

A GREAT FALL.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

It was resolved in Culhampton that Miss Crossley should not be encouraged.

There was no reason indeed why she should be, for she was lovely, fascinating, and chic.

Had she not been so she might have been allowed to pass, for her only relative in the place was very poor and of little importance.

But as, to her other three qualifications, the young lady added that of being a newcomer in the neighbourhood, it was felt that she ought to be suppressed.

Culhampton was rather skillful in suppressing people when it chose.

It was a small country town with cliques and coteries as difficult of penetration as the chain-armour of ancient days.

Miss Crossley's very existence would not have been recognized had it not been that her old, poverty-stricken aunt, Miss de Howard, was a relic of better days, and could not always be overlooked, as, until Miss Crossley's advent, she has been unfortunately considered one of the elect, within certain limits.

Nobody wanted her society, but she could not be put outside the barrier, because of her unimpeachable birth and her name.

But Miss Crossley was an interloper. She had come stepping coolly into Culhampton without explaining herself of the reason of her existence, and Miss de Howard, who was a 'close' old lady, had not explained either.

And there were enough girls in Culhampton without her.

If they wanted beauty they had it. Was not Miss Annabelle Caloney enough for anybody with her calm repose and her pink cheeks, her blue eyes and her golden hair?

She was Culhampton's stock example of liveliness, and nobody could surely wish for any brighter one.

Then as to wit where was it if not embodied in Miss Dolly Tregunter?

And Miss Kitty Reeves was smart and chic enough to please anyone who entered Culhampton society.

Altogether, there was really no room for this Miss Crossley, and there was no doubt that she would soon find there was not.

It was at a large and rather important gathering that the singular reckless young woman first made her appearance.

Everyone seemed to be known to each other, to have unbent, and be smiling and talking like most ordinary people, when suddenly a graceful, slight form was observed to be walking up the drawing room after poor little bent and fragile looking Miss de Howard, who have never made a stir in her life, and was only saved from being a nonentity by her name.

Her young and slender companion rather gave one the impression that she had made a stir in her time, and might be destined to do so again.

For one thing, she was most elegantly clothed, in a style that Culhampton was not familiar with though its inhabitants were much richer than this intruder could be.

Her dress was of plain, rich white satin, jeweled around the straps of sleeves and the low cut corsage with sparkling green stones, sewn on here and there by an artist's hand, its clinging cut emphasizing its wearer's grace.

But, of course, her face and figure outshone the pretty uncommon-looking dress.

Her soft, creamy, almost colourless skin was not like other people's, neither were her brown eyes, and thick, soft brown hair, arranged differently from that of the young ladies around her.

She seemed to put them into the shade completely as she glided through their ranks, for there was an air about her—a charm, that was indescribable.

It seemed as if they—the Culhampton girls—scented danger in a moment, for in such a place, where every face was well known, there must perforce have been danger in any new-comer, even had she been plain and unprepossessing, such an interest does novelty hold for most minds, either masculine or feminine.

But where the new-comer was lovely, fascinating, and charmingly attired, the danger was increased a thousandfold.

'So glad to make your niece's acquaintance, Miss de Howard,' murmured the hostess, Lady Tighe, as in duty bound.

But she was not glad, for she possessed four daughters who could only giggle and 'chaff', and had not a 'presence' among them.

And she possessed also a son who was young and susceptible.

'Who is she?' people asked about the room.

Aloys Crossley was not a girl to be overlooked.

'Oh, she can't be anybody much,' replied Annabelle, the Culhampton beauty. 'Miss de Howard is so poor, you know. I expect she is a governess or a companion, or something of that kind, come down to stay with her aunt for a holiday.'

'What a gown!' tittered Dolly Tregunter. 'She looks just like an earwig in it. I didn't care for Kitty Reeves' until I caught sight of this one. Now I think Kitty's is beautiful.'

There were a great many other girls, and the majority made similar little remarks, so that Miss Crossley altogether was rather successful in her debut.

A handsome, fair, rather heavily built man of about thirty years of age was seated by Miss Caloney as the little withered looking young one made her entry, and it was his languid questioning which had elicited Annabelle's supposition.

He was very well known in Culhampton, as indeed he ought to have been, holding, as he did, the reputation of being the greatest parti in the place.

He went by the name of Sir Wilfred Curtis, and was the owner of a show place in the neighbourhood—Holted Park.

