CRANE COURT

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BY

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'THE BEAUTIFUL LADY CHICHESTER,' ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

WITHOUT possessing any renowned scenery, or any famous health resorts to attract strangers to it, the small county of Elmshire is perhaps as pretty as any, with one or two noted exceptions, in England. Almost every variety of scenery is to be found in it. Rock-bound coast, smiling bays, wide, rolling downs, breezy heaths, and green, fertile valleys can all be met with—in some parts in a morning's ride—in Elmshire.

It possesses no large towns—few towns indeed at all—and its villages are mostly small hamlets. It is not much traversed by railroads, so many parts of it are far from a station; the old-fashioned carriers and pedlers—higglers, as Elmshire people call the latter—go their ways unmolested. A good many people in Elmshire have never been to London at all, though from some parts of the county it is not more than a hundred miles away.

So the inhabitants are mostly unsophisticated, not to say decidedly behind the times. The poorer classes are ignorant to a degree hardly credible to a Cockney, though of course nowadays the School Board is altering that to a great extent, and some of them are as wild and rough as the Irish peasants, whom they resemble in more ways than one.

As for the upper classes, they have always had the character of being extremely hospitable and friendly among themselves, and exclusive to strangers, but of late years they have not altogether escaped the growing tendency of the age—that of seeking society in London principally. Also 'agricultural depression'—and Elmshire is entirely an agricultural county—has here and there forced some of the old houses to change hands, and thus admitted new people into the once charmed circle of Elmshire society.

East Elmshire is about the wildest, least known, and, at the same time, prettiest part of the county, and in one of the prettiest corners of it—a tract of hilly, thickly-wooded, sparsely-inhabited country—lies the small village of Craneham, and the beautiful old manor called Crane Court, the property of the Mortimers. About five miles off is Eastanley Castle, the Earl of Eastanley's place, and half way between the two lies Daltons, belonging to the Digbys. Very few other gentlemen's houses are to be found in the neighbourhood. Craneham lies at the extreme edge of East Elmshire, which is now empowered to return a member to represent it at St Stephen's.

It was a lovely evening in May, one of the very loveliest months in Elmshire, when every wood and

coppice was bursting into leaf, and even the old gnarled and twisted oak trees were blushing ruddy with new life, and every meadow and hedgerow was starred with numberless flowers, and the orchards were powdered with blossom. It was the very time to see Elmshire, and the very time, above all others, to see Crane Court, one of the oldest and most beautiful places in the whole county. Others were finer and larger—Eastanley Castle for one—but none more picturesque, or better situated.

The setting sun shone with full splendour on its red walls, covered here and there with dark ivy, and stained with time, on its stone mullion windows, and on its many-gabled roof. It stood on a gentle incline, raised a little above the village, which clustered close to it on one side. In front and on the other side stretched the glades of the well-timbered park, and behind it rose a crest of dark woods—not dark, though, this May evening, for the sun had turned their young foliage into a mass of emerald and gold, among which an occasional fir or yew tree looked black by contrast.

A carriage drive approached the house, with many a leisurely sweep and curve across the park from the turnpike road which just touched one end of the village, but close to it was the little grey parish church—so close that the churchyard seemed a part of the grounds—and a shady lane, overhung by tall elm trees, led from this to the village. The Mortimers had always lived on kindly terms with the villagers, their tenants, and did not mind this close proximity.

In front of the house ran a low, broad terrace, below which were the flower gardens, and long bowling-green, and shrubberies. The nucleus of the house must have

been built in the reign of Queen Elizabeth or her successor, but it had been added to by Mortimers of following generations who had been afflicted with a building mania, and who had wished to enlarge their abode, so that it could show many different styles of architecture. But for the last hundred years at least, it had not been touched.

That, indeed, was the chief peculiarity of the house and grounds; there was nothing that could be called modern about them.

Inside, it was just what one would imagine such a house ought to be. On going in you entered a small oak-wainscoted, low hall, from which a broad, shallow flight of oak steps led to a fine centre hall, or 'saloon,' as it was called, hung round with horns and skins and decorated with weapons, for the Mortimers had generally been sportsmen. The principal living-rooms are entered from this central hall, but there are unexpected little passages and staircases leading to oddly-shaped little rooms and dim nooks, all about Crane Court, and it takes a stranger a little time before he finds his way about the house and learns not to fall up or down the treacherous single steps that abound, usually in the darkest corners.

Crane Court had for centuries been the property of the Mortimers, one of the oldest, most honoured families int he county. There had been a title in the family once, which had died out, but at least every other owner of the place had married some Lady this or Honourable that, and when they had not married members of the aristocracy they had allied themselves to county families whose blood was as blue as their own.

Of course, in so long a chronicle, the Mortimer legends could show a black sheep here and there, but they had mostly been honest, God-fearing men. The younger sons had generally gone into either the Church or Army, with now and then a more adventurous spirit who had become a sailor. And the Mortimers of Crane Court had always been Tories. A Mortimer had not infrequently been the Tory representative of the county.

A Mortimer still owned Crane Court, and all the broad lands around it, but the bitter moment had come when he felt he must no longer live there. It was the old, common story, which, common though it be, has not lost its pathos. Geoffrey Mortimer was too poor any longer to inhabit the stately home of his forefathers. He had been a poor man when he found himself at one-and-twenty owner of the property, and since then the terrible time of agricultural depression had set in. His rents had diminished year by year, and finally, his largest farm had been thrown on his own hands, with no alternative but to farm it himself—probably at a loss—or to let it go out of cultivation.

So beautiful old Crane Court had been advertised, a desecration in itself, and tenants had been found for it, and the time had come when Geoffrey Mortimer, having set his house in order, and swept and garnished it, and nearly ruined himself in doing what his tenants demanded, was to leave it to strangers.

Not that he was going far away. He was only going to his untenanted farmhouse, where he meant to live and farm all the land that was in his own hands. This decision of his had amazed most of his friends and neighbours. But to such of them as had expressed their

astonishment to him, he had said that economy was his sole motive in leaving Crane Court, and that if he had had to put a good bailiff into Ten Acre Farm, besides providing a home elsewhere for himself and his son he would not attain this object as much as he desired. Moreover, he added, he thought it was a good thing for his son to grow up among his own people.

His son—there lay the cause of it all. Had Geoffrey Mortimer been a childless man, he would, in all probability, have chosen to struggle on somehow in the home of his forefathers while he lived. But he had a son, and this fact made any sacrifice possible.

On the beautiful May evening we have described the great front door of Crane Court stood wide open, as indeed it did most of the year round. Anyone could have entered it, and ascended the broad oak stairs, and passed from one room to another, all, as we have said, swept and garnished, some of them newly carpeted, and with their quaint, scanty, old-fashioned furniture stiffly disposed, all in readiness for the incoming tenants.

The house was not quite empty, though, for its master, Geoffrey Mortimer, was taking a last survey of it, to see that all was in order. And close at his heels trotted his little seven-year-old son, who followed his father chiefly from habit, not because he took much interest in the arrangements. Mr Mortimer had another follower too, a huge, handsome mastiff, who walked after his master with slow and stately steps, keeping close to him, though, because he knew there was something unusual in the air. He was still a fine, powerful beast, but his whitening muzzle showed he was at least a year senior to the little boy, with whom, however, he was not

above playing now and then in a majestic and condescending way.

Mortimer, having finished his inspection of the house, went out on to the terrace in front, and then, descending the stone steps, he crossed the lawn and flower garden, followed by the child and the dog. Here he paused, and turning, stood looking back long and steadily, with a face pale with pain, at his home, which showed so fair and stately and peaceful in the warm evening sunshine. The boy ran off, hat in hand, in pursuit of a belated butterfly, the great dog lay down lazily on the turf at his master's feet, but still Geoffrey Mortimer gazed sadly at the house which was to shelter him and his no longer.

At length he turned and began to walk away rapidly. The mastiff rose to his feet and followed close at his heel.

'Fidge, come!' called Mortimer to the little boy, who was still in vain pursuit of the butterfly; 'it is late, and we must hurry, or what will Margaret say to us?'

Fidge came running across the grass, and tucking a small hand into his father's, trotted along by his side.

'I couldn't catch him,' he said, still thinking of the butterfly. Then, almost in the same breath, 'Dad, sha'n't we come back here any more?'

'Not for years and years, Fidge. Not till you are grown up—three times as old as you are now.'

'Three sevens is—bother, I can't do arithmetic now, but it must be a great lot. Not till then—well, I call it *horrid!*' said Fidge, with emphasis.

Mr Mortimer made no reply. Perhaps his son had too clearly given voice to his own feelings for any to be possible.

CHAPTER II.

MR MORTIMER'S silence did not disconcert Fidge the least. All day long both his father and Margaret, his old nurse, had been far too busy to attend to him, or listen to his chatter, and he had had to possess his soul in silence, which he did not at all approve of.

Now he had his father all to himself, with, as he thought, no distracting elements, and he never stopped talking all the way. Mr Mortimer, however much preoccupied, had learnt by experience to pay enough attention to his chatter to put in the right word now and then at the right place, and Fidge was satisfied, and rippled on till Ten Acre Farm was reached.

It was not a long walk from Crane Court—only a little over a mile. First you crossed the park, then went a little way along the road, and then up a narrow, deeply-rutted country lane. A cart track across a field led from this lane to the farmhouse, a pretty, picturesque building, looking when you first saw it like a row of three cottages, until a nearer approach showed that it was all one house, low and thatched, with the dairy at one end. It was, as has been said,

pretty and picturesque, but nothing more than the merest farmhouse—indeed a farmhouse that an ordinary modern farmer would probably have objected to live in. The farmyard and cowhouses and stables and barns were all close by, and the farm pond, where the ducks and geese paddled about, and the animals were watered, was in full view of the windows. The house was partially covered with creepers, and overshadowed by some tall elm-trees. A narrow strip of garden divided it from the field, but behind and on one side there was a good large garden and an orchard.

The sun had disappeared behind the low surrounding hills, and Ten Acre Farm lay in deep shadow when Geoffrey Mortimer and his little son reached it that evening. They were met as they entered the house by a grey-haired woman, with an odd, harsh-featured, kindly face, neatly dressed in black, with a white apron.

'Your supper is all ready, Mr Mortimer,' she said; 'and I have put Master Fidge's with yours to-night.'

'Thanks, Margaret. I'm afraid we are rather late—I meant to have brought Fidge down earlier.'

'Oh there! it don't matter, sir. I've been so busy trying to get things a bit settled here, that I've hardly noticed how the time went. Everything's all at sixes and sevens, and I don't know however we shall get straight!'

'We've plenty of time to do that, Margaret,' Mortimer answered, with a feeling that he cared little just then whether things were straight or crooked.

In a few minutes he and Fidge were seated at their evening meal, with old Rollo, the mastiff, who still kept close to his master's side, not quite understanding his new quarters.

'Dad!' said Fidge, as he discussed his bread and butter and milk, 'what are the people called who are going to live in our house?'

'Delmar, Fidge. But for the next few years, remember, it is not *our* house, but theirs.'

'What was it Uncle Digby said Mr Delmar was? A mill—mill—what was it, Dad?'

'A millionaire, I suppose you mean. That is only a very rich man.'

'Richer than you, or Uncle Digby?'

Mortimer nearly laughed.

'Much richer than both of us put together, I should think, Fidge.'

'Margaret says they're horrid people, and that it's a great shame of them to turn us out of Crane Court.'

'Margaret does not know them, so she can't tell whether they are horrid or not. And they have not turned us out of Crane Court at all. I let them come and live there,' Mr Mortimer answered, with a touch of unwonted severity in his tone.

It was so seldom anything Margaret said or did was questioned that Fidge was amazed, and for one brief moment, silenced. He was soon off at score again but on a different topic.

Before long Fidge went to bed, and Mortimer, having finished his meal, threw himself into an arm-chair, and lighted his pipe. He took up the day's paper, at which he had hitherto had no time to look, but this evening its columns failed to rivet his attention. He glanced round the untidy room, where pictures and shelves lay about waiting to be put up, and boxes and desks to be unpacked, but he felt in no mood to busy

himself over them to-night. He allowed his paper to fall unheeded to the ground, and gave himself up to his thoughts.

Geoffrey Mortimer's history was a very simple one, and any one of his tenants or his neigbours could have related it. He had come into his property at twenty-one, his father having died some months previously. He inherited a very impoverished exchequer, for the days when the Mortimers kept the hounds, and entertained the county right royally, had long been over; but his income was not so hopelessly reduced then as it afterwards became. He had been brought up to the management of an estate, and luckily had no extravagant habits. People said he was the man to bring round his affairs if anyone could, and then with his old name and good looks, he ought to marry money.

But before people had begun to think seriously of his marrying at all, Geoffrey Mortimer had disappointed this last expectation of his friends. When barely three-and-twenty, he met the pretty, penniless niece of his neighbour, Mr Digby of Daltons, and then it was all up with him. In six months' time the bells of the little Craneham parish church were ringing joyously to welcome home the master of Crane Court and his young bride, and the tenants met them in a body at the park entrance, to draw them in state up to the house.

It was, in a worldly point of view, an extremely foolish marriage, but Mortimer never regretted it. He and his young wife were as happy as it is possible for two people to be, living in a corner of their beautiful old home, driving about with their one horse, and, though never entertaining in the ordinary sense of the word, always

glad to see their neighbours and friends in a quiet way Nellie loved the old house and place as much as Geoffrey did himself, and having never known what it was to have money, did not feel the want of it.

About a year after their marriage, the bells were again ringing noisily to celebrate the birth of a son and heir, and then the young couple seemed indeed to have reached the height of human happiness.

But before the little son was a year old, instead of a merry peal the mournful passing bell was sounding slowly from the little grey church, and Geoffrey Mortimer sat in his lonely home, listening to its knell with a breaking heart, a widower at five-and-twenty.

That had been more than six years before my story begins. Since then Mortimer had lived quietly at home, managing his estate, attending to county business, and seeing his money affairs, in spite of all his care and economy, going from bad to worse. For his own sake he might not have minded so much, but for his son's!

That small son, christened Geoffrey after himself, but nicknamed Fidge, was everything to him. He had kept the child always with him, under the care of Margaret, who had nursed not only him, but his mother, from their earliest babyhood. Father and son were all in all to each other, and little Fidge, not missing what he had never known, did not feel the want of a mother's love and care. 'Dad' was his companion, his playmate, his everything, in short. And if there were any needs Mortimer could not satisfy, there was good, faithful old Margaret, who could hardly have loved the boy better had he been her own son.

She was one of those old-fashioned servants, grow-

ing rarer day by day, who are rather friends than servants, so completely do they identify themselves with the family to which they belong. Margaret was ready to do anything for her master and his son—nothing was beneath her, or 'not her place,' in their service; but for their sakes, and with a good sound prejudice, she hated this move into the farmhouse, and the arrival of strangers at Crane Court. Geoffrey Mortimer had tried to reason with her once or twice on the subject, but she was impenetrable to reason, and he gave up in despair.

The day after that on which Mr Mortimer had quitted Crane Court, the Delmars' servants and carriages arrived there, and the following day the Delmars themselves came.

Great excitement prevailed in the small village of Craneham. The natives were so unaccustomed to see strangers. Crane Court had never been let before. About once in a generation a new parson arrived at the little Rectory, but even this event was not equal in importance to the appearance of a whole fresh family and establishment at the Court, where nobody but Mortimers had ever lived in the memory of man.

Fidge shared the village excitement and curiosity. He knew all his father's tenants, and had always gone familiarly about among them, to an extent a mother might not have allowed, but which had done him no perceptible harm. Perhaps the Mortimer blue blood ran too purely in his veins for him not intuitively to know, from earliest childhood, the difference between himself and them.

But he heard all this gossip about the new people up at the Court, and faithfully transmitted it to the 'Squire,' in a way they perhaps hardly anticipated; but Fidge always told his father everything. So, in spite of himself, Mortimer came to know exactly how many servants and how many horses the new occupiers of his ancestral home kept, what members of the family had arrived, and many other small items.

If all this information failed to interest Mr Mortimer, it was not so with Margaret, who listened to all Fidge imparted on the subject with eager interest, and bitter indignation.

'Twenty servants, indeed!' she exclaimed, with a toss of her head. 'What do they want with twenty servants when *we* never kept but five? And a whole lot of furniture and things—as if Crane Court was not furnished good enough for anyone!'

Obtaining his information in all sorts of mysterious ways, Fidge Mortimer was ere long able to announce that the family consisted of Mr and Mrs Delmar, and a grown-up son and daughter. Fidge was rather disappointed to find there were no children in the case. There was another married son, who lived in London, but about his existence Fidge was not so clear, occular demonstration being wanting.

CHAPTER III.

THE great beauty of living in the country, as everybody knows, is that you can do what you like, and go about by yourself. So one lovely, fine afternoon Miss Madeline Delmar started out for a long ride alone. Her usual companion, her brother Owen, had gone up to town, and she declined to take a groom, just to prove that she was in the heart of the country, and that the proprieties need not be observed. The horse she was riding was a perfectly quiet, gentle animal, that had carried her some time, so on the score of safety there was no objection to be made, though Mrs Delmar felt and expressed some horror at her daughter venturing out in so solitary a manner.

Madeline Delmar was passionately fond of the country, but hitherto her experience of it had been limited to a few months in every year. It was only recently her father had given up his business in town sufficiently to his eldest son Vernon to enable him to live away from London altogether.

Madeline fell in love with Crane Court at first sight. It more than fulfilled her ideal of what a country house ought to be. She delighted in wander-

ing about it, and looking at the old carved oak, the portraits of dead and gone Mortimers, and the trophies of both war and chase which abounded. And then she loved rambling about the quaint, old-fashioned gardens and grounds, and peopling them in fancy with stately squires and dames of old. And she wondered how the owner of such a place,—the descendant of all those innumerable Mortimers whose portraits hung on the walls of the house, and whose names were recorded on endless monuments and tablets in the church, could have brought himself to leave it. She indulged, too, in a few idle speculations what this owner could be like,—what sort of a man he was, who came of such a fine old family, and whether he resembled any of his ancestors, with whose portraits she was growing familiar.

She thoroughly enjoyed her lonely ride that June afternoon. She had never been in the country—regularly in the country—at that time of year before, and she was entranced with the beauty of it, and the rich luxuriance of blossom and foliage all round her.

