

**МАРГАРЕТ
ОЛИФАНТ**

OLD MR.
TREDGOLD

Маргарет Олифант

Old Mr. Tredgold

«Public Domain»

Олифант М. У.

Old Mr. Tredgold / М. У. Олифант — «Public Domain»,

© Олифант М. У.

© Public Domain

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	18
CHAPTER V	24
CHAPTER VI	29
CHAPTER VII	33
CHAPTER VIII	38
CHAPTER IX	44
CHAPTER X	49
CHAPTER XI	54
CHAPTER XII	58
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	61

Margaret Oliphant

Old Mr. Tredgold

CHAPTER I

They were not exactly of that conventional type which used to be common whenever two sisters had to be described—the one dark and the other fair, the one sunny and amiable, the other reserved and proud; the one gay, the other melancholy, or at least very serious by nature. They were not at all like Minna and Brenda in the “Pirate,” which used to be a contrast dear to the imagination. But yet there was a very distinct difference between them. Katherine was a little taller, a little bigger, a little darker, than Stella. She was three years older but was supposed to look ten. She was not so lively in her movements either of mind or person, and she was supposed to be slow. The one who was all light threw a shadow—which seems contradictory—on the other. They were the two daughters of an old gentleman who had been that mysterious being called a City man in his time. Not that there was anything at all mysterious about old Mr. Tredgold; his daughters and his daughters’ friends were fond of saying that he had come to London with the traditionary half-crown in his pocket; but this was, as in so many cases, fabulous, Mr. Tredgold having in fact come of a perfectly creditable Eastern Counties family, his father being a well-to-do linen draper in Ipswich, whose pride it was to have set forth all his boys comfortably, and done everything for them that a father could do. But perhaps it is easier to own to that half-crown and the myth of an origin sudden and commercially-romantic without antecedents, than to a respectable shop in a respectable town, with a number of relatives installed in other shops, doing well and ready to claim the rights of relationship at inconvenient moments. I do not know at all how fortunes are made “in the City.” If you dig coals out of the bowels of the earth, or manufacture anything, from cotton to ships, by which money is made, that is a process which comes within the comprehension of the most limited faculties; but making money in the City never seems to mean anything so simple. It means handing about money, or goods which other people have produced, to other third or fourth people, and then handing them back again even to the Scriptural limits of seventy times seven; which is why it appears so mysterious to the simple-minded.

But, indeed, if anybody had investigated the matter, Mr. Tredgold’s progress had been quite easy to follow, at least in the results. He had gone from a house in Hampstead to a house in Kensington, and thence to Belgravia, changing also his summer residences from Herne Bay to Hastings, and thence to the wilds of Surrey, and then to the Isle of Wight, where, having retired from the cares of business, he now lived in one of those beautiful places, with one of the most beautiful prospects in the world before him, which so often fall to the lot of persons who care very little about beauty in any shape. The house stood on a cliff which was almost a little headland, standing out from the line of the downs between two of the little towns on the south side of that favoured island. The grounds were laid out quite regardless of expense, so much so that they were a show in the district, and tourists were admitted by the gardeners when the family was absent, to see such a collection of flowering shrubs and rare trees as was not to be found between that point, let us say, and Mr. Hanbury’s gardens at Mortola. The sunny platform of the cliff thus adorned to the very edge of the precipice was the most delightful mount of vision, from which you could look along the lovely coast at that spot not much inferior to the Riviera, with its line of sunny towns and villages lying along the course of the bay on one hand, and the darker cliffs clad with wood, amid all the picturesque broken ground of the Landslip on the other; and the dazzling sea, with the additional glory of passing ships giving it a continual interest, stretching out far into the distance, where it met the circle of the globe, and merged as all life does in the indefinite Heaven beyond—the Heaven, the Hades, the unknown—not always celestial, sometimes dark with storm or wild with wind, a vague and indeterminate distance

from which the tempests and all their demons, as well as the angels, come, yet the only thing that gives even a wistful satisfaction to the eyes of those who sway with every movement of this swaying globe in the undiscovered depths of air and sky.

Very little attention, I am sorry to say, was paid to this beautiful landscape by the family who had secured it for their special delectation. The girls would take their visitors “to see the view,” who cast a careless glance at it, and said, “How pretty!” and returned with pleasure to the tennis or croquet, or even tea of the moment. Mr. Tredgold, for his part, had chosen a room for himself on the sheltered side of the house, as was perhaps natural, and shivered at the thought of the view. There was always a wind that cut you to pieces, he said, on that side of the cliff; and, truth to tell, I believe there was, the proverbial softness of the climate of the Isle of Wight being a fond delusion, for the most part, in the minds of its inhabitants. Katherine was the only one who lingered occasionally over the great panorama of the sea and coast; but I think it was when she felt herself a little “out of it,” as people say, when Stella was appropriating everything, and all the guests and all the lovers were circling round that little luminary, and the elder sister was not wanted anywhere—except to fill out tea perhaps, or look after the comforts of the others, which is a *rôle* that may suit a staid person of forty, but at twenty-three is not only melancholy but bewildering—it being always so difficult to see why another should have all the good things, and yourself all the crosses of life.

In the circumstances of these two girls there was not even that cheap way of relief which ends in blaming some one. Even Providence could not be blamed. Katherine, if you looked at her calmly, was quite as pretty as Stella; she had a great deal more in her; she was more faithful, more genuine and trustworthy; she played tennis as well or better; she had as good a voice and a better ear; in short, it was quite incomprehensible to any one why it was that Stella was the universal favourite and her sister was left in the shade. But so it was. Katherine made up the set with the worst players, or she was kept at the tea-table while the merriest game was going on. She had the reversion of Stella’s partners, who talked to her of her sister, of what a jolly girl, or what an incipient angel she was, according to their several modes of speech. The old ladies said that it was because Katherine was so unselfish; but I should not like to brand a girl for whom I have a great regard with that conventional title. She was not, to her own consciousness, unselfish at all. She would have liked very much, if not to have the first place, at least to share it, to have a retinue of her own, and champions and admirers as well as Stella. She did not like the secondary position nor even consent to it with any willingness; and the consequence was that occasionally she retired and looked at the view with anything but happy feelings; so that the appreciation of Nature, and of their good fortune in having their lines thrown in such pleasant places, was very small and scant indeed in this family, which outsiders were sometimes disposed to envy for the beauty of their surroundings and for their wonderful view.

The house which occupied this beautiful situation was set well back in the grounds, so that it at least should not be contaminated by the view, and it was an odd fantastic house, though by no means uncomfortable when you got into the ways of it. A guest, unacquainted with these ways, which consisted of all the very last so-called improvements, might indeed spend a wretched day or night in his or her ignorance. I have indeed known one who, on a very warm evening, found herself in a chamber hermetically sealed to all appearance, with labels upon the windows bearing the words “Close” and “Open,” but affording no information as to how to work or move the complicated machinery which achieved these operations; and when she turned to the bell for aid, there was a long cord depending by the wall, at which she tugged and tugged in vain, not knowing (for these were the early days of electrical appliances) that all she had to do was to touch the little ivory circle at the end of the cord. The result was a night’s imprisonment in what gradually became a sort of Black Hole of Calcutta, without air to breathe or means of appealing to the outside world. The Tredgolds themselves, however, I am happy to say, had the sense in their own rooms to have the windows free to open and shut according to the rules of Nature.

The whole place was very elaborately furnished, with an amount of gilding and ornament calculated to dazzle the beholder—inlaid cabinets, carved furniture, and rich hangings everywhere, not a door without a *portière*, not a window without the most elaborate sets of curtains. The girls had not been old enough to control this splendour when it was brought into being by an adroit upholsterer; and, indeed, they were scarcely old enough even yet to have escaped from the spell of the awe and admiration into which they had been trained. They felt the flimsiness of the fashionable mode inspired by Liberty in comparison with their solid and costly things, even should these be in worst taste, and, as in everything a sense of superiority is sweet, they did not attempt any innovations. But the room in which they sat together in the evening was at least the most simply decorated in the house. There was less gold, there were some smooth and simple tables on which the hand could rest without carrying away a sharp impression of carved foliage or arabesques. There were no china vases standing six feet high, and there was a good deal of litter about such as is indispensable to the happiness of girls. Mr. Tredgold had a huge easy-chair placed near to a tall lamp, and the evening paper, only a few hours later than if he had been in London, in his hands. He was a little old man with no appearance to speak of—no features, no hair, and very little in the way of eyes. How he had managed to be the father of two vigorous young women nobody could understand; but vigorous young women are, however it has come about, one of the commonest productions of the age, a fashion like any other. Stella lay back in a deep chair near her father, and was at this moment, while he filled the air of the room with the crinkling of his paper as he folded back a leaf, lost in the utterance of a long yawn which opened her mouth to a preternatural size, and put her face, which was almost in a horizontal position thrown back and contemplating the ceiling, completely out of drawing, which was a pity, for it was a pretty face. Katherine showed no inclination to yawn—she was busy at a table doing something—something very useless and of the nature of trumpery I have no doubt; but it kept her from yawning at least.

“Well, my pet,” Mr. Tredgold said, putting his hand on the arm of Stella’s chair, “very tired, eh—tired of having nothing to do, and sitting with your old father one night?”

“Oh, I’ve got plenty to do,” said Stella, getting over the yawn, and smiling blandly upon the world; “and, as for one night I sit with you for ever, you ungrateful old dad.”

“What is in the wind now? What’s the next entertainment? You never mean to be quiet for two days together?” the old gentleman said.

“It is not our fault,” said Katherine. “The Courtnays have gone away, the Allens are going, and Lady Jane has not yet come back.”

“I declare,” cried Stella, “it’s humiliating that we should have to depend on anybody for company, whether they are summer people or winter people. What is Lady Jane to us? We are as good as any of them. It is you who give in directly, Kate, and think there is nothing to be done. I’ll have a picnic to-morrow, if it was only the people from the hotel; they are better than nobody, and so pleased to be asked. I shan’t spend another evening alone with papa.”

Papa was not displeased by this sally. He laughed and chuckled in his throat, and crinkled his newspaper more than ever. “What a little hussy!” he cried. “Did you ever know such a little hussy, Kate?”

Kate did not pay any attention at all to papa. She went on with her gum and scissors and her trumpery, which was intended for a bazaar somewhere. “The question is, Do you know the hotel people?” she said. “You would not think a picnic of five or six much fun.”

“Oh, five or six!” cried the other with a toss of her head; and she sprang up from her chair with an activity as great as her former listlessness, and rushed to a very fine ormolu table all rose colour and gold, at which she sat down, dashing off as many notes. “The Setons at the hotel will bring as many as that; they have officers and all kinds of people about,” she cried, flinging the words across her shoulder as she wrote.

“But we scarcely know them, Stella; and Mrs. Seton I don’t like,” said Katherine, with her gum-brush arrested in her hand.

“Papa, am I to ask the people I want, or is Kate to dictate in everything?” cried Stella, putting up another note.

“Let the child have her way, Katie, my dear; you know she has always had her way all her life.”

Katherine’s countenance was perhaps not so amiable as Stella’s, who was radiant with fun and expectation and contradiction. “I think I may sometimes have my way too,” she said. “They are not nice people; they may bring any kind of man, there is always a crowd of men about *her*. Papa, I think we are much safer, two girls like us, and you never going out with us, if we keep to people we know; that was always to be the condition when you consented that Stella should send our invitations without consulting you.”

“Yes, yes, my dear,” said the old gentleman, turning to his elder daughter, “that is quite true, quite true;” then he caught Stella’s eye, and added tremulously: “You must certainly have two or three people you know.”

“And what do you call Miss Mildmay?” cried Stella, “and Mrs. Shanks?—aren’t they people we know?”

“Oh, if she is asking them—the most excellent people and knowing everybody—I think—don’t you think, Katie?—that might do?”

“Of course it will do,” cried Stella gaily. “And old Shanks and old Mildmay are such fun; they always fight—and they hate all the people in the hotels; and only think of their two old faces when they see Mrs. Seton and all her men! It will be the best party we have had this whole year.”

Katherine’s ineffectual remonstrances were drowned in the tinkling as of a cracked bottle of Mr. Tredgold’s laugh. He liked to hear the old ladies called old cats and set to fight and spit at each other. It gave him an agreeable sense of contrast with his own happy conditions; petted and appealed to by the triumphant youth which belonged to him, and of which he was so proud. The inferiority of the “old things” was pleasant to the old man, who was older than they. The cackle of his laugh swept every objection away. And then I think Katherine would have liked to steal away outside and look at the view, and console herself with the sight of the Sliplin lights and all the twinkling villages along the coast; which, it will be seen, was no disinterested devotion to Nature, but only a result of the sensation of being out of it, and not having, which Stella had, her own way.

“Well, you needn’t come unless you like,” cried Stella with defiance, as they parted at the door between their respective rooms, a door which Katherine, I confess, shut with some energy on this particular evening, though it generally stood open night and day.

“I don’t think I will,” Katherine cried in her impatience; but she thought better of this before day.

CHAPTER II

Stella had always been the spoilt child of the Tredgold family. Her little selfishnesses and passions of desire to have her own way, and everything she might happen to want, had been so amusing that nobody had chidden or thought for a moment (as everybody thought with Katherine) of the bad effect upon her character and temper of having all these passions satisfied and getting everything she stormed or cried for. Aunt after aunt had passed in shadow, as it were, across the highly lighted circle of Mr. Tredgold's home life, all of them breaking down at last in the impossibility of keeping pace with Stella, or satisfying her impetuous little spirit; and governess after governess in the same way had performed a sort of processional march through the house. Stella's perpetual flow of mockery and mimicry had all the time kept her father in endless amusement. The mockery was not very clever, but he was easily pleased and thought it capital fun. There was so much inhumanity in his constitution, though he was a kind man in his way and very indulgent to those who belonged to him, that he had no objection to see his own old sister (though a good creature) outrageously mimicked in all her peculiarities, much less the sisters of his late wife. Little Stella, while still under the age of sixteen, had driven off all these ladies and kept her father in constant amusement. "The little hussy!" he said, "the little vixen!" and chuckled and laughed till it was feared he might choke some time, being afflicted with bronchitis, in those convulsions of delight. Katherine, who was the champion of the aunts, and wept as one after the other departed, amused him greatly too. "She is an old maid born!" he said, "and she sticks up for her kind, but Stella will have her pick, and marry a prince, and take off the old cats as long as she lives."

"But if she lives," said a severe governess who for some time kept the household in awe, "she will become old too, and probably be an old cat in the opinion of those that come after her."

"No fear," cried the foolish old man—"no fear." In his opinion Stella would never be anything but pretty and young, and radiant with fun and fascination.

And since the period when the girls "came out" there had been nothing but a whirl of gaiety in the house. They did not come out in the legitimate way, by being presented to Her Majesty and thus placed on the roll of society in the usual meaning of the word, but only by appearing at the first important ball in the locality, and giving it so to be understood that they were prepared to accept any invitations that might come in their way. They had come out together, Stella being much too masterful and impatient to permit any such step on Katherine's part without her, so that Katherine had been more than nineteen while Stella was not much over sixteen when this important step took place. Three years had passed since that time. Stella was twenty, and beginning to feel like a rather *blasé* woman of the world; while Katherine at twenty-three was supposed to be stepping back to that obscurity which her father had prophesied for her, not far off from the region of the old cats to which she was supposed to belong. Curiously enough, no prince had come out of the unknown for the brighter sister. The only suitor that had appeared had been for Katherine, and had been almost laughed out of countenance, poor man, before he took his dismissal, which was, indeed, rather given by the household in general than by the person chiefly concerned. He was an Indian civilian on his way back to some blazing station on the Plains, which was reason enough why he should be repulsed by the family; but probably the annoying thought that it was Katherine he wanted and not her sister had still more to do with it.

"It was a good thing at least that he had not the audacity to ask for you, my pet," Mr. Tredgold said.

"For me!" said Stella, with a little shriek of horror, "I should very soon have given him his answer." And Katherine, too, gave him his answer, but in a dazed and bewildered way. She was not at all in love with him, but it did glance across her mind that to be the first person with some one, to have a house of her own in which she should be supreme, and a man by her side who thought there

was nobody like her— But, then, was it possible that any man should really think that? or that any house could ever have this strange fascination of home which held her fast she could not tell how or why? She acquiesced accordingly in Mr. Stanford's dismissal. But when she went out to look at the view in her moments of discouragement her mind was apt to return to him, to wonder sometimes what he was doing, where he was, or if he had found some one to be his companion, and of whom he could think that there was nobody like her in the world?

In the meantime, however, on the morning which followed the evening already recorded, Katherine had too much to do in the way of providing for the picnic to have much time to think. Stella had darted into her room half-dressed with a number of notes in her hand to tell her that everybody was coming. "Mrs. Seton brings six including her husband and herself—that makes four fresh new men besides little Seton, whom you can talk to if you like, Kate; and there's three from the Rectory, and five from the Villa, and old Mildmay and Shanks to do propriety for papa's sake."

"I wish you would not speak of them in that way by their names. It does not take much trouble to say Miss Mildmay and Mrs. Shanks."

"I'll say the old cats, if you like," Stella said with a laugh, "that's shorter still. Do stir up a little, and be quick and let us have a good lunch."

"How am I to get cold chickens at an hour's notice?" said Katherine. "You seem to think they are all ready roasted in the poultry yard, and can be put in the hampers straight off. I don't know what Mrs. Pearson will say."

"She will only say what she has said a hundred times; but it always comes right all the same," cried Stella, retreating into her own room to complete her toilette. And this was so true that Kate finished hers also in comparative calm. She was the housekeeper *de jure*, and interviewed Mrs. Pearson every morning with the profoundest gravity as if everything depended upon her; but at bottom Katherine knew very well that it was Mrs. Pearson who was the housekeeper *de facto*, and that she, like everyone else, managed somehow that Miss Stella should have her way.

"You know it's just impossible," said that authority a few minutes later. "Start at twelve and tell me at nine to provide for nearly twenty people! Where am I to get the chickens, not to speak of ham and cold beef and all the rest? Do ye think the chickens in the yard are roasted already?" cried the indignant housekeeper, using Katherine's own argument, "and that I have only to set them out in the air to cool?"

"You see I did not know yesterday," said the young mistress apologetically; "it was a sudden thought of Miss Stella's last night."

"She *is* a one for sudden thoughts!" cried Pearson, half-indignant, half-admiring; and after a little more protestation that it was impossible she began to arrange how it could be done. It was indeed so usual an experience that the protests were stereotyped, so to speak. Everything on the Cliff was sudden—even Katherine had acquired the habit, and preferred an impromptu to any careful preparation of events. "Then if anything is wrong we can say there was so very little time to do it in," she said with an instinct of recklessness foreign to her nature. But Mrs. Pearson was wise and prudent and knew her business, so that it was very seldom anything went wrong.

On ordinary occasions every one knows how rare it is to have a thoroughly fine day for the most carefully arranged picnic. The association of rain with these festivities is traditional. There is nothing that has so bad an effect upon the most settled weather. Clouds blow up upon the sky and rain pours down at the very suggestion. But that strange Deity which we call Providence, and speak of in the neuter gender, is never more apparently capricious than in this respect. A picnic which is thoroughly undesirable, which has nothing in its favour, which brings people together who ought to be kept apart, and involves mischief of every kind, is free from all the usual mischances. That day dawned more brightly even than other days. It shone even cloudless, the glass rising, the wind dropping as if for the special enjoyment of some favourite of Heaven. It was already October, but quite warm, as warm as June, the colour of autumn adding only a charm the more, and neither chill nor cloud to dull the

atmosphere. The sea shone like diamonds but more brilliant, curve upon curve of light following each other with every glittering facet in movement. The white cliff at the further point of the bay shone with a dazzling whiteness beyond comparison with anything else in sky or earth.

At twelve o'clock the sun overhead was like a benediction, not too hot as in July and August, just perfect everybody said; and the carriages and the horses with their shiny coats, and the gay guests in every tint of colour, with convivial smiles and pleasant faces, made the drive as gay as Rotten Row when Mr. Tredgold came forth to welcome and speed forth his guests. This was his own comparison often used, though the good man had never known much of Rotten Row. He stood in the porch, which had a rustical air though the house was so far from being rustical, and surveyed all these dazzling people with pride. Though he had been used for years now to such gay assemblages, he had never ceased to feel a great pride in them as though of "an honour unto which he was not born." To see his girls holding out hospitality to all the grand folks was an unceasing satisfaction. He liked to see them at the head of everything, dispensing bounties. The objectionable lady who had brought so many men in her train did not come near Mr. Tredgold, but bowed to him from a safe distance, from his own waggonette in which she had placed herself.

"I am not going to be led like a lamb to that old bore," she said to her party, which swarmed about her and was ready to laugh at everything she said; and they were all much amused by the old man's bow, and by the wave of his hand, with which he seemed to make his visitors free of his luxuries.

"The old bore thinks himself an old swell," said someone else. "Tredgold and Silverstamp, money changers," said another. "Not half so good—Tredgold and Wurst, sausage makers," cried a third. They all laughed so much, being easily satisfied in the way of wit, that Stella, who was going to drive, came up flourishing her whip, to know what was the joke.

