Anstey F.

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Содержание

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PREFACE

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F. A.

THE TALKING HORSE

It was on the way to Sandown Park that I met him first, on that horribly wet July afternoon when Bendigo won the Eclipse Stakes. He sat opposite to me in the train going down, and my attention was first attracted to him by the marked contrast between his appearance and his attire: he had not thought fit to adopt the regulation costume for such occasions, and I think I never saw a man who had made himself more aggressively horsey. The mark of the beast was sprinkled over his linen: he wore snaffle sleeve-links, a hard hunting-hat, a Newmarket coat, and extremely tight trousers. And with all this, he fell as far short of the genuine sportsman as any stage super who ever wore his spurs upside down in a hunting-chorus. His expression was mild and inoffensive, and his watery pale eyes and receding chin gave one the idea that he was hardly to be trusted astride anything more spirited than a gold-headed cane. And yet, somehow, he aroused compassion rather than any sense of the ludicrous: he had that look of shrinking self-effacement which comes of a recent humiliation, and, in spite of all extravagances, he was obviously a gentleman; while something in his manner indicated that his natural tendency would, once at all events, have been to avoid any kind of extremes.

He puzzled and interested me so much that I did my best to enter into conversation with him, only to be baffled by the jerky

embarrassment with which he met all advances, and when we got out at Esher, curiosity led me to keep him still in view.

Evidently he had not come with any intention of making money. He avoided the grand stand, with the bookmakers huddling in couples, like hoarse lovebirds; he kept away from the members' inclosure, where the Guards' band was endeavouring to defy the elements which emptied their vials into the brazen instruments; he drifted listlessly about the course till the clearing-bell rang, and it seemed as if he was searching for some one whom he only wished to discover in order to avoid.

Sandown, it must be admitted, was not as gay as usual that day, with its 'deluged park' and 'unsummer'd sky,' its waterproofed toilettes and massed umbrellas, whose sides gleamed livid as they caught the light – but there was a general determination to ignore the unseasonable dampness as far as possible, and an excitement over the main event of the day which no downpour could quench.

The Ten Thousand was run: ladies with marvellously confected bonnets lowered their umbrellas without a murmur, and smart men on drags shook hands effusively as, amidst a frantic roar of delight, Bendigo strode past the post. The moment after, I looked round for my incongruous stranger, and saw him engaged in a well-meant attempt to press a currant bun upon a carriage-horse tethered to one of the trees – a feat of abstraction which, at such a time, was only surpassed by that of Archimedes at the sack of Syracuse.

After that I could no longer control my curiosity – I felt I

must speak to him again, and I made an opportunity later, as we stood alone on a stand which commanded the finish of one of the shorter courses, by suggesting that he should share my umbrella.

Before accepting he glanced suspiciously at me through the rills that streamed from his unprotected hat-brim. 'I'm afraid,' I said, 'it is rather like shutting the stable-door after the steed is stolen.'

He started. 'He *was* stolen, then,' he cried; 'so you have heard?'

I explained that I had only used an old proverb which I thought might appeal to him, and he sighed heavily.

'I was misled for the moment,' he said: 'you have guessed, then, that I have been accustomed to horses?'

'You have hardly made any great secret of it.'

'The fact is,' he said, instantly understanding this allusion to his costume, 'I – I put on these things so as not to lose the habit of riding altogether – I have not been on horseback lately. At one time I used to ride constantly – constantly. I was a regular attendant in Rotten Row – until something occurred which shook my nerve, and I am only waiting now for the shock to subside.'

I did not like to ask any questions, and we walked back to the station, and travelled up to Waterloo in company, without any further reference to the subject.

As we were parting, however, he said, 'I wonder if you would care to hear my full story some day? I cannot help thinking it would interest you, and it would be a relief to me.'

I was ready enough to hear whatever he chose to tell me; and

persuaded him to dine with me at my rooms that evening, and unbosom himself afterwards, which he did to an extent for which I confess I was unprepared.

That he himself implicitly believed in his own story, I could not doubt; and he told it throughout with the oddest mixture of vanity and modesty, and an obvious struggle between a dim perception of his own absurdity and the determination to spare himself in no single particular, which, though it did not overcome my scepticism, could not fail to enlist sympathy. But for all that, by the time he entered upon the more sensational part of his case, I was driven to form conclusions respecting it which, as they will probably force themselves upon the reader's own mind, I need not anticipate here.

I give the story, as far as possible, in the words of its author; and have only to add that it would never have been published here without his full consent and approval.

'My name,' said he, 'is Gustavus Pulvertoft. I have no occupation, and six hundred a year. I lived a quiet and contented bachelor until I was twenty-eight, and then I met Diana Chetwynd for the first time. We were spending Christmas at the same country-house, and it did not take me long to become the most devoted of her many adorers. She was one of the most variously accomplished girls I had ever met. She was a skilled musician, a brilliant amateur actress; she could give most men thirty out of a hundred at billiards, and her judgment and daring across the most difficult country had won her the warm

admiration of all hunting-men. And she was neither fast nor horsey, seeming to find but little pleasure in the society of mere sportsmen, to whose conversation she infinitely preferred that of persons who, like myself, were rather agreeable than athletic. I was not at that time, whatever I may be now, without my share of good looks, and for some reason it pleased Miss Chetwynd to show me a degree of favour which she accorded to no other member of the house-party.

It was annoying to feel that my unfamiliarity with the open-air sports in which she delighted debarred me from her company to so great an extent; for it often happened that I scarcely saw her until the evening, when I sometimes had the bliss of sitting next to her at dinner; but on these occasions I could not help seeing that she found some pleasure in my society.

I don't think I have mentioned that, besides being exquisitely lovely, Diana was an heiress, and it was not without a sense of my own presumption that I allowed myself to entertain the hope of winning her at some future day. Still, I was not absolutely penniless, and she was her own mistress, and I had some cause, as I have said, for believing that she was, at least, not ill-disposed towards me. It seemed a favourable sign, for instance, when she asked me one day why it was I never rode. I replied that I had not ridden for years – though I did not add that the exact number of those years was twenty-eight.

'Oh, but you must take it up again!' she said, with the prettiest air of imperiousness. 'You ought to ride in the Row next season.'

'If I did,' I said, 'would you let me ride with you sometimes?'

'We should meet, of course,' she said; 'and it is such a pity not to keep up your riding – you lose so much by not doing so.'

Was I wrong in taking this as an intimation that, by following her advice, I should not lose my reward? If you had seen her face as she spoke, you would have thought as I did then – as I do now.

And so, with this incentive, I overcame any private misgivings, and soon after my return to town attended a fashionable riding-school near Hyde Park, with the fixed determination to acquire the whole art and mystery of horsemanship.

That I found learning a pleasure I cannot conscientiously declare. I have passed happier hours than those I spent in cantering round four bare whitewashed walls on a snorting horse, with my interdicted stirrups crossed upon the saddle. The riding-master informed me from time to time that I was getting on, and I knew instinctively when I was coming off; but I must have made some progress, for my instructor became more encouraging. 'Why, when you come here first, Mr. Pulvertoft, sir, you were like a pair o' tongs on a wall, as they say; whereas now – well, you can tell yourself how you are,' he would say; though, even then, I occasionally had reason to regret that I was *not* on a wall. However, I persevered, inspired by the thought that each fresh horse I crossed (and some were very fresh indeed) represented one more barrier surmounted between myself and Diana, and encouraged by the discovery, after repeated experiments, that tan was rather soothing to fall upon than otherwise.

When I walked in the Row, where a few horsemen were performing as harbingers of spring, I criticised their riding, which I thought indifferent, as they neglected nearly all the rules. I began to anticipate a day when I should exhibit a purer and more classic style of equestrianism. And one morning I saw Diana, who pulled up her dancing mare to ask me if I had remembered her advice, and I felt proudly able to reply that I should certainly make my appearance in the Row before very long.

From that day I was perpetually questioning my riding-master as to when he considered I should be ripe enough for Rotten Row. He was dubious, but not actually dissuasive. 'It's like this, you see, sir,' he explained, 'if you get hold of a quiet, steady horse – why, you won't come to no harm; but if you go out on an animal that will take advantage of you, Mr. Pulvertoft, why, you'll be all no-how on him, sir.'

They would have mounted me at the school; but I knew most of the stud there, and none of them quite came up to my ideal of a 'quiet, steady horse;' so I went to a neighbouring job-master, from whom I had occasionally hired a brougham, and asked to be shown an animal he could recommend to one who had not had much practice lately. He admitted candidly enough that most of his horses 'took a deal of riding,' but added that it so happened that he had one just then which would suit me 'down to the ground' – a phrase which grated unpleasantly on my nerves, though I consented to see the horse. His aspect impressed me most favourably. He was a chestnut of noble proportions, with

a hogged mane; but what reassured me was the expression of his eye, indicating as it did a self-respect and sagacity which one would hardly expect for seven and sixpence an hour.

'You won't get a showier Park 'ack than what he is, not to be so quiet,' said his owner. 'He's what you may call a kind 'oss, and as gentle – you could ride him on a packthread.'

I considered reins safer, but I was powerfully drawn towards the horse: he seemed to me to be sensible that he had a character to lose, and to possess too high an intelligence wilfully to forfeit his testimonials. With hardly a second thought, I engaged him for the following afternoon.

I mounted at the stables, with just a passing qualm, perhaps, while my stirrup-leathers were being adjusted, and a little awkwardness in taking up my reins, which were more twisted than I could have wished; however, at length, I found myself embarked on the stream of traffic on the back of the chestnut – whose name, by the way, was Brutus.

Shall I ever forget the pride and ecstasy of finding that I had my steed under perfect control, that we threaded the maze of carriages with absolute security? I turned him into the Park, and clucked my tongue: he broke into a canter, and how shall I describe my delight at the discovery that it was not uncomfortable? I said 'Woa,' and he stopped, so gradually that my equilibrium was not seriously disturbed; he trotted, and still I accommodated myself to his movements without any positive inconvenience. I could have embraced him for gratitude: never

before had I been upon a beast whose paces were so easy, whose behaviour was so considerate. I could ride at last! or, which amounted to the same thing, I could ride the horse I was on, and I would 'use no other.' I was about to meet Diana Chetwynd, and need not fear even to encounter her critical eyes.

We had crossed the Serpentine bridge, and were just turning in upon the Ride, when – and here I am only too conscious that what I am about to say may strike you as almost incredible – when I heard an unfamiliar voice addressing me with, 'I say – you!' and the moment afterwards realised that it proceeded from my own horse!

