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BELLES AND RINGERS

BY

HAWLEY SMART,

AUTHOR OF

"BOUND TO WIN;" "FALSE CARDS;" "TWO KISSES;" "COURTSHIP," ETC.

NEW EDITION.

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BELLES AND RINGERS.

CHAPTER I.

TODBOROUGH GRANGE.

Todborough Grange, the seat of Cedric Bloxam, Justice of the Peace, and whilom High Sheriff for East Farnshire, lies low. The original Bloxam, like the majority of our ancestors, had apparently a great dislike to an exposed situation; and either a supreme contempt for the science of sanitation, or a confused idea that water could be induced to run uphill, and so, not bothering his head on the subject of drainage, as indeed no one did in those days, he built his house in a hole, holding, I presume, that the hills were as good to look up at as the valleys to look down upon. It was an irregular pile of gabled red brick, of what could be only described as the composite order, having been added to by successive Bloxams at their own convenience, and without any regard to architectural design. It was surrounded by thick shrubberies, in which the laurels were broken by dense masses of rhododendrons. Beyond

these again were several plantations, and up the hill on the east side of the house stretched a wood of some eighty acres or so in extent.

As a race, the Bloxams possessed some of the leading Anglo-Saxon characteristics; to wit, courage, obstinacy, and density—or perhaps I should rather say slowness—of understanding. The present proprietor had been married—I use the term advisedly—to Lady Mary Ditchin, a daughter of the Earl of Turfington, a family whose hereditary devotion to sport in all its branches had somewhat impoverished their estates. The ladies could all ride; and some twenty odd years ago, when Cedric Bloxam was hunting in the Vale of White Horse country, Lord Turfington and his family chanced to be doing the same. Lady Mary rode; Cedric Bloxam saw; and Lady Mary conquered. She had made him a very good wife, although as she grew older she unfortunately, as some of us do, grew considerably heavier; and when no longer able to expend her superfluous energies in the hunting-field, she developed into a somewhat ambitious and pushing woman. In this latter *rôle* I do not think she pleased Cedric Bloxam quite so well. She insisted upon his standing for the county. Bloxam demurred at first, and, as usual, in the end Lady Mary had her own way. He threw himself into the fight with all the pugnacity of his disposition, and, while his blood was up, revelled in the fray. He could speak to the farmers in a blunt homely way, which suited them; and they brought him in as one of the Conservative Members for East Farnshire. But on penetrating the perfidy of the wife of his bosom, Cedric Bloxam mused sadly over the honours that he had won. When Lady Mary had alternately coaxed and goaded him into contesting the eastern division of his county, she was seeking only the means to an end. They had previously contented themselves with about six weeks of London in May and June; but his wife now pointed out to him that, as a Member of Parliament, it was essential that he should have a house for the season. It was the thin end of the wedge, and though Cedric Bloxam lost his seat at the next general election, that "house for the season" remained as a memento of his entrance into public life.

"You see," said Lady Mary to her intimates, while talking the thing over, "it was absolutely necessary that something should be done. After he has done the Derby, Ascot, and the University Match, Cedric is always bored with London. The girls are growing up, and how are they ever to get properly married if they don't get their season in town, poor things! I began by suggesting masters; but that had no effect on Cedric—he only retorted, 'Send them to school;' so it was absolutely necessary to approach him in another manner, and I flatter myself I was equal to the occasion."

All this took place some six or seven years before the commencement of our story; and the result had fully warranted Lady Mary's machinations, as she had successfully married off her two elder daughters, and, as she had occasionally told her intimates, her chief object in life now was to see Blanche, the younger, suitably provided for. Lady Mary was in her way a stanch and devoted mother. Her duty towards her daughters, she considered, terminated when she had once seen them properly married. She had two sons—one in a dragoon regiment, and the younger in the Foreign Office—and she never neglected to cajole or flatter any one who, she thought, might in any way be capable of advancing their interests.

The Bloxams had come down from town to entertain a few friends during the Easter holidays at Todborough, and Lady Mary was now sitting in the oriel window of the morning-room engaged in an animated *tête-à-tête* with one of her most intimate friends, Mr. Pansey Cottrell. Mr. Pansey Cottrell had been a man about town for the last thirty years, mixing freely everywhere in the very best society. It must have been a pure matter of whim if Pansey Cottrell ever paid for his own dinner during a London season—or, for the matter of that, even out of it—as he had only to name the week that suited him to be a welcome guest at scores of country houses. Nothing would have been more difficult than to explain why it was that Pansey Cottrell should be as essential to a fashionable dinner party as the epergne. Nothing more puzzling to account for than why his volunteering his presence in a country house should be always deemed a source of gratulation to the hostess. He was a man of no particular birth and no particular conversational powers; and unless due to his being thoroughly *au courant* with all the very latest gossip of the London world, his success can only be put down as past understanding. Neophytes who did not know Pansey Cottrell, when they met him in a country house, would gaze with awe-struck curiosity at the sheaf of correspondence awaiting him on the side-table, and wondered what news he would unfold to them that morning. But the more experienced knew better. Pansey Cottrell always came down late, and never talked at breakfast. He kept his budget of scandal invariably for the dinner-table and smoking-room. Such was Pansey Cottrell, as he appeared to the general public, though he possessed an unsuspected attribute, known only to some few of the initiated, and of which as yet Lady Mary had only an inkling.

A portly well-preserved gentleman, with iron-grey hair, and nothing particularly striking about him but a pair of keen dark eyes, he sits in the window, listening with a half-incredulous smile to the voluble speech of his buxom hostess.

"Well," exclaimed Lady Mary, in reply to some observation of her companion's, "I tell you, Pansey"

(she had known him from her childhood, and always called him Pansey, as indeed did many other middle-aged matrons)—"I tell you, Pansey," she repeated, "it is all a mistake; the majority of young men in our world do *not* marry whom they please: they may think so, but in the majority of cases they marry whom *we* please. The bell responds to the clapper; but who is it that makes the clapper to speak? The ringer. Do you see the force of my illustration?"

"If I fail to see its force," he replied, "I, of course, perfectly understand your illustration; and in this case Miss Blanche is of course the belle, you the ringer, and Mr. Beauchamp the clapper."

"Just so," replied Lady Mary, laughing. "Look at Diana, my eldest. She thinks she married Mannington; he thinks he married her; and *I know I married them*. People are always talking of Shakespeare's 'knowledge of human nature,' more especially those who never read him. Why don't they take a leaf out of his book? Do you suppose Beatrice nowadays, when she is told Benedick is dying for love of her, don't believe it, and that Benedick cannot be fooled in like manner? Go to—as they said in those times."

"And you would fain play Leonato to this Benedick," replied Pansey Cottrell. "Is this Beauchamp of whom you speak one of the Suffolk Beauchamps?"

"Yes; his father has a large property in the south of the county; and this Lionel Beauchamp is the eldest son, a good-looking young fellow, with a healthy taste for country life; just the man to suit dear Blanche admirably."

"And when do you expect him?"

"Oh, he ought to be here this evening in time for dinner," replied Lady Mary. "He seemed rather struck with Blanche in London, so I asked him down here for the Easter holidays, thinking it a nice opportunity of throwing them more together."

"I see," replied Mr. Cottrell, laughing; "you think in these cases it is just as well to assist nature by a little judicious forcing."

"Exactly. You see, a good-looking girl has such a pull in a country house, and when she is the only good-looking one, has it all her own way; and I need scarcely say I have taken care of that."

"Ahem! Todborough lies dangerously near to that most popular of watering-places, Commonstone," observed Cottrell; "and there is always attractive mettle to be found there."

"But I don't intend we shall ever go near it," replied her ladyship quickly. "We'll make up riding parties, plan excursions to Trotbury, and so on. Just the people in the house, you know, and the rector's daughters, nice pleasant unaffected girls, who, though not plain——"

"Cannot be counted dangerous," interposed Cottrell. "I understand. I congratulate you on your diplomacy, Lady Mary. By the way, who is your rector?"

"The Rev. Austin Chipchase. A good orthodox old-fashioned parson, thank goodness, with no High Church fads or Low Church proclivities."

"Chipchase? Ahem! I met an uncommon pretty girl of that name down in Suffolk last autumn, when I was staying at Hogden's place."

At this juncture the door opened, and the object of all this maternal solicitude entered the room. Her mother did Blanche Bloxam scant justice when she called her a good-looking girl. She was more than that; she might most certainly have been called a very good-looking girl of the thoroughly Saxon type—tall and well made, with a profusion of fair sunny hair, and deep blue eyes. Blanche was a girl no man would ever overlook, wherever he might come across her.

"What state secrets are you two talking," she exclaimed, "that you pay no attention to the bell? Come to lunch, mamma, please; for we have been playing lawn tennis all the morning, and are well-nigh distraught with hunger."

Lady Mary rose and followed her daughter to the dining-room, where the whole of the house party were assembled round the luncheon-table. It consisted, besides the family and Mr. Cottrell, of a Mr. and Mrs. Evesham and their two daughters—"such amiable girls, you know," as Lady Mary always said of them; a Mr. and Mrs. Sartoris, a young married couple; Jim Bloxam, the dragoon; and a Captain Braybrooke, a brother officer of his.

"Come along, mother," exclaimed Jim. "Mrs. Sartoris has given me such a dusting at lawn tennis this

morning that no amount of brown sherry and pigeon-pie will support me under the ignominy of my defeat."

"Thank you, Mrs. Sartoris," said Lady Mary, laughing. "I am very glad indeed, Jim, that somebody has been good enough to take the conceit out of you. But what do all you good people propose doing with yourselves this afternoon? There are a certain number of riding-horses; and of course there's the carriage, Mrs. Evesham."

"Don't you trouble, mother," exclaimed Jim Bloxam; "we are going upon an expedition of discovery. Mrs. Sartoris has got a brother in the army. She don't quite recollect his regiment; and beyond that it is in England, she does not know precisely where he is quartered. But he is in the something-somethieth, and we are going to see if we can find him in Rockcliffe Camp."

"Don't be so absurd, Captain Bloxam," rejoined Mrs. Sartoris. "But I am told, Lady Mary, it is a pretty walk to the camp, and that there is a grand view over the Channel on the south side of it."

"It is the very thing, mamma," observed Blanche. "It is our duty to absorb as much ozone as possible while we are down here, in order to fit us for the fatigues of the season which, I trust, are in store for us."

"Getting perilously near Commonstone," whispered Pansey Cottrell, who happened to be sitting next to his hostess.

Although the arrangement did not exactly meet with her approbation, yet Lady Mary could make no objection, any more than she could avoid smiling at Cottrell's remark; but it would seem as if some malignant genie had devoted his whole attention to thwarting her schemes, the malignant genie in this case taking the form of her eldest son. Upon an adjournment, Jim Bloxam strongly urged that those of the party who were not for a tramp to Rockcliffe should drive into Commonstone, and ascertain if there was anything going on that was likely to be worth their attention. In the middle of this discussion came a ring at the front door bell, immediately followed by the announcement of the Misses Chipchase; and the rector's two daughters entered the room, accompanied, to Lady Mary's horror, by one of the most piquant and brilliant brunettes she had ever set eyes on.

"So glad to see you down again, dear Lady Mary," said Miss Chipchase, "and with a house full too! that's so nice of you; just in time to assist at all our Easter revelries. Let me introduce you to my cousin, Sylla Chipchase, just come down to spend a month with us." And then the rector's daughters proceeded to shake hands with Blanche and Captain Bloxam, and be by them presented to the remainder of the party.

Pansey Cottrell could scarce refrain from laughing outright as he advanced to shake hands with Sylla Chipchase, the identical young lady whom he had met last autumn in Suffolk, and who had now turned up at Todborough, looking more provokingly pretty than ever. He had caught one glance of his hostess's face; and, behind the scenes as he was, that had been so nearly too much for his risible faculties that he dared not hazard another. As he advanced to shake hands with Miss Sylla, he felt that the Fates had been even more unkind to Lady Mary than she could as yet be possibly aware of; for he remembered at Hogden's that Miss Sylla had not only been voted the belle of a party containing two or three very pretty women, but had also enchanted the men by her fun, vivacity, and singing. Poor Lady Mary! it was hard, in spite of all her efforts to secure a clear field, to find her daughter suddenly confronted by such a formidable rival.

"We meet again, you see, Miss Sylla," said Cottrell, as they shook hands. "I told you in Suffolk, if you remember, that in my ubiquity I was a person very difficult to see the last of."

"And who that had ever met Mr. Cottrell would wish to have seen the last of him?" replied the young lady gaily. "We had great fun together in Suffolk, and I hope we are going to have great fun together in Fernshire. My cousins tell me there are no end of balls and dances to come off in the course of the next ten days."

"Dear me!" replied Mr. Cottrell, his eyes twinkling with the fun of the situation. "This is all very well for you country people, Miss Sylla; but we poor Londoners have come down for rest after a spell of hot rooms and late hours, preparatory to encountering fresh dissipations. Is it not so, Lady Mary? Did you not promise me quiet and country air, with a dash of the salt water in it?"

"Of course," was the reply; "we have come down here to recruit."

"Oh, but, Lady Mary, you will never shut yourself up and turn recluse," returned the elder Miss Chipchase. "You must come to the Commonstone ball on Easter Monday; you will all come, of course. I quite count upon you, Captain Bloxam."

"Perfectly right, Miss Chipchase," replied the dragoon, with a glance of unmistakable admiration at the new importation. "Did you ever know me fail you in valseing? and are not the soldiers of to-day every bit as much 'all there' as the sailors of yore, whenever England generally, or Commonstone in particular, expects that every man this night will do his duty?"

"Ah, yes," replied Miss Chipchase, "I recollect our trying to valse to 'God save the Queen;' but we could make nothing out of it. And you, Mr. Bloxam,—you are bound to be there. Remember you engaged me for 'Sir Roger de Coverley,' for the next dance we met at, last Christmas Eve."

"I don't forget, Laura," laughed the Squire; "only you really must moderate the pace down the middle this time."

"And then," continued the voluble young lady, "they have got a big lunch at the camp, with athletic sports afterwards, on Tuesday, for which you will, of course, receive cards."

"There is nothing like rural retirement for rest and quietness," observed Pansey Cottrell, dryly.

"My dear Laura," interposed Lady Mary, "your tongue is running away with you. I have told you we have come down here for a little quiet. I am very glad, for your sake, that you have so much gaiety going on; but I am afraid you will have to excuse us taking part in it."

"Now, really that is too bad of you, Lady Mary," returned Miss Chipchase. "You are always so kind," she continued, dropping her voice; "and you know what a difference it makes to us to be able to join the Todborough party. With my cousin Sylla staying with us and all, I really did hope——"

"Impossible, my dear," interrupted Lady Mary. "If we don't get a little quiet now, I shall be having dear Blanche thoroughly knocked up before the season is over."

Miss Chipchase said nothing, but marvelled much what all this anxiety about dear Blanche's health might portend. The two girls were sworn friends, and Laura Chipchase had more than once envied Blanche's physique when she had met her, looking as fresh as a rose, at the covertside in the morning, after they had been both dancing until four.

"I am so sorry we shall not see you at the Commonstone ball, Captain Bloxam," said Miss Sylla, with whom Jim had entered into conversation.

"Why so? What makes you think I shall not be there?"

"Because your mamma has brought you down here for the repairing of your shattered constitutions," replied the young lady, demurely. "Do you all go to bed at half-past ten?"

"Well, yes," returned Jim, with mock gravity. "I shall have to comply with the maternal's programme as far as that goes; but to do honour to the *début* of so fair a stranger in the land, I think Miss Sylla, I can contrive to get out of the window after they are all asleep, and make my way over to Commonstone."

"Dear me, how I should envy you! What fun it would be, the really going to a ball in such surreptitious fashion!"

"Yes," said Jim; "but think about all the fears and anxieties of getting back again. It's always so much easier to get out of a window than to get into one."

"But what are you all proposing to do this afternoon, Blanche?" inquired Laura Chipchase.

"Well, we thought of walking up to the camp and having a look at the sea."

"And to search for Mrs. Sartoris's brother," interposed Jim Bloxam.

"You have a brother quartered at Rockcliffe, Mrs. Sartoris? I wonder whether we know him? What is he in?" exclaimed Laura Chipchase.

"No; it is only some of Captain Bloxam's nonsense. I have a brother in the army, and he pretends that I don't know where he is, or what is his regiment."

"A walk to the camp—ah, that would be amusing!" said Miss Sylla. "I never saw one. Are they under canvas?"

"No; boards," returned Jim. "But come along; if we are going to walk to Rockcliffe, it is time we were

off. The sooner you ladies get your hats on, the better. We'll find Mrs. Sartoris's brother, launch Miss Sylla here in military circles, and return with raging appetites to dinner." And so saying, the dragoon, followed by most of the party, made his way to the front door.

"Very nice of you, Pansey," said Lady Mary, "to put in that plea for peace and quietness. I can't think what has come to the place. Who ever heard of Commonstone breaking out with an Easter ball before? Todborough generally is as dull as ditch-water at this time of year. Something, it is true, may be going on at the camp; but as we know nobody there just now, it usually does not affect us. However, I have no intention of submitting to such a *bouleversement* of my schemes as this; and go to that ball *I don't*."

CHAPTER II.

THE CONSPIRATORS TRIUMPH.

The dressing-bell was pealing as the gay party returned in high spirits from their walk. It had been a very successful excursion, and the newcomer, Miss Sylla, was unanimously voted an acquisition.

"Laura tells me," said Miss Bloxam, "that her cousin sings charmingly, and is simply immense at charades, private theatricals, and all that sort of thing."

"Ah, we might do something in that way one evening next week," said her brother, as they passed through the hall. "Mr. Beauchamp here, James?"

"Yes, sir; came about a quarter of an hour ago; he has just gone up to dress."

Blanche was sitting in front of her dressing-table, with her maid putting the finishing-touches to her toilette, when a slight tap at the door was followed by the entrance of her mother.

"That will do, Gimp," said Lady Mary. "I will arrange those flowers in Miss Blanche's hair myself;" and, obedient to the intimation, the lady's-maid left the room. "I have just looked in to speak to you, Blanche, about this ball. If the subject is revived at dinner this evening, you won't want to go to it: you understand?"

"Of course, mamma, I will say so if you wish it; but I should like to go, all the same."

"Oh, nonsense! An Easter ball at Commonstone would be a shocking, vulgar, not to say rowdy, affair. Besides, surely you have had plenty of dancing in London, to say nothing of heaps more in perspective."

"Dancing!" replied the girl, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I don't call a London ball dancing. One jigs round and round in a place about ten feet square, but one never gets a really good spin. We have been at Commonstone balls before. What makes you think this one would be more uproarious than usual?"

"We have never been to an Easter ball, my dear," replied Lady Mary, adjusting a piece of fern in her daughter's tresses. "We came down here for quiet, and if you don't require a rest, I do. You must think of your poor chaperon a little, Blanche."

"Don't say another word, mamma. You are a dear amiable chaperon, and have been awfully good about staying a little late at times. I don't want to drag you over to Commonstone, when your wish is to be left peacefully at home. We won't do the Easter ball, though it is sad to think what a capital room they have for it. But come along, there goes the bell, and I am sure now I look most bewitching."

It was not Lady's Mary's custom to take her daughters into her confidence, in the first instance, with regard to the matrimonial designs she had formed for their benefit. All the preliminary manoeuvres she conducted herself. The idea of young people gravitating together naturally was a theory she would have received with profound derision. She looked upon it that all what she would have termed successful marriages were as much owing to the clever diplomacy of mothers or chaperons as the victory of a horse in a big race is due to the skilful handling of his jockey. During the afternoon she had been meditating over the plan of her Easter campaign, and resolved to adhere to her original determination. Most decidedly she would have nothing to do with Commonstone and its gaieties, nor would she afford greater favour to any revelries at the Rockcliffe camp; and most devoutly did she wish that it was in her power to keep the rector's daughters altogether at arm's length, now that she had seen this new cousinly importation. At arm's length as much as possible the Misses Chipchase should be held, she determined.

"That Miss Sylla," she muttered, "is just the sort of girl men always lose their heads about; clever, too, if I mistake not. Well, I don't mean to see more of her at the Grange than I am positively obliged to; but keep her out altogether I can't. The Chipchase girls have grown up with my own, and been always accustomed to come and go pretty much as they liked. However," thought her ladyship, "the first thing to settle undoubtedly is this ball;" and, as she and her daughter descended to dinner, Lady Mary did fancy that, at all events, she had settled that.

"Ah, here you are at last," said the Squire, as they entered the drawing-room; "dinner is already announced, my lady. Come along, Mrs. Evesham, it's no use letting the soup get cold."

"How do you do, Mr. Beauchamp?" said Lady Mary, as a dark, good-looking young fellow came forward to shake hands with her. "It seems I am dreadfully late, and have only time now to say I am delighted that you have found your way to Todborough. Perhaps you will take care of Blanche." And then the hostess turned away to pair off her other guests.

"I congratulate you, Lady Mary, on so favourable an augury," said Pansey Cottrell, as he leisurely consumed his fish.

"Favourable augury! What can you mean?"

"Do you not see," returned Cottrell, in mock-tragical tones, "that we are thirteen to dinner? Do you not know that Lionel Beauchamp is the thirteenth? and do you not know what Fate has invariably in store for the thirteenth at a dinner party?"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Lady Mary; "why, they say it's hanging, do they not?"

"Well, of late years they have rather qualified the sentence. Popular opinion, I think, now inclines to the belief that the thirteenth, when a man, will be either hung—or married."

"I suppose we are advancing in the science of augury as in all other sciences," replied her ladyship, laughing, "and find that the omens, like the readings of the barometer, are capable of two interpretations."

"You must not speak lightly of the science of augury, Lady Mary. Allow me to give you the complete interpretation of the omen. The Fates have not only decreed that Lionel Beauchamp shall either be hung or married within the twelvemonth, but reserved the latter lot for him; and they indicate further who his future wife shall be. When there is no lady next him, it's a hanging matter, saith the oracle; where there is, that lady will be his wife before the year is out. Now, it can hardly point to Mrs. Evesham, who is on the right, and therefore I conclude it must indicate Miss Blanche, who is on his left."

"Very ingenious, indeed, Mr. Cottrell; but, dear me! they have begun to talk about that horrid ball again at the bottom of the table, have they not?"

"I say, mother," exclaimed Jim Bloxam, "of course we are all going to this Commonstone ball on Monday?"

"Nonsense! I am surprised at your thinking of such a thing. The idea of our going to a Commonstone ball on Easter Monday! Just fancy, my dear Jim, what it would be,—townspeople and excursionists from round about. No; I don't go in for being exclusive, goodness knows; but the Commonstone Easter ball is a rather more boisterous business than I can stand."

"What nonsense!" rejoined the dragoon, a little staggered, all the same, by his mother's argument. "It will be great fun, and I don't suppose a bit worse than any other of the Commonstone balls; and we have always gone to them, you know."

"Yes, but that's a very different thing from an Easter Monday ball. Of course you and any of the gentlemen of the party can go. You will have great fun, no doubt."

"But," urged Jim, "we are a large party, and can keep to ourselves, you know. It is a good room; and here is Blanche, I know, dying for a galop. Are you not, my sister?"

"No, indeed," said Blanche, responding bravely to her before-dinner tutoring; "I assure you I don't care about it in the least. I have no doubt mamma is right, and that the ball will be crowded with all sorts of disagreeable people."

"You little traitress," said Jim, with a comical grin upon his countenance, "I did think I could count upon you; but you are as perfidious as a county elector in these days of the ballot-box."

Poor Blanche coloured and bit her lip. She was conscious of gross tergiversation, of having ratted shamefully; for that merry party in the afternoon, as they stood in the camp of Rockcliffe overlooking Commonstone, had, one and all, vowed to foot it merrily in the town-hall on Easter Monday, and agreed that for real lovers of dancing a country ball beat a London one all to pieces.

"Well, mother," rejoined Jim, with one of his queer smiles, "on your head be it if any harm comes to us; if you will allow your young braves to go out on the war-path without their natural protectors, you must not be surprised if some of them lose their scalps. Beauchamp, you are a devotee of the goddess, I know. You will of course form one of 'the lost children' who brave all the horde of excursionists for the honour of Todborough."

"Thanks, no," replied Lionel. "I don't think I care about facing the barbarians at play."

He was a good deal smitten with Blanche, and knew better than to run counter to his enslaver's pronounced opinion.

"Then," exclaimed Jim, "like Curtius, I must leap into the gulf single-handed. Stop! hang it, I will exercise my military prerogative; yes, Braybrooke, I shall order you to accompany me, if it is only to witness the sacrifice."

"Stay, Captain Bloxam," said Mrs. Sartoris, laughing. "Such devoted gallantry deserves encouragement; I won't see you fall into the hands of the Philistines without an effort at your preservation. You'll go, Tom, won't you?" she continued, appealing to her husband, "if Lady Mary can only find us transport."

"Yes, I am good to go, if you wish it," replied Sartoris.

"How I should like to shake the life out of that woman!" thought Lady Mary, as she smilingly murmured that "if Mrs. Sartoris had the courage to face the horrors of an Easter ball, there was, of course, the carriage at her disposal."