"Oh, only about a funny sign we saw on the way," said Mrs. Seton, with a glance all round, quenching the laughter. The last thing that could have entered Stella's mind was that these guests of hers, so effusive in their acceptance of her invitation, so pleased to be there, with everything supplied for their day's pleasure, were making a jest of anything that belonged to her. She felt that she was conferring a favour upon them, giving them "a great treat," which they had no right to expect.

"You must tell me about it on the way," she said, beaming upon them with gracious looks, which was the best joke of all, they all thought, stifling their laughter.

Mr. Tredgold sent a great many wreathed smiles and gracious gestures to the waggonette which was full of such a distinguished company, and with Stella and her whip just ready to mount the driving-seat. They were new friends he was aware. The men were all fashionable, "a cut above" the Sliplin or even the smaller county people. The old gentleman loved to see his little Stella among them, with her little delightful swagger and air of being A I everywhere. I hope nobody will think me responsible for the words in which poor Mr. Tredgold's vulgar little thoughts expressed themselves. He did not swagger like Stella, but loved to see her swaggering. He himself would have been almost obsequious to the fine folks. He had a remnant of uneasy consciousness that he had no natural right to all this splendour, which made him deeply delighted when people who had a right to it condescended to accept it from his hand. But he was proud too to know that Stella did not at all share this feeling, but thought herself A I. So she was A I; no one there was fit to hold a candle to her. So he thought, standing at his door waving his hands, and calling out congratulations on the fine day and injunctions to his guests to enjoy themselves.

"Don't spare anything—neither the horses nor the champagne; there is plenty more where these came from," he said.

Then the waggonette dashed off, leading the way; and Katherine followed in the landau with the clergyman's family from the Rectory, receiving more of Mr. Tredgold's smiles and salutations, but not so enthusiastic.

"Mind you make everybody comfortable, Kate," he cried. "Have you plenty of wraps and cushions? There's any number in the hall; and I hope your hampers are full of nice things and plenty

of champagne—plenty of good champagne; that’s what the ladies want to keep up their spirits. And don’t be afraid of it. I have none but the best in my house.”

The vehicle which came after the landau was something of the shandrydan order, with one humble horse and five people clustering upon it.

“Why didn’t you have one of our carriages!” he cried. “There’s a many in the stables that we never use. You had only to say the word, and the other waggonette would have been ready for you; far more comfortable than that old rattle-trap. And, bless us! here is the midge—the midge, I declare—with the two old—with two old friends; but, dear me, Mrs. Shanks, how much better you would have been in the brougham!”

“So I said,” said one of the ladies; “but Ruth Mildmay would not hear of it. She is all for independence and our own trap, but I like comfort best.”

“No,” said Miss Mildmay. “Indebted to our good friend we’ll always be for many a nice party, and good dinner and good wine as well; but my carriage must be my own, if it’s only a hired one; that is my opinion, Mr. Tredgold, whatever any one may say.”

“My dear good ladies,” said Mr. Tredgold, “this is Liberty Hall; you may come as you please and do as you please; only you know there’s heaps of horses in my stables, and when my daughters go out I like everything about them to be nice—nice horses, nice carriages. And why should you pay for a shabby affair that anybody can hire, when you might have my brougham with all the last improvements? But ladies will have their little whims and fads, we all know that.”

“Mr. Perkins,” cried Miss Mildmay out of the window to the driver of the fly, “go on! We’ll never make up to the others if you don’t drive fast; and the midge is not very safe when it goes along a heavy road.”

“As safe as a coach, and we’re in very good time, Miss,” said Mr. Perkins, waving his whip. Perkins felt himself to be of the party too, as indeed he was of most parties along the half circle of the bay.

“Ah, I told you,” cried Mr. Tredgold, with his chuckle, “you’d have been much better in the brougham.” He went on chuckling after this last detachment had driven unsteadily away. A midge is not a graceful nor perhaps a very safe vehicle. It is like a section of an omnibus, a square box on wheels wanting proportions, and I think it is used only by elderly ladies at seaside places. As it jogged forth Mr. Tredgold chuckled more and more. Though he had been so lavish in his offers of the brougham, the old gentleman was not displeased to see his old neighbours roll and shamble along in that uncomfortable way. It served them right for rejecting the luxury he had provided. It served them still more right for being poor. And yet there was this advantage in their being poor, that it threw up the fact of his own wealth, like a bright object on a dark background. He went back to his room after a while, casting a glance and a shiver at the garden blazing with sunshine and flowers which crowned the cliff. He knew there was always a little shrewd breeze blowing round the corner somewhere, and the view might be hanged for anything he cared. He went indoors to his room, where there was a nice little bit of fire. There was generally a little bit of fire somewhere wherever he was. It was much more concentrated than the sun, and could be controlled at his pleasure and suited him better. The sun shone when it pleased, but the fire burned when Mr. Tredgold pleased. He sat down and stretched himself out in his easy-chair and thought for a minute or two how excellent it was to have such a plenty of money, so many horses and carriages, and one of the nicest houses in the island—the very nicest he thought—and to give Stella everything she wanted. “She makes a fool of me,” he said to himself, chuckling. “If that little girl wanted the Koh-i-Noor, I’d be game to send off somebody careering over the earth to find out as good.” This was all for love of Stella and a little for glory of himself; and in this mood he took up his morning paper, which was his occupation for the day.

CHAPTER III

A picnic is a very doubtful pleasure to people out of their teens, or at least out of their twenties; and yet it remains a very popular amusement. The grass is often damp, and it is a very forced and uncomfortable position to sit with your plate on your knees and nothing within your reach which you may reasonably want in the course of the awkward meal. Mrs. Seton and the younger ladies, who were sedulously attended upon, did not perhaps feel this so much; but then smart young men, especially when themselves guests and attached to one particular party, do not wait upon “the old cats” as they do upon the ladies of the feast. Why Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay should have continued to partake in these banquets, and spend their money on the midge to convey them there, I am unable so much as to guess, for they would certainly have been much more comfortable at home. But they did do so, in defiance of any persuasion. They were not entirely ignorant that they were considered old cats. The jibes which were current on the subject did not always fly over their heads. They knew more or less why they were asked, and how little any one cared for their presence. And yet they went to every entertainment of the kind to which they were asked with a steadiness worthy of a better cause. They were less considered even than usual in this company, which was chiefly made up of strangers. They had to scramble for the salad and help themselves to the ham. Cold chicken was supposed to be quite enough for them without any accompaniment. The *pâté de foie gras* was quite exhausted before it came their length, and Miss Mildmay had to pluck at Mr. Seton’s coat and call his attention half a dozen times before they got any champagne; and yet they were always ready to accept the most careless invitation, I cannot tell why. They talked chiefly to each other, and took their little walks together when the young ones dispersed or betook themselves to some foolish game. “Oh, here are the old cats!” they could almost hear the girls say, when the two ancient figures came in sight at the turn of the path; and Stella would turn round and walk off in the opposite direction without an attempt at concealment. But they did not take offence, and next time were always ready to come again.

That Mrs. Seton should have been ready to come was less wonderful, for though she was old enough to be a little afraid of her complexion, and was aware that damp was very bad for her neuralgia, it was indispensable for her to have something to do, and the heavy blank of a day without entertainment was dreadful to bear. And this was not for herself only but for her court, or her tail, or whatever it may be called—the retinue of young men whom she led about, and who had to be amused whatever happened. Think of the expenditure of energy that is necessary to amuse so many young active human creatures in a sitting-room in a hotel for a whole morning, before lunch comes to relieve the intolerable strain; or even in an afternoon before and after the blessed relief of tea! They sprawl about upon the chairs, they block up the windows, they gape for something to do, they expect to have funny things said to them and to be made to laugh. What hard work for any woman whose whole faculty consists in a capacity for saying every folly that comes into her head with an audacity which is not accompanied by wit! “What a fool you do look, Algy, with your mouth open like a little chick in a nest! Do you expect me to pop a worm into it?” This speech made them all roar, but it was not in itself amusing, the reader will perceive. And to go on in that strain for hours is extremely fatiguing, more so than the hardest work. Many people wondered why she should take the trouble to have all these men about her, and to undertake the Herculean task of entertaining them, which was a mystery quite as great as the persistence of the elder ladies in going to feasts where they are called old cats and receive no attention. The lightest of social entertainments *donnent à penser* in this way. You would have thought that Mrs. Seton would have welcomed the moment of relief which ensued when the boys and girls ran off together in a sort of hide-and-seek among the tufted slopes. But when she found that she was actually left alone for a moment with only her husband to attend upon her, the lady was not pleased at all.

“Where have they all gone?” she cried. “What do they mean leaving me all alone? Where’s Algy—and where’s Sir Charles—and all of them?”

“There’s nobody but me, I’m afraid, Lottie,” said little Seton, who was strengthening himself with another glass of champagne; “they’ve all gone off with the young ones.”

“The young ones!” Mrs. Seton cried, with a sort of suppressed shriek. The eldest of the Stanley girls was seated at a little distance, sedately employed in making a drawing, and Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay sat resting upon a pile of carriage cushions which they had collected together when the others went away. The old ladies were much occupied in seeing that Perkins, the driver of the midge, had his share with the other servants of the relics of the feast. And was she, the brilliant, the gay, the lovely Lottie, left with these *débris* of humanity, deserted by her kind? She rose up hastily and flourished her parasol with an energy which nearly broke the ivory stick. “Have you no spirit at all,” she cried, “to let your wife be neglected like this?” Katherine was the one who met her in full career as she went down the winding slopes—Katherine enjoying herself very moderately with none of the stolen goods about her, in sole company of Evelyn Stanley and Gerrard, her brother. “Where are all my party?” cried Mrs. Seton. “They will never forgive me for deserting them. You stole a march upon me, Miss Tredgold.” But certainly it was not Katherine who had stolen the march. At this moment Stella appeared out of the bushes, flushed with fun and laughter, her pretty hat pushed back upon her head, her pretty hair in a little confusion.

“Oh, come along, come along!” she cried, seizing Mrs. Seton by the arm, “here’s such a beautiful place to hide in; they are all after us, full cry. Come, come, we must have you on our side.” Thus, again, it was Stella that was on the amusing side where all the fun and the pleasure was. Evelyn Stanley cast wistful eyes after the pair.

“Oh, Katherine, do you mind me going, too? Hide-and-seek is such fun, and we can walk here every day.”

“Do you want to go, too, Gerrard?” Katherine said.

“Not if I may walk with you,” said the youth, who was at the University and felt himself superior. He was only a year younger than she was, and he thought that a *grande passion* for a woman advanced in life was a fine thing for a young man. He had made up his mind to keep by Katherine’s side whatever happened. “I don’t care for that silly nonsense,” he said; “it’s very well for these military fellows that have not an idea in their heads. I always liked conversation best, and your conversation, dear Katherine—”

“Why, I cannot talk a bit,” she said with a laugh.

It was on Gerrard’s lips to say, “But I can.” He had the grace, however, not to utter that sentiment. “There are some people whose silence is more eloquent than other people’s talk,” he said, which was a much prettier thing to say.

“Oh, why didn’t you come at first?” cried Stella in Mrs. Seton’s ear. “They all think you are with me, only that you’ve got some very cunning place to hide in: and here it is. I am sure they’ll never find us here.”

“I hope they will, though,” said the elder lady, speaking in tones that were not at all subdued. “You need not be so clever with your cunning places. Of course we want them to find us; there is no fun in it if they don’t.”

Stella stared a little with widely opened eyes at her experienced companion. She was still schoolgirl enough to rejoice in baffling the other side, and liked the fun simply as Evelyn Stanley did, who was only sixteen, and who came crowding in upon them whispering in her delight: “They’ve run down the other way, the whole lot of them like sheep; they have no sense. Oh, hush! hush! speak low! they’ll never think of a place like this.”

“I shall make them think,” cried Mrs. Seton, and then she began to sing snatches of songs, and whistled through the thicket to the astonishment of the girls.

“Oh, that is no fun at all,” said Evelyn.

“Hush!” cried Stella, already better informed, “it isn’t any fun if they don’t find us, after all.”

And then the train of young men came rushing back with shouts, and the romp went on. It was so far different from other romps that when the fun flagged for a moment the faces of the players all grew blank again, as if they had at once relapsed into the heavy dullness which lay behind, which was rather astonishing to the younger ones, who loved the game for its own sake. Stella, for her part, was much impressed by this recurring relapse. How exquisite must be the fun to which they were accustomed, which kept them going! She was painfully aware that she flagged too, that her invention was not quick enough to think of something new before the old was quite exhausted. She had thought of nothing better than to go on, to hide again, when Mrs. Seton, yawning, sat down to fan herself, and said what Stella thought the rudest things to her cavaliers.

“Why does Charlie Somers look so like an ass?” she said. “Do you give it up? Because he’s got thistles all round him and can’t get at ’em.”

Stella stared while the young men burst into noisy laughter.

“Is that a conundrum?” Stella said.

They thought this was wit too, and roared again. And then once more all the faces grew blank. It was her first experience of a kind of society decidedly above her level, and it was impressive as well as alarming to the inexperienced young woman. It had been her habit to amuse herself, not doubting that in doing so she would best promote the amusement of her guests. But Stella now began to feel the responsibilities of an entertainer. It was not all plain sailing. She began to understand the rush of reckless talk, the excited tones, the startling devices of her new friend. In lack of anything better, the acceptance of a cigar on Mrs. Seton’s part, and the attempt to induce Stella to try one too, answered for a moment to the necessities of the situation. They were not very particular as to the selection of things to amuse them, so long as there was always something going on.

Sir Charles Somers sat with her on the box as she drove home, and gave her a number of instructions which at first Stella was disposed to resent.

“I have driven papa’s horses ever since I was born,” she said.

“But you might drive much better,” said the young man, calmly putting his hand on hers, moulding her fingers into a better grasp upon the reins, as composedly as if he were touching the springs of an instrument instead of a girl’s hand. She blushed, but he showed no sense of being aware that this touch was too much. He was the one of the strangers whom she liked best, probably because he was Sir Charles, which gave him a distinction over the others, or at least it did so to Stella. This was not, however, because she was unaccustomed to meet persons who shared the distinction, for the island people were very tolerant of such *nouveaux riches* as the Tredgolds, who were so very ready to add to their neighbours’ entertainment. Two pretty girls with money are seldom disdained in any community, and the father, especially as he was so well advised as to keep himself out of society, was forgiven them, so that the girls were sometimes so favoured as to go to a ball under Lady Jane’s wing, and knew all “the best people.” But even to those who are still more accustomed to rank than Stella, Sir Charles sounds better than Mr. So-and-so; and he had his share of good looks, and of that ease in society which even she felt herself to be a little wanting in. He did not defer to the girl, or pay her compliments in any old-fashioned way. He spoke to her very much as he spoke to the other young men, and gripped her fingers to give them the proper grasp of the reins with as much force of grip and as perfect calm as if she had been a boy instead of a girl. This rudeness has, it appears, its charm.

“I shouldn’t have wondered if he had called me Tredgold,” Stella said with a pretence at displeasure.

“What a horrid man!” Katherine replied, to whom this statement was made.

“Horrid yourself for thinking so,” cried her sister. “He is not a horrid man at all, he is very nice. We are going to be great—pals. Why shouldn’t we be great pals? He is a little tired of Lottie Seton and her airs, he said. He likes nice honest girls that say what they mean, and are not always bullying a fellow. Well, that is what he said. It is his language, it is not mine. You know very well

that is how men speak, and Lottie Seton does just the same. I told him little thanks to him to like girls better than an old married woman, and you should have seen how he tugged his moustache and rolled in his seat with laughing. Lottie Seton must have suspected something, for she called out to us what was the joke?”

“I did not know you were on such terms with Mrs. Seton, Stella, as to call her by her Christian name.”

“Oh, we call them all by their names. Life’s too short for Missis That and Mr. This. Charlie asked me—”

“Charlie! why, you never saw him till to-day.”

“When you get to know a man you don’t count the days you’ve been acquainted with him,” said Stella, tossing her head, but with a flush on her face. She added: “I asked him to come over to lunch to-morrow and to see the garden. He said it would be rare fun to see something of the neighbourhood without Lottie Seton, who was always dragging a lot of fellows about.”

“Stella, what a very, very unpleasant man, to talk like that about the lady who is his friend, and who brought him here!”

“Oh, his friend!” cried Stella, “that is only your old-fashioned way. She is no more his friend! She likes to have a lot of men following her about everywhere, and they have got nothing to do, and are thankful to go out anywhere to spend the time; so it is just about as broad as it is long. They do it to please themselves, and there is not a bit of love lost.”

“I don’t like those kind of people,” said Katherine.

“They are the only kind of people,” Stella replied.

This conversation took place from one room to another, the door standing open while the girls performed a hasty toilette. All the picnic people had been parted with at the gate with much demonstration of friendship and a thousand thanks for a delightful day. Only the midge had deposited its occupants at the door. The two old cats were never to be got rid of. They were at that moment in another room, making themselves tidy, as they said, with the supercilious aid of Katherine’s maid. Stella did not part with hers in any circumstances, though she was about to dine in something very like a dressing-gown with her hair upon her shoulders. Mr. Tredgold liked to see Stella with her hair down, and she was not herself averse to the spectacle of the long rippled locks falling over her shoulders. Stella was one of the girls who find a certain enjoyment in their own beauty even when there is nobody to see.

“It was a very pleasant party on the whole to be such an impromptu,” said Mrs. Shanks; “your girls, Mr. Tredgold, put such a spirit in everything. Dear girls! Stella is always the most active and full of fun, and Katherine the one that looks after one’s comfort. Don’t you find the Stanleys, Kate, a little heavy in hand?—excellent good people, don’t you know, always a stand-by, but five of them, fancy! Marion that is always at her drawing, and Edith that can talk of nothing but the parish, and that little romp Evelyn who is really too young and too childish! Poor Mr. Stanley has his quiver too full, poor man, like so many clergymen.”

“If ever there was a man out of place—the Rector at a picnic!” said Miss Mildmay, “with nobody for him to talk to. I’ll tell you what it is, Mr. Tredgold, he thinks Kate is such a steady creature, he wants her for a mother to his children; now see if I am not a true prophet before the summer is out.”

Mr. Tredgold’s laugh, which was like the tinkling of a tin vessel, reached Katherine’s ear at the other end of the table, but not the speech which had called it forth.

“Papa, the officers are coming here to-morrow to lunch—you don’t mind, do you?—that is, Charlie Somers and Algy Scott. Oh, they are nice enough; they are dreadfully dull at Newport. They want to see the garden and anything there is to see. You know you’re one of the sights of the island, papa.”

“That is their fun,” said the old man. “I don’t know what they take me for, these young fellows that are after the girls. Oh, they’re all after the girls; they know they’ve got a good bit of money and

so forth, and think their father's an easy-going old fool as soft as—Wait till we come to the question of settlements, my good ladies, wait till then; they'll not find me so soft when we get there."

"It is sudden to think of settlements yet, Mr. Tredgold. The Rector, poor man, has got nothing to settle, and as for those boys in the garrison, they never saw the dear girls till to-day."

"Ah, I know what they are after," said Mr. Tredgold. "My money, that is what they are all after. Talk to me about coming to see over the garden and so forth! Fudge! it is my money they are after; but they'll find I know a thing or two before it comes to that."

"Papa," said Stella, "you are just an old suspicious absurd—What do they know about your money? They never heard your name before. Of course they had heard of *me*. The other battalion were all at the Ryde ball, and took notes. They thought I was an American, that shows how little they know about you."

"That means, Stella," said Miss Mildmay, "everything that is fast and fly-away. I wouldn't brag of it if I were you."

"It means the fashion," said Mrs. Shanks. "Dear Stella *is* like that, with her nice clothes, and her way of rushing at everything, and never minding. Now Katherine is English, no mistake about her—a good daughter, don't you know—and she'll make an excellent wife."

"But the man will have to put down his money, piece for piece, before he shall have her, I can tell you," said the master of the house. "Oh, I'm soft if you like it, and over-indulgent, and let them have all their own way; but there's not a man in England that stands faster when it comes to that."

Stella gave her sister a look, and a little nod of her head; her eyes danced and her hair waved a little, so light and fluffy it was, with that slight gesture. It seemed to say, *We shall see!* It said to Katherine, "You might stand that, but it will not happen with me." The look and the gesture were full of a triumphant defiance. Stella was not afraid that she would ever feel the restraining grip of her father's hand; and then she thought of that other grip upon her fingers, and shook her shiny hair about her ears more triumphant still.

CHAPTER IV

Stella, however, courageous as she was, was not bold enough to address Sir Charles and his companion as Charlie and Algy when they appeared, not next day, but some days later; for their engagements with Mrs. Seton and others of their friends were not so lightly to be pushed aside for the attraction of her society as the girl supposed. It was a little disappointing to meet them with their friends, not on the same sudden level of intimacy which had been developed by the picnic, and to be greeted indifferently, "like anybody else," after that entertainment and its sudden fervour of acquaintance. When, however, Mrs. Seton left the hotel, and the young men had no longer that resource in their idleness, they appeared at the Cliff without further invitation, and with an evident disposition to profit by its hospitality which half flattered and half offended the girls.

"They have never even left cards," said Katherine, after the picnic, "but now that their friends have gone they remember that you asked them, Stella."

