

Continued from Tenth Page.

A girl who has cause to fancy herself slighted, always finds a pleasure in being deferred to; and nothing could exceed the deference which the Reverend Mr. Tiptaft showed to Miss Muggleton.

One morning he met her at the house of one of his sick parishioners, and afterwards walked home with her.

Harry Rolleston, riding on horseback, and looking very happy passed them.

He raised his hat to his future sister-in-law, called out a gay 'Good morning!' and galloped on.

He was going to The Towers, and was in a desperate hurry.

'A very fine young fellow!' remarked Mr. Tiptaft, with every appearance of sincerity, though at heart he disliked Harry, and knew that Harry disliked him.

'Yes, we all like him!' said Marie, and then she sighed—not because her sister Vi was happier than herself, but because she remembered how they had all liked Sir Patrick too.

What a universal favourite he had been! How proud she had been of his attractiveness!

She might well sigh at the thought of the hopes that once were hers.

'I trust your sister will be very happy with him!' said Mr. Tiptaft, softly.

'Thank you, Mr. Tiptaft. I feel sure she will be!'

'Mr. Rolleston is a fortunate man. Sir Granville too. You know I hold your sisters in very high esteem. Ah, if only I could think the happiness of marriage would ever be in store for me!'

Marie did not—she had hoped she might—inquire why he could not think so. She said not a word, and Mr. Tiptaft was forced to begin again.

'What a delightful hope it would be!' he said, with fervour. 'What a beacon-star, shedding light over my lonely path, if only I could think I might some day enjoy the bliss of union with the one being on earth whom I could ever truly love!'

His tone was now too full of meaning, his look too tender, for Marie to affect to misunderstand him.

She still said no word, but her colour deepened, and she walked a little more quickly.

Mr. Tiptaft, glancing furtively at her out of the corner of his eye, decided that now or never was the time to declare his passion.

They had passed the lodge gates of The Towers, and a friendly sentry stood near.

He put his hand on the young lady's arm, and led her very gently to this seat, then said, in a voice which seemed to falter with the depth of his emotion—

'Miss Marie, the only woman on earth whom I could wish to make my wife—whom I could ever love—is you! You will forgive this confession, I know. You are too generous, too noble, too high-minded, to be offended at words which escape a man when his feelings overcome him, and are not under their usual control.'

'Believe me, I know quite well I could never hope to win you. I am not so madly presumptuous as that. From the first, I have known I could only hope to adore you from afar. The distance in our positions is too great. It is among the wealthy and the titled you will find a mate. Probably a coronet will grace your lovely brow.'

'Oh! I know my fate full well! I have never mocked myself with hope. But one cannot always keep the lips from betraying the feeling of the heart. This morning I have felt as though I must confess my love. Forgive me, and I will never offend again.'

This high-flown rhapsody had cost the reverend gentleman not a little trouble in the preparation.

Every word of it—especially that allusion to the coronet and the lovely brow—had been conned over and over again in the solitude of his study.

It must be admitted he delivered himself of it with a very tolerable show of fire and fervor; and, although it might have sounded too bombastic in the ear of an onlooker, it was little likely to be harshly criticised by the lady to whom such flattering sentiments were addressed.

Marie felt that it was distinctly pleasant to be worshipped in such a reverential fashion.

'Will you forgive me?' he pleaded. 'Tell me I have not, by one moment of madness, forfeited the precious privilege of being regarded as your friend!'

'Certainly not. I am sure I hope you'll never cease to be my friend, Mr. Tiptaft!'

This was slightly ambiguous.

The reverend gentleman felt it was so. Indeed, the situation was an awkward one altogether.

He had confessed his passion, but he had not made the young lady an offer of his hand.

Consequently, she had not had the opportunity of rejecting him.

But then, she had not had the opportunity of accepting him either.

This was an omission which must be repaired.

Marie was now sitting on the rustic seat, a little flushed, and somewhat confused.