"Bravo, Mrs. Sartoris!" cried Jim; "and now that you have given them a lead, I have no doubt I shall pick up some more recruits, at all events, young ladies," he continued, appealing to the Misses Evesham, "it's a consolation to think that we have secured a chaperon, even if our mothers remain obdurate on the point."

But Lady Mary was not going to suffer any further discussion concerning the Commonstone ball, if she could possibly prevent it. What she mentally termed the pig-headedness of her son already threatened to upset the seclusion that she had marked out as most conducive to Lionel Beauchamp's subjection. Taking advantage of the decanters having made their appearance on the table, she bent her head to Mrs. Evesham, and the rising of the ladies put an end to the subject, at all events for the present. "If," thought Lady Mary, as she followed her guests to the drawing-room, "I can only stop their talking any more about this wretched ball, there will be no harm done. Jim, Captain Braybrooke, and the Sartorises are welcome to go, so long as the rest stay at home."

Though silent, Pansey Cottrell had been an amused auditor of the previous conversation. Living, as he habitually had done from his boyhood, always in society, he derived no little amusement from watching the foibles and manoeuvres of those around him, and occasionally indulged himself by gently pulling the strings for his own diversion. It was a secret that had been penetrated by only a few of his intimates, but there was lurking in Pansey Cottrell a spirit of mischief that sometimes urged him to contravene the schemes of his associates. It was never from any feeling of malice, but from a sheer sense of fun. The present state of affairs, for instance, tickled him immensely. He knew that poor Lady Mary had resolutely made up her mind that the Grange party should have none of this ball, and equally did he foresee that there was every probability of both herself and all her guests being present at it. Secondly, she had brought Lionel Beauchamp down here, far away from rival beauties, so that Miss Blanche might capture him at her leisure; and such was Lady Mary's malignant star, that an exceedingly pretty and fascinating stranger immediately appeared upon the scene. Now this was just one of the little dramas that it so amused Pansey Cottrell occasionally to exercise his influence in. I do not mean to say that he would interfere to such an extent as to either make or mar the wedding; but to take part with the conspirators and coerce Lady Mary into going to this Commonstone ball was a bit of mischief quite in his way. He could not resist the temptation of teasing his fellow-creatures, and what gave such particular zest to such tormenting was that his victims were always perfectly unconscious that he was at the bottom of their annoyance.

In the drawing-room Lady Mary expressed her disapproval of the ball so strongly that Mrs. Sartoris felt quite guilty, and rather repented her of having volunteered to join Captain Bloxam's party; but when the gentlemen made their appearance, Lady Mary was doomed to be made once more

uncomfortable by the proceedings of her first-born.

She listened in somewhat *distract* fashion to a flood of anecdote and small-talk that Mr. Cottrell was pouring into her ears; for she felt intuitively that Jim was canvassing the whole party on the subject of this abominable ball with an ardour worthy of a better cause. She had seen him talking and laughing with Mrs. Sartoris, and knew that he had confirmed that lady in her iniquity. Now he was talking with the Misses Evesham, and she felt convinced that those flabby-minded damsels had admitted that they should like to be present, although not half an hour ago they had assured her that they detested all such "omnium gatherums." If she could but have got hold of Jim and told him that there were particular reasons why the Grange party should not attend upon this occasion! but no, Pansey Cottrell was entertaining her with a scandalous and apparently interminable narrative of the doings of one of her friends, and she felt she had been as effectually buttonholed as if she were the victim of the Ancient Mariner.

Suddenly a "Confound it, Jim, do hold your tongue!" from the whist-table caught her ear. "You deuced near made me revoke. What on earth makes you so red hot about this ball?" And the Squire mechanically looked round to his wife for telegraphic guidance as to what line he was to take.

By a sudden shifting of Mr. Pansey Cottrell's chair that gentleman's form intercepted the slight bending of the brows and shake of the head that replied to her husband's look of inquiry.

"The proper thing to do, sir," resumed Jim; "residents in the vicinity of Commonstone must support Commonstone festivities. The Todborough contingent must show up on such an occasion, and the Todborough contingent must show with its chief at its head. Who knows but you may want to contest the county again some of these days? and if you don't, why, perhaps I shall. I assure you I have a very pretty talent for public speaking—at least, so our fellows all say. Isn't it so, Braybrooke?"

"Oh, I don't quite know about that," was the reply. "We give you credit for unlimited 'cheek' when on your legs after supper, and that's about as far as we can give you a character."

"Well, I don't know; we always do go. I suppose we ought to go this time; but there's no necessity for all this hurry. The ball is not until the day after to-morrow." And the Squire again looked anxiously round for instructions from his wife; but Pansey Cottrell was now standing between Lady Mary and the card-table, and such inspiration as might be derived from his back was sole response to the inquiry.

"Excuse me," said Jim, "we can't have people making up their mind about ball-going on Sundays. Ball-dresses, however perfect, nearly always want a little something doing to them at the last, don't they, Mrs. Sartoris? Besides, vacillation spoils slumber. I am only anxious that you shall lay your head tranquilly on your pillow, like myself, with your mind made up to do a good and virtuous action."

"Come, I say," cried the Squire, chuckling, "that's rather tall talk, you know. I never heard going to a ball called a 'good and virtuous action' before."

"Well, perhaps not," replied Jim; "but it is, comparatively, you know, when you think of the many worse things you might do;—Stay at home here, for instance, trump your partner's thirteenth, revoke, lose your money and your temper."

"You make out a good case, Jim," said the Squire, laughing. "I suppose we must go, lest, as you say, worse should come to us."

As these two latter speeches reached her ears, Lady Mary felt that she could have boxed those of her son with exceeding satisfaction, and so wandered in her attention to Pansey Cottrell's narrative as to occasion that gentleman, who was perfectly aware of the disturbing influence, infinite amusement. As a *causeur* of some repute in his own estimation, he considered himself in duty bound to take vengeance for such negligence, and spun out his story to its extreme attenuation before suffering his hostess to escape. At length released, Lady Mary crosses to the whist-table; but the conversation has dropped. Jim has moved to another part of the room; and that the Todborough Grange party shall go to the ball is an accepted fact. To revive the subject now Lady Mary felt would be useless, but she made up her mind somewhat spitefully that her lord should hear a little more about it before he slept.

"Rather a sudden change in the wind," said Lionel Beauchamp, as he lit Miss Bloxam's candle in the hall: "instead of being dead against, it seems to be blowing quite a gale in the direction of the Commonstone ball. I suppose you will go too, if the rest do?"

"Yes," she replied mendaciously. "I don't care in the least about it, but suppose, like all minorities, I shall have to recant my opinion, or, what is the same thing, do as the others do; and I shall expect you to do the same, Mr. Beauchamp, and not, after the manner of some shameless London men whom we have had here, plead a bad cold, and then spend the evening tranquilly in the smoking-room, over much

tobacco and a French novel."

"Not I, Miss Bloxam," replied Lionel, laughing. "I can assure you I am very fond of a country ball. My objection is to a country ball with all the attraction left out."

"Thank you," said Blanche, making him a little mock curtsy, "that is a very pretty speech to send me to sleep upon; and now good night. O Jim, Jim!" she whispered, as she passed her brother, "how could you? Had you been yet in your childhood, bread and water and dungeons dark would be punishment quite inadequate to your offending."

"Why, good Heavens! what have I done?"

"Couldn't you see that mamma is dead against any of us going to this ball, and have you not been canvassing us all as if you had been a steward?"

"Go to bed, you arrant little humbug," replied Jim, with a perceptible quiver of his right eye. "What the *madre's* reasons may be for setting her face against this bit of jollity I don't know; but you and she needn't go, you know. Mrs. Sartoris has kindly undertaken the charge of all us young people."

Blanche merely smiled, nodded, and then tripped up the staircase. I think there was an unspoken understanding between these two on the subject of the Commonstone ball. Jim Bloxam had before known his sisters take part with the authorities against their private likings and convictions.

Lady Mary, when she had gained the privacy of her own chamber, felt, to speak figuratively, that the horses had got a little out of her hand; that her party, or at all events the larger portion of them, would attend this ball whether she liked it or not. Of course she herself could stay at home and keep Blanche with her; but it would be a little too marked to attempt to retain Mr. Beauchamp when all the rest of the party were bound for Commonstone. She was far too skilful a manoeuvrer to give lookers-on such transparent grounds for designating her a match-making mother. But Lady Mary was a woman both clever and fertile in resource, one who thoroughly understood the philosophy that, when things are not going to your liking, there only remains to make the best of things as they are. Her instinct warned her that it would have been better for her designs if she could have carried out her original programme, and contrived that the Grange party should keep to themselves; but as things were it was obvious that Lionel Beauchamp would go to the Commonstone ball, and under those circumstances she promptly decided that it would be advisable for Blanche and herself to go too. Her mind misgave her that Sylla Chipchase was a formidable rival to Blanche in the matter of beauty and attraction; still, the encountering of no opposition could but make Miss Sylla more formidable. Just as she had resolved upon a change of front, the Squire entered the room.

"My dear Cedric," she exclaimed, "how could you be so foolish? What made you encourage all these people in the absurdity of wishing to attend that Easter ball?—a mob of tag, rag, and bobtail, tradespeople and people from Heaven knows where: very good fun, no doubt, for the officers from Rockcliffe, Jim, or any other young men, but no place for ladies and their daughters to go to."

"What nonsense, Mary! Why, you know we always did go to the Commonstone balls; besides, Mrs. Sartoris expressed——"

"Don't talk to me about what Mrs. Sartoris expressed," interrupted Lady Mary sharply; "that woman is evidently one of the fast school, and I am very sorry for Blanche's sake that I asked her down here at all."

This was a most unjustified accusation against poor little Mrs. Sartoris, who was simply a young married woman fond of dancing and gaiety.

"Besides," she continued, "you might have remembered that I wanted Blanche to have a quiet fortnight. Girls at her age are so easily knocked up by the dissipations of London, and it is very desirable that she should take the opportunity of a rest now she can get it."

"Pooh! that's all nonsense, Mary, and you know it. Blanche is as strong as a horse, and no girl enjoys dancing more. Why, she has never been sick nor sorry since she was a little thing! I'll go bail that she's none the worse for her first season."

"Oh, very well; of course if you know better than I do, well and good. A mother is usually supposed to be the best judge of such matters. If she is regularly knocked up by July, don't forget I raised my voice against the Commonstone ball."

"No, my dear," replied the Squire, as he composed himself for slumber; "there is not the slightest probability of my forgetting it, insomuch as, if such a misfortune should befall the girl, I feel confident

that fact would be pretty constantly recalled to my memory."

CHAPTER III.

THE COMMONSTONE BALL.

The same evening that all this discussion—one might almost say plotting and counter-plotting—concerning the Commonstone ball was going on at the Grange, there was a conversation going on at Todborough Rectory, which, could she but have heard it, would have somewhat opened Lady Mary's eyes to the conspiracy of which she had been the victim.

"I wonder," exclaimed Laura Chipchase, "whether Jim has carried his point? He vowed to-day the Grange party should go to the ball, and I hope they may."

"Yes," said Miss Sylla, "it is always nicer, I think, to be one of a large party in an affair of this sort. You are quite independent then,—a ball within a ball, as it were."

"Just so," said the younger sister. "And though we know plenty of people, and are not likely to want for partners, yet it's not the fun of going a big party. As for you, Sylla, I can't imagine your wanting partners anywhere." And the girl gazed with undisguised admiration at her pretty cousin.

"The young men are mostly good to me," replied Miss Sylla demurely. "But what made Lady Mary set her face so dead against this ball? You told me she was full of fun, and either assisted at or promoted all the gaiety in the neighbourhood."

"Ah, I cannot understand that," rejoined Laura. "The excuse about Blanche requiring rest is all nonsense. Why, she told me to-day, she was never better, and, as you yourself heard, said she should like to go to this ball immensely."

"Ah, well," said Sylla, with a shrug of her shoulders and a slight elevation of her expressive eyebrows, "I don't think I care much about your Lady Mary; your word-painting has been a little too flattering."

"You mustn't condemn her just because she has got this whim in her head. We know her well, and like her very much. We have been brought up so much with her own children, you know. But you never told us you knew Mr. Cottrell."

"Why should I?" rejoined Sylla. "I hadn't the slightest idea he was in these parts until I saw him. He is a dear clever old gentleman" (if Pansey could but have heard that!), "and one of my most devoted admirers. I met him at the Hogdens' last autumn. It amused me so much to see how he always got his own way about everything, that I struck up a desperate flirtation with him, and then, you see, I got mine. Oh, you needn't look shocked. It's great fun when they have arrived at years of discretion, like Mr. Cottrell; they always get you everything you want, and are no more in earnest than you are. Then they are always at hand to save you 'an infliction.' I always said I was engaged to Mr. Cottrell whenever I didn't want to dance with any one who claimed me, and if I made him a pretty speech, he would always forgive my throwing him over. My dear Laura," continued the young lady gravely, "an admirer of that sort is worth a good half-dozen younger ones. But tell me a little more about the Bloxams."

"There is nothing much to tell," rejoined Laura. "The Squire is just what you saw him—a fresh, genial, and hospitable country gentleman. Blanche is a dear unaffected girl, a good horsewoman, and good at lawn tennis, billiards, and all that sort of thing. Jim Bloxam is what you see—as gay, light-hearted, and rattled a dragoon as any in the service; and as for Lady Mary, she is very much better than you give her credit for."

"Whether the big house goes or not makes a difference in our staff of partners," observed the younger Miss Chipchase sententiously. "Let's see: there's Captain Bloxam, Captain Braybrooke, and Mr. Sartoris—all most eligible, don't you think so, Laura? I wonder what this other man is like whom Blanche talked about—Lionel Beauchamp? he comes to-night."

"What, Lionel Beauchamp!" exclaimed Sylla: "do you mean to say Lionel Beauchamp is coming to the Grange?"

"So Blanche told me this afternoon; why, do you know him?"

"Know him? yes, pretty much in the same way you know Jim Bloxam. By the way, do you call him 'Jim'?" (The two girls nodded assent.) "Ah, I like to ask about these things: proprieties differ in different counties; it strikes me Fernshire is of the rigidly decorous order."

"Well," laughed Miss Chipchase, "it is past twelve; and if Todborough Rectory is to keep its character, we must be off to bed and listen no more to your Suffolk gabbling. It's well mamma is laid up with a cold, or we should have been broomed off long ago."

"Very well, Laura; in revenge for that last aspersion I will tell you nothing whatever more about Lionel Beauchamp. Only promise me one thing: don't let out that he and I have known each other from childhood, please don't. I do so want to see Lady Mary's face when she hears me call him Lionel. I suspect she is inclined to think me a very fast young woman. She shall!" and with this ominous menace Miss Sylla danced upstairs to bed. Lady Mary, when she found that she must yield in the matter of the ball, was far too clever a diplomatist not to give a most gracious assent. She laughed, and vowed that she really thought a set of Londoners like they all were would have looked forward to quiet during the Easter holidays; but as they preferred racket, well, racket be it to their hearts' content. Her duty towards her guests as hostess was simply to promote the happiness of the greater number. They would all go to Commonstone, and it only remained now to settle the matter of transport. The break would hold eight comfortably. If Mr. and Mrs. Evesham with their daughters, Mr. and Mrs. Sartoris, Mr. Cottrell, and the Squire would go in that, then she, Blanche, and either Captain Braybrooke or Mr. Beauchamp could go in the carriage, and Jim could drive one gentleman over in the dog-cart.

Jim Bloxam knew that he had carried his point sorely against his mother's inclination; but he had got his cue now, and resolved to second all her arrangements loyally.

"All right, mother," he said, "that will do very well, you take Beauchamp in the carriage, and Braybrooke can come in the cart with me."

Although the party generally cared little about the manner of their going to the ball, there was one exception, and this was Mr. Pansey Cottrell. That gentleman was extremely fond of his own ease and comfort, and when a hostess presumed to take him out to a country ball, he did consider that she was at least bound to find him a front seat in a most comfortable carriage. "Breaks are all very well," quoth Mr. Cottrell, "for tough country gentlemen; but I don't expect to be carted about as if I was a stag on Easter Monday." In short, although Pansey Cottrell could hardly have been said to be seriously annoyed, yet he held Lady Mary guilty of a want of consideration for a man of his status in the fashionable world. To the mischief inherent in his disposition, and which so often led him to thwart the schemes of those about him, was now added a mild feeling of resentment, not amounting to anger, but a feeling that he owed it to himself to mete out some slight punishment to his hostess. "Yes," he muttered, as he arranged his white tie in the glass just before dinner, "I think, Lady Mary, the chances are that I shall contrive to make you a little uncomfortable this evening. That Sylla Chipchase is as full of devilry as she can be, and with a very pretty taste for privateering besides. If I give her a hint of your designs, I should think there is nothing she would like better than to do a little bit of cutting-out business, and temporarily capture Lionel Beauchamp under the very guns of the fair Blanche; however, I shall be guided by events. But there is one thing, my lady, you may be sure—I shall not forget I was relegated to a break."

When the ringers are not in accord the result is wont to be

"Sweet bells jangled, out of tune."

Upon arrival at Commonstone it became at once evident that Lady Mary had shamefully libelled the Easter ball. It was a mixed ball, certainly; but by no means the tag, rag, and bobtail affair that Lady Mary had stigmatized it. If there was a sprinkling of the tradespeople and also of strangers, there was also a large muster of all the best people in Commonstone and its neighbourhood. The Rockcliffe camp, too, had sent a strong contingent; and altogether, with a good room and good music, there was every prospect, as Jim Bloxam said, of a real good dance. That the Misses Chipchase should meet the Grange party and attach themselves to it was but natural. They had always been encouraged to do so, and how were they to know that the *avatar* of such an incarnation of fun, spirits, and beauty as Sylla should have made Lady Mary repent of former good-nature? However, Jim showed the way with Mrs. Sartoris, and the whole party were soon whirling away to the strains of the "Zingari" vales.

"At last, Mrs. Sartoris," said Jim, "I taste the sweets of successful diplomacy, and in the Commonstone terpsichorean temple publicly acknowledge the valuable assistance you lent me in the late great crisis."

"I am very glad, Captain Bloxam," replied Mrs. Sartoris, laughing, "that my poor exertions have been so fully recognized. I am terribly afraid that Lady Mary has registered a black mark against my name as

a giddy and contumacious guest, not to be lightly entertained for the future."

"No," replied Jim, "I must stand up for my mother; she may fume a good deal at the time, but she never bears malice. But here comes one of my greatest allies, Dick Conyers; I hope you will allow me to present him to you."

Mrs. Sartoris bowed assent; the introduction made, his name duly inscribed on the lady's tablets, and Captain Conyers exclaimed,

"Of course you are coming to 'our athletics' to-morrow? I know cards have been duly sent to the Grange—for the matter of that, round the country generally. There will be lunch all over the camp; but mind, I expect you to patronize our mess in particular. Mile races, half-mile races, quarter-mile races, sack races, barrow races,—in short, humanity contending on its feet in every possible shape."

"The very thing," said Jim, "after a ball; don't you think so, Mrs. Sartoris? Fresh air, amusement, gentle exercise, and a little stimulant close at hand if we feel low."

"Ah, Mrs. Sartoris," replied Conyers, "and I really am a little low about to-morrow. The best race of the day is a quarter-mile race for the 'All Army Cup.' There is a horribly conceited young Engineer of the name of Montague who already regards it as his own property; and saddest of all remains the fact that, notwithstanding his crowing, he can run above a bit; we have nobody in the camp with a chance of defeating him."

"Why don't you make Captain Bloxam, here, run?" said Mrs. Sartoris. "Why, you know," she said, turning to Jim, "that you beat all the men at the Orleans Club a fortnight ago across the cricket-ground in that impromptu handicap."

"Of course," replied Conyers; "I never thought of that. I remember now you won the quarter mile at Aldershot last year. Capital! this race is open to the whole army, and the entries don't close till to-morrow. I'll stick your name down; and if ever you wish to do me a turn, mind you cut Montague's comb for him to-morrow."

"Well, I can only say," replied Jim, "I am good to have a shy, and will do my best."

Enthroned amongst the chaperons, and keeping a watchful eye upon her flock, Lady Mary so far views their proceedings with much complacency. After two successive dances with Blanche, Lionel Beauchamp has disappeared with that young lady, and though her daughter is no longer under her eye, still Lady Mary feels that events are marching in the right direction. However, it seemed as if Miss Bloxam had retired into the purlieu of the ball-room for the evening, and though, under the circumstances of her disappearance, Lady Mary felt no whit disturbed, about it, yet she thought she should like a cup of tea, and asked Mr. Sartoris to be her escort. But upon arrival at the tea-room, her equanimity was destined to be somewhat upset, for the first sight that met her eyes was Lionel Beauchamp and Sylla Chipchase seated in one of the corners, and apparently engaged in a tolerably pronounced flirtation. Now, in the confusion of the greeting between the Grange party and the rectory people, it had quite escaped Lady Mary that Lionel Beauchamp shook hands like an old acquaintance with Sylla. She had, therefore, no idea that they had met before this evening, and her dismay at finding Mr. Beauchamp improving his opportunities with Miss Sylla, when she had pictured him similarly engaged with Blanche, may be easily imagined. However, crossing over to the culprit, she observed, with a pleasant smile,

"Not half a bad ball, Mr. Beauchamp, I think. I can only hope you find it so. I really am quite glad I was persuaded into coming. By the way, what have you done with Blanche? She was dancing with you when I last saw her some half-hour ago."

"Oh, the room was so warm," replied Lionel, "we came down here to get cool; and then Mr. Cottrell and Miss Sylla joined us; and then Cottrell told Miss Bloxam that it was his dance—or you wanted her—or something, and——"

"Left me as a substitute," interrupted Sylla Chipchase.

"Ah, well," said Lady Mary, "if Mr. Cottrell is taking care of her, Blanche is in good hands; I need not trouble myself much about her."

"You make a terrible mistake there, Lady Mary," said Sylla, in accents of mock anguish. "Mr. Cottrell is one of the most dangerous and inconstant of his sex. He made most desperate love last year to me in Suffolk, whispers pretty speeches into my ear the whole of this evening, and then turns me over—consigns me, I believe, is the proper term—to Mr. Beauchamp as if I were a bale of calico!" And the young lady assumed the prettiest attitude of most pitiable resignation.

"I was quite right," thought Lady Mary, as she resumed her cavalier's arm: "it is as I thought; that girl is as practised and brazen a flirt as ever crossed a poor woman's schemes. It was an ill wind that blew her into Fernshire this Easter."

"Come along, Lionel," said Sylla; "remember that here we must not call each other by our Christian names. Fernshire don't understand that we have been brought up together. In Suffolk it's different; but Fernshire will be putting it down as my habit to call all gentlemen by their Christian names, and I certainly don't want that."

"As you like, Syl—I mean, Miss Chipchase," replied Lionel; and with that they made their way to the ball-room, where Jim Bloxam immediately claimed the young lady's hand.

In the course of their dance Jim told his partner all about the programme for the morrow; how it was arranged that they should all drive up to the camp to lunch, look at the games, and either walk or drive back as seemed good to them. Then he confided to her how he was going to enter for the "All Army Cup." "Principally," continued Jim, "to oblige Dick Conyers, who is so extremely anxious to see the conceit taken out of a fellow in the Engineers called Montague."

"And you," said Sylla, who manifested great interest in the affair, "are you really a good runner?"

"Well, no, I can hardly say that—remember that is rather a big thing to say; but I am a bit above the average, and have beaten good fields upon three or four occasions."

"I understand; and what chance do you think you have with this Mr. Montague? Recollect, I mean plunging in gloves unless you assure me it is hopeless."

"Well, if I thought it that," replied Jim, "I shouldn't run, and that's about as much as I can say. I have never seen Montague run, and I don't think either of us can possibly draw an estimate of the other's form; still, the best man in a camp like Rockcliffe must be a pretty good amateur. I can only take for my comfort that Aldershot is bigger, and I proved myself the best man there over a similar distance last year."

"That's good enough for me. You must pardon my getting a little slangy," replied Sylla, laughing; "but, dear me! when we come down to pedestrianism we can't help it. I like your friend Captain Conyers. He is very anxious, you tell me, to see Mr. Montague's colours lowered."

"Yes, I assure you he was quite pathetic in his adjuration to me to do my utmost," rejoined Jim.

"Ah, well, we must hope he will be gratified, and in spite of *Punch's* wicked comparison of the dismounted dragoon to the goose on the turnpike-road, I shall hope to see the camp champion go down before Todborough to-morrow. But now tell me, how long have you known Lionel Beauchamp?"

"I met him this year in London for the first time."

"What do you think of him?"

"He is a very good fellow as far as I can judge," replied Jim; "very quiet; but you know I have had no opportunity of seeing much of him."

"You never saw him ride, I suppose?"

"No, except in the Row. Does he hunt?"

"Oh, yes, he hunts in his own county," replied Sylla. "You never saw him shoot, I suppose?"

"No, he doesn't attend Hurlingham; that is to say, I mean he doesn't go in for pigeons. But why all these questions, Miss Sylla?"

"Never mind; that's my secret. You may be sure it is intended for your good," laughed his interrogator. "In short, you never saw him ride, shoot, nor do any of those things."

