

Continued from Tenth Page.

fixed. As it is, I'm afraid you booked. However, I suppose you persons don't feel such things the same way as we rough-ellows do, so you'll make the best of it.

And then Mr. Charles Tiptaft betook himself to the station, and was whirled back to town.

All the way he was secretly chuckling over his cousin's discomfiture, and, as he left the train, at London, he muttered, to himself—

'What a precious humbug the fellow is! He'll throw that girl over as sure as Fate. The best I wish him is, that old Muggleton may give him a sound horse-whipping.'

CHAPTER LX.

HOW SIR GRANVILLE TOOK THE NEWS.

The Rev. Mr. Tiptaft, left alone with his misery, sat by his fireside for fully two hours without as much as moving.

When he did at length rise, with a sigh that was almost a groan, his eye fell on the text he had chosen for his Sunday's sermon.

Half abstractedly he stood in front of it, then took a pen, and drew it across the words.

He would defer the writing of that sermon to a later day.

Mr. Tiptaft was so deeply stricken by the dreadful intelligence which had been communicated to him, and he scarcely closed his eyes that night; and, at breakfast, the next morning, his devilled kidneys and choice veal outlets could only provoke him to very languid appetite.

Life had lost its savor, so far as the Reverend Augustus was concerned.

During the night, as he tossed restlessly on his downy bed—for he liked to lie soft, as well as to fare sumptuously—he had tried to think of some way of extricating himself from what, he feared, would prove an extremely delicate and difficult position.

One thing was quite certain: if Marie Muggleton had no fortune, he had no wish to marry her.

A penniless wife would not be to his taste at all.

Not for this had he preserved his handsome figure, and his smooth complexion, with such assiduous care; not for this had he remained a celibate until now, avoiding, successfully, all the traps that had been laid for his feet when he was a curate, young and callow.

He had put a very high price upon himself in these later years; but he had fully believed old Muggleton was able to pay that price.

And now that the moment of disillusion had come, he felt himself an injured and ill-used man.

But how was he to get out of the entanglement—this wretched entanglement—as he had already begun to term in his own mind?

His cousin had told him he was 'booked'—a horrid phrase, which rang in his ears, and disquieted his soul not a little during the watches of the night.

Booked.

It was only another word for doomed—doomed to give up all the glorious chances of his bachelorhood; doomed to be led to the altar like a lamb to the slaughter, and to eat cold mutton in a country rectory all the days of his life! The whole soul of the man revolted against it.

'Oh, no!—no!' he cried out within himself.

Fate could not require such a cruel immolation of all his dearest hopes. It could not—it should not—be.

And then he remembered that, during the last few months, a widow—comfortably not to say richly, dowered—had settled in the neighborhood of Little Cleeve, and had occasionally cast on his portly form such looks of tender admiration as only widows know how to give.

With the richer prize of Marie Muggleton and her million dangling before his eyes, he had regarded the widow with a soft, almost a condescending, compassion, as though gently regretting he could not fulfil her hopes; but now he thought of her with a quickened pulse, and a distinct sense of longing.

Her money apart, she was a fairer woman, in his eyes, than Marie Muggleton—a brilliant brunette of five-or-six-and-thirty, with much vivacity of manner, and a witty tongue.

Mr. Tiptaft began to think he could be proud of such a wife.

Then, she had eighty thousand pounds to do with exactly as she chose, and it was invested in the Three Per Cents.

No fear of her fortune vanishing, as poor Marie Muggleton's had done.

The more he thought of Mrs. Darling, the more attractive she looked in his eyes. A union with her seemed a thing, above all things, to be desired.

To get on with the new love, Mr. Tiptaft did not doubt, would be an easy enough thing; but how to get off with the old?

There was the rub.

To solve this question, the reverend gentleman applied all the powers of his great mind.

Suddenly it occurred to him that there were two others in the same strait as himself.

Sir Granville Granly and Harry Rolleston were engaged to Marie's sisters, and, of course, this terrible blow would fall on them as heavily as on him.