She did not like to rise and end the interview, and she felt less able than ever to do so when her reverend admirer sat down beside her, and, with a look of the most infinite respect, took her prettily-gloved hand into his own.

'If I could but feel certain you forgive me for my boldness!' he said, looking into her face with a tenderly imploring gaze. 'I had resolved never to let my secret escape my lips. I thought I was strong enough to conceal it in my own bosom. But I am weaker than I supposed.'

And then he went on to describe what his feelings had been as he watched her at the bedside of the sick and suffering; how she had seemed to him a veritable angel from Heaven; how he had yearned for a life-long companionship with her; and how, at last, his feelings, long sternly repressed, had overcome him.

'I fear—I greatly fear—you can never

think as well of me again!' he said, still with that tenderly beseeching look.

'Indeed, Mr. Tiptaft, you must not think so,' said Marie, gently. 'I shall always esteem you—always.'

'How often,' he murmured; 'Oh, how often I have wished you had been poor! Then I might have won you!'

'Oh, please don't say that! Money wouldn't have made any difference!' cried Marie.

She had scarcely intended this as an encouragement for him to urge his suit; but he professed to so regard it.

It was exactly the opportunity he had been waiting for.

It was a moment—as though again overcome by his feeling he was telling her how he adored her, and humbly beseeching her to accept his hand.

Money he declared, was mere dross in his eyes.

If her father saw fit not to give her a farthing, he should be well content; nay he gave her to understand that this would rejoice his soul, inasmuch as it would enable him to prove the disinterestedness of his passion.

He hinted at his hopes of becoming a bishop, or even an archbishop, and concluded by reminding her that there were but two frail lives between him and an earldom—that of his uncle, Lord Gowan.

As a matter of fact his cousin, Lord Gowan's son, was as strong as a horse, and the proud father of a sturdy little boy; while his wife seemed likely to present him with an increase to his family every year.

Mr. Tiptaft's chance of succession, like his chances of a bishopric, were exceedingly remote.

Miss Muggleton, however, did not, in plain words, refuse his suit.

She listened—and hesitated.

To do her justice, it was neither the earl's coronet nor the bishop's mitre which tempted her.

She was a good, affectionate-natured, unselfish-minded girl, not at all ambitious, and very strongly disposed to think well of people who thought well of her.

Her heart, smarting under the neglect of Sir Patrick, found a kind of balm in the tender and respectful devotion of this son of the church.

She did not love him—of that she was quite certain; but then he loved her, and she found a pensive pleasure in the idea of devoting her life to making another's happiness.

And the happiness of so good a man—a man so devout, so holy, so worthy of all consideration and esteem.

She would have to marry somebody some day, she supposed.

There was nobody she could like better than Mr. Tiptaft—nobody but Sir Patrick; and he was not to be had.

Her sisters were both engaged, and she was the eldest of the three.

It was time she chose someone, unless she intended to be an old maid.

These thoughts passed through Miss Muggleton's brain more rapidly than we can write them.

Before Mr. Tiptaft had well concluded his appeal, she had made up her mind to be his wife; and he, shrewdly observant of her every look in the midst of his eloquence, saw that she had so decided.

'Dearest, is there any hope for me?' he pleaded. 'I hardly dare to think it, and yet—you are so noble, so unselfish. No other woman is like you.'

He was all but on his knees beside her now, bending over her, holding her hand, looking into her eyes, and altogether conducting himself in the most approved love-like fashion.

An old-time romance would have been just the thing, with him as its hero.

Marie could not but feel a little proud of him as a wooer.

There is a subtle something in the nature of woman which responds to such wooing as this.

She murmured an encouraging word or two.

Mr. Tiptaft seized upon them with lightning speed, and, in a very few minutes, the whole thing was settled.

He had imprinted a chaste salute upon her lips, and she had promised to be Mrs. Tiptaft, Rectress of Little Cleve.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WITH MR. MUGGLETON.

