

Braddon Mary Elizabeth

Vixen. Volume I



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Braddon M. E. Mary Elizabeth Vixen, Volume I

CHAPTER I A Pretty Horsebreaker

The moon had newly risen, a late October moon, a pale almost imperceptible crescent, above the dark pine spires in the thicket through which Roderick Vawdrey came, gun in hand, after a long day's rabbit-shooting. It was not his nearest way home, but he liked the broad clearing in the pine wood, which had a ghostly look at dusk, and was so still and lonely that the dart of a squirrel through the fallen leaves was a startling event. Here and there a sturdy young oak that had been newly stripped of its bark lay among the fern, like the naked corpse of a giant. Here and there a tree had been cut down and slung across the track, ready for barking. The ground was soft and spongy, slippery with damp dead leaves, and inclined in a general way to bogginess; but it was ground that Roderick Vawdrey had known all his life, and it seemed more natural to him than any other spot upon mother earth.

On the edge of this thicket there was a broad ditch, with more mud and dead fern in it than water, a ditch strongly suspected of snakes, and beyond the ditch the fence that enclosed Squire Tempest's domain – an old manor house in the heart of the New Forest. It had been an abbey before the Reformation, and was still best known as the Abbey House.

"I wonder whether I'm too late to catch her," speculated Roderick, shifting his bag from one shoulder to the other; "she's no end of fun."

In front of the clearing there was a broad five-barred gate, and beside the gate a keeper's cottage. The flame of a newly-lighted candle flashed out suddenly upon the autumn dusk, while Roderick stood looking at the gate.

"I'll ask at the lodge," he said; "I should like to say good-bye to the little thing before I go back to Oxford."

He walked quickly on to the gate. The keeper's children were playing at nothing particular just inside it.

"Has Miss Tempest gone for her ride this afternoon?" he asked.

"Ya-ase," drawled the eldest shock-headed youngster.

"And not come back yet?"

"Noa. If she doant take care her'll be bogged."

Roderick hitched his bag on to the top of the gate, and stood at ease waiting. It was late for the little lady of Tempest Manor to be out on her pony; but then it was an understood thing within a radius of ten miles or so that she was a self-willed young person,

and even at fifteen years of age she had a knack of following her own inclination with that noble disregard of consequences which characterises the heaven-born ruler.

Mr. Vawdrey had not waited more than ten minutes when there came the thud of hoofs upon the soft track, a flash of gray in the distance, something flying over those forky branches sprawling across the way, then a half-sweet, half-shrill call, like a bird's, at which the keeper's children scattered themselves like a brood of scared chickens, and now a rush, and a gray pony shooting suddenly into the air and coming down on the other side of the gate, as if he were a new kind of skyrocket.

"What do you think of that, Rorie?" cried the shrill sweet voice of the gray pony's rider!

"I'm ashamed of you, Vixen," said Roderick, "you'll come to a bad end some of these days."

"I don't care if I do, as long as I get my fling first," replied Vixen, tossing her tawny mane.

She was a slim young thing, in a short Lincoln-green habit. She had a small pale face, brown eyes that sparkled with life and mischief, and a rippling mass of reddish-auburn hair falling down her back under a coquettish little felt hat.

"Hasn't your mamma forbidden jumping, Vixen?" remonstrated Roderick, opening the gate and coming in.

"Yes, that she has, sir," said the old groom, riding up at a jog-trot on his thickset brown cob. "It's quite against Mrs. Tempest's orders, and it's a great responsibility to go out with Miss Violet.

She will do it."

"You mean the pony will do it, Bates," cried Vixen. "I don't jump. How can I help it if papa has given me a jumping pony? If I didn't let Titmouse take a gate when he was in the humour, he'd kick like old boots, and pitch me a cropper. It's an instinct of self-preservation that makes me let him jump. And as for poor dear, pretty little mamma," continued Vixen, addressing herself to Roderick, and changing her tone to one of patronising tenderness, "if she had her way, I should be brought up in a little box wrapped in jeweller's wool, to keep me safe. But you see I take after papa, Rorie; and it comes as natural to me to fly over gates as it does to you to get ploughed for smalls. There, Bates," jumping off the pony, "you may take Titmouse home, and I'll come presently and give him some apples, for he has been a dear, darling, precious treasure of a ponykins."

She emphasised this commendation with a kiss on Titmouse's gray nose, and handed the bridle to Bates.

"I'm going to walk home with Mr. Vawdrey," she said.

"But, Vixen, I can't, really," said Roderick; "I'm due at home at this moment, only I couldn't leave without saying good-bye to little Vix."

"And you're over due at Oxford, too, aren't you?" cried Vixen, laughing; "you're always due somewhere – never in the right place. But whether you are due or not, you're coming up to the stables with me to give Titmouse his apples, and then you're coming to dine with us on your last night at home. I insist upon

it; papa insists; mamma insists – we all insist."

"My mother will be as angry as –"

"Old boots!" interjected Vixen. "That's the best comparison I know."

"Awfully vulgar for a young lady."

"You taught it me. How can I help being vulgar when I associate with you? You should hear Miss McCroke preach at me sermons so long" – here Vixen extended her arms to the utmost – "and I'm afraid they'd make as much impression on Titmouse as they do upon me. But she's a dear old thing, and I love her immensely."

This was Vixen's usual way, making up for all shortcomings with the abundance of her love. The heart was always atoning for the errors of the head.

"I wouldn't be Miss McCroke for anything. She must have a bad time of it with you."

"She has," assented Vixen, with a remorseful sigh; "I fear I'm bringing her sandy hairs with sorrow to the grave. That hair of hers never could be gray, you know, it's too self-opinionated in its sandiness. Now come along, Rorie, do. Titmouse will be stamping about his box like a maniac if he doesn't get those apples."

She gave a little tug with both her small doeskin-covered hands at Roderick's arm. He was still standing by the gate irresolute, inclination drawing him to the Abbey House, duty calling him home to Briarwood, five miles off, where his widowed mother

was expecting his return.

"My last night at home, Vix," he said remonstrantly; "I really ought to dine with my mother."

"Of course you ought, and that's the very reason why you'll dine with us. So 'kim over, now,' as Bates says to the horses; I don't know what there is for dinner," she added confidentially, "but I feel sure it's something nice. Dinner is papa's particular vanity, you know. He's very weak about dinner."

"Not so weak as he is about you, Vixen."

"Do you really think papa is as fond of me as he is of his dinner?"

"I'm sure of it!"

"Then he must be very fond of me," exclaimed Vixen, with conviction. "Now, are you coming?"

Who could resist those little soft hands in doeskin? Certainly not Rorie. He resigned himself to the endurance of his mother's anger in the future as a price to be paid for the indulgence of his inclination in the present, gave Vixen his arm, and turned his face towards the Abbey House.

They walked through shrubberies that would have seemed a pathless wilderness to a stranger, but every turn in which was familiar to these two. The ground was undulating, and vast thickets of rhododendron and azalea rose high above them, or sank in green valleys below their path. Here and there a group of tall firs towered skyward above the dark entanglement of shrubs, or a great beech spread its wide limbs over the hollows; here and

there a pool of water reflected the pale moonshine.

The house lay low, sheltered and shut in by those rhododendron thickets, a long, rambling pile of building, which had been added to, and altered, and taken away from, and added to again, like that well-known puzzle in mental arithmetic which used to amuse us in our childhood. It was all gables, and chimney-stacks, and odd angles, and ivy-mantled wall, and richly-mullioned windows, or quaint little diamond-paned lattices, peeping like a watchful eye from under the shadow of a jutting cornice. The stables had been added in Queen Elizabeth's time, after the monks had been routed from their snug quarters, and the Abbey had been bestowed upon one of the Tudor favourites. These Elizabethan stables formed the four sides of a quadrangle, stone-paved, with an old marble basin in the centre – a basin which the Vicar pronounced to be an early Saxon font, but which Squire Tempest refused to have removed from the place it had occupied ever since the stables were built. There were curious carvings upon the six sides, but so covered with mosses and lichens that nobody could tell what they meant; and the Squire forbade any scraping process by officious antiquarians, which might lead to somebody's forcible appropriation of the ancient basin.

The Squire was not so modern in his ideas as to set up his own gasometer, so the stables were lighted by lanterns, with an oil-lamp fixed here and there against the wall. Into this dim uncertain light came Roderick and Vixen, through the deep stone archway

which opened from the shrubbery into the stable-yard, and which was solid enough for the gate of a fortified town.

Titmouse's stable was lighted better than the rest. The door stood open, and there was Titmouse, with the neat little quilted doeskin saddle still on his back, waiting to be fed and petted by his young mistress. It was a pretty picture, the old low-ceiled stable, with its wide stalls and roomy loose-boxes and carpet of plaited straw, golden against the deep brown of the woodwork.

