Chapter VII - The Curates at Tea

Caroline Helstone was just eighteen years old, and at eighteen the true narrative of life is yet to be commenced. Before that time we sit listening to a tale, a marvellous fiction, delightful sometimes and sad sometimes, almost always unreal. Before that time our world is heroic, its inhabitants half-divine or semi-demon; its scenes are dream-scenes; darker woods and stranger hills, brighter skies, more dangerous waters, sweeter flowers, more tempting fruits, wider plains, drearier deserts, sunnier fields than are found in nature, over- spread our enchanted globe. What a moon we gaze on before that time! How the trembling of our hearts at her aspect bears witness to its unutterable beauty! As to our sun, it is a burning heaven - the world of gods.

At that time, at eighteen, drawing near the confines of illusive, void dreams, Elf-land lies behind us, the shores of Reality rise in front. These shores are yet distant; they look so blue, soft, gentle, we long to reach them. In sunshine we see a greenness beneath the azure, as of spring meadows; we catch glimpses of silver lines, and imagine the roll of living waters. Could we but reach this land, we think to hunger and thirst no more; whereas many a wilderness, and often the flood of death, or some stream of sorrow as cold and almost as black as death, is to be crossed ere true bliss can be tasted. Every joy that life gives must be earned ere it is secured; and how hardly earned, those only know who have wrestled for great prizes. The heart's blood must gem with red beads the brow of the combatant, before the wreath of victory rustles over it.

At eighteen we are not aware of this. Hope, when she smiles on us, and promises happiness to-morrow, is implicitly believed; Love, when he comes wandering like a lost angel to our door, is at once admitted, welcomed, embraced. His quiver is not seen; if his arrows penetrate, their wound is like a thrill of new life. There are no fears of poison, none of the barb which no leech's hand can extract That perilous passion - an agony ever in some of its phases; with many, an agony throughout - is believed to be an unqualified good. In short, at eighteen the school of experience is to be entered, and her humbling, crushing, grinding, but yet purifying and invigorating lessons are yet to be learned.

Alas, Experience! No other mentor has so wasted and frozen a face as yours, none wears a robe so black, none bears a rod so heavy, none with hand so inexorable draws the novice so sternly to his task, and forces him with authority so resistless to its acquirement. It is by your instructions alone that man or woman can ever find a safe track through life's wilds; without it, how they stumble, how they stray! On

what forbidden grounds do they intrude, down what dread declivities are they hurled!

Caroline, having been conveyed home by Robert, had no wish to pass what remained of the evening with her uncle. The room in which he sat was very sacred ground to her; she seldom intruded on it; and to-night she kept aloof till the bell rang for prayers. Part of the evening church service was the form of worship observed in Mr Helstone's household. He read it in his usual nasal voice, clear, loud, and monotonous. The rite over, his niece, according to her wont, stepped up to him.

'Good-night, uncle.'

'Hey! You've been gadding abroad all day - visiting, dining out, and what not'

'Only at the cottage.'

'And have you learned your lessons?'

'Yes.'

'And made a shirt?'

'Only part of one.'

'Well, that will do. Stick to the needle, learn shirt-making and gown-making and piecrust-making, and you'll be a clever woman some day. Go to bed now. I'm busy with a pamphlet here.'

Presently the niece was enclosed in her small bedroom, the door bolted, her white dressing-gown assumed, her long hair loosened and falling thick, soft, and wavy to her waist; and as, resting from the task of combing it out, she leaned her cheek on her hand and fixed her eyes on the carpet, before her rose, and close around her drew, the visions we see at eighteen years.

Her thoughts were speaking with her, speaking pleasantly, as it seemed, for she smiled as she listened. She looked pretty meditating thus; but a brighter thing than she was in that apartment - the spirit of youthful Hope. According to this flattering prophet, she was to know disappointment, to feel chill no more; she had entered on the dawn of a summer day - no false dawn, but the true spring of morning - and her sun would quickly rise. Impossible for her now to suspect that she was the sport of delusion; her expectations seemed warranted, the foundation on which they rested appeared solid.

'When people love, the next step is they marry,' was her argument. 'Now, I love Robert, and I feel sure that Robert loves me. I have thought so many a time before; to-day I felt it. When I looked up at him after repeating Chénier's poem, his eyes (what handsome eyes he has!) sent the truth through my heart. Sometimes I am afraid to speak to him, lest I should be too frank, lest I should seem forward - for I have more than once regretted bitterly overflowing, superfluous words, and feared I had said more than he expected me to say, and that he would disapprove what he might deem my indiscretion; now, to-night I could have ventured to express any thought, he was so indulgent. How kind he was as we walked up the lane! He does not flatter or say foolish things; his love- making (friendship, I mean; of course I don't yet account him my lover, but I hope he will be so some day) is not like what we read of in books, - it is far better - original, quiet, manly, sincere. I do like him, I would be an excellent wife to him if he did marry me; I would tell him of his faults (for he has a few faults), but I would study his comfort, and cherish him, and do my best to make him happy. Now, I am sure he will not be cold to-morrow. I feel almost certain that to-morrow evening he will either come here, or ask me to go there.'

She recommenced combing her hair, long as a mermaid's. Turning her head as she arranged it she saw her own face and form in the glass. Such reflections are soberising to plain people: their own eyes are not enchanted with the image; they are confident then that the eyes of others can see in it no fascination. But the fair must naturally draw other conclusions: the picture is charming, and must charm. Caroline saw a shape, a head, that, daguerreotyped in that attitude and with that expression, would have been lovely. She could not choose but derive from the spectacle confirmation to her hopes. It was then in undiminished gladness she sought her couch.