I am not ashamed to own that I was as nearly off as possible; for a more practised rider than I could pretend to be might have a difficulty in preserving his equanimity in this all but unparalleled situation. I was too much engaged in feeling for my left stirrup to make any reply, and presently the horse spoke once more. 'I say,' he inquired, and I failed to discern the slightest trace of respect in his tone – 'do you think you can ride?' You can judge for yourself how disconcerting the inquiry must have been from such lips: I felt rooted to the saddle – a sensation which, with me, was sufficiently rare. I looked round in helpless bewilderment, at the shimmering Serpentine, and the white houses in Park Lane gleaming out of a lilac haze, at the cocoa-coloured Row, and the flash of distant carriage-wheels in the sunlight: all looked as usual – and yet, there was I on the back of a horse which had just inquired 'whether I thought I could ride'!

'I have had two dozen lessons at a riding-school,' I said at last, with rather a flabby dignity.

'I should hardly have suspected it,' was his brutal retort. 'You are evidently one of the hopeless cases.'

I was deeply hurt, the more so because I could not deny that he had some claim to be a judge. 'I – I thought we were getting on so nicely together,' I faltered, and all he said in reply to that was, '*Did* you?'

'Do you know,' I began, striving to be conversational, 'I never was on a horse that talked before.'

'You are enough to make any horse talk,' he answered; 'but I suppose I *am* an exception.'

'I think you must be,' said I. 'The only horses I ever heard of as possessing the gift of speech were the Houyhnhnms.'

'How do you know I am not one of them?' he replied.

'If you are, you will understand that I took the liberty of mounting you under a very pardonable mistake; and if you will have the goodness to stand still, I will no longer detain you.'

'Not so fast,' said he: 'I want to know something more about you first. I should say now you were a man with plenty of oats.'

'I am – well off,' I said. How I wished I was!

'I have long been looking out for a proprietor who would not overwork me: now, of course, I don't know, but you scarcely strike me as a *hard* rider.'

'I do not think I could be fairly accused of that,' I answered, with all the consciousness of innocence.

'Just so – then buy me.'

'No,' I gasped: 'after the extremely candid opinion you were good enough to express of my riding, I'm surprised that you should even suggest such a thing.'

'Oh, I will put up with that – you will suit me well enough, I dare say.'

'You must excuse me. I prefer to keep my spare cash for worthier objects; and, with your permission, I will spend the remainder of the afternoon on foot.'

'You will do nothing of the sort,' said he.

'If you won't stop, and let me get off properly,' I said with firmness, 'I shall *roll* off.' There were some promenaders within easy hail; but how was I to word a call for help, how explain such a dilemma as mine?

'You will only reduce me to the painful necessity of rolling on you,' he replied. 'You must see that you are to a certain extent in my power. Suppose it occurred to me to leap those rails and take you into the Serpentine, or to run away and upset a mounted policeman with you – do you think you could offer much opposition?'

I could not honestly assert that I did. 'You were introduced to me,' I said reproachfully, 'as a *kind* horse!'

'And so I am – apart from matters of business. Come, will you buy, or be bolted with? I hate indecision!'

'Buy!' I said, with commercial promptness. 'If you will take me back, I will arrange about it at once.'

It is needless to say that my one idea was to get safely off his back: after which, neither honour nor law could require me to execute a contract extorted from me by threats. But, as we were going down the mews, he said reflectively, 'I've been thinking – it will be better for all parties, if you make your offer to my proprietor *before* you dismount.' I was too vexed to speak: this animal's infernal intelligence had foreseen my manœuvre – he meant to foil it, if he could.

And then we clattered in under the glass-roofed yard of the livery stables; and the job-master, who was alone there, cast his eyes up at the sickly-faced clock, as if he were comparing its pallor with my own. 'Why, you *are* home early, sir,' he said. 'You didn't find the 'orse too much for you, did you?' He said this without any suspicion of the real truth; and, indeed, I may say, once for all, that this weird horse – Houyhnhnm, or whatever else he might be – admitted no one but myself into the secret of his marvellous gifts, and in all his conversations with me, managed (though how, I cannot pretend to say) to avoid being overheard.

'Oh, dear no,' I protested, 'he carried me admirably – admirably!' and I made an attempt to slip off.

No such thing: Brutus instantly jogged my memory, and me, by the slightest suggestion of a 'buck.'

'He's a grand 'orse, sir, isn't he?' said the job-master complacently.

'M – magnificent!' I agreed, with a jerk. 'Will you go to his head, please?'

But the horse backed into the centre of the yard, where he plunged with a quiet obstinacy. 'I like him so much,' I called out, as I clung to the saddle, 'that I want to know if you're at all inclined to part with him?' Here Brutus became calm and attentive.

'Would you be inclined to make me a orfer for him, sir?'

'Yes,' I said faintly. 'About how much would he be?'

'You step into my orfice here, sir,' said he, 'and we'll talk it over.'

I should have been only too willing, for there was no room there for the horse, but the suspicious animal would not hear of it: he began to revolve immediately.

'Let us settle it now – here,' I said, 'I can't wait.'

The job-master stroked away a grin. No doubt there *was* something unbusinesslike and unpractical in such precipitation, especially as combined with my appearance at the time.

'Well, you *'ave* took a voilent fancy to the 'orse and no mistake, sir,' he remarked.

'I never crossed a handsomer creature,' I said; which was hardly a prudent remark for an intending purchaser, but then, there was the animal himself to be conciliated.

'I don't know, really, as I can do without him just at this time of year,' said the man. 'I'm under-'orsed as it is for the work I've got to do.'

A sweet relief stole over me: I had done all that could be expected of me. 'I'm very sorry to hear that,' I said, preparing

to dismount. 'That *is* a disappointment; but if you can't there's an end of it.'

'Don't you be afraid,' said Brutus, '*he'll* sell me readily enough: make him an offer, quick!'

'I'll give you thirty guineas for him, come!' I said, knowing well enough that he would not take twice the money.

'I thought a gentleman like you would have had more insight into the value of a 'orse,' he said: 'why, his action alone is worth that, sir.'

'You couldn't let me have the action without the horse, I suppose?' I said, and I must have intended some joke.

It is unnecessary to prolong a painful scene. Brutus ran me up steadily from sum to sum, until his owner said at last: 'Well, we won't 'aggle, sir, call it a hundred.'

I had to call it a hundred, and what is more, it *was* a hundred. I took him without a warranty, without even a veterinary opinion. I could have been induced to take my purchase away then and there, as if I had been buying a canary, so unaccustomed was I to transactions of this kind, and I am afraid the job-master considered me little better than a fool.

So I found myself the involuntary possessor of a Houyhnhnm, or something even worse, and I walked back to my rooms in Park Street in a state of stupor. What was I to do with him? To ride an animal so brutally plainspoken would be a continual penance; and yet, I should have to keep him, for I knew he was cunning enough to outwit any attempt to dispose of him. And to this, Love and

Ambition had led me! I could not, after all I had said, approach Diana with any confidence as a mere pedestrian: the fact that I was in possession of a healthy horse which I never rode, would be sure to leak out in time, and how was I to account for it? I could see no way, and I groaned under an embarrassment which I dared not confide to the friendliest ear. I hated the monster that had saddled himself upon me, and looked in vain for any mode of escape.

I had to provide Brutus with stabling in another part of the town, for he proved exceedingly difficult to please: he found fault with everything, and I only wonder he did not demand that his stable should be fitted up with blue china and mezzotints. In his new quarters I left him for some days to his own devices: a course which I was glad to find, on visiting him again, had considerably reduced his arrogance. He wanted to go in the Row and see the other horses, and it did not at all meet his views to be exercised there by a stableman at unfashionable hours. So he proposed a compromise. If I would only consent to mount him, he engaged to treat me with forbearance, and pointed out that he could give me, as he expressed it, various 'tips' which would improve my seat. I was not blind to the advantages of such an arrangement. It is not every one who secures a riding-master in the person of his own horse; the horse is essentially a generous animal, and I felt that I might trust to Brutus's honour. And to do him justice, he observed the compact with strict good faith. Some of his 'tips,' it is true, very nearly tipped me off, but their result was to bring

us closer together; our relations were less strained; it seemed to me that I gained more mastery over him every day, and was less stiff afterwards.

But I was not allowed to enjoy this illusion long. One day when I innocently asked him if he found my hands improving, he turned upon me his off sardonic eye. 'You'll *never* improve, old sack-of-beans' (for he had come to address me with a freedom I burned to resent); 'hands! why, you're sawing my mouth off all the time. And your feet "home," and tickling me under my shoulders at every stride – why, I'm half ashamed to be seen about with you.'

I was deeply hurt. 'I will spare you for the future,' I said coldly; 'this is my last appearance.'

'Nonsense,' he said, 'you needn't show temper over it. Surely, if I can put up with it, *you* can! But we will make a new compact.' (I never knew such a beast as he was for bargains!) 'You only worry me by interfering with the reins. Let 'em out, and leave everything to me. Just mention from time to time where you want to go, and I'll attend to it, – if I've nothing better to do.'

I felt that such an understanding was destructive of all dignity, subverting, as it did, the natural relations between horse and rider; but I had hardly any self-respect left, and I consented, since I saw no way of refusing. And on the whole, I cannot say, even now, that I had any grave reason for finding fault with the use Brutus made of my concessions; he showed more tact than I could have expected in disguising the merely nominal nature of my

authority.

I had only one serious complaint against him, which was that he had a habit of breaking suddenly away, with a merely formal apology, to exchange equine civilities with some cob or mare, to whose owner I was a perfect stranger, thus driving me to invent the most desperate excuses to cover my seeming intrusion: but I managed to account for it in various ways, and even made a few acquaintances in this irregular and involuntary manner. I could have wished he had been a less susceptible animal, for, though his flirtations were merely Platonic, it is rather humiliating to have to play 'gooseberry' to one's own horse – a part which I was constantly being called upon to perform!

As it happened, Diana was away in Paris that Easter, and we had not met since my appearance in the Row; but I knew she would be in town again shortly, and with consummate diplomacy I began to excite Brutus's curiosity by sundry careless, half-slighting allusions to Miss Chetwynd's little mare, Wild Rose. 'She's too frisky for my taste,' I said, 'but she's been a good deal admired, though I dare say you wouldn't be particularly struck by her.'

So that, on the first afternoon of Diana's return to the Row, I found it easy, under cover of giving Brutus an opportunity of forming an opinion, to prevail on him to carry me to her side. Diana, who was with a certain Lady Verney, her chaperon, welcomed me with a charming smile.