But when she tried to return home, she found herself lost in a maze of deep, narrow lanes, overshadowed by high hedgerows. She rode on and on, feeling sure she could not be far from Crane Court, but never seeming to get any nearer to it. At last she made up her mind she must humble her pride, and ask her way. But in Elmshire it is quite one thing to make up your mind to ask your way, and another to find anyone to ask it of, and accordingly Miss Delmar rode at least a mile after coming to this determination, without meeting a soul, except one very small boy,

apparently on his way home from school, though Madeline wondered greatly where either his home or the school could be. Him she accosted, but with no result. The small boy only stared helplessly, but made no attempt to answer her inquiry, so she went on, mentally setting him down as an idiot, in which she did him injustice. It is not the nature of an Elmshire native to answer in a hurry any question put to him; besides, the small boy really did not quite understand her accent, which was not the Elmshire one.

At last Miss Delmar descried a man, towards whom she at once made her way. She was a little appalled to see, as she approached him, that he was a gentleman —a neighbouring squire, she at once settled. But experience had taught her she must not be too particular, or she might never find her way home again.

'Would you be kind enough to tell me the way to Crane Court?' she asked accordingly, reining up when she reached him.

'You are going right, but it is some way round by the lane,' the stranger replied. 'There is a very much shorter way across the fields. You go through here, and then— Can you open gates?'

'Oh, yes, I suppose so,' Madeline answered. But secretly she felt extremely doubtful as to her prowess in this respect, never having had any practice in the art.

Perhaps the stranger guessed this, for he said,—

'I am going in that direction, and, if you like, I can put you in the way?'

'Oh! thanks very much, if it really does not inconvenience you,' she replied, feeling rather relieved that

she was not going to be left to wrestle with unknown difficulties in the gate line, or to get lost again.

He swung open the gate close to which he had been standing for her to pass through, and then walked along by her side, keeping pace to her horse with easy, even strides over the rough ground.

'Is it far?' she asked.

'No, not this way. I suppose you find this country rather confusing, Miss Delmar?'

'Oh! you know who I am!' she exclaimed, surprised, for she came from London, where everybody certainly does not know everybody else by sight, and she was not aware she had ever seen this man before.

He smiled a little, and a smile wonderfully lighted up his rather grave face.

'You see, we so seldom see strangers in these parts,' he said, 'that when they do come we natives are all curiosity, and soon know all about them. Besides, I have seen you in church.'

'Then you are a native?'

'Yes, I am one of the aborigines.'

'And are strangers so rare? Has Crane Court never been let before?'

'No, never!'

'It is a lovely old place. I never saw one I liked so much, and I am so glad papa has taken it,' said Miss Delmar; but her companion made no reply, and they went on a little way in silence.

Presently they crossed a sort of footpath. He paused.

'This is my way,' he said. 'You must go straight on, across those two fields, and then you will find yourself in—your own park.'

'Oh, thank you, I am—'

'But, now I come to think of it, there are two rather heavy gates. I think I had better come and open them for you.'

'No, indeed! You must not think of it! I am sure I shall be able to manage them.'

'But I am sure you will not. Having brought you so far, I had better see you to the end of your journey.'

'It is extremely kind of you.'

'Not at all, it is no distance.' And he proceeded to lead the way.

Madeline was beginning to wonder who he was. He seemed to know every inch of the country, and as they were standing in the footpath, a couple of farm-labourers came along it, touching their hats to him, and he wished them a cheery good evening by name.

Rather for something to say, for he did not speak, she pointed with her whip down the valley, and remarked,—

'What a pretty place that is!'

'I am glad you admire it,' he answered, smiling again, 'for that is where I live.'

Madeline was utterly amazed. It was picturesque and pretty enough the thatched building she was looking at, but she could see it was nothing but a small farmhouse—at first she had thought it was only a cottage. And her companion was not at all the sort of man she would have expected to live in either. Not only was he most indisputably a gentleman, but there was an indefinable something about his manner—a somewhat stately (Madeline could think of no other word for it) air, which

was natural to him, and which had seemed to infer he was a man of high social position.

She looked at him again as he walked by her side, with fresh interest. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, well-made man, with light brown hair, a fair, sunburnt complexion, and honest grey eyes. If his features were not strictly handsome in a classical sense, his face was a good-looking and a pleasant one. He wore a sunburnt straw hat, a brown tweed shooting suit, rather the worse for wear, worsted stockings, and strong nailed boots, and he walked, as has been said, with the easy grace of a strong man accustomed to pedestrianism.

Miss Delmar was filled with a burning curiosity to know who he could be.

'I am really ashamed of taking you so far out of your way,' she said.

'Don't mention it—it is nothing. But I could not have your coming to grief over a gate on my shoulders. Do you hunt, Miss Delmar?'

'I haven't often hunted, but I shall hope to do so regularly now.'

'The hunting is fairly good about here, and nearly everybody goes out.'

They had reached another gate, which he held open for her to pass through.

'Now you are in Crane Court park, and the house lies over there,' he said, indicating the direction with his stick.

'Oh, thank you—now I feel quite at home. It is most kind of you to have come to my rescue,' said Madeline. Then, feeling she must find out who he was, or die, she added, 'Will you not let me know *who* I have to thank for so much kindness?'

'Who I am? Yes, certainly. I am Geoffrey Mortimer, at your service.' And taking off his hat to her, he let the gate swing too, and was gone before she had time to recover from her surprise.

She cantered rapidly home across the park, her mind full of what had just taken place. She had never guessed her companion had been none other than the owner of Crane Court, the man she had speculated so much about. She had not known Mr Mortimer was still in the neighbourhood—least of all living in a small farmhouse. She mentally reviewed her conversation with him, and recalled one or two things she certainly would have left unsaid had she known who he was. Altogether she felt rather annoyed with herself.

At the front door she met her second brother, Owen, who had just returned from London.

'Oh, Owen,' she said, as she kissed him, 'I've had an adventure!'

'You don't say so, Maidie. Well done you. Tell us about it!'

And she recounted her afternoon's proceedings.

'I felt I must find out who he was, Owen,' she finished, 'so in my sweetest way I asked if I might know who to thank, etc., and who do you think he was?—"Geoffrey Mortimer, at your service"!'

'Mortimer—the rightful owner?'

'Yes, the man all this belongs to. And I had asked him if the place had ever been let before, and gaily remarked I felt quite at home when I found myself inside the park—*his* park.'

'What sort of a fellow was he, Maidie?'

'Rather what you might imagine the hereditary

owner of this place, and the descendant of all those ancestors, would be. Tall and good-looking, and rather alarming, I think, with a *grand* air. That doesn't exactly describe him, but—'

'But he wasn't like a soap-boiler, eh?' finished Owen, as she hesitated. Madeline laughed. The Delmar money had been made in soap, people said. The brother and sister were going across the saloon, and she paused, and looked up at the portraits on the panelled walls.

'I often feel as if all those old people were looking down with contemptuous disgust to see us here instead of Mortimers,' she said.

'More likely they are looking down with anxiety to see what becomes of the h's our mother leaves about.'

'I don't think many are lost, for they get put in somewhere,' Madeline answered, with a gleam of fun. Then, more gravely,—'Don't let us be wicked, Owen. After all, if we have been better educated than they were, it's not our own merit. Though I must confess father and mother do seem rather inconsistent with this place.'

'Apparently old places, like other good things, are only to be had by those who can pay for them. Evidently this man, with all his blue blood, is as poor as a rat. The days of "county families" and squiredom are played out. I think, on the whole, I would sooner be Delmar than Mortimer.'

'You wretched Radical! I wonder why he lives so close in that little farmhouse. Has he a wife, Owen?'

'I have not the remotest idea. Consult mother's con-

stant companion, Walford. Here you are—"Geoffrey Mortimer—my stars, what a pedigree, married in 18— Ellen Mary Digby, who died 18—, leaving issue one son, Geoffrey Digby Mortimer"!'

'Then he is a widower, and his wife only lived two years?'

'Quite romantic, eh? Come, give us a cup of tea, Maidie. I suppose the parents are out driving? Yes, I think on the whole I would rather be Delmar than Mortimer—rising than falling.'

'I wonder if he is so very poor,' Madeline said thoughtfully. 'I don't think I should so much mind being poor.'

Owen laughed as he answered,—

'You have not the faintest idea what it means, my dear.'

CHAPTER IV.

IF the occupation of Crane Court by the Delmars was the cause of some excitement among the villagers, it was scarcely less so to the neighbouring squires and parsons. Nobody knew anything at all about the newcomers except that they were very rich, which was by no means a recommendation in the eyes of Elmshire society. People said they were soap-boilers, which was not encouraging either.

Were they to be called upon? That was the burning question that agitated people's minds. It seemed strange not to know the inhabitants of Crane Court, but then again it seemed stranger still that anyone should be there whose name was not Mortimer. It was such a beautiful place, that if rich and nice people were living there, it might be a pity not to know them. But then a millionaire soap-boiler might be—well, there was no saying what he might not be. No one was willing to take the initiative.

The question was being discussed one afternoon at Daltons, the place belonging to Mr Digby, who was Mortimer's uncle by marriage. The Digby family was an old one too—not quite so old as the Mortimer—but

there had been Digbys in Elmshire for a very long time. Daltons was a solid, square, comfortable-looking house, surrounded by fine trees and thick shrubberies.

Five o'clock tea was going on under the tulip tree on the lawn. The party gathered round the basket-table consisted of Mr Digby himself, an active, spare man of about fifty-five, with hair and beard which had once been red, but were now fast turning grey; his wife, a pretty, fragile little woman, who did not look old enough to be the mother of a grown-up daughter and half-a-dozen other children; Gertrude, the aforesaid grown-up daughter, who was pouring out the tea; and Ted Calverley, Lord Eastanley's third son, who had come to Daltons for a game of tennis.

He was living just then in solitary state at Eastanley Castle, not from choice, but because his father had made his dwelling there quietly an indispensable condition before he would extricate him from one of the many scrapes into which Ted had a knack of falling. Eastanley Castle was well out of the way of race meetings, and there was no one in the neighbourhood to gamble with. It may be concluded that Ted found it insufferably dull. But his affairs had reached such a pitch that he was obliged to submit to his father's conditions.

He was a handsome young fellow, with graceful, lazy manners, a quiet voice, and a pair of fine, dark eyes, which he seldom displayed by lifting his eyelids very far. He was dressed in white flannels, tennis shoes, and a straw hat, and lay back in his garden-chair, a graceful, handsome, indolent figure.

'No, I don't know anything of them,' he said, in

reply to an inquiry of Mrs Digby's. 'There was a fellow called Delmar at Magdalen, when I was up at Oxford, but I knew nothing of him.'

Ted Calverley's career at the University had terminated rather abruptly, it may be mentioned.

'That's nothing—everybody goes to Oxford now,' said Mrs Digby.

'If they can afford it, and, of course, these people are tremendously rich,' remarked Gertrude.

'Yes, what were they? Drysalters, button-makers—no soap-boilers, isn't it?' asked Ted ungrammatically.

'Isn't it horrible? Fancy Crane Court let to people like that!' exclaimed Gertrude. 'Oh, mamma! don't let us call upon them.'

'My dear, I don't know what Geoffrey Mortimer would wish.'

'It's a beastly bore for him having to turn out of Crane Court, and live in that pokey way close by,' observed Calverley.

'I don't believe Geoffrey really minds, or he would not let the place to such horrid people and do it,' said Gertrude impetuously.

She was a small, slight girl, with rather a pretty figure, and neat little head, almost weighed down by a mass of hair she had never heard called anything but red. But she had the exquisite, shell-like colouring that sometimes goes with such hair. And when she laughed, she had a fascinating little dimple in her chin, and showed two rows of pearly white teeth. She was, like Ted Calverley, dressed in white flannel, a straw sailor hat, and tennis shoes.

'Well, here comes Geoffrey himself,' said Mr Digby;

'so you can ask him about the Delmars, and whether he wants you to call on them.'

Mr Mortimer was to be seen coming up the drive, with Fidge, mounted on a shaggy little pony, the only quadruped now in the Mortimer stables, by his side The pony was soon sent round to the stables, and Fidge, rather to his disgust, though he was accustomed to it at Daltons, despatched to the schoolroom to have tea with his younger cousins.

'We were just discussing your tenants, Geoffrey,' said Mrs Digby, as Mortimer settled himself on a garden chair, and Gertrude handed him a cup of tea. 'Have you seen much of them?'

'Nothing. I only know Mr Delmar, and I have met the daughter.'

'What is Mr Delmar like?' asked Gertrude.

'Oh! a stoutish, iron-grey man, with—'

'No, no, of course I don't want a description of his personal appearance; I mean, what sort of a man is he—is he very awful?'

'I don't exactly know what you mean by *awful*,' said Mortimer. 'He did not alarm me much.' Privately, he not only knew perfectly what Gertrude had meant, but he had a conviction that Mr Delmar was what she would have called awful. But he was not going to tell her so. It was not his nature to say anything against anyone; moreover, from the moment Crane Court was let, he had determined to make the best of his tenants, and to let no personal feelings prejudice him against them.

'I've heard Miss Delmar is pretty,' observed Calverley, in his soft, lazy voice.

'Pretty—yes, I suppose she is pretty,' Mr Mortimer replied, in the tone of a man who had not taken the matter into consideration before.

'If Helen of Troy were alive and Geoffrey talked to her for half an hour he would remark at the end, if anyone suggested it to him, that he supposed she was pretty,' said Gertrude Digby scornfully.

Mortimer laughed, and denied the charge, but all the same there was a great deal of truth in it. Were a woman on one side of him, and a field of turnips on the other, Geoffrey Mortimer would probably have looked critically at the turnips before he even found out whether the woman was pretty or plain.

'The question is, Geoffrey, do you want your aunt to call on these Delmars or not?' asked Mr Digby.

Somehow they all seemed to think Mortimer must have a personal interest in the matter.

'It would be very kind of you,' he answered, turning to Mrs Digby. 'No doubt they will be glad to know people.'

'I suppose we must call,' said Gertrude, 'but I know I shall hate them. Vulgar, rich people!'

'Riches and vulgarity aren't quite synonymous, Gertie,' observed her cousin quietly.

'Aren't they?' she replied. 'It seems to me it is only vulgar people who are rich nowadays. The nice ones are always poor!'

'Many thanks for the compliment. After that *I* can say no more,' answered Mortimer, as he moved off to help Ted Calverley with the tennis-net.

'I shall go over and leave my pasteboard on these Delmars of yours,' said that gentleman to him. 'If the

girl is pretty and rich, she may be worth looking up.'

'Why, are you thinking of matrimony, Ted?'

'I hope I'm not quite so bad as that yet. But there's nothing my mother and the governor would like better than to see me marry and settle down, so I may be reduced to it. And Miss Delmar might suit.'

'I don't imagine Lady Eastanley would care for her.'

'Is she an awful bounder? Money is all that matters nowadays.'

'She has two brothers, one of them married, with a family,' said Mortimer, 'so she can't be much of an heiress.'

'Well, I'll leave my pasteboard on the soap-boiler, anyhow.'

These two men, Geoffrey Mortimer and Ted Calverley, with hardly a taste in common, with widely different characters, and leading totally dissimilar lives, were yet decidedly friends when they met. Perhaps this very difference of character was as much the cause of their friendship as the fact that they had known each other from boyhood, and been at the same school. A man does not always want his friend to be the replica of himself. Calverley, though not much addicted to the practice of virtue himself, could yet admire it in other people, and always spoke of Mortimer as 'such a good old fellow.'

This friendship was in every way encouraged by the Eastanleys, with whom the owner of Crane Court had always been a favourite, and who devoutly wished all Ted's friends had been of the same stamp.

This conversation about his tenants had reminded Mortimer that it was quite time he himself called on them formally. So Mrs Delmar, returning home with her daughter late in the afternoon from a drive, was delighted to find quite a collection of cards awaiting her on the carved oak table in the outer hall. She carried them all to the drawing-room, where tea was ready, and Owen sat deep in the papers.

Mrs Delmar was a comely, plump dame, who carried her fifty-six years lightly, for hardly a streak of grey yet showed in her dark hair, or a wrinkle on her fresh-coloured face. She was dressed somewhat richly for an afternoon in the country, and her silk gown rustled as she sat down in an armchair, and began to study the cards.

'"Mr and Mrs Townley, Craneham Rectory." Oh! they're only the parson and his wife. "Mr Mortimer," he's called, has he? "Mr Digby, Mrs and Miss Digby, Daltons;" now I wonder who they are! How puzzling it is to come into a new neighbourhood, and not have the least idea who anyone is.'

'Daltons is that pretty place nearly hidden in trees we passed the other day, mother.'

But Mrs Delmar was not attending. Her eyes were riveted on yet another card she held in her hand, and there was a perceptible note of elation in her voice as she read out the name printed on it.

'"The *H*onourable Edward J. Calverley, Eastanley Castle"—that's written in pencil. He must be a son of the Earl of Eastanley. Now I wonder which son'—and Mrs Delmar rose to consult—not Walford this time, but the more magnificent Burke, unobserv-

ant of a look of amusement that passed between her son and daughter.

'"The *H*onourable Edward Jervis—the third and youngest son,"' she read out before long—Mrs Delmar aspirated the H in Honourable. 'Quite a young man. We must ask him here for some tennis.'

During tea Mrs Delmar talked a good deal about the Honourable Edward, and the magnificence of the Eastanleys. Then she went away to take off her bonnet, and Owen and his sister indulged in a good laugh—not of mockery, be it understood, but of pure amusement.

'We are getting into high life,' said Owen, 'now that a *H*onourable has called upon us. Poor dear old mother, how pleased she is!'

'She feels that we shall be in the Peerage next.'

'She means us to be. Mark my words, Maidie. you are intended to be the *H*onourable Mrs Edward Jervis Calverley.'

'Oh, Owen, what nonsense!'

Miss Delmar picked up the cards her mother had left about, in order to put them into the card tray. One attracted her attention, and she stood looking at it a moment. 'Mr Mortimer, Crane Court,' was printed on it, but 'Crane Court' had been scored through, and 'Ten Acre Farm' written above it.

'What! gloating over the *H*onourable pasteboard, Maidie?' laughed her brother. 'Come, that's a hopeful sign.'

Miss Delmar put all the cards in the tray, with on further reply than a laugh.

CHAPTER V.

THE weather next morning was so exquisite that Miss Delmar found it quite impossible to remain indoors. So she armed herself with a book and a parasol, and made her way to a part of the park she had discovered in one of her rambles, and noted as a delightful spot in which to spend a morning.