Vixen ran into the box, and took off Titmouse's bridle, he holding down his head, like a child submitting to be undressed. Then, with many vigorous tugs at straps and buckles, and a good deal of screwing up of her rosy lips in the course of the effort, Vixen took off her pony's saddle.

"I like to do everything I can for him," she explained, as Rorie watched her with an amused smile; "I'd wisp him down if they'd let me."

She left the leather panel on Titmouse's back, hung up saddle and bridle, and skipped off to a corn-chest to hunt for apples. Of these she brought half-a-dozen or so in the skirt of her habit, and then, swinging herself lightly into a comfortable corner of the manger, began to carry out her system of reward for good conduct, with much coquetry on her part and Titmouse's, Rorie watching it all from the empty stall adjoining, his folded inns resting on the top of the partition. He said not another word about his mother, or the duty that called him home to Briarwood, but stood and watched this pretty horsebreaker in a dreamy

contentment.

What was Violet Tempest, otherwise Vixen, like, this October evening, just three months before her fifteenth birthday? She made a lovely picture in this dim light, as she sat in the corner of the old manger, holding a rosy-cheeked apple at a tantalising distance from Titmouse's nose: yet she was perhaps not altogether lovely. She was brilliant rather than absolutely beautiful. The white skin was powdered with freckles. The rippling hair was too warm an auburn to escape an occasional unfriendly remark from captious critics; but it was not red hair for all that. The eyes were brownest of the brown, large, bright, and full of expression. The mouth was a thought too wide, but it was a lovely mouth notwithstanding. The lips were full and firmly moulded – lips that could mean anything, from melting tenderness to sternest resolve. Such lips, a little parted to show the whitest, evenest teeth in Hampshire, seemed to Rorie lovely enough to please the most critical connoisseur of feminine beauty. The nose was short and straight, but had a trick of tilting itself upward with a little impatient jerk that made it seem *retroussé*; the chin was round and full and dimpled; the throat was full and round also, a white column supporting the tawny head, and indicated that Vixen was meant to be a powerful woman, and not one of those ethereal nymphs who lend themselves most readily to the decorative art of a court milliner.

"I'm afraid Violet will be a dreadfully large creature," Mrs. Tempest murmured plaintively, as the girl grew and flourished;

that lady herself being ethereal, and considering her own appearance a strictly correct standard of beauty. How could it be otherwise, when she had been known before her marriage as "the pretty Miss Calthorpe?"

"This is very nice, you know, Vixen," said Roderick critically, as Titmouse made a greedy snap at an apple, and was repulsed with a gentle pat on his nose, "but it can't go on for ever. What'll you do when you are grown up?"

"Have a horse instead of a pony," answered Vixen unhesitatingly.

"And will that be all the difference?"

"I don't see what other difference there can be. I shall always love papa, I shall always love hunting, I shall always love mamma – as much as she'll let me. I shall always have a corner in my heart for dear old Crokey; and, perhaps," looking at him mischievously, "even an odd corner for you. What difference can a few more birthdays make in me? I shall be too big for Titmouse, that's the only misfortune; but I shall always keep him for my pet, and I'll have a basket-carriage and drive him when I go to see my poor people. Sitting behind a pony is an awful bore when one's natural place is on his back, but I'd sooner endure it than let Titmouse fancy himself superannuated."

"But when you're grown up you'll have to come out, Vixen. You'll be obliged to go to London for a season, and be presented, and go to no end of balls, and ride in the Row, and make a grand marriage, and have a page all to yourself in the *Court Journal*."

"Catch me – going to London!" exclaimed Vixen, ignoring the latter part of the sentence. "Papa hates London, and so do I. And as to riding in Rotten Row, *je voudrais bien me voir faisant cela*," added Vixen, whose study of the French language chiefly resulted in the endeavour to translate English slang into that tongue. "No, when I grow up I shall take papa the tour of Europe. We'll see all those places I'm worried about at lessons – Marathon, Egypt, Naples, the Peloponnesus, *tout le tremblement*– and I shall say to each of them, 'Oh, this is you, is it? What a nuisance you've been to me on the map.' We shall go up Mount Vesuvius, and the Pyramids, and do all sorts of wild things; and by the time I come home I shall have forgotten the whole of my education."

"If Miss McCroke could hear you!"

"She does, often. You can't imagine the wild things I say to her. But I love her – fondly."

A great bell clanged out with a vigorous peal, that seemed to shake the old stable.

"There's the first bell. I must run and dress. Come to the drawing-room and see mamma."

"But, Vixen, how can I sit down to dinner in such a costume," remonstrated Rorie, looking down at his brown shooting-suit, leather gaiters, and tremendous boots – boots which, instead of being beautified with blacking, were supplied with tallow; "I can't do it, really."

"Nonsense," cried Vixen, "what does it matter? Papa seldom

dresses for dinner. I believe he considers it a sacrifice to mamma's sense of propriety when he washes his hands after coming in from the home farm. And you are only a boy – I beg pardon – an undergraduate. So come along."

"But upon my word, Vixen, I feel too much ashamed of myself."

"I've asked you to dinner, and you've accepted," cried Vixen, pulling him out of the stable by the lapel of his shooting-jacket.

He seemed to relish that mode of locomotion, for he allowed himself to be pulled all the way to the hall-door, and into the glow of the great beech-wood fire; a ruddy light which shone upon many a sporting trophy, and reflected itself on many a gleaming pike and cuirass, belonging to days of old, when gentlemanly sport for the most part meant man-hunting.

It was a fine old vaulted hall, a place to love and remember lovingly when far away. The walls were all of darkly bright oak panelling, save where here and there a square of tapestry hung before a door, or a painted window let in the moonlight. At one end there was a great arched fireplace, the arch surmounted with Squire Tempest's armorial bearings, roughly cut in freestone. A mailed figure of the usual stumpy build, in helm and hauberk, stood on each side of the hearth; a large three-cornered chair covered with stamped and gilded leather was drawn up to the fireside, the Squire's favourite seat on an autumn or winter afternoon. The chair was empty now, but, stretched at full length before the blazing logs, lay the Squire's chosen companion, Nip,

a powerful liver-coloured pointer; and beside him in equally luxurious rest, reclined Argus, Vixen's mastiff. There was a story about Vixen and the mastiff, involving the only incident in that young lady's life the recollection whereof could make her blush.

The dog, apparently coiled in deepest slumber, heard the light footsteps on the hall floor, pricked up his tawny ears, sprang to his feet, and bounded over to his young mistress, whom he nearly knocked down in the warmth of his welcome. Nip, the pointer, blinked at the intruders, yawned desperately, stretched himself a trifle longer, and relapsed into slumber.

"How fond that brute is of you," said Rorie; "but it's no wonder, when one considers what you did for him."

"If you say another word I shall hate you," cried Vixen savagely.

"Well, but you know when a fellow fights another fellow's battles, the other fellow's bound to be fond of him; and when a young lady pitches into a bird-boy with her riding-whip to save a mastiff pup from ill-usage, that mastiff pup is bound – "

"Mamma," cried Vixen, flinging aside a tapestry *portière*, and bouncing into the drawing-room, "here's Roderick, and he's come to dinner, and you must excuse his shooting-dress, please. I'm sure pa will."

"Certainly, my dear Violet," replied a gentle, *trâînante* voice from the fire-lit dimness near the velvet-curtained hearth. "Of course I am always glad to see Mr. Vawdrey when your papa asks him. Where did you meet the Squire, Roderick?"

"Upon my word, Mrs. Tempest," faltered Rorie, coming slowly forward into the ruddy glow, "I feel quite awfully ashamed of myself; I've been rabbit-shooting, and I'm a most horrid object. It wasn't the Squire asked me to stay. It was Vixen."

Vixen made a ferocious grimace at him – he could just see her distorted countenance in the fire-light – and further expressed her aggravation by a smart crack of her whip.

"Violet, my love, you have such startling ways," exclaimed Mrs. Tempest, with a long-suffering air. "Really, Miss McCroke, you ought to try and correct her of those startling ways."

On this Roderick became aware of a stout figure in a tartan dress, knitting industriously on the side of the hearth opposite Mrs. Tempest's sofa. He could just see the flash of those active needles, and could just hear Miss McCroke murmur placidly that she had corrected Violet, and that it was no use.

Rorie remembered that plaid poplin dress when he was at Eton. It was a royal Stuart, too brilliant to be forgotten. He used to wonder whether it would ever wear out, or whether it was not made of some indestructible tissue, like asbestos – a fabric that neither time nor fire could destroy.

"It was Rorie's last night, you see, mamma," apologised Vixen, "and I knew you and papa would like him to come, and that you wouldn't mind his shooting-clothes a bit, though they do make him look like the under-keeper, except that the under-keeper's better looking than Rorie, and has finished growing his whiskers, instead of living in the expectation of them."

And with this Parthian shot, Vixen made a pirouette on her neat little morocco-shod toes, and whisked herself out of the room; leaving Roderick Vawdrey to make the best of his existence for the next twenty minutes with the two women he always found it most difficult to get on with, Mrs. Tempest and Miss McCroke.