'I had no idea you could ride so well,' she said, 'you manage

that beautiful horse of yours so very easily – with such light hands, too.'

This was not irony, for I could now give my whole mind to my seat; and, as I never interfered at all with the steering apparatus, my hands must have seemed the perfection of lightness.

'He wants delicate handling,' I answered carelessly, 'but he goes very well with *me*.'

'I wish you would let me try his paces some morning, Pulvertoft,' struck in a Colonel Cockshott, who was riding with them, and whom I knew slightly: 'I've a notion he would go better on the curb.'

'I shall be very happy,' I began, when, just in time, I noticed a warning depression in Brutus's ears. The Colonel rode about sixteen stone, and with spurs! 'I mean,' I added hastily, 'I should have been – only, to tell you the truth, I couldn't conscientiously trust any one on him but myself.'

'My dear fellow!' said the Colonel, who I could see was offended, 'I've not met many horses in my time that I couldn't get upon terms with.'

'I think Mr. Pulvertoft is *quite* right,' said Diana. 'When a horse gets accustomed to one he does so resent a strange hand: it spoils his temper for days. I never will lend Wild Rose to anybody for that very reason!'

The Colonel fell back in the rear in a decided sulk. 'Poor dear Colonel Cockshott!' said Diana, 'he is so proud of his riding, but *I* think he dragoons a horse. I don't call that *riding*, do you?'

'Well – hardly,' I agreed, with easy disparagement. 'I never believe in ruling a horse by fear.'

'I suppose you are very fond of yours?' she said.

'Fond is not the word!' I exclaimed – and it certainly was not.

'I am not sure that what I said about lending Wild Rose would apply to *you*,' she said. 'I think you would be gentle with her.'

I was certain that I should treat her with all consideration; but as I doubted whether she would wholly reciprocate it, I said with much presence of mind, that I should regard riding her as akin to profanation.

As Brutus and I were going home, he observed that it was a good thing I had not agreed to lend him to the Colonel.

'Yes,' I said, determined to improve the occasion, 'you might not have found him as considerate as – well, as some people!'

'I meant it was a good thing for *you*!' he hinted darkly, and I did not care to ask for an explanation. 'What did you mean,' he resumed, 'by saying that I should not admire Wild Rose? Why, she is charming – charming!'

'In that case,' I said, 'I don't mind riding with her mistress occasionally – to oblige you.'

'You don't mind!' he said; 'you will *have* to, my boy, – and every afternoon!'

I suppressed a chuckle: after all, man *is* the nobler animal. I could manage a horse – in my own way. My little *ruse* had succeeded: I should have no more forced introductions to mystified strangers.

And now for some weeks my life passed in a happy dream. I only lived for those hours in the Row, where Brutus turned as naturally to Wild Rose as the sunflower to the sun, and Diana and I grew more intimate every day. Happiness and security made me almost witty. I was merciless in my raillery of the eccentric exhibitions of horsemanship which were to be met with, and Diana was provoked by my comments to the sweetest silvery laughter. As for Colonel Cockshott, whom I had once suspected of a desire to be my rival, he had long become a 'negligible quantity;' and if I delayed in asking Diana to trust me with her sweet self, it was only because I found an epicurean pleasure in prolonging a suspense that was so little uncertain.

And then, without warning, my riding was interrupted for a while. Brutus was discovered, much to his annoyance, to have a saddle-raw, and was even so unjust as to lay the blame on me, though, for my own part, I thought it a mark of apt, though tardy, retribution. I was not disposed to tempt Fortune upon any other mount, but I could not keep away from the Row, nevertheless, and appeared there on foot. I saw Diana riding with the Colonel, who seemed to think his opportunity had come at last; but whenever she passed the railings on which I leaned, she would raise her eyebrows and draw her mouth down into a little curve of resigned boredom, which completely reassured me. Still, I was very glad when Brutus was well again, and we were cantering down the Row once more, both in the highest spirits.

'I never heard the horses here *whinny* so much as they do this

season,' I said, by way of making conversation. 'Can you account for it at all?' For he sometimes gave me pieces of information which enabled me to impress Diana afterwards by my intimate knowledge of horses.

'Whinnying?' he said. 'They're *laughing*, that's what they're doing – and no wonder!'

'Oh!' said I, 'and what's the joke?'

'Why, *you* are!' he replied. 'You don't suppose you take *them* in, do you? They know all about you, bless your heart!'

'Oh, do they?' I said blankly. This brute took a positive pleasure, I believe, in reducing my self-esteem.

'I dare say it has got about through Wild Rose,' he continued. 'She was immensely tickled when I told her. I'm afraid she must have been feeling rather dull all these days, by the bye.'

I felt an unworthy impulse to take his conceit down as he had lowered mine.

'Not so very, I think,' I said. 'She seemed to me to find that brown hunter of Colonel Cockshott's a very agreeable substitute.'

Late as it is for reparation, I must acknowledge with shame that in uttering this insinuation, I did that poor little mare (for whom I entertained the highest respect) a shameful injustice; and I should like to state here, in the most solemn and emphatic manner, my sincere belief that, from first to last, she conducted herself in a manner that should have shielded her from all calumny.

It was only a mean desire to retaliate, a petty and ignoble

spite, that prompted me thus to poison Brutus's confidence, and I regretted the words as soon as I had uttered them.

'That beast!' he said, starting as if I had touched him with a whip – a thing I never used – 'why, he hasn't two ideas in his great fiddle-head. The only sort of officer *he* ought to carry is a Salvationist!'

'I grant he has not your personal advantages and charm of manner,' I said. 'No doubt I was wrong to say anything about it.'

'No,' he said, 'you – you have done me a service,' and he relapsed into a sombre silence.

I was riding with Diana as usual, and was about to express my delight at being able to resume our companionship, when her mare drew slightly ahead and lashed out suddenly, catching me on the left leg, and causing intense agony for the moment.

Diana showed the sweetest concern, imploring me to go home in a cab at once, while her groom took charge of Brutus. I declined the cab; but, as my leg was really painful, and Brutus was showing an impatience I dared not disregard, I had to leave her side.

On our way home, Brutus said moodily, 'It is all over between us – you saw that?'

'I felt it!' I replied. 'She nearly broke my leg.'

'It was intended for me,' he said. 'It was her way of signifying that we had better be strangers for the future. I taxed her with her faithlessness; she denied it, of course – every mare does; we had an explanation, and everything is at an end!'

I did not ride him again for some days, and when I did, I found him steeped in Byronic gloom. He even wanted at first to keep entirely on the Bayswater side of the Park, though I succeeded in arguing him out of such weakness. 'Be a horse!' I said. 'Show her you don't care. You only flatter her by betraying your feelings.'

This was a subtlety that had evidently not occurred to him, but he was intelligent enough to feel the force of what I said. 'You are right,' he admitted; 'you are not quite a fool in some respects. She shall see how little I care!'

Naturally, after this, I expected to accompany Diana as usual, and it was a bitter disappointment to me to find that Brutus would not hear of doing so. He had an old acquaintance in the Park, a dapple-grey, who, probably from some early disappointment was a confirmed cynic, and whose society he thought would be congenial just then. The grey was ridden regularly by a certain Miss Gittens, whose appearance as she titupped laboriously up and down had often furnished Diana and myself with amusement.

And now, in spite of all my efforts, Brutus made straight to the grey. I was not in such difficulties as might have been expected, for I happened to know Miss Gittens slightly, as a lady no longer in the bloom of youth, who still retained a wiry form of girlishness. Though rather disliking her than not, I found it necessary just then to throw some slight effusion into my greeting. She, not unnaturally perhaps, was flattered by my preference, and begged me to give her a little instruction in

riding, which – Heaven forgive me for it! – I took upon myself to do.

Even now I scarcely see how I could have acted otherwise: I could not leave her side until Brutus had exhausted the pleasures of cynicism with his grey friend, and the time had to be filled up somehow. But, oh, the torture of seeing Diana at a distance, and knowing that only a miserable misunderstanding between our respective steeds kept us apart, feeling constrained even to avoid looking in her direction, lest she should summon me to her side!

One day, as I was riding with Miss Gittens, she glanced coyly at me over her sharp right shoulder, and said, 'Do you know, only such a little while ago, I never even dreamed that we should ever become as intimate as we are now; it seems almost incredible, does it not?'

'You must not say so,' I replied. 'Surely there is nothing singular in my helping you a little with your riding?' Though it struck me that it would have been very singular if I had.

'Perhaps not singular,' she murmured, looking modestly down her nose; 'but will you think me very unmaidenly if I confess that, to me, those lessons have developed a dawning danger?'

'You are perfectly safe on the grey,' I said.

'I – I was not thinking of the grey,' she returned. 'Dear Mr. Pulvertoft, I must speak frankly – a girl has so many things to consider, and I am afraid you have made me forget how wrongly and thoughtlessly I have been behaving of late. I cannot help

suspecting that you must have some motive in seeking my society in so – so marked a manner.'

'Miss Gittens,' said I, 'I can disguise nothing: I have.'

'And you have not been merely amusing yourself all this time?'

'Before Heaven,' I cried with fervour, 'I have *not*!'

'You are not one of those false men who give their bridle-reins a shake, and ride off with "Adieu for evermore!" – tell me you are not?'

I might shake *my* bridle-reins till I was tired and nothing would come of it unless Brutus was in the humour to depart; so that I was able to assure her with truth that I was not at all that kind of person.

'Then why not let your heart speak?'

'There is such a thing,' I said gloomily, 'as a heart that is gagged.'

'Can no word, no hint of mine loosen the gag?' she wished to know. 'What, you are silent still? Then, Mr. Pulvertoft, though I may seem harsh and cruel in saying it, our pleasant intercourse must end – we must ride together no more!'

No more? What would Brutus say to that? I was horrified. 'Miss Gittens,' I said in great agitation, 'I entreat you to unsay those words. I – I am afraid I could not undertake to accept such a dismissal. Surely, after that, you will not insist!'

She sighed. 'I am a weak, foolish girl,' she said; 'you are only too able to overcome my judgment. There, Mr. Pulvertoft, look happy again – I relent. You may stay if you will!'

You must believe that I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself, for I could not be blind to the encouragement which, though I sought to confine my words to strict truth, I was innocently affording. But, with a horse like mine, what was a man to do? What would you have done yourself? As soon as was prudent, I hinted to Brutus that his confidences had lasted long enough; and as he trotted away with me, he remarked, 'I thought you were never going.' Was he weary of the grey already? My heart leaped. 'Brutus,' I said thickly, 'are you strong enough to bear a great joy?'

