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am not to be allowed to do the very thing that is!"

"All right; then we'll walk," cried Gilbert, giving in at once, with the utmost kindness. "I'll send the cart on to King's Common—David can take it—and I will escort you back. There, will that do?" and he looked as if he had cut the knot cleverly and pleased everyone.

If he had, he was not permitted to think so long.

"Surely I need not be such a bugbear to you all! Surely this need not have been made such a fuss about, and such a business of!" cried Rosamund, in a high, sharp voice. "It is perfectly ridiculous for us all to be planning and discussing a mere nothing, as if it were a matter of life and death"—drumming impatiently upon the table. "Why may I not do as I always used to do and trouble nobody! I never needed any 'escort' home from here; and why should I begin at once to be so particular? Do, Aunt Julia, let us come," still more impatiently; "we cannot be required to stay on here for ever. Here are Hartland and Mr. Stoneby to watch Major Gilbert eating his luncheon, and it seems years since we had ours!"

"My dear child!"

Even Lady Julia was shocked.

"Dear Rosamund, you—you forget yourself," she murmured, for Rosamund had already pushed back her chair. "My dear child—dear love, do remember." Then louder, "No, Major Gilbert, pray don't hurry—pray do not think you are keeping us here. Indeed none of us wish to go in the least; it is only that dear Rosamund feels the heat of the room a little, is it not, love? The room is very hot, certainly. The sun has been on it all day, and the day is too mild for that large fire. The fire is quite too large. I feel it myself; and the weather is unseasonable, altogether unseasonable for November."

"I have been wanting particularly to see you, Gilbert, added Hartland, doing his part next. "I am making some alterations in the stables, and the builder is to be over this afternoon; so it is quite a piece of luck your being here at the same time. I had almost written asking you to meet him, but I let the post-time slip by."

"And I too should have written," put in Jack Stoneby, who had only waited till the others had done, and who, as he was sitting next the major, could say his say without being obtrusive. "I received your note this morning, and I cannot tell how to thank you enough. Your generosity—"

Gilbert kicked his foot beneath the table. He did not know that his generosity had been already proclaimed.

All who could had now done their best towards atoning for Rosamund's insolent assault, and her heart swelled with resentment against each one.

Why should she not say what she chose, be unfeeling, ungrateful, and rude, if she pleased, towards her lover? Gilbert was hers—not theirs. Surely she might do as she would with her own; and all that she had done and suffered on his behalf rose up as usual to justify her. She now longed to break away from the scene, the hateful room, and the hateful company, to rush forth to solitude and passion, unrestrained and misery.

Strange to say, the three Gilberts were the ones with whom she was in her heart least at war. On her aunt and Hartland and the Stonebys—all of whom she perceived to be watchful and anxious—on these she could pour the full violence of her wrath. The poor Gilberts—they were as harmless as doves—they alone did not molest her; they were satisfied and unsuspecting, and, in consequence, to be borne; but she saw that Lady Julia was aroused, she fancied the Stonebys on the alert, and she knew that Hartland knew; they were one and all intolerable.

The dogcart, the pony-chaise, anything would be better than that solemn, round table, surrounded by those many pairs of curious eyes, which were now turned on her, now on her lover, and now on the plates before them. It needed that she clasped her hot, trembling hands closely on her lap, that she held her breath and set her teeth tight within her closed lips, to prevent further exposure and defeat. That she could not bear.

It seemed now as if the hostess would never rise; and as, indeed, Lady Julia would have set on till midnight to undo her niece's misdemeanour, she was now glued to her chair, thankful as she would have been—almost as thankful as any one—to quit it. Wild with vexation, the author of her own discomfiture had accordingly to endure prolonged punishment; while Gilbert, who had been unable to help feeling hurt, and had gently enough charged her with unreasonableness in his own mind, was being comforted and soled.

Under such treatment he could not but recover, and though he had just sufficient feeling on the point to cut short his meal, and refuse cheese and biscuits, and some young, crisp and juicy celery, of which vegetable he was particularly fond, he was himself again by the time he had finished.

"She should not have snubbed me so before them all," he reflected; "but, poor girl, she has so much spirit, I must not be too hard upon her."