"Well," cried Stella, "that is so much the more friendly. Do you suppose they haven't hundreds of places to go to? And when they choose *us*, are we to be disagreeable? I shan't be so at least."

She ran downstairs indeed wreathed with smiles, and received them with an eager gratification, which was very flattering to the young men, who opened their eyes at the luxury of the luncheon and gave each other a look which said that here was something worth the trouble. Old Mr. Tredgold, in his shabby coat and his slippers, was a curious feature in the group; but it was by no means out of keeping that a rich old father, who had begun life with half a crown, should thus fulfil his part, and the young men laughed at his jokes, and elevated an eyebrow at each other across the table, with a sense of the fun of it, which perplexed and disturbed the two young women, to whom they were still figures unaccustomed, about whose modes and manners they were quite unassured. Katherine took it all seriously, with an inclination towards offence, though it is not to be supposed that the advent of two young officers, more or less good-looking and a novelty in her life, should not have exercised a little influence upon her also. But Stella was in a state of suppressed excitement which made her eyes shine indeed, and brightened her colour, but was not very pleasant to behold for anyone who loved her. She was half offended with her father for the share he took in the conversation, and angry with the young men who listened to and applauded him, without remarking her own attempts to be witty. Her voice, though it was a pretty voice, grew a little shrill in her endeavours to attract their attention and to secure the loud outbursts of laughter which had been used to accompany Mrs. Seton's sallies. What was it about Mrs. Seton which amused them? She said nothing remarkable, except for rudeness and foolishness, and yet they laughed; but to Stella's funniest remarks they gave but a gape of inattention, and concentrated their attention on her father—on papa! What could they possibly see in him?

It was consolatory, however, when they all went out into the garden after lunch, to find that they came one on each side of her instinctively with a just discrimination, leaving Katherine out. Stella, to do her justice, did not want Katherine to be left entirely out. When her own triumph was assured she was always willing that there should be something for her sister. But it was well at least that the strangers should recognise that she was the centre of everything. She led them, as in duty bound, through all the rare trees and shrubs which were the glory of the Cliff. "This papa had brought all the way from Brazil, or somewhere. It is the first one that ever was grown in England; and just look at those berries! Wain, the gardener, has coaxed them to grow, giving them all sorts of nice things to eat. Oh, I couldn't tell you all he has given them—old rags and rusty nails and all kinds of confectioneries!"

"Their dessert, eh?" said Sir Charles. He had stuck his glass in his eye, but he looked gloomily at all the wonderful plants. Algy put up his hand to his moustache, under which his mouth gaped more open than usual, with a yawn. Stella remembered that Mrs. Seton had proposed to pop a worm into it, and longed to make use, though at second hand, of that famous witticism, but had not the

courage. They looked about blankly even while she discoursed, with roving yet vacant looks, seeking something to entertain them. Stella could not entertain them—oh, dreadful discovery! She did not know what to say; her pretty face began to wear an anxious look, her colour became hectic, her eyes hollow with eagerness, her voice loud and shrill with the strain. Mrs. Seton could keep them going, could make them laugh at nothing, could maintain a whirl of noisy talk and jest; but Stella could not amuse these two heavy young men. Their opaque eyes went roving round the beautiful place in search of some “fun,” their faces grew more and more blank. It was Katherine, who did not pretend to be amusing, who had so very little to say for herself, who interposed:

“Don’t you think,” she said, “Stella, they might like to look at the view? Sliplin Harbour is so pretty under the cliff, and then there are some yachts.”

“Oh, let’s look at the yachts,” the young men said, pushing forward with a sudden impulse of interest. The bay was blazing in the afternoon sunshine, the distant cliff a dazzle of whiteness striking sharp against the blue of sky and sea; but the visitors did not pause upon anything so insignificant as the view. They stumbled over each other in their anxiety to see the little vessel which lay at the little pier, one white sail showing against the same brilliant background. Whose was it? Jones’s for a wager, the *Lively Jinny*. No, no, nothing of the sort. Howard’s the *Inscrutable*, built for Napier, don’t you know, before he went to the dogs.

Stella pressed forward into the discussion with questions which she did not know to be irrelevant. What was the meaning of clipper-rigged? Did raking masts mean anything against anyone’s character? Which was the jib, and why should it be of one shape rather than another? The gentlemen paid very little attention to her. They went on discussing the identity of the toy ship with interest and fervour.

“Why, I know her like the palm of my hand,” cried Sir Charles. “I steered her through that last westerly gale, and a tough one it was. I rather think if any one should know her, it’s I. The *Lively Jinny*, and a livelier in the teeth of a gale I never wish to see.”

“Pooh!” said the other. “You’re as blind as a bat, Charlie, everyone knows; you wouldn’t know your best friend at that distance. It’s Howard’s little schooner that he bought when poor Napier went to—”

“I tell you it’s *Jinny*, the fetish of Jones’s tribe. I know her as well as I know you. Ten to one in sovs.”

“I’ll take you,” cried the other. “Howard’s, and a nice little craft; but never answers her helm as she ought, that’s why he calls her the *Inscrutable*.”

“What a strange thing,” cried Stella, toiling behind them in her incomprehension, “not to answer your helm! What is your helm, and what does it say to you? Perhaps she doesn’t understand.”

This, she thought, was *à la mode de* Mrs. Seton, but it produced no effect, not even a smile.

“You could see the figure-head with a glass,” said Captain Scott. “Where’s the glass, Miss Tredgold? There ought to be a glass somewhere.”

“Jove!” cried Sir Charles. “Fancy a look-out like this and no telescope. What could the people be thinking of?”

“You are very rude to call papa and me the people,” cried Stella, almost in tears. “Who cares for a silly little cockle-shell of a boat? But it is a good thing at least that it gives you something to talk about—which I suppose you can understand.”

“Hullo!” said the one visitor to the other, under his breath, with a look of surprise.

“If it is only a glass that is wanted,” said Katherine, “why shouldn’t we all have a look? There is a telescope, you know, upstairs.”

Stella flashed out again under the protection of this suggestion. “I’ll run,” she said, being in reality all compliance and deeply desirous to please, “and tell one of the footmen to bring it down.”

“Too much trouble,” and “What a bore for you to have us on your hands!” the young men said.

“Don’t, Stella,” said Katherine; “they had better go up to papa’s observatory, where they can see it for themselves.”

“Oh, yes,” cried the girl, “come along, let’s go to papa’s observatory, that will be something for you to do. You always want something to do, don’t you? Come along, come along!” Stella ran on before them with heated cheeks and blazing eyes. It was not that she was angry with them, but with herself, to think that she could not do what Mrs. Seton did. She could not amuse them, or keep up to their high level of spirits, and the vacancy of the look which came over both their faces—the mouth of Algy under his moustache, the eyes of Charlie staring blankly about in search of a sensation—were more than her nerves could bear. And yet she was alarmed beyond measure, feeling her own prestige in question, by the thought that they might never come again.

Papa’s observatory was a terrace on the leads between the two gables where the big telescope stood. Was it a pity, or was it not, that papa was there in his shabby coat sniffing at the ships as they went out to sea? He had an extended prospect on all sides, and he was watching a speck on the horizon with much interest through the glass. “Perhaps you young fellows have got some interest in the shipping like me?” he said. “There, don’t you see the *Hatch* and the *Ho* on the pennant just slipping out of sight? I have a deal of money in that ship. I like to see them pass when it’s one I have an interest in. Put your little peeper here, Stella, you’ll see her yet. They pay very well with proper care. You have to keep your wits about you, but that’s the case with all investments. Want to see any particular ship, eh? I hope you’ve got some money in ’em,” Mr. Tredgold said.

“Oh, papa, take your horrid thing away; you know I never can see anything,” cried Stella. “Now look, now look, Sir Charles! Remember, I back you. The *Jenny* before the world.”

“Miss Tredgold, put a sixpence on me,” said Algy; “don’t let a poor fellow go into the ring unprotected. It’s Howard’s or nobody’s.”

“Betting?” said Mr. Tredgold. “It is not a thing I approve of, but we all do it, I suppose. That little boat, if that is what you’re thinking of, belongs to none of those names. It’s neither the *Jones* nor the *Howard*. It’s the *Stella*, after that little girl of mine, and it’s my boat, and you can take a cruise in it if you like any day when there’s no wind.”

“Oh, papa,” cried Stella, “is it really, really for me?”

“You little minx,” said the old man as she kissed him, “you little fair weather flatterer, always pleased when you get something! I know you, for all you think you keep it up so well. Papa’s expected always to be giving you something—the only use, ain’t it? of an old man. It’s a bit late in the season to buy a boat, but I got it a bargain, a great bargain.”

“Then it was Jones’s,” cried Sir Charles.

“Then Howard was the man,” cried his friend.

“That’s delightful,” cried Stella, clapping her hands. “Do keep it up! I will put all my money on Sir Charles.” And they were so kind that they laughed with her, admiring the skip and dance of excitement which she performed for their pleasure. But when it turned out that Mr. Tredgold did not know from whom he had bought the boat, and that the figure-head had been removed to make room for a lovely wooden lady in white and gold with a star on her forehead, speculation grew more and more lively than ever. It was Stella, in the excitement of that unexpected success, who proposed to run down to the pier to examine into the yacht and see if any solution was possible. “We have a private way,” she cried. “I’ll show you if you’d like to come; and I want to see my yacht, and if the *Stella* on it is like me, and if it is pretty inside, and everything. And, Kate, while we’re gone, you might order tea. Papa, did you say the *Stella* on the figure-head was to be like me?”

“Nothing that is wooden could be like you,” said Sir Charles graciously. It was as if an oracle had spoken. Algy opened his mouth under his moustache with a laugh or gape which made Stella long there and then to repeat Mrs. Seton’s elegant jest. She was almost bold enough in the flush of spirits which Sir Charles’s compliment had called forth.

“I wish Stella would not rush about with those men,” said Katherine, as the noise of their steps died away upon the stairs.

“Jealous, eh?” said her father. “Well, I don’t wonder—and they can’t both have her. One of them might have done the civil by you, Katie—but they’re selfish brutes, you know, are men.”

Katherine perhaps walked too solemnly away in the midst of this unpalatable consolation, and was undutifully irritated by her father’s tin-tinkle of a laugh. She was not jealous, but the feeling perhaps was not much unlike that unlovely sentiment. She declared indignantly to herself that she did not want them to “do the civil” to her, these dull frivolous young men, and that it was in the last degree injurious to her to suggest anything of the sort. It was hopeless to make her father see what was her point of view, or realise her feelings—as hopeless as it was to make Stella perceive how little fit it was that she should woo the favour of these rude strangers. Mrs. Seton might do it with that foolish desire to drag about a train with her, to pose as a conqueror, to—Katherine did not know what words to use. But Stella, a girl! Stella, who was full of real charm, who was fit for so much better things! On the whole, Katherine found it was better to fulfil the homely duties that were hers and give her orders about the tea. It was the part in life that was apportioned to her, and why should she object to it? It might not be the liveliest, but surely it was a more befitting situation than Stella’s rush after novelty, her strain to please. And whom to please? People who sneered at them before their faces and did not take pains to be civil—not even to Stella.

It did her good to go out into the air, to select the spot under the acacia where the tea-table stood so prettily, with its shining white. It was still warm, extraordinary for October. She sat down there gazing out upon the radiance of the sea and sky; the rocky fringe of sand was invisible, and so was the town and harbour which lay at the foot of the cliff; beyond the light fringe of the tamarisk trees which grew there as luxuriantly as in warmer countries there was nothing but the sunny expanse of the water, dazzling under the Western sun, which was by this time low, shining level in the eyes of the solitary gazer. She saw, almost without seeing it, the white sail of a yacht suddenly gleam into the middle of the prospect before her, coming out all at once from the haven under the hill. Someone was going out for a sail, a little late indeed; but what could be more beautiful or tempting than this glorious afternoon! Katherine sighed softly with a half sensation of envy. A little puff of air came over her, blowing about the light acacia foliage overhead, and bringing down a little shower of faintly yellow leaves. The little yacht felt it even more than the acacia did. It seemed to waver a little, then changed its course, following the impulse of the breeze into the open. Katherine wondered indifferently who it could be. The yachting people were mostly gone from the neighbourhood. They were off on their longer voyages, or they had laid up their boats for the season. And there had begun to grow a windy look, such as dwellers by the sea soon learn to recognise about the sky. Katherine wished calmly to herself in her ignorance of who these people were that they might not go too far.

She was sitting thus musing and wondering a little that Stella and her cavaliers did not come back for tea, when the sound of her father’s stick from the porch of the house startled her, and a loud discussion with somebody which he seemed to be carrying on within. He came out presently, limping along with his stick and with a great air of excitement. “I said they were only to go when there was no wind. Didn’t you hear me, Katie? When there was no wind—I said it as plain as anything. And look at that; look at that!” He was stammering with excitement, and could scarcely keep his standing in his unusual excitement.

“What is the matter, papa? Look at what? Oh, the boat. But we have nothing to do with any boat,” she cried. “Why should you disturb yourself? The people can surely take care of—Papa! what is it?”

He had sunk into a chair, one of those set ready on the grass for Stella and her friends, and was growing purple in the face and panting for breath. “You fool! you fool! Stella,” he cried, “Stella, my little girl. Oh, I’ll be even with those young fools when I catch them. They want to drown her. They want to run away with her. Stella! my little girl!”

Katherine had awakened to the fact before these interrupted words were half uttered. And naturally what she did was perfectly unreasonable. She rushed to the edge of the cliff, waving aloft the white parasol in her hand, beckoning wildly, and crying, "Come back, come back!" She called all the servants, the gardener and his man, the footmen who were looking out alarmed from the porch. "Go, go," she cried, stamping her foot, "and bring them back; go and bring them back!" There was much rushing and running, and one at least of the men flung himself helter-skelter down the steep stair that led to the beach, while the gardeners stood gazing from the cliff. Katherine clapped her hands in her excitement, giving wild orders. "Go! go! don't stand there as if nothing could be done; go and bring them back!"

"Not to contradict you, Miss Katherine—" the gardener began.

"Oh, don't speak to me—don't stand talking—go, go, and bring them back."

Mr. Tredgold had recovered his breath a little. "Let us think," he said—"let us think, and don't talk nonsense, Kate. There's a breeze blowing up, and where will it drive them to, gardener? Man, can't you tell where it'll drive them to? Round by the Needles, I shouldn't wonder, the dangerousest coast. Oh, my little girl, my little girl! Shall I ever see her again? And me that said they were never to go out but when there was no wind."

"Not to the Needles, sir—not to the Needles when there's a westerly breeze. More likely round the cliffs Bembridge way; and who can stop 'em when they're once out? It's only a little cruise; let 'em alone and they'll come home, with their tails be'ind them, as the rhyme says."

"And I said they were only to go out if there was no wind, gardener!" The old gentleman was almost weeping with alarm and anxiety, but yet he was comforted by what the man said.

"They are going the contrary way," cried Katherine.

"Bless you, miss, that's tacking, to catch the breeze. They couldn't go far, sir, could they? without no wind."

"And that's just what I wanted, that they should not go far—just a little about in the bay to please her. Oh, my little girl! She will be dead with fright; she will catch her death of cold, she will."

"Not a bit, sir," cried the gardener. "Miss Stella's a very plucky one. She'll enjoy the run, she'll enjoy the danger."

"The danger!" cried father and sister together.

"What a fool I am! There ain't none, no more than if they was in a duck pond," the gardener said.

And, indeed, to see the white sail flying in the sunshine over the blue sea, there did not seem much appearance of danger. With his first apprehensions quieted down, Mr. Tredgold stumbled with the help of his daughter's arm to the edge of the cliff within the feathery line of the tamarisk trees, attended closely by the gardener, who, as an islander born, was supposed to know something of the sea. The hearts of the anxious gazers fluctuated as the little yacht danced over the water, going down when she made a little lurch and curtsy before the breeze, and up when she went steadily by the wind, making one of those long tacks which the gardener explained were all made, though they seemed to lead the little craft so far away, with the object of getting back.

"Them two young gentlemen, they knows what they're about," the gardener said.

"And there's a sailor-man on board," said Mr. Tredgold—"a man that knows everything about it, one of the crew whose business it is—"

"I don't see no third man," said the gardener doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, yes, there's a sailor-man," cried the father. The old gentleman spoke with a kind of sob in his throat; he was ready to cry with weakness and trouble and exasperation, as the little vessel, instead of replying to the cries and wailings of his anxiety by coming right home as seemed to him the simplest way, went on tacking and turning, sailing further and further off, then heeling over as if she would go down, then fluttering with an empty sail that hung about the mast before she struck off in another direction, but never turning back. "They are taking her off to America!" he cried, half weeping, leaning heavily on Katherine's arm.

“They’re tacking, sir, tacking, to bring her in,” said the gardener.

“Oh, don’t speak to me!” cried the unhappy father; “they are carrying her off to America. Who was it said there was nothing between this and America, Katie? Oh, my little girl! my little girl!”

And it may be partly imagined what were the feelings of those inexperienced and anxious people when the early October evening began to fall, and the blue sky to be covered with clouds flying, gathering, and dispersing before a freshening westerly gale.

CHAPTER V

I will not enter in detail into the feelings of the father and sister on this alarming and dreadful night. No tragedy followed, the reader will feel well assured, or this history would never have been written. But the wind rose till it blew what the sailors called half a gale. It seemed to Katherine a hurricane—a horrible tempest, in which no such slender craft as that in which Stella had gone forth had a chance for life; and indeed the men on the pier with their conjectures as to what might have happened were not encouraging. She might have fetched Ventnor or one of those places by a long tack. She might have been driven out to the Needles. She mightn't know her way with those gentlemen only as was famous sailors with a fair wind, but not used to dirty weather. Katherine spent all the night on the pier gazing out upon the waste of water now and then lighted up by a fitful moon. What a change—what a change from the golden afternoon! And what a difference from her own thoughts!—a little grudging of Stella's all-success, a little wounded to feel herself always in the shade, and the horrible suggestion of Stella's loss, the dread that overwhelmed her imagination and took all her courage from her. She stood on the end of the pier, with the wind—that wind which had driven Stella forth out of sound and sight—blowing her about, wrapping her skirts round her, loosing her hair, making her hold tight to the rail lest she should be blown away. Why should she hold tight? What did it matter, if Stella were gone, whether she kept her footing or not? She could never take Stella's place with anyone. Her father would grudge her very existence that could not be sacrificed to save Stella. Already he had begun to reproach her. Why did you let her go? What is the use of an elder sister to a girl if she doesn't interfere in such a case? And three years older, that ought to have been a mother to her.

Thus Mr. Tredgold had babbled in his misery before he was persuaded to lie down to await news which nothing that could be done would make any quicker. He had clamoured to send out boats—any number—after Stella. He had insisted upon hiring a steamer to go out in quest of her; but telegrams had to be sent far and wide and frantic messengers to Ryde—even to Portsmouth—before he could get what he wanted. And in the meantime the night had fallen, the wind had risen, and out of that blackness and those dashing waves, which could be heard without being seen, there came no sign of the boat. Never had such a night passed over the peaceful place. There had been sailors and fishermen in danger many a time, and distracted women on the pier; but what was that to the agony of a millionaire who had been accustomed to do everything with his wealth, and now raged and foamed at the mouth because he could do nothing? What was all his wealth to him? He was as powerless as the poor mother of that sailor-boy who was lost (there were so many, so many of them), and who had not a shilling in the world. Not a shilling in the world! It was exactly as if Mr. Tredgold had come to that. What could he do with all his thousands? Oh, send out a tug from Portsmouth, send out the fastest ferry-boat from Ryde, send out the whole fleet—fishing cibles, pleasure boats—everything that was in Sliplin Harbour! Send everything, everything that had a sail or an oar, not to say a steam engine. A hundred pounds, a thousand pounds—anything to the man who would bring Stella back!

The little harbour was in wild commotion with all these offers. There were not many boats, but they were all preparing; the men clattering down the rolling shingle, with women after them calling to them to take care, or not to go out in the teeth of the gale. "If you're lost too what good will that do?" they shrieked in the wind, their hair flying like Katherine's, but not so speechless as she was. The darkness, the flaring feeble lights, the stir and noise on the shore, with these shrieking voices breaking in, made a sort of Pandemonium unseen, taking double horror from the fact that it was almost all sound and sensation, made visible occasionally by the gleam of the moon between the flying clouds. Mr. Tredgold's house on the cliff blazed with lights from every window, and a great pan of fire wildly blazing, sending up great shadows of black smoke, was lit on the end of the pier—everything that could be done to guide them back, to indicate the way. Nothing of that sort was

done when the fishermen were battling for their lives. But what did it all matter, what was the good of it all? Millionaire and pauper stood on the same level, hopeless, tearing their hair, praying their hearts out, on the blind margin of that wild invisible sea.

There was a horrible warning of dawn in the blackness when Stella, soaked to the skin, her hair lashing about her unconscious face like whips, and far more dead than alive, was at last carried home. I believe there were great controversies afterwards between the steam-tug and the fishing boats which claimed to have saved her—controversies which might have been spared, since Mr. Tredgold paid neither, fortified by the statement of the yachtsmen that neither had been of any use, and that the *Stella* had at last blundered her way back of her own accord and their superior management. He had to pay for the tug, which put forth by his orders, but only as much as was barely necessary, with no such gratuity as the men had hoped for; while to the fishers he would give nothing, and Katherine's allowance was all expended for six months in advance in recompensing these clamorous rescuers who had not succeeded in rescuing anyone.