"No," rejoined Jim, much amused; "I never saw him commit himself to rackets, skating, billiards, or any of those things."

"Ah," rejoined Sylla, "I was curious to see how much you knew about him. And now I think I must go and join the rest of them."

Upon arriving at the part of the ball-room in which Lady Mary had taken up her abode, they found most of the elders of the party assembled, and the expediency of a move homewards prominently under discussion.

"Ah, make room for me, please," exclaimed the vivacious young lady, "in that corner next to you, Mr. Cottrell. You have neglected me shamefully the whole of the evening, you know. The sole admirer I can reckon on in all Fernshire, an adorer privileged to say sweet things to me, and whose bounden duty it is never to neglect an opportunity of administering such sugarplums—how dare you treat me so? You abandon me in the tea-room, leaving me to be picked up like any other derelict by the passing stranger. Now, Mr. Cottrell, I should just like to hear what you have got to say in your defence."

"Well, Miss Sylla," rejoined the accused, "I left you under very tolerable protection, and Lady Mary had given me a hint to find Miss Bloxam for her if I could."

"I don't believe a word of it," replied the young lady. "You got rid of me, you know you did, because you felt lazy and unequal to the exigencies of the situation."

Of course Pansey Cottrell knew that this was all fooling; but then, like many other middle-aged gentlemen, he rather liked such fooling with a pretty girl; in fact, was somewhat given to what may be designated as fatherly flirtation.

"I don't think I left you quite so desolate as you make out. I should imagine Beauchamp an eligible cavalier. He comes from your county, so no doubt you know him."

"Yes, Mr. Beauchamp and I have foregathered before to-day."

"Ah, it was provoking," continued Cottrell, "after all the pains I took on your behalf, that Lady Mary, looking upon you as one of her charges, should be so sternly determined to do her duty by you as to penetrate the tea-room and nip such a promising flirtation in the bud."

"Yes," said the girl musingly, "I don't think she was altogether pleased at finding me there. Still, I can't see that Lady Mary's duty extends to us just because we have joined her party."

"Can't you really, Miss Sylla?" replied Cottrell, with a twinkle in his eye and a preternatural solemnity of manner that immediately aroused the young lady's attention. "Don't you know that one of the most important duties of the governors of all communities is to see that the right men are in the right place?"

"I don't understand you," said Sylla.

"To speak more plainly, then, it is the duty of chaperons to see that the right men don't sit out with the wrong ladies."

"Ah," replied Sylla, her eyes dancing with fun, "I think I begin to understand you now. I was the wrong young lady."

"Well," said Cottrell, "I am very much afraid you were. Do you see now why I so basely deserted you and changed partners with Beauchamp? You used to be quick enough in abetting me in such pranks last winter."

"I declare," rejoined Sylla, laughing, "you are the wickedest and most amusing man I ever came across. You dare to tell me that these Bloxam people have the audacity to come poaching on our Suffolk preserves?"

"Oh, I don't say that; still, people are so unscrupulous now-a-days. But I want your help in another little bit of mischief."

"What is it?" rejoined the young lady, with an animation which promised ready assent.

"Do you know Beauchamp well enough to ask him to dance?"

"Yes, certainly; only don't you let them know it at the Grange."

"Not I. The carriages have just been sent for; make him dance with you, and take him out of the way when I signal to you. He came here with Lady Mary and Miss Bloxam in the carriage. When he is not to be found, I shall volunteer to take his place, leaving him to follow and take mine in the break; and shall take care that the fact of his being left dancing with you does not escape Lady Mary's attention."

"Go across and tell Mr. Beauchamp I want him," said Sylla. "I'll take care he is out of the way when wanted."

This little conspiracy was crowned with success; and when the carriage was announced, Lionel Beauchamp was nowhere to be seen.

"It's nonsense waiting for him, Lady Mary," said Mr. Cottrell. "As Miss Bloxam is not dancing, you had

better be off at once; I will come with you, and Beauchamp can take my place in the break. What has become of him and Sylla Chipchase, goodness only knows!"

There was nothing for it but to submit to circumstances; and, with a feeling of no little asperity towards that "flirting Suffolk girl," Lady Mary drove home to Todborough.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROCKCLIFFE GAMES.

When Lady Mary came to think over the events of the night she found considerable cause for dissatisfaction, but it was as nothing to the further discomfiture awaiting her at the breakfast-table the next morning. Her scheme of seclusion—of a quiet party which, contenting themselves with their own society, should seek for no other amusement than was comprised within the resources of the Grange—had been already rudely broken in upon. And now she was confronted by an arrangement which her son had entered into without consulting her. On entering the breakfast-room she found Jim explaining the programme of the day,—how they were all to lunch at the mess of the —th regiment and witness the athletic sports of Rockcliffe camp.

"Cold collation all over the camp, five o'clock tea, fresh air, fun and flirtation, society and sunshine; if all that does not realize 'a dream of fair women,' well, then, I know nothing about them," were the first words that greeted Lady Mary's ear. Lady Mary Bloxam was no weak vacillating woman—a woman, on the contrary, wont to carry her point, and who contrived to have her own way, perhaps, rather more than most people; but she saw at once that it would be hopeless to stem the tide upon this occasion. With all her guests on a lovely spring day anxious to attend an entertainment not three miles off, what was there to be said? No possible pretext could be devised for preventing them. Why, oh, why had she persuaded that graceless dragoon to leave Aldershot and share the peace and tranquillity of home? She might have remembered how foreign peace and tranquillity were to Jim's mercurial disposition; and then, Lady Mary reflected ruefully, that flirting Suffolk girl was certain to be present at the sports. In her dismay, she for a second thought of taking counsel with Pansey Cottrell as to what it were best to do under the circumstances; but after such festivities as that of the previous night Mr. Cottrell was always invisible to every one save his valet till past midday.

The hierarchy of Olympus had apparently taken the Rockcliffe games under their special protection. A more glorious April day never dawned than the Tuesday appointed for its athletic sports. Here and there a few fleecy clouds flecked the sky, as here and there a snowy patch of canvas dotted the sea. The sun shone forth in all his majesty, and the soft south-west wind just rippled the waters of the treacherous Channel and fluttered the flags with which the huts were decorated. Over every mess-room flew the regimental burgee as a signal that therein was lunch for all comers; while in front of those near the course, flanked on either side by rows of chairs and benches, were pitched marquees for the convenience of those who might desire lighter refreshment. As the Todborough carriages drove up, Captain Conyers and one or two of his brother officers stepped forward to welcome the party, and, as Lady Mary had anticipated, almost the next people to greet them were the Reverend Austin Chipchase, his daughters, and niece.

"Good morning, Mr. Cottrell," said Sylla, with an arch glance at her fellow-conspirator of last night. "May I hope that the sweet sleep that waits on virtuous actions was vouchsafed to you?"

"Thanks, yes," replied that gentleman. "I slept as a good man should. I am afraid some of us were a little over-tired. I regret to say there was a little irritability manifest in my carriage on the way home;" and the twinkle in Cottrell's eyes told Sylla Chipchase that Lady Mary had made due note of her offending.

"You have heard of course that Captain Bloxam means trying for the 'All Army Cup.' Great excitement it will be for us, will it not? We are all bound to bet recklessly upon the Todborough champion. I should like to see this Mr. Montague. I must get Captain Conyers to point him out to me. But, ah, look! here they come!" and as she spoke the girl pointed to some half-score figures who, clad in gaily-coloured jerseys, came racing down over six flights of hurdles. The leading three or four were well together till they cleared the last hurdle save one; but immediately they were over that, a pink jersey shot to the front, left his antagonists apparently without an effort, and, clearing the last hurdle in excellent style, ran in an easy winner by some half-score yards, amid tumultous cheering.

"Oh, do find out what this is all about; who won that? what was it?
Ah, Captain Braybrooke, please come here and explain all this to me.
Why are they cheering?"

"That was the two hundred yard race over hurdles, Miss Chipchase. They are cheering the winner, Mr. Montague, our opponent, you know. It seems ever since Jim's name appeared in the 'All Army Cup' this morning, excitement has run high; you see, of course they know that Jim won the quarter of a mile race at Aldershot last year. It becomes a case of Rockcliffe *versus* Aldershot, and of course all the sympathies of Rockcliffe are with their own champion. I don't think, Miss Chipchase, they will throw things at us; but you mustn't expect Jim's victory to be received with enthusiasm. It's great fun to see the excitement his appearance in the lists has occasioned. It was looked upon as a foregone conclusion for Montague before; and though he is still favourite, they know now that he has not got it all his own way."

"Thank you so much," said Sylla, in her most dulcet tones. "And now, Captain Braybrooke, I want you to do me a great favour. It's of no use denying it, but I am an arrant gambler at heart; I must and will have a gamble on this. Will you please put five pounds for me on Captain Bloxam?" and as she spoke Sylla saw with infinite satisfaction that she had Lady Mary for an auditor.

"Certainly, Miss Chipchase," replied Braybrooke. "There can be no manner of difficulty about that. I have backed Jim myself, and you can stand in that much with my bets."

"Once more, thank you," replied Sylla; "and pray let Captain Bloxam know that the fortunes of all Todborough depend upon his exertions."

But Sylla made a great mistake if she thought that her making a bet on the result of this race would shock Lady Mary. The Ladies Ditchin had known what it was as girls to lose their quarter's allowance over one of their father's unlucky favourites for a big race; and Lady Mary all her life had been far too accustomed to regard backing an opinion as the strongest proof of sincere belief in it to feel in the least shocked at anybody holding similar views. She had indeed told her husband, as soon as the fact of her son being entered for this race came to her knowledge, that she must have her usual wager of ten pounds on the result. All the sporting instinct of her nature had been aroused, and Jim's entering the lists against the Rockcliffe champion had gone far to reconcile her to such an infringement of her programme as was involved in their attending the Rockcliffe games.

"Your brother is a good runner, I presume, Miss Bloxam?" inquired Lionel Beauchamp, who was sitting with Blanche on the other side of the marquee.

"Yes, Jim is fast and has won several 'gentlemen's' races. I don't want to brag, Mr. Beauchamp, but we Bloxams are all pretty good at those sort of things, and of course that's all as it should be with my brothers; but with us girls I don't know that it works quite so well. We can all dance, but we can none of us draw. We all play lawn tennis pretty well, but we can't play the piano; can all ride an awkward horse, but can neither sing a note in Italian nor any other language. And you—are you fond of any of these things? It is so difficult to tell what a man likes in London."

"Yes," rejoined Beauchamp, "in the London world we are wont to rave about matters we really don't care a rush about, to affect aesthetic tastes which we have not got, and the pretension to which entraps us into much foolish speaking. We go to all sorts of entertainments we don't care about, simply because other people go. You must not betray me, Miss Bloxam, but I declare I think one passes no pleasanter afternoon in London than when witnessing a good match at Lord's with a pleasant party on a warm day."

"Ah, we are all cricketers down here in Fernshire, boys and girls, men and women; we believe we invented the game, and in the old days stood pre-eminent in it. However, we now number so many disciples, and they have profited so much by our teaching that we are like the old man who,

"To teach his grandson draughts then his leisure did employ,
Until at last the old man was beaten by the boy."

"Well, we must hope the old county is not going to be beaten this afternoon; for I take it your brother represents Fernshire, and Montague England, and the race by all accounts is reduced pretty well to a match between them. But see, there go the competitors!" and Beauchamp pointed to five men who, with overcoats thrown loosely over their flannels, were making their way down to the quarter-mile starting-post.

In spite of their reputation of being swift-footed, Montague and Bloxam found three other competitors bent on testing whether they really were as fast over a quarter of a mile as rumour credited them: men

of the stamp always to be found in the army, who do not believe they are to be beaten till they have had actual experience of it, and who are wont to be a little incredulous even then about their conqueror's ability to repeat his victory. As one of these philosophers remarked, "Montague means running in the hurdle race; there is always a possibility of his breaking or straining something in that, and so being *hors de combat* for the Cup." However, Mr. Montague had won that race without damage to himself, and was evidently perfectly fit to take part in the fray. There is some slight delay at the start, owing to the praiseworthy but mistaken attempts of a gentleman in a dark blue jersey to get off somewhat in advance of his companions—an undue eagerness which, having resulted in his twice jumping off before the word, terminates in his getting two or three yards the worst of the start when the word "go" is finally given. A green and white jersey dashes to the front, and assuming a longish lead, brings them along at a great pace. Next come the all white of Jim Bloxam and the pink of Montague running side by side and eyeing each other closely. They take but little heed of their leader, as they know very well that he can never last the quarter of a mile at the pace that he is going. As they anticipated, the green and white champion is in difficulties before they have travelled half-way, and the two favourites come on side by side. They are as nearly level as possible, but, if anything, the pink jersey has a slight advantage. The conviction is gradually stealing over Jim that his opponent has a little the speed of him; his only chance, he thinks, is that his adversary may not quite "stay" home. The marquee of the —th regiment, of which the Todborough party are the guests, is close to the winning-post, and as the competitors near it the excitement becomes intense. Just opposite it, and not thirty yards from the winning-post, Montague makes his effort, and for a second shows a good yard in advance; but Jim instantly replies to the challenge and partially closes the gap. But it is all of no use:—though he struggles with unflinching pluck he can never quite get up, and the judge's fiat is in favour of the pink jersey by half a yard.

"A terrible result that, Mrs. Sartoris," said Conyers, when the judge's decision was made known: "not only have we lost our money, but there will be no holding Montague at all now he has lowered the colours of the Aldershot champion."

"Well," replied the lady, "I don't think Mr. Montague can crow much over his victory."

"No, indeed!" chimed in Sylla Chipchase; "Captain Bloxam struggled splendidly, and Mr. Montague had nothing in hand if I know anything about it."

"Ah, you don't know the man," replied Conyers. "The closeness of the contest will not prevent his talking very big about his victory."

"Now that reminds me of a serious omission on your part, Captain Conyers; remember we have not yet been introduced to the hero of the hour, and you know what hero-worshippers our sex are."

"That's an omission easily rectified, Miss Chipchase, for here come the two antagonists. And as he spoke Jim and his conqueror came up to the marquee.

"Ah, Miss Sylla," exclaimed the dragoon gaily, "I am afraid I have disappointed all Todborough; I did my level best, but it was of no use. Montague here is just a little too good for me. Allow me to introduce him to you."

"You must not expect very warm congratulations from us Todborough people, Mr. Montague. As you may easily suppose, both our money and our sympathies were with Captain Bloxam."

"That would naturally be the case," replied the young officer; "and I am myself indebted to Bloxam's putting in an appearance for a victory worth winning. I should have beaten my other opponents without much difficulty."

"Yes, indeed," replied Sylla, "we fell into what you military men call the weakness of underrating our opponent. We did not half believe in your prowess, Mr. Montague."

"I can only hope that I have convinced you now," he rejoined, smiling; "and that another time you will range yourself amongst my supporters."

"Oh, I don't know," replied the young lady, with a slight shrug of her shoulders. "We are obstinate in our convictions at Todborough, are we not, Lady Mary? We still think we can beat Rockcliffe Camp over a quarter of a mile."

Those around her were listening with no little interest to Sylla Chipchase's *badinage*. Pansey Cottrell, who knew the girl better than the others, felt pretty sure, from the mischief dancing in her eyes, that this was not mere idle talk, and awaited the disclosure of her design with considerable curiosity; while Lady Mary, although putting Sylla down as the most audacious little piece of sauciness she had ever come across, showed no little admiration for the stanchness with which the girl stood to her guns in

thus upholding their defeated champion.

"No doubt, Miss Chipchase," replied Montague, "a race is sometimes reversed when run over again, but you must excuse my clinging to the conviction that what I have once done I can also do again."

"Ah, well," replied the young lady, with an air of mock resignation; "I told you Todborough fell into the error of underrating the enemy, and Todborough has paid the penalty of defeat. Had we deemed you so swift of foot, Mr. Montague, we should certainly have entered the best runner we had against you."

Sylla's auditors were now thoroughly nonplussed. What could the girl be driving at? Mr. Cottrell's curiosity was raised to the highest pitch, whilst Jim Bloxam stared at the fair speaker with undisguised astonishment. He most certainly deemed that he was fleet of foot than any one in Todborough, and, having lived there all his life, Jim was not likely to fall into any mistake on that point.

"With the greatest deference for your opinion," rejoined Montague, "I think, perhaps, we men are better judges on that point than you can be, Miss Chipchase. I think, if you ask Bloxam, he will tell you that he not only can beat everybody at Todborough, but, with the exception of professionals, can dispose of most men that he comes across."

"That is so like you lords of the creation," replied Sylla, with a wicked little laugh; "you never will allow that we know anything about sporting affairs; and yet I have heard my father say that the best judge of racing he ever knew was a woman, and I am sure some of us take the best of you to keep with us in the hunting-field. I have no doubt that Captain Bloxam thinks, as you do, that there is nobody that can beat him at Todborough."

"I most undoubtedly don't know it if there is," interposed Jim.

"And yet, Mr. Montague," continued Sylla, "if you had not run such a severe race to-day, I would challenge you to beat my champion over the same course."

"Oh, pray don't let that be any consideration," replied Montague, now somewhat nettled. He had felt no little elated at defeating Bloxam, and did not relish any disparagement of his victory. "Running a quarter-mile race," he continued, "does not place one *hors de combat* for the afternoon."

"Ah, well," cried Sylla gaily, "I told you Todborough was stubborn to believe itself beaten. If you dare, I'll wager my bracelet"—and she touched a very handsome bangle on her wrist—"against the cup you have just won that my champion beats you this afternoon."

"It shall be a match if you wish it. I can merely say I have beaten the only man I considered dangerous, and am afraid of none other. Don't blame me if I rob you of your bracelet; but remember, Miss Chipchase, this match was none of my seeking. However, your champion is on the ground, I presume; perhaps, now, you don't mind naming him."

"Not at all," she replied. "Will somebody please tell Lionel Beauchamp I want him?"

"Lionel Beauchamp!" ejaculated Jim, and then he shook his head; for he regarded Sylla's proceedings now as mere temper.

To the bystanders, of course, the name of Lionel Beauchamp told nothing. He was a stranger to all except the Todborough party. His name had never been heard of in connection with athletic sports in any way. Lionel Beauchamp, in fact, was a young man who, what between taking a degree at Oxford and foreign travel, had scarcely is yet been either seen or heard of in the London world. He was known only in his own country as one of those quiet reserved dispositions little given to vaunt their accomplishments. Both Braybrooke and Jim Bloxam, having been appealed to by Captain Conyers, said they could form no idea whatever of his capabilities. They had never heard him say a word about running; and if he ever had done anything in that way, it was odd that he had never mentioned it in the smoking-room last night, when, in consequence of Jim's entry for the "All Army Cup," discussion had run high concerning such things. Lady Mary, on her part, was lost in conjecture—not so much as to whether Mr. Beauchamp could run, but as to where Sylla Chipchase could have attained such intimate knowledge of his accomplishments; while Mr. Cottrell alone showed faith in this unknown champion, observing cynically to Mrs. Sartoris, that when women went the length of wagering their bracelets, he thought it most advisable to be upon their side.

"They really must know they have an immense deal the best of it when they do that, depend upon it." Further speculation on the match was here interrupted by the appearance of Lionel Beauchamp, whom Mr. Sartoris had duly fetched from the other side of the marquee, where he had discovered him—what

Lady Mary would have called—profitably employing himself by the side of Miss Bloxam.

"Oh, Lionel!" exclaimed Sylla, and to Mr. Cottrell's intense amusement she stole a glance at Lady Mary to see how she liked this familiar address, "I have sent for you to preserve me from the fruits of my rashness. If you don't beat Mr. Montague for me over a quarter of a mile, I shall have to go home without my bracelet."

"But I am sure," interrupted Beauchamp, "that Mr. Montague has no wish to hold you to so foolish a wager."

"Certainly not," interposed Montague; "I have no wish whatever to press it. The match, I assure you, is of Miss Chipchase's making, not mine."

"Ah, well, then," exclaimed Sylla, "perhaps it is my obstinacy, not my rashness. I can be obstinate, you know, Lionel; but you will run for me all the same, won't you?"

"I think it a very foolish wager," he replied, "and that you will probably lose your bracelet; but I cannot say no if you insist upon it, and must only do my best."

"You must run," she replied, quickly. "I could not be so cowardly as to 'cry off' now. You *must* run, and you *will* win, I feel. Nobody here believes it but me; but I know it." Then, leaning towards him, she said, with a light laugh, and in tones so low that the others could not overhear her words, "Lose if you dare, sir!"

Blanche Bloxam, who had come up with Mr. Sartoris and Beauchamp, was no better pleased than her mother at hearing her late cavalier so familiarly addressed by such an extremely pretty girl as Sylla Chipchase. As for Lionel, he turned away in a quiet matter-of-fact manner, and said,

"I suppose somebody here can lend me a pair of shoes; and as soon as I have fitted myself out with those, I am at your disposal, Mr. Montague, whenever you like."

Any amount of cricket and racket-shoes were speedily placed at Beauchamp's disposal; and Montague having said that he should be prepared to try conclusions with the new-comer in half an hour, the match at once became the subject of animated discussion. But if the Engineer had been favourite before, he was still more so now. With all the *prestige* of having beaten the Aldershot champion, it was but natural that the camp should proffer liberal odds on their "crack" against an unknown man, and the staunchest adherents of Todborough stood aloof, with the exception of Mr. Cottrel, and his faith, to speak correctly, was the result of his belief in Sylla Chipchase.

"Won't you wish me luck, Miss Bloxam?" said Lionel, quietly, as the bugle summoned the competitors in the match to the starting-post.

"Certainly, with all my heart," rejoined Blanche. "All our sympathies are of course with you. But do you think you can win?"

"I really don't know. If it was only a mile, Montague would find me troublesome to get rid of; but this is hardly far enough for me."

The "novice," as the camp with much promptitude christened him, was keenly scanned when, having divested himself of his coat, he appeared at the post. A slight, dark, wiry young fellow, with a terrible wear-and-tear look about him that should make an antagonist judge him difficult to dispose of in a struggle of any duration. There was no delay this time about the start; for the two jumped off at the first attempt, Montague having decidedly somewhat the best of it. By the time they had gone a hundred yards the Engineer felt sure that he had the speed of his opponent, and then, sad to say for his supporters, he fell into the very error which Sylla Chipchase had so deprecated, viz., holding his antagonist too cheap. Mr. Montague's vanity had been considerably wounded by that young lady's disbelief in his prowess. She had contrived, as she had most assuredly intended, to irritate him by her persistent scepticism as to his being the swift-footed Achilles he so loved to pose as. He determined to show her and all other unbelievers what he could really do. He would make a veritable exhibition of his antagonist. He would cut him down and run clean away from him. Fired with this idea, he shot well to the front, and came along the next hundred yards at a great pace, and a shout went up from the marquees near the winning-post of "Montague wins anyhow!" But we all know what comes of the attempt to astonish the gallery. Although the Engineer had undoubtedly established a strong lead, yet his wiry foe, running well within himself, hung persistently on his track, and was a long way from beaten off. During the next hundred yards it was palpable that Beauchamp was slowly but steadily diminishing the gap between them, and thence up to the marquees he closed rapidly on his leader. Thirty yards from the winning-post Lionel made his effort, fairly collared his antagonist about ten yards from home, and, leaving him without an effort, won a good race by a couple of yards. Whether the

result would have been different had Mr. Montague held his opponent in higher esteem, as in all such cases, it is impossible to determine; but there can be no doubt that the ostentatious victory he aspired to made Lionel Beauchamp's task considerably more easy.

Gratulations and condolences welcomed the victor and vanquished as they walked slowly back to the marquees; but it was with somewhat of a crestfallen air that Montague advanced to present Sylla with the cup that she had won. He feared that she would be merciless in this her hour of triumph, and dreaded the banter to which he might be subjected. But Sylla knew well the virtue of moderation, and was, besides, far too pleased with her success to be hard upon any one.

"No, no, Mr. Montague!" she exclaimed, with the sunniest of smiles; "I cannot take it; I cannot, indeed. I am not entitled to it, for my champion is not even a soldier. I know without Lionel telling me that I have been very lucky to save my bracelet. I am well content to leave my cup in your hands, for I feel quite sure that you will keep it for me against all comers."

But if Sylla Chipchase was content, Lady Mary Bloxam was very much the reverse. Mr. Beauchamp's victory had gratified her, it was true; but then how came this sparkling brunette not only to call him "Lionel," but apparently to know all his habits and capabilities? She felt, too, exceedingly wroth at the manner in which Sylla had unexpectedly usurped the position of queen of the revels, and again determined that she would see as little as possible of the Chipchase girls as long as their cousin was with them.

CHAPTER V.

AN EXCURSION TO TROTBURY.

