

## CHAPTER XLII

"Why, Arthur, I had almost forgotten what you are like," said Mildred, when that young gentleman at last put in an appearance at the Quinta.

"Where have you been to all this time?"

"I--oh, I have been writing letters," said Arthur.

"Then they must have been very long ones. Don't tell fibs, Arthur; you have not stopped away from here for a day and a half in order to write letters. What is the matter with you?"

"Well, if you must know, Mildred, I detest your friend Lord Minster, the mere sight of him sets my teeth on edge, and I did not want to meet him. I only came here to-day because Lady Florence told me that they were going up to the Convent this afternoon."

"So you have been to see Lady Florence?"

"No, I met her buying fruit yesterday, and went for a walk with her."

"In the intervals of the letter-writing?"

"Yes."

"Well, do you know I detest Lady Florence?"

"That is very unkind of you. She is charming."

"From your point of view, perhaps, as her brother is from mine."

"Do you mean to tell me that you think that horrid fellow charming?"  
asked Arthur in disgust.

"Why should I not?"

"Oh, for the matter of that there is no reason why you should not, but I can't congratulate you either on your friend or your taste."

"Leaving my taste out of the question, why do you call Lord Minster my friend?"

"Because Miss Terry told me that he was; she said that he was always proposing to you, and that you would probably marry him in the end."

Mildred blushed faintly.

"She has no business to tell you; but, for the matter of that, so have many other men. It does not follow that, because they choose to propose to me, they are my friends."

"No, but then they have not married you."

"No more has he; but, while we are talking of it, why should I not marry Lord Minster? He can give me position, influence, everything that is dear to a woman, except the rarest of all gifts--love."

"But is love so rare, Mildred?"

"Yes, the love that it can satisfy a woman either to receive or to give, especially the latter, for in this we are more blessed in giving than in receiving. It is but very rarely that the most fortunate of us get a chance of accepting such love as I mean, and we can only give it once in our lives. But you have not told me your reasons against my marrying Lord Minster."

"Because he is a mean-spirited, selfish man. If he were not, he could not have talked as he did last night. Because you do not love him, Mildred, you cannot love such a man as that, if he were fifty times a member of the Government."

"What does it matter to you, Arthur," she said, in a voice of indescribable softness, bending her sunny head low over her work, "whether I love him or not; my doing so would not make your heart beat the faster."

"I don't wish you to marry him," he said, confusedly.

She raised her head and looked full at him with eyes which shone like stars through a summer mist.

"That is enough, Arthur," she answered, in a tone of gentle submission, "if you do not wish it, I will not," and, rising, she left the room.

Arthur blushed furiously at her words, and a new sensation crept over him.

"Surely," he said to himself, "she cannot---- No, of course she only means that she will take my advice."

But, though he dismissed the suspicion thus readily, it left something that he could not quite define behind it. He had, after the manner of young men where women are concerned, thought that he understood Mildred thoroughly; now he came to the modest conclusion that he knew very little about her.

On the following afternoon, when he was at the Quinta talking as usual to Mrs. Carr, he saw Lord Minster coming up the steps of the portico, dressed in much the same way and with exactly the same air as he was accustomed to assume when he mounted those of the "Reform," or occasionally, if he thought that the "hungry electors" wanted "pandering" to, those of the new "National Club."

"Hullo," said Arthur, "here comes Lord Minster in his war paint, frock coat, tall hat, eye-glass and all. Good-bye."

"Why do you go away, Arthur? Stop and protect me," said Mildred, laughing.

"Oh, no, indeed, I don't want to spoil sport. I would not interfere with your amusement on any account."

Mildred looked a little vexed.

"Well, you will come back to dinner?"

"That depends upon what happens."

"I told you what would happen, Arthur. Good-bye."

"Perhaps it is as well to get it over at once," thought Mildred.

In the hall Arthur met Lord Minster, and they passed with a gesture of recognition so infinitesimally small that it almost faded into the nothingness of a "cut." So far as he could condescend to notice so low a thing at all, his lordship had conceived a great dislike for Arthur.

"How do you do, Lord Minster?" said Mildred, cordially. "I hear that you went to the Convent yesterday; what did you think of the view?"

"The view, Mrs. Carr--was there a view? I did not notice it; indeed, I only went up there at all to please Florence. I don't like that sort of thing."

"If you don't like roughing it, I am afraid that you did not enjoy your voyage out."

"Well, no, I don't think I did, and there was a low fellow on board who had been ruined by the retrocession of the Transvaal, and who, hearing that I was in the Government, took every possible opportunity to tell me publicly that his wife and children were almost in a state of starvation, as though I cared about his confounded wife and children. He was positively brutal. No, certainly I did not enjoy it. However, I am rewarded by finding you here."

"I am very much flattered."

Lord Minster fixed his eye-glass firmly in his eye, planted his hands at the bottom of his trousers pockets, and, clearing his throat, placed himself in the attitude that was so familiar to the House, and began.

"Mrs. Carr, I told you, when last I had the pleasure of seeing you, that I should take the first opportunity of renewing a conversation that I was forced to suspend in order to attend, if my memory serves

me, a very important committee meeting. I was therefore surprised, indeed I may almost say hurt, when I found that you had suddenly flitted from London."

"Indeed, Lord Minster?"

