

XXXIX.

So here is the world with us again, and our sentimental excursion is over. In the front of the Rufus Stone Hotel conceive a remarkable collection of wheeled instruments, watched over by Dangle and Phipps in grave and stately attitudes, and by the driver of a stylish dogcart from Ringwood. In the garden behind, in an attitude of nervous prostration, Mr. Hoopdriver was seated on a rustic seat. Through the open window of a private sitting-room came a murmur of voices, as of men and women in conference. Occasionally something that might have been a girlish sob.

"I fail to see what status Widgery has," says Dangle, "thrusting himself in there."

"He takes too much upon himself," said Phipps.

"I've been noticing little things, yesterday and to-day," said Dangle, and stopped.

"They went to the cathedral together in the afternoon."

"Financially it would be a good thing for her, of course," said Dangle, with a gloomy magnanimity.

He felt drawn to Phipps now by the common trouble, in spite of the man's chequered legs. "Financially it wouldn't be half bad."

"He's so dull and heavy," said Phipps.

Meanwhile, within, the clergyman had, by promptitude and dexterity, taken the chair and was opening the case against the unfortunate Jessie. I regret to have to say that my heroine had been appalled by the visible array of public opinion against her excursion, to the pitch of tears. She was sitting with flushed cheeks and swimming eyes at the end of the table opposite to the clergyman. She held her handkerchief crumpled up in her extended hand. Mrs. Milton sat as near to her as possible, and occasionally made little dabs with her hand at Jessie's hand, to indicate forgiveness. These advances were not reciprocated, which touched Widgery very much. The lady in green, Miss Mergle (B. A.), sat on the opposite side near the clergyman. She was the strong-minded schoolmistress to whom Jessie had written, and who had immediately precipitated the pursuit upon her. She had picked up the clergyman in Ringwood, and had told him everything forthwith, having met him once at a British Association meeting. He had immediately constituted himself administrator of the entire business. Widgery, having been foiled in an attempt to conduct the proceedings, stood with his legs wide apart in front of the fireplace ornament, and looked profound and sympathetic. Jessie's account of her adventures was a chary one and given amidst frequent interruptions. She surprised herself by skilfully omitting any allusion to the Bechamel episode. She completely exonerated Hoopdriver from the charge of being more than an accessory to her escapade. But public feeling was heavy against Hoopdriver. Her narrative was

inaccurate and sketchy, but happily the others were too anxious to pass opinions to pin her down to particulars. At last they had all the facts they would permit.

"My dear young lady," said the clergyman, "I can only ascribe this extravagant and regrettable expedition of yours to the wildest misconceptions of your place in the world and of your duties and responsibilities. Even now, it seems to me, your present emotion is due not so much to a real and sincere penitence for your disobedience and folly as to a positive annoyance at our most fortunate interference--"

"Not that," said Mrs. Milton, in a low tone. "Not that."

"But WHY did she go off like this?" said Widgery. "That's what I want to know."

Jessie made an attempt to speak, but Mrs. Milton said "Hush!" and the ringing tenor of the clergyman rode triumphantly over the meeting. "I cannot understand this spirit of unrest that has seized upon the more intelligent portion of the feminine community. You had a pleasant home, a most refined and intelligent lady in the position of your mother, to cherish and protect you--"

"If I HAD a mother," gulped Jessie, succumbing to the obvious snare of self-pity, and sobbing.

"To cherish, protect, and advise you. And you must needs go out of it all alone into a strange world of unknown dangers--"

"I wanted to learn," said Jessie.

"You wanted to learn. May you never have anything to UNlearn."

"AH!" from Mrs. Milton, very sadly.

"It isn't fair for all of you to argue at me at once," submitted Jessie, irrelevantly.

"A world full of unknown dangers," resumed the clergyman. "Your proper place was surely the natural surroundings that are part of you. You have been unduly influenced, it is only too apparent, by a class of literature which, with all due respect to distinguished authoress that shall be nameless, I must call the New Woman Literature. In that deleterious ingredient of our book boxes--"

"I don't altogether agree with you there," said Miss Mergle, throwing her head back and regarding him firmly through her spectacles, and Mr. Widgery coughed.

"What HAS all this to do with me?" asked Jessie, availing herself of the interruption.

"The point is," said Mrs. Milton, on her defence, "that in my books--"

"All I want to do," said Jessie, "is to go about freely by myself. Girls do so in America. Why not here?"

"Social conditions are entirely different in America," said Miss Mergle.

"Here we respect Class Distinctions."

"It's very unfortunate. What I want to know is, why I cannot go away for a holiday if I want to."

"With a strange young man, socially your inferior," said Widgery, and made her flush by his tone.

"Why not?" she said. "With anybody."

"They don't do that, even in America," said Miss Mergle.