It was some little way from the house, and it was hot; but Miss Delmar strolled along leisurely, thoroughly enjoying the glorious beauty of the midsummer morning, until she reached the place she had fixed upon. It was a little, steep, tree-embowered dell, along the bottom of which ran a tiny stream, fringed by ferns and periwinkles.

But on the edge of the dell Madeline paused. It was not, as she had fully expected to find it, untenanted. She was not first in the field. Standing just where a broad patch of sunshine filtered down between the trees, was a little boy, clad in a grey tweed suit, with a straw sailor hat on the back of his head—a little boy with whom Miss Delmar fell

in love at first sight, for he had such a quaint, pretty, refined face, such sunny, golden curls, and such long, dark eyelashes. His eyes she could not see, for he was intent on trying to float a toy-boat on the stream —so intent that he did not notice her approach, and she able to watch him a few moments unobserved.

The miniature boat stuck fast in some weeds, just where the child, do what he would, could not reach it, and Madeline descended the bank.

'Your boat is caught by that weed,' she said. 'Perhaps I could reach it with my parasol.'

The little boy looked up at her, with hardly any surprise, suddenly as she had appeared, and absolutely no alarm, and she saw he had the loveliest golden brown eyes, with large pupils, and blue whites.

'Could you?' he said. 'I wish you would try. I can't reach it anyhow.'

'Well, you must hold my hand tight, and not let me fall in.'

He took her hand in both his little sunburnt ones.

'Don't be afraid, I won't let you fall,' he said consolingly. 'You wouldn't be drownded if you did, though—it's not deep enough.'

'No, but I should get very wet.'

'Wouldn't you like that? I like getting wet, but Margaret always scolds me when I do.'

Madeline succeeded in reaching the boat with the handle of her parasol, and handing it to her small companion. As she did so, she saw it was evidently made at home, though neat and strong.

'Where did you get your boat?' she asked.

'Dad made it for me.'

'I wish we had another, and then we might float them together, and have a race.'

'That would be jolly!' cried the child, his eyes lighting up. 'Are you fond of boats too?'

'Yes, very, when I have someone to play with. Now I tell you what we will do. First you shall start the boat here, and see how far it will go down the stream, and we'll put a mark, and then we will bring it back, and I will start it from the same place, and see how far it will go. If it goes furthest your time, you will win—if mine, I shall!'

'Yes, yes; do let's try!' he cried, with a skip of delight. 'Sometimes it goes quite under, and gets wrecked where that waterfall is. If it does that now it's my time, I shall have lost, sha'n't I?'

'Do you float your boat here often?'

'Oh yes! always. Now then, I'm going to start!'

And for a few moments the excitement was too intense for conversation. Madeline Delmar felt herself growing more fascinated every minute by this friendly, lonely little boy, who seemed to have dropped from the skies. Much to his delight, his boat weathered the dangers of the waterfall, but hers succumbed to them, so that he was indisputably the winner.

'Have you no brothers or sisters to play with?' she asked, as he was preparing for a fresh launch.

'No, there's only me. But I can play by myself, you know; and then I've got Rollo, and Shaggy, and Dad always plays with me when he isn't too busy.'

'So you don't want anyone else?'

'No, *I* don't, but Margaret says Dad would not spoil

me so much if I had a brother or a sister. Oh, there's the boat stuck again! please, please get it out.'

But just as Madeline was fishing for the boat, with the boy holding her hand, quick steps were heard approaching, and a man's voice said,—'Oh! Fidge, there you are! I have been looking for you everywhere,' and Mr Mortimer came up to the pair, just as Madeline had rescued the dripping boat. Taking off his hat to her, he said,—

'I am afraid you must think me a shocking trespasser, but I am in pursuit of my little boy.'

'Ah! so he is your little boy.' She had already guessed as much.

'Yes, but he has no business here. Fidge, don't you know I told you you were not to come into this park at all?'

Mr Mortimer's voice had so stern a sound to Madeline, that she murmured pleadingly,—

'Oh, please don't scold him!'

But Fidge faced his father bravely, and though his sunny little face had grown serious, he answered without any apparent alarm,—

'Yes, Dad, I remember now. But I quite forgotted, really I did, until I saw you.'

'Well, Fidge, if you really forgot, I must say no more. But you must try to remember another time.'

'Were you alarmed about him, Mr Mortimer?' Miss Delmar asked.

'Oh, no! Fidge always manages to take care of himself. I was not alarmed when I missed him, but I felt a presentiment he would be here. It is so difficult to make children understand,' he added, with a sort of stately apology.

'Why shouldn't he be here?'

She was going on to say more, but he answered quickly,—

'Because the park is yours, not his. Come, Fidge, say good-bye to Miss Delmar, we must be going!'

'Won't you let—*what* is his name, Mr Mortimer?'

Smiling a little for the first time, he answered,—

'He was christened Geoffrey, but he has never been called anything but Fidge. If you knew him a little better, you would know why.'

'Mayn't he come here again? Fidge, you must come another day, and we'll have some more races. I shall look out for you to-morrow morning.'

'Oh, how jolly!' exclaimed Fidge, who had kept silence an unusual length of time. 'Dad, I may come, mayn't I?'

'Yes, if Miss Delmar asks you. It is very kind of her.'

But Madeline knew the consent was unwillingly given. She knew the man hated that it should be by the invitation of a stranger his boy should play in that park.

'He is a little darling!' she thought to herself, as she watched the two walk away, Fidge with his hand in his father's, his face upturned, chattering hard. 'He is a little darling, and I hope I shall see more of him; but I wish he had a less alarming father. Mr Mortimer seems a very unapproachable man.'

She settled herself comfortably among the ferns, free to open her book at last, but she was in no hurry to do so. Her thoughts were full of the fascinating small acquaintance she had made that morning, for Madeline had fallen in love at first sight with

Fidge Mortimer. She liked to recall to her mind's eye the picture she had seen when she first approached the dell—the lonely little figure in the patch of golden sunlight. Even when she began to read her book—a novel, but a German one—the quaint little figure would come between her and the printed page.

Madeline Delmar was a well-read, accomplished girl. Her parents, conscious of their own short-comings, had given their children the best education that could be had for money. One of the results of this they had never anticipated, and now never discovered. But, all the same, it came to pass. This was, that this high education made the children painfully alive to the difference between themselves and their father and mother. It was inevitable—the children fought against it, and concealed it, but it was, all the same.

Madeline was naturally of a quiet, gentle disposition, intensely affectionate, and always happier in her home-surroundings than in other circumstances. She had been brought up to society, and had gone through two London seasons, but she cared nothing for all these things.

And the perception of her parents' little failings rather tended to strengthen these characteristics. She could not but notice that her father thought a good deal of the money he had made, and was fond of displaying his wealth, and this made her dislike money, and shrink from ostentation. She saw her mother's great desire to get into good society, and her love of finery, and so, instinctively, the girl cared little for the world, and still less for dress.

Her good education had supplemented a finely-

balanced mind, and an amount of natural tact unusual even to a woman. These qualities made everyone who knew Madeline well love her equally, but were otherwise sometimes rather inconvenient possessions. Nearly all her love, hitherto, had been given to three persons, her father, her mother, and her brother Owen. Her eldest brother, Vernon, had married some time previously, and had drifted a little out of the family circle.

Meantime, Fidge and his father made their way to the hayfield, from which the child had previously wandered away. The scented hay was being rapidly carried, and he had become tired of watching his father superintend this operation. Now they found Shaggy, the pony, tied up in the shade where he had been left, with old Rollo keeping guard over him.

Mortimer untied him, and lifting Fidge into the saddle, prepared to start homewards. Whereupon the pony, weary of waiting, with nothing to do so long, started off at a canter. Fidge, sitting square and firm, tugged in vain at the rein. Shaggy, who had not the ghost of a mouth, only shook his head derisively, and wagged his bushy tail. Mortimer, with Rollo, followed at a slower pace, laughing at the absurd appearance of the boy and the pony scampering across the field. Finding it rather hot work, Shaggy stopped abruptly, and stood quite still till Mr Mortimer caught him up. Then he walked along by his side as quietly and nearly as closely as the dog.

'Why did you go off at that pace, Fidge?' asked his father.

'I couldn't stop him. I don't know what he went

for,' Fidge panted, heated, but not the least alarmed. He and Shaggy knew each other well. It was some time since his father had bought the pony for him, and taught him to ride, so that the child might be his companion in his walks over the farm. A mother might perhaps have been nervous at the way Fidge and the pony were trusted together—indeed, Margaret did not like it at all—but it was the very best training for riding he could have had.

'Dad!' Fidge exclaimed, when he had cooled down a little, and recovered his breath, 'did you say that was Miss Delmar?'

'Yes, Fidge.'

'Well then, Margaret was quite wrong. She isn't horrid at all, but very nice. Don't you think she's awfully nice, Dad?'

'She was very kind to you, Fidge.'

'We played boats together. She said she liked playing boats very much, but she hadn't got one. Don't you think you might make her a boat like mine, Dad?'

'I think, Fidge, that if Miss Delmar wanted a boat, she could easily get one,' Mr Mortimer replied, smiling a little in spite of himself at the absurdity of the child's suggestion. 'And remember, old chap, though you may go to-morrow because Miss Delmar asked you, you are never to go into the park unless you are asked. When we lived at Crane Court we didn't allow strangers in the park, nor would the Delmars like it either.' This was not the first time he had tried to impress this upon Fidge, but that morning's experience had proved that his cautions had not had much effect.

'All right, Dad, I won't go again unless I'm asked.

I didn't mean to to-day, but I got tired of waiting in the hayfield, and I had my boat in my pocket, and there was nowhere to swim it, and I thought how jolly it would be in the dell. She was awfully nice. I say, I'm so hungry. Do you think it's nearly dinner time?'

CHAPTER VI.

MRS DELMAR was destined to make acquaintance with the Honourable Ted Calverley even earlier than she had anticipated in her most sanguine moments. It happened in this wise.

A few days after Mortimer had left his card at Crane Court, Mr Delmar announced his intention of walking down to the farm to return the call.

'There are one or things in connection with the coverts I want to ask Mortimer about,' he said. 'Of course, he isn't the least bound to answer, but I hope he will. I hope he is a pleasant fellow.'

Of this Madeline had her doubts. She did not feel at all sure Mr Mortimer was what her father would call a pleasant fellow. At any rate, he was very unlike the other men she had heard so described by Mr Delmar.

The rich tenant of Crane Court was rather a fine man of about sixty, with a healthy-looking, florid face, and iron-grey hair and whiskers. He was somewhat stout, but carried himself well, and showed no signs of old age. His face habitually wore an easy, good-

natured expression, curiously mixed, however, with one of shrewdness, that caused even casual acquaintances to pronounce that Mr Delmar was no fool.

But there was something—just a little indescribable something—about his dress and appearance that fine afternoon as he crossed the park on his way to Ten Acre Farm, that would have prevented you from mistaking him for the hereditary owner of Crane Court and its broad acres. A slight flavour of the City, a suggestion of trade, clung too closely to him ever to be shaken off.

He found Mortimer at home, and Madeline might have been spared her anxiety, for the interview passed off very well. Mortimer was determined to be agreeable to his tenant, and Mr Delmar having less fine perceptions than his daughter, perceived the friendliness, but not the effort that it cost. He failed to discern the shade of hauteur in Geoffrey's manner that Madeline had discovered. All the information he needed on the subject of the coverts was readily given, though the Squire was perhaps a little amazed at the millionaire's ignorance of matters he had learned with his alphabet. He may however have reflected that had he been confronted with some of the mysteries of trade with which his visitor was no doubt thoroughly conversant, he would have displayed equal ignorance.

While Mr Delmar was at Ten Acre Farm, Ted Calverley happened to drop in to see Mortimer. On being introduced, he at once expressed his regret that he had not found anyone at home when he had called at Crane Court. Mindful of his wife's aspirations, and not unwilling himself to extend his acquaintance with

this son of the great Tory Earl, Mr Delmar suggested that Calverley should accompany him back to Crane Court, where Mrs Delmar and Madeline would be sure to be at home, and would give him tea.

Ted accepted this invitation, which was extended to Mortimer, who however declined.

It was a very hot afternoon, and at Crane Court tea was laid out under the trees on the lawn. Madeline had lived enough in London thoroughly to enjoy an *al fresco* tea. She was talking so busily to her mother that Calverley had time for a good look at her as he and Mr Delmar advanced noiselessly over the soft turf, before either of the ladies noticed their approach, and he made the most of his opportunity.

Miss Delmar was a very pretty girl, but her beauty was not of that order which attracts much attention at first sight. Pretty no one could fail to think her, but it was necessary to know her to find out how really pretty she was. Her brown hair—brown, with warm lights in it—grew rather low on her forehead, from which it was drawn loosely but plainly back. Her complexion was usually a creamy white, unless some transient emotion called a delicate colour to her cheek; and she had beautiful eyes, in colour a deep blue grey, shaded by long dark eyelashes. She was rather tall, with a slender, graceful figure. The habitual expression of her face was a serious but far from unhappy one.

She wore, this particular summer afternoon, a very simple straw hat and cotton gown. Both were perfectly fresh, but either of them might have been worn by anyone, and could have cost very little. There was nothing the least suggestive of money about her appearance and

essentially quiet style. But then Mrs Delmar always lamented that Madeline would not pay enough attention to dress, and indeed the ordinary feminine love for pretty clothes seemed to have been left out of her composition. Had she been a poor man's daughter, it would have been a blessing, but as it was, it was rather a pity for the milliners and dressmakers, whose hearts she might have made happy. Miss Delmar seemed to care very little what her gowns were like, so long as they were quiet, and neat, and clean.

Ted Calverley had time to admit to himself that she was not the least like what he had expected her to be, before their approach was noticed, and Mr Delmar said, somewhat pompously,—'Mr Calverley, let me introduce you to Mrs Delmar, and my daughter. Maria, my dear, this is the Honourable Mr Calverley.'

Mrs Delmar rose from her seat with even more rustle than usual, and a delighted expression on her comely face.

'It was awfully bad luck my not finding you at home when I was here the other day,' said Ted, as he shook hands with her, and returned Madeline's bow. She was quite aware her manner was cold, but for the very life of her she could not help it, seeing her mother's alacrity.

'We were very sorry, Mr Calverley,' replied Mrs Delmar truthfully. 'Won't you sit down and have some tea?'

'Thanks, delighted. Awfully hot, isn't it, Mrs Delmar?'

'It is very warm. You must have found it most oppressive walking all up the 'ill.' Mrs Delmar only

left out her aspirates occasionally. More often she put them in laboriously, the result of the effort being that they sometimes made their appearance at the wrong places.

Calverley sat down in the basket-chair near Mrs Delmar, and talked carelessly on, addressing most of his remarks to her. Without being either particularly clever or brilliant or witty, he was an amusing talker in his way, and had an easy, graceful way of putting things that perfectly enchanted the soap-boiler's wife. Presently Owen Delmar came out, and it turned out that he and Calverley had been at Oxford at much the same time, though they had been at different Colleges, and belonged to different sets. Still, they had a few mutual acquaintances to talk over, and it was some time before Ted took his departure, amid pressing invitations from Mrs Delmar to come again.

Madeline was the one of the party he had spoken to least. Perhaps he had had no opportunity, or perhaps he had noticed her slight coldness on his arrival, and had not deemed the present moment a suitable one to devote to the task of dispelling it. Only once or twice had he addressed a remark to her, just to find out what her voice was like, and whether she copied her mother's weakness on the subject of h's. If she had, it may be doubted whether the wealth of a Rothschild could have induced even easy-going, lax Ted Calverley to think of her for one moment in the light of a possible wife.

Riding slowly homeward, he encountered Geoffrey Mortimer and Fidge.

'Yes,' he said, reining up for a moment by their side, 'you were quite right, she is very pretty!'

'She! who?' asked Mortimer vaguely.

'Who? why Miss Soap-boiler, of course. Did you think I meant that white-faced cow you are contemplating? I believe you did. She is certainly very pretty, and I think, if it comes to that, I might do worse!'

Mortimer laughed.

'But you devoutly hope it mayn't come to that. Is that it, old fellow?'

'That's about the ticket. But, upon my word, Geoff, I am getting so sick of this, that I believe even matrimony would be a blessed relief. I wonder if the Prodigal Son had to marry and live in the country, as the price he paid for the fatted calf, and all the rest of it!'

'It doesn't say so in the Bible, I don't think,' said Fidge gravely.

'Not even in the Revised Edition, you rum little cove? Well, good-night, Geoff; come over and dine with me some day, to save me from cutting my throat.'

And the Honourable Ted, as he was commonly called, cantered off, leaving Fidge in a puzzle. It was just as well that young gentleman had not understood to whom the former part of his conversation related, for had he known it referred to Miss Delmar, he would have been deeply interested.

Meanwhile at Crane Court Mrs Delmar had been holding forth eloquently, with the charms of Ted Calverley for her theme. He had quite come up to

her ideal of what a scion of nobility ought to be, in which respect Mrs Delmar was lucky, so seldom is it that a person is obliging enough to realise our expectations of him. Her audience, her son and daughter, did not respond much.

'I fancy he is rather a black sheep,' Owen remarked once, finding he was expected to say something, and so rousing himself from his paper.

'Do you think he has been wild, Owen? But he can't be now, you know, or he would not be living so quietly in the country. Owen, you are so buried in that paper, there is no getting you to attend to anything.'

'The paper is deeply interesting just now, mother. I think a dissolution is inevitable shortly, and then—'

'Then what, Owen?' asked Madeline.

'A great many things. For one, we shall see how the new franchise works. Depend upon it, a general election will put us in power.'

'I suppose you mean the Radicals by *us*, Owen, dear?' said Mrs Delmar plaintively. 'I do wish you would not talk like that. What would Mr Calverley say if he thought we were Radicals. The Earl of Eastanley is such a strong Conservative.

'When I say *us*, mother, I mean the party to which *I* belong. I do not mean to incriminate you.'

'I have never wished so much before that you were not such a Radical, Owen, dear,' observed Mrs Delmar wistfully.

'I am one purely from conviction,' he answered clasping his hands behind his head, and looking at her with amused eyes, 'and so I am afraid I cannot alter, even to please the Honourable Ted.'

'You will be asked to stand for some place, I suppose, Owen, if there is a general election?' inquired Madeline.