The logs broke into a crackling blaze just at this moment, and lighted up that luxurious hearth and the two figures beside it.

It was the prettiest thing imaginable in the way of a drawing-room, that spacious low-ceiled chamber in the Abbey House.

The oak panelling was painted white, a barbarity on the part of those modern Goths the West End decorators, but a charming background for quaint Venetian mirrors, hanging shelves of curious old china, dainty little groups of richly-bound duodecimos, brackets, bronzes, freshest flowers in majolica jars; water-colour sketches by Hunt, Prout, Cattermole, and Edward Duncan; sage-green silk curtains; black and gold furniture, and all the latest prettinesses of the new Jacobean school. The mixture of real medievalism and modern quaintness was delightful. One hardly knew where the rococo began or the mediaeval left off. The good old square fireplace, with its projecting canopy, and columns in white and coloured marbles, was as old as the days of Inigo Jones; but the painted tiles, with their designs from the Iliad and Odyssey after Dante Rossetti, were the newest thing from Minton's factory.

Even Rorie felt that the room was pretty, though he did above

all things abhor to be trapped in it, as he found himself this October evening.

"There's a great lot of rubbish in it," he used to say of Mrs. Tempest's drawing-room, "but it's rather nice altogether."

Mrs. Tempest, at five-and-thirty, still retained the good looks which had distinguished Miss Calthorpe at nineteen. She was small and slim, with a delicate complexion. She had large soft eyes of a limpid innocent azure, regular features, rosebud lips, hands after Velasquez, and an unexceptionable taste in dress, the selection of which formed one of the most onerous occupations of her life. To attire herself becomingly, and to give the Squire the dinners he best liked, in an order of succession so dexterously arranged as never to provoke satiety, were Mrs. Tempest's cardinal duties. In the intervals of her life she read modern poetry, unobjectionable French novels, and reviews. She did a little high-art needle-work, played Mendelssohn's Lieder, sang three French *chansons* which her husband liked, slept, and drank orange pekoe. In the consumption of this last article Mrs. Tempest was as bad as a dram-drinker. She declared her inability to support life without that gentle stimulant, and required to be wound up at various hours of her languid day with a dose of her favourite beverage.

"I think I'll take a cup of tea," was Mrs. Tempest's inevitable remark at every crisis of her existence.

"And so you are going back to Oxford, Roderick?" the lady began with a languid kindness.

Mrs. Tempest had never been known to be unkind to anyone. She regarded all her fellow-creatures with a gentle tolerance. They were there, a necessary element of the universe, and she bore with them. But she had never attached herself particularly to anybody except the Squire. Him she adored. He took all the trouble of life off her hands, and gave her all good things. She had been poor, and he had made her rich; nobody, and he had elevated her into somebody. She loved him with a canine fidelity, and felt towards him as a dog feels towards his master – that in him this round world begins and ends.

"Yes," assented Rorie, with a sigh, "I'm going up to-morrow."

"Why up?" inquired Miss McCroke, without lifting her eyes from her needles. "It isn't up on the map."

"I hope you are going to get a grand degree," continued Mrs. Tempest, in that soft conciliatory voice of hers; "Senior Wrangler, or something."

"That's the other shop," exclaimed Rorie; "they grow that sort of timber at Cambridge. However, I hope to pull myself through somehow or other this time, for my mother's sake. She attaches a good deal of importance to it, though for my own part I can't see what good it can do me. It won't make me farm my own land better, or ride straighter to hounds, or do my duty better to my tenants."

"Education," said Miss McCroke sententiously, "is always a good, and we cannot too highly estimate its influence upon –"

"Oh yes, I know," answered Rorie quickly, for he knew that

when the floodgates of Miss McCroke's eloquence were once loosened the tide ran strong, "when house and lands are gone and spent a man may turn usher in an academy, and earn fifty pounds a year and his laundress's bill by grinding Caesar's Commentaries into small boys. But I shouldn't lay in a stock of learning with that view. When my house and lands are gone I'll go after them – emigrate, and go into the lumber trade in Canada."

"What a dreadful idea," said Mrs. Tempest; "but you are not going to lose house and lands, Roderick – such a nice place as Briarwood."

"To my mind it's rather a commonplace hole," answered the young man carelessly, "but the land is some of the best in the county."

It must be nearly seven by this time, he thought. He was getting through this period of probation better than he had expected. Mrs. Tempest gave a little stifled yawn behind her huge black fan, upon which Cupids and Graces, lightly sketched in French gray, were depicted dancing in the airiest attitudes, after Boucher. Roderick would have liked to yawn in concert, but at this juncture a sudden ray of light flashed upon him and showed him a way of escape.

"I think I'll go to the gentleman's room, and make myself decent before the second bell rings," he said.

"Do," assented Mrs. Tempest, with another yawn; and the young man fled.

He had only time to scramble through a hurried toilet, and

was still feeling very doubtful as to the parting of his short crisp hair, when the gong boomed out its friendly summons. The gentleman's room opened from the hall, and Rorie heard the Squire's loud and jovial voice uplifted as he raised the tapestry curtain.

Mr. Tempest was standing in front of the log fire, pulling Vixen's auburn hair. The girl had put on a picturesque brown velvet frock. A scarlet sash was tied loosely round her willowy waist, and a scarlet ribbon held back the rippling masses of her bright hair.

"A study in red and brown," thought Rorie, as the fire-glow lit up the picture of the Squire in his hunting-dress, and the girl in her warm velvet gown.

"Such a run, Rorie," cried the Squire; "we dawdled about among the furze from twelve till four doing nothing, and just as it was getting dark started a stag up on the high ground this side of Pickett's Post, and ran him nearly into Ringwood. Go in and fetch my wife, Rorie. Oh, here she is" – as the *portière* was lifted by a white hand, all a-glitter with diamonds – "you must excuse me sitting down in pink to-day, Pamela; I only got in as the gong began to sound, and I'm as hungry as the proverbial hunter."

"You know I always think you handsomest in your scarlet coat, Edward," replied the submissive wife, "but I hope you're not very muddy."

"I won't answer for myself; but I haven't been actually up to my neck in a bog."

Rorie offered his arm to Mrs. Tempest, and they all went in to dinner, the squire still playing with his daughter's hair, and Miss McCroke solemnly bringing up the rear.

The dining-room at the Abbey House was the ancient refectory, large enough for a mess-room; so, when there were no visitors, the Tempests dined in the library – a handsome square room, in which old family portraits looked down from the oak panelling above the bookcases, and where the literary element was not obtrusively conspicuous. You felt that it was a room quite as well adapted for conviviality as for study. There was a cottage piano in a snug corner by the fireplace. The Squire's capacious arm-chair stood on the other side of the hearth, Mrs. Tempest's low chair and gipsy table facing it. The old oak buffet opposite the chimney-piece was a splendid specimen of Elizabethan carving, and made a rich background for the Squire's racing-cups, and a pair of Oliver Cromwell tankards, plain and unornamental as that illustrious Roundhead himself.

It was a delightful room on a chill October evening like this: the logs roaring up the wide chimney, a pair of bronze candelabra lighting buffet and table, Mrs. Tempest smiling pleasantly at her unbidden guest, and the squire stooping, red-faced and plethoric, over his mulligatawny; while Vixen, who was at an age when dinner is a secondary consideration, was amusing herself with the dogs, gentlemanly animals, too wellbred to be importunate in their demands for an occasional tid-bit, and content to lie in superb attitudes, looking up at the eaters patiently, with

supplication in their great pathetic brown eyes.

"Rorie is going up to-morrow – not in a balloon, but to Magdalen College, Oxford – so, as this was his last night, I made him come to dinner," explained Vixen presently. "I hope I didn't do wrong."

"Rorie knows he's always welcome. Have some more of that mulligatawny, my lad, it's uncommonly good."

Rorie declined the mulligatawny, being at this moment deeply engaged in watching Vixen and the dogs. Nip, the liver-coloured pointer, was performing his celebrated statue feat. With his forelegs stiffly extended, and his head proudly poised, he simulated a dog of marble; and if it had not been for the occasional bumping of his tail upon the Persian carpet, in an irresistible wag of self-approbation, the simulation would have been perfect.

"Look, papa! isn't it beautiful? I went out of the room the other day, while Nip was doing the statue, after I'd told him not to move a paw, and I stayed away quite five minutes, and then stole quietly back; and there he was, lying as still as if he'd been carved out of stone. Wasn't that fidelity?"

"Nonsense!" cried the Squire. "How do you know that Nip didn't wind you as you opened the door, and get himself into position? What are these?" as the old silver *entrée* dishes came round. "Stewed eels? You never forget my tastes, Pamela."

"Stewed eels, sir; *sole maître d'hôtel*," said the butler, in the usual suppressed and deferential tone.

Rorie helped himself automatically, and went on looking at Vixen.