Stella was very ill for a few days; when she recovered the wetting and the cold, then she was ill of the imagination, recalling more clearly than at first all the horrors which she had passed through. As soon as she was well enough to recover the use of her tongue she did nothing but talk of this tremendous experience in her life, growing proud of it as she got a little way beyond it and saw the thrilling character of the episode in full proportion. At first she would faint away, or rather, almost faint away (between two which things there is an immense difference), as she recalled the incidents of that night. But after a while they became her favourite and most delightful subjects of conversation. She entertained all her friends with the account of her adventure as she lay pale, with her pretty hair streaming over her pillow, not yet allowed to get up after all she had gone through, but able to receive her habitual visitors.

"The feeling that came over me when it got dark, oh! I can't describe what it was," said Stella. "I thought it was a shadow at first. The sail throws such a shadow sometimes; it's like a great bird settling down with its big wing. But when it came down all round and one saw it wasn't a shadow, but darkness—night!—oh, how horrible it was! I thought I should have died, out there on the great waves and the water dashing into the boat, and the cliffs growing fainter and fainter, and the horrible, horrible dark!"

"Stella dear, don't excite yourself again. It is all over, God be praised."

"Yes, it's all over. It is easy for you people to speak who have never been lost at sea. It will never be over for me. If I were to live to be a hundred I should feel it all the same. The hauling up and the hauling down of that dreadful sail, carrying us right away out into the sea when we wanted to get home, and then flopping down all in a moment, while we rocked and pitched till I felt I must be pitched out. Oh, how I implored them to go back! 'Just turn back!' I cried. 'Why don't you turn back? We are always going further and further, instead of nearer. And oh! what will papa say and Katherine?' They laughed at first, and told me they were tacking, and I begged them, for Heaven's sake, not to tack, but to run home. But they would not listen to me. Oh, they are all very nice and do what you like when it doesn't matter; but when it's risking your life, and you hate them and are miserable and can't help yourself, then they take their own way."

"But they couldn't help it either," cried Evelyn, the rector's daughter. "They had to tack; they could not run home when the wind was against them."

"What do I care about the wind?" cried Stella. "They should not have made me go out if there was a wind. Papa said we were never to go out in a wind. I told them so. I said, 'You ought not to have brought me out.' They said it was nothing to speak of. I wonder what it is when it is something to speak of! And then we shipped a sea, as they called it, and I got drenched to the very skin. Oh, I don't say they were not kind. They took off their coats and put round me, but what did that do for me? I was chilled to the very bone. Oh, you can't think how dreadful it is to lie and see those sails swaying and to hear the men moving about and saying dreadful things to each other, and the boat

moving up and down. Oh!” cried Stella, clasping her hands together and looking as if once more she was about almost to faint away.

“Stella, spare yourself, dear. Try to forget it; try to think of something else. It is too much for you when you dwell on it,” Katherine said.

“Dwell on it!” cried Stella, reviving instantly. “It is very clear that *you* never were in danger of your life, Kate.”

“I was in danger of *your* life,” cried Katherine, “and I think that was worse. Oh, I could tell you a story, too, of that night on the pier, looking out on the blackness, and thinking every moment—but don’t let us think of it, it is too much. Thank God, it is all over, and you are quite safe now.”

“It is very different standing upon the pier, and no doubt saying to yourself what a fool Stella was to go out; she just deserves it all for making papa so unhappy, and keeping me out of bed. Oh, I know that was what you were thinking! and being like me with only a plank between me and—don’t you know? The one is very, very different from the other, I can tell you,” Stella said, with a little flush on her cheek.

And the Stanley girls who were her audience agreed with her, with a strong sense that to be the heroine of such an adventure was, after all, when it was over, one of the most delightful things in the world. Her father also agreed with her, who came stumping with his stick up the stairs, his own room being below, and took no greater delight than to sit by her bedside and hear her go over the story again and again.

“I’ll sell that little beast of a boat. I’ll have her broken up for firewood. To think I should have paid such a lot of money for her, and her nearly to drown my little girl!”

“Oh, don’t do that, papa,” said Stella; “when it’s quite safe and there is no wind I should like perhaps to go out in her again, just to see. But to be sure there was no wind when we went out—just a very little, just enough to fill the sail, they said; but you can never trust to a wind. I said I shouldn’t go, only just for ten minutes to try how I liked it; and then that horrid gale came on to blow, and they began to tack, as they call it. Such nonsense that tacking, papa! when they began it I said, ‘Why, we’re going further off than ever; what I want is to get home.’”

“They paid no attention, I suppose—they thought they knew better,” said Mr. Tredgold.

“They always think they know better,” cried Stella, with indignation. “And oh, when it came on to be dark, and the wind always rising, and the water coming in, in buckets full! Were you ever at sea in a storm, papa?”

“Never, my pet,” said Mr. Tredgold, “trust me for that. I never let myself go off firm land, except sometimes in a penny steamboat, that’s dangerous enough. Sometimes the boilers blow up, or you run into some other boat; but on the sea, not if I know it, Stella.”

“But I have,” said the girl. “A steamboat! within the two banks of a river! You know nothing, nothing about it, neither does Katherine. Some sailors, I believe, might go voyages for years and never see anything so bad as that night. Why, the waves were mountains high, and then you seemed to slide down to the bottom as if you were going—oh! hold me, hold me, papa, or I shall feel as if I were going again.”

“Poor little Stella,” said Mr. Tredgold, “poor little girl! What a thing for her to go through, so early in life! But I’d like to do something to those men. I’d like to punish them for taking advantage of a child like that, all to get hold of my new boat, and show how clever they were with their tacking and all that. Confound their tacking! If it hadn’t been for their tacking she might have got back to dinner and saved us such a miserable night.”

“What was your miserable night in comparison to mine?” cried Stella, scornfully. “I believe you both think it was as bad as being out at sea, only because you did not get your dinner at the proper time and were kept longer than usual out of bed.”

“We must not forget,” said Katherine, “that after all, though they might be to blame in going out, these gentlemen saved her life.”

“I don’t know about that,” said the old man. “I believe it was my tug that saved her life. It was they that put her life in danger, if you please. I’d like just to break them in the army, or sell them up, or something; idle fellows doing nothing, strolling about to see what mischief they can find to do.”

“Oh, they are very nice,” said Stella. “You shan’t do anything to them, papa. I am great chums with Charlie and Algy; they are such nice boys, really, when you come to know them; they took off their coats to keep me warm. I should have had inflammation of the lungs or something if I had not had their coats. I was shivering so.”

“And do you know,” said Katherine, “one of them is ill, as Stella perhaps might have been if he had not taken off his coat.”

“Oh, which is that?” cried Stella; “oh, do find out which is that? It must be Algy, I think. Algy is the delicate one. He never is good for much—he gives in, you know, so soon. He is so weedy, long, and thin, and no stamina, that is what the others say.”

“And is that all the pity you have for him, Stella? when it was to save you—”

“It was not to save me,” cried Stella, raising herself in her bed with flushed cheeks, “it was to save himself! If I hadn’t been saved where would they have been? They would have gone to the bottom too. Oh, I can’t see that I’m so much obliged to them as all that! What they did they did for themselves far more than for me. We were all in the same boat, and if I had been drowned they would have been drowned too. I hope, though,” she said, more amiably, “that Algy will get better if it’s he that is ill. And it must be he. Charlie is as strong as a horse. He never feels anything. Papa, I hope you will send him grapes and things. I shall go and see him as soon as I am well.”

“You go and see a young fellow—in his room! You shall do nothing of the sort, Stella. Things may be changed from my time, and I suppose they are, but for a girl to go and visit a young fellow—in his—”

Stella smiled a disdainful and amused smile as she lay back on her pillow. “You may be sure, papa,” she said, “that I certainly shall. I will go and nurse him, unless he has someone already. I ought to nurse the man who helped to save my life.”

“You are a little self-willed, wrong-headed—Katherine, you had better take care. I will make you answer for it if she does anything so silly—a chit of a girl! I’ll speak to Dr. Dobson. I’ll send to—to the War Office. I’ll have him carted away.”

“Is poor Algy here, Kate? Where is he—at the hotel? Oh, you dreadful hard-hearted people to let him go to the hotel when you knew he had saved my life. Papa, go away, and let me get dressed. I must find out how he is. I must go to him, poor fellow. Perhaps the sight of me and to see that I am better will do him good. Go away, please, papa.”

“I’ll not budge a step,” cried the old gentleman. “Katie, Katie, she’ll work herself into a fever. She’ll make herself ill, and then what shall we do?”

“I’m very ill already,” said Stella, with a cough. “I am being thrust into my grave. Let them bring us together—poor, poor Algy and me. Oh, if we are both to be victims, let it be so! We will take each other’s hands and go down—go down together to the—”

“Oh, Katie, can’t you stop her?” cried the father.

Stella was sobbing with delicious despair over the thought of the two delightful, dreadful funerals, and all the world weeping over her untimely fate.

Stella recovered rapidly when her father was put to the door. She said with a pretty childish reverberation of her sob: “For you know, Kate, it never was he—that would be the poignant thing, wouldn’t it?—it was not he that I ever would have chosen. But to be united in—in a common fate, with two graves together, don’t you know, and an inscription, and people saying, ‘Both so young!’” She paused to dry her eyes, and then she laughed. “There is nothing in him, don’t you know; it was Charlie that did all the work. He was nearly as frightened as I was. Oh, I don’t think anything much of Algy, but I shall go to see him all the same—if it were only to shock papa.”

“You had better get well yourself in the meantime,” said Katherine.

“Oh, you cold, cold—toad! What do you care? It would have been better for you if I had been drowned, Kate. Then you would have been the only daughter and the first in the house, but now, you know, it’s Stella again—always Stella. Papa is an unjust old man and makes favourites; but you need not think, however bad I am, and however good you are, that you will ever cure him of that.”

CHAPTER VI

When Stella was first able to appear out of the shelter of her father's grounds for a walk, she was the object of a sort of ovation—as much of an ovation as it is possible to make in such a place. She was leaning on her sister's arm and was supported on the other side by a stick, as it was only right a girl should be who had gone through so much. And she was very prettily pale, and looked more interesting than words could say, leaning heavily (if anything about Stella could be called heavy) upon Katherine, and wielding her stick with a charming air of finding it too much for her, yet at the same time finding it indispensable. There was nobody in the place who did not feel the attraction of sympathy, and the charm of the young creature who had been rescued from the very jaws of death and restored to the family that adored her. To think what might have been!—the old man broken-hearted and Katherine in deep mourning going and coming all alone, and perhaps not even a grave for the unfortunate Stella—lost at sea! Some of the ladies who thronged about her, stopping her to kiss her and express the depths of sympathetic anguish through which they had gone, declared that to think of it made them shudder. Thank Heaven that everything had ended so well! Stella took all these expressions of sympathy very sweetly. She liked to be the chief person, to awaken so much emotion, to be surrounded by so many flatteries. She felt, indeed, that she, always an interesting person, had advanced greatly in the scale of human consideration. She was more important by far since she had “gone through” that experience. They had been so near to losing her; everybody felt now fully what it was to have her. The rector had returned thanks publicly in church, and every common person about the streets curtsied or touched his hat with a deeper sentiment. To think that perhaps she might have been drowned—she, so young, so fair, so largely endowed with everything that heart could desire! If her neighbours were moved by this sentiment, Stella herself was still more deeply moved by it. She felt to the depths of her heart what a thing it was for all these people that she should have been saved from the sea.

Public opinion was still more moved when it was known where Stella was going when she first set foot outside the gates—to inquire after the rash young man who, popular opinion now believed, had beguiled her into danger. How good, how sweet, how forgiving of her! Unless, indeed, there was something—something between them, as people say. This added a new interest to the situation. The world of Sliplin had very much blamed the young men. It had thought them inexcusable from every point of view. To have taken an inexperienced girl out, who knew nothing about yachting, just when that gale was rising! It was intolerable and not to be forgiven. This judgment was modified by the illness of Captain Scott, who, everybody now found, was delicate, and ought not to have exposed himself to the perils of such an expedition. It must have been the other who was to blame, but then the other conciliated everybody by his devotion to his friend. And the community was in a very soft and amiable mood altogether when Stella was seen to issue forth from her father's gates leaning on Katherine at one side and her stick on the other, to ask for news of her fellow-sufferer. This mood rose to enthusiasm at the sight of her paleness and at the suggestion that there probably was something between Stella and Captain Scott. It was supposed at first that he was an honourable, and a great many peerages fluttered forth. It was a disappointment to find that he was not so; but at least his father was a baronet, and himself an officer in a crack regiment, and he had been in danger of his life. All these circumstances were of an interesting kind.

Stella, however, did not carry out this tender purpose at once. When she actually visited the hotel and made her way upstairs into Captain Scott's room her own convalescence was complete, and the other invalid was getting well, and there was not only Katherine in attendance upon her, but Sir Charles, who was now commonly seen with her in her walks, and about whom Sliplin began to be divided in its mind whether it was he and not the sick man between whom and Stella there was something. He was certainly very devoted, people said, but then most men were devoted to Stella.

Captain Scott had been prepared for the visit, and was eager for it, notwithstanding the disapproval of the nurse, who stood apart by the window and looked daggers at the young ladies, or at least at Stella, who took the chief place by the patient's bedside and began to chatter to him, trying her best to get into the right tone, the tone of Mrs. Seton, and make the young man laugh. Katherine, who was not "in it," drew aside to conciliate the attendant a little.

"I don't hold with visits when a young man is so weak," said the nurse. "Do you know, miss, that his life just hung on a thread, so to speak? We were on the point of telegraphing for his people, me and the doctor; and he is very weak still."

"My sister will only stay a few minutes," said Katherine. "You know she was with them in the boat and escaped with her life too."

"Oh, I can see, miss, as there was no danger of her life," said the nurse, indignant. "Look at her colour! I am not thinking anything of the boat. A nasty night at sea is a nasty thing, but nothing for them that can stand it. But he couldn't stand it; that's all the difference. The young lady may thank her stars as she hasn't his death at her door."

"It was her life that those rash young men risked by their folly," said Katherine, indignant in her turn.

"Oh, no," cried the nurse. "I know better than that. When he was off his head he was always going over it. 'Don't, Charlie, don't give in; there's wind in the sky. Don't give in to her. What does she know?' That was what he was always a-saying. And there she sits as bold as brass, that is the cause."

"You take a great liberty to say so," said Katherine, returning to her sister's side.

Stella was now in full career.

"Oh, do you remember the first puff—how it made us all start? How we laughed at him for looking always at the sky! Don't you remember, Captain Scott, I kept asking you what you were looking for in the sky, and you kept shaking your head?"

Here Stella began shaking her head from side to side and laughing loudly—a laugh echoed by the two young men, but faintly by the invalid, who shook his head too.

"Yes, I saw the wind was coming," he said. "We ought not to have given in to you, Miss Stella. It doesn't matter now it's all over, but it wasn't nice while it lasted, was it?"

"Speak for yourself, Algy," said Sir Charles. "You were never made for a sailor. Miss Stella is game for another voyage to-morrow."

"Oh, if you like," cried Stella, "with a good man. I shall bargain for a good man—that can manage sails and all that. What is the fun of going out when the men with you won't sit by you and enjoy it. And all that silly tacking and nonsense—there should have been someone to do it, and you two should have sat by me."

They both laughed at this and looked at each other. "The fun is in the sailing—for us, don't you know," said Sir Charles. It was not necessary in their society even to pretend to another motive. Curiously enough, though Stella desired to ape that freedom, she was not—perhaps no woman is—delivered from the desire to believe that the motive was herself, to give her pleasure. She did not even now understand why her fellow-sufferers should not acknowledge this as the cause of their daring trip.

"Papa wants to thank you," she said, "for saving my life; but that's absurd, ain't it, for you were saving your own. If you had let me drown, you would have drowned too."

"I don't know. You were a bit in our way," said Sir Charles. "We'd have got on better without you, we should, by George! You were an awful responsibility, Miss Stella. I shouldn't have liked to have faced Lady Scott if Algy had kicked the bucket; and how I should have faced your father if you—"

"If that was all you thought of, I shall never, never go out with you again," cried Stella with an angry flush. But she could not make up her mind to throw over her two companions for so little. "It was jolly at first, wasn't it?" she said, after a pause, "until Al—Captain Scott began to look up to the sky, and open his mouth for something to fall in."

But they did not laugh at this, though Mrs. Seton's similar witticism had brought on fits of laughter. Captain Scott swore "By George!" softly under his breath; Sir Charles whistled—a very little, but he did whistle, at which sound Stella rose angry from her seat.

"You don't seem to care much for my visit," she cried, "though it tired me very much to come. Oh, I know now what is meant by fair-weather friends. We were to be such chums. You were to do anything for me; and now, because it came on to blow—which was not my fault—"

Here Stella's voice shook, and she was very near bursting into tears.

"Don't say that, Miss Stella; it's awfully jolly to see you, and it's dreadful dull lying here."

"And weren't all the old cats shocked!" cried Sir Charles. "Oh, fie!" putting up his hands to his eyes, "to find you had been out half the night along with Algy and me."

"I have not seen any old cats yet," said Stella, recovering her temper, "only the young kittens, and they thought it a most terrible adventure—like something in a book. You don't seem to think anything of that, you boys; you are all full of Captain Scott's illness, as if that dreadful, dreadful sail was nothing, except just the way he caught cold. How funny that is! Now I don't mind anything about catching cold or being in bed for a week; but the terrible sea, and the wind, and the dark—these are what I never can get out of my mind."

"You see you were in no danger to speak of; but Algy was, poor fellow. He is only just clear of it now."

"I only got up for the first time a week ago," said Stella, aggrieved; but she did not pursue the subject. "Mrs. Seton is coming across to see us—both the invalids, she says; and perhaps she is one of the old cats, for she says she is coming to scold me as well as to pet me. I don't know what there is to scold about, unless perhaps she would have liked better to go out with you herself."

"That is just like Lottie Seton," they both said, and laughed as Stella's efforts never made them laugh. Why should they laugh at her very name when all the poor little girl could do in that way left them unmoved?

"She's a perfect dragon of virtue, don't you know?" said Algy, opening his wide mouth.

"And won't she give it to the little 'un!" said Sir Charles, with another outburst.

"I should like to know who is meant by the little 'un; and what it is she can give," said Stella with offence.

They both laughed again, looking at each other. "She's as jealous as the devil, don't you know?" and "Lottie likes to keep all the good things to herself," they said.

Stella was partly mollified to think that Mrs. Seton was jealous. It was a feather in her little cap. "I don't know if you think that sail was a good thing," she said. "She might have had it for me. It is a pity that she left so soon. You always seem to be much happier when you have her near."

"She's such fun, she's not a bad sort. She keeps fellows going," the young men replied.

"Well then," said Stella, getting up quickly, "you'll be amused, for she is coming. I brought you some grapes and things. I don't know if you'll find them amusing. Kate, I think I'm very tired. Coming out so soon has thrown me back again. And these gentlemen don't want any visits from us, I feel sure."

"Don't say that, Miss Stella," cried Sir Charles. "Algy's a dull beggar, that's the truth. He won't say what he thinks; but I hope you know me. Here, you must have my arm downstairs. You don't know the dark corners as I do. Algy, you dumb dog, say a word to the pretty lady that has brought you all these nice things. He means it all, Miss Stella, but he's tongue-tied."

"His mouth is open enough," said Stella as she turned away.

"Choke full of grapes, and that is the truth," said his friend. "And he's been very bad really, don't you know? Quite near making an end of it. That takes the starch out of a man, and just for a bit of fun. It wasn't his fun, don't you know? it was you and I that enjoyed it," Sir Charles said, pressing his companion's hand. Yes, she felt it was he whom she liked best, not Algy with his mouth full of grapes. His open mouth was always a thing to laugh at, but it is dreary work laughing alone. Sir Charles, on the other hand, was a handsome fellow, and he had always paid a great deal more

attention to Stella than his friend. She went down the stairs leaning on his arm, Katherine following after a word of farewell to the invalid. The elder sister begged the young man to send to the Cliff for anything he wanted, and to come as soon as he was able to move, for a change. "Papa bade me say how glad we should be to have you."

Algy gaped at Katherine, who was supposed to be a sort of incipient old maid and no fun at all, with eyes and mouth wide. "Oh, thanks!" he said. He could not master this new idea. She had been always supposed to be elderly and plain, whereas it appeared in reality that she was just as pretty as the other one. He had to be left in silence to assimilate this new thought.

"Mind you tell me every word Lottie Seton says. She *is* fun when she is proper, and she just can be proper to make your hair stand on end. Now remember, Miss Stella, that's a bargain. You are to tell me every word she says."

"I shall do nothing of the sort; you must think much of her indeed when you want to hear every word. I wonder you didn't go after her if you thought so much of her as that."

"Oh, yes, she's very amusing," said Sir Charles. "She doesn't always mean to be, bless you, but when she goes in for the right and proper thing! Mrs. Grundy is not in it, by Jove! She'll come to the hotel and go on at Algy; but it's with you that the fun will be. I should like to borrow the servant's clothes and get in a corner somewhere to hear. Lottie never minds what she says before servants. It is as if they were cabbages, don't you know?"