An eager look succeeded the one of amusement in his eyes, but his tone was light enough as he answered,—

'That I can't possibly tell, Maidie. It would be a death-blow to our acquaintance with Calverley, wouldn't it, if I were standing as Radical candidate anywhere? The son of Lord Eastanley could not be expected to associate with the relatives of such an abandoned sinner.'

It may be rather wondered that so sensible a man as Mr Delmar, a man, too, who had worked pretty hard in his time, should have not put his second son into any profession. There was more than one reason for this. As a child, Owen had always been very delicate, and when he was just reaching the age when it became necessary to settle what he was to do, he had a very severe illness, which left him for a long time unfit for anything. When he was strong enough, he was sent to Oxford. And then the Delmars awoke to the fact that they were the parents of an unusually clever son. Owen's career at the university was one series of triumphs, and very high opinions of his abilities were formed by all who came in contact with him.

'Don't force him into anything,' advised one competent to judge. 'He will make his mark in the world whatever he does. His ambition needs no stimulus.'

There was no necessity for him to take to any profession. As usual, money had attracted money, and being already the son of a millionaire, Owen had been left a very comfortable fortune of his own by his god-

father. So, as he was free to turn his attention to anything he liked, he chose politics. He was a politician heart and soul, and, as he had told his mother, a Radical from conviction.

'I am by birth one of the people, and I am proud of it,' he argued. 'The very facts that I have money and education are opposed to Conservatism. It would be an anomaly for me, risen from the ranks, to be a Conservative.'

His views were rather disturbing to his parents. Mr Delmar cared little for politics, and would gladly have left them altogether alone. But as he rose in wealth and position, this became impossible, and he found it necessary to belong to either one party or the other. And so, owing chiefly to his wife's influence, he announced himself to be a Conservative. Mrs Delmar, in her inmost soul, considered this party the most respectable and aristocratic.

So it was rather a blow when Owen, the clever one of the family, of whose intellect his parents could never be proud enough, became a pronounced Radical, and likely to be a prominent one. For he spared himself no work, and was soon known among his party as a very promising speaker. His oratory had been more than once displayed on a Liberal platform, and he had already stood as parliamentary candidate. It was a forlorn hope, certainly, for he had to oppose a 'moral' certainty, but he secured a far greater number of votes than had been deemed possible.

There was little doubt that in the event of a General Election he would be invited to represent his party somewhere. And the Delmars were divided between delight in his growing fame, and dislike of his principles

CHAPTER VII.

IT was only a day or two after this that Madeline again met Ted Calverley. This time she was out riding with her brother, and they met on the downs, and Calverley joined them for half an hour. He would have stayed with them longer, but his animal—a flighty, odd-tempered young thoroughbred, which he was struggling to break in as a hunter, his one amusement at Eastanley Castle—proved a troublesome companion, and he left them to calm it by a good gallop.

Maidie was conscious that she was sorry he left them. She had said nothing in reply to her mother's raptures about him, but all the same she had not been as indifferent as she appeared. Most people found Ted Calverley very fascinating, and she was among the number.

For one thing, he was unlike most of the young men she had hitherto met, with his soft voice, and handsome face, and indolent gracefulness. Vernon's friends had been quite different, and so had Owen's—the latter mostly hard-reading, intellectual men, some of them with a political turn like himself, all of them full of ambition. Ted Calverley was a new type to her.

I don't know whether my heroine will sink hopelessly in everyone's estimation when I add that the fact of his being a Calverley of Eastanley did not detract from his charms in her eyes. He came of an old historical house—an Earl Eastanley had been distinguished in more than one reign—and she could not help feeling a little more interested in him than in the Browns and Joneses of her acquaintance.

Let it not be for a moment imagined that Madeline fell in love with the Honourable Ted at first sight. I don't say such things never occur,—merely that she was not the sort of girl they would occur to. She had inherited from her parents a strong vein of bourgeois common sense, and at present she was not the least in love with Calverley, only fascinated by him when she was with him, which is quite another thing. It remained for time to prove whether the one might not become the other.

But she did not reveal, even to Owen, how much she was taken, for she knew he would laugh at her pitilessly, and it is a little trying to have even a mild *penchant* made fun of heartlessly by a brother.

About her other love, little Fidge Mortimer, she had no need to be so reticent. They had become sworn allies. That first morning in the dell was the prelude to many others. Fidge was given carte blanche to go there whenever he liked, and though it may be doubted whether this arrangement was altogether to his father's taste, he did nothing to prevent it. Whenever she had nothing else to do, those summer mornings, Madeline made her way to the dell too, to look for her little friend.

So they became great allies; which meant that Fidge

chattered to her about anything that came into his head, just as freely as he did to his father or Margaret. He had never been snubbed, or told to hold his tongue, so his freshness and candour were delightful.

It may easily be guessed that Miss Delmar heard a great many things that were never intended to reach her ears.

One morning, when even Fidge found it rather too hot to play, he came and sat down at her side on the ferny bank, and began amusing himself by talking to solemn old Rollo, who had come with him that morning.

'What a dear old doggie,' said Madeline. 'Have you had him all his life?'

'Yes, I suppose so, but he is a little bit older than me. He was mother's dog, you know. Mother's dead!' he added, in a tone of cheerful indifference that rather horrified Madeline, who had often pitied the motherless child.

'Can you remember your mother, Fidge?' she asked.

'Oh, no! I was only a baby when she died. It was ever so long ago. But Dad tells me about her sometimes, and we've got her picture.'

'Don't you wish you had her, Fidge?'

'No, I don't think so. Dad does; but I don't know what she was like. He says she was very nice, and he tells me all the things she used to say and do. Oh, look, isn't that a dragon fly?'

It was difficult to keep Fidge to one topic long, but on this occasion Madeline was glad of the diversion. She felt she had no right to be listening to what the widower told his motherless boy about that dead young wife, whose stone cross she had so often noticed in the little churchyard.

'Fidge dear, do sit still. You will get so hot rushing about like that.'

'Yes, and I can't catch him. Margaret said I wasn't to over'eat myself. She meant get too hot, you know, but she always says such funny things. Oh, Miss Delmar?'

'Well, Fidge, what is it?'

'Has your father got enormous lots of money?'

The question was somewhat abrupt, and took Madeline rather aback.

'I suppose he is rich,' she answered. 'Why?'

'Because Margaret says he is rolling in money. Does he really *roll* in money, Miss Delmar?' asked Fidge seriously.

Madeline laughed so she could hardly answer. At last she said,—

'I never saw him, Fidge. I don't think he does. It would not be very comfortable, would it?'

'No, horrid—hard and cold. That's just what I thought. I'll tell Margaret he doesn't, and that she was talking nonsense. She often talks nonsense. She said she knew you would all be horrid, and *you* aren't a bit. Dad said she couldn't tell till she had seen you.'

'I am glad you don't think me horrid, Fidge.'

'I think you're awfully nice. But I wish you hadn't made us have to turn out of Crane Court.'

'You don't like living at the Farm as well?'

'Not half. It's so little and pokey, and there's no garden to speak of. It's quite different. I hate it, and Margaret hates it. Dad doesn't say so, but Margaret says he minds it most of all.'

'I expect he thinks us horrid too, only doesn't say

so either,' thought Miss Delmar, but all she said was,—'Was that you I saw on a pony yesterday, Fidge?'

'Oh yes, that was me on Shaggy. He is such a jolly pony—Dad got him for me to ride, and go out farming with him.'

'You must come for a ride with me some day.'

'That would be jolly. Do you like riding? You have lots of horses, haven't you? Oh, I should so like to go for a ride with you!'

'Then you shall, little man. You must ask Dad if you may.'

But next time he saw her, Fidge ran up with the melancholy intelligence that Dad hadn't said yes, and he didn't think he would let him.

'Oh, Fidge! that is sad. I wonder why not.'

'I don't 'zactly know. He said I should be a bother to you,—that Shaggy could not go so fast as your horse, and that perhaps you hadn't really meant it. But you did mean it, didn't you, Miss Delmar?'

'Yes, certainly I did. Mr Mortimer is mistaken. I want you to come very much. I wish he had not said no, Fidge.'

'He didn't quite say *no*. I wish you would ask him, Miss Delmar. Perhaps he would say yes if you did.'

'Well then, I will, next time I see him,' she answered.

But she rather wished subsequently she had not made such a rash promise, much as she wanted to take the little boy a ride. Mr Mortimer was such a very unapproachable person, she felt; and then she never saw him; or if by any chance they met, he merely lifted his hat and passed on. He certainly did not display Ted Calverley's eagerness to become more closely acquainted with her or her people.

So the week went by, and Sunday arrived. A little path led through a belt of shrubbery from Crane Court to the church. Just inside the gate in the iron fence dividing the grounds from the churchyard, partly overshadowed by a graceful laburnum tree, which, however, grew in the shrubbery, was the plain stone cross which marked the grave of Ellen, the beloved wife of Geoffrey Mortimer, aged twenty-one. When they lived at the Court he and his little son must have passed close by this grave every time they went to church—now it lay out of their path.

From where they sat in state in the Crane Court pews, in what had once been the Lady Chapel, surrounded by monuments and tablets to Mortimers innumerable, who all lay in the vault beneath, Miss Delmar could just see, in the pew appropriated always by the dweller at Ten Acre Farm, the stalwart form of Mr Mortimer, and Fidge's sunny curls and sweet little face, still and serious for once, with a lovely, rapt expression in his brown eyes. Where did he get those eyes from, Madeline wondered, eyes that might one moment have been those of a cherub, at another, an elf's. Certainly they were very unlike Mr Mortimer's serious, steadfast grey ones.

Seeing father and son thus together reminded Madeline of her promise to the latter, and she felt that she must really no longer delay its fulfilment. If she could speak to Mr Mortimer now, when church was over, she would ask him.

It was not consonant with the Delmar dignity to move till the rest of the congregation had begun to leave the church, and Madeline partly hoped, partly feared, that Fidge and his father would have disappeared

before she got outside. But there was more than one worshipper with whom the squire paused to exchange a kindly greeting and a few words. So he was still only just by the porch when Miss Delmar found herself outside the dark little church in the dazzling mid-day sunshine.

As he lifted his hat to her and her people, she screwed up her courage, and said,—

'Mr Mortimer, I have something to ask you.'

'Yes, Miss Delmar.'

He turned to her with his grave courtesy, and Fidge skipped up to her, and gave her hand a rapturous squeeze, for once not venturing to speak, however, for fear of impeding the momentous conversation between her and his father.

They moved a few steps away from the little knot of villagers, and the hot sunshine, and then Madeline stopped, not noticing till afterwards that it was just by the grave of Mr Mortimer's wife.

'I want you so much to let Fidge come out for a ride with me,' she said, plunging at once in *medias res.*

'It is extremely kind of you to ask him, but I am sure you would find him a dreadful bother.'

If Mortimer meant his tone to be decisive, she would not take it as such, for she replied quickly,—

'He would be no bother, I am sure, only a most delightful companion. Do let him come, Mr Mortimer.'

'Fidge's pony is only a rough little beast, and could not possibly keep pace with your horse.'

'But I can make my horse keep pace with the pony. I would ride my quiet old one, and I would take the greatest care of Fidge. We would have a groom if you liked. Are you afraid to trust the little man with me?'

Mr Mortimer actually smiled.

'No, indeed ; certainly not. I am sure you would take care of him ; besides, Fidge can quite well look after himself. He sticks on very fairly now. But—'

'Please don't say *but*. Please let him come,' Madeline pleaded eagerly, almost as if she was a child herself.

Mr Mortimer looked at her, and then at Fidge's wistful face. Clearly he would disappoint them both if he persisted in his refusal. And yet it was hard to let his son be beholden to these rich tenants of his.

But Fidge's longing eyes carried the day.

'If you really wish it, Miss Delmar, Fidge shall go with you at any hour you like to name,' he said. 'But you must not let him bother you,—send him home if he does.'

'Yes, I will, if he does,' she replied gaily, delighted at her success. 'Then may I call for Fidge at half-past five to-morrow? Will that time suit? It is so hot earlier!'

'Fidge shall meet you in the lane at that hour, Miss Delmar. It is very kind of you—'

'Thanks so much. Good-bye, Mr Mortimer'—she held out her hand to the Squire—'good-bye, Fidge, till to-morrow.'

Miss Delmar was delighted with her success, but after that interview she found it as difficult as ever to reconcile the Mr Mortimer with whom she was acquainted with the 'Dad' of Fidge's chatter. For 'Dad' was evidently the little boy's dearest companion and friend, his confidant and playmate, and how could the grave Squire, with his distantly courteous manner, be all that to a mischievous imp of seven?

CHAPTER VIII.

NOT very long after this the Delmars gave their first dinner-party. The Vernon Delmars were staying at Crane Court, and so were several other friends, and Mrs Delmar could not resist rushing into her first effort to entertain 'the county!' Only as yet she was not sufficiently acquainted with many people to venture to invite them.

In fact, the number of guests, over and above the large house-party, only amounted to the Digbys, the Craneham parson—Mr Townley—and his wife, Ted Calverley, and Mr Mortimer.

Gertrude Digby was indignant when the invitation arrived.

'Such cheek, asking us to dinner before we have asked them! Do refuse it.'

'They have been here to tennis, my dear,' said Mrs Digby.

'Yes, worse luck! But tennis is nothing.'

But an appeal to Mr Digby settled the matter, and the invitation was accepted. He decided it was far better to be on friendly terms with so near a neighbour—near, at least, from an Elmshire view of proximity. So, grumble as she might, and she did grumble not a little, Gertrude had to accompany her parents to the

dinner-party, though she went in anything but a pleasant temper.

Both Owen and Madeline had tried to dissuade their parents from asking Geoffrey Mortimer. Instinctively they felt it would be better taste not to hurry to invite him to a festivity in his own house. But Mr Delmar could not see this view of the case.

'Not ask Mr Mortimer!' he exclaimed. 'It would be impossible to do anything so inhospitable. He is a very pleasant fellow, too, and we certainly don't want to seem high and mighty to him, just because he can't afford to live here, and we can.'

'Yes, and he must be very dull in that little farm-house,' chimed in Mrs Delmar. 'It will be a charity to have him up here whenever we have anything going on.'

Madeline and Owen felt further opposition would be useless, for their father and mother would never understand their ideas.

'Poor Mortimer!' exclaimed Owen, as soon as they were alone.

'It will be dreadful if they try to patronise him!' said Madeline.

'He does not look an easy subject for patronage,' Owen answered. 'And, after all, he can easily refuse.'

Mortimer would have liked to refuse, but he had no reasonable excuse for doing so, and he was not the sort of man to invent one. Moreover, he knew if he intended to be on friendly terms with his weathy tenants, this must happen sooner or later, and it was as well to face it at once. So he signified that he would be 'delighted to accept.'

Perhaps he would not have done so had he foreseen

quite how much it would cost him. He had not been inside Crane Court since he left it that May evening with little Fidge. Then it had been swept and garnished indeed, but the old familiar Crane Court of his boyhood and whole life. Then it had been empty, except for its associations, now— He despised himself for feeling it so acutely, but he could not help it.

The pain of it reached its highest point when he led his partner into the dining-room, and sat down at the side of the long table, covered with beautiful silver, and hot-house flowers, and rare fruits. The room was all a blaze of light, and the Mortimer pictures on the wainscoted walls looked down sternly at the feast; while at the top of the table, where no one had sat since Nellie had died, appeared Mrs Delmar's portly form, glittering with jewels, and gorgeous in satin and brocade.

Mortimer was not a particularly imaginative man, but he felt as if he were in some hideous nightmare, and for the first moment he made absolutely no effort to converse with his neighbour. Perhaps he had hardly noticed that Madeline Delmar had been relegated to him.

But when she addressed him, he turned to her at once. Her quiet tone and simple dress was a relief from all the strange glitter and glare.

'How is Fidge, Mr Mortimer?' she asked.

She spoke even more gently than usual, for her instinctive tact and sympathy had told her why Mr Mortimer was so stern and silent, though she knew he would have hated that she should be aware of his pain.

A genuine desire to know of Fidge's welfare had prompted her remark, but she could not have made a more fortunate one. Fidge was a subject of the deepest

interest always to his father. In talking about Fidge to one so ready to listen, Geoffrey Mortimer could throw off a little of the burden that oppressed him.

'Fidge is very well, Miss Delmar. He sent you his best love.'

'Please give him mine. Dear little man. What an amusing child he is.'

'Yes, he is very absurd sometimes. He propounds such startling ideas. One never knows what he may be going to say next.'

'No, indeed. He is most confidential. He tells me all sorts of things I don't expect I am supposed to hear.'

Mortimer laughed, and an amused look came into his eyes. Not an annoyed one, Madeline noticed, so evidently his conscience was clear, and he had no fear of what his small son might reveal about him.

'I wonder what you do hear?' he said.

'Ah! I can't tell you that. He tells me all about you and about Margaret too.'

'About Margaret!' Mortimer exclaimed, rather nervously for he suddenly recollected the many extremely uncomplimentary remarks Margaret was in the habit of making about 'them new people up at the Court.' He looked at Miss Delmar, and a conviction rushed over him that Fidge had retailed some of these remarks to her.

But she only said demurely,—

'I feel rather alarmed at Margaret, but I think she must be delightfully original.'

'That she certainly is,' Mortimer replied. 'She has been in the family for ages—in fact, she began life as nurse to Fidge's mother—and she considers herself quite one of us, only rather more so. But she is a

good old soul, and perfectly devoted to Fidge, and I don't know what we should have done without her.'

Madeline was secretly much amused. She so well knew the motive that prompted the squire to make this sort of apology for his child's nurse. She changed the conversation, for she did not mean to repeat any of Fidge's revelations, by saying, as she glanced down the table,—

'What beautiful hair Miss Digby has!'

'I expect she would be much amazed at anyone admiring her carrots,' Mortimer replied. 'I don't think I do!'

'She is pretty altogether, and I admire her style.'

'Do you? It is hard to realise she is grown up, and has any. We are sort of cousins, you know—my wife was a Digby.'

This was the second time he had mentioned his wife, quite casually in the course of conversation. He was not one of those men to whom a person who is dead, however near to them in life, becomes one not to be spoken of. His nature was too healthy and wholesome for that. Besides, he had always talked of her and quoted her to Fidge, and striven to keep the thought of her alive in the child's mind, and so he was in the habit of speaking of her in such a way that a stranger would never have guessed that the wife to whom he referred had been dead six years.

