed to Athol Fergusson, Esq., 74 rue des Pierres, Revranches.”

“Double postage, you see,” she said gaily, “fifty centimes worth of sighs and kisses and vows of eternal fidelity. Now, auntie, honour bright! There’s no stove alight to pop it into, but we must tear it up at once and scatter it to the four winds of heaven.”

“Stop, Lina,” exclaimed Miss Rutherford, “on second thoughts, I think it is my duty to send this letter, just as it is, to Muriel’s
father. Now, don't make any objection, my dear. It is the kindest thing to do after all, for this is a very serious matter, and Lord Rhylton is the proper person to deal with it. If it isn't stopped at once, it may lead to a lifelong misery for Muriel. And should she ever hear of the disposition of her letter (which is very unlikely) you can say that I insisted upon your giving it up to me."

And so the long epistle which carried all poor Lady Muriel's hopes and fears with it, travelled to Italy instead of Revranches, and was perused by the Earl of Rhylton instead of Athol Fergusson. His approval of his cousin's prompt action knew no bounds.

"You have done perfectly right, my dear Amelia," he wrote in answer, "and I trust you to destroy all future letters that may fall into your hands, either to or from my daughter. I shall not communicate with the young man. It would look like making too much of the foolish affair; but leave it to die
of itself, as it is sure to do. Lady Rhylton and I have decided on returning to Oakley Court next month to make preparations for the shooting season, and we shall expect Miss Seton and Muriel to join us there. Meanwhile, ask de Crespigny, as a favour to me, to do all in his power to divert Muriel's mind by taking her about to places of amusement. Leave her no time to think, my dear Amelia, and pour as much ridicule as you possibly can on any cases similar to her own, and she will soon forget this loutish lover of Revranches."

Miss Rutherford acted faithfully on these instructions, and the days in Paris flew by so quickly in the pursuit of pleasure, that Lady Muriel was astonished to find that a whole fortnight had elapsed since her letter to Athol had been posted. But when she ventured to express her wonder at not having received an answer, to Lina, that young lady's remark was not very consolatory.
“Did you expect to hear, my dear? Oh! you don’t know boys. Nothing frightens them so much as having to write a letter. They’d rather walk up to a cannon’s mouth any day. I had a boy lover once—a nice young fellow he was, too, and awfully good-looking—but when we parted he couldn’t keep up a correspondence with me, and so it came to nothing, and I said, ‘No more boys for me, thank you, who don’t know their own minds.’”

“Oh, but Athol does know his own mind, Lina, and I am sure he would have written to me, unless something very particular had prevented him.”

“Perhaps you will hear in a day or two,” said Lina soothingly.

“Perhaps,” echoed Muriel with a sigh.

But “to-morrow and to-morrow” came, without a line from Athol Fergusson, and Lady Muriel Damer turned her back on the country that held him, without having heard a word.
CHAPTER VI.

ATHOL Fergusson.

Athol Fergusson did not walk away from the Château des Lauriers directly he had parted from Muriel Damer, on the last night of her residence there. He had more feeling than love for this girl. A great sense of protection and ownership was associated with all his thoughts of her, and it seemed quite wrong, somehow, that she should be entering a house where he had no right to follow her. He stood for some minutes outside the gate, watching the dim light of the pétrole lamp through the shuttered window, and as he reluctantly walked away at last, he said half-audibly, "God bless her and make my love a blessing to her."

The night had fallen by this time and he
had to pick his way rather cautiously over the rutted road, on each side of which was a deep ditch, but he hardly thought where he was going, his mind was so full of Muriel. Oh! how hard it seemed to contemplate parting with her. How much harder than he ever thought it would be! and how fair the prospect and how light the duties would stretch out before him, if he might only take her with him as his companion and his wife. The contemplation of such an idea made Athol's heart beat like a sledge-hammer. Was it, after all, then, such an utter impossibility? Mr. Damer (as the young man still believed him to be) had systematically neglected his daughter. He had left her for ten long years to the tender mercies of the Grants. He hardly knew indeed what she was like, and he certainly could care nothing at all about her. Was it absurd to imagine then that he might be glad to get rid of her altogether, even to share the somewhat
uncertain fortunes of an English subaltern. But after all (as Athol proudly thought)—and if this young man had some faults in his character more prominent than others, they were those of overweening pride and ultra-sensitiveness—his birth and position were those of a gentleman, and if he lived he might hold a better position than Mr. Damer himself. He had heard occasional references to Muriel’s father, made by visitors to Revranches, and they had not been very favourable ones. He had been described as an intensely selfish and somewhat niggardly character, universally disliked by men and not in much better odour with the women. Such a man might reject his modest overtures with scorn, or snap at the opportunity to rid himself of the burden of Muriel, and Athol Fergusson almost came to the resolution to stand his chance. He was a very deep-thinking and deep-feeling young fellow (as has been already said), and the events of
his life had made him years older than his age, and he decided he would rather know what lay before him at once and shape his course accordingly. This decision and the pleasant dreams it brought in its train warmed his blood and quickened his step, so that by the time he arrived at his mother's rooms in the Rue des Pierres, his face and eyes were glowing. As he entered the little salon Mrs. Fergusson's eyes turned on him with unspeakable affection, and, indeed, he was a son of whom any mother might have been proud. His young, lithe figure was fast developing into that of a well-set-up and muscular man. His face bore the impress of truth and goodness. It seemed impossible that his frank deep blue eyes could look you in the face and lie, or that any ribald or offensive language could issue from his cleanly-cut and sensitive mouth. When he appeared amongst them all his women-kind bestirred themselves to do him honour.
Alice commenced to lay the supper-table; Helen moved her easel to one side, and prepared to listen to any news Athol might have to give them, and Mrs. Fergusson put down her needlework, and pulled a chair significantly to her side.

"Well, dear boy," she said as her son sat down in it, "and what has kept you out so late this evening? Alice and Nelly thought you were going to take them for a walk."

They had him so seldom amongst them, that they all made a great deal of him when he was there, but to his mother Athol was more than to any one else in the world. Mrs. Fergusson loved her girls, but she did not hope to keep them long. Alice was already engaged to marry a Belgian, Baron Raymond d'Aragon, and Helen was studying to become an artist, and would probably drift away from home on her own account. But Athol was his mother's
stronghold—the tower of defence she looked to for her old age. He had passed with the highest honours for a noble profession, and she knew that as long as he lived, he would never desert his mother, who was penniless except for the support afforded her by her daughters' earnings as teachers of music and drawing. It had often made Athol's heart ache to see the privations they were compelled to endure at home, and he would have relinquished the hope of marrying Muriel (even if it tore his heart out) sooner than give up the prospect of helping his mother out of his own earnings. It was for this he had studied and striven so hard—that he had denied himself the pleasures natural to his youth—and refused the assistance offered by his uncle—that he might become independent of all but himself, and feel that his mother owed her support to no one but her son.

When Mrs. Fergusson asked him where
he had been that evening, he blushed a little, for he was still young enough and ingenuous enough to blush. He half suspected that she did not entirely approve of his intimacy with Muriel Damer, but a lie was foreign to his nature and he answered her without hesitation.

"I have been on the Ramparts, mother, with Muriel Damer, and have just returned from seeing her home. I didn't know my sisters expected me to join them, or I should have told them I was engaged."

"You are always engaged, it seems to me," said Helen, in a tone of annoyance.

"Well, why shouldn't he be?" returned Alice, who was the most amiable of the two sisters. "It's much pleasanter for the dear boy to stroll about the Ramparts with a pretty girl like Muriel, than to be walking after you and me like a footman. Isn't it, Athol?"

The young man laughed uneasily, but
said nothing. His mother glanced at him, and then turned to Alice reprovingly.

"It may be *pleasanter*, Alice, but it is certainly not so safe. Mrs. Grant neglects her charge very much, in my opinion, to let Miss Damer run about alone as she does, and what Mr. Damer can be about not to be cognizant of it, beats me altogether. It is quite disgraceful. No modest girl would do it or she would not remain modest long if she did."

"You wrong both Miss Damer and myself there, mother," said Athol hotly. "I'll lay there's not a more modest, nor loveable little girl in the United Kingdom than she is, and that I shall never do anything to violate it. On the contrary, I would give my life to preserve it, for—*I have promised to marry her*.

The murder was out now, and he was almost astonished at his own audacity in having let it out so freely. He hung his head a
bit, when the words were said—not from shame, but dread of the storm that might ensue, but the Fergussons were ladies, and would not indulge in vituperation.

Helen laughed rather sardonically, as if the news were too absurd to be credible. Alice stared and exclaimed, "What nonsense! How can you?"—and his mother turned very pale and said, "My boy! you are not in earnest! You are playing off a joke upon us."

But the accusation of not being in earnest irritated Athol more than any other could have done.

"Why should I not be in earnest?" he exclaimed. "I was never more so in my life. Muriel and I have been fond of each other for a year past and she engaged herself to me six months ago; and I wouldn't give her up for all the world. I would have told you of it sooner, mother, had there been any prospect of my marrying
her, but now that I am an officer, it is but right you should hear of my intentions."

"But what prospect have you of marrying her now?" demanded Mrs. Fergusson, with trembling lips.

"Not immediately perhaps, but Muriel is quite willing to wait for me, and as for myself, I shall never forget her to the last day of my life."

At this declaration Helen laughed immoderately.

"Forgive me, my dear Athol, but it is too absurd. You, at twenty-two, and Muriel at eighteen, vowing a life-long fidelity. Why, it's calf love, dear boy. You will forget all about it before six months are over."

Athol drew himself up proudly, but vouchsafed no answer, except what was conveyed by turning round to his mother and saying:

"You won't laugh at my trouble in part-
ing with her, mother. It is a very real and heavy one to me."

"No, my dear, of course not; but I sincerely hope, with Helen, that you will get over it. It is very ridiculous, Athol; every one would say that. You have positively nothing but your pay, and Miss Damer appears to be a pauper. There is no chance of your being able to marry any one for years—if even then. And to suppose this schoolgirl will keep faith with you for an indefinite period, is really laughable. Indeed, I trust you do not think too seriously of her, for your own sake. If I believed what you say, I should be truly miserable; but I look upon it as a mere flirtation, that will fade as quickly as it has sprung up."