That there is nothing succeeds like success, is an axiom most profoundly believed in by women. The sex have a natural tendency to hero-worship, and can you but snatch the laurel-leaf, you will ever count plenty of admirers among them. In the drawing-room at Todborough that evening the victor of the afternoon was quite the hero of the occasion; but we may be sure that in the course of the conversation the race provoked, Lady Mary did not neglect to ascertain how it was that Lionel had become on such a familiar footing with Sylla Chipchase. That young lady having dropped the mask, of course Beauchamp made no mystery of the fact that they lived close to each other and had been friends from childhood. Lady Mary was by no means gratified by this discovery. She foresaw that Lionel must necessarily be thrown much into the society of one whom, with all her prejudice, she could not but admit was a most attractive girl; and she reflected that young men at times discover that the little-thought-of playmates of their childhood have grown up wondrous fair to look upon. Blanche's curiosity, too, was also much exercised on this subject, and young ladies, in their own artless fashion, can cross-examine in such cases as adroitly as a Queen's Counsel. On one point there was much unanimity, namely, that it was a great triumph for the Grange, and most satisfactory that Jim Bloxam's defeat should have been so speedily avenged.

In the tobacco parliament, held as usual after the ladies had retired, the race was again discussed, but from its more professional aspect.

"In these hard times," exclaimed Jim, "we cannot allow such a formidable amateur to be idle. We shall have to christen you the 'Suffolk Stag,' Beauchamp, enter you at Lillie Bridge, and keep on matching you at the Orleans Club, Hurlingham, and in the vicinity of the metropolis generally. There is only one thing puzzles me: while we were all talking pedestrianism the other evening, you never gave us a hint of your powers. You and Miss Sylla could not surely have already arranged the successful coup of this afternoon?"

Pansy Cottrell listened somewhat curiously for Lionel's reply. He did not think exactly that the pair were confederates, but he most assuredly suspected that the little comedy had been most deliberately planned by the young lady, though not perhaps intended to have been played had Jim Bloxam proved successful; but he called to mind the dexterity with which she had led up to the wager, and thought of the many rash bets which he had seen the esquires of fair women goaded into by their charges at Sandown, Ascot, and the like.

"Certainly not," replied Beauchamp, "I knew nothing about it till I was called upon to run. If I had, I should have protested strongly; but it was too late when I was consulted—there was nothing for it but to save her bracelet if I could."

"Well, all I can say," returned Jim, "is that the lady is a much better judge of your capabilities than you are yourself; though how she got her knowledge I own I am at a loss to determine."

"Well," said Lionel, as he ejected a thin cloud of smoke from his lips, "I can explain that to you. I was the quickest in my time at Harrow, and Sylla Chipchase knows that, as well as that when I was out in North America after the big game I could hold my own with any of the Indian hunters of our party; but I never contended against any amateur runners at home here. I should think, Bloxam, your opinion is the same as my own about this afternoon. Montague would, I fancy, have beaten me if he hadn't tried to cut me down; over double the distance I have no doubt I should always beat him."

"It might have made a difference," returned Jim; "but I should back you all the same if it were to be run over again."

"By the way, Bloxam," observed Mr. Sartoris, as he busied himself in opening a bottle of seltzer-water, "now I am down here I must see Trobury Cathedral. I suppose it's easy enough to slip over by rail from Commonstone."

"Oh dear, yes," replied Jim; "but hang it, that's an idea! We'll do ever so much better than that, we'll organize a big ride-and-drive party there; as many of us as can will ride, and the remainder must travel on wheels. We will have every available horse out of the stables to-morrow, go over to Trobury, lunch at "The Sweet Waters," do the cathedral and place generally in the afternoon, and get back in time for dinner. It'll make a capital day,—suit everybody down to the ground."

"That would be very charming, and it is extremely good of you to suggest it; but, my dear Bloxam, I didn't quite mean that. Lady Mary has very likely made other arrangements, and of course I don't want to interfere with those. I can slip over by myself——"

"Oh, fiddle-de-dee!" interposed Jim. "My mother will be only too glad to hear that we have hit off our day's diversion."

"Yes," observed Mr. Cottrell, in a meditative manner; "I have known Lady Mary for many years, and that is her great charm as a hostess. She is always anxious that her guests should amuse themselves after their own fashion. Too many of our entertainers, alas! will insist upon it we shall amuse ourselves in theirs."

Jim Bloxam looked sharply at the speaker as he lit his bed-room candle. Jim had a shrewd idea that Mr. Cottrell at times laughed a little at his friends as well as with them.

"Cottrell is right, however," he said. "It's time to go to bed. After dancing all last night and running races this afternoon, Beauchamp, like myself, feels no doubt fit for it."

When Mr. Cottrell reached his bed-room, he took two or three turns up and down the floor in a somewhat preoccupied manner. At length a faint smile played about his mouth, and muttering to himself, "I will!" he seated himself at the writing-table, rapidly penned a short note, addressed it, and then sought his pillow in the tranquil frame of mind that befits a man who has planned a pleasant surprise for his fellow-creatures. When his valet brought him his cup of tea the next morning at nine, Mr. Cottrell briefly informed him that there was a note on the table for the rectory.

"If you don't know where it is, Smithson," he continued, "inquire quietly. Take it at once; there is no answer; and no tattling about where you have been, mind."

Smithson vanished silently, though aggrieved. He did feel that the latter injunction to such a model of discretion as himself amounted almost to an insult. A very paragon of valets was Smithson—could be relied on to be mute as a fish concerning his master's doings, unless paid to be otherwise, when he of course held to the accepted traditions of his class.

After a previous conference with the stable authorities, Jim Bloxam at breakfast proposed the Trobury expedition. Lady Mary listened to the proposed excursion at first with some misgivings. She expected to hear it announced that the Chipchase girls had been already asked to join the party. They had been thus invited so often before, that they would have been quite justified in themselves proposing to do so on hearing such an expedition was in contemplation; but no, neither from Blanche nor Jim came a hint of such being the case; and then Lady Mary expressed most unqualified approval of the idea. It was settled that they should start punctually at twelve; and as Mr. Cottrell had not as yet made his appearance, Lady Mary very thoughtfully sent a message up to his room to inform him of what was in contemplation. The breakfast party had nearly all dispersed, even the late comers had thrown their napkins on the table, and yet the hostess, usually one of the first to bustle off upon her own private affairs, still lingered over the *Morning Post*.

"Come, mother," said Jim, suddenly putting his head into the room, "if you have finished. I want you to help me to tell people off. The governor is not coming; so that leaves his hack at our disposal. I thought if we gave that to Sartoris, Beauchamp and myself can take the hunters, Blanche has her own horse, and the rest of you can go quite comfortably in the break. I told them to take the hood off. And as for Braybrooke, he is going over to Rockcliffe to see some chum of his who is quartered there."

"I have no doubt, my dear Jim, that will all do very well," replied Lady Mary. "I don't think I shall go myself; and Mrs. Evesham is also, I fancy, of my way of thinking."

"All right, then; I shall consider that as settled;" and with that observation Jim left his mother once more in the undisturbed enjoyment of her paper.

But whether the proceedings of her Majesty's Government, or whether the denunciation of her Majesty's Opposition, were not to her liking; or whether the perusal of the Court news had disturbed her serenity; whether it was that the latest discovery in tenors was reported stricken with sore throat that grieved her; or whether it was the last atrocity in crime that made her flesh creep and so disquieted her, it was impossible to say; but that Lady Mary fidgeted considerably over her journal was a fact past dispute. A looker-on, had there been one, would have noticed that her eye frequently wandered from the page to the door; and as the clock on the mantelpiece chimed eleven, she rose from her chair with a petulant gesture and walked towards the window. A few minutes more, and her patience was rewarded: Pansey Cottrell strolled into the room, and rang lazily for some fresh tea.

"You're shamefully late, Pansey; you always are, I know," she said, as she advanced with outstretched hand to greet him. "But it was too bad of you to be so when I am so particularly anxious to talk to you."

"My dear Lady Mary, why did you not send me word upstairs? You know my usual habits; but you know also that I break them without hesitation whenever I can be of service to a lady, or even gratify her caprice."

Lady Mary laughed, as she said, "I know better than to exact such a tremendous sacrifice." She was perfectly well aware that Cottrell, blandly as he might talk, never submitted to the faintest interference with what he termed his natural hours. "You are in my confidence," she continued, "and have seen how circumstances combined against me. Who could have dreamt those Chipchase girls had such a provokingly pretty cousin? They had never even mentioned her very existence."

"Yes, it is awkward," replied Cottrell slowly, "a Miss Chipchase turning up who is dangerous—decidedly dangerous."

"Yes; and the rector's daughters have always been so intimate with us all that it is difficult to keep them at a distance—in fact, since they amalgamated with our party at that dreadful ball, impossible. Tell me, what do you think of this Sylla Chipchase? You met her down in Suffolk. She is just the saucy chit men go wild about, I suppose?"

"Well," replied Cottrell, with a malicious twinkle in his eyes, "there is no real harm in the girl; but she'd flirt with a bishop if she sat next to him at dinner. And as for men going wild about her, we had two or three very pretty women at Hogden's last year; and the manner in which some of those fellows wavered in their allegiance was positively shameful."

"Men always *do* make such fools of themselves about girls of that sort," said Lady Mary, with no little asperity. "Tell me, did you notice anything between them?"

"Between whom?" replied Cottrell languidly, and with an expression of such utter ignorance of her meaning in his face as did infinite credit to his histrionic powers.

"Between her and Mr. Beauchamp, of course," said Lady Mary sharply.

"Beauchamp wasn't there," replied Cottrell. "I never saw him till I met him in this house."

"And what do you think about it now?"

"Two things," replied Cottrell, smiling, "both of which are calculated to give you comfort. First, people brought up together don't often fall in love; seeing too much of each other is probably an excellent antidote to that complaint. Secondly, that he seems very much devoted to Miss Bloxam at present."

"Well, I hope you are right," said Lady Mary. "It would really be a very nice thing for Blanche. At all events, we are out of the Chipchase girls for to-day." And, so saying, she rose somewhat comforted, little aware, poor woman, that another ringer was meddling with the ropes.

But now the party began to muster in the front hall. Lady Mary observed with maternal complacency that Blanche was looking her best and brightest in one of Creed's masterpieces. Jim was fidgeting about, all impatience, and, throwing open the dining-room door, called out,

"You really have time for no more breakfast, Cottrell, if you are coming with us. You must put off further satisfying of your hunger until we arrive at 'The Sweet Waters' at Trotbury. The horses will be round directly. Ah, here they are!"

And as he spoke, the sound of hoofs was heard on the gravel outside, speedily followed by a peal on the bell; and Mr. Cottrell emerged from the dining-room just in time to see Jim open the hall door to Laura Chipchase, attired in hat and habit, with Miss Sylla mounted and holding her cousin's horse in the background.

Mr. Cottrell contemplated the tableau with all the exultation of a successful artist; and as for Lady Mary, her heart sank within her as the conviction crossed her mind she was destined never to be quit of that "Suffolk girl."

"Admirable, Laura!" exclaimed Jim, as he shook hands. "What happy chance inspired you to turn up all ready for riding? We are just off to lunch at Trotbury, and of course you and Miss Sylla will join us."

"That will be charming," replied Miss Chipchase. "Sylla was wild for a ride this morning; so she and I came over to see if any of you are in the same mood;" and then the young lady passed on to greet the rest of the party.

Lady Mary, sad to say, received this statement with the utmost incredulity, and mentally arraigned her own offspring of duplicity; but whether Jim or Blanche was the traitor she could not determine. Could she but have peeped over Sylla Chipchase's shoulder as that laughter-loving damsel read Pansey Cottrell's note, she would have been both enlightened and astonished.

"DEAR MISS SYLLA," it ran, "I cannot recollect the name of the French song that you told me would just suit Mrs. Wriothesley. Please send it me. We are all going over to-morrow to lunch at Trotbury; some on horseback, and some upon wheels. You should join the riding party if you can, as it will be doubtless pleasant; and though I am not empowered to say so, Lady Mary will of course be delighted to see you."

"Song!" muttered Miss Sylla, as she read this note, "I never said anything to him about a French song; but, ah—stop—I think I see it now!" and she ran through the note again, and as she finished it, broke into a merry laugh. "What a dear, clever, mischievous old man he is!" she muttered. "Of course he means that I am to join that riding party and make Lady Mary a little uncomfortable. Well, she really does deserve it. How dare she pretend that I am setting my cap at Lionel? Such a designing matron deserves some slight punishment, and she little knows what Mr. Cottrell and I can do when we combine together to avenge ourselves."

When she descended to the breakfast-room, Sylla found no difficulty in persuading her cousin Laura to go for a ride. It was of course easy to suggest Trotbury. Then it was agreed they might as well look in at the Grange on the way, to see if they could persuade any of the party there to join them in such an expedition; and thus Sylla Chipchase successfully carried out Mr. Cottrell's design, without making mention to any one of the note that she had received from him.

The merry party were soon started. The Misses Evesham, Mrs. Sartoris, and Pansey Cottrell in the carriage—the reduced number of those electing to travel on wheels sparing the latter the indignity of the "break"—the remainder were of course upon horseback; and as Lady Mary looked after them, admiring the firm seat of her daughter sitting squarely and well back in her saddle, she wondered whether the "Suffolk chit," as she persistently termed her, could ride.

"That's a very good-looking one you are riding, Miss Bloxam, and up to a stone or two more than your weight, as a lady's horse always should be."

"I don't know about that," replied Blanche, laughing. "I am tall, and by no means of the thread-paper order. King Cole," she continued, leaning forward to pat the glossy neck of her black favourite, "would probably tell you he found me quite enough on his back, could he be consulted. He is as good, too, as he is handsome, as I shall perhaps have an opportunity of showing you to-day."

"How so?" inquired Beauchamp.

"Well, we very often on these excursions to Trotbury ride there quietly, and then lark home. There is a lovely piece of galloping ground over Tapton Downs, and a charming cut across country this side of it,

by which we can save nearly a mile."

"That'll be great fun," replied Beauchamp, "and I advocate strongly such a saving of distance on our homeward journey. This is one of your father's hunters I am riding, is it not?"

"Yes, and a grand jumper he is too: accustomed to papa's weight, carrying you will be quite play to him."

Arrived at Trotbury, the first thing, as Jim remarked, was obviously to order lunch at "The Sweet Waters;" fortified with which they could then proceed to do the cathedral, and spend as much time as seemed good to them over that noble pile.

"There are all sorts of tombs and chapels to see," continued Jim, "with more than an average crop of historical legends concerning them; and the vergers have all the characteristics of that class: once upset them in their parrot-like description, and they flounder about in most comical manner. The last time I was here they showed me the tomb of St. Gengulphus, with an effigy of that eminent clergyman—considerably damaged about the nose—in stone, on the top. I appealed to the verger gravely to know if it was considered a good likeness. He was staggered for a moment, and then replied hurriedly that it was. But, thank goodness, here comes the lunch. I feel as hungry as an unsuccessful hawk."

"Too bad of you, too bad, Mr. Cottrell," exclaimed Sylla Chipchase; "you were not one of the riding party, and so I have had no opportunity as yet of rebuking you for your forgetfulness: you had no business to forget the name of that French song I told you to recommend to my aunt."

"Allow me to observe, Miss Sylla, that I don't consider I deserve much rebuke on the subject. I quite remembered your message to Mrs. Wriothesley; it was only the name of the song that escaped my memory."

"Is Mrs. Wriothesley an aunt of yours?" inquired Blanche, with no little curiosity; "we know her, and often meet her in town."

"Yes; isn't she charming? I am going up to stay with her as soon as the Easter holidays are over; we shall no doubt meet often."

Blanche said no more, but pondered for a minute or two over this little bit of intelligence. She did not understand why, but she was quite certain that her mother disliked Sylla Chipchase, and was conscious of being not quite in accord with that young lady herself. She knew, moreover, that if there was one person that Lady Mary detested in all her London circle, it was this very Mrs. Wriothesley.

But luncheon is finished, and the whole party proceed to view the cathedral. Pansey Cottrell, however, was not to be got beyond the threshold: he protested that he had too small a mind for so great a subject, and declared his intention of solacing himself with a cigar outside for the temporary absence of the ladies, which was, as Miss Sylla informed him, a mere pandering to the coarser instincts of his nature, whatever he might choose to call it. With the exception of Mr. Sartoris, it may be doubted whether any of the party paid much attention to what they were shown. The principal effect on Blanche's mind was a hazy conviction that Sylla Chipchase was a somewhat disagreeable girl. She considered that the familiar way in which that young lady addressed Lionel Beauchamp, to say the least of it, was in very bad taste.

But these irreverent pilgrims at last brought their inspection of the famous shrine to a conclusion, having displayed on the whole, perhaps, no more want of veneration than is usually shown by such sightseers, and, picking up the philosophic Cottrell in the close, wended their way once more back to "The Sweet Waters."

"Don't you think Lady Mary was enraptured to see me this morning, Mr. Cottrell?" inquired Sylla Chipchase, as they lingered for a minute or two behind the rest.

"Quite sure of it," was the reply, and the speaker's keen dark eyes twinkled with fun as he spoke; "and what is more, if my ears do not deceive me, we shall carry back to the Grange a little bit of intelligence that I am quite sure will gladden the heart of our hostess."

"What is that?" inquired Sylla.

"Don't you know? No; how could you possibly, considering that you are only now about to make your *début* in the London world? You must know, then, that your aunt Mrs. Wriothesley is the object of Lady Mary's particular detestation."

"But how came that about? What was the cause of their quarrel? I am sure my aunt is a very charming woman."

"An assertion that I most cordially endorse, and so would all the men of her acquaintance, and most of the women; but when you come to ladies in society, there are wheels within wheels, you see. Your aunt and Lady Mary have been rivals."

"Nonsense, Mr. Cottrell!" exclaimed Sylla; "why, my aunt is at least fifteen years younger than Lady Mary. She was not only married, but all her children born, before my aunt Mrs. Wriothesley came out."

"True, Miss Sylla; but there are rivalries of many kinds, as you will find as you grow older. I can only repeat what I have said before—Mrs. Wriothesley and Lady Mary have been rivals."

"Please explain," said Sylla in her most coaxing tones.

"No, no," rejoined Cottrell, laughing; "you are quick enough, and can afford to trust to your own ears and your own observation when you reach town."

On again arriving at "The Sweet Waters" Jim ordered tea at once, and the horses in half an hour. The conversation became general around the tea-table, and Jim Bloxam was suddenly moved by one of those strokes of inspiration of which his mother had such wholesome dread.

"Miss Sylla," he explained, "I hear you are a theatrical 'star' of magnitude in your own country; there is Mrs. Sartoris too, well known on the amateur London boards; and there are others amongst us who have figured with more or less success. It would be sinful to waste so much dramatic talent; don't you think so, Blanche? We have not time to get up regular theatricals, but there is no reason we should not do some charades to-morrow evening; don't you all think it would be great fun?"

There was a general chorus of assent from all but Blanche, though Miss Bloxam did not venture upon any protest.

"Then I consider that settled," exclaimed Jim. "You will do the proper thing, Laura; my mother's compliments to your father, and she hopes you will all come up in the evening for charades and an impromptu valse or two in the hall. And now, ladies and gentlemen, to horse, to horse! or else we shall never save the dressing-bell."

"And, Jim," exclaimed Miss Bloxam, as she gathered up her habit, "let's go the cross-country way home."

"Certainly; well thought of, sister mine. It's a lovely evening for a gallop."

CHAPTER VI.

A SHORT CUT HOME.

Through the streets of Todborough and on through the environs of the city the gay cavalcade rode decorously and discreetly; but nearing Tapton Downs, the spirits of the party seemed to rise as they encountered the fresh sea-breeze.

"I am sure you must be dying for a good gallop," said Blanche, turning to Sylla Chipchase. "We turn off the main road a little farther on, and then, if you remember, we have lovely turf upon each side of the way. We generally have what Jim calls a 'real scurry' over that."

"I understand—an impromptu race; that will be great fun. But tell me, Miss Bloxam—you know all these horses—have I any chance of beating Lionel?"

"I can hardly say," returned Blanche, laughing. "We have really never tried them in that way I should think old Selim, the horse he is riding, is rather faster than yours."

"Ah; but then, you see, I am much lighter than he is. Lionel, I challenge you to a race as soon as we turn off across the downs. You shall bet me two dozen pair of gloves to one. I always make him do that, you know," she remarked confidentially to Blanche, "in all our battles, whatever they may be at."

"Very well," replied Beauchamp. "Only remember, I shall expect those gloves if I win them; and as I did my best for you yesterday at Rockcliffe, so I intend to do the best for myself now."

"A very sporting match," exclaimed Bloxam. "There's about a mile of capital going over the downs without trespassing. I'll ride forward, and be judge and winning-post, while Sartoris will start you." And so saying, Jim trotted forward.

"Now," exclaimed Blanche, as, quitting the main highway, they turned into the cross-country road that led over the downs towards the sea, "this is where you ought to start from. If one of you will take the turf on the right-hand side, and the other that on the left, and do your best till you come to Jim, we shall all have a splendid gallop, whichever of you wins. You start them, Mr. Sartoris. Let them get a hundred yards in front of us, and then we'll follow as fast as we can."

The antagonists took their places as directed; Mr. Sartoris gave the word "Go!" and away they dashed. Miss Bloxam, sailing away on King Cole in the wake of Sylla Chipchase, scans that young lady's performance with a critical eye. A first-rate horsewoman herself, she was by no means favourably impressed with it. Sylla rides well enough, but her seat is not such as would have been held in high repute in the shires. She also displays a most ladylike tendency on the present occasion to what is technically called ride her horse's head off.

"Two to one!" murmured Blanche; "why, it should be ten to one upon old Selim!" and with that she turned her eyes to ascertain after what fashion old Selim's jockey is conducting himself. But a single glance at Lionel bending slightly forward in his stirrups, with hands low and his horse held firmly by the head, pretty well convinces her that he is a first-flight man to hounds, and probably has appeared in silk on a racecourse. The match terminates as might be anticipated: Sylla, under the laudable impression that she is making her advantage in the weights tell, gallops her luckless mare pretty nearly to a standstill, and Lionel, though winning as he likes, good-naturedly reduces it to a half length, whereby his defeated antagonist lays the flattering unction to her soul that, had he carried a few more pounds, the result would have been the other way.

They jogged soberly along some couple of miles, when Blanche exclaimed gaily, "Who is for the short cut home? 'Let all who love me follow me.'" And, putting King Cole at the small fence that bordered the road, she jumped into the big grass-field on the other side. Lionel Beauchamp and Laura Chipchase followed promptly; but Jim, who was a little in advance, said quietly,

"We had better, I think, keep the road, Sartoris. The governor's hack, though admirable in his place, is not quite calculated for the inspection of the agriculture of the neighbourhood."

He said this good-naturedly, solely upon Sylla's account. He had marked the finish of her race with Lionel, and had come to the conclusion that the young lady was not much of a horsewoman. Now this short cut, although over an easy country, did involve the negotiation of two or three good-sized fences, and he thought it just possible that the girl would prefer not being called upon to ride over anything of that sort. Sylla was possessed of a good many accomplishments, but riding across country was not one of them. She had, however, that curious but common desire to excel in that for which she had no aptitude; still, if she possessed no other attribute of a horsewoman, she was undoubtedly gifted with nerve amounting almost to recklessness.

"Oh, no, Captain Bloxam," she exclaimed; "I am sure we can go anywhere that the rest of them do. Don't you think so, Mr. Sartoris?"

Without waiting for a reply, the young lady jumped her horse into the field, and cantered smartly after Blanche and her cousin.

"Well, wilful woman must have her way," Jim said drily. "Come along, Sartoris; the governor's hack can jump well enough if you don't hurry him." And the two men promptly followed their fair leader across the grass.

King Cole enjoyed the scurry across country to the full as much as his mistress, and expressed his pleasure by shaking his head and reaching hard at his bit. Laura Chipchase's horse was also roused by the smart canter at which they were going, and began to pull unpleasantly.

"Let him go, Laura," cried Miss Bloxam; "the King, too, is fidgeting most uncomfortably. A good gallop will take the nonsense out of them."

And with that the two girls quickened their pace, and, going on side by side, led the way at a fair hunting gallop. The first few fences were small, and as she sailed triumphantly over them, Sylla's pulses tingled, and she was fired with the spirit of emulation. Although she was some little distance behind, she resolved to catch and pass the leaders, and with that intent commenced bucketing her mare along in rather merciless fashion. In vain did Jim shout words of warning. She turned a deaf ear to them. Had he not recommended that she should keep the road? Did he think the art of crossing a country was known only to the maidens of Fernshire? She was determined to catch Blanche and her

cousin, whatever her escort might urge to the contrary, and saw with infinite satisfaction that she was rapidly closing the gap between them. Jim Bloxam, galloping a little to her left, and watching her closely, has already come to the conclusion that wilful woman will have her fall, and only trusts it may not be serious.