Madeline's other neighbour at table was Ted Calverley. He had taken in Mrs Delmar, but that lady had contrived that her daughter should be by his side. But for the first half of dinner he devoted himself exclusively to his hostess, leaning across the corner of the table to talk to her with an appearance of the deepest interest. Nor was this wholly feigned. Mrs

Delmar amused him, for the precise reason he himself fascinated Madeline—he had never met anyone exactly like her before.

Madeline, in the pauses of her conversation with Mr Mortimer, could not help noticing that in her happiness her mother's aspirates were performing stranger feats than usual, and she wondered, with an inward shudder, what the Honourable Ted must think of them. But if they astonished him, he certainly allowed no symptoms of it to escape him.

'Haven't you seen Eastanley Castle?' he said, in reply to some remark of Mrs Delmar's. 'It isn't much to see,—nothing like so jolly an old place as this, for the house was only built about sixty years ago.'

'But I've heard the gardens are lovely, Mr Calverley.'

'I wish you would come over and see them. You see, all my people are away, and I'm all by myself. But if you would come over to tea, it would be awfully jolly, and I could show you the gardens.'

Mrs Delmar looked, as she felt, delighted at this invitation. It would be very pleasant to have tea at Eastanley Castle.

'It is very kind of you, Mr Calverley,' she murmured.

'Then you will come? That's good. Of course, I mean you and Miss Delmar, and anyone else you care to bring. There's only me, but I can muster plenty of tea-cups. Come whatever day you like, only just drop me a line, so that I may be sure to be in.'

'Madeline, Mr Calverley is kind enough to ask us to go to tea with him some day at Eastanley Castle,' said Mrs Delmar, to her daughter.

'I hope you will think it worth while to come, Miss

Delmar,' said the young man, turning to her. 'I shall feel so honoured if you will.'

'It would be very pleasant,' Madeline answered, in her low, quiet voice. She felt it would be very pleasant indeed, but she could not display her delight as openly as did her mother.

Calverley did not fail to perceive the contrast between her indifference and Mrs Delmar's eagerness, and it rather piqued him. 'The old woman is as keen as mustard to come, goodness knows why!' he thought to himself, 'but the young one doesn't care a rap. Hang it! I should rather like to make her care.' With which intentions he devoted himself to her for the rest of dinner, and strove to make himself as agreeable as possible. This was rather an unwonted exertion on his part—he did not often put himself out of the way to please either man or woman.

Mortimer, with a remembrance of some of Ted's speeches fresh in his mind, looked on amused for a moment or two, and then turned to his other neighbour so that Madeline was left free to allow herself to be entertained by Calverley, and to find that she got on with him very well indeed. She was not the first quiet woman who found herself attracted by a fast man.

This very quietness of hers, too, constituted one of her charms in his eyes; looking at her in the light of a possible wife. Perhaps he had seen too much of fast women to have any desire to marry one.

But all this is anticipating. At present Ted Calverley only regarded matrimony as an evil that might overtake him, and Madeline Delmar had merely found out he was amusing and pleasant.

CHAPTER IX.

ON the opposite side of the table that evening at Crane Court things had not gone so smoothly. Owen Delmar had taken in Gertrude Digby, an arrangement that had added the last straw to that young lady's discontent. She was firmly convinced that the rich soap-boiler's son must be a cad. He would be even more unbearable than his parents, inasmuch as he was younger.

She just glanced at him as he offered her his arm, and decided that he was only redeemed from positive plainness by his insignificance—a small, slight, pale man, not glaringly vulgar merely because he was so insignificant.

Miss Digby was in a bad temper, which the sight of all the gorgeousness of the Delmar *ménage* did not tend to improve, and she hardly made an effort to conceal her scorn from Owen. He perceived it, and guessed its cause. He knew that she looked upon him and his as *nouveaux riches*, and beneath contempt. But if it annoyed him, he allowed no shadow of annoyance to be visible in his voice or manner, but talked quietly on, exchanging common-places with her. As

far as conversation went, Gertrude probably did not expect much more, but common-places from a Vere de Vere and common-places from a soap-boiler are very different things.

They got on the subject of hunting.

'Does your sister hunt?' asked Gertrude carelessly, by way of saying something. 'I know she rides, for I have seen her out.'

'She never has hunted hitherto, Miss Digby, but I daresay she will now she lives in the country. Do you?'

'Yes. There's nothing I like better.'

'Is this a great hunting county?'

'Oh, yes! Everybody about here hunts.'

'Everybody, that is, I suppose, who can afford to keep a horse?' Owen amended smoothly.

Gertrude Digby shot a look of disgust at him. Just the sort of remark she might have expected, she felt, from a parvenu's son. Of course, he would like to flaunt his wealth in the faces of the poorer county people. She felt his remark all the more acutely because only that week had Mr Digby observed he would have to give up keeping hunters, either for himself or his daughter. And here was this wretched soap-boiler's son, who probably could not ride the least, and who could have as many horses as he cared for.

She did not reply to Owen's last remark, and there was a moment's silence between them. Not far off, a hot political discussion was going on—at least, it could hardly be called discussion, for the talkers were all agreed. All were strong Conservatives, and in no measured terms

were they roundly abusing the great leader of the opposite party. He was a madman; he was in his second childhood; he was a scourge to the county.

Owen listened, and a smile stole over his face. Turning to Miss Digby, he remarked,—

'The leader of the Opposition is catching it strong.'

'Not more than he deserves. Wretched old sinner!' she retorted.

'Ah! then you are a Conservative?'

'Most decidedly. Why, what else should I be?'

'Is no one ever anything else? I was just thinking it was rather rash to abuse one side in that very open way.'

'Oh no! for one never meets anyone who is not Conservative. In society, I mean. I am sorry to say a good many of the labourers about here are Radical, but then that is owing to their ignorance and stupidity.'

Gertrude was being decidedly rash, but it must be said, in her excuse, that she had not often met Radicals in society, and that she knew Mr Delmar was a Conservative.

Owen smiled.

'Do you go in for enlightening and converting them, Miss Digby? Are you a Dame of the Primrose League?'

'Yes, I am, and I work among our own people a little. I suppose, if there is an election soon, we shall have to canvass a good deal. Do you go in for that sort of thing?'

Under the influence of politics, she was getting more friendly.

'Yes, I too am a politician, in a mild way,' Owen Delmar replied calmly. 'But I suppose it must be owing to my ignorance and stupidity that I am a Radical!'

Gertrude looked at him with eyes wide with horror.

'You don't mean to say you are a *Radical!*' she exclaimed. 'As well as a cad,' she added mentally.

But though she did not utter this last clause, her tone implied it, and Owen answered,—

'Yes, I add that to my other objectionable qualities, Miss Digby. You have increased your experiences, since you have actually met a Radical. But then, perhaps, you do not consider me in society.'

Gertrude felt furious. He was so very composed, and it was extremely trying to have her thoughts put into words in that way. He was looking at her with a grave face, but there was a gleam of mockery in his eyes—beautiful blue-grey eyes, with long lashes, the one good feature in an otherwise plain face.

'Whatever makes you one?' she asked.

'Conviction, Miss Digby. But you should try to convert me—surely it is your obvious duty, as a Primrose Dame.'

'I don't think it would be worth while!' she answered contemptuously, as she rose, for she saw with relief that the ladies were going.

'What a fascinating little termagant,' thought Owen to himself, as the door closed after Mrs Delmar's rustling train. 'It was rather a shame to get such rises out of her, though! If all Primrose Dames were like her—'

Looking up, he saw that Mr Mortimer was sitting, silent and unobserved, gazing very sadly at one of his own family portraits on the opposite wall. The departure of the ladies had relieved him from the necessity of making talk, and for a moment he had given way to the sad thoughts that pressed upon him.

Owen Delmar rose, and took the empty place by his

side. 'That is a very beautiful portrait,' he said, following the direction of Mortimer's eyes. 'My sister and I have often admired it. Was she an ancestress?'

'Yes. She was a Lady Mary Mortimer, my great-grandmother. I believe she was a great beauty in her youth.'

'No wonder. She is very lovely. I am afraid I cannot trace a family likeness!' remarked Owen.

Mortimer laughed, as he was intended to do, and brought his gaze down from his ancestress to his neighbour.

'One does not inherit much, either good looks or anything else, from one's great-grandmother,' he said.

'I presume not. I can't say for certain, for I don't know that I ever had one. History saith not.'

Mortimer laughed again, not quite knowing what to say. The political discussion opposite was waxing fiercer than ever, and some of the remarks made were plainly audible across the table. The language used had grown stronger since the departure of the ladies.

'This is most edifying,' Owen observed, with his half-mocking smile. 'It is as well to know what people think of us.'

'Of *us!* Are you really a Radical, then?'

'Yes, I am, Mr Mortimer. But you needn't be alarmed. My people are not—Crane Court will not become a Liberal stronghold.'

'That would be hard to stand, and I am glad I have not to bear that. Did my cousin Gertie Digby discover your principles?'

'She did!' Owen replied, smiling. 'I am afraid her dinner was quite spoilt by the knowledge that she was sitting next a Radical.'

'She is a violent politician.'

'She has the courage of her convictions.'

'Don't you long to throw yourself into the breach, and stand up for your chief and your party?' asked Mortimer, glancing across the table.

'Not I! There would be bloodshed if I did. At present, everyone seems to agree most amicably. It would be a pity to throw down the apple of discord.'

The drawing-room at Crane Court bore as changed an aspect as the rest of the house, that evening. Mrs Delmar had pronounced that it looked bare and cold, and had set herself to remedy these defects. She had filled it with little tables and odd chairs, and screens and jardinières, and had introduced draperies and hangings of rich plush and velvet wherever she could. Also, under her *régime* all manner of ornaments, from statuettes to small china animals, had made their appearance.

A little of all this would no doubt have been an improvement, but Mrs Delmar had contrived to overdo it.

This evening the room was brilliantly lighted, and full of flowers, both cut and in pots. The empty fireplace was one mass of delicate ferns and bright blossoms.

Mortimer, entering the room with the other men, glanced round it for a moment or two, and then seated himself by Gertrude Digby, who happened to be near the door.

'Well, Geoffrey, I hope you like all those alterations,' she said sharply.

'Don't you? Are they not improvements?' he replied, too proud to show he minded.

'Oh! if *you* like it, it's all right. There's nothing like plenty of light and colour in a room, is there? Geoffrey, how could you let Crane Court to such awful people?'

'They pay me a very good rent for it,' he answered. 'Besides, I don't submit that they are so very awful. What is there awful about Miss Delmar, now?'

'Well, she is the best of the bunch, I admit. She is quietly turned out enough to-night, at any rate. She is dressed as if she hadn't twopence a year! But look at Mrs Delmar, and listen to her h's. And Mr Delmar is the rich City man all over.'

'My dear Gertie, you know both you and I would give a good deal to be half as rich,' said Mortimer, with cousinly familiarity. 'Are you sure there is no envy mixed up with your disgust?'

'Envy!' repeated Miss Digby furiously. But she knew it was not much use being furious with Geoffrey Mortimer—she was powerless to disturb his equanimity. She paused—'But the worst of them all is that horrid son who took me in to dinner. He is simply *detestable!*'

'Really!' replied Mortimer. 'I thought him a very pleasant fellow.'

But at this moment their talk was interrupted by Miss Delmar, who began to sing. Her voice, more sweet than powerful, was so perfectly cultivated that every tone it possessed was brought out, and she sang with great correctness and feeling. She had had lessons from the best teachers, and had profited by them.

When she had finished her song, she came up to Gertrude.

'Don't you sing, Miss Digby?' she asked.

'Only a very little.'

'Please sing something to-night. We should be so pleased.'

'I will sing if you want me to,' Gertie replied un-

graciously. 'But I am sure no one will care to listen to me after you. I have hardly had any teaching.' And she moved to the piano.

It is only in novels that the untaught heroine's simple ballad quite cuts out the more elaborate performance of her well-instructed rival. Gertrude had only spoken the truth. Her voice was perhaps the finer of the two, but her singing did not sound much after Madeline's, a fact she was perfectly aware of herself. Good singing lessons had been an unfulfilled longing of her life.

Madeline Delmar, listening, felt it was the greatest pity such a good voice should not have been better taught.

'Thanks so much,' she said, as Gertrude rose from the piano. 'That was delightful!'

'No, it wasn't,' Gertrude replied bluntly. 'I know I can't sing at all.'

'Indeed you can. It would be very nice if we could practise together sometimes, and sing duets,' Madeline answered, with a good-natured idea that she might be able to help Miss Digby a little.

But Gertrude drew herself up to the full height of her small person, and said in the coldest of tones,—

'Thanks, Miss Delmar, but I think that would hardly be practicable.'

Madeline flushed painfully, and turned away. She was not given to being effusive, and she was more hurt than she cared to show at the reception her small effort at friendliness had met with. She saw plainly enough that Miss Digby did not care to associate with her more than she could help,—that between the daughter of the country squire and the daughter of

the parvenu there must be a gulf fixed it would not do to attempt to bridge over.

'You might have been more polite,' said Mortimer severely to his cousin, in a low tone. He had heard what had passed between her and Miss Delmar, and he felt annoyed at her rudeness.

'It was such cheek of her to suggest such a thing!' exclaimed Gertie pettishly. 'It's no good being cross, Geoffrey—I won't be friends with these people.'

'Do you always sing without notes, Miss Digby?' said Owen Delmar's voice, so near that she looked up with a start, not at all sure whether he had not heard her observation.

CHAPTER X.

'WAS it a nice party last night, Dad?' asked Fidge next morning, as he attacked his breakfast of bread and milk.

'Yes, I suppose so,' Mortimer answered; 'it was very grand and very smart.'

'But didn't you like it, Dad?'

'I would sooner have been quietly at home, Fidge.'

'Wasn't you glad to see the house again?'

Mortimer shook his head.

'Not like that.'

'Not like what, Dad?'

'Oh! it was different—all lighted up and altered, and full of people.'

'Was it? We never had parties when we were there, did we?'

'No, we were much too poor.'

'Did you talk to Miss Delmar, Dad?'

'Yes. I sat next her at dinner, so we talked a good deal.'

'Isn't she nice? Did you give her my message?'

'Yes, and she sent you her love, and said you were to meet her in the lane for a ride after tea this evening.'

'Oh, jolly! I wish you had a horse, Dad, and could

come out too. Why don't you have a horse? They've got lots.'

'If you mean the Delmars, Fidge, they have lots of things we haven't, because they are rich, and we are not. You will find that out all through your life, my sonnie—that other people are better off than yourself.'

'Rich people aren't always wicked, are they?' asked the boy reflectively.

'Why, no, of course not, Fidge! Very often they are very good.'

'They never were in the Bible, but perhaps it was different in those days. Perhaps they've got better since, because they're afraid they might get burnt like the man in the Parable.'

But Geoffrey Mortimer made no reply. He always rather dreaded his small son's sudden dives into Scripture history or theology. There was no knowing what unanswerable question he might propound.

After tea that summer evening, Fidge rode down the lane to meet Miss Delmar. These rides together had proved the greatest success. Shaggy had no intention of being left behind by Miss Delmar's larger steed, and made heroic efforts to keep up. They resulted in a good deal of jog-trotting, but this Fidge did not appear to mind the least. He was so at home in the saddle, and had so firm a seat, that Madeline soon found she need have no anxiety about him; and it was a great pleasure to her to have a little talkative companion by her side in her rides.

Talkative the little boy certainly was. His tongue was never still. Madeline sometimes wondered whether, if he had no other listener, he talked to himself.

'That's right!' she said, as they met just at the beginning of the lane. 'Dad gave you my message.'

'Oh yes; Dad never forgets, you know. Margaret often forgets, but he never does. He telled me all about everything last night.'

'Did he, Fidge? Would you like to have been there?'

'I think I should have, but he didn't, much. He said he would rather have been quietly at home,' remarked Fidge, with his usual candour.

Madeline smiled, but rather sadly. She would have spared Mr Mortimer what she had known must have been pain to him, had she been able. Then she almost laughed as she thought what his feelings would have been had he heard his son's confidences to her.

'Well, I wish you had been there, Fidge. You must come to tea with me one of these days,' she said.

'I should like to, awfully, Miss Delmar,' he answered earnestly. 'I want to see Crane Court inside again so much.'

'Do you, my little man? Then you must come some day soon, if Dad will let you. We won't have a party—only just you and me, and Owen, if he will come. I don't think you know my brother Owen, Fidge. You would like him—he is so amusing.'

'I've seen him, but I never talked to him. Is he called Owen?—what a funny name!'

'Do you call it funny? I call him O.o sometimes.'

'What does he call you? What is your Christian name, Miss Delmar?'

'Madeline; do you think it a pretty one, Fidge?

They generally call me Maidie at home, because when I was little, father used to call me his little maid.'

'I like that. I think Maidie is awfully pretty.'

'Would you like to call me Maidie, Fidge?'

'Oh! may I? I would like to, so much. My darling Maidie, that's what I shall always call you, because you are so jolly, and I do love you so much.'

So the compact was made, and Miss Delmar became from thenceforth 'my darling Maidie' to little Fidge Mortimer, whom she grew to love more every day, and who certainly returned her affection in kind.

One or two small events took place about this time, which were excitements to Mrs Delmar, if not to anyone else. The tenants of Crane Court were bidden to a large garden-party at a neighbouring—always reckoning neighbourhood by the East Elmshire standard—squire's—the first 'county' gaiety that had fallen to their lot. Mrs Delmar was anxious they should go in force—that is to say, herself, her husband, and the two home children, Owen and Madeline. By this time all the guests had left Crane Court. Madeline fully expected that Owen would absolutely decline going, instead of which he went without a murmur. When she expressed her surprise to him, he replied,—

'It's not worth making a fuss about. Besides, I rather want to study the manners and customs of the natives.'

'Don't talk of them as if they were oysters.'

'It remains to be proved whether mother won't find it equally hard to make the English squire at home open his shell.'

'I don't suppose they are all as—as reserved as Mr Mortimer.'

'Oh! he is not at home, and that makes it fifty times worse. I presume even an oyster now and then opens its shell on its native bed, though never away from it. I suppose Mortimer will be there to-day, also your fate, the Honourable Ted.'

Owen Delmar was partly right and partly wrong in his surmises. Ted Calverley was at the party, but Mr Mortimer was not.

'I invited your landlord,' observed the hostess, as she received the Delmars, 'but I did not expect him to come. Mr Mortimer so rarely goes out.'

'Is he unsociable? He dined with us the other night?' said Mrs Delmar.