The girls made the mistake of angling for him—some secretly, others openly; but Sir Wilfred was cool and listless, and had not yet thrown the handkerchief to any of them.

He was a man who looked before he leaped—if ever he leaped at all.

At present, he favored Miss Caloney more than the rest; but then, she was the acknowledged belle of the place, so the attention was only due to her, and probably meant nothing.

Indeed, he had done his part, some years before, to make her the belle by openly proclaiming her as the only decent looking woman to be met with down there, and his opinion was generally respected, as being that of a man who knew the world.

It was, therefore, a shock to the fair Annabelle when, a minute or two after her reference to the intruder as being probably some governess or companion, her admirer rose leisurely from her side, strolled lazily across the room, and was presented to Miss Aloys Crossley.

Annabelle bit her red lips with vexation and her round, pink cheeks became pinker.

Miss Crossley, strange to say, was surrounded by two or three gentlemen, though the ladies held themselves pointedly aloof.

There was the old Marquis of Arminster, 'a grinning idiot,' Dolly Tregunter called him, because there was a sneer or a twinkle in his eyes that she did not understand; a Mr. Watts, a stout, prosperous-looking man of about forty or forty-five, who had made an enormous fortune in pickles; and a dark haired young fellow, with a plain, quiet, but rather interesting face, who seemed to have been attracted to Miss Crossley by sheer force of contrast.

She was talking and smiling brilliantly; he was only gazing earnestly.

Sir Wilfred Curtis's appearance caused a diversion in the little group.

A minute or two later the rest had faded away, and he and Aloys Crossley were left tete-a-tete.

'I don't remember to have seen you in Culhampton before tonight,' said Sir Wilfred, with his slow, musical drawl. 'Is this your first visit to us, Miss Crossley?'

'Yes; I have come down to stay with my aunt, Miss de Howard,' returned Aloys.

Her brown eyes, which had a tawny gleam in them, met his heavy-lidded, light-grey blue ones much more calmly than other girls' eyes were in the habit of doing.

She was evidently accustomed to society, or else she had no idea of her importance.

'I think you will like Culhampton,' remarked Sir Wilfred. 'It is considered rather a jolly sort of place—plenty going on always, I mean.'

'Oh, this sort of thing?' inquired Miss Crossley, glancing round the large, brilliantly-lighted room; she did not seem impressed. 'Who is that young man?' she added irrelevantly, pointing out the one who had been included in the group around her when Sir Wilfred approached—the man who had looked at her with such intensity.

'Oh, he's!' replied the baronet carelessly. 'His name is Denzil Essex; he is my cousin and secretary.'

'I know his name,' remarked Miss Crossley, regarding her companion with half-closed, critical eyes—Sir Wilfred had not often been the object of such a gaze. 'But a name does not tell us much, as a general thing, does it?'

'And did you want to have anything told concerning him?' inquired Sir Wilfred, as he returned her unmoved gaze.

'No not particularly,' said Aloys. 'You must not make a point of imagining any speech of mine is relevant, Sir Wilfred. I utter what first occurs to me, without reference very often to what has gone before.'

'I never made a point of anything,' observed the baronet with cool ease of manner and look.

Miss Crossley evidently was not a Culhampton girl, or she would him better than to imagine he would.

There was something a little provoking as well as bewitching in her manner.

She was so unawed by him, so unawed of any reason why she should be flattered or overwhelmed by his notice; certainly she looked as if she had been accustomed to Belgrave and drawing-rooms, but, of course, being poor old Miss de Howard's relation, this could not be the case, and she was either assuming complete nonchalance, or else she was a coquette—which he thought.

Sir Wilfred was accustomed to society which was a deal better than his.

His own set were eager to make his acquaintance; the other set were eager to win his admiration and approval, which seemed

never more than half-hearted.

Therefore, as his conversation with his new companion progressed, he could not help a feeling of distinct pique that she was in no degree overpowered.

Meanwhile, in another corner of the room, Miss Caloney—who generally had more than one admirer in attendance, and who was feeling very bitter that Sir Wilfred had forsaken her for the new arrival—was uttering her opinion concerning that new arrival to Mr. Essex, who, though of small importance, and not the rose itself, was nevertheless near it, and patronized whenever the belle of Culhampton felt in the humor.