The mare Sylla was riding was a fairly good hunter, and if she would but have left her alone would have carried the girl safely over such obstacles as they had to encounter. But Jim noticed with dismay that Sylla had some indistinct idea of assisting her at her fences, the result of which could only be inevitable grief. The exhilaration of the trio in front, as attested by the wild shout sent back by Lionel Beauchamp as they cleared the first of those bigger fences previously mentioned, put Sylla's blood thoroughly up. Heedless of Jim's "For God's sake, take a pull!" she struck her mare sharply with the whip, and sent her at it as fast as she could lay legs to the ground. The consequence was the mare took off too soon, and the pair landed in the next field somewhat in a heap. Jim was over and off his horse in a minute, and at once came to the discomfited fair's assistance. It is seldom that a lady shows to advantage after a regular "crumpler," the story of Arabella Churchill notwithstanding; nor, for the matter of that, do men either look the better for the process. No real harm having been done, the ludicrous side of the situation generally presents itself; but Sylla was certainly an exception. Although her hat was broken, her habit woefully torn and mud-stained, nobody could have looked at her somewhat flushed face and flashing dark eyes without admitting that she was a very pretty girl even "in ruins."

"No, thanks; I am not in the least hurt, Captain Bloxam," she replied, as Jim helped her to her feet; "but I could cry with vexation. I had set my heart upon catching those two; but now," she continued, with a comical little grimace, "I have got to first catch my mare."

With the assistance of Mr. Sartoris, who, taking Jim's advice, had followed at a more sedate pace, this was soon done; and Sylla, having rectified her toilette as far as circumstances permitted, was once more in the saddle. That she presented a rather dilapidated and woebegone appearance, nobody could be more conscious than herself; but, as a woman always does under such affliction, she put the best face she could upon it.

"I am looking a dreadful guy," she said; "and it is very good of you two not to laugh at me. I dare not even think of my hat, for nobody ever did, nor ever will, succeed in straightening that article into any semblance of its former shape when it has been once stove in. I have only one thing to be thankful for. Do you know what that is?"

"That you are not hurt in any way," replied Jim.

"Hurt!" she rejoined, with a contemptuous shrug of her shoulders; "I never thought of that. Can you guess, Mr. Sartoris?"

"I think so," he returned, laughing. "You are well pleased that your cousin and Miss Bloxam were well in front."

"Just so," said Sylla. "It is easy to see that you are married, Mr. Sartoris, and can to some extent follow the windings of our feminine minds. *They* would have laughed, and, under pretence of assistance, called attention," and here the girl looked ruefully down at her rent habit, "to all the weak joints in my armour; and, lastly, they would have done what you won't,—tease me to death about it for the next week."

"Matrimony has inculcated that blindness is wisdom as far as I am concerned," said Sartoris.

"You see, Captain Bloxam, how that ceremony quickens the understanding. But you are very good. I know you think that my fall was my own fault; that if I had listened to your warning it wouldn't have happened; and you remain mute. Laura is a dear good girl; but, in your place, she couldn't have resisted saying, 'Didn't I tell you so?' to save her life."

Jim muttered a courteous and most mendacious disclaimer of Miss Sylla's "grief" being due to disregard of his warning.

The leading trio, in the meanwhile, lost in all the exultation of a good gallop, and in utter ignorance of Sylla Chipchase's fall, kept on without slacking rein till they once more found themselves near the high-road, sweeping round from the point they had left it to this, in an arc, by traversing the chord of which they had saved about a mile; and now, looking round for the remainder of the party, discovered, to their surprise, that they were nowhere in sight.

"They must have gone round by the road!" exclaimed Blanche. "Perhaps your cousin, Laura, is not used to crossing a country."

"That I can't say," replied Miss Chipchase. "Till this Easter I haven't seen her since she was quite a small child; but I must say, from what I know of her, that I am rather surprised she didn't try."

"I think it most probable she has tried," observed Lionel quietly.
"Shall I ride back and see what has become of them?"

"No," said Miss Chipchase, "I don't think that is necessary. Jim and Mr. Sartoris will no doubt take every care of her. We had better jump into the road, Blanche, and see if they are coming that way."

But of course there were no signs of the rearguard along the highway; and after a delay of a few minutes the party agreed that Sylla was well taken care of, and they might as well proceed leisurely homewards. The victim of her ambition to "witch the world with noble horsemanship" saw the leaders vanish from her view with much satisfaction. Under Jim Bloxam's guidance, and proceeding quietly over more moderate fences, which, though not the straightest, was perhaps the safest, path to the high-road, they regained it without further accident. It must not be supposed that Sylla's nerves were shaken by her fall. She rode as boldly as at first at everything her Mentor allowed; but she was in a strange country, and compelled, whether she liked it or not, to trust herself to Jim Bloxam's guidance.

"Now," she exclaimed, "you have come very nearly to the end of your responsibilities, Captain Bloxam. You have only, if possible, to smuggle me into the rectory; and remember—I swear you both to secrecy."

"I can take you," replied Jim, "by a bridle-path through the wood, which will in all probability insure your reaching the rectory grounds unnoticed; but your getting into the house I must leave to your own ingenuity."

When, in the course of the evening, Jim, in his own impetuous fashion, told that he had asked the Chipchase girls to come up to the Grange the next evening, with a view to charades and an impromptu valse or two, Lady Mary received the intelligence with the calm resignation of a follower of Mahomet. She saw it was hopeless attempting any further to control the march of events.

"No," she murmured confidentially to Mr. Cottrell in the drawing-room, "the Fates are against me. I have done all that woman could, but I cannot contend with destiny. It is sad; but whatever with due forethought I propose, destiny, embodied in the shape of that wretch Jim, persistently thwarts. There is no such thing as instilling the slightest tact into him."

"But, my dear Lady Mary," rejoined Cottrell, whose sense of the humorous was again highly gratified by the outcome of the trip to Trotbury, "I really cannot see that you have any cause for complaint. Things look to me progressing very favourably in the direction you wish."

"My dear Pansey," replied her ladyship, solemnly, "you do not understand these things *quite so well* as I thought you did. A variety of belles disturbs concentration, and prevents that earnestness of purpose which is so highly desirable."

"I see," rejoined Pansey, laughing. "To revert to the metaphor you used in our conversation some days since, you object to a peal of belles. Your doctrine may be embodied in the formula, I presume, of one belle and one ringer."

"Yes," rejoined her ladyship, smiling, "that about describes it. And now I think it is about bed-time. Jim, my dear," she continued, as she took her bed-room candle, "as you have thought fit to improvise a ball, you had better take care that the young ladies have partners by asking three or four of the officers from Rockcliffe, if they will waive ceremony and come."

"All right," he replied, "I will send over the first thing to-morrow morning;" and from the inflexion of his mother's voice, Jim gathered that his programme for the morrow had, at all events, not met altogether with her approval.

But there were still a few more bitter drops to be squeezed into the cup of Lady Mary's discontent before she laid her head upon her pillow. She had not been ten minutes in her room when there was a tap at the door, and Blanche entered.

"I just looked in, mamma dear, to ask you if you knew that the Chipchases were related to Mrs. Wriothesley?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Lady Mary; "what can you be dreaming of? Why, I have known Laura and her sister all their lives; and had they been related to that detestable woman, I must have heard of it."

"Well, I can only say that Sylla Chipchase told me to-day at Trotbury that Mrs. Wriothesley was her aunt, and that she was going up to stay with her as soon as the holidays were over."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Lady Mary, "I might have guessed it; I might have known there was some reason for my instinctive dislike to that girl. That a niece of that horrid woman should turn out as objectionable as herself is only what one might expect."

"But really, mamma dear," expostulated Blanche, "although I don't quite like Sylla Chipchase myself, you cannot say that of her. I know you don't like Mrs. Wriothesley; but she is a very pretty woman, and Jim declares a very pleasant one."

"Don't talk to me of Jim!" cried Lady Mary petulantly. "He is too provoking, and thinks every woman not positively ugly that smiles upon him delightful; but I lose all patience when I speak of Mrs. Wriothesley. Of course it's quite possible for Mrs. Wriothesley to be Sylla's aunt, although no relation to her cousins; and you say this girl is going to stay with her?"

"Yes, for the remainder of the season," rejoined Blanche.

"Upon my word," exclaimed Lady Mary, "I really cannot think what sins I have committed, that such a trial should be laid upon me. Mrs. Wriothesley is bad enough as it is, and hard enough to keep at arms' length; but Mrs. Wriothesley with a pretty girl to chaperon—and I am sorry to own that Sylla is that—a girl, moreover, who has forced her way upon us in the country, will be simply unendurable."

Pansey Cottrell, had he been present at this scene, would most thoroughly have enjoyed it, and even Blanche could not help laughing at her mother's dismay. Lady Mary's was no simulation of despair. She pictured, as Cottrell would have divined, herself and her former foe once more pitted against each other as rivals, and recalled rather bitterly that campaign of four or five years back, when another niece of that lady's successfully carried off an eligible *parti* that she, Lady Mary, had at that time selected as suitable for her eldest daughter. She had congratulated her antagonist in most orthodox fashion when the engagement was announced; and, though nothing but the most honied words were exchanged between them, Mrs. Wriothesley had contrived to let her see, as a woman always can, that she was quite aware of her disappointment, and thoroughly cognizant that her soft speeches were as dust and ashes in her mouth.

"Well, good night, mamma," said Blanche, breaking in upon her mother's reverie. "Although you don't like Mrs. Wriothesley, I really don't think that need interfere with your slumbers."

"My dear, you don't know her," rejoined Lady Mary, with a vindictive emphasis that sent Blanche laughing out of the room.

Jim Bloxam might have his faults, but no one could charge him with lack of energy. Whatever he busied himself about, Jim did it with all his might. He had—as in these days who has not?—dabbled a little in amateur theatricals; and, whatever his audience might think of his performance, the stage-manager would emphatically testify that he threw himself into the business heart and soul. That he should take counsel with Mrs. Sartoris next morning concerning the proposed charades was only what might have been expected; and then, an unusual thing in a country-house party, a dearth of talent was discovered. Neither Blanche nor the Misses Evesham had ever taken part in anything of the kind, and declared in favour of being lookers-on. Mr. Sartoris promised to assist to the extent of his ability; but neither he nor his wife would accept the responsibility of deciding what they should do, or in fact undertaking the management. The trio seemed rather nonplussed, when Pansey Cottrell, who had taken no part in the discussion, said quietly,

"Why don't you go down to the rectory, and talk things over with the young ladies there? Miss Sylla is very clever in that way, I can vouch, having seen her."

"Of course," exclaimed Jim. "How stupid of me not to think of it before! Get your hat, Mrs. Sartoris. We have just nice time to slip across before lunch."

Upon arriving at the rectory, Jim plunged at once *in medias res*.

"We are come across to consult you about what we are to do to-night. Rumour, in the shape of Pansey Cottrell, declares, Miss Sylla, that you are 'immense' in all this sort of thing."

"Mr. Cottrell, as you will soon discover, has been imposing upon you to a great extent," replied Sylla; "but still I shall be glad to be of any use I can."

"Our difficulty is this," interposed Mrs. Sartoris: "when I have acted, it has always been in a regular play. My words have been set down for me, so that of course I knew exactly what I had to say and when to say it; but in charades, Captain Bloxam tells me, I shall have to improvise my words. I have never seen one acted; but that strikes me as dreadfully difficult."

"You are perfectly right, Mrs. Sartoris; it is. And yet people who have serious misgivings about their ability to act a play have no hesitation about taking part in charades. It is wont to result in all the characters wanting to talk together, or else in nobody apparently having anything to say, or in one character being so enamoured with the ease he or she improvises, that the affair resolves itself into a mere monologue. I would venture to suggest that our charades should be merely pantomimic."

"Glorious!" exclaimed Jim. "I vote we place ourselves in Miss Sylla's hands, and elect her manageress. Will you agree, Mrs. Sartoris?"

"Most certainly. The idea sounds excellent, and to leave the originator to carry it out is undoubtedly the best thing we can do."

"Very well, then; if you will give me an hour or two to think out my words, I will explain how they ought to be done."

"If you wouldn't mind coming up to the Grange, we might have a rehearsal this afternoon, rummage up the properties, and all the rest of it," exclaimed Jim, energetically.

"That will do admirably," said Laura Chipchase. "And now, Sylla, the sooner you set that great mind of yours to work, the better."

CHAPTER VII.

"THE PLAY'S THE THING."

Todborough Grange rejoiced in what should be the adjunct of every country house—a large unfurnished room. It had been thrown out expressly as a playroom for the children by Cedric Bloxam's father, and as they grew up proved even more useful. Should the house be full and the weather prove wet, what games of battledore and shuttlecock, "bean-bags," &c., were played in it in the daytime, and what a ball-room it made at night! There was no trouble moving out the furniture or taking up the carpet, there being nothing but a few benches and a piano in the room. At one end was a slightly-raised stage, and off that was a tiny chamber, originally known as the toy-room, and pretty well dedicated to the same use now, being stored with properties for cotillons, the aforesaid games, theatrical representations, &c. There was a regular drop-curtain to the stage, but that was all. Scenery there was none. That was fitted in when required, but would have been considered in the way as a permanency, the stage being used at times as an orchestra, at others as a tea-room. It was raised not quite a foot above the floor, and could therefore be easily stepped on to; in fact, upon the few occasions that the Theatre Royal Todborough opened, the entertainment had been confined invariably to one-act farces. At such times it was spoken of with considerable ostentation as a theatre; but as a rule the old appellation was adhered to, and it was generally known as the play-room. It was in this room that the Misses Chipchase found Blanche, Jim, Mr. Cottrell, Lionel Beauchamp, and the Sartorises awaiting their arrival in the afternoon.

"Now, Miss Sylla," exclaimed Jim, "we are all ready for you. We have installed you in command, and hereby promise attention and obedience."

"Honour and obey, Jim," interrupted Blanche, laughing; "but it is the lady who should say it."

"It does sound a little as if he had strayed into the marriage service," observed Cottrell.

"Ladies and gentlemen not intending to assist in this representation are requested to withdraw," retorted Jim, "by order of the stage-manager, James Bloxam."

"Come along, Mr. Cottrell: he has right on his side; the audience have certainly no business at the rehearsals."

And, followed by the younger Miss Chipchase, Cottrell, and Beauchamp, Blanche crossed towards the door. At the threshold they were arrested by Sylla, who exclaimed,

"You cannot all go; I must have another gentleman. If Mr. Cottrell won't act, you must, Lionel."

"I had no idea you acted," said Blanche Bloxam, with some little surprise; "you said nothing about it

this morning when we were talking this over."

It may have been some slight inflexion of the voice that prompted the deduction; but certain it was that as Pansey Cottrell heard that commonplace little speech, he muttered to himself, "The lady is beginning to take things in earnest, whatever Beauchamp may be."

"I have no idea that I can act," rejoined Lionel, laughing; "but I can stand still in whatever attitude I am placed, and that, I fancy, is all Sylla requires of me. You do not feel any disposition to volunteer, I suppose, Mr. Cottrell?"

"Heaven forbid!" rejoined Mr. Cottrell fervently, "Miss Sylla might want me to stand upon one leg. She will put some of you in most uncomfortable attitudes, just for the fun of the thing, I know."

"Now," said the manageress-elect, as Mr. Cottrell closed the door behind him, "what we have got to do is very simple. I have thought of two words which will each represent in three tableaux. Now, I propose that we arrange these tableaux—six in all—and then, if we run through them a second time, just to be sure we have not forgotten our places, we shall have nothing to do but to talk over any details that may occur to us. First, Mrs. Sartoris, which will you represent, the Lady or the Chambermaid of my charades?"

"Well, if you will allow me, I think I will do the Lady," said Mrs. Sartoris, laughing. "I ought, at all events, to be best in that; but there are three of us. What is Miss Chipchase going to do?"

"Oh, she is the Band," rejoined Sylla. "You see, we must have soft music all the way through these charades; and we want somebody to play for us who knows what we are about, and so can follow us."

"And so," interposed Miss Chipchase, "we have settled that I shall play the piano."

"Very well, Mrs. Sartoris," said Sylla; "then we will consider that settled; you do the Ladies and I do the Chambermaids. Now, gentlemen, you must select your own lines. What will you be, Mr. Sartoris—Walking Gentleman, Low Comedian, or Melodramatic Villain?"

"Oh, Melodramatic Villain," cried Mrs. Sartoris,— "he will be delighted. Tom's theatrical proclivities, shocking to relate, are murderous in the extreme. He is always complaining that he is never entrusted with a real good assassination."

"Then that's settled," exclaimed Sylla. "Captain Bloxam will take the Walking Gentleman, and Lionel can do the Low Comedy part."

Under the young manageress's energetic directions the tableaux were rapidly run through. The little troupe worked with a will, and in something under two hours they pronounced themselves perfect, and predicted, as people always do under these circumstances, that the performance would be a great success.

"Now comes a question," said Jim, "as to scenery, properties, and dresses. There is some little scenery in the granary that has been used before at different times, and of course we have a certain amount of properties. What shall you want, Miss Sylla?" and Jim, taking a sheet of paper and pencil in a very business-like manner, prepared to make notes on the top of the piano.

"For the first charade," said Sylla, "the scenery should be a wood scene, and then we want a lady's bed-chamber. The second charade is simply a drawing-room scene all through. For properties a brace of pistols, a pair of handcuffs, a jewel-box with plenty of bracelets, rings, &c.—we ladies can easily find those amongst us. In the second, nothing but a letter in bold handwriting. As for dresses, Mrs. Sartoris and I can easily manage; and as for you gentlemen, you want nothing but a policeman's dress, a livery, and a low comedy wig."

"No trouble about any of those things, Miss Sylla, unless it's the low comedy wig, and about that I have my doubts. However, Beauchamp must manage the best he can with his own hair if I can't find one. There is only one thing more you forgot to tell us,—what the second word is."

"No forgetfulness at all, Captain Bloxam," replied the young lady, laughing. "I am very curious to see if any of you, or any of the audience, make that word out."

"It's high time we were on our way home," observed Miss Chipchase; "as soon as you have given us a cup of tea, Jim, Sylla, and I will be off."

When the evening came there was really a good sprinkling of visitors to look on or join in whatever entertainment might be provided for them. Jim the energetic, in pursuance of his mother's hints overnight, had not only sent over to the Rockcliffe Camp, but had dispatched missives in all directions

by a groom on horseback, with the pithy intimation, "Charades and an impromptu dance this evening at nine. If you have nothing better to do, please come." Jim Bloxam was a popular man in his neighbourhood, and the Grange had a reputation for improvising pleasant entertainments in such fashion. Lady Mary contemplated the forthcoming proceedings with resignation, if not with satisfaction. She had a presentiment that the evening would end unpleasantly for her. She felt certain that Sylla would contrive to pose as its heroine; and that the niece of the woman she most detested in the world should have the opportunity of for once assuming such a position in the house of which she, Lady Mary, was mistress, was exasperating. Pansey Cottrell, too, had contributed not a little to her irritation by dwelling somewhat persistently at dinner on Miss Sylla's dramatic talent. He had done this, dear pleasant creature! simply for his own diversion. He was acting as prompter to a little comedy of real life; and it is ideas, not words, that the prompters on such occasions instil into our minds. As a rule, Pansey Cottrell would have judiciously shirked such an entertainment as the one which he was now with genuine curiosity taking his seat to witness. Neither host nor hostess ever succeeded in persuading him to do what he did not fancy. He would be ill, retire to his own bed-room at the shortest possible notice, would no more make up a fourth at whist, or conduce to the entertainment of his fellows, than volunteer for a turn on the treadmill. If his entertainers troubled him much, he did not come their way again. Of course, they need not ask him unless they liked. But Mr. Cottrell knew society well. Once assured such recognition as he had done, and how obtained matters not an iota: the more unmeasured your insolence to society, the more does society bow down and worship.

"Where's Brummell dished?"

Yes, but it was a mere matter of *L.s.d.* that dished him. That he ever did tell the Prince to ring the bell is unlikely; but society thought him capable of doing so, and revered him accordingly.

The bell rings, and the fingers of Laura Chipchase, who has already seated herself at the piano, begin to move dreamily over the keys. She plays well, and a soft weird-like melody attunes the minds of the spectators to what is to follow. Again the bell rings, and as the curtain slowly rises comes the sharp report of a pistol. "Good Heavens! there is some accident," escapes from three or four lips. But the wild ghostly music still falls, without ceasing, from the piano. Slowly the curtain continues to rise, and discovers two men confronting each other after the approved custom of duelling. On the proper stage right stands Mr. Sartoris, with brows bent and sullen scowl upon his lip; the nerveless hand by his side grasps the still-smoking pistol. Opposite, and as far from him as the space will admit, is Bloxam, his right arm upraised, and his hand holding a pistol pointed upwards. In the background stands Beauchamp, in an attitude expressive of intense anxiety. Having reached the ceiling, the curtain slowly commences to descend. As it does so, Bloxam's pistol is discharged in the air, and the performers remain unmovable till once more masked from the view of the spectators.

"A duel!" exclaims Miss Evesham; "what are we to make of that?"

"No, no, that won't do," ejaculates the Squire: "he has missed—missed, don't you see? Can't be quite right; but that's the idea."

"I have it," rejoins Miss Evesham; "you are right, Mr. Bloxam, that is it. It's not missed, but a miss. There are lots of words, you know, begin with 'miss.'"

Some slight delay, during which the soft dreamy music still falters unceasingly from Laura Chipchase's fingers, and then the curtain once more begins to ascend. There is no such sensational effect as a pistol-report to startle the audience this time. The scene represents a lady's dressing-room. In an arm-chair, placed on the stage right opposite the toilette-table on the stage left, attired as a smart lady's-maid, reclines Sylla sound asleep; on the table are scattered bracelets, &c., and also stands an open jewel-case. Mr. Sartoris, got up to represent a dog-stealer, a burglar, or other member of the predatory classes, is in the act of getting in a practicable window at the back of the stage. A dark lantern is in his hand, and his feet are artistically enshrined in india-rubbers. Stealthily, with many melodramatic starts and gestures, and anxious glances at the sleeping girl, he makes his way to the toilette-table, fills his pockets with the glittering gewgaws, then turns to depart, with his plunder, silently as he had come. As he passes the sleeping soubrette, she moves uneasily in her chair. With a ferocious gesture the robber draws from his breast an ominous-looking knife, pauses for a moment, and then, reassured by her tranquillity, makes his way to the window. As he disappears, Mrs. Sartoris, an opera-cloak thrown over her ball-room dress, and carrying a bed-room candle in her hand, enters and crosses to the toilette-table. Placing her candle on the table, she seizes the jewel-box, and, it is evident, becomes cognizant that robbery has been committed. As she turns, Sylla starts from the chair in great confusion; Mrs. Sartoris points to the table, and then with a start notices the open window. The curtain descends upon Mrs. Sartoris pointing in an accusing manner to the window, and Sylla with clasped hands mutely protesting her innocence and ignorance of the robbery.

With the clue afforded by the solution of the first syllable, the audience very soon make out the

second; and that the word was either "mistake" or "mistaken" they entertained little doubt. Curiosity now centred on what version they would give of the whole, for that each word was to be rendered in three tableaux had been stated before the performance commenced.

The curtain rises again upon the last scene; and upon this occasion the representation is motionless. In the centre of the stage, Lionel Beauchamp, in the guise of a policeman, is snapping-to the hand-cuffs on the weeping Sylla. On the left, with averted head, stands Mrs. Sartoris, indicating sorrow for the offender, but entire belief in her guilt. On the opposite side, Jim Bloxam, attired in evening costume, is unmistakably directing the officer to remove his prisoner. Slowly the curtain descends amid much acclamation and cries of "Mistake!" In his capacity of stage-manager, Jim Bloxam glides for a moment in front, and, in a few off-hand words to the audience, acknowledges the correctness of their apprehension.

"I give Jim credit for his exertions. That really was most successful," said Lady Mary, as her son disappeared.

"I fancy the success is due more to Miss Sylla than him," rejoined Pansey Cottrell, suavely. "Jim, as we all know, though one of the best of fellows, is the most execrable of actors; and I don't think those tableaux look like his inspiration."

"I am sure he is quite as good as the generality of amateurs," retorted Lady Mary, with no little asperity.

She was no more exempt from the true womanly instinct that prompts the regarding of her own chicks as swans than any of her sex. Mr. Cottrell was much too quick-witted not to see that his criticism was distasteful, but he never could resist the temptation of teasing his fellow-creatures.

"Admitting, for the sake of argument, Lady Mary," he replied, "that Jim is an average actor, when one knows that there is rather exceptional talent in the troupe, one is apt to regard that as the guiding spirit. Sylla Chipchase is very clever at all this sort of thing, I know, because I have seen her on previous occasions."

"You seem to be losing your head about that girl, Pansey, like the rest of them. You all seem to think that she is wonderfully clever because she happened to know that Mr. Beauchamp could run."

"I fancy she knows a good deal more about him than that," replied Mr. Cottrell demurely.

"What do you mean? What have you heard about her?" inquired Lady Mary, somewhat eagerly.

"Nothing, further than she seemed to be equally well aware that he could act. But stop, they are commencing again."

Slowly, as before, the curtain ascends to a dreamy melody of the piano, and discovers Sylla, attired as the smartest of soubrettes, in close juxtaposition to Lionel Beauchamp in a groom's livery. Taking a letter from him, she places it in her bosom, and then looks up at him with all the devilry of coquetry in her eyes. She toys with the corner of her apron, twiddling it backwards and forwards between her fingers. She glances demurely down at her feet, then looks shyly up at him again; then once more studying her apron, she, as if unconsciously, proffers her cheek in a manner too provocative for any man to resist, and as the curtain descends Lionel Beauchamp is apparently about to make the most of his opportunity.