Might it not be well, he asked himself, to visit his fellow-victims, and see what they intended doing?

They were as much 'booked' as he was, and if they could get their heads out of

the noose, why, surely, he could do the same.

Thus meditating, he dressed himself with scrupulous care, then set out for the home of Sir Granville Granly.

When he arrived at Upton Manor, he found Sir Granville still at the breakfast-table.

Very surprised he looked to see his reverend visitor—surprised and, one would have said, not over well-pleased.

As has been remarked before, Mr. Tiptaft was not a favourite with his own sex.

'Ah! Tiptaft, you're an early bird. I thought you persons liked to lie in bed of a morning!' Sir Granville said, carelessly. 'Have you breakfasted?'

'Thank you, yes; I took breakfast two hours ago.'

'Oh! then it's about time you took another. There's some capital potted game there, if you like to try a bit.'

And Sir Granville pointed to a place at the table, and put his hand on the bell.

No servant was in attendance in the room.

Mr. Tiptaft stopped him with a gesture. 'Don't ring!' he said, hastily. 'I really don't want any breakfast—and I've some very important private news to tell you.'

'To tell me?' said Sir Granville, in some surprise.

'Yes.'

The Reverend Augustus sat down opposite the baronet, and looked steadily at him.

In the midst of his wretchedness, he felt a melancholy pleasure in the consciousness that, when he had told his news, this man would be wretched, too.

'Why, what the deuce is the matter?' exclaimed the baronet, impatiently.

'Matter enough, Sir Granville,' said Mr. Tiptaft, solemnly. 'Do you happen to know that Mr. Muggleton is a ruined man?'

Sir Granville sprang to his feet, exactly as Mr. Tiptaft had done the night before.

His florid face turned a shade paler, his eye emitted a peculiar gleam.

'What's the good of talking such nonsense?' he demanded, angrily.

Evidently he was trying, desperately, to cheat himself into the belief that his reverend friend was hoaxing him.

'It's quite true,' said Mr. Tiptaft, in a sepulchral voice.

And then he told Sir Granville the whole melancholy story, as it had been told him by his cousin.

Sir Granville listened, aghast.

The blow was, in truth, a far heavier one for him than for Mr. Tiptaft, for he had run deeply into debt, in order to fit Upton Manor for the reception of his bride, whereas his reverend friend had not, as yet, laid out an unnecessary farthing.

Sir Granville had been a deeply impoverished man before he met Miss Muggleton; but if this fatal news were true, he might now be said to be a ruined one.

He might well stand aghast, as he listened to Mr. Tiptaft's intelligence.

At the close of the recital, there was dead silence in the room.

Sir Granville walked to the window, and looked out.

Mr. Tiptaft turned round in his chair, and, not being able to see his friend's face, studied the back of his head.

'It is a very melancholy affair. Terribly awkward for us, eh, Sir Granville?'

It was thus the Reverend Augustus finally ventured to hint at his own relations to the Muggleton family.

'It's deucedly awkward for me. I don't know that it need greatly affect you!' said Sir Granville, impatiently.

'Not affect me! Why, I am engaged to marry Marie Muggleton!' cried Mr. Tiptaft, in amazement.

'Well, and what if you are? You've been at no expense on that account that ever I've heard of. You've got a settled income, and will get a decent girl for a wife. Even if she doesn't bring you a penny, you'll do very well.'

'Oh!' said Mr. Tiptaft, and he opened his eyes very wide as he said it.

'With me the case is different,' went on Sir Granville. 'I've spent thousands in doing up this place, and Heaven knows I hadn't a penny to spare for anything of the sort. Janet's dowry would, of course, have spared me; but now, where am I?'

Mr. Tiptaft did not reply to this.

He was asking himself where he was.

'I blame Muggleton for not letting us know sooner,' went on Sir Granville. 'And yet I've always found him an honest man. Perhaps he has felt certain he could right himself.'