And in undiminished gladness she rose the next day. As she entered her uncle's breakfast-room, and with soft cheerfulness wished him good-morning, even that little man of bronze himself thought, for an instant, his niece was growing 'a fine girl.' Generally she was quiet and timid with him - very docile, but not communicative; this morning, however, she found many things to say. Slight topics alone might be discussed between them; for with a woman - a girl - Mr Helstone would touch on no other. She had taken an early walk in the garden, and she told him what flowers were beginning to spring there; she inquired when the gardener was to come and trim the borders; she informed him that certain starlings were beginning to build their nests in the church-tower (Briarfield church was close to Briarfield rectory); she wondered the tolling of the bells in the belfry did not scare them.

Mr Helstone opined that 'they were like other fools who had just paired - insensible to inconvenience just for the moment.' Caroline, made perhaps a little too courageous by her temporary good spirits, here hazarded a remark of a kind she had never before ventured to make on observations dropped by her revered relative.

'Uncle,' said she, 'whenever you speak of marriage, you speak of it scornfully. Do you think people shouldn't marry?'

'It is decidedly the wisest plan to remain single, especially for women.'

'Are all marriages unhappy?'

'Millions of marriages are unhappy. If everybody confessed the truth, perhaps all are more or less so.'

'You are always vexed when you are asked to come and marry a couple. Why?'

'Because one does not like to act as accessory to the commission of a piece of pure folly.'

Mr Helstone spoke so readily, he seemed rather glad of the opportunity to give his niece a piece of his mind on this point. Emboldened by the impunity which had hitherto attended her questions, she went a little further.

'But why,' said she, 'should it be pure folly? If two people like each other, why shouldn't they consent to live together?'

'They tire of each other - they tire of each other in a month. A yoke-fellow is not a companion; he or she is a fellow-sufferer.'

It was by no means naive simplicity which inspired Caroline's next remark; it was a sense of antipathy to such opinions, and of displeasure at him who held them.

'One would think you had never been married, uncle. One would think you were an old bachelor.'

'Practically, I am so.'

'But you have been married. Why were you so inconsistent as to marry?'

'Every man is mad once or twice in his life.'

'So you tired of my aunt, and my aunt of you, and you were miserable together?'

'Mr Helstone pushed out his cynical lip, wrinkled his brown forehead, and gave an inarticulate grunt.

'Did she not suit you? Was she not good-tempered? Did you not get used to her? Were you not sorry when she died?'

'Caroline,' said Mr Helstone, bringing his hand slowly down to within an inch or two of the table, and then smiting it suddenly on the mahogany, 'understand this: it is vulgar and puerile to confound generals with particulars. In every case there is the rule and there are the exceptions. Your questions are stupid and babyish. Ring the bell, if you have done breakfast.'.

The breakfast was taken away, and that meal over, it was the general custom of uncle and niece to separate, and not to meet again till dinner; but to-day the niece, instead of quitting the room, went to the window-seat and sat down there. Mr Helstone looked round uneasily once or twice, as if he wished her away; but she was gazing from the window, and did not seem to mind him: so he continued the perusal of his morning paper - a particularly interesting one it chanced to be, as new movements had just taken place in the Peninsula, and certain columns of the journal were rich in long dispatches from General Lord Wellington. He little knew, meantime, what thoughts were busy in his niece's mind - thoughts the conversation of the past half-hour had revived but not generated; tumultuous were they now, as disturbed bees in a hive, but it was years since they had first made their cells in her brain.

She was reviewing his character, his disposition, repeating his sentiments on marriage. Many a time had she reviewed them before, and sounded the gulf between her own mind and his; and then, on the other side of the wide and deep chasm, she had seen, and she now saw another figure standing beside her uncle's - a strange shape, dim, sinister, scarcely early - the half-remembered image of her own father, James Helstone, Matthewson Helstone's brother.

Rumours had reached her ear of what that father's character was; old servants had dropped hints; she knew, too, that he was not a good man, and that he was never kind to her. She recollected - a dark recollection it was - some weeks that she had spent with him in a great town somewhere, when she had had no maid to dress her or take care of her; when she had been shut up, day and night, in a high garret-room, without a carpet, with a bare uncurtained bed, and scarcely any other furniture; when he went out early every morning, and often forgot to return and give her her dinner during the day, and

at night, when he came back, was like a madman, furious, terrible, or - still more painful - like an idiot, imbecile, senseless. She knew she had fallen ill in this place, and that one night when she was very sick he had come roving into the room, and said he would kill her, for she was a burden to him. Her screams had brought aid; and from the moment she was then rescued from him she had never seen him, except as a dead man in his coffin.

That was her father. Also she had a mother, though Mr Helstone never spoke to her of that mother, though she could not remember having seen her; but that she was alive she knew. This mother was then the drunkard's wife. What had their marriage been? Caroline, turning from the lattice, whence she had been watching the starlings (though without seeing them), in a low voice, and with a sad, bitter tone, thus broke the silence of the room, -

'You term marriage miserable, I suppose, from what you saw of my father and mother's. If my mother suffered what I suffered when I was with papa, she must have had a dreadful life'

Mr Helstone, thus addressed, wheeled about in his chair, and looked over his spectacles at his niece. He was taken aback.

Her father and mother! What had put it into her head to mention her father and mother, of whom he had never, during the twelve years she had lived with him, spoken to her? That the thoughts were self-matured, that she had any recollections or speculations about her parents, he could not fancy.

'Your father and mother? Who has been talking to you about them?'

'Nobody; but I remember something of what papa was, and I pity mamma. Where is she?'

This 'Where is she?' had been on Caroline's lips hundreds of times before, but till now she had never uttered it.

'I hardly know,' returned Mr Helstone; 'I was little acquainted with her. I have not heard from her for years: but wherever she is, she thinks nothing of you; she never inquires about you. I have reason to believe she does not wish to see you. Come, it is schooltime. You go to your cousin at ten, don't you? The clock has struck.'

Perhaps Caroline would have said more; but Fanny, coming in, informed her master that the churchwardens wanted to speak to him in the vestry. He hastened to join them, and his niece presently set out for the cottage.