Her praises of Nip had kindled jealous fires in the breast of Argus, her own particular favourite; and the blunt black muzzle had been thrust vehemently under her velvet sleeve.

"Argus is angry," said Rorie.

"He's a dear old foolish thing to be jealous," answered Vixen, "when he knows I'd go through fire and water for him."

"Or even fight a big boy," cried the Squire, throwing himself back in his chair with the unctuous laughter of a man who is dining well, and knows it.

Vixen blushed rosiest red at the allusion.

"Papa, you oughtn't to say such things," she cried; "I was a little bit of a child then."

"Yes, and flew at a great boy of fourteen and licked him," exclaimed the Squire, rapturously. "You know the story, don't you, Rorie?"

Rorie had heard it twenty times, but looked the picture of ignorant expectancy.

"You know how Vixen came by Argus? What, you don't? Well, I'll tell you. This little yellow-haired lass of mine was barely nine years old, and she was riding through the village on her pony, with young Stubbs behind her on the sorrel mare – and, you know, to her dying day, that sorrel would never let anyone dismount her quietly. Now what does Vixen spy but a lubberly lad and a lot of small children ill-using a mastiff pup. They'd tied

a tin-kettle to the brute's tail, and were doing their best to drown him. There's a pond just beyond Mrs. Farley's cottage, you know, and into that pond they'd pelted the puppy, and wouldn't let him get out of it. As fast as the poor little brute scrambled up the muddy bank they drove him back into the water."

"Papa darling," pleaded Vixen despairingly, "Rorie has heard it all a thousand times before. Haven't you now, Rorie?"

"It's as new to me as to-morrow's *Times*," said Roderick with effrontery.

"Vixen was off the pony before you could say 'Jack Robinson.' She flew into the midst of the dirty little ragamuffins, seized the biggest ruffian by the collar, and trundled him backwards into the pond. Then she laid about her right and left with her whip till the wretches scampered off, leaving Vixen and the puppy masters of the situation; and by this time the sorrel mare had allowed Stubbs to get off her, and Stubbs rushed to the rescue. The young ringleader had been too much surprised by his ducking to pull himself together again before this, but he came up to time now, and had it out with Stubbs, while the sorrel was doing as much damage as she conveniently could to Mrs. Farley's palings. 'Don't quite kill him, please, Stubbs,' cried Vixen, 'although he richly deserves it;' and then she took the muddy little beast up in her arms and ran home, leaving her pony to fate and Stubbs. Stubbs told me the whole story, with tears in his eyes. 'Who'd ha' thought, Squire, the little lady would ha' been such a game 'un?' said Stubbs."

"It's very horrid of you, papa, to tell such silly old stories," remonstrated Vixen. "That was nearly seven years ago, and Dr. Dewsnap told us the other day that everybody undergoes a complete change of – what is it? – all the tissues – in seven years. I'm not the same Vixen that pushed the boy into the pond. There's not a bit of her left in me."

And so the dinner went on and ended, with a good deal of distraction, caused by the dogs, and a mild little remark now and then from Mrs. Tempest, or an occasional wise interjection from Miss McCroke, who in a manner represented the Goddess of Wisdom in this somewhat frivolous family, and came in with a corrective and severely rational observation when the talk was drifting towards idiocy.

The filberts, bloomy purple grapes, and ruddy pippins, and yellow William pears had gone their rounds – all home produce – and had been admired and praised, and the Squire's full voice was mellowing after his second glass of port, when the butler came in with a letter on a salver, and carried it, with muffled footfall and solemn visage, as of one who entrusted with the delivery of a death-warrant, straight to Roderick Vawdrey.

The young man looked at it as if he had encountered an unexpected visitor of the adder tribe.

"My mother," he faltered.

It was a large and handsome letter with a big red seal.

"May I?" asked Rorie, with a troubled visage, and having received his host and hostess's assent, broke the seal.

"Dear Roderick, – Is it quite kind of you to absent yourself on this your last night at home? I feel very sure that this will find you at the Abbey House, and I send the brougham at a venture. Be good enough to come home at once. The Dovedales arrived at Ashbourne quite unexpectedly this afternoon, and are dining with me on purpose to see you before you go back to Oxford. If your own good feeling did not urge you to spend this last evening with me, I wonder that Mr. and Mrs. Tempest were not kind enough to suggest to you which way your duty lay. – Yours anxiously,

"JANE VAWDREY."

Roderick crumpled the letter with an angry look. That fling at the Tempests hit him hard. Why was it that his mother was always so ready to find fault with these chosen friends of his?

"Anything wrong, Rorie?" asked the Squire.

"Nothing; except that the Dovedales are dining with my mother; and I'm to go home directly."

"If you please, ma'am, Master Vawdrey's servant has come for him," said Vixen, mimicking the style of announcement at a juvenile party. "It's quite too bad, Rorie," she went on, "I had made up my mind to beat you at pyramids. However I daresay you're very glad to have the chance of seeing your pretty cousin before you leave Hampshire."

But Rorie shook his head dolefully, made his adieux, and departed.

CHAPTER II

Lady Jane Vawdrey

"It is not dogs only that are jealous!" thought Roderick, as he went home in the brougham, with all the windows down, and the cool night breeze blowing his cigar smoke away into the forest, to mix with the mist wreaths that were curling up from the soft ground. It was an offence of the highest grade to smoke in his mother's carriage; but Rorie was in an evil temper just now, and found a kind of bitter pleasure in disobedience.

The carriage bowled swiftly along the straight, well-made road, but Rorie hated riding in a brougham. The soft padded confinement galled him.

"Why couldn't she send me my dog-cart?" he asked himself indignantly.

Briarwood was a large white house in a small park. It stood on much higher ground than the Abbey House, and was altogether different from that good old relic of a bygone civilisation. Briarwood was distinctly modern. Its decorations savoured of the Regency: its furniture was old-fashioned, without being antique. The classic stiffness and straightness of the First French Empire distinguished the gilded chairs and tables in the drawing-room. There were statues by Chantrey and Canova in the spacious lofty hall; portraits by Lawrence and Romney in the dining-room;

a historical picture by Copley over the elephantine mahogany sideboard; a Greek sarcophagus for wines under it.

At its best, the Briarwood house was commonplace; but to the mind of Lady Jane Vawdrey, the gardens and hot-houses made amends. She was a profound horticulturist, and spent half her income on orchids and rare newly-imported flowers, and by this means she had made Briarwood one of the show places of the neighbourhood.

"A woman must be distinguished for something, or she is no better than her scullery-maid," said Lady Jane to her son, excusing herself for these extravagances. "I have no talent for music, painting, or poetry, so I devote myself to orchids; and perhaps my orchids turn out better than many people's music and poetry."

Lady Jane was not a pleasant-tempered woman, and enjoyed the privilege of being more feared than liked; a privilege of which she made the most, and which secured her immunity from many annoyances to which good-natured people are subject. She did good to her poor neighbours, in her own cold set way, but the poor people about Briarwood did not send to her for wine and brandy as if she kept a public-house, and was benefited by their liberal patronage; the curate at the little Gothic church, down in the tiny village in a hollow of the wooded hills, did not appeal to Lady Jane in his necessities for church or parish. She subscribed handsomely to all orthodox well-established charities, but was not prone to accidental benevolence. Nobody ever disappointed

her when she gave a dinner, or omitted the duty-call afterwards; but she had no unceremonious gatherings, no gossipy kettledrums, no hastily-arranged picnics or garden parties. When people in the neighbourhood wanted to take their friends to see the orchids, they wrote to Lady Jane first, and made it quite a state affair; and on an appointed afternoon, the lady of Briarwood received them, richly clad in a dark velvet gown and a point-lace cap, as if she had just walked out of an old picture, and there were three or four gardeners in attendance to open doors, and cut specimen blossoms for the guests.

"She's a splendid woman, admirable in every way," said Roderick to an Oxford chum, with whom he had been discussing Lady Jane's virtues; "but if a fellow could have a voice in the matter, she's not the mother I should have chosen for myself."

Ambition was the leading characteristic of Lady Jane's mind. As a girl, she had been ambitious for herself, and that ambition had been disappointed; as a woman, her ambition transferred itself to her son. She was the eldest daughter of the Earl of Lodway, a nobleman who had been considerably overweighted in the handicap of life, having nine children, seats in three counties, a huge old house in St. James's Square, and a small income – his three estates consisting of some of the barrenest and most unprofitable land in Great Britain. Of Lord Lodway's nine children, five were daughters, and of these Lady Jane was the eldest and the handsomest. Even in her nursery she had a very distinct notion that, for her, marriage meant promotion. She

used to play at being married at St. George's, Hanover Square, and would never consent to have the ceremony performed by less than two bishops; even though the part of one hierarch had to be represented by the nursery hearth-broom. In due course Lady Jane Umleigh made her *début* in society, in all the bloom and freshness of her stately Saxon beauty. She was admired and talked about, and acknowledged as one of the belles of that season; her portrait was engraved in the *Book of Beauty*, and her ball programmes were always filled with the very best names; but at the end of the season, Lady Lodway went back to the Yorkshire Wolds with a biting sense of failure and mortification. Her handsome daughter had not sent her arrow home to the gold. She had not received a single offer worth talking about.

