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his napkin in Catherine's surly face as she filed past after the others, for whom he was gallantly holding open the door; he almost made a grimace at her behind her back. "Ridiculous puss! If she thinks to sit there and look sour at her own father, she is mistaken," cried he to himself; "that's the nuisance of daughters. But I shall certainly not put up with any nonsense from her. Back she shall hop, skip, and jump to Miss Penrose to-morrow if she does not behave herself better—ay, even if Rosamund has to be still away. What odds? I can get on without either of them,"—and so openly did he show this and so effectually were the few words presently whispered in the ear of the malcontent, that there was a swift curtailing of the young lady's long-drawn face, and a rearrangement of her ideas.

"Of course, if poor papa makes a point of it, poor papa ought certainly to be the first consideration," Propriety counselled; "and anything would be better than being stopped dining to-morrow," Truth slipped out, next.

But though this was all very well for the nonce, it was an unnatural state of things, and one which could not go on, and two questions were agitating the breasts of all ere the next day ended: the first being naturally as to whether Rosamund were or were not ill enough to be long detained from her home; the second, regarding the Miss Gilberts and their visit.

They had come avowedly to make friends with their future connections, their brother's affianced wife in particular; could it be necessary for them under such circumstances to feel *de trop*? On the other hand, was it in accordance with etiquette that they should remain at King's Common without a hostess, and throughout the day left to their own devices?

To decamp in hot haste because Rosamund was suffering from a feverish attack, seemed, however, somewhat unreasonable. "Good Lord!" cried Gilbert, "what are you thinking of?"

"But then," responded Miss Emily, "we don't quite know what to do with ourselves, brother."

"Do with yourselves? How? I should have thought that you might have found plenty to do. Go about and see the place; go over to the Abbey—"

"It is not that, Frederick. Of course there is plenty to be done; but it does feel so odd, and somehow as if we had no right to be doing it. We don't feel as if we had any business anywhere."

"And we have been alone ever since breakfast," chimed in Henrietta; "for although Catherine was with us then, she said she had to go off directly afterwards, and we have not seen her again. And we did think of going over to call on Lady Julia, but we did not quite like—"

"Not like! Not like to go over to Julia? What nonsense! Nobody minds Julia. And I had counted on your having been at the Abbey, so I came here first. Why, bless my soul! I thought you would have been sure to go. I'll answer for it your places were laid for luncheon there. I made sure you would have asked after Rosamund the first thing."

"So we did—at least Mr. Liscard did. A groom was sent over this morning."

"Well?"

"She had passed a restless night, but was no worse. However, she was to be kept perfectly quiet, and Lady Julia would let us know how she was, later on. Nothing was said about our going over there."

"Hum! Oh, well, perhaps it was as well you didn't go, then. But I shall go. I shall ride round presently. I did not bring the dog-cart to-day, as none of you would go in it yesterday."

"Oh, Frederick!"

"You would not. You preferred that old arm-chair of a chaise."

"Frederick, you know why; it was because we had been promised to go round by the mill-stream and see the place where—you know—and the affectionate sisters each looked the rest."

"Oh, that was it, was it? And you could not wait? Well, now about your stopping on. Of course you must stop on now that you have come. It would never do to sneak back the way you came, before you were well out of sight. I don't want it all over the place at home that Rosamund is delicate either—mind that, both of you. We must manage somehow," ruminating. "You say you get on well with the old gentleman?"

"Oh dear, yes; as well as possible. He is so kind, and really quite lively and talkative now. He is going to show us all his books and things. But you know, Frederick, he only appears at meal-times, and to-day he has not even done that at luncheon. He explained that this was the day of some meeting at Longminster, and it was to be his first appearance at it."

"I know. It is always on a Wednesday."

"So we two had to sit up in state in that great, huge dining-room," said Etta, her blue eyes glowing round at the remembrance. "Think of Em and me seated there, being waited on by those three tremendously fine men, and solemnly going through all the courses! Brother, it was dreadful," and her voice sank to a whisper.