'Speak out,' he said, 'and do try to keep those heels out of my ribs.'

'I cannot see you suffer,' I told him, with a sense of my own hypocrisy all the time. 'I must tell you – circumstances have come to my knowledge which lead me to believe that we have both judged Wild Rose too hastily. I am sure that her heart is yours still. She is only longing to tell you that she has never really swerved from her allegiance.'

'It is too late now,' he said, and the back of his head looked inflexibly obstinate; 'we have kept asunder too long.'

'No,' I said, 'listen. I take more interest in you than you are, perhaps, aware of, and I have thought of a little plan for bringing you together again. What if I find an opportunity to see the lady she belongs to – we have not met lately, as you know, and I do not pretend that I desire a renewal of our intimacy – '

'You like the one on the grey best; I saw that long ago,' he said; and I left him in his error.

'In any case, for your sake, I will sacrifice myself,' I said magnanimously. 'I will begin to-morrow. Come, you will not let your lives be wrecked by a foolish lovers' quarrel?'

He made a little half-hearted opposition, but finally, as I knew he would, consented. I had gained my point: I was free from Miss Gittens at last!

That evening I met Diana in the hall of a house in Eaton Square. She was going downstairs as I was making my way to the ball-room, and greeted me with a rather cool little nod.

'You have quite deserted me lately,' she said, smiling, but I could read the reproach in her eyes, 'you never ride with us now.'

My throat was swelling with passionate eloquence – and I could not get any of it out.

'No, I never do,' was all my stupid tongue could find to say.

'You have discovered a more congenial companion,' said cruel Diana.

'Miss Chetwynd,' I said eagerly, 'you don't know how I have been wishing – ! Will you let me ride with you to-morrow, as – as you used to do?'

'You are quite sure you won't be afraid of my naughty Wild Rose?' she said. 'I have given her such a scolding, that I think she is thoroughly ashamed of herself.'

'You thought it was *that* that kept me!' I cried. 'Oh, if I could tell you!'

She smiled: she was my dear, friendly Diana again.

'You shall tell me all about it to-morrow,' she said. 'You will

not have another opportunity, because we are going to Aix on Friday. And now, good-night. I am stopping the way, and the linkman is getting quite excited over it.'

She passed on, and the carriage rolled away with her, and I was too happy to mind very much – had she not forgiven me? Should we not meet to-morrow? I should have two whole hours to declare myself in, and this time I would dally with Fortune no longer.

How excited I was the following day: how fearful, when the morning broke grey and lowering: how grateful, when the benignant sun shone out later, and promised a brilliant afternoon: how carefully I dressed, and what a price I paid for the flower for my buttonhole!

So we cantered on to the Row, as goodly a couple (if I may be pardoned this retrospective vanity) as any there; and by and by, I saw, with the quick eye of a lover, Diana's willowy form in the distance. She was not alone, but I knew that the Colonel would soon have to yield his place to me.

As soon as she saw me, she urged her mare to a trot, and came towards me with the loveliest faint blush and dawning smile of welcome, when, all at once, Brutus came to a dead stop, which nearly threw me on his neck, and stood quivering in every limb.

'Do you see that?' he said hoarsely. 'And I was about to forgive her!'

I saw: my insinuation, baseless enough at the beginning, was now but too well justified. Colonel Cockshott was on his raw-

boned brown hunter, and even my brief acquaintance with horses enabled me to see that Wild Rose no longer regarded him with her former indifference.

Diana and the Colonel had reined up and seemed waiting for me – would Brutus never move? 'Show your pride,' I said in an agonised whisper, 'Treat her with the contempt she deserves!'

'I will,' he said between his bit and clenched teeth.

And then Miss Gittens came bumping by on the grey, and, before I could interfere, my Houyhnhnm was off like a shot in pursuit. I saw Diana's sweet, surprised face: I heard the Colonel's jarring laugh as I passed, and I – I could only bow in mortified appeal, and long for a gulf to leap into like Curtius!

I don't know what I said to Miss Gittens. I believe I made myself recklessly amiable, and I remember she lingered over parting in a horribly emotional manner. I was too miserable to mind: all the time I was seeing Diana's astonished eyes, hearing Colonel Cockshott's heartless laugh. Brutus made a kind of explanation on our way home: 'You meant well,' he said, 'but you see you were wrong. Your proposed sacrifice, for which I am just as grateful to you as if it had been effected, was useless. All I could do in return was to take you where your true inclination lay. I, too, can be unselfish.'

I was too dejected to curse his unselfishness. I did not even trouble myself to explain what it had probably cost me. I only felt drearily that I had had my last ride, I had had enough of horsemanship for ever!

That evening I went to the theatre, I wanted to deaden thought for the moment; and during one of the intervals I saw Lady Verney in the stalls, and went up to speak to her. 'Your niece is not with you?' I said; 'I thought I should have had a chance of – of saying good-bye to her before she left for the continent.'

I had a lingering hope that she might ask me to lunch, that I might have one more opportunity of explaining.

'Oh,' said Lady Verney, 'but that is all changed; we are not going – at least, not yet.'

'Not going!' I cried, incredulous for very joy.

'No, it is all very sudden; but, – well, you are almost like an old friend, and you are sure to hear it sooner or later. I only knew myself this afternoon, when she came in from her ride. Colonel Cockshott has proposed and she has accepted him. We're *so* pleased about it. Wasn't dear Mrs. – delightful in that last act? I positively saw real tears on her face!'

If I had waited much longer she would have seen a similar display of realism on mine. But I went back and sat the interval out, and listened critically to the classical selection of chamber-music from the orchestra, and saw the rest of the play, though I have no notion how it ended.

All that night my heart was slowly consumed by a dull rage that grew with every sleepless hour; but the object of my resentment was not Diana. She had only done what as a woman she was amply justified in doing after the pointed slight I had apparently inflicted upon her. Her punishment was sufficient already, for,

of course, I guessed that she had only accepted the Colonel under the first intolerable sting of desertion. No: I reserved all my wrath for Brutus, who had betrayed me at the moment of triumph. I planned revenge. Cost what it might I would ride him once more. In the eyes of the law I was his master. I would exercise my legal rights to the full.

The afternoon came at last. I was in a white heat of anger, though as I ascended to the saddle there were bystanders who put a more uncharitable construction upon my complexion.

Brutus cast an uneasy eye at my heels as we started: 'What are those things you've got on?' he inquired.

'Spurs,' I replied curtly.

'You shouldn't wear them till you have learnt to turn your toes in,' he said. 'And a whip, too! May I ask what that is for?'

'We will discuss that presently,' I said very coldly; for I did not want to have a scene with my horse in the street.

When we came round by the statue of Achilles and on to the Ride, I shortened my reins, and got a better hold of the whip, while I found that, from some cause I cannot explain, the roof of my mouth grew uncomfortably dry.

'I should be glad of a little quiet talk with you, if you've no objection,' I began.

'I am quite at your disposal,' he said, champing his bit with a touch of irony.

'First, let me tell you,' I said, 'that I have lost my only love for ever.'

'Well,' he retorted flippantly, 'you won't die of it. So have I. We must endeavour to console one another!'

I still maintained a deadly calm. 'You seem unaware that you are the sole cause of my calamity,' I said. 'Had you only consented to face Wild Rose yesterday, I should have been a happy man by this time!'

'How was I to know that, when you let me think all your affections were given to the elderly thing who is trotted out by my friend the grey?'

'We won't argue, please,' I said hastily. 'It is enough that your infernal egotism and self-will have ruined my happiness. I have allowed you to usurp the rule, to reverse our natural positions. I shall do so no more. I intend to teach you a lesson you will never forget.'

For a horse, he certainly had a keen sense of humour. I thought the girths would have snapped.

'And when do you intend to begin?' he asked, as soon as he could speak.

I looked in front of me: there were Diana and her accepted lover riding towards us; and so natural is dissimulation, even to the sweetest and best women, that no one would have suspected from her radiant face that her gaiety covered an aching heart.

'I intend to begin *now*,' I said. 'Monster, demon, whatever you are that have held me in thrall so long, I have broken my chains! I have been a coward long enough. You may kill me if you like. I rather hope you will; but first I mean to pay you back some

of the humiliation with which you have loaded me. I intend to thrash you as long as I remain in the saddle.'

I have been told by eye-witnesses that the chastisement was of brief duration, but while it lasted, I flatter myself, it was severe. I laid into him with a stout whip, of whose effectiveness I had assured myself by experiments upon my own legs. I dug my borrowed spurs into his flanks. I jerked his mouth. I dare say he was almost as much surprised as pained. But he *was* pained!

I was about to continue my practical rebuke, when my victim suddenly evaded my grasp; and for one vivid second I seemed to be gazing upon a birdseye view of his back; and then there was a crash, and I lay, buzzing like a bee, in an iridescent fog, and each colour meant a different pain, and they faded at last into darkness, and I remember no more.

'It was weeks,' concluded Mr. Pulvertoft, 'before that darkness lifted and revealed me to myself as a strapped and bandaged invalid. But – and this is perhaps the most curious part of my narrative – almost the first sounds that reached my ears were those of wedding bells; and I knew, without requiring to be told, that they were ringing for Diana's marriage with the Colonel. *That* showed there wasn't much the matter with me, didn't it? Why, I can hear them everywhere now. I don't think she ought to have had them rung at Sandown though: it was just a little ostentatious, so long after the ceremony; don't you think so?'

'Yes – yes,' I said; 'but you never told me what became of the horse.'

'Ah! the horse – yes. I am looking for him. I'm not so angry with him as I was, and I don't like to ask too many questions at the stables, for fear they may tell me one day that they had to shoot him while I was so ill. You knew I was ill, I dare say?' he broke off: 'there were bulletins about me in the papers. Look here.'

He handed me a cutting on which I read:

'The Recent Accident in Rotten Row. – There is no change as yet in Mr. Pulvertoft's condition. The unfortunate gentleman is still lying unconscious at his rooms in Park Street; and his medical attendants fear that, even if he recovers his physical strength, the brain will be permanently injured.'

'But that was all nonsense!' said Mr. Pulvertoft, with a little nervous laugh, 'it wasn't injured a bit, or how could I remember everything so clearly as I do, you know?'

And this was an argument that was, of course, unanswerable.