"Don't you think you could consent to be married by one bishop and a dean, Jenny, if the Marquis comes to the scratch soon after the twelfth?" asked Lady Jane's youngest brother derisively.

He had been made to do bishop in those play-weddings of Lady Jane's, very often when the function went against the grain.

The Marquis thus familiarly spoken about was Lord Strishfogel, the richest nobleman in Ireland, and a great sea-rover, famous for his steam yachts, and his importance generally. He had admired Lady Jane's statuesque beauty, and had been more particular in his attentions than the rest of her satellites, who for the most part merely worshipped her because it was the right thing to do. Lord Strishfogel had promised to come to

Heron's Nest, Lord Lodway's place in the Wolds, for the grouse-shooting; but instead of keeping his promise, this erratic young peer went off to the Golden Horn, to race his yacht against the vessel of a great Turkish official. This was Lady Jane Umleigh's first disappointment. She had liked Lord Strishfogel just well enough to fancy herself deeply in love with him, and she was unconscious of the influence his rank and wealth had exercised upon her feelings. She had thought of herself so often as the Marchioness of Strishfogel, had so completely projected her mind into that brilliant future, that to descend from this giddy height to the insignificance of unwedded girlhood was as sharp a fall as if she had worn a crown and lost it.

Her second season began, and Lord Strishfogel was still a rover; He was in the South Seas by this time, writing a book, and enjoying halcyon days among the friendly natives, swimming like a dolphin in those summery seas, and indulging in harmless flirtations with dusky princesses, whose chief attire was made of shells and flowers, and whose untutored dancing was more vigorous than refined. At the end of that second season, Jane Umleigh had serious thoughts of turning philanthropist, and taking a shipload of destitute young women to Australia. Anything would be better than this sense of a wasted life and ignominious failure.

She was in this frame of mind when Mr. Vawdrey came to Heron's Nest for the shooting. He was a commoner, but his family was one of the oldest in Hampshire, and he had lately

distinguished himself by some rather clever speeches in the House of Commons. His estate was worth fifteen thousand a year, and he was altogether a man of some mark. Above all, he was handsome, manly, and a gentleman to the marrow of his bones, and he was the first man who ever fell over head and ears in love with Jane Umleigh.

The charms that had repelled more frivolous admirers attracted John Vawdrey. That proud calm beauty of Lady Jane's seemed to his mind the perfection of womanly grace. Here was a wife for a man to adore upon his knees, a wife to be proud of, a wife to rule her vassals like a queen, and to lead him, John Vawdrey, on to greatness.

He was romantic, chivalrous, aspiring, and Lady Jane Umleigh was the first woman he had met who embodied the heroine of his youthful dreams. He proposed and was refused, and went away despairing. It would have been a good match, undoubtedly – a truth which Lord and Lady Lodway urged with some iteration upon their daughter – but it would have been a terrible descent from the ideal marriage which Lady Jane had set up in her own mind, as the proper prize for so fair a runner in life's race. She had imagined herself a marchioness, with a vast territory of mountain, vale, and lake, and an influence in the sister island second only to that of royalty, She could not descend all at once to behold herself the wife of a plain country gentleman, whose proudest privilege it was to write M.P. after his name.

The Earl and Countess were urgent, for they had another

daughter ready for the matrimonial market, and were inclined to regard Lady Jane as an "old shopkeeper," but they knew their eldest daughter's temper, and did not press the matter too warmly.

Another season, Lady Jane's fourth, and Lady Sophia's first, began and ended. Lady Sophia was piquant and witty, with a snub nose and a playful disposition. She was a first-rate horsewoman, an exquisite waltzer, good at croquet, archery, billiards, and all games requiring accuracy of eye and aim, and Lady Sophia brought down her bird in a single season. She went home to Heron's Nest a duchess in embryo. The Duke of Dovedale, a bulky, middle-aged nobleman, with a passion for fieldsports and high farming, had seen Lady Sophia riding a dangerous horse in Rotten Row, and had been so charmed by her management of the brute, as to become from that hour her slave. A pretty girl, with such a seat in her saddle, and such a light hand for a horse's mouth, was the next best thing to a goddess. Before the season was over the Duke had proposed, and had been graciously accepted by the young lady, who felt an inward glow of pride at having done so much better than the family beauty.

"Can I ever forget how that girl Jane has snubbed me?" said Lady Sophia to her favourite brother. "And to think that I shall be sitting in ermine robes in the House of Lords, while she is peeping through the nasty iron fretwork in the Ladies' Gallery to catch a glimpse of the top of her husband's head in the House of Commons."

This splendid engagement of Lady Sophia's turned the tide for the faithful John Vawdrey. Lady Jane met her rejected lover at Trouville, and was so gracious to him that he ventured to renew his suit, and, to his delighted surprise, was accepted. Anything was better than standing out in the cold while the ducal engagement was absorbing everybody's thoughts and conversation. Lady Sophia had boasted, in that playful way of hers, of having her beauty-sister for chief bridesmaid; and the beauty-sister had made up her mind that this thing should not be. Perhaps she would have married a worse man than John Vawdrey to escape such infamy.

And John Vawdrey was by no means disagreeable to her; nay, it had been pride, and not any disinclination for the man himself that had bidden her reject him. He was clever, distinguished, and he loved her with a romantic devotion which flattered and pleased her. Yes, she would marry John Vawdrey.

Everybody was delighted at this concession, the lady's parents and belongings most especially so. Here were two daughters disposed of; and if the beauty had made the inferior match, it was only one of those capricious turns of fortune that are more to be expected than the common order of things.

So there was a double marriage the following spring at St. George's, and Lady Jane's childish desire was gratified. There were two bishops at the ceremony. True that one was only colonial, and hardly ranked higher than the nursery hearth brush.

Fate was not altogether unkind to Lady Jane. Her humble

marriage was much happier than her sister's loftier union. The Duke, who had been so good-natured as a lover, proved stupid and somewhat tiresome as a husband. He gave his mind to hunting and farming, and cared for nothing else. His chief conversation was about cattle and manure, guano and composts, the famous white Chillingham oxen, or the last thing in strawberry roans. He spent a small fortune that would have been large for a small man – in the attempt to acclimatise strange animals in his park in the Midlands. Sophia, Duchess of Dovedale, had seven country seats, and no home. Her children were puny and feeble. They sickened in the feudal Scotch castle, they languished in the Buckinghamshire Eden – a freestone palace set among the woods that overhang the valley of the Thames. No breezes that blow could waft strength or vitality to those feeble lungs. At thirty the Duchess of Dovedale had lost all her babies, save one frail sapling, a girl of two years old, who promised to have a somewhat better constitution than her perished brothers and sisters. On this small paragon the Duchess concentrated her cares and hopes. She gave up hunting – much to the disgust of that Nimrod, her husband – in order to superintend her nursery. From the most pleasure-loving of matrons, she became the most domestic. Lady Mabel Ashbourne was to grow up the perfection of health, wisdom, and beauty, under the mother's loving care. She would have a great fortune, for there was a considerable portion of the Duke's property which he was free to bequeath to his daughter. He had coal-pits in the

North, and a tin-mine in the West. He had a house at Kensington which he had built for himself, a model Queen Anne mansion, with every article of furniture made on the strictest aesthetic principles, and not an anachronism from the garrets to the cellars. You might have expected to meet Marlborough on the stairs, and to find Addison reading in the library. The Scottish castle and the Buckinghamshire Paradise would go with the title; but the Duke, delighted with the easy-going sport of the New Forest, had bought six hundred acres between Stony Cross and Romsey – a wide stretch of those low level pastures across which you see the distant roofs and spires of the good old market town – and had made for himself an archetypal home-farm, and had built himself a hunting-box, with stables and kennels of the most perfect kind; and this estate, with the Queen Anne house, and the pits, and the mine, was his very own to dispose of as he pleased.

Lady Jane's marriage had proved happy. Her husband, always egged on by her ambitious promptings, had made himself an important figure in the senate, and had been on the eve of entering the cabinet as Colonial Secretary, when death cut short his career. A hard winter and a sharp attack of bronchitis nipped the aspiring senator in the bud.

Lady Jane was as nearly broken-hearted as so cold a woman could be. She had loved her husband better than anything in this life, except herself. He left her with one son and a handsome jointure, with the full possession of Briarwood until her son's majority. Upon that only child Lady Jane lavished all her care,

but did not squander the wealth of her affection. Perhaps her capacity for loving had died with her husband. She had been proud and fond of him, but she was not proud of the little boy in velvet knickerbockers, whose good looks were his only merit, and who was continually being guilty of some new piece of mischief; laming ponies, smashing orchids, glass, china, and generally disturbing the perfect order which was Briarwood's first law.