'I'm sure I don't know whatever I am to do,' he added, very gloomily, after a pause. 'It's no use attempting to live here, as a married man, on my own wretched income. I suppose I shall have to take Janet abroad. I shall hate it; but we shall be able to live cheaply there.'

'Then you intend to marry the girl?'

The exclamation broke involuntarily from Mr. Tiptaft, in the greatness of his surprise; how great that surprise really was, his countenance testified abundantly.

'Intend to marry her?' repeated Sir Granville. 'Great Heavens! man, what do you mean?'

And he turned on Mr. Tiptaft with a look which made him tremble.

The Rev. Augustus saw he was on the wrong tack, and trimmed his sails accordingly.

'I thought you might feel compelled to postpone the marriage for a time,' he said, smoothly.

'Humph!' said Sir Granville, with a suspicious look.

To himself he muttered—

'I don't believe that's when he did mean. I verily believe the fellow's a thorough scoundrel, and means to act like one if he gets half a chance.'

Presently Mr. Tiptaft rose to go.

Sir Granville seemed to have no desire to detain him; and he himself had an uncomfortable sense of having met with no sympathy, and very little encouragement, in the design which was now dear to his soul.

He left with a heavy heart; and a countenance expressive of deep dejection.

At that moment there seemed literally no bright spot on the reverend gentleman's horizon.

He had counted so certainly on having Sir Granville as an ally.

It would have been comparatively easy for him to jilt Marie, if only the baronet would have led the way by jilting her sister.

But he seemed to have no such intention. Instead, he talked about an immediate marriage.

Apparently, he considered that he was "booked."

'I wonder what young Rolleston will do?' thought Mr. Tiptaft, with a heavy sigh.

CHAPTER LXI.

HOW HARRY ROLLESTON TOOK THE NEWS.

It chanced that Harry Rolleston was away from home when the news of poor Mr. Muggleton's ruin fell, like a bomb-shell, on the county of Hampshire.

He had gone for a day's fishing, and did not return until the evening of the day on which Mr. Tiptaft took the melancholy tidings to Sir Granville.

He was walking home from the station in a very gay and buoyant mood, full of happy thoughts of his dear Vi, when he met Lady Cantrip, the malicious old dowager whom Sir Gerald had once declared to deserve drumming out of every drawing room in Hampshire.

Her ladyship was aunt to Sir Granville Granly, and had heard the news from her nephew early in the day.

At sight of young Rolleston she stopped her pony phaeton, and beckoned him to her side.

'Mr. Rolleston, have you heard the news?'

'What news?' asked Harry, quite unsuspecting of the calamity that had befallen him.

'Mr. Muggleton has lost all his money. It's well if he doesn't turn out a bankrupt into the bargain,' said her ladyship, improving on the story she had actually heard.

The young man changed color.

'Oh, I think you must be mistaken! It can't be true?' he said, hastily.

'But it is true,' retorted her ladyship, triumphantly. 'I heard it from my nephew, Sir Granville, and, of course, he knows. Besides, it's in all the evening papers.'

'In the papers!' echoed Rolleston.

There was still incredulity—perhaps more than was quite consistent with courtesy—in his tone.

The thing seemed to him too terrible for belief.

'Yes, in all the papers,' said Lady Cantrip, thoroughly enjoying herself as she noted the look of blank consternation on the young man's face. 'I quite think the poor man will have to declare himself a bankrupt. Shocking thing, isn't it, Mr. Rolleston?'

Harry made a hurried and rather incoherent rejoinder, then shook hands with her ladyship, and hastened in the direction of The Towers.

'My poor little darling!' he muttered, as he went. 'To think I should be away at such a time!'

Arrived at The Towers, he could see for himself that something was amiss.

The solemn-faced butler looked more solemn than ever, and indescribably important.

Rolleston was sure he knew of his master's ruin.

'Where is Miss Vi?' Harry asked, impetuously.

'I believe she is in the library, sir,' said the butler, in a tone that would have done credit to a funeral-attendant.

'You needn't announce me. I'll step into the library, and see for myself,' said Harry.