THE GOOD LITTLE GIRL
A STORY FOR CHILDREN

Her name was Priscilla Prodgers, and she was a very good little girl indeed. So good was she, in fact, that she could not help being aware of it herself, and that is a stage to which very many quite excellent persons never succeed in attaining. She was only just a child, it is true, but she had read a great many beautiful story-books, and so she knew what a powerful reforming influence a childish and innocent remark, or a youthful example, or a happy combination of both, can exert over grown-up people. And early in life – she was but eleven at the date of this history – early in life she had seen clearly that her mission was to reform her family and relatives generally. This was a heavy task for one so young, particularly in Priscilla's case, for, besides a father, mother, brother, and sister, in whom she could not but discern many and serious failings, she possessed an aunt who was addicted to insincerity, two female cousins whose selfishness and unamiability were painful to witness, and a male cousin who talked slang and was so worldly that he habitually went about in yellow boots! Nevertheless Priscilla did not flinch, although, for some reason, her earnest and unremitting efforts had hitherto failed to produce any deep impression. At times she thought this was owing to the fact that she tried to reform

all her family together, and that her best plan would be to take each one separately, and devote her whole energies to improving that person alone. But then she never could make up her mind which member of the family to begin with. It is small wonder that she often felt a little disheartened, but even that was a cheering symptom, for in the books it is generally just when the little heroine becomes most discouraged that the seemingly impenitent relative exhibits the first sign of softening.

So Priscilla persevered: sometimes with merely a shocked glance of disapproval, which she had practised before the looking-glass until she could do it perfectly; sometimes with some tender, tactful little hint. 'Don't you think, dear papa,' she would say softly, on a Sunday morning, 'don't you *think* you could write your newspaper article on some *other* day – is it a work of *real* necessity?' Or she would ask her mother, who was certainly fond of wearing pretty things. 'How much bread for poor starving people would the price of your new bonnet buy, mother? I should so like to work it out on my little slate!'

Then she would remind her brother Alick that it would be so much better if, instead of wasting his time in playing with silly little tin soldiers, he would try to learn as much as he could before he was sent to school; while she was never tired of quoting to her sister Betty the line, 'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever!' which Betty, quite unjustly, interpreted to mean that Priscilla thought but poorly of her sister's intellectual capacity. Once when, as a great treat, the children were allowed to read

'Ivanhoe' aloud, Priscilla declined to participate until she had conscientiously read up the whole Norman period in her English history; and on another occasion she cried bitterly on hearing that her mother had arranged for them to learn dancing, and even endured bread and water for an entire day rather than consent to acquire an accomplishment which she feared, from what she had read, would prove a snare. On the second day – well, there was roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for dinner, and Priscilla yielded; but she made the resolution – and kept it too – that, if she went to the dancing class, she would firmly refuse to take the slightest pains to learn a single step.

I only mention all these traits to show that Priscilla really was an unusually good child, which makes it the more sad and strange that her family should have profited so little by her example. She was neither loved nor respected as she ought to have been, I am grieved to say. Her papa, when he was not angry, made the cruellest fun of her mild reproofs; her mother continued to spend money on dresses and bonnets, and even allowed the maid to say that her mistress was 'not at home,' when she was merely unwilling to receive visitors. Alick and Betty, too, only grew more exasperated when Priscilla urged them to keep their tempers, and altogether she could not help feeling how wasted and thrown away she was in such a circle.

But she never quite lost heart; her papa was a literary man and wrote tales, some of which she feared were not as true as they affected to be, while he invariably neglected to insert a moral in

any of them; frequently she dropped little remarks before him with apparent carelessness, in the hope that he might put them in print – but he never did; she never could recognise herself as a character in any of his stories, and so at last she gave up reading them at all!

But one morning she came more near to giving up in utter despair than ever before. Only the previous day she had been so hopeful! her father had really seemed to be beginning to appreciate his little daughter, and had presented her with sixpence in the new coinage to put in her money-box. This had emboldened her to such a degree that, happening on the following morning to hear him ejaculate 'Confound it!' she had, pressing one hand to her beating heart and laying the other hand softly upon his shoulder (which is the proper attitude on these occasions), reminded him that such an expression was scarcely less reprehensible than actual bad language. Upon which her hard-hearted papa had told her, almost sharply, '*not to be a little prig!*'

Priscilla forgave him, of course, and freely, because he was her father and it was her duty to bear with him; but she felt the injustice deeply, for all that. Then, when she went up into the nursery, Alick and Betty made a frantic uproar, merely because she insisted on teaching them the moves in chess, when they perversely wanted to play Halma! So, feeling baffled and sick at heart, she had put on her hat and run out all alone to a quiet lane near her home, where she could soothe her troubled mind

by thinking over the ingratitude and lack of appreciation with which her efforts were met.

She had not gone very far up the lane when she saw, seated on a bench, a bent old woman in a poke-bonnet with a crutch-handled stick in her hands, and this old woman Priscilla (who was very quick of observation) instantly guessed to be a fairy – in which, as it fell out, she was perfectly right.

'Good day, my pretty child!' croaked the old dame.

'Good-day to you, ma'am!' answered Priscilla politely (for she knew that it was not only right but prudent to be civil to fairies, particularly when they take the form of old women). 'But, if you please, you mustn't call me pretty – because I am not. At least,' she added, for she prided herself upon her truthfulness, 'not *exactly* pretty. And I should hate to be always thinking about my looks, like poor Milly – she's our housemaid, you know – and I so often have to tell her that she did not make her *own* face.'

'I don't alarm you, I see,' said the old crone; 'but possibly you're not aware that you're talking to a fairy?'

'Oh, yes, I am – but I'm not a bit afraid, because, you see, fairies can only hurt *bad* children.'

'Ah, and you're a good little child – that's not difficult to see!'

'They don't see it at home!' said Priscilla, with a sad little sigh, 'or they would listen more when I tell them of things they oughtn't to do.'

'And what things do they do that they oughtn't to, my child – if you don't mind telling me?'

'Oh, I don't mind in the *least*!' Priscilla hastened to assure her; and then she told the old woman all her family's faults, and the trial it was to bear with them and go on trying to induce them to mend their ways. 'And papa is getting worse than ever,' she concluded dolefully; 'only fancy, this very morning he called me a little prig!'

'Tut, tut!' said the fairy sympathetically, 'deary, deary me! So he called you *that*, did he? – "a little prig"! And *you*, too! Ah, the world's coming to a pretty pass! I suppose, now, your papa and the rest of them have got it into their heads that you are too young and too inexperienced to set up as their adviser – is that it?'

'I'm afraid so,' admitted Priscilla; 'but we mustn't blame them,' she added gently, 'we must remember that they don't know any better – mustn't we, ma'am?'

'You sweet child!' said the old lady with enthusiasm; 'I must see if I can't do something to help you, though I'm not the fairy I used to be – still, there are tricks I can manage still, if I'm put to it. What you want is something that will prove to them that they ought to pay more attention to you, eh? – something there can be no possible mistake about?'

'Yes!' cried Priscilla eagerly, 'and – and – how would it be if you changed them into something else, just to *show* them, and then I could ask for them to be transformed back again, you know?'

'What an ingenious little thing you are!' exclaimed the fairy; 'but, let us see – if you came home and found your cruel papa

doing duty as the family hatstand, or strutting about as a Cochin China fowl – '

'Oh, *yes*; and I'd feed him every day, till he was sorry!' interrupted the warmhearted little girl impulsively.

'Ah, but you're so hasty, my dear. Who would write all the clever articles and tales to earn bread and meat for you all? – fowls can't use a pen. No, we must find a prettier trick than that – there *was* one I seem to remember, long, long ago, performing for a good little ill-used girl, just like you, my dearie, just like you! Now what was it? some gift I gave her whenever she opened her lips – '

'Why, *I* remember – how funny that you should have forgotten! Whenever she opened her lips, roses, and diamonds, and rubies fell out. That would be the very thing! Then they'd *have* to attend to me! Oh, do be a kind old fairy and give me a gift like that – do, *do*!'

'Now, don't be so impetuous! You forget that this is not the time of year for roses, and, as for jewels, well, I don't think I can be very far wrong in supposing that you open your lips pretty frequently in the course of the day?'

'Alick does call me a "mag,"' said Priscilla; 'but that's wrong, because I never speak without having something to say. I don't think people ought to – it may do so *much* harm; mayn't it?'

'Undoubtedly. But, anyhow, if we made it *every* time you opened your lips, you would soon ruin me in precious stones, that's plain! No, I think we had better say that the jewels

shall only drop when you are saying something you wish to be particularly improving – how will that do?'

'Very nicely indeed, ma'am, thank you,' said Priscilla, 'because, you see, it comes to just the same thing.'

'Ah, well, try to be as economical of your good things as you can – remember that in these hard times a poor old fairy's riches are not as inexhaustible as they used to be.'

'And jewels really will drop out?'

'Whenever they are wanted to "point a moral and adorn a tale,"' said the old woman (who, for a fairy, was particularly well-read). 'There, run along home, do, and scatter your pearls before your relations.'

It need scarcely be said that Priscilla was only too willing to obey; she ran all the way home with a light heart, eager to exhibit her wonderful gift. 'How surprised they will be!' she was thinking. 'If it had been Betty, instead of me, I suppose she would have come back talking toads! It would have been a good lesson for her – but still, toads are nasty things, and it would have been rather unpleasant for the rest of us. I think I won't tell Betty *where* I met the fairy.'

She came in and took her place demurely at the family luncheon, which was the children's dinner; they were all seated already, including her father, who had got through most of his writing in the course of the morning.

'Now make haste and eat your dinner, Priscilla,' said her mother, 'or it will be quite cold.'

'I always let it get a little cold, mother,' replied the good little girl, 'so that I mayn't come to think too much about eating, you know.'

As she uttered this remark, she felt a jewel producing itself in some mysterious way from the tip of her tongue, and saw it fall with a clatter into her plate. 'I'll pretend not to notice anything,' she thought.

'Hullo!' exclaimed Alick, pausing in the act of mastication, 'I say —*Prissie*!'

'If you ask mother, I'm sure she will tell you that it is most ill-mannered to speak with your mouth full,' said Priscilla, her speech greatly impeded by an immense emerald.

'I like that!' exclaimed her rude brother; 'who's speaking with their mouth full *now*?'

'"*Their*" is not grammar, dear,' was Priscilla's only reply to this taunt, as she delicately ejected a pearl, 'you should say *her* mouth full.' For Priscilla's grammar was as good as her principles.

'But really, Priscilla, dear,' said her mother, who felt some embarrassment at so novel an experience as being obliged to find fault with her little daughter, 'you should not eat sweets just before dinner, and – and couldn't you get rid of them in some other manner?'