The reverend gentleman had done much; but there was still more to do.

The lady's consent was one thing, but her father's was another.

The millionaire must be interviewed without delay.

'When shall I speak to your father

dearest?' he asked, when his first raptures had in some measure subsided, and he and Marie were writing in the direction of the house.

'Oh, at once, I think! Papa hates anything like concealment. I am sure he will be better pleased if you speak to him now.'

'Very well. I will do so.'

But the reverend gentleman quaked a little, inwardly.

Mr. Muggleton was a plain-spoken man, and, on occasions, as a passionate-tempered one.

The pleadings which had been so successful with his daughter were little likely to be of use with him.

As soon as they reached the house, Marie slipped away upstairs to her own room.

Her lover, left thus alone to face the enemy, shook himself together, put on a look of almost more than apostolical benevolence, and requested to be shown into the presence of Mr. Muggleton.

The millionaire was sitting in his library, a very grand apartment lined with books, which were resplendent in new bindings.

A splendid purple carpet covered the floor, and the ink-stand before which he sat was of solid gold.

Presumptuous Mr. Tiptaft, to come and ask for the daughter of such a house as this!

Mr. Muggleton did not get up to receive his visitor.

Instead, he dipped his pen in the ink, as if he meditated resuming his writing in a moment or two.

He didn't particularly like the Reverend Augustus.

He had a suspicion he was a bit of a humbug.

He did not doubt he had come for a subscription, and would go away as soon as he had got it.

Never for one moment did he dream that the man had come to ask him for his daughter.

The truth is, Mr. Tiptaft had been so very prudent in his wooing, meeting his beloved one in his parishioners' cottages, and in country lanes, rather than in the vicinity of The Towers, that, perhaps, no single member of the family suspected his design.

Mr. Muggleton then sat, with his pen poised in the air, waiting for him to declare his business and be gone.

'I am sorry to disturb you,' said Mr. Tiptaft, in his softest tones. 'Might I—er—might I ask the favour of a few minutes' private conversation with you?'

'Why, to tell you the truth, I'm rather busy this morning,' said Mr. Muggleton. 'However I can spare you a minute or two.'

And, so saying, he laid down his pen, and twisted himself round so that he could face his visitor.

Mr. Tiptaft felt a little of his courage ooze away as he noted the lines of determination about that florid face, and the keenness of the eye.

The next moment, however, he remembered that this purse-proud millionaire was only a vulgar soap maker after all, while he—was he not the nephew of the Earl of Gowan?

'I am afraid you may think my errand a bold one,' he began, and then paused.

'Well, you may as well tell me what it is,' said Mr. Muggleton, good humouredly—he supposed he was going to be asked for an especially big subscription. 'I can but refuse you, you know.'

This was true; but it didn't reassure Mr. Tiptaft.

However, he braced his nerves, and made the fatal plunge.

'Well, then, Mr. Muggleton, I have come to ask you for your daughter!'

'My daughter! Good Heavens! What do you mean?'

Mr. Muggleton understood, but he chose to pretend he did not.

Mr. Tiptaft got up from his chair, and looked round the room a little nervously.

'She has promised to be my wife. It is a great honor, I know; but—and—and I have come to ask your consent.'

The millionaire got up, too, and looked full into the face—a weak and flabby face it appeared just at this moment—of his would-be son-in-law.

'I'm not sure I heard you aright,' he said, slowly. 'Do you mean to tell me that my daughter, Marie—it is Marie, I suppose—that my daughter Marie has promised to marry you?'

There was a terribly contemptuous inflection on that 'you.'

Mr. Tiptaft winced beneath it.

It seemed to imply so much.

'That is what I mean,' he said, bowing his head, and trying—not quite successfully—to speak with dignity.

'And you have come to ask my consent?'

The reverend suitor bowed again.

'Well, you won't have it. I never heard such a preposterous idea in all my life! I refuse, utterly.'