"Then you think wrong," said Athol gloomily.

"Well, my opinion is that you're both very hard on the dear boy," interposed
Alice in her cheery voice. "He can’t marry now, of course, and I don’t suppose he wants to; but why shouldn’t he engage himself to Muriel Damer if he has a fancy that way? It’s the girl’s own choice to wait for him, and I think she will show her sense if she does so. He’s going into a splendid corps, and will draw good pay, by-and-by; besides there’s always the chance (a poor one I grant, but *nil desperandum*) of Uncle Robert and his sickly little son vacating the baronetcy for Athol’s benefit."

"Oh, my dear, it is you who are talking nonsense now," exclaimed her mother, "and I think it wrong of you to put such ideas into your brother’s head. Your cousin Herbert is almost restored to health, and Sir Robert is likely to outlive us all. I hope Athol will never be so foolish as to indulge in any expectations from that quarter."

"Never," said the young man emphatically. "I mean to depend on my own exer-
tions, and wait for no man's shoes. But I thank you for your advocacy, dear Alice, all the same. *You* know what love is, and will understand me when I say that I would rather wait till I am grey-haired for Muriel, than marry any other woman."

"But will she wait for you?" demanded Helen.

"I think so, Nelly," he answered briefly.

"We are making much too much of this affair," interposed Mrs. Fergusson fretfully. "After all it is only a boy and girl fancy, and time alone can prove whether it will ever be anything more. But I hope (whatever happens) that Athol will never forget what he owes to his mother and sisters."

"Never! mother!" he repeated as earnestly as before, but he perceived how distasteful his news had been to his hearers, and his natural reticence made him drop the subject. But he only thought of it the more, and walked to the Ramparts to meet
Muriel the next evening, with the full determination to ask her consent to write at once to Mr. Damer and learn his opinion with regard to their engagement. If he would only consent to their immediate marriage (he thought), or agree to its taking place at any definite period, how hard he would work and save, meanwhile, to provide his darling with a comfortable home. It was beyond the usual hour of their meeting, and he had just begun to wonder what had detained her, when he saw Agnes Prudhomme advancing to him. Athol had a particular dislike to this girl. Her influence disturbed and irritated him. The atmosphere of cunning and malignity by which she was surrounded, had nothing in common with his open soul and generous, charitable spirit. Added to this, he felt uneasy in her presence. There was a time when Agnes had tried hard to win the young Englishman for herself and failed,
and such misunderstandings between the sexes generally culminate in mutual dislike. He tried to avoid her, on this occasion, by turning quickly back and sauntering down a lower path, but Agnes quickened her footsteps and overtook him.

"Ah! Monsieur Fergusson!" she exclaimed, "so you are running away from me. But you would not do so if you knew the grand news I bring you."

"News," he said, wheeling round to face her. "Of whom? Miss Damer?"

"But, yes! of Miss Damer. Conceive the consternation we are in, monsieur, at the Château. We are deserted. She has left us."

Athol turned very white. The intelligence came so suddenly that it unnerved him, and, for the moment, all his feeling rushed into his face and betrayed him. It was what Agnes had intended it should do.

"Ah! you are surprised. You did not believe she would leave you like this, with-
out a word, eh? But I knew all along that some day Mademoiselle Damer would play you a trick, and show you what she is.

"I don't understand you, Agnes," he said hurriedly. "Do you mean that Muriel has left Revranches? When did she go? Whom did she go with?"

"That is just what I have come to tell monsieur, if he will but listen. I promised mademoiselle the last thing that I would come here this evening and tell him every-thing. But wait. The greatest surprise of all is, that mademoiselle is no longer mademoiselle, but Miladi Muriel Damer, and mon-sieur son père is the Earl of Rhypton."

"Oh, Agnes! have pity on me and say it more distinctly. You do not know what I am feeling," he cried, in a voice of genuine distress.

"I am telling you the truth, monsieur. Last night an English lady and gentleman—relations of Miladi Muriel—came to the
Château to tell us the grand news, and this morning at ten o'clock they fetched her away, and she has gone—I do not know where—with them.”

“And she is actually gone! She has left me,” he exclaimed, as he turned his face away from Agnes's scrutinizing stare.

“She has, monsieur; but she couldn't help it. She was obliged to go. They would not let her have one day more in Revranches. Her papa, the earl, has made a grand marriage with much money, and he sent for miladi home at once, that she may be introduced into society. That is what the lady who fetched her, said. And Madame Grant and I were up all night, packing her clothes, and as soon as the déjeuner was over, she went.”

“But did she leave no letter for me—no message?” cried the young man, using all his moral strength to stamp down his rising emotion:
“How could Miladi Muriel write? What time had she?” demanded Agnes, shrugging her shoulders at his unreasonableness.

“She was crying too much at leaving the Demoiselles Grant and Revanches, to be able to think of anything. Only she said to me, ‘Go to the Ramparts this evening, Agnes, and tell Athol’—that is how she called you, monsieur—‘why I cannot come, and say I am going home to my papa in London.’”

“She might have scribbled me one word,” he said despairingly. “But I will write to her instead. What is her address, Agnes?”

The girl opened her big eyes at him.

“I don’t know, monsieur. I don’t even know where Miladi Muriel is gone; but I have heard Captain Grant say that Milord Rhyton is in Italy.”

“But you can get it for me, Agnes, surely?”

She shook her head.
"But how, monsieur? If I make such a demand, I shall be asked the reason. They know I cannot need it for myself, and for you, would they disclose it?"

"Oh, you are so clever, I am sure you could find it out if you choose. You will try, won't you? I shall be so unhappy till I hear from her."

"Miladi will write to you herself perhaps. She knows your address," said Agnes, dubiously.

"Yes—yes; you are right. Of course she will. There may be a letter on its way to me, even now. Thank you, Agnes, for the suggestion. I will not despair, though it is hard to part with her like this."

"I told miladi you would find it hard; but parbleu! how can you expect those who go away to feel like those who are left behind? It was a moment of great excitement for her. She could talk and think of nothing but the theatres and operas she was
to see, and the costumes of the newest mode that the lady promised her."

"It is no wonder they thrust me out of her mind," said Athol sarcastically.

"Ah, Monsieur Fergusson, a young girl's affection is not often very strong, and Muriel is too frivolous to love well. She does not know what real love is. It is all very pleasant to amuse oneself (as she did with you) when there is nothing better to do, but I would not give much for her love after she has been to a few balls and parties in that beautiful heaven of London."

"There, there, Agnes, that will do," returned the young man hastily; "you wrong her, but it does not signify. It is not likely Muriel would speak of all she felt to you. Never mind the address, I will find it out for myself. And now, thank you for coming to meet me, and good-night."

He raised his hat and strode away quickly, gnawing his budding moustache as he went.
The news of Muriel's departure had taken him so completely by surprise that he could hardly believe it was true. Gone from Rev-ranches, and hardly leaving a trace behind her! She, who but four and twenty hours before had walked with him on that very spot, with her hand clasped in his, and her eyes looking fondly in his face. It appeared impossible, and yet what reason had he to disbelieve his informant? His first impulse was to walk straight to the Château and ask Mrs. Grant to tell him every particular she might know concerning her ward. But second thoughts made him change his mind. The same pride which had forbid his using Agnes Prudhomme as a go-between, or showing her how deeply her intelligence affected him, prevented his going to the Château. What right had the Grants (he thought) to know his secret, or to have the chance of commenting on, or ridiculing it? It was sacred to himself and Muriel, and he
would keep it so. He decided that he would wait until he heard from Muriel herself, and then ask her leave to address her father. But the light had faded from the bright summer's evening for him as he reflected how his darling might be weeping for him even at that moment; he could no longer take any pleasure in the sights and sounds around him, and turned his steps towards home, that he might battle with his disappointment unwitnessed and alone. But when he arrived there he found his news had preceded him. Gossip was a staple commodity in Revanches, and the Misses Fergusson had not mixed with their pupils long that day before they had heard the whole story of Muriel Damer's sudden transformation into Lady Muriel Damer, the daughter of the Earl of Rhylton, and how she had been at once sent for to return home and take her proper position in society as one of the aristocracy. Athol found his mother and sisters
brimful of the wonderful intelligence which had just been brought home by Alice, and they assailed him with it as soon as his foot had crossed the threshold.

"Well, my dear son," exclaimed Mrs. Fergusson, not without a degree of satisfaction in her voice, "and so this is the end of your fairy dream. Your inamorata is transformed into an earl's daughter. You must see what an impassable gulf divides you now."

"And she left the Château without giving you the slightest notice," cried Helen; "that doesn't look as if she were very responsive. But I don't trust Muriel Damer, and I expect you will say the same, Athol, before long. Miss Bush tells me the ingratitude she displayed towards the Grants was really disgusting, for they have done their best for her, when all's said and done. She left them without the least feeling, and poor Mrs. Grant has been in bed all day from fretting."
"Poor dear Athol," chimed in Alice compassionately, "I am really afraid this sudden change will put a stop to your little love affair. You could never hope to aspire to an earl's daughter; so the sooner you give up the idea the better."

"Stop, stop; you don't know how you are torturing me," cried Athol in a voice of pain. "I have suffered enough to-day already. For God's sake, spare me your suggestions and surmises. I only know one thing—that my Muriel will be faithful to me through everything, and marry me before the man of highest rank in England. When I hear from her (as I shall do perhaps tomorrow) I will tell you her determination, but till then in pity leave me to bear this unexpected trouble by myself."

He walked up to his own room as he spoke, and they saw no more of him until the following morning, and by that time the subject of Lady Muriel Damer had been
tabooed amongst them by general consent. They were wise enough to see that Athol was too much of a man to be influenced in such a matter by their likes or dislikes, and that the best means to make him forget it was to leave him to himself. They watched his anxious looks and nervous manner as the post came in, day after day, without bringing any letter from Lady Muriel, and though they secretly rejoiced at her defalcation, they could not help grieving for the young fellow who was so dear to them. At last the weary weeks came to an end, and Athol Fergusson received the news that he was gazetted to a battalion of Horse Artillery, stationed at Malta, and was under orders to join at once. He came into the salon to communicate this intelligence, which he knew would be received with consterna-
tion by his mother and sisters, with a face beaming with expectation.