'Sweets!' cried Priscilla, considerably annoyed at being so misunderstood, 'they are not *sweets,* mother. Look!' And she offered to submit one for inspection.

'If I may venture to express an opinion,' observed her father,

'I would rather that a child of mine should suck sweets than coloured beads, and in either case I object to having them prominently forced upon my notice at meal-times. But I daresay I'm wrong. I generally am.'

'Papa is quite right, dear,' said her mother, 'it *is* such a dangerous habit – suppose you were to swallow one, you know! Put them in the fire, like a good girl, and go on with your dinner.'

Priscilla rose without a word, her cheeks crimsoning, and dropped the pearl, ruby, and emerald, with great accuracy, into the very centre of the fire. This done, she returned to her seat, and went on with her dinner in silence, though her feelings prevented her from eating very much.

'If they choose to think my pearls are only beads, or jujubes, or acidulated drops,' she said to herself, bitterly, 'I won't waste any more on them, that's all! I won't open my lips again, except to say quite ordinary things – so *there*!'

If Priscilla had not been such a very good little girl, you might almost have thought she was in a temper; but she was not; her feelings were wounded, that was all, which is quite a different thing.

That afternoon, her aunt Margarine, Mrs. Hoyle, came to call. She was the aunt whom we have already mentioned as being given to insincerity; she was not well off, and had a tendency to flatter people; but Priscilla was fond of her notwithstanding, and she had never detected her in any insincerity towards herself. She was sent into the drawing-room to entertain her aunt until

her mother was ready to come down, and her aunt, as usual, overwhelmed her with affectionate admiration. 'How pretty and well you are looking, my pet!' she began, 'and oh, what a beautiful frock you have on!'

'The little silkworms wore it before I did, aunt,' said Priscilla, modestly.

'How sweet of you to say so! But they never looked half so well in it, I'll be bou – Why, my child, you've dropped a stone out of a brooch or something. Look – on the carpet there!'

'Oh,' said Priscilla, carelessly, 'it was out of my mouth – not out of a brooch, I never wear jewellery. I think jewellery makes people grow so conceited; don't you, Aunt Margarine?'

'Yes, indeed, dearest – indeed you are *so* right!' said her aunt (who wore a cameo-brooch as large as a tart upon her cloak), 'and – and surely that can't be a *diamond* in your lap?'

'Oh, yes, it is. I met a fairy this morning in the lane, and so – ' and here Priscilla proceeded to narrate her wonderful experience. 'I thought it might perhaps make papa and mamma value me a little more than they do,' she said wistfully, as she finished her story, 'but they don't take the least notice; they made me put the jewels on the fire – they did, really!'

'What blindness!' cried her aunt; 'how *can* people shut their eyes to such a treasure? And – and may I just have *one* look? What, you really don't want them? – I may keep them for my very own? You precious love! Ah, I know a humble home where you would be appreciated at your proper worth. What would I not

give for my poor naughty Belle and Cathie to have the advantage of seeing more of such a cousin!'

'I don't know whether I could do them much good,' said Priscilla, 'but I would try my best.'

'I am sure you would!' said Aunt Margarine, 'and now, dearest sweet, I am going to ask your dear mamma to spare you to us for just a little while; we must both beg very hard.'

'I'll go and tell nurse to pack my things now, and then I can go away with you,' said the little girl.

When her mother heard of the invitation, she consented quite willingly. 'To tell you the truth, Margarine,' she said, 'I shall be very glad for the child to have a change. She seems a little unhappy at home with us, and she behaved most unlike her usual self at lunch; it *can't* be natural for a child of her age to chew large glass beads. Did your Cathie and Belle ever do such a thing?'

'Never,' said Aunt Margarine, coughing. 'It is a habit that certainly ought to be checked, and I promise you, my dear Lucy, that if you will only trust Priscilla to me, I will take away anything of that kind the very moment I find it. And I do think, poor as we are, we shall manage to make her feel at home. We are all so fond of your sweet Priscilla!'

So the end of it was that Priscilla went to stay with her aunt that very afternoon, and her family bore the parting with the greatest composure.

'I can't give you nice food, or a pretty bedroom to sleep in such as you have at home,' said her kind aunt. 'We are very plain

people, my pet; but at least we can promise you a warm welcome.'

'Oh, auntie,' protested Priscilla, 'you mustn't think I mind a little hardship! Why, if beds weren't hard and food not nicely cooked now and then, we should soon grow too luxurious to do our duty, and that would be so very bad for us!'

'Oh, what *beauties*!' cried her aunt, involuntarily, as she stooped to recover several sparkling gems from the floor of the cab. 'I mean – it's better to pick them up, dear, don't you think? they might get in people's *way*, you know. What a blessing you will be in our simple home! I want you to do all you can to instruct your cousins; don't be afraid of telling them of any faults you may happen to see. Poor Cathie and Belle, I fear they are very far from being all they should be!' and Aunt Margarine heaved a sigh.

'Never mind, auntie; they will be better in time, I am sure. *I* wasn't *always* a good girl.'

Priscilla thoroughly enjoyed the first few days of her visit; even her aunt was only too grateful for instruction, and begged that Priscilla would tell her, quite candidly, of any shortcomings she might notice. And Priscilla, very kindly and considerately, always *did* tell her. Belle and Catherine were less docile, and she saw that it would take her some time to win their esteem and affection; but this was just what Priscilla liked: it was the usual experience of the heroines in the books, and much more interesting, too, than conquering her cousins' hearts at once.

Still, both Catherine and Belle persistently hardened their hearts against their gentle little cousin in the unkindest way; they

would scarcely speak to her, and chose to make a grievance out of the fact that one or other of them was obliged, by their mother's strict orders, to be constantly in attendance upon her, in order to pick up and bring Mrs. Hoyle all the jewels that Priscilla scattered in profusion wherever she went.

'If you would only carry a plate about with you, Priscilla,' complained Belle one day, 'you could catch the jewels in that.'

'But I don't *want* to catch the jewels, dear Belle,' said Priscilla, with a playful but very sweet smile; 'if other people prize such things, that is not my fault, is it? *Jewels* do not make people any happier, Belle!'

'I should think not!' exclaimed Belle. 'I'm sure my back perfectly aches with stooping, and so does Cathie's. There! that big topaz has just gone and rolled under the sideboard, and mother will be so angry if I don't get it out! It is too bad of you, Priscilla! *I* believe you do it on purpose!'

'Ah, you will know me better some day, dear, was the gentle response.

'Well, at all events, I think you might be naughty just now and then, Prissie, and give Cathie and me a half-holiday.'

'I would do anything else to please you, dear, but not that; you must not ask me to do what is impossible.'

Alas! not even this angelic behaviour, not even the loving admonitions, the tender rebukes, the shocked reproaches that fell, accompanied by perfect cascades of jewels, from the lips of our pattern little Priscilla, succeeded in removing the

utterly unfounded prejudices of her cousins, though it was some consolation to feel that she was gradually acquiring a most beneficial influence over her aunt, who called Priscilla 'her little conscience.' For, you see, Priscilla's conscience had so little to do on her own account that it was always at the service of other people, and indeed quite enjoyed being useful, as was only natural to a conscientious conscience which felt that it could never have been created to be idle.

Very soon another responsibility was added to little Priscilla's burdens. Her cousin Dick, the worldly one with the yellow boots, came home after his annual holiday, which, as he was the junior clerk in a large bank, he was obliged to take rather late in the year. She had looked forward to his return with some excitement. Dick, she knew, was frivolous and reckless in his habits – he went to the theatre occasionally and frequently spent an evening in playing billiards and smoking cigars at a friend's house. There would be real credit in reforming poor cousin Dick.

He was not long, of course, in hearing of Priscilla's marvellous endowment, and upon the first occasion they were alone together treated her with a respect and admiration which he had very certainly never shown her before.

'You're wonderful, Prissie!' he said; 'I'd no idea you had it in you!'

'Nor had I, Dick; but it shows that even a little girl can do something.'

'I should rather think so! and – and the way you look – as

grave as a judge all the time! Prissie, I wish you'd tell me how you manage it, I wouldn't tell a soul.'

'But I don't know, Dick. I only talk and the jewels come – that is all.'

'You artful little girl! you can keep a secret, I see, but so can I. And you might tell me how you do the trick. What put you up to the dodge? I'm to be trusted, I assure you.'

'Dick, you can't – you mustn't – think there is any trickery about it! How can you believe I could be such a wicked little girl as to play tricks? It was an old fairy that gave me the gift. I'm sure I don't know why – unless she thought that I was a good child and deserved to be encouraged.'

'By Jove!' cried Dick, 'I never knew you were half such fun!'

'I am not fun, Dick. I think fun is generally so very vulgar, and oh, I wish you wouldn't say "by Jove!" Surely you know he was a heathen god!'

'I seem to have heard of him in some such capacity,' said Dick. 'I say, Prissie, what a ripping big ruby!'

'Ah, Dick, Dick, you are like the others! I'm afraid you think more of the jewels than of any words I may say – and yet *jewels* are common enough!'

'They seem to be with you. Pearls, too, and such fine ones! Here, Priscilla, take them; they're your property.'

Priscilla put her hands behind her: 'No, indeed, Dick, they are of no use to me. Keep them, please; they may help to remind you of what I have said.'

'It's awfully kind of you,' said Dick, looking really touched. 'Then – since you put it in that way – thanks, I will, Priscilla. I'll have them made into a horse-shoe pin.'

'You mustn't let it make you too fond of dress, then,' said Priscilla; 'but I'm afraid you're that already, Dick.'

'A diamond!' he cried; 'go on, Priscilla, I'm listening – pitch into me, it will do me a *lot* of good!'

But Priscilla thought it wisest to say no more just then.

That night, after Priscilla and Cathie and Belle had gone to bed, Dick and his mother sat up talking until a late hour.

'Is dear little cousin Priscilla to be a permanency in this establishment?' began her cousin, stifling a yawn, for there had been a rather copious flow of precious stones during the evening.

'Well, I shall keep her with us as long as I can,' said Mrs. Hoyle, 'she's such a darling, and they don't seem to want her at home. I'm sure, limited as my means are, I'm most happy to have such a visitor.'

'She seems to pay her way – only her way is a trifle trying at times, isn't it? She lectured me for half an hour on end without a single check!'

'Are you sure you picked them all up, dear boy?'

'Got a few of the best in my waistcoat-pocket now. I'm afraid I scrunched a pearl or two, though: they were all over the place, you know. I suppose you've been collecting too, mater?'