Frederick laughed superior. "My dear children, you would soon get used to it. Rosamund sits up all alone, I believe, and would not care to hang if there were thirty to wait on her."

g" used to it," said Etta. Em was silent, for she was beginning to think that for her part she could.

"I suppose if you had Catherine you would be all right?" inquired their brother presently.

"Oh dear, yes; her, or any one. It is the being just our two selves, with no one else at all—not one single member of the family—"

"Even a dog or a cat would be an addition," said Frederick; "is that it?"

"So that we need not rack our brains for something to converse solemnly about. You cannot think, Frederick, how terrible it is to have regularly to converse with each other, when we dare not say a single thing we want to say."

"It does sound rather bad. Well, the only thing for it that I see," said he, "is for me to go to old Penrose—old Penrose will do anything for me—and beg her to give Catherine holidays in advance of the others. The Christmas holidays must be on before long, and I don't think she could refuse. I don't suppose Rosamund would mind," he added, more doubtfully; for he was learning not to take Rosamund's acquiescence for granted even in very simple matters. "It really seems the only thing to be done," he concluded. "Come, we'll go for a stroll now, and I'll tackle the governess afterwards."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

UNCERTAINTY.

On the abrupt termination of the luncheon-party at the Abbey, the three Miss Waterfields had walked off with Mr. Stonely and his sister, Emily and Henrietta Gilbert having been disposed of in the pony-carriage, and their brother having flown for medical aid. He had constituted himself Lady Julia's messenger, since no one else, he was sure, would go so fast, or get to the village so soon; and, all anxiety and activity had been off ere she could say "Yes" or "No."

The absence of the entire Gilbert family was far from unwelcome to the walkers. The Waterfields were dying to know what the Stonelys thought, while the Stonelys were equally on the tenter-hooks to learn the impressions received by the Waterfields. The latter had seen nothing of Major Gilbert as an engaged man, the former scarcely anything of him in any other capacity. His sisters were new to all alike.

In consequence, the four females were thirsting to discuss the matter in all its bearings; while even Jack, though but little was to be looked for from him in the way of contribution, was nothing loath to hear what others had to tell.

"I had forgotten that you knew anything of Major Gilbert," began Clementina bravely taking the first plunge; "it took me by surprise to hear him say 'Miss Violet' so glibly."

"That is one of Major Gilbert's little ways," said Violet, drily. "He is very particular about giving each one of us our Christian name, and never misses an opportunity. You saw he had but half a minute for his 'Miss Violet,' and it would have been 'Miss Eleanor' the next, but that his eye fell on Rosamund fainting in Eleanor's arms."

"It must have been very alarming for you, Eleanor," said Clemmy; "but I own I, for my part, was not surprised. Rosamund has been so strange for some time, so odd and irritable and——" she just remembered to pause before another adjective slipped out. She did not wish the suggestion of unhappiness to come from her.

"She felt her mother's death exceedingly," observed the rector, coming to the rescue.

"It must certainly have been a great shock," added Miss Waterfield. But they all knew it was not Lady Caroline they were thinking about.

"I like Major Gilbert," said Clementina abruptly. Even Jack started. He had been hastily running over in his mind something neat and vague which should sound to Gilbert's credit, and yet which should not compromise his own conscience but the four plain words of his little-truthful sister somewhat took him aback; and, unable to endorse them himself, he listened breathlessly for some one of the other three to make the almost necessary response.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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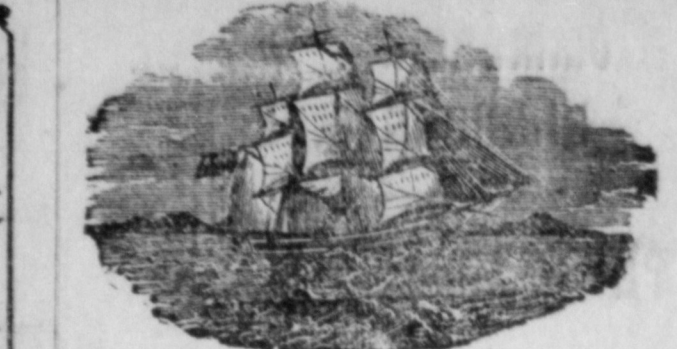
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