When the boy was old enough to go to Eton, he seemed still more remote from his mother's love and sympathy. He was passionately fond of field sports, and those Lady Jane Vawdrey detested. He was backwards in all his studies, despite the careful coaching he had received from the mild Anglican curate of Briarwood village. He was intensely pugilistic, and rarely came home for the holidays without bringing a black eye or a swollen nose as the result of his latest fight. He spent a good deal of money, and in a manner that to his mother's calm sense appeared simply idiotic. His hands were always grubby, his nails wore almost perpetual mourning, his boots were an outrage upon good taste, and he generally left a track of muddy foot-marks behind him along the crimson-carpeted corridors. What could any mother do for such a boy, except tolerate him? Love was out of the question. How could a delicate, high-bred woman, soft-handed, velvet robed, care to have such a lad about her? a boy who smelt of stables and wore hob-nailed boots, whose pockets were always sticky with toffee, and his handkerchiefs

a disgrace to humanity, who gave his profoundest thoughts to pigeon-fancying, and his warmest affections to ratting terriers, nay, who was capable of having a live rat in his pocket at any moment of his life.

But while all these habits made the lad abominable in the eyes of his mother, the Duke and Duchess of Dovedale admired the young Hercules with a fond and envious admiration. The Duke would have given coal-pits and tin-mine, all the disposable property he held, and deemed it but a small price for such a son. The Duchess thought of her feeble boy-babies who had been whooping-coughed or scarlet-fevered out of the world, and sighed, and loved her nephew better than ever his mother had loved him since his babyhood. When the Dovedales were at their place in the Forest, Roderick almost lived with them; or, at any rate, divided his time between Ashbourne Park and the Abbey House, and spent as little of his life at home as he could. He patronised Lady Mabel, who was his junior by five years, rode her thorough-bred pony for her under the pretence of improving its manners, until he took a header with it into a bog, out of which pony and boy rolled and struggled indiscriminately, boy none the worse, pony lamed for life. He played billiards with the Duke, and told the Duchess all his school adventures, practical jokes, fights, apple-pie beds, booby-traps, surreptitious fried sausages, and other misdemeanours.

Out of this friendship arose a brilliant vision which reconciled Lady Jane Vawdrey to her son's preference for his aunt's house

and his aunt's society. Why should he not marry Mabel by-and-by, and unite the two estates of Ashbourne and Briarwood, and become owner of the pits and the mine, and distinguish himself in the senate, and be created a peer? As the husband of Lady Mabel Ashbourne, he would be rich enough to command a peerage, almost as a right; but his mother would have had him deserve it. With this idea Lady Jane urged on her son's education. All his Hampshire friends called him clever, but he won no laurels at school. Lady Jane sent for grinders and had the boy ground; but all the grinding could not grind a love of classics or metaphysics into this free son of the forest. He went to Oxford, and got himself ploughed for his Little Go, with a wonderful facility. For politics he cared not a jot, but he could drive tandem better than any other undergraduate of his year. He never spoke at the Union, but he pulled stroke in the 'Varsity boat. He was famous for his biceps, his good-nature, and his good looks; but so far he had distinguished himself for nothing else, and to this stage of nonperformance had he come when the reader first beheld him.

CHAPTER III

"I Want a Little Serious Talk with You."

It was only half-past nine when the brougham drove up to the pillared porch at Briarwood. The lighted drawing-room windows shone out upon the vaporous autumn darkness – a row of five tall French casements – and the sound of a piano caught Roderick's ear as he tossed the end of his cigar in the shrubbery, and mounted the wide stone door-steps.

"At it again," muttered Rorie with a shrug of disgust, as he entered the hall, and heard, through the half-open drawing-room door, an interlacement of pearly runs. At this stage of his existence, Rorie had no appreciation of brilliant pianoforte playing. The music he liked best was of the simplest, most inartificial order.

"Are the Duke and Duchess here?" he asked the butler.

"Her Grace and Lady Mabel is here, sir; not the Dook."

"I suppose I must dress before I face the quality," muttered Rorie sulkily, and he went leaping upstairs – three steps at a time – to exchange his brown shooting-clothes and leather gaiters for that dress-suit of his which was continually getting too small for him. Rorie detested himself in a dress-suit and a white tie.

"You beast," he cried, addressing his reflection in the tall

glass door of his armoire, "you are the image of a waiter at The Clarendon."

The Briarwood drawing-room looked a great deal too vast and too lofty for the three women who were occupying it this evening. It was a finely-proportioned room, and its amber satin hangings made a pleasing background for the white and gold furniture. White, gold, and amber made up the prevailing tone of colour. Clusters of wax lights against the walls and a crystal chandelier with many candles, filled the room with a soft radiance. It was a room without shadow. There were no recesses, no deep-set windows or doors. All was coldly bright, faultlessly elegant. Rorie detested his mother's drawing-room almost as much as he detested himself in a dress-coat that was too short in the sleeves.

The matrons were seated on each side of the shining gold and steel fireplace, before which there stretched an island of silky white fur. Lady Jane Vawdrey's younger sister was a stout, comfortable-looking woman in gray silk, who hardly realised one's preconceived notion of a duchess. Lady Jane herself had dignity enough for the highest rank in the "Almanach de Gotha." She wore dark green velvet and old rose-point, and looked like a portrait of an Austrian princess by Velasquez. Years had not impaired the purity of her blonde complexion. Her aquiline nose, thin lips, small firm chin, were the features of one born to rule. Her light brown hair showed no streak of gray. An admirable woman, no doubt, for anybody else's mother, as Rorie so often said to himself.

The young lady was still sitting at the piano, remote from the two elders, her slim white fingers running in and out and to and fro in those wondrous intricacies and involutions which distinguish modern classical music. Rorie hated all that running about the piano to no purpose, and could not perceive his cousin's merit in having devoted three or four hours of her daily life for the last seven years to the accomplishment of this melodious meandering. She left off playing, and held out her small white hand to him as he came to the piano, after shaking hands with his aunt.

What was she like, this paragon formed by a mother's worshipping love and ceaseless care, this one last pearl in the crown of domestic life, this child of so many prayers and hopes, and fears, and deep pathetic rejoicings?

She was very fair to look upon – complete and beautiful as a pearl – with that outward purity, that perfect delicacy of tint and harmony of detail which is in itself a charm. Study her as captiously as you would, you could find no flaw in this jewel. The small regular features were so delicately chiselled, the fair fine skin was so transparent, the fragile figure so exquisitely moulded, the ivory hand and arm so perfect – no, you could discover no bad drawing or crude colouring in this human picture. She lifted her clear blue eyes to Rorie's face, and smiled at him in gentle welcome; and though he felt intensely cross at having been summoned home like a school-boy, he could not refuse her a responsive smile, or a gentle pressure of the taper fingers.

"And so you have been dining with those horrid people!" she exclaimed with an air of playful reproach, "and on your last night in Hampshire – quite too unkind to Aunt Jane."

"I don't know whom you mean by horrid people, Mabel," answered Rorie, chilled back into sulkiness all at once; "the people I was with are all that is good and pleasant."

"Then you've not been at the Tempests' after all?"

"I have been at the Tempests'. What have you to say against the Tempests?"

"Oh, I have nothing to say against them," said Lady Mabel, shrugging her pretty shoulders in her fawn-coloured silk gown. "There are some things that do not require to be said."

"Mr. Tempest is the best and kindest of men; his wife is – well, a nonentity, perhaps, but not a disagreeable one; and his daughter – "

Here Rorie came to a sudden stop, which Lady Mabel accentuated with a silvery little laugh.

"His daughter is charming," she cried, when she had done laughing; "red hair, and a green habit with brass buttons, a yellow waistcoat like her papa's, and a rose in her button-hole. How I should like to see her in Rotten Row!"

"I'll warrant there wouldn't be a better horse-woman or a prettier girl there," cried Rorie, scarlet with indignation.

His mother looked daggers. His cousin gave another silvery laugh, clear as those pearly treble runs upon the Erard; but that pretty artificial laugh had a ring which betrayed her

mortification.

"Rorie is thorough," she said; "when he likes people he thinks them perfection. You do think that little red-haired girl quite perfection, now don't you, Rorie?" pursued Lady Mabel, sitting down before the piano again, and touching the notes silently as she seemed to admire the slender diamond hoops upon her white fingers – old-fashioned rings that had belonged to a patrician great-grandmother. "You think her quite a model young lady, though they say she can hardly read, and makes her mark – like William the Conqueror – instead of signing her name, and spends her life in the stables, and occasionally, when the fox gets back to earth – swears."

"I don't know who they may be," cried Roderick, savagely, "but they say a pack of lies. Violet Tempest is as well educated as – any girl need be. All girls can't be paragons; or, if they could, this earth would be intolerable for the rest of humanity. Lord deliver us from a world overrun with paragons. Violet Tempest is little more than a child, a spoiled child, if you like, but she has a heart of gold, and a firmer seat in her saddle than any other woman in Hampshire."