"You seem to know a great deal about Mrs. Seton, Sir Charles," said Stella severely; but he did not disown this or hesitate as Stella expected. He said, "Yes, by Jove," simply into his big moustache, meaning Stella did not know what of good or evil. She allowed him to put her into the carriage which was waiting without further remark. Stella began to feel that it was by no means plain sailing with these young soldiers. Perhaps they were not so silly with her as with Mrs. Seton, perhaps Stella was not so clever; and certainly she did not take the lead with them at all.

"I think they are rude," said Katherine; "probably they don't mean any harm. I don't think they mean any harm. They are spoiled and allowed to say whatever they like, and to have very rude things said to them. Your Mrs. Seton, for instance—"

"Oh, don't say my Mrs. Seton," said Stella. "I hate Mrs. Seton. I wish we had never known her. She is not one of our kind of people at all."

"But you would not have known these gentlemen whom you like but for Mrs. Seton, Stella."

"How dare you say gentlemen whom I like? as if it was something wrong! They are only boys to play about," Stella said.

Which, indeed, was not at all a bad description of the sort of sentiment which fills many girlish minds with an inclination that is often very wrongly defined. Boys to play about is a thing which every one likes. It implies nothing perhaps, it means the most superficial of sentiments. It is to be hoped that it was only as boys to play about that Mrs. Seton herself took an interest in these young men. But her promise of a visit and a scold was perplexing to Stella. What was she to be scolded about, she whom neither her father nor sister had scolded, though she had given them such a night! And what a night she had given herself—terror, misery, and cold, a cold, perhaps, quite as bad as Algy Scott's, only borne by her with so much more courage! This was what Stella was thinking as she drove home. It was a ruddy October afternoon, very delightful in the sunshine, a little chilly out of it, and it was pleasant to be out again after her week's imprisonment, and to look across that glittering sea and feel what an experience she had gained. Now she knew the other side of it, and had a right to shudder and tell her awe-inspiring story whenever she pleased. "Oh, doesn't it look lovely, as if it could not harm anyone, but I could tell you another tale!" This was a possession which never could be taken from her, whoever might scold, or whoever complain.

CHAPTER VII

“I only wonder to find you holding up your head at all. Your people must be very silly people, and no mistake. What, to spend a whole night out in the bay with Charlie Somers and Algy Scott, and then to ask me what you have done? Do you know what sort of character these boys have got? They are nice boys, and I don’t care about their morals, don’t you know? as long as they’re amusing. But then I’ve my husband always by me. Tom would no more leave me with those men by myself—though they’re all well enough with anyone that knows how to keep them in order; but a young girl like you—it will need all that your friends can do to stand by you and to whitewash you, Stella. Tom didn’t want me to come. ‘You keep out of it. She has got people of her own,’ he said; but I felt I must. And then, after all that, you lift up your little nozzle and ask what you have done!”

Stella sat up, very white, in the big easy-chair where she had been resting when Mrs. Seton marched in. The little girl was so entirely overwhelmed by the sudden downfall of all her pretensions to be a heroine that after the first minute of defiance her courage was completely cowed, and she could not find a word to say for herself. She was a very foolish girl carried away by her spirits, by her false conception of what was smart and amusing to do, and by the imperiousness natural to her position as a spoilt child whose every caprice was yielded to. But there was no harm, only folly, in poor little Stella’s thoughts. She liked the company of the young men and the *éclat* which their attendance gave her. To drag about a couple of officers in her train was delightful to her. But further than that her innocent imagination did not go. Her wild adventure in the yacht had never presented itself to her as anything to be ashamed of, and Mrs. Seton’s horrible suggestion filled her with a consternation for which there was no words. And it gave her a special wound that it should be Mrs. Seton who said it, she who had first introduced her to the noisy whirl of a “set” with which by nature she had nothing to do.

“It was all an accident,” Stella murmured at last; “everybody knows it was an accident. I meant to go—for ten minutes—just to try—and then the wind got up. Do you think I wanted to be drowned—to risk my life, to be so ill and frightened to death? Oh!” the poor little girl cried, with that vivid realisation of her own distress which is perhaps the most poignant sentiment in the world—especially when it is unappreciated by others. Mrs. Seton tossed her head; she was implacable. No feature of the adventure moved her except to wrath.

“Everybody knows what these accidents mean,” she said, “and as for your life it was in no more danger than it is here. Charlie Somers knows the bay like the palm of his hand. He is one of the best sailors going. I confess I don’t understand what *he* did it for. Those boys will do anything for fun; but it wasn’t very great fun, I should think—unless it was the lark of the thing, just under your father’s windows and so forth. I do think, Stella, you’ve committed yourself dreadfully, and I shouldn’t wonder if you never got the better of it. *I* should never have held up my head again if it had been me.”

They were seated in the pretty morning-room opening upon the garden, which was the favourite room of the two girls. The window was open to admit the sunshine of a brilliant noon, but a brisk fire was burning, for the afternoons were beginning to grow cold, when the sunshine was no longer there, with the large breath of the sea. Mrs. Seton had arrived by an early train to visit her friends, and had just come from Algy’s sick bed to carry fire and flame into the convalescence of Stella. Her injured virtue, her high propriety, shocked by such proceedings as had been thus brought under her notice, were indescribable. She had given the girl a careless kiss with an air of protest against that very unmeaning endearment, when she came in, and this was how, without any warning, she had assailed the little heroine. Stella’s courage was not at all equal to the encounter. She had held her own with difficulty before the indifference of the young men. She could not bear up at all under the unlooked-for attack of her friend.

“Oh, how cruel you are!—how unkind you are!—how dreadful of you to say such things!” she cried. “As if I was merely sport for them like a—like any sort of girl; a lark!—under my father’s

windows—” It was too much for Stella. She began to cry in spite of herself, in spite of her pride, which was not equal to this strain.

Katherine had come in unperceived while the conversation was going on.

“I cannot have my sister spoken to so,” she said. “It is quite false in the first place, and she is weak and nervous and not able to bear such suggestions. If you have anything to say against Stella’s conduct it will be better to say it to my father, or to me. If anybody was to blame, it was your friends who were to blame. They knew what they were about and Stella did not. They must be ignorant indeed if they looked upon her as they would do upon”—Katherine stopped herself hurriedly—“upon a person of experience—an older woman.”

“Upon me, you mean!” cried Mrs. Seton. “I am obliged to you, Miss Tredgold! Oh, yes! I have got some experience and so has she, if flirting through a couple of seasons can give it. Two seasons!—more than that. I am sure I have seen her at the Cowes ball I don’t know how many times! And then to pretend she doesn’t know what men are, and what people will say of such an escapade as that! Why, goodness, everybody knows what people say; they will talk for a nothing at all, for a few visits you may have from a friend, and nothing in it but just to pass the time. And then to think she can be out a whole night with a couple of men in a boat, and nothing said! Do you mean to say that you, who are old enough, I am sure, for anything—”

“Katherine is not much older than I am,” cried Stella, drying her tears. “Katherine is twenty-three—Katherine is—”

“Oh, I’m sure, quite a perfect person! though you don’t always think so, Stella; and twenty-three’s quite a nice age, that you can stand at for ever so long. And you are a couple of very impudent girls to face it out to me so, who have come all this way for your good, just to warn you. Oh, if you don’t know what people say, I do! I have had it hot all round for far more innocent things; but I’ve got Tom always to stand by me. Who’s going to stand by you when it gets told all about how you went out with Charlie Somers and Algy Scott all by yourself in a boat, and didn’t come back till morning? You think perhaps it won’t be known? Why, it’s half over the country already; the men are all laughing about it in their clubs; they are saying which of ’em was it who played gooseberry? They aren’t the sort of men to play gooseberry, neither Algy nor Charlie. The old father will have to come down strong—”

Poor Stella looked up at her sister with distracted eyes. “Oh, Kate, what does she mean? What does she mean?” she cried.

“We don’t want to know what she means,” cried Katherine, putting her arms round her sister. “She speaks her own language, not one that we understand. Stella, Stella dear, don’t take any notice. What are the men in the clubs to you?”

“I’d like to know,” said Mrs. Seton with a laugh, “which of us can afford to think like that of the men in the clubs. Why, it’s there that everything comes from. A good joke or a good story, that’s what they live by—they tell each other everything! Who would care to have them, or who would ask them out, and stand their impudence if they hadn’t always the very last bit of gossip at their fingers’ ends? And this is such a delicious story, don’t you know? Charlie Somers and Algy Scott off in a little pleasure yacht with a millionaire’s daughter, and kept her out all night, by Jove, in a gale of wind to make everything nice! And now the thing is to see how far the old father will go. He’ll have to do something big, don’t you know? but whether Charlie or Algy is to be the happy man—”

“Kate!” said Stella with a scream, hiding her head on her sister’s shoulder. “Take me away! Oh, hide me somewhere! Don’t let me see anyone—anyone! Oh, what have I done—what have I done, that anything so dreadful should come to me.”

“You have done nothing, Stella, except a little folly, childish folly, that meant nothing. Will you let her alone, please? You have done enough harm here. It was you who brought those—those very vulgar young men to this house.”

Even Stella lifted her tearful face in consternation at Katherine’s boldness, and Mrs. Seton uttered a shriek of dismay.

“What next—what next? Vulgar young men! The very flower of the country, the finest young fellows going. You’ve taken leave of your senses, I think. And to this house—oh, my goodness, what fun it is!—how they will laugh! To *this* house—”

“They had better not laugh in our hearing at least. This house is sacred to those who live in it, and anyone who comes here with such hideous miserable gossip may be prepared for a bad reception. Those vulgar cads!” cried Katherine. “Oh, that word is vulgar too, I suppose. I don’t care—they are so if any men ever were, who think they can trifle with a girl’s name and make her father come down—with what? his money you mean—it would be good sound blows if I were a man. And for what? to buy the miserable beings off, to shut their wretched mouths, to—”

“Katherine!” cried Stella, all aglow, detaching herself from her sister’s arms.

“Here’s heroics!” said Mrs. Seton; but she was overawed more or less by the flashing eyes and imposing aspect of this young woman, who was no “frump” after all, as appeared, but a person to be reckoned with—not Stella’s duenna, but something in her own right. Then she turned to Stella, who was more comprehensible, with whom a friend might quarrel and make it up again and no harm done. “My dear,” she said, “you are the one of this family who understands a little, who can be spoken to—I shan’t notice the rude things your sister says—I was obliged to tell you, for it’s always best to hear from a friend what is being said about you outside. You might have seen yourself boycotted, don’t you know? and not known what it meant. But, I dare say, if we all stand by you, you’ll not be boycotted for very long. You don’t mean to be rude, I hope, to your best friends.”

“Oh, Lottie! I hope you will stand by me,” cried Stella. “It was all an accident, as sure, as sure—I only took them to the yacht for fun—and then I thought I should like to see the sails up—for fun. And then—oh, it was anything but fun after that!” the girl cried.

“I dare say. Were you sick?—did you make an exhibition of yourself? Oh, I shall hear all about it from Algy—Charlie won’t say anything, so he is the one, I suppose. Don’t forget he’s a very bad boy—oh, there isn’t a good one between them! I shouldn’t like to be out with them alone. But Charlie! the rows he has had everywhere, the scandals he has made! Oh, my dear! If you go and marry Charlie Somers, Stella, which you’ll have to do, I believe—”

“He is the very last person she shall marry if she will listen to me!”

“Oh, you are too silly for anything, Katherine,” said Stella, slightly pushing her away. “You don’t know the world, you are goody-goody. What do you know about men? But I don’t want to marry anyone. I want to have my fun. The sea was dreadful the other night, and I was terribly frightened and thought I was going to be drowned. But yet it was fun in a way. Oh, Lottie, you understand! One felt it was such a dreadful thing to happen, and the state papa and everybody would be in! Still it is very, very impudent to discuss me like that, as if I had been run away with. I wasn’t in the least. It was I who wanted to go out. They said the wind was getting up, but I didn’t care, I said. ‘Let’s try.’ It was all for fun. And it was fun, after all.”

“Oh, if you take it in that way,” said Mrs. Seton, “and perhaps it is the best way just to brazen it out. Say what fun it was for everybody. Don’t go in for being pale and having been ill and all that. Laugh at Algy for being such a milksop. You are a clever little thing, Stella. I am sure that is the best way. And if I were you I should smooth down the old cats here—those old cats, you know, that came to the picnic—and throw dust in the eyes of Lady Jane, and then you’ll do. I’ll fight your battles for you, you may be sure. And then there is Charlie Somers. I wouldn’t turn up my nose at Charlie Somers if I were you.”

“He is nothing to me,” said Stella. “He has never said a word to me that all the world—that Kate herself—mightn’t hear. When he does it’ll be time enough to turn up my nose, or not. Oh, what do I care? I don’t want to have anybody to stand up for me. I can do quite well by myself, thank you. Kate, why should I sit here in a dressing gown? I am quite well. I want the fresh air and to run about. You are so silly; you always want to pet me and take care of me as if I were a child. I’m going out now with Lottie to have a little run before lunch and see the view.”

“Brava,” said Mrs. Seton, “you see what a lot of good I’ve done her—that is what she wants, shaking up, not being petted and fed with sweets. All right, Stella, run and get your frock on and I’ll wait for you. You may be quite right, Miss Tredgold,” she said, when Stella had disappeared, “to stand up for your family. But all the same it’s quite true what I say.”

“If it is true, it is abominable; but I don’t believe it to be true,” Katherine cried.

“Well, I don’t say it isn’t a shame. I’ve had abominable things said of me. But what does that matter so long as your husband stands by you like a brick, as Tom does? But if I were you, and Charlie Somers really comes forward—it is just as likely he won’t, for he ain’t a marrying man, he likes his fun like Stella—but if he does come forward—”

“I hope he will have more sense than to think of such a thing. He will certainly not be well received.”

“Oh, if you stick to that! But why should you now? If she married it would be the best thing possible for you. You ain’t bad looking, and I shouldn’t wonder if you were only the age she says. But with Stella here you seem a hundred, and nobody looks twice at you—”

Katherine smiled, but the smile was not without bitterness. “You are very kind to advise me for my good,” she said.

“Oh, you mean I’m very impudent—perhaps I am! But I know what I’m saying all the same. If Charlie Somers comes forward—”

“Advise him not to do so, you who are fond of giving advice,” said Katherine, “for my father will have nothing to say to him, and it would be no use.”

“Oh, your father!” said Mrs. Seton with contempt, and then she kissed her hand to Stella, who came in with her hat on ready for the “run” she had proposed. “Here she is as fresh as paint,” said that mistress of all the elegancies of language—“what a good ’un I am for stirring up the right spirit! You see how much of an invalid she is now! Where shall we go for our run, Stella, now that you have made yourself look so killing? You don’t mean, I should suppose, to waste that toilette upon me?”

“We’ll go and look at the view,” said Stella, “that is all I am equal to; and I’ll show you where we went that night.”

“Papa will be ready for his luncheon in half an hour, Stella.”

“Yes, I know, I know! Don’t push papa and his luncheon down my throat for ever,” cried the girl. She too was a mistress of language. She went out with her adviser arm-in-arm, clinging to her as if to her dearest friend, while Katherine stood in the window, rather sadly, looking after the pair. Stella had been restored to her sister by the half-illness of her rescue, and there was a pang in Katherine’s mind which was mingled of many sentiments as the semi-invalid went forth hanging upon her worst friend. Would nobody ever cling to Katherine as Stella, her only sister, clung to this woman—this—woman! Katherine did not know what epithet to use. If she had had bad words at her disposal I am afraid she would have expended them on Mrs. Seton, but she had not. They were not in her way. Was it possible this—woman might be right? Could Stella’s mad prank, if it could be called so—rather her childish, foolish impulse, meaning no harm—tell against her seriously with anybody in their senses? Katherine could not believe it—it was impossible. The people who had known her from her childhood knew that there was no harm in Stella. She might be thoughtless, disregarding everything that came in the way of her amusement, but after all that was not a crime. She was sure that such old cats as Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay would never think anything of the kind. But then there was Lady Jane. Lady Jane was not an old cat; she was a very important person. When she spoke the word no dog ventured to bark. But then her kindness to the Tredgold girls had always been a little in the way of patronage. She was not of their middle-class world. The side with which she would be in sympathy would be that of the young men. The escapade in the boat would be to her their fun, but on Stella’s it would not be fun. It would be folly of the deepest dye, perhaps—who could tell?—depravity. In fiction—a young woman not much in society instinctively takes a good many of her ideas from fiction—it had become fashionable of late to represent wicked girls, girls without soul or heart, as the prevailing

type. Lady Jane might suppose that Stella, whom she did not know very well, was a girl without soul or heart, ready to do anything for a little excitement and a new sensation, without the least reflection what would come of it. Nay, was not that the *rôle* which Stella herself was proposing to assume? Was it not to a certain extent her real character? This thought made Katherine's heart ache. And how if Lady Jane should think she had really compromised herself, forfeited, if not her good name, yet the bloom that ought to surround it? Katherine's courage sank at the thought. And, on the other hand, there was her father, who would understand none of these things, who would turn anybody out of his house who breathed a whisper against Stella, who would show Sir Charles himself the door.

CHAPTER VIII

It would be absurd to suppose that Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay had not heard the entire story of Stella's escape and all that led up to it, the foolish venture and the unexpected and too serious punishment. They had known all about it from the first moment. They had seen her running down to the beach with her attendants after her, and had heard all about the boat with the new figure-head which Mr. Tredgold had got a bargain and had called after his favourite child. And they had said to each other as soon as they had heard of it, "Mark my words! we shall soon hear of an accident to that boat." They had related this fact in all the drawing-rooms in the neighbourhood with great, but modest, pride when the accident did take place. But they had shown the greatest interest in Stella, and made no disagreeable remarks as to the depravity of her expedition. Nobody had been surprised at this self-denial at first, for no one had supposed that there was any blame attaching to the young party, two out of the three of whom had suffered so much for their imprudence; for Stella's cold and the shock to her nerves had at first been raised by a complimentary doctor almost to the same flattering seriousness as Captain Scott's pneumonia. Now the event altogether had begun to sink a little into the mild perspective of distance, as a thing which was over and done with, though it would always be an exciting reminiscence to talk of—the night when poor Stella Tredgold had been carried out to sea by the sudden squall, "just in her white afternoon frock, poor thing, without a wrap or anything."

This had been the condition of affairs before Mrs. Seton's visit. I cannot tell how it was breathed into the air that the adventure was by no means such a simple matter, that Stella was somehow dreadfully in fault, that it would be something against her all her life which she would have the greatest difficulty in "living down." Impossible to say who sowed this cruel seed. Mrs. Seton declared afterwards that she had spoken to no one, except indeed the landlady of the hotel where Captain Scott was lying, and his nurse; but that was entirely about Algy, poor boy. But whoever was the culprit, or by what methods soever the idea was communicated, certain it is that the views of the little community were completely changed after that moment. It began to be whispered about in the little assemblies, over the tea-tables, and over the billiard-tables (which was worse), that Stella Tredgold's escapade was a very queer thing after all. It was nonsense to say that she had never heard of the existence of the *Stella* till that day, when it was well known that old Tredgold bragged about everything he bought, and the lot o' money, or the little money he had given for it; for it was equally sweet to him to get a great bargain or to give the highest price that had ever been paid. That he should have held his tongue about this one thing, was it likely? And she was such a daring little thing, fond of scandalising her neighbours; and she was a little fast, there could be no doubt; at all events, she had been so ever since she had made the acquaintance of that Mrs. Seton—that Seton woman, some people said. Before her advent it only had been high spirits and innocent nonsense, but since then Stella had been infected with a love of sensation and had learned to like the attendance of men—any men, it did not matter whom. If the insinuation was of Mrs. Seton's making, she was not herself spared in it.

Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay were by no means the last to be infected by this wave of opinion. They lived close to each other in two little houses built upon the hill side, with gardens in long narrow strips which descended in natural terraces to the level of the high road. They were houses which looked very weedy and damp in the winter time, being surrounded by verandahs, very useful to soften the summer glow but not much wanted in October when the wind blew heaps of withered leaves (if you ventured to call those rays of gold and crimson withered) under the shelter of their green trellises. There are few things more beautiful than these same autumn leaves; but a garden is sadly "untidy," as these ladies lamented, when covered with them, flying in showers from somebody else's trees, and accumulating in heaps in the corners of the verandahs. "The boy," who was the drudge of Mrs. Shanks' establishment, and "the girl" who filled the same place in Miss Mildmay's, swept and swept for ever, but did not succeed in "keeping them down;" and indeed, when these two ladies

stepped outside in the sunny mornings, as often as not a leaf or two lighted, an undesired ornament upon the frills of Mrs. Shanks' cap or in the scanty coils of Miss Mildmay's hair. There was only a low railing between the two gardens in order not to break the beauty of the bank with its terraces as seen from below, and over this the neighbours had many talks as they superintended on either side the work of the boy and the girl, or the flowering of the dahlias which made a little show on Mrs. Shanks' side, or the chrysanthemums on the other. These winterly flowers were what the gardens were reduced to in October, though there were a few roses still to be found near the houses, and the gay summer annuals were still clinging on to life in rags and desperation along the borders, and a few sturdy red geraniums standing up boldly here and there.