"Mother," he exclaimed, "my orders have
arrived, and I am off to London to-morrow. Will you and the girls see that my things are ready in time?"

"To-morrow!" echoed the women with dismay. "Oh, Athol, are we really to lose you so soon?"

"Well, you knew it was coming, my dear mother, and since I am doing no good here the sooner I get to work the better."

But in his own heart a different tune was ringing.

"To-morrow! To-morrow I shall be in London, and if I die for it, I will see my Muriel and learn the truth of her silence before I go."
CHAPTER VII.

OAKLEY COURT.

Lord Rhyllton was everything that he had been described to be, both to Lady Muriel and to Athol Fergusson. In person, he was of low stature, with narrow chest and stooping shoulders—keen eyes, a large hawk-like nose and a cold mouth with thin and bloodless lips. His character corresponded to his appearance. He was cruel (in a small domestic way), selfish and stingy. It is to be supposed that he had possessed some attractions in his youth wherewith to win the affections of Lady Muriel's beautiful but unaristocratic young mother, but it was fortunate for the poor child that she died early and passed out of a world that would have proved very disappointing to her. As Mr.
Damer, the Earl of Rhylton had been very impecunious—in fact, the scanty allowance he made his daughter had swallowed up a fourth of his income. It was not therefore wonderful, that as a commoner he had not married again. It would have been a brave woman indeed who would have risked binding herself to such a man, without the means of getting away from him. But when he suddenly and unexpectedly walked into the earldom, everything became changed; for a coronet covers a multitude of sins, and from having been despised and forsaken—his name forgotten in every visiting list and his only associates the members of his club—Lord Rhylton found himself to be in universal request. The income which accompanied the title was very inadequate to keep it up, but the name of "countess" alone was such a marketable article that the earl had the pick of the prettiest heiresses for sale at once. But he did not wish to commence a second
voyage on the troubled seas of matrimony with an inexperienced traveller. He wanted a fashionable, handsome and experienced woman, with a fortune of her own, to preside over his household, and the Honourable Mrs. Seton seemed made for the purpose. She was not of aristocratic lineage herself, and so she was likely to value the privileges of being admitted to the purple all the more. Indeed originally she had been rather less than gentle, having been picked up at a very early age by the Honourable James Seton—some said on the stage, others from behind a bar, and others again from a still more dubious position. But all such rumours (whether true or false) had been forgotten long ago, for Mr. Seton had married her, and died, and left her in possession of Oakley Court and a princely fortune years and years before, and she had lived there and brought up her only child, Cecilia, like a young lady, and been admitted to the county
society ever since. So the early ban had gone through the bankruptcy court of public opinion and been whitewashed, and the Honourable Mr. Seton's widow was considered a very suitable match for the new Earl of Rhylton. There was not a dissentient voice with regard to her beauty, which had been a byword from her youth, and now, at past forty, seemed only in its prime. Her magnificently moulded figure and alabaster skin, her large hazel eyes and auburn locks, made her look (as Colonel de Crespigny had remarked) "every inch a countess;" and if her manners were sometimes more free than is permitted in the strictest canons of good taste, she had arrived at an age when a woman is supposed to be a law to herself. But there was one peculiarity about Lady Rhylton which his lordship had heard nothing of before he married her. One seldom does hear anything of a woman's faults during the period of betrothal. They
are reserved for a *bonne-bouche* after marriage. She possessed a most violent temper—so unrestrained indeed at times as to frighten those about her. It had frightened her daughter, Miss Seton, into a cowering timid creature, who was afraid of the sound of her own voice when in the presence of her mother. Cecilia Seton had not inherited one tithe of that mother's beauty. She was the living image of her father, who had possessed small eyes and a sharp pointed nose, and been dubbed "Bandy-legged Jem" amongst his intimate associates. Her want of good looks had made Cecilia almost repugnant to her handsome, dashing mother and it was a source of annoyance to Lady Rhylton that (notwithstanding the substantial dowry left her by her father) she had failed in marrying off her daughter before herself. She would have liked to have made her second start in life unencumbered by a living tell-tale of her age, but all her en-
deavours had been in vain. Cecilia was so stupid and dull and uninteresting, that no man would take the trouble to become acquainted with her. And now, there would be a second trouble on her hands in the shape of Lady Muriel Damer, whom report said to be handsome; and though Lady Rhylton would have preferred her own daughter to be a beauty, she did not relish the idea of having a rival near her throne in the shape of a step-daughter. However, she was politic enough to make the best of it before her husband, trusting that she might be relieved before long of Lady Muriel's presence, and meanwhile, she ordered preparations to be made on an extensive scale to receive both the young ladies at Oakley Court. They were not to share a maid between them as Miss Rutherford had anticipated. Each of them was to have an attendant of her own, for the countess, with the vulgar ideas common to those who have
risen in the social scale, thought that no one could be a "lady" who did anything for herself. The girls' suites of apartments adjoined each other and had been fitted up according to the taste of the upholsterer—one suite being radiant with rose-colour, the other, with pale blue. They were very luxurious and convenient, but the "smell of money" was on everything in Oakley Court and jarred on the senses of those who possessed refined and cultivated minds. The Earl and Countess of Rhylton returned home in the latter part of July, and Lady Muriel Damer and Miss Seton were desired to join them without delay. Cecilia was the first to arrive, having stayed with friends during her mother's absence. She was nervous and miserable in the presence of her purse-proud and self-conscious mother and her silent, undemonstrative step-father, and crept away by herself as often as she could to wander through the rose-tinted apartments reserved
for Lady Muriel, and wonder what her new sister would be like. Muriel did not cross from Paris for some days later. Miss Rutherford (who was not afraid of the earl, or any man) did not find it convenient to obey his summons immediately, and therefore took French leave to put off the journey home until she did. And Muriel was not sorry for the delay. She had become interested in Paris and its amusements by that time and was loath to leave them. Colonel de Crespigny had carried out her father's injunctions to the letter and taken her about to see everything, until she was so familiar with the city and her new friends she seemed to have known them all her life. And during this time she had not received one line from Athol Fergusson. She had written him a second letter which Miss Walford had also managed to get into her hands, but there was necessarily no reply to it, and Muriel had begun to believe that Lina must
be right when she averred that men only cared for a woman while she was present, and forgot all about her directly her back was turned. It was with a heavy heart that she said good-bye to her cousins at their rooms in Jermyn Street, and prepared to accompany Colonel de Crespigny down to her father's house in Surrey. Lord Rhyllton had especially begged his old friend de Crespigny to take the trouble of bringing his daughter to him at Oakley Court, and the colonel appeared only too willing to execute the commission. He did not say much to combat Lady Muriel's evident nervousness and timidity at the prospect of meeting her father again, before Miss Rutherford, but as soon as they found themselves in the train and free from observation, he commenced to rally her on her melancholy.

"And what is the matter with Lady Muriel?" he inquired playfully, as he took her hand. "She is surely not in any doubt
of the cordial reception that awaits her at Oakley Court?"

"I don't know," replied Muriel, whilst a rebellious tear which refused to be held back coursed slowly down her cheek. "They are all strangers to me, you see. I don't seem to know even my own father. I can hardly remember what he is like, and—and—I have been so happy in Paris with Cousin Amelia and Lina and you."

"It gives me inexpressible pleasure to hear you say so, dear Lady Muriel," said the colonel with effusive gallantry, "but I trust you will be still happier with your own family, distracting as your loss must prove to our little circle in Jermyn Street. Lord Rhyllton cannot fail to be charmed with your appearance, and Lady Rhyllton is most enthusiastic when she takes a fancy. Miss Seton is, too, I understand, a most amiable young lady. And Oakley Court is furnished in a style of exceptional comfort and luxury."
I am sure you will have everything there that you can possibly desire."

"But I don't want anything better than I had in Paris," replied Lady Muriel childishly, and with something very like a sob. Her words and manner awakened the colonel's vanity—a sentiment always very much on the alert in his bosom—and made him flatter himself that the girl's tears fell for the loss of his own company, and the idea added a thousand charms to her in his sight.

"My dearest Lady Muriel," he said softly, as he drew nearer to her, "may I hope that you will sometimes think of the pleasant time we have had together with regret, and wish for its renewal? For Paris is not the only city in the world, remember. London teems with pleasure and interest, and I shall be just as charmed to be your cicéroné here, as there."

"If papa will let me," faltered Muriel.

"Let you! Why, of course he will. I am
afraid the difficulty will be to get you away from Oakley Court."

"But my step-mother. You forget her. She may choose to interfere with my visiting Cousin Amelia."

"Now, my dear girl! you are taking a most distorted view of the matter. Why should Lady Rhylton interfere with your innocent amusements? She is not an old bel-dame who has forgotten what pleasure is. You will laugh at your own conjectures an hour hence."

And indeed Lady Muriel was quite ready by that time to own herself mistaken. A magnificently-appointed carriage, with two footmen standing behind it and a third to open the door, met them at the Richmond Station (near which the Court was situated), and in a quarter of an hour more they had driven to it through a park-like approach, and stopped at the hall door. Colonel de Crespigny felt Lady Muriel's hand tremble
in his own as he assisted her to alight, so he drew it under his arm and patted it paternally, in a way that was very soothing to her and made her cling to him for protection. The powdered flunkey, who had met them at the hall door, ushered them into a large and luxurious library, at the further end of which a handsome woman attired in purple velvet was seated at an inlaid table writing letters. As soon as she heard their names announced she rose hastily and, coming forward, folded Muriel in a close embrace. The girl’s first sensation was that she had got into a perfumer’s shop—so powerfully scented was Lady Rhylton, from her hair and her hands to her dress and her pocket-handkerchief. Her ample bosom, falling and swelling beneath the folds of purple velvet, seemed to breathe forth Rimmel’s extracts, and the very powder on her skin was dense with patchouli. Lady Muriel drew back, half stifled, but her step-mother
insisted upon kissing her again and again.

"And so this is my new daughter. Upon my word, you will make me feel quite an old lady—you look such a woman. How surprised your dear father will be to see you. He always speaks of you as if you were a little girl."

"I am eighteen," replied Muriel, drawing herself up.

"No more? Why, then you are the same age as my Cecil—what could be nicer? Colonel de Crespigny I don't know how to thank you for bringing this dear child to us, and now you have come we must keep you prisoner until to-morrow morning. I have brought a whole case of treasures home from Italy for your inspection."