Roderick had turned from scarlet to pale by the time he finished this speech. His mother had paled at the first mention of poor Vixen. That young lady's name acted upon Lady Jane's feelings very much as a red rag acts on a bull.

"I think, after keeping you away from your mother on the last night of your vacation, Mr. Tempest might at least have had the

good taste to let you come home sober," said Lady Jane, with suppressed rage.

"I drank a couple of glasses of still hock at dinner, and not a drop of anything else from the time I entered the Abbey till I left it; and I don't think, considering how I've seasoned myself with Bass at Oxford, that two glasses of Rudesheimer would floor me," explained Rorie, with recovered calmness.

"Oh, but you were drinking deep of a more intoxicating nectar," cried Lady Mabel, with that provokingly distinct utterance of hers. She had been taught to speak as carefully as girls of inferior rank are taught to play Beethoven – every syllable studied, every tone trained and ripened to the right quality. "You were with Violet Tempest."

"How you children quarrel!" exclaimed the Duchess; "you could hardly be worse if you were lovers. Come here, Rorie, and tell me all that has happened to you since we saw you at Lord's in July. Never mind these Tempest people. They are of the smallest possible importance. Of course, Rorie must have somebody to amuse himself with while we are away."

"And now we are come back, he is off to Oxford," said Mabel with an aggrieved air.

"You shouldn't have stayed so long in Switzerland then," retorted Rorie.

"Oh, but it was my first visit, and everything is so lovely. After all the Swiss landscapes I have done in chalk, and pencil, and water-colours, I was astonished to find what a stranger I

was to the scenery. I blushed when I remembered those dreadful landscapes of mine. I was ashamed to look at Mont Blanc. I felt as if the Matterhorn would fall and crush me."

"I think I shall do Switzerland next long," said Rorie patronisingly, as if it would be a good thing for Switzerland.

"You might have come this year while we were there," said Lady Mabel.

"No, I mightn't. I've been grinding. If you knew what a dose of Aristotle I've had, you'd pity me. That's where you girls have the best of it. You learn to read a story-book in two or three modern languages, to meander up and down the piano, and spoil Bristol board, or Whatman's hot-pressed imperial, and then you call yourselves educated; while we have to go back to the beginning of civilisation, and find out what a lot of old Greek duffers were driving at when they sat in the sunshine and prosed like old boots."

Lady Mabel looked at him with a serene smile.

"Would you be surprised to hear that I know a little Greek," she said, "just enough to struggle through the Socratic dialogues with the aid of my master?"

Roderick started as if he had been stung.

"What a shame!" he cried. "Aunt Sophia, what do you mean by making a Lady Jane Grey or an Elizabeth Barrett Browning of her?"

"A woman who has to occupy a leading position can hardly know too much," answered the Duchess sententiously.

"Ah, to be sure, Mabel will marry some diplomatic swell, and be entertaining ambassadors by-and-by. And when some modern Greek envoy comes simpering up to her with a remark about the weather, it will be an advantage for her to know Plato. I understand. Wheels within wheels."

"The Duchess of Dovedale's carriage," announced the butler, rolling out the syllables as if it were a personal gratification to announce them.

Mabel rose at once from the piano, and came to say good-night to her aunt.

"My dear child, it's quite early," said Lady Jane; "Roderick's last night, too. And your mamma is in no hurry."

Mabel looked at Roderick, but that young gentleman was airing himself on the hearth-rug, and gazing absently up at the ceiling. It evidently signified very little to him whether his aunt and cousin went or stayed.

"You know you told papa you would be home soon after ten," said Lady Mabel, and the Duchess rose immediately.

She had a way of yielding to her only daughter which her stronger-minded sister highly disapproved. The first duty of a mother, in Lady Jane's opinion, was to rule her child, the second, to love it. The idea was no doubt correct in the abstract; but the practice was not succeeding too well with Roderick.

"Good-night and good-bye," said Lady Mabel, when the maid had brought her wraps, and Rorie had put them on.

"Not good-bye," said the good-natured Duchess; "Rorie must

come to breakfast to-morrow, and see the Duke. He has just bought some wonderful short-horns, and I am sure he would like to show them to you, Rorie, because you can appreciate them. He was too tired to come out to-night, but I know he wants to see you."

"Thanks, I'll be there," answered Rorie, and he escorted the ladies to their carriage; but not another word did Mabel speak till the brougham had driven away from Briarwood.

"What a horrid young man Roderick has grown, mamma!" she remarked decisively, when they were outside the park-gates.

"My love, I never saw him look handsomer."

"I don't mean his looks. Good looks in a man are a superfluity. But his manners – I never saw anything so underbred. Those Tempest people are spoiling him."

"Roderick," said Lady Jane, just as Rorie was contemplating an escape to the billiard-room and his cigar, "I want a little serious talk with you."

Rorie shivered in his shoes. He knew too well what his mother's serious talk meant. He shrugged his shoulders with a movement that indicated a dormant resistance, and went quietly into the drawing-room.

CHAPTER IV

Rorie comes of Age

"Bless my soul!" cried the Squire; "it's a vixen, after all."

This is how Squire Tempest greeted the family doctor's announcement of the his baby's sex. He had been particularly anxious for a son to inherit the Abbey House estate, succeed to his father's dignities as master of the fox-hounds, and in a general way sustain the pride and glory of the family name; and, behold! Providence had given him a daughter.

"The deuce is in it," ejaculated the Squire; "to think that it should be a vixen!"

This is how Violet Tempest came by her curious pet name. Before she was short-coated, she had contrived to exhibit a very spirited, and even vixenish temper, and the family doctor, who loved a small joke, used to ask after Miss Vixen when he paid his professional visits. As she grew older, her tawny hair was not unlike a red fox's brush in its bright golden-brown hue, and her temper proved decidedly vixenish.

"I wish you wouldn't call Violet by that dreadful nickname, dear," Mrs. Tempest remonstrated mildly.

"My darling, it suits her to a nicety," replied the Squire, and he took his own way in this as in most things.

The earth rolled round, and the revolving years brought no

second baby to the Abbey House. Every year made the Squire fonder of his little golden-haired girl. He put her on a soft white ball of a pony as soon as she could sit up straight, and took her about the Forest with a leading-rein. No one else was allowed to teach Vixen to ride. Young as she was, she soon learnt to do without the leading-rein, and the gentle white pony was discarded as too quiet for little Miss Tempest. Before her eleventh birthday she rode to hounds, rose before the sun to hunt the young fox-cubs in early autumn, and saw the stag at bay on the wild heathery downs above the wooded valleys that sink and fall below Boldewood with almost Alpine grandeur. She was a creature full of life, and courage, and generous impulses, and spontaneous leanings to all good thoughts; but she was a spoiled child, liked her own way, and had no idea of being guided by anybody else's will – unless it had been her father's, and he never thwarted her.

Him she adored with the fondest love that child ever gave to parent: a blind worshipping love, that saw in him the perfection of manhood, the beginning and end of earthly good. If anyone had dared to say in Vixen's hearing that her father could, by any possible combination of circumstances, do wrong, act unjustly, or ungenerously, it would have been better for that man to have come to handy grips with a tiger-cat than with Violet Tempest. Her reverence for her father, and her belief in him, were boundless.

There never, perhaps, was a happier childhood than Violet's.

She was daughter and heiress to one of the most popular men in that part of the country, and everybody loved her. She was not much given to visiting in a methodical way among the poor, and it had never entered into her young mind that it was her mission to teach older people the way to heaven; but if there was trouble in the village – a sick child, a husband in prison for rabbit snaring, a dead baby, a little boy's pinafore set fire – Vixen and her pony were always to the fore; and it was an axiom in the village that, where Miss Tempest did "take," it was very good for those she took to. Violet never withdrew her hand when she had put it to the plough. If she made a promise, she always kept it. However long the sickness, however dire the poverty, Vixen's patience and benevolence lasted to the end.

The famous princess in the story, whose sleep was broken because there was a pea under her seven feather-beds, had scarcely a more untroubled life than Vixen. She had her own way in everything. She did exactly what she liked with her comfortable, middle-aged governess, Miss McCroke, learnt what she pleased, and left what she disliked unlearned. She had the prettiest ponies in Hampshire to ride, the prettiest dresses to wear. Her mother was not a woman to bestow mental culture upon her only child, but she racked her small brain to devise becoming costumes for Violet: the coloured stockings which harmonised best with each particular gown, the neat little buckled shoes, the fascinating Hessian boots. Nothing was too beautiful or too costly for Violet. She was the one thing her

parents possessed in the world, and they lavished much love upon her; but it never occurred to Mr. and Mrs. Tempest, as it had occurred to the Duchess of Dovedale – to make their daughter a paragon.