The road from the rectory to Hollow's Mill inclined downwards; she ran, therefore, almost all the way. Exercise, the fresh air, the thought of seeing Robert, at least of being on his premises, in his vicinage, revived her somewhat depressed spirits quickly. Arriving in sight of the white house, and within hearing of the thundering mill and its rushing watercourse, the first thing she saw was Moore at his garden gate. There he stood, in his belted Holland blouse, a light cap covering his head, which undress costume suited him. He was looking down the lane, not in the direction of his cousin's approach. She stopped, withdrawing a little behind a willow, and studied his appearance.

'He has not his peer,' she thought. 'He is as handsome as he is intelligent. What a keen eye he has! What clearly-cut, spirited features - thin and serious, but graceful! I do like his face, I do like his aspect, I do like him so much - better than any of those shuffling curates, for instance - better than anybody; bonnie Robert!'

She sought 'bonny Robert's' presence speedily. For his part, when she challenged his sight, I believe he would have passed from before her eyes like a phantom, if he could; but being a tall fact, and no fiction, he was obliged to stand the greeting. He made it brief. It was cousin-like, brother-like, friend- like, anything but lover-like. The nameless charm of last night had left his manner: he was no longer the same man; or, at any rate, the same heart did not beat in his breast. Rude disappointment, sharp cross! At first the eager girl would not believe in the change, though she saw and felt it. It was difficult to withdraw her hand from his, till he had bestowed at least something like a kind pressure; it was difficult to turn her eyes from his eyes, till his looks had expressed something more and fonder than that cool welcome.

A lover masculine so disappointed can speak and urge explanation, a lover feminine can say nothing; if she did, the result would be shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery. Nature would brand such demonstration as a rebellion against her instincts, and would vindictively repay it afterwards by the thunderbolt of self-contempt smiting suddenly in secret. Take the matter as you find it ask no questions, utter no remonstrances; it is your best wisdom. You expected bread and you have got a stone: break your teeth on it, and don't shriek because the nerves are martyrised; do not doubt that your mental stomach - if you have such a thing - is strong as an ostrich's; the stone will digest. You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation; close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm. Never mind; in time, after your hand and arm have swelled and quivered long with torture, the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob. For the whole remnant of your life, if you survive the test - some, it is said, die under it - you will be stronger, wiser, less sensitive. This you are not aware of,

perhaps, at the time, and so cannot borrow courage of that hope. Nature, however, as has been intimated, is an excellent friend in such cases, sealing the lips, interdicting utterance, commanding a placid dissimulation - a dissimulation often wearing an easy and gay mien at first, settling down to sorrow and paleness in time, then passing away, and leaving a convenient stoicism, not the less fortifying because it is half-bitter.

Half-bitter! Is that wrong? No; it should be bitter: bitterness is strength - it is a tonic. Sweet, mild force following acute suffering you find nowhere; to talk of it is delusion. There may be apathetic exhaustion after the rack. If energy remains, it will be rather a dangerous energy - deadly when confronted with injustice.

Who has read the ballad of 'Puir Mary Lee' - that old Scotch ballad, written I know not in what generation nor by what hand? Mary had been ill-used - probably in being made to believe that truth which was falsehood. She is not complaining, but she is sitting alone in the snowstorm, and you hear her thoughts. They are not the thoughts of a model heroine under her circumstances, but they are those of a deeply-feeling, strongly-resentful peasant-girl. Anguish has driven her from the inglenook of home to the white-shrouded and icy hills. Crouched under the 'cauld drift,' she recalls every image of horror - 'the yellow-wymed ask,' 'the hairy adder,' 'the auld moon-bowing tyke,' 'the ghaist at e'en,' 'the sour bullister,' 'the milk on the taed's back.' She hates these, but 'waur she hates Robin-a-Ree.'

Oh! ance I lived happily by yon bonny burn -
The warld was in love wi' me;
But now I maun sit 'neath the cauld drift and mourn,
And curse black Robin-a-Ree!

Then whudder awa', thou bitter biting blast,
And sough through the scrunty tree,
And smoor me up in the snaw fu' fast,
And ne'er let the sun me see!

Oh, never melt awa', thou wreath o' snaw,
That's sae kind in graving me;
But hide me frae the scorn and guffaw
O' villains like Robin-a-Ree!

But what has been said in the last page or two not germane to Caroline Helstone's feelings, or to the state of things between her and Robert Moore. Robert had done her no wrong; he had told her no lie; it was she that was to blame, if any one was. What bitterness her mind distilled should and would be poured on her own head. She had loved

without being asked to love - a natural, sometimes an inevitable chance, but big with misery.

Robert, indeed, had sometimes seemed to be fond of her; but why? Because she had made herself so pleasing to him, he could not, in spite of all his efforts, help testifying a state of feeling his judgment did not approve nor his will sanction. He was about to withdraw decidedly from intimate communication with her, because he did not choose to have his affections inextricably entangled, nor to be drawn, despite his reason, into a marriage he believed imprudent. Now, what was she to do? To give way to her feelings, or to vanquish them? To pursue him, or to turn upon herself? If she is weak, she will try the first expedient - will lose his esteem and win his aversion; if she has sense, she will be her own governor, and resolve to subdue and bring under guidance the disturbed realm of her emotions. She will determine to look on life steadily, as it is; to begin to learn its severe truths seriously, and to study its knotty problems closely, conscientiously.

It appeared she had a little sense, for she quitted Robert quietly, without complaint or question, without the alteration of a muscle or the shedding of a tear, betook herself to her studies under Hortense as usual, and at dinner-time went home without lingering.

When she had dined, and found herself in the rectory drawing-room alone, having left her uncle over his temperate glass of port wine, the difficulty that occurred to and embarrassed her was, 'How am I to get through this day?'

Last night she had hoped it would be spent as yesterday was, that the evening would be again passed with happiness and Robert. She had learned her mistake this morning; and yet she could not settle down, convinced that no chance would occur to recall her to Hollow's Cottage, or to bring Moore again into her society.