It did not occur to him to wonder why she should have been inclined to "snub." Hartland was ruminating for cigars when the ladies at last left the room. "I have

lots in the billiard-room," he said, "but it is such a way off. I brought some here. I know I put them down here"—overturning papers, and peering behind mantelpiece ornaments—"on purpose to be handy; for I expect that builder fellow has come, and we may as well go out at once."

"First say what you think of these," said Major Gilbert, producing the handsome silver cigar-case wherewith Rosamund had endowed him in the early and palmy days of their engagement. They were moving towards the door as he spoke, and he looked at it for a moment tenderly, and, as he thought, unperceived. "I have some rather good ones here," and he handed the case to each.

"I know them," said Hartland joyfully accepting one; "if these are the same brand as the last, they are perfectly delicious."

"Do allow me to make you a present of a box, Lord Hartland. They are the same. I never smoke any other, and I shall be greatly honored if you will accept them."

"You may be quite sure I shan't refuse them. I say, how good of you! I shall look forward every hour till that box arrives. Thanks awfully." (Then he turned away with almost a groan. All on the surface so smooth and fair, but beneath—what next?—what next?)

Poor Rosamund, whom to blame or pity most we know not, but whose state of mind did not certainly render her the most agreeable companion in the world at this period, did not long enjoy the relief afforded by a general discovery of this fact.

For a brief half-hour she was indeed left in peace, while Lady Julia explained the mysteries of some new kind of needlework to Emily Gilbert, and Clementina piloted Henrietta through an illustrated manual; and during that time she could lie back in the depths of her chair, speechless and weary, caring about nothing but to be let alone, conscious of nothing but the luxury of being unobserved and unwatched. Gradually, under the influence of the quiet room, whose distant murmurs only soothed her ear, and further refreshed by a cup of hot and fragrant coffee—Lady Julia's institution, which had never been adopted at King's Common, though greatly appreciated by the young ones whenever they came to the Abbey,—under these combined narcotics her breathings became gentler and gentler, her eyelids closed, and the heavings of her troubled bosom resembled the slow swell of the ocean after the tumult of the storm has subsided,—thought was all but suspended, pain quite, she had nearly sunk into a slumber, peaceful and sweet as an infant's, from sheer exhaustion of mind and body—when, and as it seemed with a deafening and odious clamour, an incomprehensible, cruel uproar, she was all in a moment recalled to the present scene, and to the entrance of Eleanor, Violet and Amy Waterfield, who were walking up the room.

Waterfields, now! Waterfields at this most unfortunate, most miserable juncture!

No words can depict the feelings of the unhappy Rosamund. She had dreaded their return, and wished the first meeting well over, and had wound herself up to carry it off bravely; but that they should have her thus at vantage was unfair indeed.


She had known very well how they felt about her engagement; the letters had been exactly what she had expected. They had hoped she would "be very happy," and had been sure Major Gilbert "was very fortunate," and she had tossed the ejestiles scornfully aside, and had responded in set terms, which had been understood with equal distinctness by them on their part. This formality accomplished, there had been a lull, with an ever-increasing repugnance towards breaking it. To have it broken thus! To have this added to all that had gone before!

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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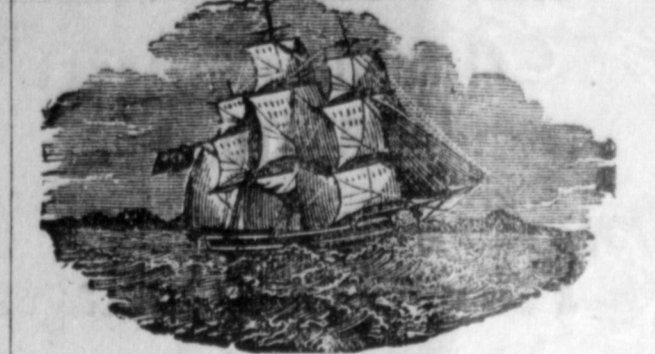
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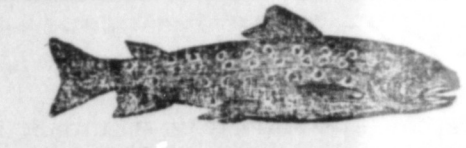
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