"Have you heard what they are saying about Stella Tredgold?" said the one lady to the other one of these mornings. Mrs. Shanks had a hood tied over her cap, and Miss Mildmay a Shetland shawl covering her grey hair.

"Have I heard of anything else?" said the other, shaking her head.

"And I just ask you, Ruth Mildmay," said Mrs. Shanks, "do you think that little thing is capable of making up any plan to run off with a couple of officers? Good gracious, why should she do such a thing? She can have them as much as she likes at home. That silly old man will never stop her, but feed them with the best of everything at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, if they like—and then be astonished if people talk. And as for Katherine—but I have no patience with Katherine," the old lady said.

"If it's only a question what Stella Tredgold is capable of," answered Miss Mildmay, "she is capable of making the hair stand up straight on our heads—and there is nothing she would like better than to do it."

"Ah," said Mrs. Shanks, "she would find that hard with me; for I am nearly bald on the top of my head."

"And don't you try something for it?" said the other blandly. Miss Mildmay was herself anxiously in search of "something" that might still restore to her, though changed in colour, the abundance of the locks of her youth.

"I try a cap for it," said the other, "which covers everything up nicely. What the eye does not see the heart does not grieve—not like you, Ruth Mildmay, that have so much hair. Did you feel it standing up on end when you heard of Stella's escapade?"

"I formed my opinion of Stella's escapade long ago," said Miss Mildmay. "I thought it mad—simply mad, like so many things she does; but I hoped nobody would take any notice, and I did not mean to be the first to say anything."

"Well, it just shows how innocent I am," said Mrs. Shanks, "an old married woman that ought to know better! Why, I never thought any harm of it at all! I thought they had just pushed off a bit, three young fools!"

"But why did they push off a bit—that is the question? They might have looked at the boat; but why should she go out, a girl with two men?"

"Well, two was better than one, surely, Ruth Mildmay! If it had been one, why, you might have said—but there's safety in numbers—besides, one man in a little yacht with a big sail. I hate those things myself," said Mrs. Shanks. "I would not put my foot in one of them to save my life. They are like guns which no one believes are ever loaded till they go off and kill you before you know.

"I have no objection to yachting, for my part. My Uncle Sir Ralph was a great yachtsman. I have often been out with him. The worst of these girls is that they've nobody to give them a little understanding of things—nobody that knows. Old Tredgold can buy anything for them, but he can't tell them how to behave. And even Katherine, you know—"

"Oh, Katherine—I have no patience with Katherine. She lets that little thing do whatever she pleases."

"As if any one could control Stella, a spoilt child if ever there was one! May I ask you, Jane Shanks, what you intend to do?"

“To do?” cried Mrs. Shanks, her face, which was a little red by nature, paling suddenly. She stopped short in the very act of cutting a dahlia, a large very double purple one, into which the usual colour of her cheeks seemed to have gone.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake take care of those earwigs,” cried Miss Mildmay. “I hate dahlias for that—they are always full of earwigs. When I was a little child I thought I had got one in my ear. You know the nursery-maids always say they go into your ear. And the miserable night I had! I have never forgotten it. There is one on the rails, I declare.”

“Are we talking of earwigs—or of anything more important?” Mrs. Shanks cried.

“There are not many things more important, I can tell you, if you think one has got into your ear. They say it creeps into your brain and eats it up—and all sorts of horrible things. I was talking of going to the Cliff to see what those girls were about, and what Stella has to say for herself.”

“To the Cliff!” Mrs. Shanks said.

“Well,” said her neighbour sharply, “did you mean to give them up without even asking what they had to say for themselves?”

“I—give them up?—I never thought of such a thing. You go so fast, Ruth Mildmay. It was only yesterday I heard of this talk, which never should have gone from me. At the worst it’s a thing that might be gossiped about; but to give them up—”

“You wouldn’t, I suppose,” said Miss Mildmay sternly, “countenance depravity—if it was proved to be true.”

“If what was proved to be true? What is it they say against her?” Mrs. Shanks cried.

But this was not so easy to tell, for nobody had said anything except the fact which everybody knew.

“You know what is said as well as I do,” said Miss Mildmay. “Are you going? Or do you intend to drop them? That is what I want to know.”

“Has any one dropped them, yet?” her friend asked. There was a tremble in her hand which held the dahlias. She was probably scattering earwigs on every side, paying no attention. And her colour had not yet come back. It was very rarely that a question of this importance came up between the two neighbours. “Has Lady Jane said anything?” she asked in tones of awe.

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” cried Miss Mildmay boldly; for, maiden lady as she was, and poor, she was one of those who did not give in to Lady Jane. “For my part, I want to hear more about it before I decide what to do.”

“And so should I too,” said Mrs. Shanks, though still with bated breath. “Oh, Ruth Mildmay, I do not think I could ever have the heart! Such a little thing, and no mother, and such a father as Mr. Tredgold! I think it is going to rain this afternoon. I should not mind for once having the midge if you will share it, and going to call, and see what we can see.”

“I will share the midge if you like. I have other places where I must call. I can wait for you outside if you like, or I might even go in with you, for five minutes,” Miss Mildmay said severely, as if the shortness of that term justified the impulse. And they drove out accordingly, in the slumbrous afternoon, when most people were composing themselves comfortably by the side of their newly-lighted fires, comforting themselves that, as it had come on to rain, nobody would call, and that they were quite free either to read a book or to nod over it till tea-time. It rained softly, persistently, quietly, as the midge drove along amid a mingled shower of water-drops and falling leaves. The leaves were like bits of gold, the water-drops sparkled on the glass of the windows. All was soft, weeping, and downfall, the trees standing fast through the mild rain, scattering, with a sort of forlorn pleasure in it, their old glories off them. The midge stumbled along, jolting over the stones, and the old ladies seated opposite—for it held only one on each side—nodded their heads at each other, partly because they could not help it, partly to emphasise their talk. “That little thing! to have gone wrong at her age! But girls now were not like what they used to be—they were very different—not the least like what we used to be in our time.”

“Here is the midge trundling along the drive and the old cats coming to inquire. They are sure to have heard everything that ever was said in the world,” cried Stella, “and they are coming to stare at me and find out if I look as if I felt it. They shall not see me at all, however I look. I am not going to answer to them for what I do.”

“Certainly not,” said Katherine. “If that is what they have come for, you had better leave them to me.”

“I don’t know, either,” said Stella, “it rains, and nobody else will come. They might be fun. I shall say everything I can think of to shock them, Kate.”

“They deserve it, the old inquisitors,” cried Kate, who was more indignant than her sister; “but I think I would not, Stella. Don’t do anything unworthy of yourself, dear, whatever other people may say.”

“Oh! unworthy of myself!—I don’t know what’s worthy of myself—nothing but nonsense, I believe. I should just like, however, for fun, to see what the old cats have to say.”

The old cats came in, taking some time to alight from the midge and shake out their skirts in the hall. They were a little frightened, if truth must be told. They were not sure of their force against the sharp little claws sheathed in velvet of the little white cat-princess, on whom they were going to make an inquisition, whether there was any stain upon her coat of snow.

“We need not let them see we’ve come for that, or have heard anything,” Mrs. Shanks whispered in Miss Mildmay’s ear.

“Oh, I shall let them see!” said the fiercer visitor; but nevertheless she trembled too.

They were taken into the young ladies’ room, which was on the ground floor, and opened with a large window upon the lawn and its encircling trees. It was perhaps too much on a level with that lawn for a house which is lived in in autumn and winter as well as summer, and the large window occupied almost one entire side of the room. Sometimes it was almost too bright, but to-day, with the soft persistent rain pouring down, and showers of leaves coming across the rain from time to time, as if flying frightened before every puff of air, the effect of the vast window and of the white and gold furniture was more dismal than bright. There was a wood fire, not very bright either, but hissing faintly as it smouldered, which did not add much to the comfort of the room. Katherine was working at something as usual—probably something of no importance—but it was natural to her to be occupied, while it was natural for Stella to do nothing. The visitors instinctively remarked the fact with the usual approval and disapproval.

“Katherine, how do you do, my dear? We thought we were sure to find you at home such a day. Isn’t it a wet day? raining cats and dogs; but the midge is so good for that, one is so sheltered from the weather. Ruth Mildmay thought it was just the day to find you; Jane Shanks was certain you would be at home. Ah, Stella, you are here too!” they said both together.

“Did you think I shouldn’t be here too?” said Stella. “I am always here too. I wonder why you should be surprised.”

“Oh, indeed, Stella! We know that is not the case by any means. If you were always with Katherine, it would be very, very much the better for you. You would get into no scrapes if you kept close to Katherine,” Mrs. Shanks said.

“Do I get into scrapes?” cried Stella, tossing her young head. “Oh, I knew there would be some fun when I saw the midge coming along the drive! Tell me what scrapes I have got into. I hope it is a very bad one to-day to make your hair stand on end.”

“My dear, you know a great deal better than we can tell you what things people are saying,” said Miss Mildmay. “I did not mean to blurt it out the first thing as Jane Shanks has done. It is scarcely civil, I feel—perhaps you would yourself have been moved to give us some explanation which would have satisfied our minds—and to Katherine it is scarcely polite.”

“Oh, please do not mind being polite to me!” cried Katherine, who was in a white heat of resentment and indignation, her hands trembling as she threw down her work. And Stella, that little

thing, was completely at her ease! “If there is anything to be said I take my full share with Stella, whatever it may be.” And then there was a little pause, for tea was brought in with a footman’s instinct for the most dramatic moment. Tea singularly changed the face of affairs. Gossip may be exchanged over the teacups; but to come fully prepared for mortal combat, and in the midst of it to be served by your antagonist with a cup of tea, is terribly embarrassing. Katherine, being excited and innocent, would have left it there with its fragrance rising fruitlessly in the midst of the fury melting the assailants’ hearts; but Stella, guilty and clever, saw her advantage. Before she said anything more she sprang up from her chair and took the place which was generally Katherine’s before the little shining table. Mr. Tredgold’s tea was naturally the very best that could be got for money, and had a fragrance which was delightful; and there were muffins in a beautiful little covered silver dish, though October is early in the season for muffins. “I’ll give you some tea first,” cried the girl, “and then you can come down upon me as much as you please.”

And it was so nice after the damp drive, after the jolting of the midge, in the dull and dreary afternoon! It was more than female virtue was equal to, to refuse that deceiving cup. Miss Mildmay said faintly: “None for me, please. I am going on to the—” But before she had ended this assertion she found herself, she knew not how, with a cup in her hand.

“Oh, Stella, my love,” cried Mrs. Shanks, “what tea yours is! And oh, how much sweeter you look, and how much better it is, instead of putting yourself in the way of a set of silly young officers, to sit there smiling at your old friends and pouring out the tea!”

Miss Mildmay gave a little gasp, and made a motion to put down the cup again, but she was not equal to the effort.

“Oh, it is the officers you object to!” cried Stella. “If it was curates perhaps you would like them better. I love the officers! they are so nice and big and silly. To be sure, curates are silly also, but they are not so easy and nice about it.”

Miss Mildmay’s gasp this time was almost like a choke. “Believe me,” she said, “it would be much better to keep clear of young men. You girls now are almost as bad as the American girls, that go about with them everywhere—worse, indeed, for it is permitted there, and it is not permitted here.”

“That makes it all the nicer,” cried Stella; “it’s delightful because it’s wrong. I wonder why the American girls do it when all the fun is gone out of it!”

“Depend upon it,” said Miss Mildmay, “it’s better to have nothing at all to do with young men.”

“But then what is to become of the world?” said the culprit gravely.

“Stella!” cried Katherine.

“It is quite true. The world would come to an end—there would be no more—”

“Stella, Stella!”

“I think you are quite right in what you said, Jane Shanks,” said Miss Mildmay. “It is a case that can’t be passed over. It is—”

“I never said anything of the sort,” cried Mrs. Shanks, alarmed. “I said we must know what Stella had to say for herself—”

“And so you shall,” said Stella, with a toss of her saucy head. “I have as much as ever you like to say for myself. There is nothing I won’t say. Some more muffin, Mrs. Shanks—one little other piece. It is so good, and the first of the season. But this is not enough toasted. Look after the tea, Katherine, while I toast this piece for Miss Mildmay. It is much nicer when it is toasted for you at a nice clear fire.”

“Not any more for me,” cried Miss Mildmay decisively, putting down her cup and pushing away her chair.

“You cannot refuse it when I have toasted it expressly for you. It is just as I know you like it, golden brown and hot! Why, here is another carriage! Take it, take it, dear Miss Mildmay, before some one else comes in. Who can be coming, Kate—this wet day?”

They all looked out eagerly, speechless, at the pair of smoking horses and dark green landau which passed close to the great window in the rain. Miss Mildmay took the muffin mechanically, scarcely knowing what she did, and a great consternation fell upon them all. The midge outside, frightened, drew away clumsily from the door, and the ladies, both assailed and assailants, gazed into each other's eyes with a shock almost too much for speech.

“Oh, heavens,” breathed Mrs. Shanks, “do you see who it is, you unfortunate children? It is Lady Jane herself—and how are you going to stand up, you little Stella, before Lady Jane?”

“Let her come,” said Stella defiant, yet with a hot flush on her cheeks.

And, indeed, so it happened. Lady Jane did not pause to shake out her skirts, which were always short enough for all circumstances. Almost before the footman, who preceded her with awe, could open the door decorously, she pushed him aside with her own hand to quicken his movements, Lady Jane herself marched squarely into the expectant room.

CHAPTER IX

Lady Jane walked into the room squarely, with her short skirts and her close jacket. She looked as if she were quite ready to walk back the four miles of muddy road between her house and the Cliff. And so indeed she was, though she had no intention of doing so to-day. She came in, pushing aside the footman, as I have said, who was very much frightened of Lady Jane. When she saw the dark figures of Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay sitting against the large light of the window, she uttered a suppressed sound of discontent. It might be translated by an "Oh," or it might be translated, as we so often do as the symbol of a sound, by a "Humph." At all events, it was a sound which expressed annoyance. "You here!" it seemed to say; but Lady Jane afterwards shook hands with them very civilly, it need not be said. For the two old cats were very respectable members of society, and not to be badly treated even by Lady Jane.

"That was your funny little carriage, I suppose," she said, when she had seated herself, "stopping the way."

"Was it stopping the way?" cried Mrs. Shanks, "the midge? I am astonished at Mr. Perkins. We always give him the most careful instructions; but if he had found one of the servants to gossip with, he is a man who forgets everything one may say."

"I can't undertake what his motives were, but he was in the way, blocking up the doors," said Lady Jane; "all the more astonishing to my men and my horses, as they were brought out, much against their will, on the full understanding that nobody else would be out on such a day."

"It is a long way to Steephill," said Miss Mildmay, "so that we could not possibly have known Lady Jane's intentions, could we, Jane Shanks? or else we might have taken care not to get into her way."

"Oh, the public roads are free to every one," said Lady Jane, dismissing the subject. "What rainy weather we have had, to be sure! Of course you are all interested in that bazaar; if it goes on like this you will have no one, not a soul to buy; and all the expense of the decorations and so forth on our hands."

"Oh, the officers will come over from Newport," said Miss Mildmay; "anything is better than nothing. Whatever has a show of amusement will attract the officers, and that will make the young ladies happy, so that it will not be thrown away."

"What a Christian you are!" said Lady Jane. "You mean it is an ill wind that blows nobody good. I have several cousins in the garrison, but I don't think I should care so much for their amusement as all that."

"Was there ever a place," said Mrs. Shanks, with a certain tone of humble admiration, which grated dreadfully upon her companion, "in which you had not a number of cousins, Lady Jane? They say the Scotch are the great people for having relatives everywhere, and my poor husband was a Scotchman; but I'm sure he had not half so many as you."

Lady Jane answered curtly with a nod of her head and went on. "The rain is spoiling everything," she said. "The men, of course, go out in spite of it when they can, but they have no pleasure in their work, and to have a shooting party on one's hands in bad weather is a hard task. They look at you as if it were your fault, as if you could order good weather as easily as you can order luncheon for them at the cover side."

"Dear me, that is not at all fair, is it, Ruth Mildmay? In my poor husband's lifetime, when we used to take a shooting regularly, I always said to his friends, 'Now, don't look reproachfully at me if it's bad weather. We can't guarantee the weather. You ought to get so many brace if you have good luck. We'll answer for that.'"

"You were a bold woman," said Lady Jane; "so many brace without knowing if they could fire a gun or not! That's a rash promise. Sir John is not so bold as that, I can tell you. He says, 'There's

a bird or two about if you can hit 'em.' Katherine, you may as well let me see those things of yours for my stall. It will amuse me a little this wet day."

"They are all upstairs, Lady Jane."

"Well, I'll go upstairs. Oh, don't let me take you away from your visitors. Stella, you can come with me and show them; not that I suppose you know anything about them."

"Not the least in the world," said Stella very clearly. Her face, so delicately tinted usually, and at present paler than ordinary, was crimson, and her attitude one of battle. She could propitiate and play with the old cats, but she dare not either cajole or defy Lady Jane.

"Then Katherine can come, and I can enjoy the pleasure of conversation with you after. Shall I find you still here," said Lady Jane, holding out her hand graciously to the other ladies, "when I come downstairs again?"

"Oh, we must be going—"

Mrs. Shanks was interrupted by Miss Mildmay's precise tones. "Probably you will find *me* here, Lady Jane; and I am sure it will be a mutual pleasure to continue the conversation which—"

"Then I needn't say good-bye," said the great lady calmly, taking Katherine by the arm and pushing the girl before her. Stella stood with her shoulders against the mantel-piece, very red, watching them as they disappeared. She gave the others an angry look of appeal as the door closed upon the more important visitor.

"Oh, I wish you'd take me away with you in the midge!" she cried.

"Ah, Stella," cried Mrs. Shanks, shaking her head, "the times I have heard you making your fun of the midge! But in a time of trouble one finds out who are one's real friends."

Miss Mildmay was softened too, but she was not yet disposed to give in. She had not been able to eat that special muffin which Stella had re-toasted for her. Lady Jane, in declining tea curtly with a wave of her hands, had made the tea-drinkers uncomfortable, and especially had arrested the eating of muffins, which it is difficult to consume with dignity unless you have the sympathy of your audience. It was cold now, quite cold and unappetizing. It lay in its little plate with the air of a thing rejected. And Miss Mildmay felt it was not consistent with her position to ask even for half a cup of hot tea.

"It has to be seen," she said stiffly, "what friends will respond to the appeal; everybody is not at the disposal of the erring person when and how she pleases. I must draw a line—"

"What do you say I have done, then?" cried Stella, flushing with lively wrath. "Do you think I went out in that boat on purpose to be drowned or catch my death? Do you think I wanted to be ill and sea-sick and make an exhibition of myself before two men? Do you think I wanted them to see me *ill*? Goodness!" cried Stella, overcome at once by the recollection and the image, "could you like a man—especially if he was by way of admiring you, and talking nonsense to you and all that—to see you *ill* at sea? If you can believe that you can believe anything, and there is no more for me to say."

The force of this argument was such that Miss Mildmay was quite startled out of her usual composure and reserve. She stared at Stella for a moment with wide-opened eyes.

"I did not think of that," she said in a tone of sudden conviction. "There is truth in what you say—certainly there is truth in what you say."

"Truth in it!" cried the girl. "If you had only seen me—but I am very thankful you didn't see me—leaning over the side of that dreadful boat, not minding what waves went over me! When you were a girl and had men after you, oh, Miss Mildmay, I ask you, would you have chosen to have them to see you *then*?"

Miss Mildmay put the plate with the cold muffin off her knees. She set down her empty cup. She felt the solemnity of the appeal.

"No," she said, "if you put it to me like that, Stella, I am obliged to allow I should not. And I may add," she went on, looking round the room as if to a contradictory audience, "I don't know any woman who would; and that is my opinion, whatever anybody may say." She paused a moment with a little triumphant air of having conducted to a climax a potent argument, looking round upon the

baffled opponents. And then she came down from that height and added in soft tones of affectionate reproach: “But why did you go out with them at all, Stella? When I was a girl, as you say, and had—I never, never should have exposed myself to such risks, by going out in a boat with—”

“Oh, Miss Mildmay,” cried Stella, “girls were better in your time. You have always told us so. They were not perhaps so fond of—fun; they were in better order; they had more—more—” said the girl, fishing for a word, which Mrs. Shanks supplied her with by a movement of her lips behind Miss Mildmay’s back—“disciplined minds,” Stella said with an outburst of sudden utterance which was perilously near a laugh.

“And you had a mother, Ruth Mildmay?” said the plotter behind, in tender notes.

“Yes; I had a mother—an excellent mother, who would not have permitted any of the follies I see around me. Jane Shanks, you have conquered me with that word. Stella, my dear, count on us both to stand by you, should that insolent woman upstairs take anything upon her. Who is Lady Jane, I should like to know? The daughter of a new-made man—coals, or beer, or something! A creation of this reign! Stella, this will teach you, perhaps, who are your true friends.”