"Indeed, Lady Rhylton, you must excuse me. I did not come prepared to stay, and have no change with me. I shall only wait to see his lordship before I return."
"Oh, do stay," pleaded Muriel. It was the cry of a child about to lose her protector and the face most familiar to her, but the countess chose to interpret it differently.

"Hullo!" she exclaimed significantly, "and what is this? Has the colonel been making himself too agreeable during the Paris trip? You must be very careful what you do with him, Muriel. He is a terrible flirt, and always has been—one of the sort that 'loves and rides away.'"

"You will find me 'riding after,' more likely, Lady Rhylton," laughed de Crespigny. "Upon my word, you have made the Court look so bright and beautiful that I doubly regret not being able to accept your kind invitation."

"Here is Rhylton. Perhaps he will make you rescind your refusal," cried the countess, as the earl entered the room. Lady Muriel ran up to him at once without speaking. She had not seen him for many years, and he
was not very attractive in appearance now she did see him, but he was her father, and the tie between parent and child is an unalienable one, however hard we may try to rend it asunder. Lord Rhylton drew a long breath as his daughter came up to him and held her at arm's length for a moment whilst he gazed earnestly into her beautiful, speaking face. What memories surged up in his withered and hardened heart as he did so—memories of another face as lovely and ardent and unsophisticated—unsophisticated enough, indeed, to give itself up to a man who cared so little for its owner as to send her broken-hearted to her grave within a few years of her marriage to him. Some sort of emotion displayed itself in the dark, thin countenance of Lord Rhylton as he met Muriel again, but it went no further. With an effort he drew the girl towards him and kissed her on the forehead, and then, as if ashamed of the feeling into which he had
been betrayed, he shook her hand, and said huskily:

"How do you do, my dear? Very glad to see you. How are you, de Crespigny? Had a pleasant journey? I thought the carriage would have been back sooner."

"It must have been your anxiety to see Lady Muriel, Rhylton. We came as quickly as the train would bring us."

"All well in Jermyn Street?" said the earl, turning over some papers on the table.

"Quite well, thank you. Miss Rutherford sends her love, of course, and hopes you will soon let Lady Muriel visit her again."

"Ah! we must see about that. You are not going back to-night, colonel. You will stay and dine with us."

"I have been trying to persuade him to do it before you came in, darling," said the countess, entwining her arms about her husband's neck in a most youthful fashion, "but
the naughty man refused me. Perhaps you will be more successful."

"Your ladyship can hardly believe what you say," replied de Crespigny. "Nothing would have given me greater pleasure had I been prepared for your invitation, but I have no evening clothes with me, and I could not dine with you like this—added to which, I have already made an engagement for this evening. Believe me, Lady Rhylton, it is my loss rather than your own."

"And Lady Muriel's," interposed the countess archly.

"Lady Muriel knows what a pleasure her society is to me," rejoined the colonel, glancing at the earl's daughter.

"Eh! eh! what's that?" said Lord Rhylton, pricking up his ears.

"Nothing for you to hear, my dear," exclaimed his wife playfully. "It is a little secret between Muriel and myself. But you would like to change your dress, dear, doubt-
less,” she continued, addressing her step-daughter, who stood by perfectly unconscious of the badinage directed against her. “I will ring for your maid at once.”

The summons soon brought a smartly-dressed young woman to the library door.

“Fielding,” said her ladyship, “this is your mistress, Lady Muriel Damer. Show her the way to her apartments, and inform Miss Seton of her arrival. One more kiss, dear, and don’t forget that afternoon tea will be served at five o’clock. Colonel de Crespigny will at least stay for that.”

“I am afraid I must deny myself the pleasure, Lady Rhylton, for my time is limited. Indeed, I must be off now. Adieu, dear Lady Muriel. I trust it will not be long before we meet again.”

Muriel gave him her hand with an appealing, timid look in her grey eyes, which did not pass unnoticed by the earl and countess.

“Oh, you naughty, naughty darling,” cried
the latter as soon as the door was closed, "to give me such a great big daughter, and make me look seventy years old. But isn't she lovely, Colonel de Crespigny?" she continued gushingly to their visitor. "Hasn't she wonderful eyes, and the most perfect mouth in the world?"

"She is indeed very beautiful," sighed de Crespigny.

"You think so?" said the earl interrogatively. "Ah, well! she is the image of her poor mother. But I hope you have not been putting any foolish ideas in my girl's head, de Crespigny. She is too young to marry yet."

The colonel started. He had never thought of Lady Muriel in a matrimonial light, but an idea once roused is sometimes difficult to put to sleep again.

"My dear Rhylton, you are doing me a great injustice. Did you not confide your daughter to my care? Do you think me
capable of betraying your trust? You may accept my assurance that I have never said a word to Lady Muriel that you might not have overheard. The difference in our ages alone would have prevented me.”


“But, unfortunately, I am much older, and quite aware of all my many deficiencies into the bargain,” he answered with a deprecating bow.

It was all very well, and the right thing to do, to depreciate the advantages of a marriage with himself in the presence of his friends, but Colonel de Crespigny had no belief in what he said concerning himself, and the persiflage about his having paid attention to Lady Muriel Damer raised some serious thoughts in his mind concerning her as he travelled back to London.
Was it really on the cards (he asked himself) that Lord Rhylton might accept his proposals for his daughter's hand? He had never contemplated such a thing before, but the notion once put into his head, grew and flourished there. She was certainly very lovely, and gave promise of still greater beauty, and the colonel's sensual nature was ready to accept her physical perfection as all that was necessary to fit her for a wife. He was no longer young, it is true (having passed his fiftieth birthday), but no one ever took him for his full age, and if they did, it mattered little in a man. He was still robust and healthy, and capable of enjoyment, and he had always been esteemed good-looking—and at this junction de Crespigny's memory went back with a deep-drawn sigh to the days before those dropsical-looking bags had formed under his full blue eyes, or his jaw developed its present coarse and cruel expression—the
days when he had rejoiced in the enviable sobriquet of "Handsome Arthur." Then, as to his fortune, it rivalled that of Lady Rhyllton, and when he came to think of it, all he needed was a wife from the aristocracy, to launch him fully on the tide of fashion. There was no barrier in the way of a second marriage. His two awkward louts of sons (as he usually designated his offspring) were safely disposed of in India, and he, and the new Mrs. de Crespigny would have it all their own way. Was it possible that Fate had led him to the right woman's feet? He allowed himself to dwell on this exciting topic, until he was quite absorbed in its contemplation, and woke up with a start to find he was at Waterloo, and that it was past six o'clock. Flinging himself into a hansom, he rattled off to his chambers in Victoria Street, where he changed his clothes for an evening suit, and having descended to where his brougham
stood waiting for him, jumped into it, and directed the coachman to drive him to Mrs. Lorrimer’s in Bryanston Square.
CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. LORRIMER.

It was considerably past seven o'clock when he arrived there, and some one was evidently on the look-out for him, for the door was flung open as soon as his carriage stopped before it, and a smart-looking female servant, with a profusion of curls over her forehead and an artificial rose stuck in the side of her lace cap, stood under the gas globe, smiling him welcome.

Colonel de Crespigny gave his directions to the coachman, and entered the house as if it were his own.

"All well, Rosa?" he said interrogatively, as the maid relieved him of his hat and overcoat.

"Yes, sir, thank you, and the mistress is
in the drawing-room. She expected you half-an-hour ago."

"I've been detained," he answered carelessly, "but you can tell Parsons to dish up now." And then he walked deliberately and rather heavily upstairs (for he weighed fifteen stone with his fifty years), and turned the handle of the drawing-room door.

Mrs. Lorrimer was standing on the hearth-rug, waiting to receive him, and looking very much put out. She was a short woman of about five-and-thirty years of age (though she only confessed to thirty), who might have possessed some title to the beauté de diable in her youth, but had certainly lost all claim to it now. She had become fatally stout with the passing years, and had one of those broad flat faces that cannot keep up with the changing fashions, so that she appeared to be quite out of date. Her flaxen hair was worn in crimped
bands, parted in the middle, her pale greenish-blue eyes had lost their lustre, and her small straight nose was sunk in two cheeks of pallid fat. She was a woman of a sharp acid temper too, which had aged her before her time. Mrs. Lorrimer was not attractive therefore, nor was she clever, or rich—and so, many people might have wondered at the intimacy between her and the pleasure-loving Colonel de Crespigny. But there are various kinds of affection in this world, and some drag out their course and refuse to die—like the cat's affection for the house she has inhabited—not because there is anything left in them, but because we do not know how to tear ourselves away. We huddle over the ashes of a burned-out fire sometimes, when it has lost all power to warm us—and this was the secret of de Crespigny's continued friendship with Caroline Lorrimer. She was the widow of one of his brother officers, and
there had been sundry love-passages between them in the years gone by (for Arthur de Crespigny had never had the honour to spare any woman who was foolish enough to succumb to him), and he was sometimes a little afraid of the mischief her tart tongue might do him, even now. And so it was less troublesome for him to give a sop to Cerberus occasionally, by using her house as his own, and pretending (for it never came difficult to the colonel to make love to any woman) that the sentiments of the past were not wholly extinguished in him, than to avow his real sentiments towards her. But Mrs. Lorrimer expected something more from him than this. She had kept very quiet during his wife's lifetime, for her own sake as well as his, but now that he was free and rich, she considered that she had a right to demand some satisfaction for her wrongs. Mrs. de Crespigny had now been dead over
two years, and he had never professed to have any attachment for her. And Mrs. Lorrimer considered it was time he spoke of something more definite than kisses and sighs over a past, which it was in his power to remedy, if not to expunge. She had not been pleased at his trip to Brussels and Paris, taken without her consent and in the company of other women, and she had written to him immediately on his return to beg him to come to her. Colonel de Crespigny had no appearance of a criminal however as he entered her presence. He had been used to consider her for so long as a piece of personal property, which he could not get rid of (as we may keep a hall clock, or a wardrobe which is cumbersome and in the way, simply because it belonged to our great-grandfather) that he never dreamt the relations between them would be altered, or done away with. He walked up to her as coolly as if she had
been his mother, and kissed her on the cheek as an established precedent.