'Oh, I don't think he is exactly unsociable, but he does not care much for parties,' said Mrs Roper. Then, turning to Owen, she went on,—'I hope you are ready to play tennis, Mr Delmar? Let me see—you know Miss Digby, I think. Will you play with her—my husband will make up the sett.'

Mrs Roper was pleased Gertrude Digby happened not to be engaged, for she wished to avoid introducing the Delmars to any of the people who had not yet called upon them. For it was not quite clear yet whether everybody meant to take up the rich new comers.

Gertie was quite as much disgusted as her hostess was pleased, at the arrangement. Owen advanced towards her with the evident intention of shaking hands, but she merely vouchsafed him a small, stiff bow. He drew back, raising his hat with equal formality, and mentally resolving not to attempt to shake hands with Miss Digby again unless she held out hers.

'We are to play together, Miss Digby,' he said.

'So I hear,' she replied briefly.

'I am extremely sorry for you, as I know you dislike it. Still, I suppose it must be done.'

'I fear it must. Let us try to make the best of it.'

'Oh! I did not say I minded it, Miss Digby. Of course, it is a great honour for me to play with you.'

'Make the most of it then, Mr Delmar,' Gertie rejoined, feeling herself getting furious, for she had a sensation he was laughing at her.

Lawn-tennis is not a game that readily lends itself to conversation. It is impossible to hold much connected talk with a partner, who may at one moment be touching you, and at the next twenty feet away. Besides, players require their breath for other purposes.

Owen Delmar and Miss Digby played their game out in silence. When it was over, their opponents went off together in search of tea, so they found themselves left alone on the field of action, for the tennis ground was a little apart from the rest of the garden. Gertrude would have liked to have walked off by herself, but she felt it would look ridiculous. Owen leisurely put on his coat, and then, with a twinkle in his eye, which showed he appreciated the situation, he gravely asked her if she would like some tea.

'No, thanks!' she answered, feeling that she could not go to tea with him. 'But we might go back to the others. No doubt you would like another game.'

'And you another partner, Miss Digby?'

'Well, yes, since you ask me,' she retorted. His way of putting her thoughts into words was most aggravating.

Altogether, he was most annoying. It would not have been quite so bad had he been awkward, or vulgar, or

stupid. Then, at least, he would have been what the son of such parents ought to be, and she would have had good ground for her aversion. But it was impossible to deny that he was distinctly gentlemanly in his manners, and his voice and intonation were refined. Moreover, she had heard from Ted Calverley of the high honours he had taken at Oxford.

She plunged into conversation with the first friends she met on returning to the lawn, turning her back upon Owen, and in a very short time he watched her going off to tea with someone else. But her conduct, which might have disgusted another man, had precisely the contrary effect upon him. All his life he had regarded opposition and difficulties merely as obstacles to be overcome. The greater the difficulty, so much the more pleasure in vanquishing it. There was any amount of determination under Owen's somewhat insignificant exterior. And hitherto with him determination had carried the day against all odds.

Gertrude Digby hated and despised him—she must be made to reverse those sentiments. It must be added that by her very dislike and contempt, quite as much as by her piquante prettiness, she had attracted him as no girl had hitherto done.

Meantime, Madeline had begun by not enjoying her party at all. She had that indescribably lonely feeling one experiences when one is a stranger among people who are all acquainted with each other. Moreover, she was uncomfortably conscious that her father's white tall hat, and her mother's very rich and rather bright silk gown, were neither of them quite suited to the occasion.

But as soon as he could Ted Calverley came up, and

devoted himself to her, and then the aspect of things changed speedily. For one thing, her *amour propre* was consoled. He was decidedly the best-looking and most distinguished young man there, and he evidently preferred being with her to anyone else. Moreover, he was almost equally attentive to her father and mother, and did not appear to notice Mr Delmar's tall hat, or Mrs Delmar's gorgeous robes. He made himself extremely agreeable and amusing, and kept by Madeline's side as much as he could all the afternoon, so that several people inquired who the pretty girl was to whom Ted Calverley was so attentive. Without much difficulty he persuaded Mrs Delmar to fix an afternoon for her promised visit to Eastanley Castle.

'We are to have a big political sort of affair there soon, I believe,' he said to her, in his soft tones ; 'but I should like you to see the place comfortably first, if you care to. My people will be coming down later on, and then my mother will come to call on you, Mrs Delmar.'

At which speech, and at the prospect of being on visiting terms with so great a lady as the Countess Eastanley, Mrs Delmar looked so beaming with delight that Ted's gravity was sorely tried. But in promising that his mother would call upon her, he had not spoken so rashly as may be imagined. He knew well enough that Lady Eastanley would call upon anyone who was likely to have much influence in the county in the Conservative cause.

The afternoon at Eastanley Castle went off very pleasantly. Ted took the Delmars all over the house, which, though not beautiful or old like Crane Court, had a certain easy grandeur about it which moved Mrs

Delmar to much admiring envy. They went through the picture gallery, and wandered about the gardens and orangeries, hot-houses and orchid houses, and finally they had tea in the cool little Louis XV. drawing-room, which opened into the great saloon. Mrs Delmar began to feel she had really achieved good society at last.

Ted made a graceful, attentive host. Mrs Delmar amused him immensely, as she sat on the chair a Royal Princess had occupied not so very long ago, and sipped her tea out of a Sèvres cup. Her own enjoyment was so evident and so delightful to him, he really felt quite philanthropic to have afforded her so much pleasure.

But Madeline looked pretty and elegant enough for anything, he decided, glancing at her from those sleepy eyes which seemed to see nothing. She would look well anywhere, he settled; he had never seen a girl he liked better, only—only he had so very little desire to get married at all. Domesticity, even domesticity with a Louis XV. drawing-room and Sèvres teacups, was very little in Ted Calverley's line. Madeline herself was, as usual, a good deal amused and fascinated by Ted, and a little taken by the luxurious beauty, so indefinably different from the display at home, of his surroundings. But all the same her pulse as yet beat no more rapidly, nor did she sleep less calmly, on account of him. She might be amused and fascinated, but Madeline Delmar was not a girl to yield herself up readily.

CHAPTER XI.

'NO., don't forget that little Fidge Mortimer is coming up this afternoon. We are to have tea in my room, and you have promised to come.'

'I have not forgotten, Maidie. Does the Squire come too?'

'Oh no! I never thought of asking him. He hates coming here, and confides to Fidge that he would far rather stop at home.'

'Which the young shaver carefully repeats to you. I expect you hear secondhand some funny things said about us.'

'I don't think Mr Mortimer himself says much. Probably he thinks the more. But the old nurse Margaret evidently considers us too dreadful for words.'

'So, no doubt, does mother's beloved county!'

'Do you really think so, Owen? I wish they did not.'

'What does it matter, Maidie? They despise us because we are plebeians. Let them. It is not who a man's ancestors were, but what he is himself, that matters.'

'All the same, I don't like being despised and snubbed. Do you think everybody looks down upon us, Owen? I know Miss Digby does.'

'Miss Digby may have to alter her opinion yet. Well,

I suppose this ministry is now beginning its death-agony. I say, Maidie, I have just had a letter asking me to stand for the Radical interest at Greatmills.'

'Oh, have you, Owen. I suppose that is a great honour. Will you accept?'

'Yes, I shall. Now I am going to begin life, Maidie. I do want to be in Parliament,—to help to regenerate the country; and it is from our side alone that regeneration can come. There is so much to be done in life—I feel I grudge every moment of inaction.'

As he spoke, Owen rose to his feet and stretched out his arms with a quick, energetic motion. His head was thrown back, and his eyes were blazing.

It was so rarely that he displayed his enthusiasm, that his sister looked at him a moment in surprise. Then she said softly,—

'I hope you will succeed, Owen.'

'I hope I shall,' he replied, with a short laugh; 'but it will be a tussle, this election. My opponent will probably be Sidney Warren, who must have no end of influence and interest. But I mean to succeed now, if I can, and if not now, why, some day. I always get what I want, you know!'

Little Fidge Mortimer was unaffectedly delighted to be once more at Crane Court. He showed Madeline all his favourite haunts, and told her all the legends connected with them, and the games he played in them. He showed her where his own little garden had been—a retired spot in the shrubbery, as yet little disturbed by gardeners, where he was delighted to find some of the flowers he had planted, in blossom, and the rockery Dad had made for him untouched. Madeline resolved that untouched it should remain. He took her to the spot where a kitten

had been buried, a short-lived pet which Rollo had killed by mistake, as Fidge put it ; and he graphically described how Shaggy had once got loose in the grounds, and been pursued by himself and Dad for ever so long, and finally run to ground under the great chestnut trees by the sunk fence. And finally he absolutely shrieked with joy to find the swing Dad had put up for him still in existence.

Madeline swung him for some time, and then she took him to the stables, where he thoroughly enjoyed looking at all the horses. The only drawback was, that he would run up to them all, never dreaming they might not be as amiable as the exemplary Shaggy. Madeline suffered terrors lest she should behold the last of the Mortimers kicked to death before her eyes, but the special Providence that watches over small boys intervened, and no mishap occurred. Both she and Fidge were surprised to hear the church clock strike five, which meant tea-time.

One of the prettiest little rooms at Crane Court had been given up to Madeline for her private sitting-room. It was a quaint-shaped little chamber, niched into an odd corner, and was rather prettily decorated and furnished in the style of a few years previously. It contained a nice cottage piano, and Madeline had not altered it beyond putting a few of her own particular treasures about. She had arranged that tea should be ready there for herself, Owen, and Fidge—Mr and Mrs Delmar were away that afternoon.

'Are we going to have tea here?' said Fidge. 'This was mother's room.'

'Was it, Fidge,' said Madeline softly.

'Oh, yes! and that was her piano. Do you play on it?' he went on, in his cheerful tones. 'Oh, I say, are all

those photographs yours?' But at this moment he perceived Owen, and for a moment his volubility was checked.

Only for a moment, however. In a very short time he, and Madeline too, were in fits of laughter at Owen's sallies, who could talk amusing nonsense by the hour together, as only very clever men can, and who was speedily almost as much fascinated as his sister by Fidge's quaintness. So the meal was an exceedingly merry one, and Fidge had but one wish, which he suddenly expressed,—'Oh, how funny you are! I do wish Dad were here to laugh too!'

The brother and sister glanced at each other, feeling extremely doubtful whether Dad would have laughed too had he been there.

After tea, Fidge discovered that Madeline sang, and begged her to sing to him. She readily complied, and found out that the child loved music, and had a very good ear. She asked him if he sang, and he said he did in church, and that sort of thing, so she played a well-known hymn, and made him sing it. She was rewarded by making the discovery that he had a voice like a thrush.

'Oh, Fidge, you ought to learn music!' she exclaimed.

'That's what Dad is always wanting, but you know there's nobody to teach me here. If there was anybody, he says I might learn. I do like it so awfully. Mother did too, and he says I'm like her.'

'Fidge, I wish—I wish I could teach you. Why shouldn't I? Would you like me to be your music-mistress, little man?'

'It would be lovely, my darling Maidie. Would you really teach me to play the piano? I don't even know my notes.'

Madeline proceeded to give him a lesson forthwith, in the middle of which Mr Mortimer was shown in. He had walked up to Crane Court to fetch his little son home, but Madeline had not intended that he should be shown in to her room, especially since Fidge's announcement about it.

Her native tact made her painfully conscious of what Mr Mortimer's feelings must be to see this room desecrated too, and a stranger seated at his dead wife's piano, and she rose hastily as he entered, leaving the boy fingering out a tune. Whatever Mr Mortimer's thoughts were, he hardly even glanced round the room, as he advanced, with a forced smile, to shake hands with Miss Delmar.

'I have come to fetch my son,' he said. 'I hope you have not found him very troublesome?'

'He never could be that to me; but indeed he has been so good. I have enjoyed my afternoon so much,' she answered.

'So has he, I am sure. Eh, sonnie?' Mortimer said laying his hand on the boy's bright hair, for on hearing his father's voice, Fidge had left the piano, and run up to him.

'Oh, Dad, it has been so jolly! I will tell you all about it by-and-by. And, Dad, they haven't dug up my garden, or taken down the swing, and it has been so jolly seeing it all again. How I wish we had never had to leave!'

'Do you know, Mr Mortimer,' Madeline said, rather hastily, 'that your son has a very good ear and a delightful voice? He ought to learn music.'

'I know, Miss Delmar. Fidge is very musical. His mother was, and I suppose he gets it from her. I only wish he could learn music, but there is absolutely no one to teach him about here. It is a great pity.'

'If that's all, I do wish you would let me teach him. I think I have been well taught myself; and I should like it so much.'

'You, Miss Delmar!' Mortimer exclaimed, astonished.

But before he could say any more, a diversion was occasioned by the door, which had been left ajar, being pushed open, and old Rollo walking composedly into the room. He just gave one flop of his tail as he passed Fidge, and then he went and lay down quietly in a corner near the fireplace, where he had been taught to lie years ago, in his uncouth puppyhood, by his dead mistress.

For one moment Mortimer did not speak, and Madeline saw his face change.

Then he said,—

'Oh, Rollo, I told you to stay outside! I must apologise for my dog, Miss Delmar. I left him at the front door, believing he would stop there; but—go, Rollo—'

'No, no; please don't turn him out, Mr Mortimer. I like him—he is such a dear old thing; Fidge introduced us long ago. Certainly he must not be turned out.' And she bent down to stroke his wise old head, with a feeling that she, and not Rollo, ought to be the one turned out of that room.

'Well, Fidge, we must be going. Say good-bye to Miss Delmar.'

'Good-bye, little man. You must come to tea again some day. Then it is quite settled that I teach him music, Mr Mortimer?'

'Is it, Miss Delmar? It is awfully good of you, but I don't know why you should be bothered.'

'It would be only a pleasure. That's all right. Mind, Fidge, you do credit to your mistress.'

But before twenty-four hours had elapsed, Mortimer

came to the conclusion that Miss Delmar's arrangement would never do. He had not quite realised what she meant at first. Not that even then he had intended to accept, but she had taken his acquiescence for granted, before he had had presence of mind to refuse. But now that he thought it over, he felt that it could not be. He could not allow Fidge to lay himself under such an obligation to anyone. He had absolutely no claim on Miss Delmar; and Mortimer had hardly liked his riding, and going to tea with her. He had only permitted it under protest, partly because he could not bear to deprive his little son of the pleasure, and partly because he did not wish to appear churlish or proud to his tenants.

But further he could not possibly go. It had never been the way of a Mortimer to lay himself under obligations to anyone which he could not repay, and Geoffrey Mortimer knew he had now no means of repaying any hospitality or generosity. Least of all could he endure that his son should owe anything to a Delmar. So, the afternoon of the day after Fidge had had tea at Crane Court, his father walked up there to tell Madeline that he had reconsidered his decision, or rather, had time to consider about her proposal, and that he must decline it, with thanks. He knew it would be a disappointment to Fidge, and he was sorry for it, but he trusted to the child's habits of unquestioning obedience to have no fuss about it. And even if there would be a fuss—Geoffrey Mortimer hardened his heart, and felt sooner anything than Fidge should accept benefits he could never hope to return.

When he reached Crane Court—he had taken care to leave Rollo behind this time—he was shown into the

drawing-room, and in a few moments Madeline came in. He plunged at once into the subject that had brought him.

After shaking hands, he began,—

'Miss Delmar, I have come to tell you that I think I left you under a wrong impression yesterday about Fidge's music lessons. It is most kind of you to offer to teach him, and I assure you I am very grateful, but it can't possibly be.'

'You won't allow Fidge to come for his lessons! Oh, Mr Mortimer, why not?' Madeline exclaimed, looking, as she felt, deeply disappointed.

She had received a blow, for she had so much looked forward to teaching her small friend music, and training his fresh young voice. In her prosperous, smooth life, Madeline Delmar was sometimes conscious of a slight lack of real interest, a want of occupation. As has been said, she did not care for society, and as yet she had had little opportunity of taking to anything else. She had begun to visit a little in the Craneham cottages, but she was too shy to care much for it; besides, there was no serious poverty in the place.

But this void she had hoped regular lessons to Fidge might fill up. All the morning she had been looking out easy exercises and elementary books, and now here was Fidge's unapproachable father calmly telling her that the lessons to which she was so much looking forward could not be. She felt very much inclined to cry.

'I really cannot allow Fidge to lay himself under such an obligation to you,' said Mortimer, in reply to her question. 'It would be a great fag for anyone to teach a small boy music, and he has no possible claim on you. I did not quite take in the case yesterday, or I would have said so then.'

'Is that the only reason, Mr Mortimer? It is not

because you think I should not teach him well enough?' Madeline asked.

Mortimer laughed as he answered,—

'I certainly do not think that, Miss Delmar. But I know, what perhaps you do not, that to teach at all is a fag, and—'

'And you think I should grow tired of it, and not stick to it?'

'No, Miss Delmar, nothing of the kind. Please don't imagine I mean that sort of thing,' said Mortimer earnestly. 'I know it would be an immense benefit to Fidge to be taught by you, but—what claim on you has he? Don't you see he would be accepting a great deal from you which he would never be able to repay in any possible way. Indeed, I cannot permit it!'

He had not meant to explain his views quite so plainly, but he was rather driven into a corner.

Madeline perfectly comprehended the pride which was actuating him, but she was not going to submit quietly.

'Mr Mortimer,' she said, looking up at him as he stood on the hearthrug, 'I think you are very cruel—cruel to your son, and still more cruel to me. You admit that my lessons would be a benefit to him, and I was so looking forward to teaching him. I have not a very great deal to do—very little that is any use to anyone—and it would be such an interest to cultivate a voice and a talent like his. I mightn't do it very well, but I would do my best. It is very unkind of you to forbid it, for no reason at all.'

'But, Miss Delmar, I have any number of reasons.'

'You haven't explained them yet. Don't you see I want to teach Fidge quite as much to amuse myself as to benefit him—I shouldn't do it, indeed I shouldn't, unless I liked it, so please don't be so unkind.'

Mortimer hesitated. He was not prepared for this sort of pleading, and he did not know what to say. He still disliked the idea of his son being the recipient of such a great benefit, but he did not wish to be disagreeable to Miss Delmar, and he felt that if he persisted in his refusal, she would have every reason to think him so. How could she understand what it would cost him to let her teach Fidge? He little guessed that she could read what was passing in his mind quite clearly.

'Must I retract, then?' he asked.

'Yes, please do, Mr Mortimer. I wish Fidge were here to persuade you.'

'But I don't like retracting!'