"By Jove!" laughed the Squire, "in Beauchamp's place I think I would have been thoroughly realistic—the proper thing in these days!"

"Well," whispered Lady Mary to Pansey Cottrell, "of all the audacious minxes! Mr. Beauchamp deserves great credit for his discretion in waiting until the curtain fell before he kissed her."

That Lady Mary assumed the ceremony was concluded may be easily imagined, while the audience generally differed considerably about the scene, some of the ladies contending that there was no necessity for carrying dramatic representation quite so far; while the men, on the other hand, thought that Beauchamp did not carry it far enough.

The second scene discovers Mrs. Sartoris in the centre of the stage, with Jim Bloxam on one knee, kissing the hand she extends towards him. On her other side, Mr. Sartoris, made up as an elderly gentleman, with coat thrown very much back, thumbs stuck in the armholes of his waistcoat, contemplates the pair with a look of bland satisfaction. Again the curtain descends, leaving the audience more at sea than ever as to what the word can be. Nor is the third scene calculated to throw

much enlightenment on the subject. In it Lionel Beauchamp, in his groom's dress, appears to be pantomimically explaining something to the remainder of the company, who are artistically grouped in the centre of the stage, and which shrugs of the shoulders, upraised eyebrows, and other gestures, indicate they either fail to understand, or, it may be, to agree with. But the whole word, like more ambitious dramatic representations, is somehow involved in fog. You cannot help thinking that it must be a good charade if you could only make out what it was about; but when the curtain descends, the audience, instead of at once proclaiming the word, can hardly even make a guess at it. There are cries for the stage-manager; and when Jim Bloxam appears in reply to a laughing call, "The word? the word?" he bows low to the audience, and regrets his inability to comply with their request.

"The distinguished authoress," continued Jim, "has taken none of us into her confidence. She has, I presume, strong opinions on the subject of copyright, and is determined to give no opportunity of its infringement."

Jim's speech created both merriment and curiosity, and was followed by a prompt call of "Author, author!" A few seconds, and then the stage-manager responds by leading Sylla forward in her soubrette dress. Dropping the sauciest of curtsies in acknowledgment of the applause with which she is greeted, she replies in clear distinct tones,

"Ladies and gentlemen, you find our word unintelligible. Paradoxical as it may seem, that is precisely the result we have aimed at; and now that I have told you the word, I am sure you will admit our efforts have been successful;" and once more bowing to her audience, Sylla disappeared behind the curtain Jim held back for her.

What can she mean? What do they mean? What is it? What was the word? were questions responded to by the jolly laugh of Cedric Bloxam.

"Can't you see?" he said, "it's all a sell: we found it unintelligible, and that is precisely what we were meant to do—that's the word."

And once more the Squire indulged in a hearty guffaw.

But now the company flock into the drawing-room for tea or other refreshment, while the servants rapidly clear the play-room for dancing. The curtain is pulled up, the stage occupied by a select section of the Commonstone band, and, in something like a quarter of an hour Jim's impromptu dance is in full swing.

"My dear Sylla," exclaimed Lady Mary, as that young lady, leaning upon Bloxam's arm, stopped near her in one of the pauses of the valse, "I have not had an opportunity of congratulating you upon your very spirited pantomime—carried, my dear, a *little* too far in that last charade."

"Oh, I hope you don't really think so, Lady Mary," cried Sylla; "but you cannot half act a thing. When the exigencies of the stage require one to be embraced, one must admit of that ceremony. Surely if a girl has scruples about going through such a mere form, she had much better decline to act at once."

"That's a question that we will not argue," said Lady Mary. "I hear you are going to stay with Mrs. Wriothsley for the remainder of the London season."

"Yes, she is an aunt of mine; you know her, I believe."

"Very well; we are old friends, although I don't see so much of her as I once did. The London world has got so very big, you see, and Mrs. Wriothsley and I have drifted into different sets."

"Yes," chimed in Pansey Cottrell, who was standing by, "it has got perfectly unendurable. One could calculate at one time upon seeing a good deal of one's friends during the season; now half of them we only come across some once or twice. But surely you and Mrs. Wriothsley see a good deal of each other."

"No, not in these days," rejoined Lady Mary, tartly, much to Mr. Cottrell's amusement.

He knew perfectly well that the two ladies met continually, although there was little cordiality between them. But Lady Mary's last speech showed him she intended to keep Mrs. Wriothsley at arms' length, if possible, for the future; and Pansey Cottrell smiled as he thought that his hostess's schemes would, in all likelihood, be as persistently thwarted in town as they had been in the country.

"Well, I trust that Blanche and I will contrive to see a good bit of each other all the same," replied Sylla courteously. "You know my aunt, Captain Bloxam," she continued, as she moved away. "I should have thought her an easy person to get on with; but I am afraid Lady Mary does not like her."

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. WRIOTHESLEY.

When Ralph Wriothesley of the Household Cavalry, better known among his intimates as the "Rip," married pretty Miss Lewson, niece of that worldly and bitter-tongued old Lady Fanshawe, everybody said what a fool he had made of himself. What did he, a man who had already developed a capacity for expenditure much in excess of his income, want with a wife who brought little or no grist to the mill? The world was wrong—as the world very frequently is on such points. It was about the first sensible thing that the "Rip," in the course of his good-humoured, blundering, plunging career, had done. It saved him. Without the check that his clever little wife almost imperceptibly imposed upon him, "Rip" Wriothesley would probably, ere this, have joined the "broken brigade," and vanished from society's ken. As it was, the pretty little house in Hans Place thrived merrily; and though people constantly wondered how the Wriothesleys got on, yet the unmistakable fact remained, that season after season they were to be seen everywhere and ruffling it with the best.

The Wriothesleys had advantages for which those who marvelled as to how they managed failed to make due allowance. They were both of good family—in fact, their escutcheons were better to investigate than their banker's account. Both popular in their own way, they were always in request to make up a party for Hurlingham dinners, the Ascot week, or other similar diversion. They did not affect to entertain; but the half-dozen little dinners—strictly limited to eight persons—that they gave in that tiny dining-room in the course of the season were spoken of with enthusiasm by the privileged few who had been bidden. An invitation to Mrs. Wriothesley's occasional little suppers after the play was by no means to be neglected; the two or three *plats* were always of the best, and the "Rip" took care that Giessler's "Brut" should be unimpeachable. They had both a weakness for race-meetings; but Wriothesley's plunging days were over, and his modest ventures were staked with considerably more discretion than in the times when he bet heavily. The lady was a little bit of a coquette, no doubt; but the most unscrupulous of scandalmongers had never ventured to breathe a word of reproach against Mrs. Wriothesley. A flirting, husband-hunting little minx, she had fallen honestly in love with this big, *blond*, good-humoured Life Guardsman; and, incredible as it might seem to the world she lived in, remained so still. They understood each other marvellously well, those two. The "Rip" regarded his wife as the cleverest woman alive; and, though she most undoubtedly looked upon him in a very different light, nobody more thoroughly appreciated the honest worth of his character than she did. As she once said, to one of her female intimates, of her husband, "He has one great virtue: he is always 'straight,' my dear. The 'Rip' couldn't tell me a lie if he tried."

Mrs. Wriothesley is sitting in her pretty little drawing-room listening to Sylla Chipchase's spirited account of her visit to Todborough Rectory.

"It was great fun," continued the girl. "Lady Mary Bloxam was thoroughly convinced, and no doubt is still, that I was setting my cap at Lionel Beauchamp. She had no idea that we had known each other from childhood; and her face, when I first called him Lionel, would have sent you into fits of laughter."

"But Lady Mary was right about one thing, Sylla. Lionel Beauchamp would be a very nice match for you."

"Don't talk nonsense, mine aunt, or speculate upon the impossible. I couldn't care for Lionel in that way any more than he would care for me. I am only eighteen, and I am sure I need not think about marriage as a speculation for some years yet."

"Well," rejoined Mrs. Wriothesley, laughing, "I am certainly not entitled to preach worldly wisdom. I was as mercenary, speculative a little animal at your age as you could wish to see; and what came of it? I forgot all my prudent resolutions, fell over head and ears in love, married the 'Rip,' and have been the genteel pauper you see me ever since."

"Consigned to such a poor-house as this," exclaimed Sylla melodramatically, and glancing round at the china and other knickknacks scattered about the room, "methinks that the stings of poverty are not so hard to bear."

"Ah, yes," replied Mrs. Wriothesley; "but then, you see, I meant to have had my country seat, my box at the opera, my two or three carriages, and that *my* balls should be *the* balls of the season."

"Now, aunt, I want to ask you one question. Mr. Cottrell told me that you and Lady Mary were once rivals. What did he mean by that?"

"No! Did Pansey tell you that?" laughed Mrs. Wriothesley. "He has a good memory. It's now some six

or seven years ago that your cousin, Lady Rosington, then unmarried, was staying with me for the season, Mary Bloxam at that time was trailing that grenadier eldest girl of hers about" (a little bit of feminine exaggeration this, the lady referred to being only half an inch taller than Blanche), "and thought Sir Charles would suit very well for her husband. Unluckily for Mary Bloxam, I thought Sir Charles equally suitable for Jessie, and—well, in short, we won."

"Ah, now I understand; and I suppose you have never been friends since. Lady Mary told me that she saw very little of you in London now."

"That is not quite the case. I think we meet as often as formerly. Friends we never were, but acquaintances we have been for some years. Jim Bloxam, though, is one of my intimates. He is a great friend of both mine and the 'Rip's,' and we see a good deal of him when he is in London; and, indeed," she continued, laughing, "for the matter of that, when he is not; for he has a way of turning up at all places generally when there is anything going on. Indeed, we have half promised to lunch at their regimental tent at Ascot. And you, what do you think of Captain Bloxam?"

"I like him very much indeed," replied Sylla. And she looked her inquisitor so steadily in the face, that Mrs. Wriothesley came promptly to the conclusion that no love passages had taken place between the pair as yet. But it had suddenly shot through the energetic little woman's mind that her favourite, Jim Bloxam, would make a most suitable husband for her niece. Jim was an eldest son, and Todborough, from all accounts, a very respectable property. Yes, it would do very well if it could be brought about, to say nothing of the satisfaction there would be in stealing from her old enemy's flock the only lamb that was worth the taking. All this ran through Mrs. Wriothesley's mind as quick as lightning; and though she said nothing to Sylla on the subject, she had pretty well resolved to do her best to marry those two.

When Mrs. Wriothesley took charge of nieces for the season, she conceived it her clear and bounden duty to provide for them satisfactorily if possible. If Sylla could not be brought to think of Lionel Beauchamp, it might be possible for her to take a more favourable view of Captain Bloxam. True, he was not quite so good a *parti* as the other; but it was comforting to think that there was every probability that it would occasion her old antagonist equal annoyance. It further struck her that, engrossed in her plans for her daughter, Lady Mary would probably totally overlook any flirtation of her son's. There is a species of fascination in countermining difficult to resist; and, though of course she would have in some measure to be guided by events, Mrs. Wriothesley had pretty well determined upon the course she would pursue.

"What are you thinking about?" inquired Sylla, breaking in upon her aunt's reverie. "They should be pleasant thoughts, judging from the smile on your lips."

"Thinking, my dear, that if we don't get our bonnets on, the world will all have gone home to luncheon before we get to the Row, and it is good for us to get the fresh air of the morning."

A little later, and the two ladies passed into the Park by the Albert Gate, and made their way to the High Change of gossip of fashionable London. A bright fresh spring morning filled the Row to overflowing. It was thronged, as it always is on a fine day after Easter. Fashionable London comes to see who of its acquaintances may be in town; and numberless parties and plans for the future are sketched out on these occasions. As for Mrs. Wriothesley's acquaintance, their name was legion. Everybody seemed to know her; and that she was popular was evident from the numbers who stopped to speak to her. They had not been long installed in their chairs before Sylla perceived Mr. Cottrell lounging towards them, and pointed him out to her aunt.

"Ah," exclaimed Mrs. Wriothesley, "I must signal him as soon as he gets within range. I want to speak to him. I should like to hear his account of your Todborough party."

"Do," replied Sylla, laughing. "He is my fellow-conspirator, remember, though I don't suppose he will confess anything. It's delicious to see the utterly unconscious way in which he will upset people's schemes. I used really at first to think he did it innocently, but I soon discovered it was *malice prepense*."

"Yes, I know Pansey Cottrell very well. He is very mischievous; though not malicious, unless you interfere with his personal comfort; rather given to playing tricks upon his fellow-creatures; but he is more of a Puck than a Mephistopheles.—Good morning, Mr. Cottrell. Pray come and give an account of yourself. Sylla tells me you have been passing Easter with the Bloxams."

"Quite so," replied that gentleman, as he raised his hat. "Miss Sylla and I have been dedicating our poor talents to the amusement of Lady Mary's guests, and to the furtherance of Lady Mary's plans. I am sure she was much delighted at all the dancing and theatricals we inveigled her into. I presume," he continued, turning to Sylla, "that you have seen her since your arrival in town."

"Not yet," returned the girl. "She told me, you know, at Todborough, that she and my aunt moved in somewhat different sets."

"Which is hardly the case, as you know," interrupted Mrs. Wriothlesley.
"What do you suppose she meant by that?"

"I?" replied Cottrell. "My dear Mrs. Wriothlesley, I never pretend to understand what a woman means by doubtful speech of any kind. Our masculine understandings are a great deal too dense to penetrate the subtleties of feminine language. She might mean that she intends your grooves to lie far apart for the future; and then again she might mean something—something—else," continued Mr. Cottrell, rather vaguely.

"So you think Mary Bloxam intends to see as little of me in future as possible?" rejoined Mrs. Wriothlesley, taking no manner of notice of her companion's last words.

"No; don't say I think so," interrupted Mr. Cottrell. "I told you particularly I could form no conclusion as to what she meant. However, this place is neutral ground, and all the world meets here, or rather would, if it was not so crowded that it is almost impossible to find anybody. But—ah, here comes Lady Mary and *la belle* Blanche! Shall I stop her, and ask her what she does mean?" And Mr. Cottrell looked so utterly unconscious, that any one who did not know him might have deemed him actually about to put this awkward interrogatory. But the two ladies to whom he was speaking knew him better than that, and only laughed.

Whether Lady Mary intended to pass Mrs. Wriothlesley with merely a bow it would be difficult to say, but certain it is that Mr. Cottrell supposed that to be her intention. Prompted by his insatiable passion for teasing his fellow-creatures, he took advantage of his situation, and, turning from Mrs. Wriothlesley and Sylla, placed himself in Lady Mary's way, and stopped her to shake hands. It was only natural that Sylla should jump up to say "How do you do?" to Blanche; and then suddenly occurred to Mrs. Wriothlesley the audacious idea of capturing her enemy and bearing her off in triumph to luncheon. She rose, greeted Lady Mary and Blanche warmly, and then strongly urged that they should come home with her to Hans Place when the Park should begin to thin.

"You know, I am close to Prince's, and the Canadians are going to play a match at La Crosse, which is well worth looking on at; such a pretty game. We can go across and have our afternoon tea at the little tables overlooking the cricket-ground. Everybody will be there."

"Mrs. Wriothlesley is quite right," interposed Cottrell gravely. "Not to have seen La Crosse played is as grave an omission this season as not to have done the Opera, the Royal Academy, or other of the stereotyped exhibitions. If you can't rave about the 'dexterity of the dear Indians,' you are really not doing your duty to society. They are the last new craze; and admitting that you have not seen them being out of the question, as a lover of veracity I counsel you to do so at once."

We lunch and dine at a good many places that we would rather not; entertain, and are entertained by, a good many people for whom we feel a by no means dormant aversion. It is only the Pansey Cottrells of this world who successfully evade all such obligations, and persistently decline to do aught that does not pleasure them.

Lady Mary was too much a woman of the world to be entrapped by a *tour de force* such as this. She hesitated; thought it was impossible. It was very kind of Mrs. Wriothlesley; but they had so many visits to pay, so much to do, &c. But here, somewhat to her mother's astonishment, Blanche interposed, and suggested that their other engagements could be postponed. The young lady was great at lawn tennis, having a natural aptitude for all games of that description. She had heard a great deal about this La Crosse, and was extremely curious to see it; therefore it was not surprising that she should advocate the acceptance of Mrs. Wriothlesley's invitation.

"It's a thing you will have to do some time or other, Lady Mary," observed Mr. Cottrell, "unless you are setting up as an 'eccentric.' By-the-bye, Miss Sylla, of course you will see Beauchamp at Prince's. Tell him I have heard of a park hack worth his looking at. He was wanting one the other day."

That settled the question. Lady Mary felt now it was essential that she should be at Prince's and see how Sylla progressed in her insidious designs. For that Miss Chipchase, under her aunt's guidance, was not doing her best to entangle Lionel Beauchamp in her toils, no power could have persuaded Lady Mary. Mrs. Wriothlesley was one of the few people who thoroughly understood the whimsical perversity of Mr. Cottrell's character, and she shrewdly suspected, as was indeed the case, that he had no more heard of that hack than that he had that Beauchamp wanted one.

It was seldom that Ralph Wriothlesley honoured his wife's luncheon-table, so the four ladies had that meal all to themselves. Mrs. Wriothlesley exerted herself to be agreeable; and if Lady Mary had still

doubts about her hostess's sincerity, she was not insensible to the charm of her manner; so that in spite of her mother's misgivings and Blanche's own nascent jealousy of Sylla, the afternoon glided pleasantly by, until it was time to stroll across to Prince's. They found quite a fashionable mob already there assembled, for, as Mr. Cottrell had told them, to see the Canadians play La Crosse was one of the novelties of the season. That gentleman's idle words proved true also in more senses than one, for they had not long taken chairs overlooking the cricket-field, before Lionel Beauchamp joined them, and, as he greeted Sylla, thanked her for her very pretty present.

"I am very glad you like it," replied Sylla, smiling; "but I can't take much credit for my generosity. I am afraid, strictly speaking, it only amounts to the payment of a debt. You deserved a testimony of your prowess, and I to pay a penalty for my rashness."

"What is this testimony?" inquired Blanche. "What has Sylla given you? and what have you done to deserve it?"

"A mere trifle," interposed Miss Chipchase; "I daresay he will show it you some day. He got me out of my scrape that day at Rockcliffe, you know, as indeed he has been called upon to do before, though not quite in that fashion. He saved my bracelet, you remember; it's rather a pet bangle, and I should have been very sorry to have lost it. Have you done my other commission for me?"

"Not as yet," replied Lionel. "I haven't had time; but I will see about it in a day or two."

All this fell very unpleasantly upon Blanche's ears. She was utterly unconscious of her mother's schemes and hopes. She had not as yet recognized that she was drifting into love with Lionel Beauchamp, but she did know that his confidential intimacy with Sylla Chipchase was very distasteful to her. What was this present she had made him? and what was this commission she had given him? She did not like to ask further questions just then, but she made up her mind that she would know all about these things the first time she got Lionel to herself. People who make mysteries of trifles at times exercise their friends a good deal,—the imagination so often converts molehills into mountains; and then there is always a power in the unknown.

"Have you seen this game of La Crosse before, Miss Bloxam?" inquired Lionel. "It looks incomprehensible and never-ending, to start with; but when you have seen a goal or two taken you will understand it, and admire the dexterity of the players."

"Mrs. Wriothesley explained it to me at luncheon. As I told you at Todborough, I am good at games, and can follow it very fairly. But, Sylla, you have a message for Mr. Beauchamp, which you have forgotten to give him."

Sylla had not forgotten Mr. Cottrell's message at all, but she thought it more than doubtful whether that message was intended to be delivered. She had her own opinion as to the motive of that message, but, thus challenged, immediately replied, "Oh, yes, something about a hack from Mr. Cottrell; he told me to tell you he had heard of one to suit you."

"There he is wrong," rejoined Beauchamp: "a thing can't suit you when you don't want it; and that's my case with regard to a hack."

"Curious that he should be so misinformed," said Lady Mary. "He certainly said you had asked him if he knew of one."

"Mixed up with somebody else," interposed Mrs. Wriothesley. "Mr. Cottrell is a very idle man with a very numerous acquaintance. Somebody wanted a hack, and he has forgotten who."

If Lady Mary's suspicions had been lulled to sleep during luncheon, they had been now most thoroughly reawakened. She, like her daughter, had overheard the conversation between Sylla and Lionel upon the latter's first arrival. She had always had misgivings that the relations between the two would change into something much warmer, to the downfall of her own hopes. She was annoyed with herself for having accepted the hand of amity extended by her ancient antagonist. She felt sure that the battle that she pictured to herself on that night at the Grange, when she had first heard of the relationship between Sylla and Mrs. Wriothesley, was already begun. She had a horrible conviction that she was once more destined to undergo the bitterness of offering her congratulations to her successful opponent. What cruel fatality had ordained that whenever she had a daughter to settle, Mrs. Wriothesley should invariably appear upon the scene with a niece? And in the anguish of her spirit she gave way to very harsh thoughts concerning poor Sylla's conduct. If she could but have divested herself of all prejudice, and looked on matters with dispassionate eyes, she would have seen, as Pansey Cottrell had told her at Todborough, that things were travelling much in the way she wished them. At this very

moment, when she is inwardly raging against Mrs. Wriothesley, Lionel Beauchamp is undoubtedly paying at least as much, if not more, attention to Blanche than he is to Miss Chipchase; but the spectacles of prejudice are never neutral-tinted.

However, it is time to leave; and Lady Mary, rising, signals her daughter, and makes her adieu.

"I really have no patience with that girl," said Lady Mary, when she found herself outside. "I think her making a present to a young man like Mr. Beauchamp is going a great deal more than half-way."

"Oh, I don't know, mamma," replied Blanche; "she has known him all her life; and you know he did save her bracelet."

"Very indelicate of her ever to have made such a wager," retorted Lady Mary, quite trumpeting in her wrath.

"I have known you bet yourself, mamma," rejoined Blanche; "and I think she was perhaps carried away by the excitement of the occasion. I wonder what it is that she has given him?"

It was curious, that although Miss Bloxam was as uncomfortable concerning that gift as her mother, she still took Sylla's part regarding it. She was a proud girl, and it was probable that she shrank from owning even to her mother that it could possibly matter to her what presents any lady might choose to bestow on Mr. Beauchamp.

CHAPTER IX.

SATURDAY AT HURLINGHAM.

Hurlingham in the merry month of June, just when the east winds have ceased to trouble; when the roses and strawberries are at their best; when the lamb is verging towards muttoney, and the whitebait are growing up; when the leaves are yet young, and Epsom and Ascot either pleasant or grim memories of the past. Can anything be more delightful than Hurlingham on a fine Saturday afternoon? that one week-day when the daughters of Venus throng the pleasant grounds, and the birds sacred to the goddess are held sacred for fear that the shooters should scatter the coaches—it would be too grievous that the destruction of pigeons, through frightening the horses, should result in the upsetting of a drag bearing a bevy of London's fairest daughters. What matches have been made here both for life and for centuries—as, in the "shibboleth" of our day, a hundred pounds is sometimes termed! Much damage at times has no doubt accrued both to the hearts of humanity and the legs of the polo ponies. The coaches gather thick about their allotted end of the grassy paddock; drag after drag drops quietly into its position; the teams are unharnessed and led slowly away; and their passengers either elect to view the forthcoming match from their seats of vantage, or, alighting, stroll up and mix with the fashionable crowd that throngs the far side of the lawn-like paddock. All London has flocked to Hurlingham to-day to enjoy the bright afternoon, indulge in tea, gossip, or claret-cup, and look lazily on at the polo match between the —th Hussars and Monmouthshire. Both teams are reported very strong, and opinion is pretty equally divided as to which way the match will go.

Mrs. Wriothesley is, of course, there. That lady is a pretty constant *habituée*, and with Sylla to chaperon is not likely to miss it on this occasion. She has joined forces already with Lady Mary: as she said, they have all a common interest in the event of the day, for was not Captain Bloxam the life and soul of the Hussar side, and were they not all there ready to sympathize or applaud? Applause at Hurlingham, by the way, being in as little accord with the traditions of the place as it is in the stalls of a fashionable theatre. The match has not yet begun. Two or three wiry ponies, with carefully-bandaged forelegs, are being led up and down on the opposite side of the paddock. The centre is still unoccupied, save for a few late-comers walking quietly across, none of the competitors having so far put in an appearance.

"Just the sort of thing to interest you, this, Miss Sylla," exclaimed Pansey Cottrell, after lifting his hat in a comprehensive manner to the whole party. "I know you are passionately fond of horses and have a taste for riding."

"Now, what does he mean by that?" thought Sylla. There was nothing much in the remark, but she was getting a little afraid of this mischievous elderly gentleman. She was beginning to look for a hidden meaning in his speeches. Could this be a covert allusion to her mishap at Todborough? Had the story of

her fall come to his ears, and was he about to indulge his love of teasing people at her expense? "I don't know," she replied, guardedly, "that I am so very passionately fond of horses; but I have no doubt I shall enjoy this very much. Knowing one of the players will of course make it interesting."

"Quite so," replied Cottrell. "It is a pity Mr. Beauchamp is not playing. If he were, I should consult you as to which side to back. You judge his capabilities in all ways so accurately."