"Well, my dear, and how are you? O! here is Arthur," he continued, perceiving a tall lad of fifteen, in Eton jacket and trousers, who stood by Mrs. Lorrimer's side. "Quite well, my boy, and studying hard? That's right. I'm afraid I'm a little over my time, Carrie, but it was unavoidable! I have just come up from Richmond."

Mrs. Lorrimer consulted her watch.

"Ten minutes to eight," she said sharply. "Yes! that's considerably over seven, but if the fish is spoiled you will have only yourself to blame for it. Artie, dear! run and tell Parsons we are ready for dinner."

"I have ordered it," said the colonel languidly. But the boy had already taken the hint and disappeared.

"What did you have him up here for to-night? Can't we ever have an evening
to ourselves?" demanded de Crespigny as soon as the door had closed after him.

"I thought you took sufficient interest in your godson to want to see him after an interval of six months," replied Mrs. Lorrimer, tartly. "Besides it is the summer vacation. However, we can easily dispose of him after dinner—if you wish it."

"I do wish it! I have several matters to speak to you about, Caroline, which are no concern of his. He is growing a fine boy, however. Let me see! What is his age?"

"Fifteen, last March. I should think you might remember that, Arthur."

"Ah! my memory is not what it was. And I suppose you will put him into his father's profession? Lorrimer always intended it, didn't he?"

"Yes," she answered in a low voice, "but the expenses will be very heavy I am afraid."

"Oh! never mind the expenses. I will see about that. I always intended to do as much
for my godson. But here is Rosa to announce dinner. We will talk more of this by-and-by."

He gave her his arm to lead her down to the dining-room, but Mrs. Lorrimer's heart was heavy as he did so. Women are very intuitive, and she felt, without knowing why, there was something impending that should blight her hopes. It was genuine feeling that made her stop for a moment as they descended the narrow staircase, and press his arm and whisper, "I have missed you so, Arthur," and her voice shook as she recognized that her power had departed, and she might have to reiterate the sentiment for many years to come. But de Crespigny squeezed her hand in return and replied so warmly, "Yes, of course, and you can't think how glad I am to be home again," that her pale face brightened, and she was able to go through the meal that followed with comparative cheerfulness.
As it drew to a conclusion the colonel turned to his godson and said:

"And what are you going to do this evening, my fine fellow?"

"I don't know, sir. I have nothing to do in particular," replied the boy, glancing at his mother.

De Crespigny drew two sovereigns from his pocket and laid them in his palm.

"Then take these, Arthur, and go out and enjoy yourself. There are dozens of places in London where you can spend a few hours pleasantly."

The lad reddened with delight.

"But is it safe?" urged Mrs. Lorrimer. "He is only fifteen, you know, and he has never been used to go out by himself at night. Consider the dangers of a town, Colonel de Crespigny. Why! he might be robbed or murdered."

"Rubbish, my dear Carrie. Are you going to bring the boy up as a milksop? Why,
before I was fifteen I knew every nook and corner of London either by night or day, and what harm has it done me? Let the lad learn to take care of himself. Now, Arthur, off with you! I want to have a talk with your mother."

Mrs. Lorrimer sighed as her son left the room. He was her only child and she was inordinately fond of him, which was the reason perhaps that she still cherished some lingering regard for a man who had long ago proved himself to be utterly selfish, sensual and self-opinionated.

As they found themselves alone, Colonel de Crespigny drew his chair closer to her own.

"I want to interest you in a little protégée of mine, Carrie. A young girl, the orphan daughter of a man for whom I had a great esteem, and who asked me to look after her. She is half Belgian and half English—smart, capable and active—and wants to be a lady's
maid. Can't you find room for her in your household?"

"My dear Arthur, how can I afford another servant? You know what my means are, and that I can barely pay my way. I have never kept a lady's maid in my life."

"I don't wish her to be any expense to you, Carrie. I will pay for her board and wages whilst she is with you, and if you don't get on together we will find her another situation. I only want you to receive her on her first arrival in England as she has never left Belgium before."

"I have never heard you speak of her," said Mrs. Lorrimer with knitted brows.

"My dear Carrie! As if I told you of every person I have been mixed up with in my roving life. I did not even know of the girl's existence until lately. But I fancy you will find her a great help to you in making your dresses and so forth. Her name is
Agnes Prudhomme, and she has been a sort of companion to Lady Muriel Damer."

"That reminds me, Arthur, about your late tour. A very painful report has reached me concerning it, and though I hate speaking about such matters to you, I *must*, because—because—my own happiness is involved in it."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"If it is not true, you must forgive me, and lay my anxiety to its true cause; but my informant was a very reliable one. I was told that you have serious thoughts of marrying Miss Rutherford."

The colonel burst out laughing.

"*I* marry Miss Rutherford? Why, you must have been out of your senses to believe such a story! What on earth should I marry her for? An old woman of forty or fifty—Heaven best knows her age—without beauty, or talents, or money. You *must* think me a fool. No, no, my dear 12—2
Carrie; if I should ever be induced to alter my present condition you may depend it will be for some one a little better worth having than Miss Rutherford, or any one like her.”

And de Crespigny leant back in his chair and puffed collectedly away at his cigar. Mrs. Lorrimer was trembling all over. She could hardly trust herself to speak, for strong as were her claims over this man, she would have renounced them all at once sooner than have let him see that their relinquishment spoilt her hopes for the future. But when she was a little calmer she said:

“Then you do intend to marry again, Arthur.”

“Possibly. It is on the cards. You can hardly expect a man of my age to remain single for the rest of his life.”

“And you would do it without any consideration for me, or for Arthur,” she said, looking full into his face.

“Certainly not! I shall never cease to
have consideration both for you and for Arthur to the end of my days. I shall always rank you as one of my very best and truest friends. But I don't see what that has to do with the prospect of my marrying again, which, after all, is only a dream which may never be realized."

"And do you imagine," continued Mrs. Lorrimer significantly, "that in the event of your marrying some other woman I should continue to be your friend?"

He saw what she was driving at now, but he would not acknowledge it.

"Of course you would, Carrie. What reason is there against it? Poor Lorrimer confided you with his latest breath to my care, and I can honestly say I have never abused his trust nor forgotten my promise to him."

"He did not know——" she faltered.

"Who ever thought he did," said the colonel pettishly (for he was a man of violent
passions and his temper was quickly roused). "Not one husband in fifty knows what his wife does when his back is turned. And let us trust he has continued in the same blissful ignorance, or his bed in Heaven cannot be one of roses."

"Oh! Arthur! Don't joke on such a solemn subject."

"Look here, my dear Carrie. Let us understand each other plainly, and don't try and trade upon an old affair that was done and finished with years ago. Lorrimer has been dead—let me see—for ten years, and the boy is past fifteen. We got well out of the scrape and it can never rise up against us now. Let us rest and be thankful."

"You got well out of it, you mean," replied Mrs. Lorrimer, with something like the fire of indignation twinkling in her greenish eyes.

"And so did you, my dear," said de Crespigny coolly; "what have you to com-
plain of? Your son is everything (it appears to me) that a mother's heart could desire, and I shall always be ready to forward his interests in life—"

"Except by giving him a father's protection," she answered.

The truth was out now, without further disguise, and the colonel felt he must take the bull by the horns and settle it, once and for ever. It might prove a painful business, but it had to be done, for he had other views for himself, which might attain their fruition any day. And the idea of his marrying Caroline Lorrimer was ridiculous. She had been all very well fifteen years before, as a means of excitement and vicious amusement, when he had been located with his regiment in some out-of-the-way station in India and had nothing else to do. She had also been very faithful and attached to him during the intervening years, and denied herself many comforts and even necessaries,
in order to rear and educate his son on the scanty pension of a captain's widow. But no good qualities in women, however conspicuous, had any weight with Arthur de Crespigny, against the fatal error of want of youth, or beauty. Caroline Lorrimer was worse than nothing to him now; in fact she was a nuisance, for continuing to endure which he had accredited himself with considerable virtue during the last ten years. And that she should presume, now that he was free, to put in her claim to fill the place of his late wife incensed and irritated him, and when he answered her, it was with unmistakable tokens of annoyance.

"By giving him a father's protection," he echoed, "do you mean to say that you want me to openly acknowledge the lad, and disgrace both him and yourself in the eyes of the world? You must be mad."

"No! no! Arthur," she said with something like a sob in her throat, "you know
I don't mean that. He must always retain the name of Lorrimer, but if—if—you made what amends you could, to him and me, I should feel at least that I had a right to leave him to your legal protection."

"You would say if I married you," he answered coldly. Her only reply was conveyed by inclining her head, and the burning blood rose in her pale cheeks as she did so. It had not seemed so hard to be his mistress, but it was a terrible thing to have to ask him to do what was right by her, and be refused, as she felt she would be. De Crespigny puffed for a few seconds longer at his cigar to give her time to speak, but finding she continued silent, he took up the parable himself. "We had better discuss this matter openly at once, Carrie," he said, "and then dismiss it from our minds for ever."

She knew for certain what he meant to do now and her pride rose in the ascendant.
She had not much sentiment in her composition, and what little she possessed, she had wasted on this man, hoping that some day might see the idyl of her youth renewed, and her past dream become reality. But the last five minutes had seen that hope die and her sentiment died with it. She sat upright again—she had bowed her head for a moment on her clasped hands—and looked him full in the eyes whilst she answered in a steady voice:

"That is just what I desire. Let me hear exactly what you propose to do in the future."

"You set me too difficult a task, for I have decided upon nothing definitely. But why have you never mentioned your ideas or wishes (or whatever you may call them) to me before this evening?"

"Because I waited for you to speak first. I have been expecting you to do so, ever since your wife died."
Colonel de Crespigny shrugged his shoulders as who would say, "How unreasonable these women are," but he only answered:

"I wish you had taken the initiative. It would have saved a world of misunderstanding and trouble. However, I will be candid with you now. I have some intentions—not, as you have been wrongly informed, with regard to Miss Rutherford, but of entering, at no very distant date, into the married state again. But late events have somewhat raised my value in the matrimonial market. I don't want money with my second wife, but I must have birth and quality—something in fact to advance me in the social scale."

"And youth and beauty of course," interposed his hearer, bitterly.