'She is poor old Miss de Howard's niece,' Annabelle was saying. 'I fancy she is a governess or something like that, and she has just come down here for her holidays, poor thing!'

'She does not look like a governess,' said Denzil Essex.

'Oh! indeed. Don't you think so?' remarked Annabelle carelessly. 'Why not?'

'And she does not seem to talk like a governess either,' went on Denzil, gazing across at Miss Crossley.

'Well, I don't know much about governesses, or how they talk or look, said Miss Caloney pettishly, 'but I really see no reason why this girl shouldn't be one. In fact she must be, for Miss de Howard is so shockingly poor, in spite of her pride and her blue blood, and all the rest of it. Do you know that all last winter she had hardly a handful of fire in her grate—and then they said, only in the afternoon, for fear people would call and find out the state of the case—and lived, poor old creature, on tea and bread and butter—and sometimes not the butter—instead of meat, like other people?'

'Notwithstanding which,' put in Mr. Essex, who had listened with his peculiarly intent look, into which some contempt had crept, as this backstairs gossip retailed to him so eagerly; 'notwithstanding which, there is no doubt of the fact that Miss de Howard is one of the greatest people in the place, and could look down on all if she chose with the greatest of ease.'

'I was only telling you how she lived at home, to show you that her niece must be what I tell you, or something like it,' said Annabelle sullenly.

She did not very much care for Mr. Denzil Essex, but as he was Sir Wilfred's relation—though a poor one—she could not altogether snub him, because she could sometimes make him useful to her.

'You are probably right, Miss Caloney,' he assented, as she turned the back of her carefully dressed head towards him in some slight displeasure. 'I should certainly say there was something in it.'

'One need not be a governess to have something in one,' exclaimed Miss Caloney coldly.

'No, I agree with you,' he observed pleasantly. 'At the same time it is certain that one has to have something in one to be a governess, isn't it?'

'No,' said Annabelle flitly, more and more put out. 'What does a nursery governess know pray? But there, thank goodness, I am not in the habit of meeting such people; and how they get into society I don't in the least understand!'

She rose and sailed across to another part of the room with an air of indifference.

'Of course she honored a mere secretary in wasting five minutes upon him, although he was of good family, and she knew that other people must think her very gracious in so doing.'

She was the daughter of a baronet, and although he was a very poor one, this fact seemed a great deal to her, without the added qualification of being the Culhampton belle.

She was not going to brook the slightest insinuation that anyone else, particularly a poverty stricken new arrival in the place, could compete with her in any way.

So the feminine portion of Culhampton society or the greater part of it, made up its mind that Miss Aloys Crossley should not be encouraged, and the young lady found a decided coolness about the way in which mothers and daughters seemed to overlook her, as though she were a person of no importance.

CHAPTER II.

What Miss Caloney had stated concerning Miss de Howard was true.

Perhaps no old lady was ever much poorer than the fragile, sixty-year-old, but aristocratic one who had introduced Aloys Crossley into Culhampton.

She still lived in the home of her fathers Beaulieu Hall, but it was merely a sort of barracks nowadays—bare, draughty, ill tended and in a state of decay.

'It will last as long as I shall, and that's all that's needed, I suppose,' its owner used to murmur rather sadly.

She remembered happier days—the days of her youth, when peace and plenty, comparatively speaking, reigned in the old hall; when, if one looked thoughtfully or calculatingly at a coin, it was at any rate a sovereign, and not mere a penny.

But now every such penny was of value. It was true about the want of coal and meat.

The poor old lady was half starved, but her pride and dignity forbade her to let it known, it possible to her acquaintances in gossiping Culhampton.

She lived on with one old retainer—a woman a couple of years older than herself—who kept tidy the two rooms that were used in the forsaken looking place, and also shook her head over the past, which seemed to her more glorious now than it had been in reality.

'Poor old Elizabeth, she has come to be my only friend!' Miss de Howard used to say to herself as week after week, and month after month, went by and only a stiff call was paid her, or a few cards were handed in at the door.

Such formalities were kept up by some of the surrounding families on account of her name.

It was not of mushroom growth, and in

reality, as Mr. Essex had admitted, she was entitled to look down upon them all.

A day or two after Aloys Crossley's debut, she was out in the grounds surrounding the old house.

She had been gardening, trying to work a little order into what struck her as the worst cared for piece of ground she had ever seen, and though she had made a great clearance, and a huge heap of weeds lay behind her, she had not improved her own appearance.