Neither Lady Mary nor Mrs. Wriothesley could help noticing this speech. It was just one of those wicked little remarks to which Pansey Cottrell treated his friends when they were wanting in deference to his comments on things generally.

"Sylla has known him all her life," interposed Mrs. Wriothesley; "but because she happened to know that Lionel could run, it does not follow that she knows whether he can play polo. However, as he is not playing, it is a matter of very little account whether he can or no."

"Quite right. Nothing is much in this world, except the weather and the cooks. The sun shines to-day; and whatever the rest of us are called upon to endure, Mrs. Wriothesley, I know, can always rely upon her soup and *entrées*. I always look upon it as rather good of you to dine out."

It was probable that such judicious remarks had done Mr. Cottrell good service in the early part of his career; but now he was the fashion, and realised his position most thoroughly.

"Very pretty of you to recognize the fact that my poor little kitchenmaid is not a barbarian," rejoined Mrs. Wriothesley.

She also had her foible, and always spoke in disparaging tones of her establishment. She would ask her friends to take a cutlet with her, or to come and eat cold chicken with her after the play, but took good care that the menu should be of very different calibre. She, like Pansey Cottrell, was the fashion, and he knew it. Besides, not only was the lady a favourite of his, but he never would have permitted himself to commit the folly of quarrelling with any one who so thoroughly understood the mysteries of gastronomy.

But now, clad in white flannels, butcher-boots, and scarlet caps, a couple of players make their appearance, and walk their sturdy little steeds up the ground; another and another quickly follow, and soon the contending sides group themselves together at opposite ends of the enclosure. The Monmouthshire quintet in their all white and scarlet caps are faced by the Hussars in their blue and scarlet hoops. The umpire walks to the centre, glances round to the captains of either side to see that they are all in readiness, and then drops the ball. Quick as thought the contending teams are in motion, the "players up" of each party scudding as fast as their wiry little ponies can carry them for the first stroke. It is a close thing; but the white and scarlet obtains the first chance, and by some fatality misses the ball. Another second, and Jim Bloxam has sent it flying towards the Monmouthshire goal, and is pelting along in hot pursuit, only to see the ball come whizzing back past him from a steady drive by one of the adversary's back-players. Backwards and forwards flies the ball, and the clever little ponies, at the guidance of their riders, bustle now this way, now that, in chase of it. Over and over again it is driven close to the fatal posts at either end—the being driven between which scores the first goal of the game—only to be sent again in the reverse direction by the back-player. Then comes a regular scrimmage in the centre of the ground, and the ball is dribbled amongst the ponies' legs, first a little this way, and then that, but never more than a few yards in any direction. Suddenly it flies far away from the *mêlée*, and Jim Bloxam races after it, hotly pursued by one of the white and scarlet men. Jim fails to hit the ball fair, and it spins off at a tangent. His antagonist swerves, quick as thought, to the ball, and by a clever back-stroke sends it once more into the centre of the field; another short *mêlée*, and then the Monmouthshire men carry the ball rapidly down on the Hussar goal. The back-player of the Hussars rides forward to meet it; but a dexterous touch from the leader of the white and scarlet men sends it a little to the right, and before any of the Hussars can intervene, a good stroke from one of the Monmouthshire men galloping on that side sends it between the posts, and the first goal is credited to the white and scarlet.

Dr. Johnson, when asked by Boswell what a shining light of those days meant by a somewhat vague remark, surmised that the speaker must have "meant to annoy somebody." The Doctor was probably right, being a pretty good judge of that sort of thing. There are many unmeaning remarks made, the why of which it is difficult to explain, unless we put that interpretation upon them. It must have been some such malicious feeling that prompted Mr. Cottrell to observe,

"Poor Jim! He seems destined always to play second fiddle. As at Rockcliffe, he is just beaten again."

"Defeats such as Captain Bloxam's," exclaimed Sylla, "are as much to one's credit as easily-obtained

victories. He was just defeated at Rockcliffe after a gallant struggle. I have seen some polo-playing before at Brighton, and don't think I ever saw a harder-fought goal played."

It was with somewhat amused surprise that Mr. Cottrell found his dictum disputed by a young lady in her first season, and he shot a sharp glance at Mrs. Wriothesley, to see what that lady thought of the spirited manner in which her niece stood up for the vanquished Hussar; but she and Lady Mary were just then engaged in welcoming Lionel Beauchamp, and the observation consequently escaped their ears.

"I beg your pardon," rejoined Cottrell; "I did not know your sympathies were so strong. I am, of course," he continued, in mocking tones, "prepared to condole with his family over Jim's defeat; but I must comfort you in your affliction by reminding you that the loss of one point does not mean the loss of the rubber."

"Thank you," replied Sylla. "I have ranged myself to-day on the side of the Hussars; and my champions are not always defeated, as you may remember."

"I trust," replied Mr. Cottrell, laughing, "you will have a good afternoon. I reverence you as a young lady who wagers with infinite discretion." And so saying, he moved off to talk to other acquaintance.

Lionel Beauchamp had seated himself next Blanche, and, assisted by a slight movement of the young lady's chair in his favour, found that he had successfully obtained the *tête-à-tête* for which he had manoeuvred.

"I want you to do me a favour, Miss Bloxam," he observed.

"Certainly, Mr. Beauchamp, if I can; what is it?"

"I want you to promise to join a water party that four of us are organizing for this day fortnight; but we mean to go down the river instead of up. We intend chartering a steamer, and so be quite independent, as we shall carry our own commissariat with us."

"I have no doubt mamma will say yes if we have no other engagement. But favour for favour—I have one to ask of you; will you grant it?"

"I answer as you did—most certainly if I can."

"Ah, but you must answer differently; you must say 'certainly' without any conditions."

"That is impossible; one cannot quite pledge oneself to that. It is not very likely that I shall refuse you."

"But you are refusing me now. I want you to say 'certainly' without any reservation whatever."

"And I can only reply as I did before, Miss Bloxam, that it is impossible. No sensible person could ever do that. It is very improbable that you should ask me, but it is possible that you might wish me, to do something that I was bound to say 'no' to. I repeat, improbable but possible. Won't you tell me what it is? You may be quite sure it is already granted if within my power."

"But it is quite within your power," replied Blanche; "you can do it if you choose. Why won't you say 'yes'?"

"Tell me what it is," he answered, more determined than ever not to yield to her unreasonable demand. He was not obstinate, but Lionel Beauchamp had a will of his own, and could make up his mind quickly and decidedly, a virtue sadly wanting in many of us. His reservation had been put in mechanically in the first instance, but Blanche's persistence made him now resolute not to commit himself to an unlimited promise. Except unthinkingly, people do not make promises of this nature, any more than they give blank cheques, the filling-in of which in unwarrantable fashion might occasion much grief and tribulation to the reckless donor.

Miss Bloxam felt a little indignant at not being able to carry her point, but she knew just as well as Lionel did that she was insisting on the exorbitant. "Still," she argued, "if he were really in love with me he would not mind promising to grant me whatever I asked.

"I want to know," she said at length, "what was the present Miss Chipchase made you?"

"Good Heavens!" replied Lionel, laughing, "is that all you require? She sent me these solitaires for saving her bracelet at Rockcliffe; are they not pretty ones?" And, pulling back his coat-sleeve, Beauchamp exhibited the studs at his wrists.

"Very," returned Blanche. "But that is not quite all: what is the commission she has given you?"

Beauchamp looked a little grave at this question. This commission was in reality the mildest of mysteries; but he saw that Blanche believed it to be of far greater importance.

"I cannot tell you," he replied.

"May I ask why?"

"Certainly. I cannot tell you because I have promised not to mention it. You, of course, would not wish me to break my word?"

"Decidedly not," rejoined Miss Bloxam. "My curiosity has led me into a great indiscretion. But the game is getting interesting. Surely Jim's side are having the best of it now?" And Miss Bloxam, turning half-round in her seat, devoted her attention to the polo-players with laudable persistency. If Blanche Bloxam was showing herself somewhat childish and unreasonable—for there could be no doubt that the young lady had turned away from Lionel more or less in a huff—it must be remembered that she was very much in earnest in her love affair, that she was jealous of Sylla Chipchase, and that though she believed Lionel Beauchamp loved her, he had not as yet declared himself. She had foolishly, and perhaps whimsically, regarded this as a test question, and she had been answered in the negative. I do not know that she was out-of-the-way foolish. Maidens like Marguerite have played "He loves me, he loves me not," many a time with a flower; and Blanche's appeal was as wise as theirs, except in the one thing—you cannot quarrel with a flower, but it is very possible to do so with a lover. It is all very well for the gods to laugh at such quarrels, but those interested seldom see the humour of the situation, and in nineteen cases out of twenty the cause of their occurrence is trifling.

The band of the Guards is ringing out the most seductive of waltzes. Silken robes sweep the grass, and soft laughter floats upon the summer air. The polo-players are once more in the full tide of battle. The gaily-coloured jerseys are now here, now there, in pursuit of the ever-flying sphere, for the temporary possession of which each player seems as covetous as Atalanta was of the golden apple. Ever and anon comes a short, sharp, furious *mêlée*, and then from its midst flies the ball, with three or four horsemen riding their hardest in pursuit; while the back-player of the threatened goal warily prepares for the attack that is impending unless some one of his comrades should succeed in arresting it. One of the fiercest of these *mêlées* is now taking place in front of the promenade. From the confused surging knot suddenly shoots the ball, and skims along at an ominous pace in the direction of the goal of the scarlet and white. Jim Bloxam, slipping all the other players by a couple of lengths, leads the pursuit, with two of his antagonists riding their hardest to catch him. Jim makes the most of his opportunity, and it looks like a goal for the Hussars. He is riding a smartish pony, and feels that his followers will never catch him. He is bound to get first to the ball, and, if only he does not miss his stroke, should drive it clean through the goal-posts. But though he is so far right that he keeps his lead of his antagonists, there is another player to be taken into calculation, whom so far Jim has quite overlooked, and this is the crafty back-player of the scarlet and white men who is in charge of the goal. He is quite as alive as Jim to the gravity of the occasion. He knows that Bloxam's stroke must be prevented, if possible; and coming from the opposite direction, although lying somewhat to Jim's left, is striving his utmost to interfere. The ball has all but stopped, and it is palpable that the new-comer will cut Jim's course obliquely at the ball. It is a fine point. Each man's wiry little steed is doing its very best. But, ah, Jim has it! The Hussar's polo-mallet whirls high in the air, and, as he passes the ball, a well-aimed stroke sends it flying through the enemy's goal-posts; another second, and, unable to rein up their ponies, Jim and the back-player of the scarlet and white meet in full career and roll over in a heap on the ground, while Jim's two attendant antagonists are both brought to similar grief from tumbling over their leader.

"Good Heavens! there are four of them down!" exclaimed Lionel Beauchamp. "Don't be alarmed, Miss Bloxam: falls are not often serious at polo; see, there are two of them getting up already."

The last *mêlée* had taken place so close to the spectators that it had been quite easy to identify the players, and Miss Bloxam was therefore quite aware that her brother was one of the four men down; but she and Lady Mary were too habituated to the accidents of the hunting-field to feel that nervous terror at witnessing a fall that people not so accustomed are apt to experience. But there were other lookers-on with whom it was very different. It was a bad accident to look upon; and Mrs. Wriothsley suddenly felt her wrist gripped with a force that could hardly be supposed existent in the delicately-gloved fingers. She glanced round at her niece's face. The girl was white to her very lips. She had been educated abroad, and though, as we know, she had displayed plenty of courage when she had fallen into similar difficulties herself, accidents both in flood and field were a novel sight to her.

"He does not get up," she faltered at last, in low tones.

"For goodness' sake don't make a fool of yourself," replied Mrs. Wriothlesley sharply. She honestly thought the girl was about to faint, and was filled with dismay at the prospect of finding her niece the centre of a scene. "Men don't get hurt at polo any more than they do at cricket. They will all be galloping past here again before five minutes are over."

But in this conjecture Mrs. Wriothlesley was wrong; for although two of the fallen horsemen struggled promptly to their feet, Jim and the antagonist with whom he had come in collision had neither of them as yet done so. By this time all the players were collected round the spot where the accident had taken place, and an impression that some one was seriously hurt was rapidly gaining ground.

"Lionel," exclaimed Mrs. Wriothlesley, the moment she dared take her eyes off her niece, "I am sure Lady Mary would be extremely obliged to you if you would run down and see what is the matter. For Heaven's sake, Sylla," she whispered into her niece's ear, "don't make an exhibition of yourself by fainting or any nonsense of that sort. Ridiculous! as if any one was ever hurt by falling off a pony!"

Lady Mary reiterated Mrs. Wriothlesley's request, and Beauchamp at once slipped through the rails and ran down to the group. He found Jim resting his head upon his hand, lying on the grass and looking ghastly pale, but his brother-sufferer was still insensible.

"I don't think I can go on," gasped Jim, in answer to inquiries as to how he was—"that is, not to be of any use, you know; that confounded cannon has not only knocked all the wind out of me, but knocked me half foolish besides. I feel so faint and sick, you must get on as you best can without me for half an hour."

The other sufferer now gave signs of returning animation; and as, after looking at him, the doctor pronounced him only stunned by the fall and a good deal shaken, it was decided to draw a man from each side and so continue the game. Lionel Beauchamp made the best of his way back with his report.

"No sort of cause, Lady Mary, for being in the least alarmed. Bloxam is sensible; says there is nothing the matter, further than that they have knocked all the wind out of his body, and that he is too shaken to go on with the game at present; he will be all right again in a couple of hours. See, there he is, walking away to the dressing-rooms at the other side, along with his antagonist, who is in a similar case. It was an awkward collision, and it is well the results were no worse." And, as he finished his speech, Beauchamp rather ruefully contrasted the cool reception that Blanche gave to his intelligence with the bright smile with which Sylla rewarded him.

Under no circumstances, perhaps, would it have been otherwise. Blanche was of a calmer disposition, very different from the vivacious emotional temperament of Sylla Chipchase; and then she had never felt the nervous apprehension as to its results that had so terrified Sylla. Miss Bloxam loved her brother very dearly, but it would never occur to her to feel any great anxiety at seeing Jim fall. She would have told you quietly that "Jim knew how to fall." But she was filled with exceeding bitterness about one thing,—that her secret love-test had resulted in failure, and that her heart was, to a considerable extent, out of her possession before it had been asked for. No, her difference with Lionel Beauchamp was not to be passed over so lightly as all that. If he could refuse the slight request that she had made him, he could care very little about her. "As if any man, honestly in love, would hesitate to break a mere promise made to another woman!" And to the best of my belief, the majority of her sex would be quite of Blanche's opinion.

"He does not get up," thought Mrs. Wriothlesley, as she drove home from Hurlingham. "Yes, Sylla, my dear, you have told me something to-day that I honestly don't believe you knew yourself before. When accidents happen in the plural, and young ladies remark upon them only in the singular number, it is a sign of absorbing interest in somebody concerned. People generally, I think, would have observed, 'They don't get up.'" But Mrs. Wriothlesley wisely kept all these reflections to herself.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. WRIOTHESLEY'S LITTLE DINNER.

The accident at Hurlingham had opened Sylla's eyes. She became conscious of what her feeling for Jim Bloxam was fast ripening into. It made her thoughtful. She was suddenly aware that she cared considerably more about him than it was wise that a maiden should for any man not her avowed lover. She was a good deal startled by the discovery; for had she asked herself the question previous to seeing

him stretched, as she thought, badly hurt, or perhaps even killed, on the grass at that polo match, she would have answered, as she believed truthfully, that she liked Captain Bloxam very much: he was a very pleasant acquaintance; but as to his being anything more to her, she would have scouted the idea. She knew now that he was more to her than that, and Sylla pondered gravely upon what was her best course to pursue. One thing was quite clear, and that was, a previous intention of hers must be abandoned. She accordingly dispatched a note to Lionel Beauchamp, telling him that he need take no further trouble about her commission, which elicited a speedy reply to the effect that it was already executed.

One result of Sylla's discovery of the state of her feelings towards Captain Bloxam was a strong desire to cultivate her acquaintance with his mother and sister. She got on fairly with Blanche down at Todborough, but was quite aware that she was no favourite with Lady Mary. It most certainly was not because she fancied this would give her greater opportunities of meeting Jim. Far from it. She knew very well that she was more likely to meet Captain Bloxam in Hans Place than at his mother's house; for when he came up from Aldershot, as he did pretty constantly, it was rarely that Jim failed to appear in Mrs. Wriothesley's drawing-room; but the truth is the girl was rather shy of meeting Captain Bloxam just now. That Sylla's overtures should be coldly received was only what might be expected. Both Blanche and her mother regarded her as a dangerous rival. Indeed, Lady Mary's dislike to her from the first had proceeded from no other cause, so that Sylla's attempts to improve the acquaintance met with little success. Had Mrs. Wriothesley not obtained the keynote at Hurlingham, she would have been puzzled to understand what had come to her niece. The wand of the enchanter had transformed the girl. Her vivacity was wonderfully toned down; her whole manner softened; and Sylla, most self-possessed of young ladies, was unmistakably shy in the presence of Jim Bloxam. Diffidence is rarely an attribute of Hussars, and Jim was not without experience of women. The more retiring Miss Chipchase became, the more ardent became the attentions of her admirer.

Mrs. Wriothesley of course comprehended how matters were, and viewed the progress of events with entire satisfaction. She saw that projected scheme of hers rapidly approaching completion, and requiring but little help from her fostering hand; still it would be just as well, to use her own expression, "to assist nature;" and, with that view, she wrote a note to Jim Bloxam, suggesting that an early dinner and a night at the play were the proper restoratives for an invalid's nerves. She has seen Jim several times since his fall at Hurlingham, and knows very well that he got over the effects of that shaking in two or three days; but she has affected to regard him as a convalescent ever since, and insists upon it that quiet society is what he requires, meaning that, whenever he comes to town, the little house in Hans Place is the haven of rest best suited to him.

"I wish, Rip," said Mrs. Wriothesley, putting her head into her husband's *sanctum* one morning, "you would look in at Bubb's this afternoon, and tell them to send me a box for the Prince of Wales's next Wednesday. You will of course do as you like, but I am going to ask Jim Bloxam to dine and go with us to the play."

"What a clever designing little woman it is!" replied her husband lazily. "I'll order the box; but you must pick up somebody else to do 'gooseberry' with you, as I can't come that night. It's hardly fair upon Jim; but as I have found matrimony pleasant myself, I don't for once mind being in the conspiracy. Besides, Sylla is a good sort if she will only take a fancy to him: she seems rather inclined to avoid him, it strikes me."

"Oh, you goose!" replied his wife. "Get me the box, and pray that you may have decent luck at whist for the next few weeks; we shall want all the sovereigns you can scrape together to buy wedding presents before the season is out."

Lady Mary Bloxam was really very much to be pitied. Here was the season slipping by, and the design with which she had opened the campaign seemed further from accomplishment than ever. Worse than all, her own daughter was playing into the hands of the enemy. There was no disguising the fact. It was too palpably evident. There was something wrong between Blanche and Lionel Beauchamp. The young lady treated him with marked coldness, which he on his side resented. In vain did Lady Mary cross-examine her daughter in the most insidious manner. Blanche would own to no quarrel, nor assign any reason for their gradual estrangement; but Lady Mary saw with dismay that the two were drifting wider apart as the weeks wore on. That she should attribute all this to Sylla and her designing aunt may be easily supposed. It was true that in society Lionel Beauchamp could most certainly not be accused of paying pronounced devotion to Miss Chipchase. But Lady Mary had ever a picture before her mind of Beauchamp in a low chair, in the drawing-room at Hans Place, making passionate love to Sylla; and her dislike of that young lady was intensified accordingly. She was at variance with her daughter just now on the subject of the invitation they had received from Lionel Beauchamp for a water party down the river, and about which she and Blanche were by no means of one mind. Lady Mary was all for its acceptance, while Miss Bloxam persistently advocated its refusal.

"You are too provoking, Blanche," exclaimed Lady Mary; "sometimes you are dissatisfied because we have not cards for this, that, and the other; and now we have an invitation for what promises to be a very pleasant party, you not only declare you won't go, but won't give any reason for declining."

"I say 'no' because I don't wish to go," replied Miss Bloxam.

"Fiddle-de-dee!" replied her mother, sharply. "All girls like to go to what promises to be a pleasant party. It is only right and proper they should, unless they are unwell. Is there anything the matter with you?"

"No, unless it be that I am getting rather tired of London gaiety. I shall be very glad, indeed, to get back to Todborough."

"That's a most unnatural remark for a girl to make in her second season. None of your sisters, thank goodness, ever required it; but I am afraid I shall have to see what a doctor thinks of you. I must get hold of Pansey Cottrell and hear what he says about this picnic. I declare, if he reports favourably, I shall insist upon your going, Blanche."

"I cannot see, mamma, what Mr. Cottrell has got to do with it. There can be no possible use in consulting him."

"Every use," rejoined Lady Mary quickly. "Pansey knows everything that is going on in society. I declare I think sometimes that he must employ a staff of detectives to collect all such knowledge and gossip for him. He will know who are going to this party."

"If he knows everything," said Blanche, "he should be able to tell me what I want to know."

"And what is that?" inquired Lady Mary, with no little curiosity.

"He will know that also if omniscient, as you suppose, mamma."

"You are talking downright nonsense! How can any one answer a question which you won't ask them? But Pansey's knowledge of what goes on in his own world is marvellous. He sees more than the most lynx-eyed matron amongst us. I have been to a good many places this year for your amusement, and unless you are really ill, Blanche, it is only fair you should go this once for mine."

Miss Bloxam made no reply, but inwardly determined to be extremely unwell upon the day of that picnic. She was by no means a selfish girl, and would sacrifice herself to give her mother pleasure at any time; but she felt that she had valid reasons for declining any invitation from Lionel Beauchamp as things stood between them. No accusation of husband-hunting should ever be brought against her. Her mother was, of course, ignorant of how matters stood, and could therefore be no guide for her in this affair.

Captain Bloxam, arriving at his quarters to dress for mess after a hard afternoon's racquets, finds Mrs. Wriothlesley's note lying on his table.

"Will I dine on Wednesday, go to the play, and come back to supper afterwards? Will I not?" ejaculates Jim. "I am on duty on Wednesday, but somebody else will have to do that; and there is a big field-day on the Thursday. Never mind: get back by the early train in time for it, and I can do as much sleep as one wants coming down: so that is satisfactorily settled."

Jim, by this, was very hard hit indeed; and had he been asked to stay a month in the little house in Hans Place, would have sold out rather than have foregone the invitation; and the night in question saw him duly seated in Mrs. Wriothlesley's dining-room in the highest possible spirits.

"By the way," said Pansey Cottrell, who completed the quartet, addressing his hostess, "what is our destined place of amusement this evening? Are we bound for the French plays?"

"No, we are going to the Prince of Wales's Theatre," rejoined Mrs. Wriothlesley. "Are you very much given to the French plays, Mr. Cottrell?"

"I am not very much given to any theatrical entertainment; but whenever I feel low about the scarcity of money in the country, I like to go the French plays. To see so many people who can afford to pay a guinea for an arm-chair to read in for three hours is a refreshing proof that there is still money in the country. People go there a great deal more because it is the fashion than because they enjoy it. It is like the opera, which, though exquisite enjoyment to many, always commands a strong contingent who attend solely because it is the fashion. You are going of course to this water party of Beauchamp & Co.?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Wriothesley, "I rather like the idea. It is quite a novelty. They have chartered a large steamer, and I hear the arrangements are very perfect. You are going, Captain Bloxam?"

"Certainly," replied Jim. "I look forward to having pretty well the pleasantest day of the season. We are to lunch on board, dine on board, and, I believe, dance on board. As I told Beauchamp, the only improvement I could suggest was a stage for charades. We might have as great a success, Miss Chipchase, as we had that night at Todborough."

"Yes," replied Sylla, slightly colouring at the recollection, and wondering, in her mischievous resolve to a little shock Lady Mary, whether she might not really have gone too far.

"I declare, if well done, if they have got a big enough steamer, the right people, and it is a fine day, it ought to be a great success," observed Cottrell.

"Well," rejoined Mrs. Wriothesley, "from what Lionel told me, they have secured everything but the last; and I do think their arrangements to meet that are as perfect as possible."

Mr. Cottrell shook his head dubiously.

"In the event of a very unpromising day," continued Mrs. Wriothesley, "people will find a most excellent lunch spread in the cabins; and they have made up their minds not to leave their moorings at Westminster Bridge, so that people can have just as much as they please of the entertainment."

"That idea positively trenches on genius," exclaimed Mr. Cottrell approvingly, "and reduces it merely to lunching at any house in London. Cabs innumerable round there; one, as you say, can get away at any time."

"And now, Captain Bloxam," said Mrs. Wriothesley, "if you will ring the bell for coffee, Sylla and I will get our cloaks on while it cools; and then I think we must be going. Oh, about transport?" she adds, pausing at the door. "I think, Mr. Cottrell, if you will take me in your brougham, we will send the young couple in mine. Thanks," she continued, in reply to Mr. Cottrell's bow of assent. "Come, Sylla."