'I picked up one or two,' said his mother; 'I should think I must have nearly enough now to fill a bandbox. And that brings me

to what I wanted to consult you about, Richard. How are we to dispose of them? She has given them all to me.'

'You haven't done anything with them yet, then?'

'How could I? I have been obliged to stay at home: I've been so afraid of letting that precious child go out of my sight for a single hour, for fear some unscrupulous persons might get hold of her. I thought that perhaps, when you came home, you would dispose of the jewels for me.'

'But, mater,' protested Dick, 'I can't go about asking who'll buy a whole bandbox full of jewels!'

'Oh, very well, then; I suppose we must go on living this hugger-mugger life when we have the means of being as rich as princes, just because you are too lazy and selfish to take a little trouble!'

'I know something about these things,' said Dick. 'I know a fellow who's a diamond merchant, and it's not so easy to sell a lot of valuable stones as you seem to imagine, mother. And then Priscilla really overdoes it, you know – why, if she goes on like this, she'll make diamonds as cheap as currants!'

'*I* should have thought that was a reason for selling them as soon as possible; but I'm only a woman, and of course *my* opinion is worth nothing! Still, you might take some of the biggest to your friend, and accept whatever he'll give you for them – there are plenty more, you needn't haggle over the price.'

'He'd want to know all about them, and what should I say? I can't tell him a cousin of mine produces them whenever she feels

disposed.'

'You could say they have been in the family for some time, and you are obliged to part with them; I don't ask you to tell a falsehood, Richard.'

'Well, to tell you the honest truth,' said Dick, 'I'd rather have nothing to do with it. I'm not proud, but I shouldn't like it to get about among our fellows at the bank that I went about hawking diamonds.'

'But, you stupid, undutiful boy, don't you see that you could leave the bank – you need never do anything any more – we should all live rich and happy somewhere in the country, if we could only sell those jewels! And you won't do that one little thing!'

'Well,' said Dick, 'I'll think over it. I'll see what I can do.'

And his mother knew that it was perfectly useless to urge him any further: for, in some things, Dick was as obstinate as a mule, and, in others, far too easy-going and careless ever to succeed in life. He had promised to think over it, however, and she had to be contented with that.

On the evening following this conversation cousin Dick entered the sitting-room the moment after his return from the City, and found his mother to all appearances alone.

'What a dear sweet little guileless angel cousin Priscilla is, to be sure!' was his first remark.

'Then you *have* sold some of the stones!' cried Aunt Margarine. 'Sit down, like a good boy, and tell me all about it.'

'Well,' said Dick, 'I took the finest diamonds and rubies and pearls that escaped from that saintlike child last night in the course of some extremely disparaging comments on my character and pursuits – I took those jewels to Faycett and Rosewater's in New Bond Street – you know the shop, on the right-hand side as you go up – '

'Oh, go on, Dick; go on – never mind *where* it is – how much did you get for them?'

'I'm coming to that; keep cool, dear mamma. Well, I went in, and I saw the manager, and I said: "I want you to make these up into a horse-shoe scarf-pin for me."'

'You said that! You never tried to sell one? Oh, Dick, you are too provoking!'

'Hold on, mater; I haven't done yet. So the manager – a very gentlemanly person, rather thin on the top of the head – not that that affects his business capacities; for, after all – '

'Dick, do you want to drive me frantic!'

'I can't conceive any domestic occurrence which would be more distressing or generally inconvenient, mother dear. You do interrupt a fellow so! I forgot where I was now – oh, the manager, ah yes! Well, the manager said, "We shall be very happy to have the stones made in any design you may select" – jewellery, by the way, seems to exercise a most refining influence upon the manners: this man had the deportment of a duke – "you may select," he said; "but of course I need not tell you that none of these stones are genuine."'

'Not genuine!' cried Aunt Margarine excitedly. 'They must be – he was lying!'

'West-end jewellers never lie,' said Dick; 'but naturally, when he said that, I told him I should like to have some proof of his assertion. "Will you take the risk of testing?" said he. "Test away, my dear man!" said I. So he brought a little wheel near the emerald – "whizz!" and away went the emerald! Then he let a drop of something fall on the ruby – and it fizzled up for all the world like pink champagne. "Go on, don't mind *me*!" I told him, so he touched the diamond with an electric wire – "phit!" and there was only something that looked like the ash of a shocking bad cigar. Then the pearls – and they popped like so many air-balloons. "Are you satisfied?" he asked.

'"Oh, perfectly,"' said I, "you needn't trouble about the horse-shoe pin now. Good evening," and so I came away, after thanking him for his very amusing scientific experiments.'

'And do you believe that the jewels are all shams, Dick? – do you really?'

'I think it so probable that nothing on earth will induce me to offer a single one for sale. I should never hear the last of it at the bank. No, mater, dear little Priscilla's sparkling conversation may be unspeakably precious from a moral point of view, but it has no commercial value. Those jewels are bogus – shams every stone of them!'

Now, all this time our heroine had been sitting unperceived in a corner behind a window-curtain, reading 'The Wide, Wide

World,' a work which she was never weary of perusing. Some children would have come forward earlier, but Priscilla was never a forward child, and she remained as quiet as a little mouse up to the moment when she could control her feelings no longer.

'It isn't true!' she cried passionately, bursting out of her retreat and confronting her cousin; 'it's cruel and unkind to say my jewels are shams! They are real – they are, they *are*!'

'Hullo, Prissie!' said her abandoned cousin; 'so you combine jewel-dropping with eaves-dropping, eh?'

'How dare you!' cried Aunt Margarine, almost beside herself, 'you odious little prying minx, setting up to teach your elders and your betters with your cut and dried priggish maxims! When I think how I have petted and indulged you all this time, and borne with the abominable litter you left in every room you entered – and now to find you are only a little, conceited, hypocritical impostor – oh, *why* haven't I words to express my contempt for such conduct – why am I dumb at such a moment as this?'

'Come, mother,' said her son soothingly, 'that's not such a bad beginning; I should call it fairly fluent and expressive, myself.'

'Be quiet, Dick! I'm speaking to this wicked child, who has obtained our love and sympathy and attention on false pretences, for which she ought to be put in prison – yes, in *prison*, for such a heartless trick on relatives who can ill afford to be so cruelly disappointed!'

'But, aunt!' expostulated poor Priscilla, 'you always said you only kept the jewels as souvenirs, and that it did you so much

good to hear me talk!'

'Don't argue with *me*, miss! If I had known the stones were wretched tawdry imitations, do you imagine for an instant – ?'

'Now, mother,' said Dick, 'be fair – they were uncommonly good imitations, you must admit that!'

'Indeed, indeed I thought they were real, the fairy never told me!'

'After all,' said Dick, 'it's not Priscilla's fault. She can't help it if the stones aren't real, and she made up for quality by quantity anyhow; didn't you, Prissie?'

'Hold your tongue, Richard; she *could* help it, she knew it all the time, and she's a hateful, sanctimonious little stuck-up viper, and so I tell her to her face!'

Priscilla could scarcely believe that kind, indulgent, smooth-spoken Aunt Margarine could be addressing such words to her; it frightened her so much that she did not dare to answer, and just then Cathie and Belle came into the room.

'Oh, mother,' they began penitently, 'we're *so* sorry, but we couldn't find dear Prissie anywhere, so we haven't picked up anything the whole afternoon!'

'Ah, my poor darlings, you shall never be your cousin's slaves any more. Don't go near her, she's a naughty, deceitful wretch; her jewels are false, my sweet loves, false! She has imposed upon us all, she does not deserve to associate with you!'

'I always said Prissie's jewels looked like the things you get on crackers!' said Belle, tossing her head.

'Now we shall have a little rest, I hope,' chimed in Cathie.

'I shall send her home to her parents this very night,' declared Aunt Margarine; 'she shall not stay here to pervert our happy household with her miserable *gewgaws*!'

Here Priscilla found her tongue. 'Do you think I *want* to stay?' she said proudly; 'I see now that you only wanted to have me here because – because of the horrid jewels, and I never knew they were false, and I let you have them all, every one, you know I did; and I wanted you to mind what I said and not trouble about picking them up, but you *would* do it! And now you all turn round upon me like this! What have I done to be treated so? What have I done?'

'Bravo, Prissie!' cried Dick. 'Mother, if you ask me, I think it serves us all jolly well right, and it's a downright shame to bullyrag poor Prissie in this way!'

'I *don't* ask you,' retorted his mother, sharply; 'so you will kindly keep your opinions to yourself.'

'Tra-la-la!' sang rude Dick, 'we are a united family – we are, we are, we *are*!' – a vulgar refrain he had picked up at one of the burlesque theatres he was only too fond of frequenting.

But Priscilla came to him and held out her hand quite gratefully and humbly. 'Thank you, Dick,' she said; '*you* are kind, at all events. And I am sorry you couldn't have your horse-shoe pin!'

'Oh, *hang* the horse-shoe pin!' exclaimed Dick, and poor Priscilla was so thoroughly cast down that she quite forgot to

reprove him.

She was not sent home that night after all, for Dick protested against it in such strong terms that even Aunt Margarine saw that she must give way; but early on the following morning Priscilla quitted her aunt's house, leaving her belongings to be sent on after her.

She had not far to walk, and it so happened that her way led through the identical lane in which she had met the fairy. Wonderful to relate, there, on the very same stone and in precisely the same attitude, sat the old lady, peering out from under her poke-bonnet, and resting her knotty old hands on her crutch-handled stick!

Priscilla walked past with her head in the air, pretending not to notice her, for she considered that the fairy had played her a most malicious and ill-natured trick.

'Heyday!' said the old lady (it is only fairies who can permit themselves such old-fashioned expressions nowadays). 'Heyday, why, here's my good little girl again! Isn't she going to speak to me?'

'No, she's not,' said Priscilla – but she found herself compelled to stop, notwithstanding.

'Why, what's all this about? You're not going to sulk with me, my dear, are you?'

'I think you're a very cruel, bad, unkind old woman for deceiving me like this!'

'Goodness me! Why, didn't the jewels come, after all?'

'Yes – they came, only they were all horrid artificial ones – and it is a shame, it *is*!' cried poor Priscilla from her bursting heart.

'Artificial, were they? that really is very odd! Can you account for that at all, now?'

'Of course I can't! You told me that they would drop out whenever I said anything to improve people – and I was *always* saying *something* improving! Aunt had a bandbox in her room quite full of them.'