And Miss Mildmay extended her arms and took the girl to her bosom. Stella had got down on her knees for some reason of her own, which girls who are fond of throwing themselves about may understand, and therefore was within reach of this unexpected embrace, and I am afraid laughed rather than sobbed on Miss Mildmay’s lap; but the slight heaving of her shoulders in that position had the same effect, and sealed the bargain. The two ladies lingered a little after this, hoping that Lady Jane might come down. At least Miss Mildmay hoped so. Mrs. Shanks would have stolen humbly out to get into the midge at a little distance along the drive, not to disturb the big landau with the brown horses which stood large before the door. But Miss Mildmay would have none of that; she ordered the landau off with great majesty, and waved her hand indignantly for Perkins to “come round,” as if the midge had been a chariot, a manœuvre which Stella promoted eagerly, standing in the doorway to see her visitors off with the most affectionate interest, while the other carriage paced sullenly up and down.

In the meantime Lady Jane had nearly completed her interview with Katherine in the midst of the large assortment of trumpery set out in readiness for the bazaar. “Oh, yes, I suppose they’ll do well enough,” she said, turning over the many coloured articles into which the Sliplin ladies had worked so many hours of their lives with careless hands. “Mark them cheap; the people here like to have bargains, and I’m sure they’re not worth much. Of course, it was not the bazaar things I was thinking of. Tell me, Katherine, what is all this about Stella? I find the country ringing with it. What has she done to have her name mixed up with Charlie Somers and Algy Scott—two of the fastest men one knows? What has the child been doing? And how did she come to know these men?”

“She has been doing nothing, Lady Jane. It is the most wicked invention. I can tell you exactly how it happened. A little yacht was lying in the harbour, and they went up to papa’s observatory, as he calls it, to look at it through his telescope, and papa himself was there, and he said—”

“But this is going very far back, surely? I asked you what Stella was doing with these men.”

“And I am telling you,” cried Katherine, red with indignation. “Papa said it was his yacht, which he had just bought, and they began to argue and bet about who it was from whom he had bought it, and he would not tell them; and then Stella said—”

“My dear Katherine, this elaborate explanation begins to make me fear—”

“Stella cried: ‘Come down and look at it, while Kate orders tea.’ You know how careless she is, and how she orders me about. They ran down by our private gate. It was to settle their bet, and I had tea laid out for them—it was quite warm then—under the trees. Well,” said Katherine, pausing to take breath, “the first thing I saw was a white sail moving round under the cliff while I sat waiting for them to come back. And then papa came down screaming that it was the *Stella*, his yacht, and that a gale was blowing up. And then we spent the most dreadful evening, and darkness came on and we lost sight of the sail, and I thought I should have died and that it would kill papa.”

Her breath went from her with this rapid narrative, uttered at full speed to keep Lady Jane from interrupting. What with indignation and what with alarm, the quickening of her heart was such that Katherine could say no more. She stopped short and stood panting, with her hand upon her heart.

“And at what hour,” said Lady Jane icily, “did they come back?”

“Oh, I can’t tell what hour it was. It seemed years and years to me. I got her back in a faint and wet to the skin, half dead with sickness and misery and cold. Oh, my poor, poor little girl! And now here are wicked and cruel people saying it is her fault. Her fault to risk her life and make herself ill and drive us out of our senses, papa and me!”

“Oh, Stella would not care very much for her papa and you, so long as she got her fun. So it was as bad as that, was it—a whole night at sea along with these two men? I could not have imagined any girl would have been such a fool.”

“I will not hear my sister spoken of so. It was the men who were fools, or worse, taking her out when a gale was rising. What did she know about the signs of a gale? She thought of nothing but two minutes in the bay, just to see how the boat sailed. It was these men.”

“What is the use of saying anything about the men? I dare say they enjoyed it thoroughly. It doesn’t do them any harm. Why should they mind? It is the girl who ought to look out, for it is she who suffers. Good Heavens, to think that any girl should be such a reckless little fool!”

“Stella has done nothing to be spoken of in that way.”

“Oh, don’t speak to me!” said Lady Jane. “Haven’t I taken you both up and done all I could to give you your chance, you two? And this is my reward. Stella has done nothing? Why, Stella has just compromised herself in the most dreadful way. You know what sort of a man Charlie Somers is? No, you don’t, of course. How should you, not living in a set where you were likely to hear? That’s the worst, you know, of going out a little in one *monde* and belonging to another all the time.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Lady Jane,” cried Katherine, on the edge of tears.

“No; there’s no need you should know what I mean. A girl, in another position, that got to know Charlie Somers would have known more or less what he was. You, of course, have the disadvantages of both—acquaintance and then ignorance. Who introduced Charlie Somers to your sister? The blame lies on her first of all.”

“It was—they were all—at the hotel, and Stella thought it would be kind to ask Mrs. Seton to a picnic we were giving—”

“Lottie Seton!” cried Lady Jane, sitting down in the weakness of her consternation. “Why, this is the most extraordinary thing of all!”

“I see nothing extraordinary in the whole business,” said Katherine, in a lofty tone.

“Oh, my dear Katherine, for goodness’ sake don’t let me have any more of your innocent little-girliness. Of course you see nothing! You have no eyes, no sense, no—Lottie Seton!—she to give over two of her own men to a pretty, silly, reckless little thing like Stella, just the kind for them! Well, that is the last thing I should have expected. Why, Lottie Seton is nothing without her tail. If they abandon her she is lost. She is asked to places because she is always sure to be able to bring a few men. What they can see in her nobody knows, but there it is—that’s her faculty. And she actually gave over two of her very choicest—”

“You must excuse me, Lady Jane,” said Katherine, “if I don’t want to hear any more of Mrs. Seton and her men. They are exceedingly rude, stupid, disagreeable men. You may think it a fine thing for us to be elevated to the sphere in which we can meet men like Sir Charles Somers. I don’t think so. I think he is detestable. I think he believes women to exist only for the purpose of amusing him and making him laugh, like an idiot, as he is!”

Lady Jane sat in her easy-chair and looked sardonically at the passion of the girl, whose face was crimson, whose voice was breaking. She was, with that horrible weakness which a high-spirited girl so resents in herself, so near an outbreak of crying that she could scarcely keep the tears within her eyes. The elder lady looked at her for some time in silence. The sight troubled her a little, and

amused her a little also. It occurred to her to say, “You are surely in love with him yourself,” which was her instinct, but for once forbore, out of a sort of awed sense that here was a creature who was outside of her common rules.

“He is not an idiot, however,” she said at last. “I don’t say he is intellectual. He does think, perhaps, that women exist, &c. So do most of them, my dear. You will soon find that out if you have anything to do with men. Still, for a good little girl, I have always thought you were nice, Katherine. It is for your sake more than hers that I feel inclined to do that silly little Stella a good turn. How could she be such a little fool? Has she lived on this cliff half her life and doesn’t know when a gale’s coming on? The more shame to her, then! And I don’t doubt that instead of being ashamed she is quite proud of her adventure. And I hear, to make things worse, that Algy Scott went and caught a bad cold over it. That will make his mother and all her set furious with the girl, and say everything about her. He’s not going to die—that’s a good thing. If he had, she need never have shown her impertinent little nose anywhere again. Lady Scott’s an inveterate woman. It will be bad enough as it is. How are we to get things set right again?”

“It is a pity you should take any trouble,” said Katherine; “things are quite right, thank you. We have quite enough in what you call our own *monde*.”

“Well, and what do you find to object to in the word? It is a very good word; the French understand that sort of thing better than we do. So you have quite enough to make you happy in your own *monde*? I don’t think so—and I know the world in general better than you do. And, what is more, I am very doubtful indeed whether Stella thinks so.”

“Oh, no,” cried a little voice, and Stella, running in, threw herself down at Lady Jane’s feet, in the caressing attitude which she had so lately held in spite of herself at Miss Mildmay’s. “Stella doesn’t think so at all. Stella will be miserable if you don’t take her up and put things right for her, dear Lady Jane. I have been a dreadful little fool. I know it, I know it; but I didn’t mean it. I meant nothing but a little—fun. And now there is nobody who can put everything right again but you, and only you.”

CHAPTER X

Lady Jane Thurston was a fine lady in due place and time; but on other occasions she was a robust countrywoman, ready to walk as sturdily as any man, or to undertake whatever athletic exercise was necessary. When she had gone downstairs again, and been served with a cup of warm tea (now those old cats were gone), she sent her carriage off that the horses might be put under shelter, not to speak of the men, and walked herself in the rain to the hotel, where the two young men were still staying, Captain Scott being as yet unable to be moved. It was one of those hotels which are so pretty in summer, all ivy and clematis, and balconies full of flowers. But on a wet day in October it looked squalid and damp, with its open doorway traversed by many muddy footsteps, and the wreaths of the withered creepers hanging limp about the windows. Lady Jane knew everybody about, and took in them all the interest which a member of the highest class—quite free from any doubt about her position—is able to take with so much more ease and naturalness than any other. The difference between the Tredgolds, for instance, and Mrs. Black of the hotel in comparison with herself was but slightly marked in her mind. She was impartially kind to both. The difference between them was but one of degree; she herself was of so different a species that the gradations did not count. In consequence of this she was more natural with the Blacks at the hotel than Katherine Tredgold, though in her way a Lady Bountiful, and universal friend, could ever have been. She was extremely interested to hear of Mrs. Black's baby, which had come most inopportunistly, with a sick gentleman in the house, at least a fortnight before it was expected, and went upstairs to see the mother and administer a word or two of rebuke to the precipitate infant before she proceeded on her own proper errand. "Silly little thing, to rush into this rain sooner than it could help," she said, "but mind you don't do the same, my dear woman. Never trouble your head about the sick gentleman. Don't stir till you have got up your strength." And then she marched along the passages to the room in which Algy and Charlie sat, glum and tired to death, looking out at the dull sky and the raindrops on the window. They had invented a sort of sport with those same raindrops, watching them as they ran down and backing one against the other. There had just been a close race, and Algy's man had won to his great delight, when Lady Jane's sharp knock came to the door; so that she went in to the sound of laughter pealing forth from the sick gentleman in such a manner as to reassure any anxious visitor as to the state of his lungs, at least.

"Well, you seem cheerful enough," Lady Jane said.

"Making the best of it," said Captain Scott.

"How do, Lady Jane? I say, Algy, there's another starting. Beg pardon, too excitin' to stop. Ten to one on the little fellow. By George, looks as if he knew it, don't he now! Done this time, old man—"

"Never took it," said Algy, with a kick directed at his friend. "Shut up! It's awfully kind of you coming to see a fellow—in such weather—Lady Jane!"

"Yes," she said composedly, placing herself in the easiest chair. "It would be kind if I had come without a motive—but I don't claim that virtue. How are you, by the way? Better, I hope."

"Awfully well—as fit as a—, but they won't let me budge in this weather. I've got a nurse that lords it over me, and the doctor, don't you know?—daren't stir, not to save my life."

"And occupying your leisure with elevating pastimes," said Lady Jane.

"Don't be hard on a man when he's down—nothing to do," said Sir Charles. "Desert island sort of thing—Algy educating mouse, and that sort of thing; hard lines upon me."

"Does he know enough?" said Lady Jane with a polite air of inquiry. "I am glad to find you both," she added, "and not too busy evidently to give me your attention. How did you manage, Algy, to catch such a bad cold?"

"Pneumonia, by Jove," the young man cried, inspired by so inadequate a description.

“Well, pneumonia—so much the worse—and still more foolish for you who have a weak chest. How did you manage to do it? I wonder if your mother knows, and why is it I don’t find her here at your bedside?”

“I say, don’t tell her, Lady Jane; it’s bad enough being shut up here, without making more fuss, and the whole thing spread all over the place.”

“What is the whole thing?” said Lady Jane.

“Went out in a bit of a yacht,” said Sir Charles, “clear up a bet, that was why we did it. Caught in a gale—my fault, not Algy’s—says he saw it coming—I—”

“You were otherwise occupied, Charlie—”

“Shut up!” Sir Charles was the speaker this time, with a kick in the direction of his companion in trouble.

“I am glad to see you’ve got some grace left,” said Lady Jane. “Not you, Algy, you are beyond that—I know all about it, however. It was little Stella Tredgold who ran away with you—or you with her.”

Algy burst into a loud laugh. Sir Charles on his part said nothing, but pulled his long moustache.

“Which is it? And what were the rights of it? and was there any meaning in it? or merely fun, as you call it in your idiotic way?”

“By Jove!” was all the remark the chief culprit made. Algy on his sofa kicked up his feet and roared again.

“Please don’t think,” said Lady Jane, “that I am going to pick my words to please you. I never do it, and especially not to a couple of boys whom I have known since ever they were born, and before that. What do you mean by it, if it is you, Charlie Somers? I suppose, by Algy’s laugh, that he is not the chief offender this time. You know as well as I do that you’re not a man to take little girls about. I suppose you must have sense enough to know that, whatever good opinion you may have of yourself. Stella Tredgold may be a little fool, but she’s a girl I have taken up, and I don’t mean to let her be compromised. A girl that knew anything would have known better than to mix up her name with yours. Now what is the meaning of it? You will just be so good as to inform me.”

“Why, Cousin Jane, it was all the little thing herself.”

“Shut up!” said Sir Charles again, with another kick at Algy’s foot.

“Well!” said Lady Jane, very magisterially. No judge upon the bench could look more alarming than she. It is true that her short skirts, her strong walking shoes, her very severest hat and stiff feather that would bear the rain, were not so impressive as flowing wigs and robes. She had not any of the awe-inspiring trappings of the Law; but she was law all the same, the law of society, which tolerates a great many things, and is not very nice about motives nor forbidding as to details, but yet draws the line—if capriciously—sometimes, yet very definitely, between what can and what cannot be done.

“Well,” came at length hesitatingly through the culprit’s big moustache. “Don’t know, really—have got anything to say—no meaning at all. Bet to clear up—him and me; then sudden thought—just ten minutes—try the sails. No harm in that, Lady Jane,” he said, more briskly, recovering courage, “afterwards gale came on; no responsibility,” he cried, throwing up his hands.

“Fact it was she that was the keenest. I shan’t shut up,” cried Algy; “up to anything, that little thing is. Never minded a bit till it got very bad, and then gave in, but never said a word. No fault of anybody, that is the truth. But turned out badly—for me—”

“And worse for her,” said Lady Jane—“that is, without me; all the old cats will be down upon the girl” (which was not true, the reader knows). “She is a pretty girl, Charlie.”

Sir Charles, though he was so experienced a person, coloured faintly and gave a nod of his head.

“Stunner, by Jove!” said Algy, “though I like the little plain one better,” he added in a parenthesis.

“And a very rich girl, Sir Charles,” Lady Jane said.

This time a faint “O—Oh” came from under the big moustache.

“A *very* rich girl. The father is an old curmudgeon, but he is made of money, and he adores his little girl. I believe he would buy a title for her high and think it cheap.”

“Oh, I say!” exclaimed Sir Charles, with a colour more pronounced upon his cheek.

“Yours is not anything very great in that way,” said the remorseless person on the bench, “but still it’s what he would call a title, you know; and I haven’t the least doubt he would come down very handsomely. Old Tredgold knows very well what he is about.”

“Unexpected,” said Sir Charles, “sort of serious jaw like this. Put it off, if you don’t mind, till another time.”

“No time like the present,” said Lady Jane. “Your father was a great friend of mine, Charlie Somers. He once proposed to me—very much left to himself on that occasion, you will say—but still it’s true. So I might have been your mother, don’t you see. I know your age, therefore, to a day. You are a good bit past thirty, and you have been up to nothing but mischief all your life.”

“Oh, I say now!” exclaimed Sir Charles again.

“Well, now here is a chance for you. Perhaps I began without thinking, but now I’m in great earnest. Here is really a chance for you. Stella’s not so nice as her sister, as Algy there (I did not expect it of him) has the sense to see: but she’s much more in your way. She is just your kind, a reckless little hot-headed—all for pleasure and never a thought of to-morrow. But that sort of thing is not so risky when you have a good fortune behind you, well tied down. Now, Charlie, listen to me. Here is a capital chance for you; a man at your age, if he is ever going to do anything, should stop playing the fool. These boys even will soon begin to think you an old fellow. Oh, you needn’t cry out! I know generations of them, and I understand their ways. A man should stop taking his fling before he gets to thirty-five. Why, Algy there would tell you that, if he had the spirit to speak up.”

“I’m out of it,” said Algy. “Say whatever you like, it has nothing to do with me.”

“You see,” said Lady Jane, with a little flourish of her hand, “the boy doesn’t contradict me; he daren’t contradict me, for it’s truth. Now, as I say, here’s a chance for you. Abundance of money, and a very pretty girl, whom you like.” She made a pause here to emphasise her words. “Whom—you—like. Oh, I know very well what I’m saying. I am going to ask her over to Steeplehill and you can come too if you please; and if you don’t take advantage of your opportunities, Sir Charles, why you have less sense than even I have given you credit for, and that is a great deal to say.”

“Rather public, don’t you think, for this sort of thing? Go in and win, before admiring audience. Don’t relish exhibition. Prefer own way.”

This Sir Charles said, standing at the window, gazing out, apparently insensible even of the raindrops, and turning his back upon his adviser.

“Well, take your own way. I don’t mind what way you take, so long as you take my advice, which is given in your very best interests, I can tell you. Isn’t the regiment ordered out to India, Algy?” she said, turning quickly upon the other. “And what do you mean to do?”

“Go, of course,” he said—“the very thing for me, they say. And I’m not going to shirk either; see some sport probably out there.”

“And Charlie?” said Lady Jane. There was no apparent connection between her previous argument and this question, yet the very distinct staccato manner in which she said these words called the attention.

Sir Charles, still standing by the window with his back to Lady Jane, once more muttered, “By Jove!” under his breath, or under his moustache, which came to the same thing.

“Oh, Charlie! He’ll exchange, I suppose, and get out of it; too great a swell for India, he is. And how could he live out of reach of Pall Mall?”

“Well, I hope you’ll soon be able to move, my dear boy; if the weather keeps mild and the rain goes off you had better come up to Steeplehill for a few days to get up your strength.”

“Thanks, awf’ly,” said Captain Scott. “I will with pleasure; and Cousin Jane, if that little prim one should be there—”

“She shan’t, not for you, my young man, you have other things to think of. As for Charlie, I shall say no more to him; he can come too if he likes, but not unless he likes. Send me a line to let me know.”

Sir Charles accompanied the visitor solemnly downstairs, but without saying anything until they reached the door, where to his surprise no carriage was waiting.

“Don’t mean to say you walked—day like this?” he cried.

“No; but the horses and the men are more used to take care of themselves; they are to meet me at the Rectory. I am going there about this ridiculous bazaar. You can walk with me, if you like,” she said.

He seized a cap from the stand and lounged out after her into the rain. “I say—don’t you know?” he said, but paused there and added no more.

“Get it out,” said Lady Jane.

After a while, as he walked along by her side, his hands deep in his pockets, the rain soaking pleasantly into his thick tweed coat, he resumed: “Unexpected serious sort of jaw that, before little beggar like Algy—laughs at everything.”

“There was no chance of speaking to you alone,” said Lady Jane almost apologetically.

“Suppose not. Don’t say see my way to it. Don’t deny, though—reason in it.”

“And inclination, eh? not much of one without the other, if I am any judge.”

“First-rate judge, by Jove!” Sir Charles said.

And he added no more. But when he took leave of Lady Jane at the Rectory he took a long walk by himself in the rain, skirting the gardens of the Cliff and getting out upon the downs beyond, where the steady downfall penetrated into him, soaking the tweed in a kind of affectionate natural way as of a material prepared for the purpose. He strolled along with his hands in his pockets and the cap over his eyes as if it had been a summer day, liking it all the better for the wetness and the big masses of the clouds and the leaden monotone of the sea. It was all so dismal that it gave him a certain pleasure; he seemed all the more free to think of his own concerns, to consider the new panorama opened before him, which perhaps, however, was not so new as Lady Jane supposed. She had forced open the door and made him look in, giving all the details; but he had been quite conscious that it had been there before, within his reach, awaiting his inspection. There were a great many inducements, no doubt, to make that fantastic prospect real if he could. He did not want to go to India, though indeed it would have been very good for him in view of his sadly reduced finances and considerably affected credit in both senses of that word. He had not much credit at headquarters, that he knew; he was not what people called a good officer. No doubt he would have been brave enough had there been fighting to do, and he was not disliked by his men; his character of a “careless beggar” being quite as much for good as for evil among those partial observers; but his credit in higher regions was not great. Credit in the other sense of the word was a little failing too, tradesmen having a wonderful *flair* as to a man’s resources and the rising and falling of his account at his bankers. It would do him much good to go to India and devote himself to his profession; but then he did not want to go. Was it last of all or first of all that another motive came in, little Stella herself to wit, though she broke down so much in her attempts to imitate Lottie Seton’s ways, and was not amusing at all in that point of view? Stella had perhaps behaved better on that impromptu yachting trip than she was herself aware. Certainly she was far more guilty in the beginning of it than she herself allowed. But when the night was dark and the storm high, she had—what had she done? Behaved very well and made the men admire her pluck, or behaved very badly and frightened them—I cannot tell; anyhow, she had been very natural, she had done and said only what it came into her head to say and to do, without any affectation or thought of effect; and the sight of the little girl, very silly and yet so entirely herself, scolding them, upbraiding them, though she was indeed the most to blame, yet bearing her punishment not so badly after all and not without sympathy for them, had somehow penetrated Charles Somers’ very hardened heart. She was a nice little girl—she was a very pretty little girl—she was a creature one would not tire of even

if she was not amusing like Lottie Seton. If a man was to have anything more to do with her, it was to be hoped she never would be amusing like Lottie Seton. He paced along the downs he never knew how long, pondering these questions; but he was not a man very good at thinking. In the end he came to no more than a very much strengthened conviction that Stella Tredgold was a very pretty little girl.

