

MISS MORRIS AND THE STRANGER

by Wilkie Collins

I.

WHEN I first saw him, he was lost in one of the Dead Cities of England--situated on the South Coast, and called Sandwich.

Shall I describe Sandwich? I think not. Let us own the truth; descriptions of places, however nicely they may be written, are always more or less dull. Being a woman, I naturally hate dullness. Perhaps some description of Sandwich may drop out, as it were, from my report of our conversation when we first met as strangers in the street.

He began irritably. "I've lost myself," he said.

"People who don't know the town often do that," I remarked.

He went on: "Which is my way to the Fleur de Lys Inn?"

His way was, in the first place, to retrace his steps. Then to turn to the left. Then to go on until he found two streets meeting. Then to take the street on the right. Then to look out for the second turning on the left. Then to follow the turning until he smelled stables--and there was the inn. I put it in the clearest manner, and never stumbled over a word.

"How the devil am I to remember all that?" he said.

This was rude. We are naturally and properly indignant with any man who is rude to us. But whether we turn our backs on him in contempt, or whether we are merciful and give him a lesson in politeness, depends entirely on the man. He may be a bear, but he may also have his redeeming qualities. This man had redeeming qualities. I cannot positively say that he was either handsome or ugly, young or old, well or ill dressed. But I can speak with certainty to the personal attractions which recommended him to notice. For instance, the tone of his voice was persuasive. (Did you ever read a story, written by one of us, in which we failed to dwell on our hero's voice?) Then, again, his hair was reasonably long. (Are you acquainted with any woman who can endure a man with a cropped head?) Moreover, he was of a good height. (It must be a very tall woman who can feel favorably inclined toward a short man.) Lastly, although his eyes were not more than

fairly presentable in form and color, the wretch had in some unaccountable manner become possessed of beautiful eyelashes. They were even better eyelashes than mine. I write quite seriously. There is one woman who is above the common weakness of vanity--and she holds the present pen.

So I gave my lost stranger a lesson in politeness. The lesson took the form of a trap. I asked him if he would like me to show him the way to the inn. He was still annoyed at losing himself. As I had anticipated, he bluntly answered: "Yes."

"When you were a boy, and you wanted something," I said, "did your mother teach you to say 'Please'?"

He positively blushed. "She did," he admitted; "and she taught me to say 'Beg your pardon' when I was rude. I'll say it now: 'Beg your pardon.'"

This curious apology increased my belief in his redeeming qualities. I led the way to the inn. He followed me in silence. No woman who respects herself can endure silence when she is in the company of a man. I made him talk.

"Do you come to us from Ramsgate?" I began. He only nodded his head. "We don't think much of Ramsgate here," I went on. "There is not an old building in the place. And their first Mayor was only elected the other day!"

This point of view seemed to be new to him. He made no attempt to dispute it; he only looked around him, and said: "Sandwich is a melancholy place, miss." He was so rapidly improving in politeness, that I encouraged him by a smile. As a citizen of Sandwich, I may say that we take it as a compliment when we are told that our town is a melancholy place. And why not? Melancholy is connected with dignity. And dignity is associated with age. And we are old. I teach my pupils logic, among other things--there is a specimen. Whatever may be said to the contrary, women can reason. They can also wander; and I must admit that I am wandering. Did I mention, at starting, that I was a governess? If not, that allusion to "pupils" must have come in rather abruptly. Let me make my excuses, and return to my lost stranger.

"Is there any such thing as a straight street in all Sandwich?" he asked.

"Not one straight street in the whole town."

"Any trade, miss?"

"As little as possible--and that is expiring."

"A decayed place, in short?"

"Thoroughly decayed."

My tone seemed to astonish him. "You speak as if you were proud of its being a decayed place," he said.

I quite respected him; this was such an intelligent remark to make. We do enjoy our decay: it is our chief distinction. Progress and prosperity everywhere else; decay and dissolution here. As a necessary consequence, we produce our own impression, and we like to be original. The sea deserted us long ago: it once washed our walls, it is now two miles away from us--we don't regret the sea. We had sometimes ninety-five ships in our harbor, Heaven only knows how many centuries ago; we now have one or two small coasting vessels, half their time aground in a muddy little river--we don't regret our harbor. But one house in the town is daring enough to anticipate the arrival of resident visitors, and announces furnished apartments to let. What a becoming contrast to our modern neighbor, Ramsgate! Our noble market-place exhibits the laws made by the corporation; and every week there are fewer and fewer people to obey the laws. How convenient! Look at our one warehouse by the river side--with the crane generally idle, and the windows mostly boarded up; and perhaps one man at the door, looking out for the job which his better sense tells him cannot possibly come. What a wholesome protest against the devastating hurry and over-work elsewhere, which has shattered the nerves of the nation! "Far from me and from my friends" (to borrow the eloquent language of Doctor Johnson) "be such frigid enthusiasm as shall conduct us indifferent and unmoved" over the bridge by which you enter Sandwich, and pay a toll if you do it in a carriage. "That man is little to be envied (Doctor Johnson again) who can lose himself in our labyrinthine streets, and not feel that he has reached the welcome limits of progress, and found a haven of rest in an age of hurry."