"And youth and beauty," he repeated with the utmost sang-froid; "I should be a fool if I didn't get as much as I could for my money."
"Perhaps you have cast your eye on Miss Lina Walford. I hear she is both young and pretty," suggested Mrs. Lorrimer.

"But of no higher rank than myself," he rejoined.

"Ah! Then it is Lady Muriel Damer," she exclaimed.

"You are nearer the mark now," said de Crespigny.

"That child. Why! She is hardly out of the nursery," cried Mrs. Lorrimer, and then, unable to conceal her feelings any longer, she covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

"Now, Carrie, don't be a fool," said the colonel impatiently. "Nothing is settled yet and it never may be, but Lord Rhylton has given me to understand he would not be averse to such an arrangement. And if it comes to pass, you will be one of the first to benefit by the change. I shall set up house in a good style in London, and
Lady Muriel's name and connections will bring the best society around us. And wherever I am, you know that you will always be welcome," he concluded, patting her shoulder with his hand.

"Don't touch me! I wish I might never see you again," she said in a broken voice.

"You will think better of all this nonsense to-morrow, my dear. You are too sensible a woman to stand in your own light—and Arthur's too. Such an establishment as I intend to keep will be of infinite service in launching the boy into society, and rubbing off his rough edges. You may live to see him married to a lady of title too. What should you say to that?"

"I would rather live to see him dead than false to a heart that trusted in him," she replied bitterly.

The colonel laughed as if she had uttered a pleasantry.

"I am afraid if he takes after his father,
Carrie, that he'll have a lot to answer for some day. But you and I are old enough to have outlived sentimentality. The best part of our lives is over, and our only consideration should be, how we can end them most comfortably. I am thinking of you, as much as myself, in contemplating a possible marriage with Lady Muriel Damer."

Mrs. Lorrimer knew that this assertion was as false as the man who uttered it, but she had lost the game and she would degrade herself in his eyes no longer. So she rose, and professed to be busy with getting out the spirit flask from the sideboard, and ringing for soda-water and tumblers, and when she sat down again alone with her guest, she was to all appearance reconciled to his intelligence.

"You are quite right, Arthur. The news startled me at first, but I am alive to its advantages, both for Arthur and myself, and I am not sure if, after all, I should have felt
inclined to change my condition. When do you expect this French girl you spoke of to arrive in London?"

"Agnes Prudhomme. I had nearly forgotten the poor child. Why! She is only waiting to hear I have procured her a situation. You need not be afraid to give your consent, Carrie. She shall be no expense to you, and you have often told me how much you would like to have a personal attendant."

"I know I have, and I will receive her whenever she may come over."

"Thank you, my dear. And now, if you will excuse me, I think I will toddle homewards. We only arrived early this morning, and I have long arrears of sleep to make up. Good-night," and with another placid kiss upon her forehead, Colonel de Crespigny went upon his way. Caroline Lorrimer sat where he had left her, feeling very blank and chill, and as if something which she had considered to be her own possession had passed
out of her life. She did not weep, as she thought over the events of the evening, but her teeth—now somewhat yellow and discoloured—clenched over her pale lips, and a light came into her greenish-blue eyes that was not love. She remained there immovable and thinking, for the best part of another hour, until Arthur Lorrimer ran in breathless and excited, to tell her of the wonderful things he had seen and heard in an adjacent music hall, where he gained admittance with part of his godfather’s handsome present.

“Wasn’t it kind of him, mother?” cried the lad; “I’ve got a lot of it left, and may I go with Will McClaren to the Crystal Palace to-morrow and stay there all day, and have a regular blow-out? Will says my godfather must be a jolly old brick, and he wishes he had got another like him for himself——”

“Yes, yes, my boy,” replied Mrs. Lorrimer hurriedly, and then to Artie’s intense surprise she threw her arms round his neck and burst-
ing into tears, exclaimed, "Oh! Artie, you are all that I have in the world. Be kind and true to me, my darling, or my heart will break."
CHAPTER IX.

A NEW SISTER.

Lady Muriel Damer followed her new maid out of the library of Oakley Court into a vast corridor carpeted with rich velvet pile, and decorated with marble statues, and up a broad staircase, the walls of which were hung with oil-paintings, and the banisters made of oak, carved in fanciful wreaths of fruit and flowers. She looked around her at first with some degree of awe, which was soon followed by a feeling of pride to think that she had stepped into her proper position at last. For the difference between those who are born to the purple and those who acquire it through an accident, is, that the former, though bereft of their right for years, never feel so much at home as when they regain it, whilst the latter
never feel at home in it at all, but wear it like an ill-fitting garment that refuses to accommodate itself to the owner's shape. Muriel could scarcely remember any other home but the Château des Lauriers, and yet she had always been distinctly conscious that her surroundings were beneath her. She had a sensuous and luxurious nature, and shabby clothes, bare rooms, and coarse food, had ever been matters of offence to her fastidious taste. Now, though it seemed strange to think that the smart lady's maid who preceded her upstairs was really her own servant, she who had often helped the Flemish wench Romanie with the housework of the Château, and had even sometimes lighted the poêle and prepared the vegetables for dinner, still, some feeling that had been born in her rose in her breast and prevented her evincing anything like surprise. Her visit to Paris had paved the way for this great change in her life, for she had seen there in what luxury the fashion-
able people lived, and Miss Rutherford had well impressed her mind with the grandeur she should meet at Oakley Court, and that she was only entering her proper position by attaining it. She gazed at everything around her therefore with deep interest and curiosity, but she did not make a remark concerning anything, and the maid Fielding was too well schooled to venture one. *She* felt a degree of pride as she looked at the young lady she was called upon to serve—for domestics often cross swords with one another on the rival merits of their employers—and Lady Muriel was a mistress that any maid might have been proud of. Miss Rutherford had made her put on one of her most becoming costumes, to meet her father and step-mother, and with the colour which excitement had called into her face, she was looking her very best.

"This way, my lady," said Fielding, as they reached the head of the staircase, and found themselves in another corridor as vast and as
richly furnished as the first; “these are your ladyship’s rooms, and Miss Seton’s are next to them.”

She threw open a white and gold panelled door as she spoke, and Lady Muriel passed into a bedroom, draped in rose-colour damask and furnished with every possible convenience. A large mirror stood above the mantelpiece, which was decorated with two vases of snowy-white china, and mounted on a chair before them, with her hands filled with flowers from a basket at her side, was the figure of a girl busily employed in filling them. As the door opened she looked round, and as Muriel appeared on the threshold, she gave a startled cry and seemed as if she were going to tumble off the chair altogether.

“Why, it’s Miss Seton,” exclaimed Fielding. “La! miss, I should think as Watson might have told you as her ladyship had arrived.”

(Watson was Miss Seton’s personal attendant, and the two Abigails were already at
war because one served an earl's daughter and the other only a commoner.)

"Oh! are you Lady Muriel?" exclaimed the girl with the colour rushing into her pale face.

She was neither pretty, nor prettily dressed, yet Muriel's heart went out to her at once as it had done to no one else of the relations amongst whom she had been so suddenly thrown. Cecilia Seton wore a heavy dark silk dress, unbecoming both for her age and her appearance; her face and figure showed symptoms of ill-health, and her features were commonplace and uninteresting; but there was a yearning look for affection and a fear of giving offence, in her eyes, that were unmistakable, and appealed to the newcomer.

"Yes, I am Muriel," she answered with a smile.

Miss Seton glanced at her Parisian costume of delicate French grey, and the rosebuds
that crowned her bonnet, to the lovely face smiling beneath it, and seemed to grow more timid at the sight.

"What will you say at finding me in your rooms—and before I had even seen you? But I wanted to make your mantelpiece look gay, and so I—I—"

She did not finish the sentence, but pointed nervously to her basket of flowers.

"La! miss," cried the maid jealously, "I would have done that if you had asked me. It's my business to keep her ladyship's rooms supplied with flowers, that is if her ladyship approves of sleeping with them in the room, which I call very unwholesome."

But Muriel's heart was making response to the nervous, twitching mouth, and frightened eyes, and a new dignity rose in her.

"You can go, Fielding," she said, turning to the servant.

"But your ladyship will lay aside your bonnet and mantle."
"Not now. I will ring when I want you. I wish to be left alone with my sister."

The woman disappeared affronted, but neither of the girls cared for that. Cecilia had only heard those two welcome words, my sister, and her pale face beamed with anticipation. She jumped off the chair and ran up to Muriel, and threw her arms about her neck.

"Oh, is it true?" she gasped. "Will you really be my sister? I have never had one, you know. I have been all alone ever since my birth, and I have so longed for you to come to Oakley Court, and yet I have dreaded it at the same time."

"Dreaded it. Oh, why? Ever since I heard that my new mamma had a daughter of my own age I have hoped we would be friends."

"But you are so pretty, Muriel. I don’t think I ever saw any one so pretty as you are before, and I——"

"Well, what of you?"
"I am quite different, I know that. Mamma is ashamed of me because I am so plain, and your father doesn't like me either. No one likes me, Muriel. I am so stupid and shy, and I care for nothing but books and studying all by myself in my own room."

"I shall like you, Cecil, and you will not be shy with me, will you? For I am your sister now, and you must love me dearly."

The neglected girl clasped her arms tight round her new sister's neck for a few minutes and buried her face upon her shoulder, and when she lifted it up again it was wet with tears, though lighted with a smile.

"Oh, Muriel, I will love you so—so much. I did not think that such happiness was coming to me, or that you would call me 'sister' all at once. How nice it will be to ride and drive and walk together. Do you love books and study, Muriel?"

Muriel shook her head.

"Not very much. I have been brought
up in a convent, Cecil, and it was nothing but study there all day long till I was sick of it. But I like novels. I never could get any nice new ones to read in Revranches, only a volume of Tauchnitz now and then that visitors had left behind them."

"You must come and see my rooms by-and-by, and overhaul my bookshelves, Muriel. I have plenty of standard novels in them, and mamma has a box from Mudie every week. But how do you like your rooms, dear? Are they furnished to your taste?"

"They are lovely, Cecil," replied Muriel, as she sat down on a rose-covered sofa in front of an elegant writing-table. "I can imagine nothing nicer or more convenient, and pink is my favourite colour. Were they your taste or Lady Rhylton's?"

Cecilia's face fell.