CHAPTER XI

It shut the mouths of all the gossips, or rather it afforded a new but less exciting subject of comment, when it was known that Stella Tredgold had gone off on a visit to Steephill. I am not sure that Mrs. Shanks and Miss Mildmay did not feel themselves deceived a little. They had pledged themselves to Stella's championship in a moment of enthusiasm, stimulated thereto by a strong presumption of the hostility of Lady Jane. Miss Mildmay in particular had felt that she had a foeman worthy of her steel, and that it would be an enterprise worth her while to bring the girl out with flying colours from any boycotting or unfriendly action directed by the great lady of the district; and to find that Stella had been taken immediately under Lady Jane's wing disturbed her composure greatly. There was great talk over the railing between the ladies, and even, as it became a little too cold for these outdoor conferences, in the drawing-rooms in both houses, under the shade of the verandah which made these apartments a little dark and gloomy at this season of the year. But I must not occupy the reader's time with any account of these talks, for as a matter of fact the ladies had committed themselves and given their promise, which, though offended, they were too high-minded to take back. It conduced, however, to a general cooling of the atmosphere about them, that what everybody in Sliplin and the neighbourhood now discussed was not Stella's escapade, but Stella's visit to Steephill, where there was a large party assembled, and where her accomplices in that escapade were to be her fellow-guests. What did this mean was now the question demanded? Had Lady Jane any intentions in respect to Stella? Was there "anything between" her and either of these gentlemen? But this was a question to which no one as yet had any reply.

Stella herself was so much excited by the prospect that all thought of the previous adventure died out of her mind. Save at a garden party, she had never been privileged to enter Lady Jane's house except on the one occasion when she and Katherine stayed all night after a ball; and then there were many girls besides themselves, and no great attention paid to them. But to be the favoured guest, almost the young lady of the house, among a large company was a very different matter. Telegrams flew to right and left—to dressmakers, milliners, glovers, and I don't know how many more. Stevens, the maid, whom at present she shared with Katherine, but who was, of course, to accompany her to Steephill as her own separate attendant, was despatched to town after the telegrams with more detailed and close instructions. The girl shook off all thought both of her own adventure and of her companions in it. She already felt herself flying at higher game. There was a nephew of Lady Jane's, a young earl, who, it was known, was there, a much more important personage than any trumpety baronet. This she informed her father, to his great delight, as he gave her his paternal advice with much unction the evening before she went away.

"That's right, Stella," he said, "always fly at the highest—and them that has most money. This Sir Charles, I wager you anything, he is after you for your fortune. I dare say he hasn't a penny. He thinks he can come and hang up his hat and nothing more to do all his life. But he'll find he's a bit mistaken with me."

"It isn't very nice of you, papa," said Stella, "to think I am only run after because I have money—or because you have money, for not much of it comes to me."

"Ain't she satisfied with her allowance?" said the old gentleman, looking over Stella's head at her elder sister. "It's big enough. Your poor mother would have dressed herself and me and the whole family off half of what that little thing gets through. It is a deal better the money should be in my hands, my pet. And if any man comes after you, you may take your oath he shan't have you cheap. He'll have to put down shillin' for shillin', I can tell you. You find out which is the one that has the most money, and go for him. Bad's the best among all them new earls and things, but keep your eyes open, Stella, and mark the one that's best off." Here he gave utterance to a huge chuckle. "Most

people would think she would never find that out; looks as innocent as a daisy, don't she, Katie? But she's got the old stuff in her all the same."

"I don't know what you call the old stuff," said Stella, indignant; "it must be very nasty stuff. What does your horrid money do for me? I have not half enough to dress on, and you go over my bills with your spectacles as if I were Simmons, the cook. If you had a chest full of diamonds and rubies, and gave us a handful now and then, that is the kind of richness I should like; but I have no jewels at all," cried the girl, putting up her hand to her neck, which was encircled by a modest row of small pearls; "and they will all be in their diamonds and things."

Mr. Tredgold's countenance fell a little. "Is that true?" he said. "Katie, is that true?"

"Girls are not expected to wear diamonds," said Katie; "at least, I don't think so, papa."

"Oh, what does she know? That's all old-fashioned nowadays. Girls wear just whatever they can get to wear, and why shouldn't girls wear diamonds? Don't you think I should set them off better than Lady Jane, papa?" cried Stella, tossing her young head.

Mr. Tredgold was much amused by this question; he chuckled and laughed over it till he nearly lost his breath. "All the difference between parchment and white satin, ain't there, Katie? Well, I don't say as you mightn't have some diamonds. They're things that always keep their value. It's not a paying investment, but, anyhow, you're sure of your capital. They don't wear out, don't diamonds. So that's what you're after, Miss Stella. Just you mind what you're about, and don't send me any young fool without a penny in his pocket, but a man that can afford to keep you like you've been kept all your life. And I'll see about the jewels," Mr. Tredgold said.

The consequence of this conversation was that little Stella appeared at Steephill, notwithstanding her vapoury and girlish toilettes of white chiffon and other such airy fabrics, with a *rivière* of diamonds sparkling round her pretty neck, which, indeed, did them much greater justice than did Lady Jane. Ridiculous for a little girl, all the ladies said—but yet impressive more or less, and suggestive of illimitable wealth on the part of the foolish old man, who, quite unaware what was suitable, bedizened his little daughter like that. And Stella was excited by her diamonds and by the circumstances, and the fact that she was the youngest there, and the most fun; for who would expect fun from portly matrons or weather-beaten middle age, like Lady Jane's? To do her justice, she never or hardly ever thought, as she might very well have done, that she was the prettiest little person in the party. On the contrary, she was a little disposed to be envious of Lady Mary, the niece of Lady Jane and sister of the Earl, who was not pretty in the least, but who was tall, and had a figure which all the ladies' maids, including Stevens, admired much. "Oh, if you only was as tall as Lady Mary, Miss Stella," Stevens said. "Oh, I wish as you had that kind of figger—her waist ain't more than eighteen inches, for all as she's so tall." Stella had felt nearly disposed to cry over her inferiority. She was as light as a feather in her round and blooming youth, but she was not so slim as Lady Mary. It was a consolation to be able to say to herself that at least she was more fun.

Lady Mary, it turned out, was not fun at all; neither most surely was the young Earl. He talked to Stella, whom, and her diamonds, he approached gravely, feeling that the claims of beauty were as real as those of rank or personal importance, and that the qualification of youth was as worthy of being taken into consideration as that of age, for he was a philosopher about University Extension, and the great advantage it was to the lower classes to share the culture of those above them.

"Oh, I am sure I am not cultured at all," cried Stella. "I am as ignorant as a goose. I can't spell any big words, or do any of the things that people do."

"You must not expect to take me in with professions of ignorance," said the Earl with a smile. "I know how ladies read, and how much they do nowadays—perhaps in a different way from us, but just as important."

"Oh, no, no," cried Stella; "it is quite true, I can't spell a bit," and her eyes and her diamonds sparkled, and a certain radiance of red and white, sheen of satin, and shimmer of curls, and fun and audacity, and youth, made a sort of atmosphere round her, by which the grave youth, prematurely

burdened by the troubles of his country and the lower classes, felt dazzled and uneasy, as if too warm a sun was shining full upon him.

“Where’s a book?” cried Algy Scott, who sat by in the luxury of his convalescence. “Let’s try; I don’t believe any of you fellows could spell this any more than Miss Stella—here you are—sesquipedalian. Now, Miss Tredgold, there is your chance.”

Stella put her pretty head on one side, and her hands behind her. This was a sort of thing which she understood better than University Extension. “S-e-s,” she began, and then broke off. “Oh, what is the next syllable? Break it down into little, quite little syllables—*quip*—I know that, q-u-i-p. There, oh, help me, help me, someone!” There was quite a crush round the little shining, charming figure, as she turned from one to another in pretended distress, holding out her pretty hands. And then there were several tries, artificially unsuccessful, and the greatest merriment in the knot which surrounded Stella, thinking it all “great fun.” The Earl, with a smile on his face which was not so superior as he thought, but a little tinged by the sense of being “out of it,” was edged outside of this laughing circle, and Lady Mary came and placed her arm within his to console him. The brother and sister lingered for a moment looking on with a disappointed chill, though they were so superior; but it became clear to his lordship from that moment, though with a little envy in the midst of the shock and disapproval, that Stella Tredgold, unable to spell and laughing over it with all those fellows, was not the heroine for him.

Lady Jane, indeed, would have been both angry and disappointed had the case turned out otherwise; for her nephew was not poor and did not stand in need of any *mésalliance*, whereas she had planned the whole affair for Charlie Somers’ benefit and no other. And, indeed, the plan worked very well. Sir Charles had no objection at all to the *rôle* assigned him. Stella did not require to be approached with any show of deference or devotion; she was quite willing to be treated as a chum, to respond to a call more curt than reverential. “I say, come on and see the horses.” “Look here, Miss Tredgold, let’s have a stroll before lunch.” “Come along and look at the puppies.” These were the kind of invitations addressed to her; and Stella came along tripping, buttoning up her jacket, putting on a cap, the first she could find, upon her fluffy hair. She was *bon camarade*, and did not “go in for sentiment.” It was she who was the first to call him Charlie, as she had been on the eve of doing several times in the Lottie Seton days, which now looked like the age before the Flood to this pair.

“Fancy only knowing you through that woman,” cried Stella; “and you should have heard how she bullied me after that night of the sail!”

“Jealous,” said Sir Charles in his moustache. “Never likes to lose any fellow she knows.”

“But she was not losing you!” cried Stella with much innocence. “What harm could it do to her that you spent one evening with—anyone else?”

“Knows better than that, does Lottie,” the laconic lover said.

“Oh, stuff!” cried Stella. “It was only to make herself disagreeable. But she never was any friend of mine.”

“Not likely. Lottie knows a thing or two. Not so soft as all that. Put you in prison if she could—push you out of her way.”

“But I was never in her way,” cried Stella.

At which Sir Charles laughed loud and long. “Tell you what it is—as bad as Lottie. Can’t have you talk to fellows like Uppin’ton. Great prig, not your sort at all. Call myself your sort, Stella, eh? Since anyhow you’re mine.”

“I don’t know what you mean by your sort,” Stella said, but with downcast eyes.

“Yes, you do—chums—always get on. Awf’lly fond of you, don’t you know? Eh? Marriage awf’l bore, but can’t be helped. Look here! Off to India if you won’t have me,” the wooer said.

“Oh, Charlie!”

“Fact; can’t stand it here any more—except you’d have me, Stella.”

“I don’t want,” said Stella with a little gasp, “to have any one—just now.”

“Not surprised,” said Sir Charles, “marriage awf’l bore. Glad regiment’s ordered off; no good in England now. Knock about in India; get knocked on the head most likely. No fault of yours—if you can’t cotton to it, little girl.”

“Oh, Charlie! but I don’t want you to go to India,” Stella said.

“Well, then, keep me here. There are no two ways of it,” he said more distinctly than usual, holding out his hand.

And Stella put her hand with a little hesitation into his. She was not quite sure she wanted to do so. But she did not want him to go away. And though marriage was an awf’l bore, the preparations for it were “great fun.” And he was her sort—they were quite sure to get on. She liked him better than any of the others, far better than that prig, Uffington, though he was an earl. And it would be nice on the whole to be called my Lady, and not Miss any longer. And Charlie was very nice; she liked him far better than any of the others. That was the refrain of Stella’s thoughts as she turned over in her own room all she had done. To be married at twenty is pleasant too. Some girls nowadays do not marry till thirty or near it, when they are almost decrepit. That was what would happen to Kate; if, indeed, she ever married at all. Stella’s mind then jumped to a consideration of the wedding presents and who would give her—what, and then to her own appearance in her wedding dress, walking down the aisle of the old church. What a fuss all the Stanleys would be in about the decorations; and then there were the bridesmaids to be thought of. Decidedly the preliminaries would be great fun. Then, of course, afterwards she would be presented and go into society—real society—not this mere country house business. On the whole there was a great deal that was desirable in it, all round.

“Now have over the little prim one for me,” said Algy Scott. “I say, cousin Jane, you owe me that much. It was I that really suffered for that little thing’s whim—and to get no good of it; while Charlie—no, I don’t want this one, the little prim one for my money. If you are going to have a dance to end off with, have her over for me.”

“I may have her over, but not for you, my boy,” said Lady Jane. “I have the fear of your mother before my eyes, if you haven’t. A little Tredgold girl for my Lady Scott! No, thank you, Algy, I am not going to fly in your mother’s face, whatever you may do.”

“Somebody will have to fly in her face sooner or later,” Algy said composedly; “and, mind you, my mother would like to tread gold as well as any one.”

“Don’t abandon every principle, Algy. I can forgive anything but a pun.”

“It’s such a very little one,” he said.

And Lady Jane did ask Katherine to the dance, who was very much bewildered by the state of affairs, by her sister’s engagement, which everybody knew about, and the revolution which had taken place in everything, without the least intimation being conveyed to those most concerned. Captain Scott’s attentions to herself were the least of her thoughts. She was impatient of the ball—impatient of further delay. Would it all be so easy as Stella thought? Would the old man, as they called him, take it with as much delight as was expected? She pushed Algy away from her mind as if he had been a fly in the great preoccupations of her thoughts.

CHAPTER XII

“Bravo, Charlie!” said Lady Jane. “I never knew anything better or quicker done. My congratulations! You have proved yourself a man of sense and business. Now you’ve got to tackle the old man.”

“Nothin’ of th’ sort,” said Sir Charles, with a dull blush covering all that was not hair of his countenance. “Sweet on little girl. Like her awf’ly; none of your business for me.”

“So much the better, and I respect you all the more; but now comes the point at which you have really to show yourself a hero and a man of mettle—the old father—”

Sir Charles walked the whole length of the great drawing-room and back again. He pulled at his moustache till it seemed likely that it might come off. He thrust one hand deep into his pocket, putting up the corresponding shoulder. “Ah!” he said with a long-drawn breath, “there’s the rub.” He was not aware that he was quoting anyone, but yet would have felt more or less comforted by the thought that a fellow in his circumstances might have said the same thing before him.

“Yes, there’s the rub indeed,” said his sympathetic but amused friend and backer-up. “Stella is the apple of his eye.”

“Shows sense in that.”

“Well, perhaps,” said Lady Jane doubtfully. She thought the little prim one might have had a little consideration too, being partially enlightened as to a certain attractiveness in Katherine through the admiration of Algy Scott. “Anyhow, it will make it all the harder. But that’s doubtful too. He will probably like his pet child to be Lady Somers, which sounds very well. Anyhow, you must settle it with him at once. I can’t let it be said that I let girls be proposed to in my house, and that afterwards the men don’t come up to the scratch.”

“Not my way,” said Sir Charles. “Never refuse even it were a harder jump than that.”

“Oh, you don’t know how hard a jump it is till you try,” said Lady Jane. But she did not really expect that it would be hard. That old Tredgold should not be pleased with such a marriage for his daughter did not occur to either of them. Of course Charlie Somers was poor; if he had been rich it was not at all likely that he would have wanted to marry Stella; but Lady Somers was a pretty title, and no doubt the old man would desire to have his favourite child so distinguished. Lady Jane was an extremely sensible woman, and as likely to estimate the people round her at their just value as anybody I know; but she could not get it out of her head that to be hoisted into society was a real advantage, however it was accomplished, whether by marriage or in some other way. Was she right? was she wrong? Society is made up of very silly people, but also there the best are to be met, and there is something in the Freemasonry within these imaginary boundaries which is attractive to the wistful imagination without. But was Mr. Tredgold aware of these advantages, or did he know even what it was, or that his daughters were not in it? This was what Lady Jane did not know. Somers, it need not be said, did not think on the subject. What he thought of was that old Tredgold’s money would enable him to marry, to fit out his old house as it ought to be, and restore it to its importance in his county, and, in the first place of all, would prevent the necessity of going to India with his regiment. This, indeed, was the first thing in his mind, after the pleasure of securing Stella, which, especially since all the men in the house had so flattered and ran after her, had been very gratifying to him. He loved her as well as he understood love or she either. They were on very equal terms.

Katherine did not give him any very warm reception when the exciting news was communicated to her; but then Katherine was the little prim one, and not effusive to any one. “She is always like that,” Stella had said—“a stick! but she’ll stand up for me, whatever happens, all the same.”

“I say,” cried Sir Charles alarmed—“think it’ll be a hard job, eh? with the old man, don’t you know?”

“You will please,” said Stella with determination, “speak more respectfully of papa. I don’t know if it’ll be a hard job or not—but you’re big enough for that, or anything, I hope.”

“Oh, I’m big enough,” he said; but there was a certain faltering in his tone.

He did not drive with the two girls on their return to the Cliff the morning after the ball, but walked in to Sliplin the five miles to pull himself together. He had no reason that he knew of to feel anxious. The girl—it was by this irreverent title that he thought of her, though he was so fond of her—liked him, and her father, it was reported, saw everything with Stella’s eyes. She was the one that he favoured in everything. No doubt it was she who would have the bulk of his fortune. Sir Charles magnanimously resolved that he would not see the other wronged—that she should always have her share, whatever happened. He remembered long afterwards the aspect of the somewhat muddy road, and the hawthorn hedges with the russet leaves hanging to them still, and here and there a bramble with the intense red of a leaf lighting up the less brilliant colour. Yes, she should always have her share! He had a half-conscious feeling that to form so admirable a resolution would do him good in the crisis that was about to come.

Mr. Tredgold stood at the door to meet his daughters when they came home, very glad to see them, and to know that everybody was acquainted with the length of Stella’s stay at Steephill, and the favour shown her by Lady Jane, and delighted to have them back also, and to feel that these two pretty creatures—and especially the prettiest of the two—were his own private property, though there were no girls like them, far or near. “Well,” he said, “so here you are back again—glad to be back again I’ll be bound, though you’ve been among all the grandees! Nothing like home, is there, Stella, after all?” (He said ‘ome, alas! and Stella felt it as she had never done before.) “Well, you are very welcome to your old pa. Made a great sensation, did you, little ‘un, diamonds and all? How did the diamonds go down, eh, Stella? You must give them to me to put in my safe, for they’re not safe, valuable things like that, with you.”

“Dear papa, do you think all that of the diamonds?” said Stella. “They are only little things—nothing to speak of. You should have seen the diamonds at Steephill. If you think they are worth putting in the safe, pray do so; but I should not think of giving you the trouble. Well, we didn’t come back to think of the safe and my little *rivière*, did we, Kate? As for that, the pendant you have given her is handsomer of its kind, papa.”

“Couldn’t leave Katie out, could I? when I was giving you such a thing as that?” said Mr. Tredgold a little confused.

“Oh, I hope you don’t think I’m jealous,” cried Stella. “Kate doesn’t have things half nice enough. She ought to have them nicer than mine, for she is the eldest. We amused ourselves very well, thank you, papa. Kate couldn’t move without Algy Scott after her wherever she turned. You’ll have him coming over here to make love to you, papa.”

“I think you might say a word of something a great deal more important, Stella.”

“Oh, let me alone with your seriousness. Papa will hear of that fast enough, when you know Charlie is— I’m going upstairs to take off my things. I’ll bring the diamonds if I can remember,” she added, pausing for a moment at the door and waving her hand to her father, who followed her with delighted eyes.

“What a saucy little thing she is!” he said. “You and I have a deal to put up with from that little hussy, Katie, haven’t we? But there aren’t many like her all the same, are there? We shouldn’t like it if we were to lose her. She keeps everything going with her impudent little ways.”

“You are in great danger of losing her, papa. There is a man on the road—”

“What’s that—what’s that, Katie? A man that is after my Stella? A man to rob me of my little girl? Well, I like ‘em to come after her, I like to see her with a lot at her feet. And who’s this one? The man with a handle to his name?”

“Yes; I suppose you would call it a handle. It was one of the men that were out in the boat with her—Sir Charles—”

“Oh!” said Mr. Tredgold, with his countenance falling. “And why didn’t the t’other one—his lordship—come forward? I don’t care for none of your Sir Charleses—reminds me of a puppy, that name.”

“The puppies are King Charles’s, papa. I don’t know why the Earl did not come forward; because he didn’t want to, I suppose. And, indeed, he was not Stella’s sort at all.”

“Stella’s sort! Stella’s sort!” cried the old man. “What right has Stella to have a sort when she might have got a crown to put on her pretty head. Coronet? Yes, I know; it’s all the same. And where is this fellow? Do you mean that you brought him in my carriage, hiding him somewhere between your petticoats? I will soon settle your Sir Charles, unless he can settle shilling to shilling down.”

“Sir Charles is walking,” said Katherine; “and, papa, please to remember that Stella is fond of him, she is really fond of him; she is—in love with him. At least I think so, otherwise— You would not do anything to make Stella unhappy, papa?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.