Mr. Muggleton looked very angry.

It really did seem to him a monstrous thing, that this smooth-faced, sneaking parson—for so in his heart he termed Mr. Tiptaft—should come and ask him for his daughter.

Mr. Tiptaft had not expected such a blunt refusal.

The native arrogance and impudence of the man flashed out from beneath the veneer of priestly meekness and humility.

'Pray, may I ask what is your objection, sir?'

'Objection! Good Heavens! My daughter will have a million pounds for her fortune. Do you think I shall give a sum like that to a beggarly parson? By George—no! I'll see you—further first.'

'I am sorry, sir, said the suitor, with a scarcely veiled sneer, 'that money should be the paramount consideration with you.'

'I'll be shot if it's any more of a consideration with me than with you!' cried Mr. Muggleton, growing redder and redder in his anger. 'Do you think I don't know you're only after my daughter for the sake of her fortune?'

Mr. Tiptaft raised his eyes to the ceiling

as though in holy horror at such base motives being imputed to him.

'I don't want to say anything uncivil,' resumed the millionaire, after a momentary pause. 'But I do want you to understand that your marriage with my daughter is quite out of the question. I have other views for her; and, in any case, I don't choose that she should marry a parson. You must have known I shouldn't consent to it.'

The descendant of the Gowan trembled with rage.

He had been called a beggarly parson, and generally vilified, by this bloated, purse-proud soap-maker, who, but for the fact of his having made a pile of money, would never have been permitted to so much as sit down in the same room with him.

It was almost too much for human endurance, but Mr. Tiptaft could be very meek where his own interests called for meekness.

He knew it would never do to too seriously offend his wished-for father-in-law.

'I am sorry you should take such a view of the matter,' he said, with gentle dignity; 'very sorry—more sorry than I can say. Your daughter has honoured me with her affection. She believes in my disinterestedness; and it shall be my care to show her that her faith is not misplaced.'

'Humbly!' exclaimed the irate Mr. Muggleton, feeling an indescribable itching to kick his clerical visitor out of the room.

'Sir!' exclaimed Mr. Tiptaft, and he looked majestically down on the angry red-faced man—without, however, disconcerting him in the least. 'Perhaps I had better wish you good morning!'

'I shall be much obliged, I'm sure.'

Acting on this very plain hint, the reverend gentleman bowed once more, and departed.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

An hour later, as Marie sat alone in her chamber, her maid brought her a letter, with a great air of secrecy and importance.

It was from Mr. Tiptaft.

He wrote to tell her the ill result of his interview with her father and to assure her of his undying constancy and love.

'Far be it from me—on whom devolves the solemn charge of the cure of souls—to incite a daughter to disobey a father, wrote the reverend gentleman; 'but, oh! my Marie, if only you could come to me penniless, how delightful should I think it to have such an opportunity of showing you the disinterestedness of my love.'

'Would that your stern parent be content to give to your sisters the fortune which he intends to be yours, and then permit me to make you mine—'

'It is you—you only—that I covet. Your father thinks otherwise, and has not scrupled to say so. From any other man I could hardly have borne such grievous imputations. They were of a nature to make me forget my priestly character. But he is your father. That is enough to entitle him to respect from me.'

Then followed the most ardent avowals of love, with the assurance that the writer stood ready to obey the slightest wish of his adored one.

Marie had been expected to be summoned to her father's presence long before she received this letter; but Mr. Muggleton had deemed it best to discuss the matter with his wife first, and, as that lady was out driving, he had to wait for her return.

Presently the expected message came.

Mr. Muggleton wished to speak to Miss Marie.

Would she go down to him at once?

Downstairs to the library Marie went, and found her father alone there.

Mrs. Muggleton, while agreeing with her husband that Mr. Tiptaft's suit was not to be entertained for a moment, had preferred to leave the old gentleman to deal with their daughter.