'Ah, you've been very industrious, evidently; it's unfortunate your jewels should all have been artificial – most unfortunate. I don't know how to explain it, unless' – (and here the old lady looked up queerly from under her white eyelashes), 'unless your goodness was artificial too?'

'How do you mean?' asked Priscilla, feeling strangely uncomfortable. 'I'm sure I've never done anything the least bit naughty – how can my goodness possibly be artificial?'

'Ah, that I can't explain; but I know this – that people who are really good are generally the last persons to suspect it, and the moment they become aware of it and begin to think how good they are, and how bad everybody else is, why, somehow or other, their goodness crumbles away and leaves only a sort of outside shell behind it. And – I'm very old, and of course I may be mistaken – but I think (I only say I *think*, mind) that a little girl so young as you must have some faults hidden about her somewhere, and that perhaps on the whole she would be better employed in trying to find them out and cure them before she

attempted to correct those of other people. And I'm sure it can't be good for any child to be always seeing herself in a little picture, just as she likes to fancy other people see her. Very many pretty books are written about good little girls, and it is quite true that children may exercise a great influence for good – more than they can ever tell, perhaps – but only just so long as they remain natural and unconscious, and not unwholesome little pragmatical prigesses; for then they make themselves and other people worse than they might have been. But of course, my dear, you never made such a mistake as that!'

Priscilla turned very red, and began to scrape one of her feet against the other; she was thinking, and her thoughts were not at all pleasant ones.

'Oh, fairy,' she said at last, 'I'm afraid that's just what I *did* do. I was always thinking how good I was and putting everybody – papa, mamma, Alick, Betty, Aunt Margarine, Cathie, Belle, and even poor cousin Dick – right! I have been a horrid little hateful prig, and that's why all the jewels were rubbish. But, oh, shall I have to go on talking sham diamonds and things all the rest of my life?'

'That,' said the fairy, 'depends entirely on yourself. You have the remedy in your own hands – or lips.'

'Ah, you mean I needn't talk at all? But I must – sometimes. I couldn't bear to be dumb as long as I lived – and it would look so odd, too!'

'I never said you were not to open your lips at all. But can't

you try to talk simply and naturally – not like little girls or boys in any story-books whatever – not to "show off" or improve people; only as a girl would talk who remembers that, after all, her elders are quite as likely as she is to know what they ought or ought not to do and say?'

'I shall forget sometimes, I know I shall!' said Priscilla disconsolately.

'If you do, there will be something to remind you, you know. And by and by, perhaps, as you grow up you may, quite by accident, say something sincere and noble and true – and then a jewel will fall which will really be of value!'

'No!' cried Priscilla, 'no, *please*! Oh, fairy, let me off that! If I *must* drop them, let them be false ones to punish me – not real. I don't want to be rewarded any more for being good – if I ever am really good!'

'Come,' said the fairy, with a much pleasanter smile, 'you are not a hopeless case, at all events. It shall be as you wish, then, and perhaps it will be the wisest arrangement for all parties. Now run away home, and see how little use you can make of your fairy gift.'

Priscilla found her family still at breakfast.

'Why,' observed her father, raising his eyebrows as she entered the room, 'here's our little monitor – (or is it *monitress*, eh, Priscilla?) – back again. Children, we shall all have to mind our p's and q's – and, indeed, our entire alphabet, now!'

'I'm sure,' said her mother, kissing her fondly, 'Priscilla knows

we're all delighted to have her home!'

'*I'm* not,' said Alick, with all a boy's engaging candour.

'Nor am I,' added Betty, 'it's been ever so much nicer at home while she's been away!'

Priscilla burst into tears as she hid her face upon her mother's protecting shoulder. 'It's true!' she sobbed, 'I don't deserve that you should be glad to see me – I've been hateful and horrid, I know – but, oh, if you'll only forgive me and love me and put up with me a little, I'll try not to preach and be a prig any more – I will truly!'

And at this her father called her to his side and embraced her with a fervour he had not shown for a very long time.

I should not like to go so far as to assert that no imitation diamond, ruby, pearl, or emerald ever proceeded from Priscilla's lips again. Habits are not cured in a day, and fairies – however old they may be – are still fairies; so it *did* occasionally happen that a mock jewel made an unwelcome appearance after one of Priscilla's more unguarded utterances. But she was always frightfully ashamed and abashed by such an accident, and buried the imitation stones immediately in a corner of the garden. And as time went on the jewels grew smaller and smaller, and frequently dissolved upon her tongue, leaving a faintly bitter taste, until at last they ceased altogether and Priscilla became as pleasant and unaffected a girl as she who may now be finishing this history.

Aunt Margarine never sent back the contents of that bandbox;

she kept the biggest stones and had a brooch made of them, while, as she never mentioned that they were false, no one out of the family ever so much as suspected it.

But, for all that, she always declared that her niece Priscilla had bitterly disappointed her expectations – which was perhaps the truest thing that Aunt Margarine ever said.

A MATTER OF TASTE

PART I

It is a little singular that, upon an engagement becoming known and being discussed by the friends and acquaintances of the persons principally concerned, by far the most usual tone of comment should be a sorrowing wonder. That particular alliance is generally the very last that anybody ever expected. 'What made him choose *her*, of all people,' and 'What on earth she could see in *him*,' are declared insoluble problems. It is confidently predicted that the engagement will never come to anything, or that, if such a marriage ever does take place, it is most unlikely to prove a success.

Sometimes, in the case of female friends, this tone is even perceptible under their warmest felicitations, and through the smiling mask of compliment shine eyes moist with the most irritating quality of compassion. 'So glad! so delighted! But why, *why* didn't you consult *me*?' – this complicated expression might be rendered: 'I could have saved you from this – I *was* so pleased to hear of it!'

And yet, in the majority of cases, these unions are not found to turn out so very badly after all, and the misguided couple seem really to have gauged their own hearts and their possibilities of

happiness together more accurately than the most clear-sighted of their acquaintances.

The announcement that Ella Hylton had accepted George Chapman provoked the customary sensation and surprise in their respective sets, and perhaps with rather more justification than usual.

Miss Hylton had undeniable beauty of a spiritual and rather *exalté* type, and was generally understood to be highly cultivated. She had spent a year at Somerville, though she had gone down without trying for a place in either 'Mods.' or 'Greats,' thereby preserving, if not increasing, her reputation for superiority. She had lived all her life among cultured people; she was devoted to music and regularly attended the Richter Concerts, though she could seldom be induced to play in public; she had a feeling for art, though she neither painted nor drew; a love of literature strong enough to deter her from all amateur efforts in that direction. In art, music and literature she was impatient of mediocrity; and, while she was as fond as most girls of the pleasures which upper middle-class society can offer, she reverenced intellect, and preferred the conversation of the plainest celebrity to the platitudes of the mere dancing-man, no matter how handsome of feature and perfect of step he might be.

George Chapman was certainly not a mere dancing-man, his waltzing being rather conscientious than dreamlike, and he was only tolerably good-looking. On the other hand, he was not celebrated in any way, and even his mother and sisters had

never considered him brilliant. He had been educated at Rugby and Trinity, Cambridge, where he rowed a fairly good oar, on principle, and took a middle second in the Moral Science Tripos. Now he was in a solicitor's office, where he was receiving a good salary, and was valued as a steady, sensible young fellow, who could be thoroughly depended upon. He was fond of his profession, and had acquired a considerable knowledge of its details; apart from it he had no very decided tastes; he lived a quiet, regular life, and dined out and went to dances in moderation; his manner, though he was nearly twenty-six, was still rather boyishly blunt.

What there was in him that had found favour in Ella Hylton's fastidious eyes the narrator is not rash enough to attempt to particularise. But it may be suggested that the most unlikely people may possess their fairy rose and ring which render them irresistible to at least one heart, if they only have faith to believe in and luck to perceive their power.

So, early in the year, George had plucked up courage to propose to Miss Hylton, after meeting and secretly adoring her for some months past, and she, to the general astonishment, had accepted him.

He had a private income – not a large one – of his own, and had saved out of it. She was entitled under her grandmother's will to a sum which made her an heiress in a modest way, and thus there was no reason why the engagement should be a long one, and, though no date had been definitely fixed for the marriage,

it was understood that it should take place at some time before the end of the summer.

Soon after the engagement, however, an invalid aunt with whom Ella had always been a great favourite was ordered to the south of France, and implored her to go with her; which Ella, who had a real affection for her relative, as well as a strong sense of duty, had consented to do.

This was a misfortune in one of two ways: it either curtailed that most necessary and most delightful period during which *fiancés* discover one another's idiosyncrasies and weaknesses, or it made it necessary to postpone the marriage.

George naturally preferred the former, as the more endurable evil; but Ella's letters from abroad began to hint more and more plainly at delay. Her aunt might remain on the Continent all the summer, and she could not possibly leave her; there was so much to be done after her return that could not be done in a hurry; they had not even begun to furnish the pretty little house on Campden Hill that was to be their new home – it would be better to wait till November, or even later.

The mere idea was alarming to George, and he remonstrated as far as he dared; but Ella remained firm, and he grew desperate.

He might have spared himself the trouble. About the middle of June Ella's aunt – who, of course, had had to leave the Riviera – grew tired of travelling, and Ella, to George's intense satisfaction, returned to her mother's house in Linden Gardens, Notting Hill.

And now, when our story opens, George, who had managed to get away from office-work two hours before his usual time, was hurrying towards Linden Gardens as fast as a hansom could take him, to see his betrothed for the first time after their long separation.

He was eager, naturally, and a little nervous. Would Ella still persist in her wish for delay? or would he be able to convince her that there were no obstacles in the way? He felt he had strong arguments on his side, if only – and here was the real seat of his anxiety – if only her objections were not raised from some other motive! She might have been trying to prepare him for a final rupture, and then – 'Well,' he concluded, with his customary good sense, 'no use meeting trouble halfway – in five minutes I shall know for certain!'

At the same moment Mrs. Hylton and her daughter Flossie, a vivacious girl in the transitionary sixteen-year-old stage, were in the drawing-room at Linden Gardens. It was the ordinary double drawing-room of a London house, but everything in it was beautiful and harmonious. The eye was vaguely rested by the delicate and subdued colour of walls and hangings; cabinets, antique Persian pottery, rare bits of china, all occupied the precise place in which their decorative value was most felt; a room, in short, of exceptional individuality and distinction.

Flossie was standing at the window, from which a glimpse could just be caught of fresh green foliage and the lodge-gates, with the bustle of the traffic in the High Street beyond; Mrs.

Hylton was writing at a Flemish bureau in the corner.

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