He had walked up after tea more than once to pass an hour with her uncle. The door-bell had rung, his voice had been heard in the passage just at twilight, when she little expected such a pleasure; and this had happened twice after he had treated her with peculiar reserve; and though he rarely talked to her in her uncle's presence, he had looked at her relentingly as he sat opposite her work- table during his stay. The few words he had spoken to her were comforting; his manner on bidding her good-night was genial. Now, he might come this evening, said False Hope. She almost knew it was False Hope which breathed the whisper, and yet she listened.

She tried to read - her thoughts wandered; she tried to sew - every stitch she put in was an ennui, the occupation was insufferably

tedious; she opened her desk and attempted to write a French composition - she wrote nothing but mistakes.

Suddenly the door-bell sharply rang; her heart leaped; she sprang to the drawing-room door, opened it softly, peeped through the aperture. Fanny was admitting a visitor - a gentleman - a tall man - just the height of Robert. For one second she thought it was Robert for one second she exulted; but the voice asking for Mr Helstone undeceived her. That voice was an Irish voice, consequently not Moore's, but the curate's - Malone's, He was ushered into the dining-room, where, doubtless he speedily helped his rector to empty the decanters.

It was a fact to be noted, that at whatever house in Briarfield, Whinbury, or Nunnely one curate dropped in to a meal - dinner or tea, as the case might be - another presently followed, often two more. Not that they gave each other the rendezvous, but they were usually all on the run at the same time, and when Donne, for instance, sought Malone at his lodgings and found him not, he inquired whither he had posted, and having learned of the landlady his destination, hastened with all speed after him. The same causes operated in the same way with Sweeting. Thus it chanced on that afternoon that Caroline's ears were three times tortured with the ringing of the bell and the advent of undesired guests; for Donne followed Malone, and Sweeting followed Donne; and more wine was ordered up from the cellar into the dining-room (for though old Helstone chid the inferior priesthood when he found them 'carousing,' as he called it, in their own tents, yet at his hierarchical table he ever liked to treat them to a glass of his best), and through the closed doors Caroline heard their boyish laughter, and the vacant cackle of their voices. Her fear was lest they should stay to tea, for she had no pleasure in making tea for that particular trio. What distinctions people draw! These three were men - young men - educated men, like Moore; yet, for her, how great the difference! Their society was a bore - his a delight.

Not only was she destined to be favoured with their clerical company, but Fortune was at this moment bringing her four other guests - lady guests, all packed in a pony-phaeton now rolling somewhat heavily along the road from Whinbury: an elderly lady and three of her buxom daughters were coming to see her 'in a friendly way,' as the custom of that neighbourhood was. Yes, a fourth time the bell clanged. Fanny brought the present announcement to the drawing- room, -

'Mrs Sykes and the three Misses Sykes.'

When Caroline was going to receive company, her habit was to wring her hands very nervously, to flush a little, and come forward hurriedly yet hesitatingly, wishing herself meantime at Jericho. She was, at such crises sadly deficient in finished manner, though she had once

been at school a year. Accordingly, on this occasion her small white hands sadly maltreated each other while she stood up, waiting the entrance of Mrs Sykes.

In stalked that lady, a tall, bilious gentlewoman, who made an ample and not altogether insincere profession of piety, and was greatly given to hospitality towards the clergy. In sailed her three daughters, a showy trio, being all three well-grown, and more or less handsome.

In English country ladies there is this point to be remarked. Whether young or old, pretty or plain, dull or sprightly, they all (or almost all) have a certain expression stamped on their features, which seems to say, 'I know - I do not boast of it, but I know that I am the standard of what is proper; let every one therefore whom I approach, or who approaches me, keep a sharp lookout, for wherein they differ from me - be the same in dress, manner, opinion, principle, or practice - therein they are wrong.'

Mrs and Misses Sykes, far from being exceptions to this observation were pointed illustrations of its truth; Miss Mary - a well-looked, well-meant, and, on the whole, well-dispositioned girl - wore her complacency with some state, though without harshness. Miss Harriet - a beauty - carried it more overbearingly; she looked high and cold. Miss Hannah, who was conceited, dashing, pushing, flourished hers consciously and openly. The mother evinced it with the gravity proper to her age and religious fame.

The reception was got through somehow. Caroline 'was glad to see them' (an unmitigated fib), hoped they were well, hoped Mrs Sykes's cough was better (Mrs Sykes had had a cough for the last twenty years), hoped the Misses Sykes had left their sisters at home well; to which inquiry the Misses Sykes, sitting on three chairs opposite the music-stool, whereon Caroline had undesignedly come to anchor, after wavering for some seconds between it and a large armchair, into which she at length recollected she ought to induct Mrs Sykes - and indeed that lady saved her the trouble by depositing herself therein - the Misses Sykes replied to Caroline by one simultaneous bow, very majestic and mighty awful. A pause followed. This bow was of a character to ensure silence for the next five minutes, and it did. Mrs Sykes then inquired after Mr Helstone, and whether he had had any return of rheumatism, and whether preaching twice on a Sunday fatigued him, and if he was capable of taking a full service now; and on being assured he was, she and all her daughters, combining in chorus, expressed their opinion that he was 'a wonderful man of his years.'

Pause second.

Miss Mary, getting up the steam in her turn, asked whether Caroline had attended the Bible Society meeting which had been held at Nunnely last Thursday night. The negative answer which truth compelled Caroline to utter - for last Thursday evening she had been sitting at home, reading a novel which Robert had lent her - elicited a simultaneous expression of surprise from the lips of the four ladies.

'We were all there,' said Miss Mary - 'mamma and all of us. We even persuaded papa to go. Hannah would insist upon it. But he fell asleep while Mr Langweilig, the German Moravian minister, was speaking. I felt quite ashamed, he nodded so.'

'And there was Dr. Broadbent,' cried Hannah - 'such a beautiful speaker. You couldn't expect it of him, for he is almost a vulgar-looking man.'