Mr. Cottrell's thoughts were naturally unspoken, but he could not refrain from mentally ejaculating, "Poor Lady Mary! what chance can she have against such an artist as this?"

A few weeks ago, and no girl would, perhaps, have laughed more at the idea of being nervous about driving alone to the theatre with Captain Bloxam than Sylla Chipchase; but she unmistakably was this evening, and, only that she was afraid of being ridiculed by her aunt, would have asked to change escorts. She could not help showing it in her manner a little when they were fairly started; and the Hussar was far from discouraged thereby.

His mind was fully made up, and he pleaded his best, not one bit abashed by her faint responses to his passionate protestations.

"I cannot tell you when I began to love you," he continued; "it was from the first time I saw you, I believe; and, Sylla, I do hope you care a little about me. I can hardly expect an answer tonight" (he did, and meant having it, all the same). It would be hardly fair; but if you can promise to be my wife before we part, I shall be the lightest-hearted Hussar that rides up the Long Valley tomorrow."

"I don't know. I didn't think you cared about me. I must have time," she murmured.

Oh, these lovers! She did know; she did think he cared about her, and she wanted no time.

"Sylla, dearest," continued Jim, "you must have known that I loved you; no woman is ever blind to that. That you should reflect before you give me an answer, I can understand; but please let me know my fate as soon as possible. It is cruel to keep me in suspense." And here the flood of Jim's eloquence was arrested by the brougham pulling up at the door of the theatre.

Mrs. Wriothesley and her cavalier glanced keenly at the pair as they entered the box. Mr. Cottrell, indeed, had complimented his hostess on her little bit of *finesse* on the road, and she had made no scruple of admitting that she hoped to bring about a marriage between the two. As to the Hussar, he was quite equal to the occasion, and from all that could be gathered from his imperturbable manner, might have been entertaining his companion with his meteorological views for the last half-hour. But with poor Sylla it was different. However good an actress the girl might be theatrically, she was a lamentable failure in the affairs of real life now that she found herself the leading lady; and both her quick-eyed aunt and the lynx-eyed Mr. Cottrell felt just as certain that an *éclaircissement* had taken place as if they had assisted at it. More discreet chaperons were impossible, and after the first glance they took no further notice of the lovers, confining their conversation to each other, and their attention to the stage. After a little Mr. Cottrell discovered a friend in the stalls, with whom it was an absolute

necessity he should exchange a few words; and then the interest Mrs. Wriothesley took in the play proved what an enthusiast she was about dramatic art.

But the green curtain fell at last—though, with the exception of Mrs. Wriothesley, it would be almost open to question whether any of them knew even the name of the piece they had witnessed—and the party proceeded homewards. Jim made good use of his opportunities on the drive back to Hans Place; and upon arrival, took advantage of Sylla's temporary escape upstairs to whisper to Mrs. Wriothesley that he had told his tale, and been favourably listened to. He felt assured of her congratulations. He knew he was a favourite of hers, and that she was much too clever a woman to have allowed him to see so much of Sylla unless she had approved of his suit. They were a very pleasant but rather quiet party at supper. Lovers in the spring-tide of their delirium have rarely conversation except for each other; but then that suffices amply for their enjoyment. Mrs. Wriothesley, triumphant in her schemes, chatted gaily with Mr. Cottrell, who was Sybarite enough to know that the discussion of the fish salad that he was then engaged upon, accompanied by the prattle of a pretty woman and irreproachable champagne, was about as near Elysium as a man of his years and prosaic temperament could expect to arrive at. He had had some conversation with his hostess on the way home. They had both arrived at the conclusion, from what they had seen in the theatre, that, even if everything was not yet settled, it would be before the evening was out. When she bade him good night, Mrs. Wriothesley added in low tones,

"Of course it is as we guessed; but don't say anything about it for the next few days."

It was with feelings of great complacency that Mr. Cottrell, having lit his cigar, stepped into his brougham. He had dined and supped satisfactorily. He had passed a pleasant evening, and he was in the early possession of a little piece of intelligence connected with that comedy which he had seen commenced at Todborough which made its finish perfectly plain to him. He could not help laughing as he thought of the complication of feeling that this would produce in the mind of Lady Mary Bloxam when it reached her, which of course it speedily would. Would indignation at having to welcome as a daughter-in-law a girl she disliked so much as she did Sylla Chipchase overcome the gratification she would feel at finding that she need no longer dread her as an obstacle to her plans for the settlement of Blanche? Upon the whole, Mr. Cottrell thought not.

"They don't know it," he argued; "but Sylla Chipchase's father is a wealthy man, and the young lady, in consequence of her mother's settlement, a very long way off a penniless maiden. I don't think Lady Mary has ever yet thought about Jim's marrying at all; but if Beauchamp and Blanche only make a match of it, I fancy it would reconcile her ladyship to a good deal. She wouldn't then, at all events, be beaten at all points of the game by her pet aversion—Mrs. Wriothesley." And once more Mr. Cottrell chuckled over the situation. "Piccadilly, eh?" he muttered, looking out of the window. "I don't feel a bit like bed. Egad, I'll turn in here and have another cigar;" and so saying Mr. Cottrell stopped his brougham at the door of a well-known club, got out, and leisurely ascended the steps.

Several men were seated smoking in the hall, and a little knot, of which Lionel Beauchamp was the principal figure, attracted Mr. Cottrell's attention.

"Ah, my lords of Greenwich and Gravesend!" he exclaimed gaily, "all the world is much exercised about you and your doings. Wondrous are the stories afloat as to the fitting out of your ship, and all the fun that you have prepared for us. People don't know what to expect. Some say you are about to revive the old Folly and Ranelagh. Others that you have rolled the Italian Opera and Willis's Rooms all into one, and put it on board ship."

"I can't say what they expect in the way of entertainment," exclaimed Beauchamp, "but they seem to think that we have at all events chartered the Great Eastern. We are perfectly inundated with applications for tickets."

"No doubt," replied Cottrell, as he took a chair beside them; "and from people of whose existence you were in happy ignorance. To extend your acquaintance, only give a big show of some sort, and let it be known that a card of invitation is well-nigh an impossibility. But what a very dandy cigar-case!" and as he spoke Cottrell lifted from the table by Beauchamp's side a very smart specimen of the article in question, made of maroon velvet, with a monogram embroidered on one side, and the motto, "*Loquaces si sapiat vitet*," on the other. "Very pretty indeed," he continued, looking at the monogram; "but surely you don't spell Lionel with a T?"

"No," replied Beauchamp, laughing; "I spell it with an 'L,' like other people; but that cigar-case was neither embroidered nor made for me."

"I see," rejoined Cottrell: "you have been annexing a friend's property. I regret to see the notorious laxity of principle on the subject of umbrellas is extending to cigar-cases."

"Wrong again," replied Beauchamp. "I am in perfectly legitimate possession of the case, although it was not made for me."

Insatiable thirst for gossip is naturally allied with insatiable curiosity, and Mr. Cottrell was no exception.

"J. B., J. B.?" he said, still fingering the case.

"I have it! I am right, for a dollar! You borrowed it from Jim Bloxam when we were down at Todborough."

"No," returned Lionel, much amused; "you are wrong again. I had a commission to get that case made —"

"For Jim Bloxam," interposed Cottrell quickly.

"I didn't say that," returned Lionel; "anyhow, it was not wanted; and at the risk of being accused of not being able to spell my own name, I kept it for myself. I was further commanded to adhere strictly to the motto."

"And 'avoid talkative people.' Curious, very," observed Mr. Cottrell, as he put down the cigar-case, wondering not a little who gave the commission, and for whom the case was originally intended; but he of course refrained from further inquiry.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RINGING OF THE BELLES.

The more Lady Mary heard of this water party, the more determined she was to attend it. True, her pet design, the establishment of her daughter, seemed to be running awry, but there was no occasion as yet for abandoning it. There was evidently something wrong between Blanche and Lionel Beauchamp, but that could never be put right by persistently avoiding him. Whatever the cloud between them, it was little likely to be dispelled if they never met. Then again, why should she facilitate matters for that odious Mrs. Wriothlesley and her saucy chit of a niece? No; all the sporting blood of the Ditchins boiled in Lady Mary's veins as she muttered,

"Margaret Wriothlesley may stand in my way again, as indeed she has all her life; but she sha'n't, at all events, be treated to the luxury of a 'walk over.'"

Not encountering Mr. Cottrell in the course of the next two or three days, she dropped him a line of inquiry as to the composition of this coming water party, and concluded her note with—

"Blanche is most provoking. She has evidently had some tiff with Lionel Beauchamp. She is very resolute about not going to this affair—hints mysteriously she wants to know something, and declines to say what. I have no patience with such nonsense; and if I hear from you that the right people will be there, shall insist upon her going. Her thirst for knowledge applies, I suspect, to some proceedings of Mr. Beauchamp's. If she would only confide what it is to me, I have little doubt I could put her mind at rest in eight and forty hours.

"Yours sincerely,
"MARY BLOXAM."

Mr. Cottrell received this note the morning after he had dined and supped in Hans Place. Putting one thing and the other together, he began to have a tolerable inkling of how matters stood. He was looking forward to spending rather a pleasant day at this party of Beauchamp's, and he now saw the possibility of adding still greater zest to his enjoyment by pulling the strings of one of those small social dramas so constantly occurring in our midst, which was a thing Pansey Cottrell dearly loved. He felt that he should be the good fairy on board that steamer,—that two or three of the human puppets thereon would dance in accordance with his fingering of the wires; and mischievously as he would interfere at times in such matters, felt upon this occasion that the puppets would jig as much to their own gratification as to his.

"Dear Lady Mary," he replied, "it is to be quite one of the pleasantest things of the season. All your own set will be there—pre-eminently the right people all round. I saw Beauchamp and his *confrères* last night. They say they are overwhelmed with applications for tickets, but have adhered rigidly to the number originally determined on. They may naturally expect to find themselves quite out of society next season. Those that were asked will have forgotten all about it, while those that were not won't. Kind regards to Miss Blanche. Tell her that there is a great deal of information to be picked up at water parties, and that I will guarantee her making one or two discoveries which I think will surprise and please her.

"Yours sincerely,
"PANSEY COTTRELL."

On receipt of that note Miss Bloxam's determination not to attend the Beauchamp party vanished. It would be hard to say now whether mother or daughter were more impatient for that afternoon, or more curious as to what it might bring forth. Lady Mary's speculations were vague in the extreme. Mr. Cottrell's shadowy announcement she regarded as liable to mean as much or as little as "hear of something to one's advantage" might in an advertisement in the second column of the *Times*. But with Blanche the case was different. Miss Bloxam's ideas took definite shape, and, with very slight grounds to go upon, she jumped instinctively to the conclusion—as women will in such cases—that whether Lionel Beauchamp was to be all to her or nothing would be effectually settled that afternoon. The promoters of the picnic themselves could not have prayed more fervently for fine weather than did Lady Mary and her daughter.

"Happy is the bride that the sun shines on," saith the proverb; but if it is vouchsafed one to command a fine day at will in the course of existence, it would be better to reserve that privilege not for one's wedding, but for our first important picnic. Lionel Beauchamp and his *confrères* were especially favoured. The day for their picnic was like unto that described by De Quincey, when "midsummer with all its banners was marching through the sky." A more gorgeous afternoon to loiter away upon the water it was hard to imagine. Moored along the side of the Westminster Pier was, if not the *Great Eastern*, at all events as large a steamer as it was practicable to bring there. Awnings were stretched both fore and aft above decks, the snowy whiteness of which would have done no discredit to a man-of-war. In the bows of the boat a band was pouring forth all sorts of popular melody, inciting the fashionable crowd to "Haste to the Wedding," "Down among the Coals," "When Johnny comes marching Home," &c. At the head of the gangway the hosts received their guests, and the numbers in which they trooped on board gave some warrant to Lionel Beauchamp's laughing assertion that giving a party in London is something like the making of a snowball: it increases with undreamt-of rapidity.

"Twenty-five guests apiece, Mrs. Wriothesley, was, I give you my word, the first faint-hearted conception of myself and three companions," said Beauchamp, laughing, as he welcomed that lady and Miss Chipchase; "but you see people have been kind to us, and that we are more popular in society than we dared venture to hope."

"Ah, Lionel, yes," rejoined Mrs. Wriothesley, as she shook hands, "and with so nice a ship, such glorious weather, and so many pleasant *compagnons de voyage* as I see around me, you will find us all willing to dance to your pipe, even if it led us all the way to New York."

"We are too discreet to attempt the impossible," replied Lionel. "If we can only please and amuse our guests to Gravesend and back, we shall sleep contented." And then he turned away to welcome fresh arrivals, leaving Sylla and Mrs. Wriothesley to greet their friends and inspect the arrangements made for their entertainment.

And that these had been the result of much thought and preparation was transparent even to the unreflecting. Like an elaborate piece of clockwork, the whole affair was not as yet in motion. But a glance on the foredeck of the steamer showed, mingling amongst the fashionable crowd, Spanish singers with their guitars, Tyrolese jödelers, and some two or three popular comedians, who at times consent to dispel the dreariness of an evening party. Mr. Cottrell even whispered to Mrs. Wriothesley that he should not be at all surprised if the thing was a real success.

"They are young, very young," he continued, "to undertake the responsibilities of the commissariat; but let us be charitable, and trust that they have had the wisdom to seek sound advice relative to the cookery and champagne."

Fair though the day might be, yet its opening to the eyes of Lady Mary Bloxam seemed unpropitious in the extreme. Lionel Beauchamp received her and Blanche with grave courtesy, but no more; indeed, his manner to Miss Bloxam touched upon the ceremonious. It was true that as a host he could hardly be expected to devote much time to any individual guest; but still it is very possible to convey a good deal,

even in the few words of welcome; and under the circumstances Lady Mary decided that Lionel Beauchamp had greeted them more as acquaintance, whose hospitality it was incumbent on him to return, than as intimate friends whom he was only too delighted to see. He had not lingered to exchange a few words with them as he had with Mrs. Wriothesley and Sylla, and Lady Mary felt filled with dread that her rival had already triumphed, and was receiving, conjointly with Miss Chipchase, the homage of the conquered. Blanche, too, who had already made up her mind that this day was either to set things straight with her and Lionel, or to estrange them for good, felt that there was little likelihood of its ending in the manner she desired. She would scarcely see anything of him in a large party such as this, unless he specially sought her, and she thought now it was improbable he would do that. She bitterly regretted that she had not adhered to her original determination. Nothing can be more dreary than a gay party from which there is no escape when one's mind is out of tune for society of any description. The idea that for so many hours the conventional smile must be upon our brow, and the conventional nothings upon our lips, is depressing in the extreme. It may be injudicious, but it is certainly allowable, to look sad when the bank that holds our all suddenly falls; but for a woman to acknowledge in her face that the bank of her affections is broke is most indecorous, and shows a want of proper spirit and proper pride pitiful to witness. She may scream if she is pinched; but neither sign nor cry must show that her heart-strings are wrung.

It is well to set your guests eating and drinking betimes on these occasions. The fasting man takes an acrid view of your arrangements compared with that taken by the man who has well fed; and the deferred opening of the supper-room has sealed the fate of many a dance which but for that had been voted pleasant enough. Lionel Beauchamp and his *confrères* determined to fall into no such mistake. No sooner are their friends on board and the steamer cast off from her moorings than the signal is given for lunch. The day is so fine that it has been decided to go down nearly to the Nore. With scarce a ripple on the water, even those who have no confidence whatever in their sea-going capabilities can feel no terror of *mal de mer*. The whole affair is an undoubted success. Mr. Cottrell himself pronounces the luncheon not only satisfactory, but indicative of much promise as regards dinner later on. The gay crowd breaks into knots and parties all over the decks. Now listening to the ballad some swarth Spaniard trills forth to his guitar, anon laughing at some buffo song humorously rendered by a well-known comedian, while ever and again Beauchamp and his brethren clear a space on the deck, and a valse or two becomes the order of the day.

"A very charming party, Miss Blanche, don't you think so?" remarked Mr. Cottrell, as he sauntered up to that young lady's side. "Have you been forward to look at what they call the 'Fair'? You can shoot for nuts, look at peep-shows, play *roulette* for gingerbread; in fact, indulge in all the amusements of childhood."

"No; the whole thing is no doubt very well done, but I don't feel myself to-day. I am not quite up to the sort of thing. Stupid of me to come. People should keep themselves to themselves when not in the vein for society."

"Ah," rejoined Mr. Cottrell, laughing, "not in the vein for society is a charming phrase. It embraces so much, and defines it so vaguely. Not in the vein for society may mean that we want our lunch; that some one we wanted to meet has not come; that we have fallen to the charge of the wrong person. I always feel that my being in the vein for society depends a good deal upon what the society consists of. Every now and then I get somebody to take down to dinner that makes me sigh for the Desert of Sahara. Now, I wonder what's wrong with you to-day?"

"Had too much of London, I fancy," replied Blanche, smiling. "I want to get back to Todborough. These headaches never trouble me there."

"Who was the shocking old infidel who declared young ladies' headaches were simply heartaches? What mistakes we make by seeing things as we imagine them, instead of as they actually are! I would lay a small wager, for instance, that your low spirits are the result simply of looking through the wrong end of the telescope."

"Don't talk nonsense, Mr. Cottrell! I feel a little hipped to-day, but every one does at times. I cannot plead any excuse for it."

"I am very glad to hear you say that," replied Cottrell gravely. "I thought perhaps you might be put out by this affair of your brother's."

"Affair of my brother's!" exclaimed Blanche quickly. "Jim surely is in no trouble! Why, he is here!"

"Exactly. No need to assure you he is a very long way off from being in trouble; having, on the contrary, a particularly good time, I should say judging from what I last saw of him. But surely, Miss Blanche, you must have observed that a man's relations are often moved to tears at the mode in which

he takes his pleasure, and, as a rule, always consider they are far more capable of choosing a wife for him than he is."

"Choosing a wife! Do you mean to tell me Jim is going to be married?"

"I presume so. I can only say he and Miss Chipchase are engaged in a very high-pressure flirtation, if it only means that."

"Jim going to marry Sylla! Why, I thought——" And here Blanche paused abruptly, and a rather compromising blush suffused her face.

"Ah, you thought," observed Cottrell, "that it was a mere flirtation. Well, there is no doubt that sisters don't often make a mistake about a brother's love affair when it comes within their knowledge; but in this instance I venture to think I am right."

Miss Bloxam's unnatural blindness to her brother's growing passion for Sylla Chipchase can be easily accounted for. Neither she nor her mother knew anything about his visits to Hans Place. Jim by no manner of means thought it necessary to call upon his own people every time he came up from Aldershot, and they were consequently unaware even of his being in town five times out of six.

"You must pardon my indiscretion," resumed Mr. Cottrell; "but I really supposed that Jim must have formally announced it. Ah, Beauchamp, the very man! Spare one moment from your hospitable cares, and receive the congratulations of Miss Bloxam and myself upon the perfection of your arrangements. Everything is admirable; and if ever people deserved the favour of a gorgeous day, you and your companions have done so."

"To have won the approbation of such an expert as Mr. Cottrell is ample recompense," replied Lionel, laughing, and making a mock salaam of great humility.

"We thoroughly mean what we say; and in the meantime extend your amiability so far as to give me a cigarette. Miss Blanche, I am sure, will permit it?"

Miss Bloxam bent her head in assent as Lionel Beauchamp produced the identical cigar-case that had so attracted Mr. Cottrell's attention some two or three nights ago.

"A very pretty case this, is it not?" said Cottrell, as he leisurely selected a cigarette. "In excellent taste; it does the greatest possible credit to the designer. But it is a very curious whim of Beauchamp's to spell Lionel with a 'J.' 'J.B.,' you see, would stand for John Bradshaw, Joshua Burton, or even Jim Bloxam; but you can't possibly make 'Lionel Beauchamp' out of it."

"That will do," replied Lionel, laughing; "you chaffed me enough about this the other night. Take heed, and remember the motto."

"A motto, Miss Bloxam," said Cottrell, "the meaning of which he doth not comprehend."

"Well, I flatter myself I do," replied Beauchamp; "but no matter;" and he extended his hand for the case.

"One minute. For fear you should give some spurious version, I will translate it first for Miss Bloxam's benefit; a lady cannot be supposed to know the meaning of '*Loquaces si sapiat vitet.*' Listen," continued Cottrell: "the Latin is a comprehensive language, remember,—'*Si*,' if; '*sapiat*,' you are not a fool; '*vitet*,' have nothing to say to; '*loquaces*,' ladies' commissions. A wickedly cynical saying to have broidered on one's case, even if you *have* found ladies' commissions troublesome and productive of much inconvenience. But, dear me! Lady Mary is signalling me. I must go and see what it is she wants. Try if you can make him disclose the story of that case, and who it was that commanded him to spell Lionel with a 'J,' and not chatter about it afterwards. I plead guilty to a most horrible curiosity on that point." And so saying, Mr. Cottrell dropped the cigar-case into Blanche's lap, and crossed the deck in obedience to Lady Mary's apocryphal signal.

Blanche knew now that her presentiment was fulfilled—that the crisis had arrived; and that the next two or three minutes would decide whether she and Lionel Beauchamp were to be all in all to each other, or go their respective ways. Be that as it might, on one point she must absolve herself in his eyes. With somewhat tremulous tones, she hurriedly exclaimed, as she handed the cigar-case back to Lionel,

"I have unwittingly discovered, Mr. Beauchamp, what you refused to tell me some little time ago at Hurlingham; and I hope you believe me when I say that I have never taken any steps to do so; nor, indeed, has any allusion to it passed my lips since."

"How Mr. Cottrell comes by his knowledge, I cannot say. I think he must possess a 'familiar' of some sort; but one thing, Miss Bloxam, I own, puzzles me. Why should you make such a point of my telling you what Sylla's commission was? I cannot understand it."

"And I cannot tell you. Surely the caprice of my sex is quite enough to account for it."

Apparently Lionel Beauchamp did not think so; and seating himself by Miss Bloxam's side, he proceeded to inquire into this instance of a woman's whimsies with great earnestness of purpose.

It was, of course, quite evident to Mr. Cottrell that Jim Bloxam had not as yet disclosed to his own people his engagement to Sylla Chipchase; and so delighted was Mr. Cottrell with the theatrical effect that he had just produced, that he felt the sooner he diverted himself by the production of another "situation" the better. He had crossed over to Lady Mary with no other object than the benevolent design of giving Blanche and Lionel an opportunity of clearing up their difference. He accordingly suggested to Lady Mary that they should take a turn forward and see what was going on in that part of the boat.

"It is not only that I wanted you to see what is going on in the fore part of the ship, but I want you not to see what is going on aft. I want to open your eyes to Mrs. Wriothesley's machinations, and to steel your heart against Lionel Beauchamp's perfidy."

"Lionel Beauchamp's perfidy! Good gracious, Pansey, what do you mean?"

"That I will lay you a small wager Lionel Beauchamp has stolen your daughter from you before we get back—no, don't interrupt me. Those foolish young people, finding their courtship was running too smooth, indulged themselves in the luxury of a mock quarrel—about what, shall we say?—well, a packet of lemon-drops would about represent the state of the case. However, as you know, quarrels about nothing sometimes assume portentous proportions; but I am happy to think that I have just put things right between those two."

"I only hope what you tell me is true. You know how much I have Blanche's settlement at heart."

"Yes, there is something about water parties that predisposes to flirtation. Atlantic voyages and trips to India are notorious for fostering such sweet frivolity. I really feel quite afraid of walking about to-day for dread of unknowingly interfering. It wouldn't be discreet, for instance, to intrude upon that couple so snugly ensconced under the shelter of the paddle-box. I don't know, but he is telling her secrets, I presume."

"Why, it is Sylla Chipchase!" exclaimed Lady Mary. "I cannot see who is her victim; but of course she would never neglect such a golden opportunity as to-day's."

"Hush!" replied Cottrell, drily; "the companion of her delinquency, remember, is Jim."

"Why, you surely don't mean to tell me——" exclaimed Lady Mary.

"Very much so," rejoined Cottrell; "and the sooner you make up your mind to take it *au serieux* the better."

Poor Lady Mary! Mr. Cottrell's dramatic disclosures were getting a little too much for her.

Before they had reached Westminster Bridge Blanche and Sylla knew that they were to be sisters, and there had been much quiet laughter amongst the four whom it chiefly concerned about the story of the cigar-case.

"I still don't understand," said Beauchamp, "why you should have so resented my keeping Sylla's commission secret?"

"And never will, Lionel, until you comprehend of what a jealous woman's imagination is capable."

"I can't see," whispered Jim, "why I was kept so long out of my cigar-case?"

It was in his possession at last.

"O you stupid Jim!" said Sylla softly, "don't you see it was so easy to give it you before I knew I loved you, and——"

"Well, and what?" inquired Bloxam.

"It was so difficult afterwards, until I knew you loved me."

The bells of Todborough rang bravely out one morning early in the autumn for a double marriage, and, as Mr. Cottrell wickedly whispered to one of his intimates, for the Millennium besides. The lion was lying down with the lamb. Mrs. Wriothesley was an honoured guest at the Grange.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BELLES AND RINGERS ***

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