And he went up the great carved staircase, and impulsively opened the library door, without so much as pausing to give a preliminary knock.

Someone who was sitting at the furthest window, looking steadily at the sunset, rose hurriedly at the intrusion, as though greatly startled.

It was Vi—Vi, with a pale, tear-stained face, and a very anxious look in her pretty, dark-lashed eyes.

'My darling!' cried Harry.

And there was in his voice such a mingling of love and pity, and protecting tenderness, as made poor little Vi burst into a very flood of tears.

He held out his arms to her, and she ran across the room to that dear shelter, and nestled contentedly against his bosom.

'Oh, Harry!' she whispered, 'have you heard?'

'Yes, darling,' he answered cheerily; 'and came on straight away, to pet and

comfort you. I thought you'd be feeling a bit low about it—dear little woman!'

And he pressed his lips to the soft, crimson ones which were so near his own.

'And—and it hasn't made any difference in you?' she whispered, looking up at him, adoringly.

'Vi, did you think it would?' 'I—I didn't know,' she faltered. 'I thought nothing would change you; but I couldn't be quite sure. You know how afraid one is to hope when one—one wishes something very, very much.'

And then came another rain of happy tears, and she whispered, as she nestled still more closely to his side: 'Harry, if I live to be your wife, I'll try to repay you for this.'

Presently—after a great deal of tender earnest talk—Harry asked for Mr. Muggleton.

'Where is your father? I should like to see him.'

'He's in his own room. He is dreadfully cut-up, Harry.'

And Vi gave a very sad little sigh—even though her lover's arm was tenderly enfolding her.

'Do you think he'd mind my seeing him?'

'I am sure he wouldn't.'

'Well, then, I'll say good-bye to you, my own dearest. Remember you are mine, whatever happens.'

And, with a farewell kiss, he left her.

His knock at the door of Mr. Muggleton's private room was answered by a 'Come in' uttered in a very dejected voice.

Entering, he found the master of The Towers seated, gloomily, in front of his writing-table.

His usually florid face was pale, and Harry noticed that the hand which turned over a sheet of papers trembled.

He looked up, almost suspiciously, as though doubting the errand of his visitor.

Harry, however, did not suffer him to remain long in doubt, for he walked straight up to the ruined millionaire, took his hand, gripped it heartily, and said, in a pleasant, cheery voice—

'I hope I'm not intruding, Mr. Muggleton. I'm not like a stranger, you know—all but your son-in-law, I've been talking to dear little Vi, and I felt I couldn't go away without coming in to shake hands, and tell you how sorry I am about your loss. For myself I don't care, because, as you know, I said, from the first, I'd rather take Vi without a penny; and and I'm glad, sooner than not, to have a chance of showing you I meant what I said. But I'm sorry for you, sir—very sorry indeed. I've never had much money of my own, so I don't know what it is to lose it!'

He concluded, with a frank, honest smile. 'It isn't very pleasant I suppose; but money isn't everything, and you'll pull round all right, never fear.'

Mr. Muggleton was deeply moved. A slight moisture gathered in his eyes, as he grasped the young man's hand again.

'Thank ye, Harry! Thank ye!' he said in a slightly broken voice. 'Of course I know that things must be altered now.'

'If you mean as regards Vi, I shall think it very unfair if you so much as hint at such a thing,' said Harry, stoutly. 'Vi and I don't mean this to part us, I can assure you. She's as true as steel, and is willing to face poverty with me. I only hope she'll come to me all the sooner now.'

'You're a good lad!' said Mr. Muggleton, with emotion. 'A good lad, and a generous one. I hardly expected this. I thought you might think I'd been to blame—I thought, perhaps, you'd reproach me.'

He would have said more, but his voice failed him utterly.

He sank into his chair again, and covered his face with his hands, as though quite broken down.

'Oh, come, sir, come! You mustn't give way, you know.'

And Harry pressed his hand affectionately on his shoulder, as a son might have done.