'But such a dear man,' interrupted Mary.

'And such a good man, such a useful man,' added her mother.

'Only like a butcher in appearance,' interposed the fair, proud Harriet. 'I couldn't bear to look at him. I listened with my eyes shut.'

Miss Helstone felt her ignorance and incompetency. Not having seen Dr. Broadbent, she could not give her opinion. Pause third came on. During its continuance, Caroline was feeling at her heart's core what a dreaming fool she was, what an unpractical life she led, how little fitness there was in her for ordinary intercourse with the ordinary world. She was feeling how exclusively she had attached herself to the white cottage in the Hollow, how in the existence of one inmate of that cottage she had pent all her universe. She was sensible that this would not do, and that some day she would be forced to make an alteration. It could not be said that she exactly wished to resemble the ladies before her, but she wished to become superior to her present self, so as to feel less scared by their dignity.

The sole means she found of reviving the flagging discourse was by asking them if they would all stay to tea; and a cruel struggle it cost her to perform this piece of civility. Mrs Sykes had begun, 'We are much obliged to you, but - -' when in came Fanny once more.

'The gentlemen will stay the evening, ma'am,' was the message she brought from Mr Helstone.

'What gentlemen have you?' now inquired Mrs Sykes. Their names were specified; she and her daughters interchanged glances. The curates were not to them what they were to Caroline. Mr Sweeting was quite a favourite with them; even Mr Malone rather so, because he

was a clergyman, 'Really, since you have company already, I think we shall stay,' remarked Mrs Sykes. 'We shall be quite a pleasant little party. I always like to meet the clergy.'

And now Caroline had to usher them upstairs, to help them to unshawl, smooth their hair, and make themselves smart; to reconduct them to the drawing-room, to distribute amongst them books of engravings, or odd things purchased from the Jew-basket. She was obliged to be a purchaser, though she was a slack contributor; and if she had possessed plenty of money, she would rather, when it was brought to the rectory - an awful incubus! - have purchased the whole stock than contributed a single pincushion.

It ought to be explained in passing, for the benefit of those who are not au fait to the mysteries of the 'Jew-basket' and 'missionary basket,' that these meubles are willow repositories, of the capacity of a good-sized family clothes basket, dedicated to the purpose of conveying from house to house a monster collection of pincushions, needlebooks, cardracks, workbags, articles of infant wear, etc., etc., etc., made by the willing or reluctant hands of the Christian ladies of a parish, and sold perforce to the heathenish gentlemen thereof, at prices unblushingly exorbitant. The proceeds of such compulsory sales are applied to the conversion of the Jews, the seeking out of the ten missing tribes, or to the regeneration of the interesting coloured population of the globe. Each lady contributor takes it in her turn to keep the basket a month, to sew for it, and to foist its contents on a shrinking male public. An exciting time it is when that turn comes round. Some active-minded women, with a good trading spirit, like it, and enjoy exceedingly the fun of making hard-handed worsted-spinners cash up, to the tune of four or five hundred per cent above the cost price, for articles quite useless to them; other feebler souls object to it, and would rather see the prince of darkness himself at their door any morning than that phantom basket, brought with 'Mrs Rouse's compliments; and please, ma'am, she says it's your turn now.'

Miss Helstone's duties of hostess performed, more anxiously than cheerily, she betook herself to the kitchen, to hold a brief privy-council with Fanny and Eliza about the tea.

'What a lot on 'em!' cried Eliza, who was cook. 'And I put off the baking to- day because I thought there would be bread plenty to fit while morning. We shall never have enow.'

'Are there any tea-cakes?' asked the young mistress.

'Only three and a loaf. I wish these fine folk would stay at home till they're asked; and I want to finish trimming my hat' (bonnet she meant).

'Then,' suggested Caroline, to whom the importance of the emergency gave a certain energy, 'Fanny must run down to Briarfield and buy some muffins and crumpets and some biscuits. And don't be cross, Eliza; we can't help it now.'

'And which tea-things are we to have?'

'Oh, the best, I suppose. I'll get out the silver service.' And she ran upstairs to the plate-closet, and presently brought down teapot, cream-ewer, and sugar-basin.

'And mun we have th' urn?'

'Yes; and now get it ready as quickly as you can, for the sooner we have tea over the sooner they will go - at least, I hope so. Heigh-ho! I wish they were gone,' she sighed, as she returned to the drawing-room. 'Still,' she thought, as she paused at the door ere opening it, 'if Robert would but come even now, how bright all would be! How comparatively easy the task of amusing these people if he were present! There would be an interest in hearing him talk (though he never says much in company), and in talking in his presence. There can be no interest in hearing any of them, or in speaking to them. How they will gabble when the curates come in, and how weary I shall grow with listening to them! But I suppose I am a selfish fool. These are very respectable gentlefolks. I ought, no doubt, to be proud of their countenance. I don't say they are not as good as I am - far from it - but they are different from me.

She went in.

Yorkshire people in those days took their tea round the table, sitting well into it, with their knees duly introduced under the mahogany. It was essential to have a multitude of plates of bread and butter, varied in sorts and plentiful in quantity. It was thought proper, too, that on the centre plate should stand a glass dish of marmalade. Among the viands was expected to be found a small assortment of cheesecakes and tarts. If there was also a plate of thin slices of pink ham garnished with green parsley, so much the better.

Eliza, the rector's cook, fortunately knew her business as provider. She had been put out of humour a little at first, when the invaders came so unexpectedly in such strength; but it appeared that she regained her cheerfulness with action, for in due time the tea was spread forth in handsome style, and neither ham, tarts, nor marmalade were wanting among its accompaniments.