She was dressed in a plain cotton frock which, having caught in some brambles, was now torn, and it had been made dirty by her vigorous efforts, and by her having knelt recklessly upon the grass and gravel.

Her daintily-arranged hair was ruffled, and her creamy skin flushed.

Her cuffs were turned up in a workmanlike fashion as she wielded rake and hoe, and altogether she did not look in the satin smooth condition in which Culhampton had beheld her at Lady Tighe's 'At Home.'

'She was stretching herself after her toil, and looking over the hedge into the road, when a carriage containing two or three ladies bowed past her.'

They kept their gazes rigidly before them turning neither to right nor to left.

'There was that girl, mamma,' Annabelle Caloney remarked. 'So untidy.'

'Well, naturally she will have to work while she is with her aunt,' returned Lady Caloney, as she sniffed her salts. 'You see, I don't believe Miss de Howard can afford a housemaid.'

'Or a gardener, apparently,' commented Annabelle.

A short way further along the road they encountered Mr. Denzil Essex.

Lady Caloney called to her coachman to stop, for she had something to say to the young man about a letter Sir Owen, her husband, had written a day or two previously to Sir Wilfred Curtis.

'We have just passed Miss de Howard's niece,' Annabelle remarked before they drove on. 'She is working away just like some common gardener in the front of the house.'

'I am going to call there,' Mr. Essex replied with provoking coolness.

'Do you often visit Miss de Howard?' inquired Lady Caloney coldly.

'Occasionally,' he replied.

He walked along the dusty road towards Beaulieu Hall.

Although he would not have been called so handsome as his fortunate cousin, his figure was a better one, stalwart and alert.

Miss Crossley, from her patch of raised ground, saw him coming, and her brown eyes rested upon him with a penetrating, clear-sighted look which seemed to read most of the people she met; although, when she was smiling at the same moment—which generally happened—they did not perceive it.

'Ah, Mr. Denzil Essex!' she murmured. 'Then he is not always busy.'

'Poor girl! Denzil was saying to himself. 'How hot and tired she looks! But what a beautiful face! How hard that she should be so poor! She should never have to work for her living; it seem quite preposterous!'

'Why, he is coming in here!' said Aloys aloud.

Then she ran down the slope and offered him a hand that was not guileless of mould, but was so pretty that Mr. Essex flushed as he took it.

'Are you going in to see Aunt Jane?' she asked.

Denzil might have replied that he had come to see herself, but as they had only met once before, he thought it wise to keep this information to himself.

'Yes,' he said, looking around him. 'You are gardening, I see, Miss Crossley.'

'Yes; I enjoy it very much. It is a change from my usual life,' answered Aloys simply. 'But I have had a great deal of difficulty with the dandelions. Do you know,' she proceeded, looking up at Denzil with innocent eyes, 'chickweed or groundsel is all very well, and I can manage it, but it is hard to dislodge a dandelion again; its will.'

'Let me help you!' exclaimed Mr. Essex eagerly.

'But not when you came to see Aunt Jane,' replied Miss Crossley, in a demurely shocked voice.

Her eyebrows plainly expressed that she could not dream of such a thing, and Mr. Essex regretted that he had betrayed himself.

Of course he had come to see Aunt Jane so they walked to the house together.

Her dress was an extremely simple one, and he had a full view of it and her dishevelled condition as she entered the big, bare, dusty old Hall.

The bright sunlight made the place look poorer than ever today, Denzil thought.

He had been within it only twice before.

Aloys preceded him into the drawing-room, where sat old Miss de Howard.

As he went up to her and spoke, her niece vanished.

Only one modern looking article seemed to stand in the ancient room.

That was a table for afternoon tea, and somehow he could not help thinking Aloys had imported it.

It was covered with a lace-edged, very dainty linen cloth.

Another token of her presence in the establishment were the flower-filled vases. The room seemed literally crowded with blossoms—roses, syringa, mignonette lilies—everything that was sweet.

He knew it must have been Miss Crossley who had attended to them, for he was sure Miss de Howard and old Elizabeth would not have troubled.

not think it worth while to fascinate a mere secretary.

'My dear!' cried her aristocratic little aunt, 'why do you do this? Elizabeth would have carried in the tea.'

She did not look very pleased, poor old lady, for she would have liked her charming niece to appear quite as luxuriously idle as the young ladies of Culhampton would have shown themselves, had Mr. Essex or anybody else called upon them.