"My dear young lady," said the clergyman, "the most elementary principles of decorum--A day will come when you will better understand how entirely subservient your ideas are to the very fundamentals of our present civilisation, when you will better understand the harrowing anxiety you have given Mrs. Milton by this inexplicable flight of yours. We can only put things down at present, in charity, to your ignorance--"

"You have to consider the general body of opinion, too," said Widgery.

"Precisely," said Miss Mergle. "There is no such thing as conduct in the absolute." "If once this most unfortunate business gets about," said the clergyman, "it will do you infinite harm."

"But I'VE done nothing wrong. Why should I be responsible for other people's--"

"The world has no charity," said Mrs. Milton.

"For a girl," said Jessie. "No."

"Now do let us stop arguing, my dear young lady, and let us listen to reason. Never mind how or why, this conduct of yours will do you infinite harm, if once it is generally known. And not only that, it will cause infinite pain to those who care for you. But if you will return at once to your home, causing it to be understood that you have been with friends for these last few days--"

"Tell lies," said Jessie. "Certainly not. Most certainly not. But I understand that is how your absence is understood at present, and there is no reason--"

Jessie's grip tightened on her handkerchief. "I won't go back," she said, "to have it as I did before. I want a room of my own, what books I need to read, to be free to go out by myself alone, Teaching--"

"Anything," said Mrs. Milton, "anything in reason."

"But will you keep your promise?" said Jessie.

"Surely you won't dictate to your mother!" said Widgery.

"My stepmother! I don't want to dictate. I want definite promises now."

"This is most unreasonable," said the clergyman. "Very well," said Jessie, swallowing a sob but with unusual resolution. "Then I won't go back. My life is being frittered away--"

"LET her have her way," said Widgery.

"A room then. All your Men. I'm not to come down and talk away half my days--"

"My dear child, if only to save you," said Mrs. Milton. "If you don't keep your promise--"

"Then I take it the matter is practically concluded," said the clergyman. "And that you very properly submit to return to your proper home. And now, if I may offer a suggestion, it is that we take tea. Freed of its tannin, nothing, I think, is more refreshing and stimulating."

"There's a train from Lyndhurst at thirteen minutes to six," said Widgery, unfolding a time table. "That gives us about half an hour or three-quarters here--if a conveyance is obtainable, that is."

"A gelatine lozenge dropped into the tea cup precipitates the tannin in the form of tannate of gelatine," said the clergyman to Miss Mergle, in a confidential bray.

Jessie stood up, and saw through the window a depressed head and shoulders over the top of the back of a garden seat. She moved towards the door. "While you have tea, mother," she said, "I must tell Mr. Hoopdriver of our arrangements."

"Don't you think I--" began the clergyman.

"No," said Jessie, very rudely; "I don't."

"But, Jessie, haven't you already--"

"You are already breaking the capitulation," said Jessie.

"Will you want the whole half hour?" said Widgery, at the bell.

"Every minute," said Jessie, in the doorway. "He's behaved very nobly to me."



"There's tea," said Widgery.

"I've had tea."

"He may not have behaved badly," said the clergyman. "But he's certainly an astonishingly weak person to let a wrong-headed young girl--"

Jessie closed the door into the garden.

Meanwhile Mr. Hoopdriver made a sad figure in the sunlight outside. It was over, this wonderful excursion of his, so far as she was concerned, and with the swift blow that separated them, he realised all that those days had done for him. He tried to grasp the bearings of their position. Of course, they would take her away to those social altitudes of hers. She would become an inaccessible young lady again. Would they let him say good-bye to her?

How extraordinary it had all been! He recalled the moment when he had first seen her riding, with the sunlight behind her, along the riverside road; he recalled that wonderful night at Bognor, remembering it as if everything had been done of his own initiative. "Brave, brave!" she had called him. And afterwards, when she came down to him in the morning, kindly, quiet. But ought he to have persuaded her then to return to her home? He remembered some intention of the sort. Now these people

snatched her away from him as though he was scarcely fit to live in the same world with her. No more he was! He felt he had presumed upon her worldly ignorance in travelling with her day after day. She was so dainty, so delightful, so serene. He began to recapitulate her expressions, the light of her eyes, the turn of her face.. .

He wasn't good enough to walk in the same road with her. Nobody was. Suppose they let him say good-bye to her; what could he say? That? But they were sure not to let her talk to him alone; her mother would be there as--what was it? Chaperone. He'd never once had a chance of saying what he felt; indeed, it was only now he was beginning to realise what he felt. Love I he wouldn't presume. It was worship. If only he could have one more chance. He must have one more chance, somewhere, somehow.

Then he would pour out his soul to her eloquently. He felt eloquently, and words would come. He was dust under her feet...

His meditation was interrupted by the click of a door handle, and Jessie appeared in the sunlight under the verandah. "Come away from here," she said to Hoopdriver, as he rose to meet her. "I'm going home with them. We have to say good-bye."

Mr. Hoopdriver winced, opened and shut his mouth, and rose without a word.