The curates, summoned to this bounteous repast, entered joyous; but at once, on seeing the ladies, of whose presence they had not been

forewarned, they came to a stand in the doorway. Malone headed the party; he stopped short and fell back, almost capsizing Donne, who was behind him. Donne, staggering three paces in retreat, sent little Sweeting into the arms of old Helstone, who brought up the rear. There was some expostulation, some tittering. Malone was desired to mind what he was about, and urged to push forward, which at last he did, though colouring to the top of his peaked forehead a bluish purple. Helstone, advancing, set the shy curates aside, welcomed all his fair guests, shook hands and passed a jest with each, and seated himself snugly between the lovely Harriet and the dashing Hannah. Miss Mary he requested to move to the seat opposite to him, that he might see her if he couldn't be near her. Perfectly easy and gallant, in his way, were his manners always to young ladies, and most popular was he amongst them; yet at heart he neither respected nor liked the sex, and such of them as circumstances had brought into intimate relation with him had ever feared rather than loved him.

The curates were left to shift for themselves. Sweeting, who was the least embarrassed of the three, took refuge beside Mrs Sykes, who, he knew, was almost as fond of him as if he had been her son. Donne, after making his general bow with a grace all his own, and saying in a high pragmatical voice, 'How d'ye do, Miss Helstone?' dropped into a seat at Caroline's elbow, to her unmitigated annoyance, for she had a peculiar antipathy to Donne, on account of his stultified and immovable self-conceit and his incurable narrowness of mind. Malone, grinning most unmeaningly, inducted himself into the corresponding seat on the other side. She was thus blessed in a pair of supporters, neither of whom, she knew, would be of any mortal use, whether for keeping up the conversation, handing cups, circulating the muffins, or even lifting the plate from the slop basin. Little Sweeting, small and boyish as he was, would have been worth twenty of them. Malone, though a ceaseless talker when there were only men present, was usually tongue-tied in the presence of ladies. Three phrases, however, he had ready cut and dried, which he never failed to produce: -

1stly. 'Have you had a walk to-day, Miss Helstone?'

2ndly. 'Have you seen your cousin Moore lately?'

3rdly. 'Does your class at the Sunday school keep up its number?'

These three questions being put and responded to, between Caroline and Malone reigned silence.

With Donne it was otherwise; he was troublesome, exasperating. He had a stock of small-talk on hand, at once the most trite and perverse that can well be imagined - abuse of the people of Briarfield; of the natives of Yorkshire generally; complaints of the want of high society;

of the backward state of civilisation in these districts; murmurings against the disrespectful conduct of the lower orders in the north toward their betters; silly ridicule of the manner of living in these parts - the want of style, the absence of elegance, as if he, Donne, had been accustomed to very great doings indeed, an insinuation which his somewhat underbred manner and aspect failed to bear out. These strictures, he seemed to think, must raise him in the estimation of Miss Helstone or of any other lady who heard him; whereas with her, at least, they brought him to a level below contempt, though sometimes, indeed, they incensed her; for, a Yorkshire girl herself, she hated to hear Yorkshire abused by such a pitiful prater; and when wrought up to a certain pitch, she would turn and say something of which neither the matter nor the manner recommended her to Mr Donne's good- will. She would tell him it was no proof of refinement to be ever scolding others for vulgarity, and no sign of a good pastor to be eternally censuring his flock. She would ask him what he had entered the church for, since he complained there were only cottages to visit, and poor people to preach to - whether he had been ordained to the ministry merely to wear soft clothing and sit in king's houses. These questions were considered by all the curates as, to the last degree, audacious and impious.

Tea was a long time in progress; all the guests gabbled as their hostess had expected they would. Mr Helstone, being in excellent spirits - when, indeed, was he ever otherwise in society, attractive female society? it being only with the one lady of his own family that he maintained a grim taciturnity - kept up a brilliant flow of easy prattle with his right-hand and left-hand neighbours, and even with his vis-à-vis, Miss Mary; though, as Mary was the most sensible, the least coquettish, of the three, to her the elderly widower was the least attentive. At heart he could not abide sense in women. He liked to see them as silly, as light-headed, as vain, as open to ridicule as possible, because they were then in reality what he held them to be, and wished them to be - inferior, toys to play with, to amuse a vacant hour, and to be thrown away.

Hannah was his favourite. Harriet, though beautiful, egotistical, and self- satisfied, was not quite weak enough for him. She had some genuine self-respect amidst much false pride, and if she did not talk like an oracle, neither would she babble like one crazy; she would not permit herself to be treated quite as a doll, a child, a plaything; she expected to be bent to like a queen.

Hannah, on the contrary, demanded no respect, only flattery. If her admirers only told her that she was an angel, she would let them treat her like an idiot. So very credulous and frivolous was she, so very silly did she become when besieged with attention, flattered and admired to the proper degree, that there were moments when Helstone actually

felt tempted to commit matrimony a second time, and to try the experiment of taking her for his second helpmeet; but fortunately the salutary recollection of the ennuis of his first marriage, the impression still left on him of the weight of the millstone he had once worn round his neck, the fixity of his feelings respecting the insufferable evils of conjugal existence, operated as a check to his tenderness, suppressed the sigh heaving his old iron lungs, and restrained him from whispering to Hannah proposals it would have been high fun and great satisfaction to her to hear.

It is probable she would have married him if he had asked her; her parents would have quite approved the match. To them his fifty-five years, his bend- leather heart, could have presented no obstacles; and as he was a rector, held an excellent living, occupied a good house, and was supposed even to have private property (though in that the world was mistaken; every penny of the £5,000 inherited by him from his father had been devoted to the building and endowing of a new church at his native village in Lancashire - for he could show a lordly munificence when he pleased, and if the end was to his liking, never hesitated about making a grand sacrifice to attain it) - her parents, I say, would have delivered Hannah over to his loving kindness and his tender mercies without one scruple; and the second Mrs Helstone, inverting the natural order of insect existence, would have fluttered through the honeymoon a bright, admired butterfly, and crawled the rest of her days a sordid, trampled worm.