In this perpetual sunshine Violet grew up, fair as most things are that grow in the sunshine. She loved her father with all her heart, and mind, and soul; she loved her mother with a lesser love; she had a tolerant affection for Miss McCroke; she loved her ponies, and the dog Argus; she loved the hounds in the kennels; she loved every honest familiar face of nurse, servant, and stableman, gardener, keeper, and huntsman, that had looked upon her with friendly, admiring eyes, ever since she could remember.

Not to be loved and admired would have been the strangest thing to Violet. She would hardly have recognised herself in an unappreciative circle. If she could have heard Lady Mabel talking about her, it would have been like the sudden revelation of an unknown world – a world in which it was possible for people to dislike and misjudge her.

This is one of the disadvantages of being reared in a little heaven of domestic love. The outside world seems so hard, and black, and dreary afterwards, and the inhabitants thereof passing cruel.

Miss Tempest looked upon Roderick Vawdrey as her own particular property – a person whom she had the right to order about as she pleased. Rorie had been her playfellow and companion in his holiday-time for the last five years. All their

tastes were in common. They had the same love for the brute creation, the same wild delight in rushing madly through the air on the backs of unreasoning animals; widely different in their tastes from Lady Mabel, who had once been run away with in a pony-carriage, and looked upon all horses as incipient murderers. They had the same love of nature, and the same indifference to books, and the same careless scorn of all the state and ceremony of life.

Vixen was "rising fifteen," as her father called it, and Rorie was just five years her senior. The Squire saw them gay and happy together, without one serious thought of what might come of their childish friendship in the growth of years. That his Vixen could ever care for anyone but her "old dad," was a notion that had not yet found its way into the Squire's brain. She seemed to him quite as much his own property, his own to do what he liked with, singly and simply attached to him, as his favourite horse or his favourite dog. So there were no shadowings forth in the paternal mind as to any growth and development which the mutual affection of these two young people might take in the future.

It was very different with Lady Jane Vawdrey, who never saw her son and his cousin Mabel together without telling herself how exactly they were suited to each other, and what a nice thing it would be for the Briarwood and Ashbourne estates to be united by their marriage.

Rorie went back to college, and contrived to struggle through

his next examinations with an avoidance of actual discredit; but when Christmas came he did not return to the Forest, though Violet had counted on his coming, and had thought that it would be good fun to have his help in the decorations for the little Gothic church in the valley – a pretty little new church, like a toy, which the Squire had built and paid for, and endowed with a perpetual seventy pounds a year out of his own pocket. It would have been fun to see poor Rorie prick his clumsy fingers with the holly. Vixen laughed at his awkwardness in advance, when she talked to Miss McCroke about him, and drew upon herself that lady's mild reproof.

But Christmas came and brought no Rorie. He had gone off to spend his Christmas at the Duke of Dovedale's Scotch castle. Easter came, and still no Rorie. He was at Putney, with the 'Varsity crew, or in London with the Dovedales, riding in the Row, and forgetting dear old Hampshire and the last of the hunting, for which he would have been just in time.

Even the long vacation came without Rorie. He had gone for that promised tour in Switzerland, at his mother's instigation, and was only to come back late in the year to keep his twenty-first birthday, which was to be honoured in a very subdued and unhilarious fashion at Briarwood.

"Mamma," said Violet, at breakfast-time one August morning, with her nose scornfully tilted, "what is Mr. Vawdrey like – dark or fair?"

"Why Violet, you can't have forgotten him," protested her

mother, with languid astonishment.

"I think he has been away long enough for me to forget even the colour of his hair, mamma; and as he hasn't written to anybody, we may fairly suppose he has forgotten us."

"Vixen misses her old playfellow," said the Squire, busy with the demolition of a grouse. "But Rorie is a young man now, you know, dear, and has work to do in the world – duties, my pet – duties."

"And is a young man's first duty to forget his old friends?" inquired Vixen naïvely.

"My pet, you can't expect a lad of that kind to write letters. I am a deuced bad hand at letter-writing myself, and always was. I don't think a man's hand was ever made to pinch a pen. Nature has given us a broad strong grasp, to grip a sword or a gun. Your mother writes most of my letters, Vixen, you know, and I shall expect you to help her in a year or two. Let me see; Rorie will be one-and-twenty in October, and there are to be high jinks at Briarwood, I believe, so there's something for you to look forward to, my dear."

"Edward!" exclaimed Mrs. Tempest reproachfully; "you forget that Violet is not out. She will not be sixteen till next February."

"Bless her!" cried the Squire, with a tender look at his only child, "she has grown up like a green bay-tree. But if this were to be quite a friendly affair at Briarwood, she might go, surely."

"It will not be a friendly affair," said Mrs. Tempest; "Lady

Jane never gives friendly parties. There is nothing friendly in her nature, and I don't think she likes us – much. But I daresay we shall be asked, and if we go I must have a new dress," added the gentle lady with a sigh of resignation. "It will be a dinner, no doubt; and the Duke and Duchess will be there, of course."

The card of invitation came in due course, three weeks before the birthday. It was to be a dinner, as Mrs. Tempest had opined. She wrote off to her milliner at once, and there was a passage of letters and fashion-plates and patterns of silk to and fro, and some of Mrs. Tempest's finest lace came out of the perfumed chest in which she kept her treasures, and was sent off to Madame Theodore.

Poor Vixen beheld these preparations with an aching heart. She did not care about dinner-parties in the least, but she would have liked to be with Roderick on his birthday. She would have liked it to have been a hunting-day, and to have ridden for a wild scamper across the hills with him – to have seen the rolling downs of the Wight blue in the distance – to have felt the soft south wind blowing in her face, and to have ridden by his side, neck and neck, all day long; and then to have gone home to the Abbey House to dinner, to the snug round table in the library, and the dogs, and papa in his happiest mood, expanding over his port and walnuts. That would have been a happy birthday for all of them, in Violet's opinion.

The Squire and his daughter had plenty of hunting in this merry month of October, but there had been no sign of Rorie

and his big raking chestnut in the field, nor had anyone in the Forest heard of or seen the young Oxonian.

"I daresay he is only coming home in time for the birthday," Mrs. Tempest remarked placidly, and went on with her preparations for that event.

She wanted to make a strong impression on the Duchess, who had not behaved too well to her, only sending her invitations for indiscriminate afternoon assemblies, which Mrs. Tempest had graciously declined, pleading her feeble health as a reason for not going to garden-parties.

Vixen was in a peculiar temper during those three weeks, and poor Miss McCroke had hard work with her.

"*Der, die, das,*" cried Vixen, throwing down her German grammar in a rage one morning, when she had been making a muddle of the definite article in her exercise, and the patient governess had declared that they really must go back to the very beginning of things. "What stupid people the Germans are! Why can't they have one little word for everything, as we have? T, h, e, the. Any child can learn that. What do they mean by chopping up their language into little bits, like the pieces in a puzzle? Why, even the French are more reasonable – though they're bad enough, goodness knows, with their hes and shes – feminine tables, and masculine beds. Why should I be bothered to learn all this rubbish? I'm not going to be a governess, and it will never be any use to me. Papa doesn't know a single sentence in French or German, and he's quite happy."

"But if your papa were travelling on the Continent, Violet, he would find his ignorance of the language a great deprivation."

"No, he wouldn't. He'd have a courier."

"Are you aware, my dear, that we have wasted five minutes already in this discursive conversation?" remarked Miss McCroke, looking at a fat useful watch, which she wore at her side in the good old fashion. "We will leave the grammar for the present, and you can repeat Schiller's Song of the Bell."

"I'd rather say the Fight with the Dragon," said Vixen; "there's more fire and life in it. I do like Schiller, Crokey dear. But isn't it a pity he didn't write it in English?"

And Vixen put her hands behind her, and began to recite the wonderful story of the knight who slew the dragon, and very soon her eyes kindled and her cheeks were aflame, and the grand verses were rolled out rapidly, with a more or less faulty pronunciation, but plenty of life and vehemence. This exercise of mind and memory suited Vixen a great deal better than dull plodding at the first principles of grammar, and the perpetual *der, die, das*.

This day was the last of October, and Roderick Vawdrey's birthday. He had not been seen at the Abbey House yet. He had returned to Briarwood before this, no doubt, but had not taken the trouble to come and see his old friends.

"He's a man now, and has duties, and has done with us," thought Vixen savagely.

She was very glad that it was such a wretched day – a hideous

day for anyone's twenty-first birthday, ominous of all bad things, she thought. There was not a rift in the dull gray sky; the straight fine rain came down persistently, soaking into the sodden earth, and sending up an odour of dead leaves. The smooth shining laurels in the shrubbery were the only things in nature that seemed no worse for the perpetual downpour. The gravel drives were spongy and sloppy. There was no hunting, or Vixen would have been riding her pony through rain and foul weather, and would have been comparatively independent of the elements. But to be at home all day, watching the rain, and thinking what a horrid, ungrateful young man Rorie was! That was dreary.

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