"Neither, dear; though if I had known you were going to be such a darling I would have asked mamma to let me have a voice in
arranging them. But she would not have consented. She leaves everything concerning the house to the upholsterer, and he does just what he likes."

"Never mind. They are very beautiful, and I am more than content. But go on arranging my flowers, Cecil. I shall value them so much because you thought of putting them there."

"Then I shall keep your vases always supplied, dear Muriel," said Cecil kissing her again, "and you will promise me that Fielding shall have nothing to do with them."

"Certainly not. Fielding must learn to mind her own business," replied Muriel with the air of a little princess. She did not call in the assistance of the maid at all, but divested herself of her walking apparel, and when the arrangement of the vases was complete she wandered with her new sister into the other suite of rooms, and was introduced
to Cecil's books and birds and flowers, and was fast friends with her before an hour had passed over their heads. As five o'clock struck, Fielding tapped at the door and informed the young ladies that the countess had sent up the footman to desire their presence in the library. Cecilia Seton changed colour at the summons.

"Oh, I wonder if your papa will be there," she gasped; "he does frighten me so."

"Frighten you," said Muriel, "and why?"

"I don't know. He never says anything, but I always feel, somehow, when the earl is present as if I were an intruder and in the way and had no right to be there."

"What! in your own mother's house, Cecil? It is we who should feel like intruders."

"Oh, don't say that of yourself. You have made me feel so happy, I could endure fifty step-fathers for your sake. Only mamma and the earl seem so intimate, you know, and she calls him 'darling' and those kinds of names,
and it seems so strange, and as if I shouldn't be by to hear."

"I don't think I shall like it better than you do," replied Muriel shrugging her shoulders; "it sounds so silly, doesn't it? in two old people. And I don't think I shall love my father much either, although I shall be obliged to pretend to for the sake of appearances. But we won't stay downstairs any longer than we need, and we will never go there unless we are obliged. We will make that a bargain, Cecil, and for the rest we go together, which is one comfort."

"The best comfort in the world," cried Cecil clinging to her. "Oh, Muriel, I feel quite a different girl since you have come."

"We seem to have been made for companions," said Muriel laughing, "and the same age, too. It is very curious."

"But you are only eighteen."

"And so are you—are you not?"
"Oh, no, much older than that. I am five-and-twenty, though as I am so little and so fair, I may not look it."

"But I am sure Lady Rhylton said you were the same age as myself."

Cecil coloured.

"Perhaps so. Mamma generally tries to make me out younger than I am, because she is ashamed of having so old a daughter."

"But that is very mean," cried Muriel, who was of an exceedingly frank and outspoken disposition.

"I think it is, but I suppose I mustn't say so. Let us go down to the library now, and try and forget it, Muriel, dear, for my sake."

But such things are not easily forgotten. The young perceive the faults and weaknesses of their elders far more distinctly than the old imagine, and are severe critics into the bargain. As the girls walked up to the five o'clock tea-table, Lady Rhylton
again fell into ecstasies over Muriel's appearance, although her heart sank as she noted how pinched and wan Cecilia's face seemed, and how undeveloped her figure, beside those of her step-sister.

"Here are my darlings," she exclaimed enthusiastically, as she caught sight of them. "Why, Muriel, you look taller than ever without your bonnet. You bid fair to be a perfect grenadier." And then she turned snappishly to her own daughter. "What on earth makes you wear such a sombre dress, Cecil? If you will wear silk gowns that are only fit for a grandmother, you might at least choose them of some brighter shade. That funereal green takes all the colour out of Muriel's grey."

"I am very sorry, mamma," replied Miss Seton meekly; "but you never objected to it before, and you always say light tints make me look so yellow."

"So they do, but there's a medium in all
things. However, you never had any taste. Muriel, dear, do you know where your darling father is?"

"No, Lady Rhylton. I have not seen him since I went upstairs."

"Oh, fie, dear, you mustn't call me 'Lady Rhylton.' You must say 'mamma,' or 'Bee,' if you like it better, for I am sure I feel much more like your sister than your mother. Which shall it be, dear? Will you call me 'Bee?'"

"I would rather call you 'mamma,'" replied Muriel gravely.

"Very well, darling, just as you please," returned the countess lightly; "but it seems funny to me to have such tall daughters. The world will begin to say I am quite an old woman. Ah! here is my sweetheart," she continued, as the door opened to admit the earl. "Now, my dearest. Here is your tea, just as you like it, but you shan't have it unless you come and sit down close
by me,” and as she made room for her husband on the velvet sofa, Lord Rhylton shambled to her side, with scarcely a look at his newly-recovered daughter. Cecil drew Muriel into one of the deep embrasures in the library windows that looked out upon the park, and there talked to her of her horses and her dogs (for riding was one of her chief pleasures), and of the various outdoor employments which she had made for herself. Muriel stared to hear Miss Seton speak of having given one hundred pounds for her Arab palfrey, and twenty-five for a St. Bernard mastiff, and at last she ventured to remark:

“Oh, Cecil, where do you get the money to do all this? Your mamma must be very generous to you.”

“It has nothing to do with her, Muriel. I suppose you have not heard that my poor papa left me independent. He was very rich, and I was his only child, and ever
since I came of age I have had two thousand a year of my own.”

“Two thousand a year!” repeated Lady Muriel, with astonishment.

“Yes. It seems a lot of money, doesn’t it, for an unmarried girl, but I suppose I shall want it all some day, for mamma says that if I were likely to marry, I should have been picked up long ago, with such a dowry. So I feel almost glad sometimes to think I am so uninteresting, for it would be a terrible thing to be married only for one’s money.”

“Well, I shall never be married for that,” laughed Muriel, “for I have none.”

“But the earl will make you an allowance now, Muriel. He is sure to do so, and then we will arrange all sorts of pleasures and excursions together, won’t we?”

“Yes, and it will be delightful,” sighed Muriel contentedly, as she gazed out upon the wide expanse of foliage and flowers.
before her, "and I am very glad indeed that my father has married your mother."

Her luxurious temperament was beginning to appreciate the comforts by which she was surrounded, and to revel in them, and if she looked back upon the past at all, it was only to wonder how she could ever have put up with it. Even the thought of Athol Fergusson (if it troubled her occasionally) troubled her like a past dream which one would rather leave in oblivion. She had shed many tears over his silence, but had learnt to believe at last that he must have joined his regiment before her letter reached him, and left the country, and she might never meet him again. She had thought she loved him in her girlish way, but the feeling had been but skin-deep, and was easily effaced. It requires time and experience to enable us to analyze a man's character and plant our love upon a goodness that cannot fail, and any passion founded
upon a lower basis must, sooner or later, inevitably fade. If Muriel had confessed the truth (or been able to recognize it), she would have known that she had loved Athol Fergusson for his deep blue eyes, with their long lashes, or his tender, caressing manner, or for anything but the worth and solidity of a character which she could not appreciate until she had compared it with others less worthy. It is certain, at any rate, that at this juncture the remembrance of her Revranches lover was fast fading away. The novelty of her life and the pleasures and interests of it, were gradually but surely pushing it to one side. And as the days went on, these distractions increased. The delight of learning to ride on horseback with Cecil, of reading new novels and ordering new dresses, of coming down to dinner every evening attired in some pretty costume, and by being waited on by powdered and liveried servants, all these
things soon turned Lady Muriel Damer's head, and made her past life an unpleasant memory only. And other seductions were soon added to her more innocent pleasures. The gentlemen visitors to Oakley Court—amongst whom Colonel de Crespigny put in a frequent appearance—began to flatter the earl's lovely daughter whenever they had an opportunity, and let her plainly know what they thought of her, paid her compliments indeed so warm and full-flavoured that they made the remembrance of Athol's simple praises seem poor and cold beside them. There was only one drawback to her enjoyment. Lady Rhylton continued gushingly demonstrative in her protestations of affection for her step-daughter; Cecilia was always kind and loving, and her father never said a word of remonstrance against anything she did. Only, whilst Miss Seton's purse was replete with money, Lady Muriel had never received any allowance, nor had
the subject been mentioned to her. She was too shy for some weeks to broach so delicate a matter to the earl, but as the time went on, and she found herself dependent on Cecilia for the means to defray the expenses of her various little wants, she felt that she must speak openly to him. So one evening in August, when Colonel de Crespigny (who was dining at Oakley Court) had been urging Lady Muriel to join her cousins and himself in a picnic to Maidenhead, she stole away from the drawing-room and found her way to the little room where the Earl of Rhylton usually spent his post-prandial hours alone.
CHAPTER X.

THE EARL OF RHYLTON.

Lord Rhylton was busily employed reading a letter which had come by the evening post, as his daughter tapped at his study door, whilst a pile of unopened ones lay neglected at his elbow. In fact, he could not take off his eyes from (what he considered) the cool impudence of the epistle he was perusing. It was from Athol Ferguson, and it stated plainly what he hoped, and wished, and prayed for. The young man had made it his first business on arriving in London, to find out the address of Lady Muriel's father, and to inform him of the relations he supposed to exist between his daughter and himself. He felt that he could not in honour keep on an engage-
ment with her in her altered position, without the sanction of Lord Rhylton, but at the same time it was impossible to him to give her up whilst he believed she loved him. His letter was very respectful and very humble, but it was manly and straightforward. He stated plainly his own poor prospects, but he proclaimed his earnest love for Lady Muriel and the opportunities it had had to ripen, without any shame. But the earl could only see one thing in it, and that was the confounded assurance of a pauper, in aspiring to the hand of his daughter. He had been annoyed when he heard of the foolish affair through the agency of Miss Rutherford, but as it had not been brought before his notice since, he had hoped that the young people had forgotten it. But now the lover threatened to be troublesome, Lord Rhylton did not quite like the decided manner, expressed in a firm, manly hand, in which Athol Fergusson wrote of his en-
gagement to Muriel, and of his determination to wait for her, even if it should be years before he could offer her a home. It was not the love-lorn letter of a timid youth, but the frank avowal of a fearless man, and he felt it must be answered at once and for ever. He was pondering over the matter when Lady Muriel entered, and her appearance added to his determination. He was not exactly fond of his daughter, but he was beginning to be very proud of her, and to want to see her well settled, and as she stood there in a white dress with crimson roses in her hair and at her bosom, she looked a fit consort for a duke.