Little Mr Sweeting, seated between Mrs Sykes and Miss Mary, both of whom were very kind to him, and having a dish of tarts before him, and marmalade and crumpet upon his plate, looked and felt more content than any monarch. He was fond of all the Misses Sykes; they were all fond of him. He thought them magnificent girls, quite proper to mate with one of his inches. If he had a cause of regret at this blissful moment, it was that Miss Dora happened to be absent - Dora being the one whom he secretly hoped one day to call Mrs David Sweeting, with whom he dreamt of taking stately walks, leading her like an empress through the village of Nunnely; and an empress she would have been, if size could make an empress. She was vast, ponderous. Seen from behind, she had the air of a very stout lady of forty, but withal she possessed a good face, and no unkindly character.

The meal at last drew to a close. It would have been over long ago if Mr Donne had not persisted in sitting with his cup half full of cold tea before him, long after the rest had finished and after he himself had discussed such allowance of viands as he felt competent to swallow - long, indeed, after signs of impatience had been manifested all round the board, till chairs were pushed back, till the talk flagged, till silence fell. Vainly did Caroline inquire repeatedly if he would have another

cup, if he would take a little hot tea, as that must be cold, etc.; he would neither drink it nor leave it. He seemed to think. that this isolated position of his gave him somehow a certain importance, that it was dignified and stately to be the last, that it was grand to keep all the others waiting. So long did he linger, that the very urn died; it ceased to hiss. At length, however, the old rector himself, who had hitherto been too pleasantly engaged with Hannah to care for the delay, got impatient.

'For whom are we waiting?' he asked.

'For me, I believe,' returned Donne complacently, appearing to think it much to his credit that a party should thus be kept dependent on his movements.

'Tut!' cried Helstone. Then standing up, 'Let us return thanks,' said he; which he did forthwith, and all quitted the table. Donne, nothing abashed, still sat ten minutes quite alone, whereupon Mr Helstone rang the bell for the things to be removed. The curate at length saw himself forced to empty his cup, and to relinquish the rôle which, he thought, had given him such a felicitous distinction, drawn upon him such flattering general notice.

And now, in the natural course of events (Caroline, knowing how it would be, had opened the piano, and produced music-books in readiness), music was asked for. This was Mr Sweeting's chance for showing off. He was eager to commence. He undertook, therefore, the arduous task of persuading the young ladies to favour the company with an air - a song. Con amore he went through the whole business of begging, praying, resisting excuses, explaining away difficulties, and at last succeeded in persuading Miss Harriet to allow herself to be led to the instrument. Then out came the pieces of his flute (he always carried them in his pocket, as unfailingly as he carried his handkerchief). They were screwed and arranged; Malone and Donne meanwhile herding together and sneering at him, which the little man, glancing over his shoulder, saw, but did not heed at all. He was persuaded their sarcasm all arose from envy. They could not accompany the ladies as he could; he was about to enjoy a triumph over them.

The triumph began. Malone, much chagrined at hearing him pipe up in most superior style, determined to earn distinction too, if possible, and all at once assuming the character of a swain (which character he had endeavoured to enact once or twice before, but in which he had not hitherto met with the success he doubtless opined his merits deserved), approached a sofa on which Miss Helstone was seated, and depositing his great Irish frame near her, tried his hand (or rather tongue) at a fine speech or two, accompanied by grins the most

extraordinary and incomprehensible. In the course of his efforts to render himself agreeable, he contrived to possess himself of the two long sofa cushions and a square one; with which, after rolling them about for some time with strange gestures, he managed to erect a sort of barrier between himself and the object of his attentions. Caroline, quite willing that they should be sundered, soon devised an excuse for stepping over to the opposite side of the room, and taking up a position beside Mrs Sykes, of which good lady she entreated some instruction in a new stitch in ornamental knitting, a favour readily granted; and thus Peter Augustus was thrown out.

Very sullenly did his countenance lower when he saw himself abandoned - left entirely to his own resources on a large sofa, with the charge of three small cushions on his hands. The fact was, he felt disposed seriously to cultivate acquaintance with Miss Helstone, because he thought, in common with others, that her uncle possessed money, and concluded that, since he had no children, he would probably leave it to his niece. Gérard Moore was better instructed on this point: he had seen the neat church that owed its origin to the rector's zeal and cash, and more than once, in his inmost soul, had cursed an expensive caprice which crossed his wishes.

The evening seemed long to one person in that room. Caroline at intervals dropped her knitting on her lap, and gave herself up to a sort of brain-lethargy - closing her eyes and depressing her head - caused by what seemed to her the unmeaning hum around her, - the inharmonious tasteless rattle of the piano keys, the squeaking and gasping notes of the flute, the laughter and mirth of her uncle, and Hannah, and Mary, she could not tell whence originating for she heard nothing comic or gleeful in their discourse; and more than all, by the interminable gossip of Mrs Sykes murmured dose at her ear, gossip which rang the changes on four subjects - her own health and that of the various members of her family; the missionary and Jew baskets and their contents; the late meeting at Nunnely, and one which was expected to come off next week at Whinbury.

Tired at length to exhaustion, she embraced the opportunity of Mr Sweeting coming up to speak to Mrs Sykes to slip quietly out of the apartment, and seek a moment's respite in solitude. She repaired to the dining-room where the dear but now low remnant of a fire still burned in the grate. The place was empty and quiet, glasses and decanters were cleared from the table, the chairs were put back in their places, all was orderly. Caroline sank into her uncle's large easy-chair, half shut her eyes, and rested herself - rested at least her limits, her senses, her hearing, her vision - weary with listening to nothing, and gazing on vacancy. As to her mind, that flew directly to the Hollow. It stood on the threshold of the parlour there, then it passed to the counting-house, and wondered which spot was blessed by the

presence of Robert. It so happened that neither locality had that honour; for Robert was half a mile away from both and much nearer to Caroline than her deadened spirit suspected. He was at this moment crossing the churchyard, approaching the rectory garden-gate - not, however, corning to see his cousin, but intent solely on communicating a brief piece of intelligence to the rector.