But Aloys laughed carelessly.

'Why shouldn't I, Aunt Jane?' she said. 'It pleases me. And besides, I like to make your tea myself and know you enjoy it. I have things here for you that you have never tasted before.'

And disappearing again into the hall, she returned with a little basket cake-stand, which contained several sorts of dainties.

Poor old Miss de Howard's faded eyes gleamed for a moment with satisfaction and relief.

She did not know how the wonderful young lady had managed to preserve a good appearance before the unexpected visitor, but she was glad it should be so.

It was hard to always have to expose one's poverty, especially to worldly and unsympathetic eyes, though her present caller looked neither the one nor the other.

'All of my own invention!' remarked Miss Crossley, as she sat down the stand with Mr. Essex's assistance. 'In other words, compounded and cooked by myself Aunt Jane, so you must do them justice. I am rather proud of my cooking, Mr. Essex you must know—turning to him—'also of my dusting, and gardening, and—'

'Sewing,' interposed Miss de Howard, pointing to the little rents in the cotton frock.

Aloys laughed.

'I have enough of that at other times,' she responded, probably aware that her figure was irreproachably graceful, however it was clothed.

Mr. Essex looked at her, and smiled in sympathy though he felt sorry for her as he heard her words.

She was, perhaps, not a governess or companion, as Miss Caloney had suggested but a mother's help.

This would account for her all round usefulness.

'What a shame it is,' he said within himself, 'that women should have to work! It is right that we men should; but a girl—it seems cruel!'

'How do you like Culhampton, Miss Crossley?' he inquired.

'I don't like the people,' returned Aloys with a calm air of consideration; 'the women are rather vulgar.'

'My dear!' exclaimed Miss de Howard reprovingly.

'Well, Aunt Jane, not very well-bred, amended her niece, as she poured out the tea, and gazed through the curtainless windows into the garden. 'Uninteresting, and what I shall call half and half, it you know what that means—smiling.'

'And the men?' asked Denzil, balancing his teaspoon on the edge of his cup, unmindful of his hostess's frightened glance at her bits of priceless china.

'Oh, they are very much the same as in other places, I think,' returned Aloys. She met his eyes smilingly.

Denzil remembered that the men had crowded round her a few nights before, so it was evident this was the usual thing.

But, of course, he might have known that without any hint.

Wherever those brown eyes went, admirers would follow. Had he not followed them himself?

It seemed strange to think that the exquisite satin gown she had worn at Lady Tighe's should have come out of this bare, dreary, shabby house.

Her present costume seemed much more suited to it.

There were no rings on the small white hands, not even a brooch or pin at the dainty throat.

Yet the air of distinction was still with her—always would be, Denzil could see.

It mattered not that she had baked the cakes, and dusted the rooms, and carried in the tea tray—she was patrician to the finger-tips, as Annabelle, with her pink, round face and her plump, well set up form, could never become, even if she lived to be a hundred.

'What about the dandelions?' he murmured, when he had drunk enough tea and eaten enough cake to make an ordinary man ill.

'The dandelions?' she responded. 'Oh, I don't know much about them, except that it takes something out of one to detach them if they have set themselves against being detached. The dandelion is a deadly weed to conquer.'

'I should so much like to engage in your campaign against them,' he said, looking at her pleadingly. 'I have been feeding myself up for the encounter, and I could pledge myself to clear Miss de Howard's whole garden of them if you would only say the word.'

'Have you any knowledge of the length and strength of their roots, that you talk so recklessly? I think in half an hour you would own yourself beaten.'

'I could spare half an hour very well,' said Denzil. 'Or any amount of half hours if I could be with you,' he added to himself as he looked at her.

'Very well,' allowed Aloys.

She carried away the remains of their feast, in spite of her aunt's remonstrances that she should let Elizabeth do so, and then issued forth again into the garden.

She displayed with pride her afternoon's work to Mr. Essex, and then watched him while he bent his mind and body to the undoing of Miss de Howard's flourishing weeds.

He seemed very strong.

'It is the tea,' said Aloys. 'I have always heard of its powers of stimulations.' But it was not the tea, well as she had made it; it was a much greater stimulant, that she had not yet imagined.

'I can't let you waste your time like this,' she protested after a while and when his call was becoming a very long one.