"I will not, however, take up the time of this--I mean your time, by recapitulating all that I told you on that occasion; the facts are, so to speak, all upon the table, and I will merely touch upon the main heads of my case. My prospects are these: I am now a member of the Cabinet, and enjoy, owing to the unusual but calculated recklessness of my non-official public utterances, an extraordinary popularity with a large section of the country, the hungry section to which I alluded last night. It is probable that the course of the present Government is pretty nearly run, the country is sick of it, and those who put it into power have not got enough out of it. A dissolution is therefore an event of the near future; the Conservatives will come in, but they have no power of organization, and very little political talent at their backs, above all, they are deficient in energy, probably because there is nothing that they can destroy and therefore no pickings to struggle for. In short, they are not 'capaces imperii.' The want of these qualities and of leaders will very soon undermine their hold upon the country, always a slight one, and, assisted by a few other pushing men, I anticipate, by carefully playing into the hands of the Irish party which will really rule England in the future, being able, as one of the leaders of the Opposition, to consummate their downfall.

Then will come my opportunity, and, if luck goes with me, I shall be first Lord of the Treasury within half a dozen years. But now comes the difficulty. Though I am so popular with the country, I am, for some reason quite inexplicable to myself, rather at a--hum--a discount amongst my colleagues and that influential section of society to which they belong. Now, in order to succeed to the full extent that I have planned, it is absolutely essential that I should win the countenance of this class, and the only way that I can see of doing it is by marrying some woman charming enough to disarm dislike, beautiful enough to command admiration, rich enough to entertain profusely, and clever enough to rule England. Those desiderata are all to a striking degree united in your person, Mrs. Carr, and I have therefore much pleasure in asking you to become my wife."

"You have, as I understand you, Lord Minster, made a very admirable statement of how desirable it is for yourself that you should marry me, but it is not so clear what advantage I should reap by marrying you."

"Why, the advantages are obvious: if by your help I can become Prime Minister, you would become the wife of the Prime Minister."

"The prospect fails to dazzle me. I have everything that I want; why should I strive to reach a grandeur to which I was not born, and which, to speak the truth, I regard with a very complete indifference? But there is another point. In all your speech you have said nothing



of any affection that you have to offer, not a single word of love-- you have been content to expatiate on the profits that a matrimonial investment would bring to yourself, and by reflection, to the other contracting party."

"Love," asked Lord Minster, with an expression of genuine surprise; "why, you talk like a character in a novel; now tell me, Mrs. Carr, \_what\_ is love?"

"It is difficult to define, Lord Minster; but as you ask me to do so, I will try. Love to a woman is what the sun is to the world, it is her life, her animating principle, without which she must droop, and, if the plant be very tender, die. Except under its influence, a woman can never attain her full growth, never touch the height of her possibilities, or bloom into the plenitude of her moral beauty. A loveless marriage dwarfs our natures, a marriage where love is develops them to their utmost."

"And what is love to a man?"

"Well, I should say that nine of a man's passions are merely episodes in his career, the mile-stones that mark his path; the tenth, or the first, is his philosopher's stone that turns all things to gold, or, if the charm does not work, leaves his heart, broken and bankrupt, a cold monument of failure."

"I don't quite follow you, and I must say that, speaking for myself, I never felt anything of all this," said Lord Minster, blankly.

"I know you do not, Lord Minster; your only passions tend towards political triumphs and personal aggrandisement; we are at the two poles, you see, and I fear that we can never, never meet upon a common matrimonial line. But don't be down-hearted about it, you will find plenty more women who fulfil all your requirements and will be very happy to take you at your own valuation. If only a woman is necessary to success, you need not look far, and forgive me if I say that I believe it will not make much difference to you who she is. But all the same, Lord Minster, I will venture to give you a piece of advice: next time you propose, address yourself a little more to the lady's affections and a little less to her interests," and Mrs. Carr rose as though to show that the interview was at an end.

"Am I then to understand that my offer is definitely refused?" asked Lord Minster, stiffly.

"I am afraid so, and I am sure that you will, on reflection, see how utterly unsuited we are to each other."

"Possibly, Mrs. Carr, possibly; at present all that I see is that you have had a great opportunity, and have failed to avail yourself of it. My only consolation is that the loss will be yours, and my only regret is that I have had the trouble of coming to this place for nothing.

However, there is a ship due to-morrow, and I shall sail in her."

"I am sorry to have been the cause of bringing you here, Lord Minster, and still more sorry that you should feel obliged to cut short your stay. Good-bye, Lord Minster; we part friends, I hope?"

"Oh, certainly, Mrs. Carr. I wish you a very good morning, Mrs. Carr," and his lordship marched out of Mildred's life.

"There goes my chance of becoming the wife of a prime minister, and making a figure in history," said that lady, as she watched his tall figure stalking stiffly down the avenue. "Well, I am glad of it. I would just as soon have married a speech-making figure-head stuffed full of the purest Radical principles."

On the following day Arthur met Lady Florence again in the town.

"Where have you been to, Lady Florence?" he said.

"To see my brother off," she answered, without any signs of deep grief.

"What, has he gone already?"

"Yes; your friend Mrs. Carr has been too many for poor James."

"What! do you mean that he has been proposing?"

"Yes, and got more than he bargained for."

"Is he cut up?"

"He, no, but his vanity is. You see, Mr. Heigham, it is this way. My brother may be a very great man and a pillar of the State, and all that sort of thing. I don't say he isn't; but from personal experience I know that he is an awful prig, and thinks that all women are machines constructed to advance the comfort of your noble sex. Well, he has come down a peg or two, that's all, and he don't like it. Good-bye; I'm in a hurry."

Lady Florence was nothing if not outspoken.