Yes, Caroline; you hear the wire of the bell vibrate; it rings again for the fifth time this afternoon. You start, and you are certain now that this must be he of whom you dream. Why you are so certain you cannot explain to yourself, but you know it. You lean forward, listening eagerly as Fanny opens the door. Right! That is the voice - low, with the slight foreign accent, but so sweet, as you fancy. You half rise. 'Fanny will tell him Mr Helstone is with company, and then he will go away.' Oh! she cannot let him go. In spite of herself, in spite of her reason, she walks half across the room; she stands ready to dart out in case the step should retreat; but he enters the passage. 'Since your master is engaged,' he says, 'just show me into the dining-room. Bring me pen and ink. I will write a short note and leave it for him.'

Now, having caught these words, and hearing him advance, Caroline, if there was a door within the dining-room, would glide through it and disappear. She feels caught, hemmed in; she dreads her unexpected presence may annoy him. A second since she would have flown to him; that second past, she would flee from him. She cannot. There is no way of escape. The dining-room has but one door, through which now enters her cousin. The look of troubled surprise she expected to see in his face has appeared there, has shocked her, and is gone. She has stammered a sort of apology:

'I only left the drawing-room a minute for a little quiet.'

There was something so diffident and downcast in the air and tone with which she said this, any one might perceive that some saddening change had lately passed over her prospects, and that the faculty of cheerful self-possession had left her. Mr Moore, probably, remembered how she had formerly been accustomed to meet him with gentle ardour and hopeful confidence. He must have seen how the check of this morning had operated. Here was an opportunity for carrying out his new system with effect, if he chose to improve it. Perhaps he found it easier to practise that system in broad daylight, in his mill-yard, amidst busy occupations, than in a quiet parlour, disengaged, at the hour of eventide. Fanny lit the candles, which before had stood unlit on the table, brought writing materials, and left the room. Caroline was about to follow her. Moore; to act consistently, should have let her go; whereas he stood in the doorway, and, holding out his hand,

gently kept her back. He did not ask her to stay, but he would not let her go.

'Shall I tell my uncle you are here?' asked she, still in the same subdued voice.

'No; I can say to you all I had to say to him. You will be my messenger?'

'Yes, Robert.'

'Then you may just inform him that I have got a clue to the identity of one, at least, of the men who broke my frames; that he belongs to the same gang who attacked Sykes and Pearson's dressing-shop, and that I hope to have him in custody to-morrow. You can remember that?'

'Oh yes!' These two monosyllables were uttered in a sadder tone than ever; and as she said them she shook her head slightly and sighed. 'Will you prosecute him?'

'Doubtless.'

'No, Robert.'

'And why no, Caroline?'

'Because it will set all the neighbourhood against you more than ever.'

'That is no reason why I should not do my duty, and defend my property. This fellow is a great scoundrel, and ought to be incapacitated from perpetrating further mischief'

'But his accomplices will take revenge on you. You do not know how the people of this country bear malice. It is the boast of some of them that they can keep a stone in their pocket seven years, turn it at the end of that time, keep it seven years longer, and hurl it and hit their mark ‘at last."

Moore laughed.

'A most pithy vaunt,' said he - 'one that redounds vastly to the credit of your dear Yorkshire friends. But don't fear for me, Lina. I am on my guard against these lamb-like compatriots of yours. Don't make yourself uneasy about me.'

'How can I help it? You are my cousin. If anything happened - ' She stopped.

'Nothing will happen, Lina. To speak in your own language, there is a Providence above all - is there not?'

'Yes, dear Robert. May He guard you!'

'And if prayers have efficacy, yours will benefit me. You pray for me sometimes?'

'Not sometimes, Robert. You, and Louis, and Hortense are always remembered.'

'So I have often imagined. It has occurred to me when, weary and vexed, I have myself gone to bed like a heathen, that another had asked forgiveness for my day, and safety for my night I don't suppose such vicarial piety will avail much, but the petitions come out of a sincere breast from innocent lips. They should be acceptable as Abel's offering; and doubtless would be, if the object deserved them.'

'Annihilate that doubt. It is groundless.'

'When a man has been brought up only to make money, and lives to make it, and for nothing else, and scarcely breathes any other air than that of mills and markets, it seems odd to utter his name in a prayer, or to mix his idea with anything divine; and very strange it seems that a good, pure heart should take him in and harbour him, as if he had any claim to that sort of nest. If I could guide that benignant heart, I believe I should counsel it to exclude one who does not profess to have any higher aim in life than that of patching up his broken fortune, and wiping clean from his bourgeois scutcheon the foul stain of bankruptcy.'

The hint, though conveyed thus tenderly and modestly (as Caroline thought), was felt keenly and comprehended dearly.

'Indeed, I only think - or I will only think - of you as my cousin,' was the quick answer. 'I am beginning to understand things better than I did, Robert, when you first came to England - better than I did a week, a day ago. I know it is your duty to try to get on, and that it won't do for you to be romantic; but in future you must not misunderstand me if I seem friendly. You misunderstood me this morning, did you not?'

'What made you think so?'

'Your look - your manner.'

'But look at me now.'

'Oh! you are' different now. At present I dare speak to you.'

'Yet I am the same, except that I have left the tradesman behind me in the Hollow. Your kinsman alone stands before you.'

'My cousin Robert - not Mr Moore.'

'Not a bit of Mr Moore. Caroline - '

Here the company was heard rising in the other room. The door was opened; the pony-carriage was ordered; shawls and bonnets were demanded; Mr Helstone called for his niece.

'I must go, Robert.'

'Yes, you must go, or they will come in and find us here; and I, rather than meet all that host in the passage, will take my departure through the window. Luckily it opens like a door. One minute only - put down the candle an instant - good-night. I kiss you because we are cousins, and, being cousins, one - two - three kisses are allowable. Caroline, good-night!'