"What is it, my dear?" he inquired kindly. "Does your mamma want me?"

"No, papa, it is I who want you. May I come in for a minute?"

"Certainly. But what important business has taken you away from the drawing-room? You'd better make short work of it, or we
shall have de Crespigny here to fetch you back again."

Lady Muriel blushed.

"Why Colonel de Crespigny in particular, papa? Lord Dornton, and several other gentlemen are there also."

"Because de Crespigny admires you, my dear (as you must know), and I am glad of it, because (though I don't wish you to decide in a hurry) his fortune makes him a good match for any woman in the county."

"You don't want to get rid of me again so soon, do you, papa?" said Muriel, laughing and colouring.

"No, my dear, but when you do go, I shall make it my business to see you go properly. But what is it you came to say to me?"

"You have made it more difficult than I thought it would be," replied Muriel, taking a seat beside him, "for it has arisen out of a proposal of Colonel de Crespigny's."
He has been urging mamma to let Cissy and me go to Maidenhead on Thursday, with cousin Amelia, to a picnic-party."

"And where's the objection? Doesn't Lady Rhylton approve of it?"

"Oh, yes, papa; but—but—these excursions all cost money, you know. I can't go out for the day with an empty purse—it might be so awkward—and I have positively not a penny. You have forgotten all about my allowance since I came home, so I want you to tell me how much I may spend, and in what way you will pay it me."

The earl looked unnecessarily discomposed.

"Miss Seton has always money at her command," he said; "she has a large fortune for so young a woman."

"Yes, and she is most generous and would pay for everything if I would let her. But you would not like me to place myself
under such an obligation for ever, papa. It would be too humiliating a position for your daughter."

Lady Muriel drew herself up so proudly as she said this, and spoke in so womanly a manner, that her father felt that she could not be put off with a quibble, but must be told the whole truth.

"I am glad you have mentioned the subject, my dear, as it will enable me to explain my exact position to you. With regard to your allowance, well—I suppose I must give you something, but I'm afraid it will be very inadequate to your desires, for (as I suppose you must be aware) I am really very poor."

"Isn't mamma's money yours, then?" cried Lady Muriel, surprised.

"No, my dear, not at all. It is strictly tied up on herself. She defrays, naturally, all the expenses of the household, but my miserable pittance of four hundred a year, with the sum that I came into by this beg-
garly earldom, is all the income that I can call my own."

"And we are actually pensioners on Lady Rhylton's bounty?" exclaimed Muriel, tears of wounded pride welling to her eyes.

"Well, that's rather an unpleasant light by which to view our position, Muriel; but there is no doubt that the bulk of the money belongs to my wife, and that she can dispose of it as she chooses. I had hoped she would have seen the necessity of your having an allowance now you have returned to us, and have proposed to give you a certain sum quarterly——"

"Oh, papa! I would so much rather take it from you. I don't want Lady Rhylton to give me anything. It is bad enough to know that she pays for everything I eat and drink."

"Well, my dear, it will necessarily be a small sum, but I will give you the same allowance I made the Grants for your annual
expenses. I'm afraid you will have to be very economical with it, but you must make it do. The countess has been already complaining of the expenses of your outfit. Amelia Rutherford has sent us in bills to the amount of two thousand francs."

"Well, papa, and what is that? Eighty pounds. It is little enough, when you come to think that I had not a single article of clothing fit to be seen, and had to be fitted out from head to foot."

"Your mamma thinks it extravagant, but I told her it was not your fault. But now, my dear Muriel, I must speak to you on another subject. You see how you are situated, and how important it is that you should make a wealthy marriage. I can give you nothing but a title, and (if you wish to live in the position to which you were born) you must exchange it for a fortune."
These words brought the remembrance of Athol Fergusson to Muriel's mind, and she looked unhappy and hung her head.

"What is the matter?" said the earl.

"It is so miserable to be poor," she answered.

"It is the greatest misery this world can bring us. I speak feelingly, for it has been the curse of my life, Muriel. Whatever troubles we may encounter, money has, at least, the power to alleviate them, but the greatest happiness becomes worthless when we don't know where to look for a shilling. You have seen for yourself now what luxuries money can procure for us. How would you like to give them all up again?"

"Not at all, papa."

"To go back to the sour bread and salt butter you tell me that they gave you at Revranches; to exchange that pretty robe you wear for your convent dress, and the
company of your equals for that of the Grants."

"Oh! papa! don't speak of it. I don't think I *could* go back to it now. It would seem doubly hard. And yet—-" she ended with a sigh.

"And yet, you had once some idea of spending your whole life in an atmosphere of poverty and privation, and thought it would be a delightful thing to follow the roving fortunes of a beggarly subaltern."

Lady Muriel started.

"Papa! who has told you? How did you hear?"

Lord Rhyton considered a moment. Would it be wise to let his daughter know that her lover was close at hand? He thought not. Nothing like absence to make a grave for love, and if Lady Muriel could be led to believe that Athol Fergusson had gone completely out of her reach, he might be able to work her according to his will.
So he answered deliberately, "The young man has had the impudence to write, and tell me so himself."

"Oh, papa," she cried eagerly, "where is he? Did he receive my letters?"

"I don't know. He mentioned nothing about letters. As to his whereabouts—if he is not at the bottom of the sea—I conclude he is in India, where he was proceeding with his regiment, when he wrote."

"In India," repeated Muriel weeping. "Oh, then I feel I shall never, never see him again."

"I don't suppose you will; nine-tenths of the Englishmen who go to India never return, and the rest are kept there for an indefinite number of years. If you wanted to keep your lover by your side you should have chosen one who was not going to India."

"Oh! how could I tell? How could I tell," she cried; "we were so fond of vol. I."
each other, and I—I—promised to be his wife.”

"Now, look here, Muriel," said Lord Rhylton turning to his daughter, "I want to talk very seriously to you about this matter. I have already pointed out to you the stringent reasons there are, that you should marry well, and according to your station as a woman of title. But I am not going to oppose you in this matter of Mr. Athol Fergusson. He writes me word that you love him, and he considers you are engaged to marry each other. He is a subaltern on eighty pounds a year and without any prospects. He has a mother and sisters dependent on him. He may not be promoted for ten or fifteen years, and then he will still be a pauper. If, however, you are convinced you love him so strongly, and so well, that you will not be happy unless you go following the baggage waggon of his regiment all over the world, and give up every
comfort and luxury for his sake, I will not thwart your wishes; but I shall not keep you here. I shall send you back to Revranches to live with the Grants during the ten or fifteen years you will have to wait for Mr. Fergusson. It would be useless your remaining at Oakley Court, to prove an expense to your mamma and myself, and to cultivate a taste for luxuries which you can never hope to enjoy. So, take your choice, my dear. Either give up this pauper lover of yours, or go back and wait for him in Revranches."

"Go back to Revranches!" echoed Lady Muriel, with a look of dismay. "But, papa, I cannot—indeed I cannot."

"Well, I give you the alternative, my dear. There is no need for you to leave us, unless you choose to do so. But then you must give up Mr. Athol Fergusson."

"It will break his heart. He loves me so," she sobbed.
"Rubbish! He will get over it sooner than you do. It's the way with men. He is most probably making love to some other girl, even now. Salt water is a wonderful cure for a youthful passion. But if you don't believe me, go back to Revranches."

"Do you really think he will get over it so soon, papa?"

"I am sure of it!"

"He certainly might have written to me before he went, for I sent him three long letters."

"More fool you, my dear. You made the young fellow think he was sure of you, and so he took no trouble to please you. Now, what are you going to do?"

"I will do as you wish, papa. I cannot go back to Revranches."

"My dear girl, this lad will never be able to marry you. He will never have money enough to keep a wife. Be wise, and break it off at once. There is my desk. Sit down and write and tell him so."
"What shall I say?" she exclaimed despairingly, as she took up the pen. "He will think I am such a wicked girl to give him up."

"He cannot think you wicked for obeying your father. Say what you like, and I will send it to him and explain all the rest."

So Lady Muriel sat down and wrote, whilst her tears fell fast upon the sheet of paper:

"Dear Athol, my father says that it is all nonsense, and we can never marry, and that if I do not give you up, he will send me back to Revranches. And so we had better break off our engagement, and be free, though it gives me dreadful pain to write the words. But I shall never forget you, nor the days at Revranches——"

But here Lady Muriel, unable to proceed for the memories that rushed upon her, cast herself prone upon the writing-desk, and burst into tears.

"This is ridiculous," exclaimed the earl testily, for he was losing patience with her.
"Here, you may have the chance of becoming a countess or a duchess, with plenty of money and influence, and you would throw it all away for the sake of a silly lad who will probably jilt you for some other girl, as soon as he gets out to India."

"No! no! papa! I wouldn't. I see the folly of it as clearly as you do; but just at first, you know—it seems so hard."

"Then get it over as quickly as you can, my dear. It is like having a tooth out, the harder the wrench, the sooner the ease that follows. What is that gold ring you wear upon your finger?"

"It was his. He gave it me," sighed Muriel.

"You must inclose it in your letter."

"Must I? Mayn't I keep even this?"

"Certainly not. Has this young man anything of yours?"

"Only a lock of my hair and a little seal. I had nothing else to give him."
"Ah, well! he may keep those, but that ring must decidedly be returned to him. Thank you, my dear," he continued, as Muriel drew the ring from her finger and handed it to him. "You have behaved very sensibly in this matter, and you will have your reward. You had better go back to the drawing-room now, or your mamma will wonder what has become of you."

"Papa! I cannot. Let me go to bed. My head aches terribly, and I—I—want a little time to myself to—to get over this."

"Very well, Muriel. Do as you think best, and I will make your excuses to Lady Rhylton. I daresay you feel it just now, my dear. These things are always painful, however necessary, but you will soon laugh to think you were courageous enough to do it. You have saved yourself from a life of poverty, or perhaps from being left, after all, to end your days as an old maid."

"But he loved me," replied Lady Muriel,
with a choking sob, as she rushed up to the shelter of her own apartments.

Lord Rhylton did not join the party in the drawing-room until he had written a short, but peremptory answer to poor Athol Fergusson's appeal, and inclosed the note and ring from his daughter in evidence of her acquiescence in his decision. And then he hoped the foolish affair was ended, and he should never again be troubled with a reference to it.

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