The moment the girl walked into his presence, he saw he should have some trouble with her.

Resolution sat on her brow, and sparkled in her eye.

The truth was, that although she did not love Mr. Tiptaft, she had quite made up her mind to marry him, and opposition—as is so often the case—did but confirm and strengthen her resolution.

She conceived that her lover had been grossly insulted and cruelly ill-used, and every drop of blood in her body was ready to do battle for him—and for the right of choosing her own future mate.

Janetta and Vi had been permitted to choose their husbands, and why should she, the eldest of them all, be denied a like privilege?

'I suppose you know Mr. Tiptaft has been here?' began the father, sternly.

He was a good-natured man on the whole, and loved his girls dearly; but he could be stern upon occasion, as they knew.

As Marie did not answer, only stood by the table, looking very dignified in her dark purple robe, he had to go on again.

'He told me you knew what he had come for. Is that true?'

'Of course it is true. Mr. Tiptaft would not tell a falsehood.'

'Snuff! Now, look here, Follie, there's got to be an end of this nonsense, once for all. I won't have you carrying on with that fellow! Do you hear?'

'Yes, I hear!'

'And will you do as I tell you?'

'No, papa, I will not!'

Marie, as she said this, raised her eyes, and looked her father bravely in the face.

She was pale with agitation; but her manner was composed, her eye quite bright and clear.

Perhaps she had never looked better in her life than she did at that moment.

'You won't? But, by Jove! I'll make you,' thundered the millionaire, in high wrath. 'If you marry that man, you shan't have a shilling of my money.'

'I shall marry him all the same!'

'Pshaw! Can't you see that, if you hadn't the money, he wouldn't have you?'

Marie's cheek flushed; but she replied quite steadily—

'You may insult him as you please, papa; but I know him better than you do. I know he loves me—loves me—for myself alone. He would love me just the same if I were poor.'

Mr. Muggleton twisted about in his chair in his irritation.

'You believe that?' he cried, incredulously. 'Heavens! what fools some women are!'

But he began to see that nothing was to be gained by harshness.

He softened his angry tone to one of expostulation and reproach.

'Marie, I am surprised at you. A girl of your good sense, to be so imposed upon! Of course the man is after you for your money. And what has he to give you in return?—absolutely nothing. Your mother and I have, naturally some ambition for our children. Is it likely I should want my money to go to enrich a man who has nothing—not even a title of any description—to offer in return for it?'

'Mr. Tiptaft has as much as Harry Rolleston and your letting Vi marry him.'

It was on Mr. Muggleton's lips to say Harry Rolleston was a thousand times better man than Mr. Tiptaft; but he recollected that he couldn't expect Marie to believe this, so he said, instead—

'There is no parallel between the cases. Harry's position is altogether superior.'

'Superior! Mr. Tiptaft's uncle is an earl; Harry's is only a country squire!'

flashed out poor Marie, indignantly.

'I don't care for that. What good will Tiptaft's uncle ever do him? None at all. He will, probably, go grubbing along as a country parson to the end of his days. Harry, now, is different. Although there's no title, his uncle is a landowner, and stands high in the country. Harry will be squire after him, and Vi's fortune will make him a great man—able to ruffie it with dukes and earls as well as the best of them. Tiptaft a parson—that's all, and it's all he ever will be.'

Marie did not think it wise to name, in her father's ears, those suggestions as to a bishopric of the family earldom, which had sounded so plausible when they fell from Mr. Tiptaft's lips.

She stood, in silence, and her father, misunderstanding it, hoped he had convinced her.

Mistaken notion!

A girl of Marie's mature years is not so easily persuaded to give up her lover!

That saintly demeanour of his had had its full effect on her rather impressionable mind.

Believing in the depth and sincerity of his love, she would not, for all the world, have deserted him.

'Can't! what nonsense! Tell him I refuse my consent, and that you won't disobey me; and then the thing is done with.'