'Oh! never mind that. It is so good for you, you know,' she said, feeling more at her ease.

'I don't know about that, Miss Delmar. Are disagreeable things always good for one, do you think?' and he smiled as he looked at her. What had she, in her peaceful, prosperous young life, known of disagreeable things?

'Usually; so you may comfort yourself with the reflection that it is good for you to let me teach Fidge, for I know you don't like that either.'

'Indeed it is most kind of you,' he began, in his stately way, but she put up her hand to stop him.

'It is not kind at all, Mr Mortimer, and you needn't even try to think it so. It is not *kind* to amuse oneself, and you are not to thank me. Won't you stop to tea?'

For Mortimer had taken up his hat, preparatory to leaving.

At this moment Owen Delmar entered, accompanied by Ted Calverley, whom he had met dismounting at the front door. By this time the Honourable Ted was a pretty frequent visitor to Crane Court.

CHAPTER XII.

TED, looking cool, handsome, and well-dressed, proceeded to greet Miss Delmar, and to express, with rather more *empressement* than was usual to him, his delight at finding her at home. But Mortimer, who knew him well, could not quite decide whether this *empressement* was spontaneous or assumed.

Calverley next turned to him, as he stood with his hat in his hand, waiting to take leave.

'I have just been to your place, Mortimer,' he said, 'and of course you were not at home; nor did your young hopeful, whom I found half-way up a tree, trying to break his neck, know where you were. I had something to say to you.'

'Well, here I am. Or will you look in at the Farm on your way home?' said Mortimer.

'No, I can say it now, if Miss Delmar will excuse one moment's business; for I am sure you are the soul of discretion,' he said, turning to her. 'That is to say, unless you object, Mortimer?'

'I am sure you can have nothing to say to me that might not be heard by the whole world,' replied the man addressed, easily.

'Have you no secrets then, Mr Mortimer?' inquired Owen.

'I—no ; why should I?' he replied.

'Not he,' said Calverley. 'He is as open as the day, and as steady as old Time,—not at all an interesting personage, you see, Miss Delmar. Well, Mortimer, it's just this. I have been asked to find out if I could—quite privately and unofficially, you understand—whether you would feel inclined to stand for this division of the county in the coming General Election. You are obviously the best man. Your people generally have represented the county ; you are just the sort of man we want ; and you are so popular, you would be sure of a good majority. I believe everybody on our side would like you, and goodness knows of who else the same can be said. That's all. Of course, you needn't make up your mind now, all of a heap. You can give me your answer any time, or, indeed, you needn't answer me at all, but, if you are amiable, you'll give me a hint.'

Ted was sitting on an armchair, in one of his graceful, lazy attitudes. The Delmars were a little astonished at the delicate mission that had been entrusted to him, and the easy way in which he had acquitted himself of it. But, though Ted professed to hate them, politics and diplomacy came natural to every Calverley.

Geoffrey Mortimer, standing square and erect on the hearthrug, with his back to the empty fireplace, looked Ted straight in the face as he answered quietly, but without a moment's hesitation,—

'My dear fellow, I require no time to consider, and I can give you my answer at once. I am much flattered by your proposition, and I should like to represent East

Elmshire very much, but it is utterly out of the question. I could not possibly afford such a thing.'

'But if—'

'I know what you are going to say. Even if I had not to pay all the expenses of the election, even if I could consent to have them defrayed for me, I could not possibly afford to live as a Member should. No, Ted, the days when a Mortimer sat in St Stephen's are over. Even were I a solitary man, it might be different. But I have a son. You will easily find a far better man to be your candidate; and, whoever he is, you may be sure I will support him to the very utmost of my ability. Now I really must be off.'

Madeline had felt her eyes grow misty with sympathy for the man as he made this straightforward avowal, and she was so sorry that it had to be made before her brother and herself, and in that house. For almost the first time in her life she, who had never known what it was to want anything money could procure, realised how bitter a thing poverty must be—not the poverty that begs pence in the street, and wears rags, but that other poverty, that dresses in broadcloth and has no lack of food. She made no effort to detain Mortimer as he said good-bye, but she lifted her eyes to him with so deep a pity shining in them, that he could neither ignore it nor be offended by it.

Perhaps it was some feeling of the same sort that made Owen accompany him to the front door and stand there talking to him for a moment, exerting himself to be agreeable, as he could well be when he chose. Certainly that afternoon seemed to considerably diminish the distance there had always been between the tenants of Crane Court and its owner.

And yet perhaps the interview with Ted Calverley had not been as painful to him as they imagined. He was to begin with, far too proud a man to mind owning he was poor, especially as he felt this poverty must be such a very patent fact to everyone. Besides, it had cost him so much that it was no great thing to have to refuse an honour to which he had never imagined he could aspire. If that was the only thing he had ever had to give up for want of means, he would have thought himself lucky. But, standing in the changed drawing-room at Crane Court, there was a sharper pain at his heart, a pain to which he could not get accustomed, that quite deadened the lesser one.

'Now that's a horrid bore!' said Ted Calverley to Madeline, after Mr Mortimer had gone, as he settled himself still more comfortably in his chair. 'We are to have a *fête* in our park in a week or two, and we thought it would be a capital opportunity to introduce the Conservative candidate. And now goodness knows who he will be. It's a nuisance.'

'I am afraid I pity Mr Mortimer more that you,' said Madeline. 'I suppose he is really not at all well off.'

'As poor as a rat, poor old chappie. But then almost everybody is nowadays. I know I am.'

'But I imagine that's only because you have been extravagant,' Madeline remarked.

Ted was rather taken aback. He had not an idea how much of his career was known to her. It was not a career a man would like the woman he had the slightest intention of marrying to be acquainted with in its entirety. But he had the sense not to deny Miss Delmar's imputation. He reflected that it was not the least use telling a lie when the truth might easily be discovered.

He looked mournful, and said humbly,—

'I am afraid you are not far wrong, Miss Delmar. I've been rather a bad lot, I know, in times past. Nobody knows that better than I do. But—' here he made an expressive pause.

'But you are sorry for you misdeeds?' asked Madeline lightly. Her question would have been out of place put seriously, but, all the same, she listened rather anxiously for his reply.

'That's just it—I am,' he said. 'I'm beginning to see what an awful ass I've been, and that I must mend my ways; and I hope I'm not too late.'

He looked so penitent and melancholy, and withal so handsome, that Madeline believed him, as other people had often done ere then. And, like a woman, she thought to herself that better one repentant scapegrace, than ninety and nine steady-going, every-day well-doers.

That week Lord and Lady Eastanley arrived at Eastanley Castle. Soon the house was to be filled with visitors, but for the nonce they and Ted were alone. Probably he had never been so glad to see his parents, since his school days, for he was beginning to find solitary grandeur intolerable. Since the last grand crisis, too, which had ended in his banishment to Eastanley Castle, he had really led an exemplary life, so he could meet them with a clear conscience.

If Ted loved anyone in the world, it was his mother. He was the youngest of Lady Eastanley's children, and the only one who had turned out badly, and she was fonder of him than all the others put together. It was she who had again and again pleaded for him, and it was owing

to her entreaties that Lord Eastanley had hitherto condoned his offences, and paid his debts, under protest.

It was the evening of the day on which the Eastanleys had reached home, and they had finished dinner. The servants had left the room, and Ted was engaged in preparing a peach for his mother. Perhaps one reason why he retained his hold upon her affections was, that he never failed in these small, graceful attentions, which a far better son might have omitted.

'So,' said Lord Eastanley, 'Mortimer has refused to stand for East Elmshire.'

'Yes. He say he can't afford it, poor old chap,' replied Ted.

'I thought such a thing was possible. Now the question is, who are we to have? Do you know of anyone, Ted?' asked the Earl. 'You have been living here some little time now, and, I presume, going about in the county.'

'I don't think there is anyone,' Ted answered. 'All the good men are so poor. Foster would like to stand, but he's so unpopular among the farmers, he wouldn't have a chance; and so would Mardike, but he's not sound. The new voters about here are mostly Radical, you know, and it's quite a toss-up if any Conservative gets returned.'

'I know,' said Lord Eastanley. 'Now listen, Ted. If a Mortimer does not stand for this division, a Calverley should. *You* must come forward as Tory candidate.'

'I!'

In his amazement, only the one monosyllable escaped Ted. He stopped short with his glass of claret half-way to his lips, and stared at his father as if he had told him he must be shot.

'Yes, you!' Lord Eastanley replied composedly.

'There is no one else. Silvester will, of course, stand again for Bosham, and Dick has no intention of leaving the Rifles at present.'

'But I have no intention of going into Parliament,' observed Ted.

'Allow me to remark that you have forfeited your claim to the same consideration as your brothers,' said the Earl severely. 'You can have no good reason to urge why you should not fulfil what is an obvious duty.'

'It would be such a nice thing for you to go into Parliament, dear,' interposed Lady Eastanley, before Ted had time to speak. 'It would give you an occupation, and help you to keep steady. And if only you would settle down!'

'Does that mean *marry*, mother?'

'If you could but take a fancy to some nice girl, it would be such a good thing for you, Ted.'

And Ted felt that he was indeed being 'taken in and done for,' as he mentally expressed it. Marriage and parliamentary life!—two possibilities he had never taken into his calculations. He felt at the moment that he did not know which was the worst.

The latter was the most immediate. He did not submit without many protestations and objections, but he had to give in eventually, for he was by no means in a position to decline anything on which his father insisted, though he inwardly cursed the circumstances which had led him into this unpleasant predicament. He thought he was being made to pay very dearly for what Lord Eastanley had done for him. The Honourable Ted was one of those irresponsible people who can never be made to see the necessity of earning their keep, and who appear

to consider that they were sent into the world for no other purpose than to amuse themselves.

So in the course of a few days various posters appeared in different parts of East Elmshire, on walls, barn-doors, the trunks of trees, and other convenient stations, announcing in bright blue letters that a great Conservative *fête* would be held in Eastanley Park, and setting forth all the attractions to be found at it.

Mrs Delmar, taking a stroll one evening with Madeline, encountered one of these blue and white posters, on the blank wall of a cottage of Mr Mortimer's. She stopped to study it. The fact was, the *fête* at Eastanley Castle caused her a good deal of perplexity. In his airy, off-hand way Ted Calverley had told her she must go; but she did not feel at all sure that it would be the right thing to do, and Mrs Delmar had a great horror of doing what was the wrong thing.

'I wish I knew someone to ask about it,' she said. 'I think I will drive over to call on Mrs Digby, and find out from her whether they are going.'

'The Digbys would say their proceedings were no guide for ours,' said Madeline, smiling. 'Mother, here comes Mr Mortimer.'

Mrs Delmar turned round as the Squire approached, and stopped him.

'Mr Mortimer, are you going to this affair?' she asked, pointing to the bill with her parasol.

'To the Feat, as they call it in these parts—oh yes! Are not you?' he replied, apparently rather surprised at the question.

'Well, I don't know, I'm sure. Mr Calverley wants us to; but then young men are so—so casual. I wish you

would tell us, Mr Mortimer, whether it's the right thing to do,—whether ladies do go to a thing of this sort. You will be sure to know.'

Mortimer smiled a little. Mrs Delmar spoke with such earnest anxiety, and looked at him so appealingly. Yet, after all, he perhaps reflected, Ted Calverley was very little his junior. But Mr Mortimer had long ago given up reckoning himself as a young man.

'It is very much the correct thing to do,' he answered. 'Ladies always have gone to entertainments of this description in this unsophisticated part of the world. And they do so still more now that they take such a leading part in politics. Probably you would be stigmatised as Radicals if you did not go.'

'Oh, we don't want that to 'appen!' said Mrs Delmar, much comforted. 'We are all good Conservatives, as you know, except Owen. We should not like to be thought Radicals at all. We will certainly go to Eastanley Castle, and I daresay it will be very amusing.'

'You may find it so,' Mortimer replied. 'I am afraid these affairs have begun to pall upon me—I have been to so many, from my youth up until now. But my son is looking forward immensely to this one.'

'Oh, I am so glad he is going!' exclaimed Madeline.

'Yes, Mrs Townley is going to take him. I have to be over early to attend the dinner. Good-evening, Mrs Delmar,' and lifting his hat, Mortimer went on, leaving Mrs Delmar in great joy that she was to find herself once more within the precincts of Eastanley Castle.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE day of the *fête* turned out bright and fine, luckily, and the Delmars drove to Eastanley Castle in good time to hear the speeches which followed the public dinner by which the operations began. A Feat, as everyone in East Elmshire called it, was a novel entertainment to Madeline, and she was full of amused curiosity as to what it was like.

Several large tents, swings, and a merry-go-round, had been put up in a flat and open portion of the great park. Spaces were marked off by flags and posts where races and sports were to take place, and one or two gipsy caravans were visible under the trees. A brass band was playing at intervals, and the steam merry-go-round also discoursed sweet music, but never happened to hit off the same tune as the band. As they were rather close together, the effect was confusing. There were a great many women and children about (the men were mostly in the dinner-tent), but the space was so great there was no appearance of crowd. The general aspect was more like that of a country race-meeting, without either horses, ring, or grand-stand, than anything else.

Escorted by Mrs Townley and Fidge, who joined them

directly they reached the ground, the Delmars made their way towards the dinner-tent, where the speeches were about to begin, and round which the more educated people were congregating.

Rather to the surprise of his people, for his electioneering work had fairly begun, Owen Delmar had contrived to find time to run down to Crane Court and go with his family to the Feat. He managed to elbow a way through the crowd into the tent for Madeline, so that she could both see and hear what was going on. The speeches were regarded with great interest, for it was generally understood that the Conservative candidate for the coming election was to be introduced, but who he was to be was not yet known to the *hoi polloi*, including the Delmars.

What Madeline saw was the greasy remainder of six hundred dinners, and as many tumblers of beer, the six hundred consumers of which were seated on benches round the boards on trestles on which they had eaten their dinners. They were of all ranks, more or less heterogeneously mixed, for parsons seemed to be elbowed by grocers, and farmers by their own labourers. But presently she perceived that about ten gentlemen were seated at a higher table, which, unlike the others, was adorned by a white cloth.

Fidge, who had kept close to her side, began to tell her who they all were. The man with the bald head in the centre was Lord Eastanley, and he was chairman. Then there was Lord Silvester, his eldest son, the member for Bosham, and Ted Calverley, and Mr Digby, and Geoffrey Mortimer, and a few more local magnates. Mortimer saw his son almost as quickly as his son saw him, and nodded to him across the tent.

The usual toasts were proposed and responded to very rapidly. Only one man made a speech of any length, and he was a local innkeeper, who, firmly persuaded he had the gift of oratory, was delighted to find himself in so good a position to display it. He was only audible to his more immediate neighbours, so his eloquence was lost to the majority of the assembled multitude, for by this time the tent was very crowded.

Then, to the intense excitement of Fidge, Mr Mortimer rose to his feet, and proceeded to say he had been called upon to propose *the* toast of the day, the health of their future Conservative candidate — he hoped it might be their future member—the Honourable Edward Calverley, the youngest son of their noble chairman.

Ted was received with unanimous applause. Though the dinner was a public one, and paid for by the consumers, they most of them were well aware that the spacious tent had been put up by Lord Eastanley, and the band and other amusements outside provided by him, so whatever might have been their private sentiments, this was not the place where they could do anything but receive his son with acclamation.

Ted's speech followed, an important one, for he had to announce in it his political views. Probably he took most of his acquaintances among his audience more or less by surprise. He made no pretensions to oratory, but he was a fluent, easy speaker, in a sort of gossipy, colloquial style, which it did not require much exertion to follow. He had been carefully coached as to the matter of his speech ; besides, he had lived in a political atmosphere since his babyhood, so that he was well at home in his subject. His soft, *traînante* voice and

refined pronunciation were heard easily, and at some distance, though he did not appear to take any trouble to make himself audible, and his perfect self-possession, springing partly from carelessness, gave him an advantage a more earnest speaker might have lacked. Lady Eastanley, listening delightedly, felt that perhaps after all her youngest son might be a success.

The speeches over, there was a general stampede from the tent which was in sooth uncommonly hot and close. Mortimer and Calverley soon made their way to where the Delmars and Fidge were standing, and Fidge as usual rushed to his father.

'I must congratulate you,' said Madeline to Ted. 'I had no idea you were going to represent us.'

'Nor had I, but I've got to try,' he replied sadly. 'Oh, Miss Delmar, don't you pity me? Isn't it a horrid nuisance? I wish I had never been born; but one comfort is, I am not likely to be returned.'

This was not precisely the view Madeline had been accustomed to hear taken of electioneering, but before she had time to reply, he was attacked by a couple of farmers. He shot one glance of supreme misery at her, as he submitted to the necessity, and moved away. The candidate for East Elmshire must not be permitted to please himself in future as to who he talked with.

'Miss Delmar,' said Geoffrey Mortimer, 'Fidge is yearning to go on the merry-go-round. Will you come too?'

'Not on it, but I will come to see him start,' she replied.

She looked round for Owen, but he was talking to Gertie Digby, so she went off with Mr Mortimer and

Fidge, who was clutching a penny tight in his hand, wherewith to pay for his ride.

'Are you sure you won't change your mind, and have a turn?' asked Mortimer, as they stood watching the gyrating machine whirling round its freight of happy riders.

He spoke quite gravely, and Madeline was almost affronted that he could suggest she should do such a thing. She replied somewhat indignantly, that nothing would induce her; but she found a few moments later that she might have spared her indignation. Several girls and young men, all belonging to what Mrs Delmar would have called the county families, came up, and all proceeded calmly, though with much laughter, to pay their pennies and take their seats on the concern. They tried to induce Mortimer to join them, but he declined.

'Have you ever done such a thing?' Madeline asked.

'Oh yes; often, when I was young,' he answered. 'But now I would just as soon Fidge were made giddy as I.'

When the party of young people had had their ride, they all trooped off to see the shows. Mortimer and Miss Delmar joined them, as Fidge was dying to see all there was to be seen. As she was with Geoffrey Mortimer, those of the party who knew her were very friendly, but she had an idea that it was only because she was with him. But Mortimer was very popular, and a good deal of sympathy was felt for him in East Elmshire; and it was impossible to be high and mighty to his tenants, under his nose.

They went to see—rather to Madeline's horror, be it

confessed—first of all the Fat Man and the Dwarf, and then a marvellous performing pony, who by various stamps and nods answered questions and indicated various people. For instance, on being asked who was the gentleman who was fond of kissing a pretty girl, the white pony, who looked rather weary of the world, solemnly walked round and made a dead set at Ted Calverley, at whom he nodded emphatically, much to the delight of the populace.