'Cheer up, sir!' he said. 'You'll pull through, somehow never fear.'

After a minute or two, poor Mr. Muggleton looked up, to say—

'I've had a note from Granly. He's behaving very well, I must say. Here, read it, Harry, lad.'

Harry read the letter, and could not but admit that Sir Granville had shown himself a man of honor and a gentleman.

He wrote a little stiffly, it is true, and it was easy to see he was intensely disappointed; but it was quite clear he intended to stand by his engagement.

He sympathized with Mr. Muggleton sent his love to Janet, and concluded by saying he should dine at The Towers that evening, according to a previous arrangement, if his presence, at such a time, would not be considered an intrusion.

'Tiptaft hasn't been near, nor sent a word,' said Mr. Muggleton, bitterly. 'I mistrust him, Harry.'

'Well, sir, he's got a chance, now, to show what he's made of. He never was a great favorite of mine—a shade too much oil in his composition, you know; but we'll hope he won't act like a cad. But, come what may, I'll stand by you, sir. You may count on me!'

CHAPTER LXII.

HARRY'S UNCLE.

Although poor Harry Rolleston spoke so cheerily to Vi and her father, he knew quite well there would be plenty of difficulties for him to face.

He had not a penny of his own, apart from his uncle, and even his uncle was, for his rank perhaps the poorest man in Hampshire.

What he and Vi were to live on was a problem which might well puzzle Harry's mind.

When he reached home, he was met in the hall by a servant who told him the squire was in his room and desired to speak to him as soon as he came in.

'He's heard the news!' thought Harry. 'Now for it!'

And he pushed open the door with a

resolute hand, his eyes very bright, his mouth almost stern in its look of resolution.

The squire was standing with his back to the fire, looking a good deal worried, and very cross.

One glance at his nephew's face convinced him he had heard the news.

'Well, what do you think of your precious Mr. Muggleton now?' he demanded bitterly.

'I've exactly the same opinion of him as ever I had!' was Harry's sturdy answer. 'Oh! you have, have you? Well, I consider it's something very like a fraud for a man to pose as the possessor of millions, when he's nothing but a beggarly bankrupt!'

'Uncle, you know that's unjust!' cried Harry, warmly. 'Mr. Muggleton assures me that, a week ago, he believed himself safe. How could he know there would be such an awful smash at those mines? Do you think he'd have put his money in it if he had known?'

'And, pray, when did you see Mr. Muggleton?' demanded the squire, with an angry flash of his eye.

'I called at The Towers on my way home, sir.'

'Oh, indeed! And I was it there you heard the news?'

'No; I had met Lady Cantrip first. It was she who told me.'

'And you went to The Towers after that! Upon my word, Harry, I didn't think you were such a fool. Heavens! hadn't you got the rope fast enough round your neck, that you must try to tighten the noose?'

'I'm not quite sure I know what you mean, sir,' said Harry calmly. 'But if you wish to imply that my engagement with Miss Muggleton is a noose round my neck, I must tell you plainly, that I cannot regard it in any such light. On the contrary, I am as proud and as happy as ever I was to claim her as my promised wife.'

'Your a fool!' exclaimed the squire. 'Even so, I would rather be a fool than a knave. Uncle, surely you don't mean to say you could counsel me to throw Vi overboard because of this? Putting my deep affection for her or hers for me, quite on one side, what about our honor? If we Rollestons have little left but the name, for Heaven's sake, let us keep that as untarnished as we can!'

The young man looked very handsome as he thus spoke in a frank, honest, manly fashion, with his head a little thrown back, his eyes glowing with unwonted fire.

The heart of his stern old uncle thrilled a little, in spite of himself, at the sight of him.

He loved the lad, and would have rejoiced to see him with his heart's desire.

But how could it be? The thing was impossible.

If Vi Muggleton had no money, of what use was it to bring her as a wife to that old ruined hall?

It would be madness.

For the girl's own sake Harry must be induced to give her up.

So he hardened his countenance, and questioned coldly—