On emerging from this booth, Madeline received another shock, for she suddenly found herself in extremely close propinquity to a donkey who was making violent demonstrations with his heels. She tried to move away, only to run against another donkey. Then she was seized with a panic at finding herself in the middle of a crowd, quite forgetting the crowd was a great many degrees removed, both in size and quality, from a London one. She made quite a rush at Mr Mortimer for protection. He only laughed at her unmercifully, and declared he had seen nothing so funny as her abject terror at the donkeys and the crowd, for a long time.

'It's no good,' she said, shaking her head pensively. 'I see I'm a hopeless Cockney.'

'Do you think our country ways very funny, Miss Delmar? How do you like a *fête?*'

'I think it is amusing,' she answered, rather breathlessly—the donkeys and the crowd just then went off with a rush—'but rather odd.'

Gertrude Digby had gone to look at the Athletic Sports, accompanied by Owen Delmar. She said to herself that she hated him, but she did not make very vigorous efforts to shake him off. She had not been

prepared to see him there that day. Perhaps it was the very strength of her hatred that made her think so much about him, for in truth Owen Delmar was a good deal in Gertie's thoughts, though as yet she did not admit to herself that she did otherwise than hate him.

'So Ted Calverley is to be your candidate,' Owen remarked. 'I had no idea he had any views of that sort.'

'Nor had he. I expect he was made to stand,' she replied. 'A nice candidate he will make. He won't care a bit about it, and will leave anyone else to do the work.'

'Will you work for him?'

'Of course I shall—for the Cause, not for him. But it would be more interesting were he more keen about it himself.'

'I can't imagine a man standing, and not being keen about it.'

'Ah yes! You are going to stand on the wrong side for some place in the north, are you not?' asked Gertrude. 'Are you very keen about it?'

'Yes, I am!' he said, with brief emphasis, his face lighting up. 'Will you not wish me good luck, Miss Digby?'

'No; certainly not—it would be against all my principles,' she replied promptly. 'Are you likely to get in?'

'I mean to, though I am told I have not much chance. I am going up to my constituency to-morrow, and there I shall have to stick pretty close, and work hard for some time. So you won't be bothered by seeing me again at present.'

'That's a comfort!'

'I thought you would be glad to hear it!'

'I am.' Then, with a change of tone, she said,—'Now why will you make me say such things, Mr

Delmar. I was actually trying to be civil to you for once ; it was such an effort.'

Owen burst out laughing.

'I am sorry it did not succeed well enough for me to be even aware of it,' he said.

Gertie gave a petulant twirl to her parasol, and flushed red with annoyance. She looked steadily at a jumping competition in front of her, without saying a word. She and Owen Delmar sparred a good deal, but all the same, they were together almost all the afternoon.

'Who is that pretty girl talking to Ted?' asked Lady Eastanley, sitting down on a bench to rest for a few moments by Mrs Digby.

'She is the daughter of the Delmars, the people who have taken poor Geoffrey Mortimer's place. She is a nice girl, and the younger son is not bad, but the father and mother are dreadful!' said Mrs Digby.

Lady Eastanley put up her gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and studied unconscious Madeline.

'I have heard about them,' she said. 'The girl looks nice enough. It does not do to despise plutocrats in these days. They are having their innings now, and must be cultivated. I shall call on Mrs Delmar.'

Poor little Mrs Digby had a dim idea she had been snubbed, and relapsed into silence, still, however, reserving her own opinion, after the manner of mild people, that Mr Delmar and his wife were dreadful people.

'Fidge!' said his father to him, as he stood by the side of Madeline and Ted Calverley, staring at the shooting for cocoa-nuts and brandy-balls, 'I think it is time for you and I to be trudging, if we mean to be home by your bedtime ; and what will Margaret say if we aren't?'

'Yes, Dad, I'm ready,' Fidge replied, with his prompt obedience.

'How are you going back?' Madeline asked him.

'Mrs Townley brought me here in her pony-carriage, but Dad and I are going to walk back together,' he answered.

'Isn't it rather far for you, little man?'

'Oh no, my Maidie. I can walk a great long way, you know. And if I'm tired, Dad will carry me. Good-bye, my darling Maidie; how I wish you were coming home with us—with me and Dad.'

An idea which caused Madeline's face to burn, Ted Calverley to laugh audibly, and Mortimer's voice to shake somewhat with amusement, as he bade them good-bye.

About half-an-hour later the Delmars, rolling rapidly home in their comfortable carriage, passed the two Geoffrey Mortimers, the younger riding triumphantly on the elder's back, as he trudged along the dusty highroad.

Mrs Delmar wanted to stop the carriage, and take up the little boy, but Madeline prevented her. She felt the two were perfectly happy together, hot and dusty and tired though they might be, and that the offer of a lift for his son would probably only pain the squire. It was with a curious pang of something very like envy and jealousy that she watched them until the carriage had gone round a corner, and they were hidden. Mortimer's head was turned to talk to Fidge, so that their two faces came very close together, and both were laughing merrily. They looked so absolutely all in all to each other, so serenely happy together, that the millionaire's daughter felt a little bit envious, even of the poverty that had knit them so closely together.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE weeks slipped quietly by, and the summer —the most beautiful summer Miss Delmar had ever known, because it was the first she had spent entirely in the country—passed away. The golden autumn came, and the chief thought of all such of the East Elmshire gentlemen as were not too wholly given up to electioneering, appeared to be the slaughter of game. Some of them went in for electioneering with only an occasional relaxation of shooting, but most of them only went in for politics when they could not shoot. Among these latter was Ted Calverley himself,—he never worked if he could help it, and seemed to take less interest than anyone in East Elmshire about the result of the approaching election.

Sometimes, when he was neither shooting nor canvassing, he came over to Crane Court, and bemoaned his fate to Madeline; but she did not pity him much. On the contrary, she was inclined to be angry even with charming Ted Calverley, when she reflected how hard men and women were working for him in all directions, giving up their time and pleasure, and freely

expending energy and strength for the cause for which he cared so little.

'You don't deserve to be returned!' she exclaimed to him one day.

'That's my hope,' he replied sweetly. 'Now and then in this world people get their deserts, and so perhaps I may get mine—a good minority.'

Very different was the campaign Owen was fighting at Greatmills, where he found at its outset that his chances of getting elected were even fewer than he had been led to expect. Crane Court saw nothing of him, but accounts of his labours reached his people, and they were much elated by what they heard from outsiders of his oratorical power. Whether Greatmills returned or rejected him on this particular occasion, people said, there could be no doubt that sooner or later he would make his mark.

Mr Delmar did not trouble his head much about politics of any sort or kind. Perhaps he would have, if East Elmshire had made a little more of him; but he was having his disillusionments as time went on. He saw it was not so easy to become a country gentleman all at once, even though he lived at Crane Court, and could shoot over the whole of the Mortimer property, yes, and though he could have bought up half the neighbourhood. Mr Delmar had one failing—a very common one to men of his position. He thought far too highly of money. It had done so much for him, he could not believe but that it could do everything. He had to find out that it could not, at any rate in East Elmshire, give him the same position or entitle him to the same respect as even poor Geoffrey Mortimer who

lived in a tumble-down farmhouse, and kept no horses except his boy's pony, could command. And at times he felt inclined to be put out with the whole of East Elmshire in consequence.

Moreover, he really was not fitted, by all his previous occupations, to fulfil the *rôle* of a country squire, especially in an out-of-the-way, unsophisticated place. He did not the least know how to deal with the numerous odd characters who had grown up from childhood on the Crane Court estate, clinging to the soil as closely as limpets to a rock. Often, without in the least intending it, he rode roughshod over their tenderest feelings. Of course it was as much their fault as his. They had never seen anyone but a Mortimer at the Court; besides, all that was new must be, for that reason alone, wrong, and they were disposed to criticise in no friendly spirit all that the millionaire did. It was chiefly on the always delicate subject of game that Mr Delmar offended, and it was a matter about which he was extremely ignorant, though he was fond of shooting, and had great ideas about preserving pheasants.

Mortimer often wondered whether, when he let Crane Court, he had been quite wise in remaining so near at hand. It was not because he hated to see a stranger walking over his ancestral turnips and stubbles, or because of the sharp pang he felt when he heard the shots in the coverts, every inch of which he was so familiar with, that he felt this. He had counted the cost when he let Crane Court and took up his abode at Ten Acre Farm, and he was not the man to shrink from it. But there were other reasons.

It was so difficult to persuade the people that he was

not the Squire still, and to make them understand that it was no use coming to him with their grievances, for that he had absolutely no voice in the matter. He dreaded incurring the charge of interfering, which Mr Delmar's grand head-keeper, who hated the very name of Mortimer —not without cause, poor man, so often was it thrust down his throat—would have rejoiced to bring against him. It was none the easier because in his inmost heart he often sympathised with the grumblers.

'Now do 'ee look here, Master Geoffrey,' said Aaron Futcher, one of the under-keepers, to him one day, when he had intercepted Mortimer in the fields, and begun to pour forth his wrongs to him. 'It's goin' on for thurty year that I've a-been keepering in thiccy place, as man and boy, and I never war told afore that I war a poacher mysen.'

'As far as I can make out, you have not been told that now, Aaron,' said Mortimer, who could remember Futcher as long as he could remember anything. 'Only that you were not much better than the poachers if you did not look sharper after them.'

'What do he know about poachers?' said Futcher contemptuously. 'Nary mossel. But I do tell 'ee what 'tis, Master Geoffrey; I mayn't know a poacher, and he say I doesn't, but I d'know a gentleman when I d'zee one, and he ain't one, and zo I b'ain't a-going to zerve 'un.'

'Now, Aaron, don't be a fool,' said Mortimer quietly. 'You know perfectly well Mr Delmar pays you very well,—better than you have ever been paid before. You would not find it easy to get work if you left here. Many gentlemen are putting down their shooting, and there

are keepers out of place all over the country. You've your wife and children to think of.'

'There's other work besides keepering, and I don't ze as how I can stand this any longer,' growled the man.

'Well, try a little longer, at any rate,' said the Squire, more kindly. 'I have no doubt things are altered for you; but you must remember there is far more game in the place than there has been for many years, so a sharper look-out must be kept! Good-evening, Aaron.'

'Good-evenin', zur, and I wish as you were master still.'

'You used often to grumble at me when I was,' Mortimer replied, laughing.

'Yes, Master Geoffrey, but I never thought of leaving 'ee,' retorted Futcher, as he walked off to his coverts.

Often by his discretion and influence Mortimer was able to avert difficulties and disagreeables which must otherwise have arisen. Mr Delmar was conscious of his profound ignorance of country matters, in his inmost heart, and luckily he thoroughly liked and respected the poor Squire, so that he was not at all averse to applying to him for counsel and assistance when troubles arose. Madeline sometimes wondered whether Mortimer hated being applied to, and despised her father for doing so, but he always did his best for him cheerfully and cordially. She was conscious, if no one else was, how very different it might have been at Crane Court had the Squire been a different sort of man.

As far as she herself was concerned, she was beginning, chiefly through Fidge, to know Fidge's father better, and to realise that he could be very different to the stately,

courteous man he seemed unconsciously to stiffen into as soon as he found himself within the precincts of Crane Court. He became more friendly with her than he was with any other member of her family. But then her genuine, ever-increasing love for his small son quite won his heart. He was always ready to like anyone who was good to Fidge.

At the same time, Madeline could not quite get over her awe for him. Now and then she thought she had, and then she would see him in one of his cold moods, when his indescribably grand air, his ancient lineage, his very poverty itself, seemed to remove him immeasurably from her.

Between her and little Fidge the love and friendship never varied or slackened. The more she saw of him, the more fascinating she found him. He was so loving, so amusing, so taking in all his ways, that she began to wonder how she had ever existed without him.

One afternoon early in October, Madeline, out for one of her solitary rambles, found herself in the lane leading past Ten Acre Farm, just as a heavy storm was beginning. She had not intended to be there at all, but she had taken rather a long circuit to avoid some cows, for the town-bred girl had a righteous horror of horned beasts. She only wished she were much nearer home, for the storm was likely to be a sharp one, and she was quite unprepared for it. The day had hitherto been sunny and bright, but now it had suddenly become cold and dark, and a chill, gusty wind was rattling down the autumn leaves.

The first few heavy drops fell, and Madeline quickened her pace. But she knew, do what she would, that

she must be wet through before she got home. She gave a despairing look at the great inky cloud before her. Then she heard hurrying footsteps behind her, and Mr Mortimer's voice exclaiming,—

'This way, Miss Delmar. You must come to the Farm for shelter. You would be drenched through before you got anywhere else.'

'Oh, never mind!' gasped Madeline—'it won't matter.'

'But it will matter. Come, run; don't talk; you won't have breath for both. Fidge will be so glad to see you.'

In truth, Madeline found herself being hurried along much too rapidly for conversation, and in a few moments she was standing in the ivy-covered porch of the farm-house, but not before the rain came down in torrents and both she and Mortimer presented a decidedly damp appearance. He led the way into a stone paved passage, and then opened a door, and made her go in. Fidge, who was at the opposite end of the room she entered, looked up, and then made a rush when he saw who had come in.

'My own darling Maidie!' he exclaimed, flinging his arms around her in his usual tumultuous embrace. 'I am glad to see you.'

'I am afraid you are very wet,' said Mortimer. 'I will call Margaret—she may be able to wipe off some of the wet.'

'Oh, please don't, Mr Mortimer! It does not matter; and—and I feel so alarmed at Margaret,' protested Madeline.

The squire laughed.

'I am afraid it must be, though, Miss Delmar,' he said; 'she shall not injure you.'

But Madeline really felt alarmed, when she remem-

bered some of the very severe remarks the old nurse had made about her and her people.

Margaret speedily appeared in answer to her master's summons, and Madeline found she need not have been alarmed. Margaret had the old-fashioned instinct of hospitality too strongly to permit her to be anything but civil to a guest; besides, the young lady's pleasant manner, gentle voice, and quiet appearance disarmed her. She would have been very critical about any undue smartness of attire, but certainly the plain tweed dress and jacket she set herself to wipe dry with a clean cloth, did not offend in this direction. Not even her own dear young mistress, whom she had loved better than she had ever loved anyone, except perhaps Fidge, had been more simply clad for country walks.

'Lor', miss!' she exclaimed, 'wherever have you been? You are all baked in mud!'

Madeline looked somewhat amazed at this expression, but she answered, without daring even to smile at it,—

'I have been across the fields; but the mud won't hurt this skirt. It will all brush off when it is dry. Thank you so much. I am sure the wet won't hurt me now!'

A fire, chiefly composed of wood, was burning in the grate, and Mortimer coaxed it up to a cheerful blaze. He made Miss Delmar sit quite close to it, in order to complete the drying process, and he asked Margaret to bring up tea. So Madeline, who had often felt curious to know what her little favourite's home was like, sat by the crackling fire, and looked about her at her leisure, while she talked to Mr Mortimer and his son. The

latter had curled himself up in a big arm-chair by the fireside, and was gazing at her with delighted eyes.

It was a long, narrow, low room, and had evidently once had a partition across the centre. There were three windows, one at the end opposite the door, the other two at the side. All three were of different shapes and sizes.

The room was very untidy, and had a faint aroma of tobacco smoke about it, but it looked comfortable and homelike. The end nearest the door was evidently used as the dining-room, for it had a square table, and a side-board. The other end of the room was apparently Mortimer's gunroom, study, and business-room, and Fidge's schoolroom and playroom, and it was here the untidiness prevailed. Books, papers of all sorts, guns, pipes, tobacco-jars, and toys, were strewn about in confusion. The whole apartment was furnished in a very heterogeneous manner. Mortimer had bought a few things from the farmer who had lived there before, and supplemented them by odds and ends from Crane Court. He had himself put up various shelves and corner cupboards, and pegs—indeed the walls seemed adorned with everything but pictures, with one exception. The crayon portrait of a head hung over Mortimer's writing-table.

Tea was brought in, and the Squire proceeded to pour it out, with the ease of a man accustomed to do such small things for himself. He would not let Miss Delmar move from the fire, but made Fidge take her cup to her there, with a slice of home-made bread cake. She thought she had never seen him so bright and conversational, or so ready to exchange small jokes both with Fidge and with herself.

When she had finished her tea, she thought it was time

to go ; but Mortimer pointed out that it was still raining though with much less severity than before. Fidge drew her to the other end of the room to see some of his treasures. His father followed them, and, as he saw her looking at it, showed her the work he was engaged on—drawing plans for a pair of cottages. It might have seemed an anomaly that a man should build houses for other people when he could not afford to live in his own, but Geoffrey Mortimer was not a man to let his property go to rack and ruin for the sake of any enjoyment to himself.

'Do you really design them yourself?' asked Madeline.

'Yes, I have made the plans for all I have built,' he answered. 'The village bricklayer builds them under my superintendence. It is not uninteresting work ; besides, it saves the expenses of an architect.'

'You must be very clever,' said Madeline. 'It must be dreadfully difficult.'

'Oh no! not very. You only have to be exact. That is Fidge's mother,' he said, for he saw her look at the picture over his writing-table.

She was now able to see it well. It was a beautifully executed crayon drawing of a fair young girlish face, framed in soft cloudy hair, with great hazel eyes, and a sweet, almost childlike expression.

'Oh, how lovely!' exclaimed Madeline. 'Now I know where Fidge gets—'

'His good looks from ; evidently not from my side of the family,' interposed Mortimer, with a merry laugh, as she hesitated a second for a word. 'Now, Miss Delmar, that's rather rough on me. If you think such a thing, you should not say it.'

'I did not say it, nor was I going to,' she answered, colouring and smiling. 'You said it for me. I was going to say something quite different.'

'That's all very well now, Miss Delmar, but it's quite evident what you were going to say, only you just pulled up in time. It is no use trying to get out of it.'

'If you won't believe me, you won't,' she replied. 'But what I was on the point of saying was, now I know where Fidge gets those eyes from. They are just like—hers, and certainly not the least like yours.'

'Yes, his eyes are exactly like his mother's; and you have got out of it very well,' Mortimer said, still laughing.

Madeline saw the rain was at last quite over, so thanking Mr Mortimer for his hospitality, she took her leave, escorted by him to the lane. As she made her way home, the Squire was even more in her thoughts than his small son, and she was glad she had seen him at home.