I am wandering again. Bear with the unpremeditated enthusiasm of a citizen who only attained years of discretion at her last birthday. We shall soon have done with Sandwich; we are close to the door of the inn.

"You can't mistake it now, sir," I said. "Good-morning."

He looked down at me from under his beautiful eyelashes (have I mentioned that I am a little woman?), and he asked in his persuasive tones: "Must we say good-by?"

I made him a bow.

"Would you allow me to see you safe home?" he suggested.

Any other man would have offended me. This man blushed like a boy, and looked at the pavement instead of looking at me. By this time I had made up my mind about him. He was not only a gentleman beyond all doubt, but a shy gentleman as well. His bluntness and his odd remarks were, as I thought, partly efforts to disguise his shyness, and partly refuges in which he tried to forget his own sense of it. I answered his audacious proposal amiably and pleasantly. "You would only lose your way again," I said, "and I should have to take you back to the inn for the second time."

Wasted words! My obstinate stranger only made another proposal.

"I have ordered lunch here," he said, "and I am quite alone." He stopped in confusion, and looked as if he rather expected me to box his ears. "I shall be forty next birthday," he went on; "I am old enough to be your father." I all but burst out laughing, and stepped across the street, on my way home. He followed me. "We might invite the landlady to join us," he said, looking the picture of a headlong man, dismayed by the consciousness of his own imprudence. "Couldn't you honor me by lunching with me if we had the landlady?" he asked.

This was a little too much. "Quite out of the question, sir--and you ought to know it," I said with severity. He half put out his hand. "Won't you even shake hands with me?" he inquired piteously. When we have most properly administered a reproof to a man, what is the perversity which makes us weakly pity him the minute afterward? I was fool enough to shake hands with this perfect stranger. And,

having done it, I completed the total loss of my dignity by running away. Our dear crooked little streets hid me from him directly.

As I rang at the door-bell of my employer's house, a thought occurred to me which might have been alarming to a better regulated mind than mine.

"Suppose he should come back to Sandwich?"

II.

BEFORE many more days passed I had troubles of my own to contend with, which put the eccentric stranger out of my head for the time.

Unfortunately, my troubles are part of my story; and my early life mixes itself up with them. In consideration of what is to follow, may I say two words relating to the period before I was a governess?

I am the orphan daughter of a shopkeeper of Sandwich. My father died, leaving to his widow and child an honest name and a little income of L80 a year. We kept on the shop--neither gaining nor losing by it. The truth is nobody would buy our poor little business. I was thirteen years old at the time; and I was able to help my mother, whose health was then beginning to fail. Never shall I forget a certain bright summer's day, when I saw a new customer enter our shop. He was an elderly gentleman; and he seemed surprised to find so young a girl as myself in charge of the business, and, what is more, competent to support the charge. I answered his questions in a manner which seemed to please him. He soon discovered that my education (excepting my knowledge of the business) had been sadly neglected; and he inquired if he could see my mother. She was resting on the sofa in the back parlor--and she received him there. When he came out, he patted me on the cheek. "I have taken a fancy to you," he said, "and perhaps I shall come back again." He did come back again. My mother had referred him to the rector for our characters in the town, and he had heard what our clergyman could say for us. Our only relations had emigrated to Australia, and were not doing well there. My mother's death would leave me, so far as relatives were concerned, literally alone in the world. "Give this girl a first-rate education," said our elderly customer, sitting at our tea-table in the back parlor, "and she will do. If you will send her to school, ma'am, I'll pay for her education." My poor mother began to cry at the

prospect of parting with me. The old gentleman said: "Think of it," and got up to go. He gave me his card as I opened the shop-door for him. "If you find yourself in trouble," he whispered, so that my mother could not hear him, "be a wise child, and write and tell me of it." I looked at the card. Our kind-hearted customer was no less a person than Sir Gervase Damian, of Garrum Park, Sussex--with landed property in our county as well! He had made himself (through the rector, no doubt) far better acquainted than I was with the true state of my mother's health. In four months from the memorable day when the great man had taken tea with us, my time had come to be alone in the world. I have no courage to dwell on it; my spirits sink, even at this distance of time, when I think of myself in those days. The good rector helped me with his advice--I wrote to Sir Gervase Damian.

A change had come over his life as well as mine in the interval since we had met.

Sir Gervase had married for the second time--and, what was more foolish still, perhaps, at his age, had married a young woman. She was said to be consumptive, and of a jealous temper as well. Her husband's only child by his first wife, a son and heir, was so angry at his father's second marriage that he left the house. The landed property being entailed, Sir Gervase could only express his sense of his son's conduct by making a new will, which left all his property in money to his young wife.

These particulars I gathered from the steward, who was expressly sent to visit me at Sandwich.

"Sir Gervase never makes a promise without keeping it," this gentleman informed me. "I am directed to take you to a first-rate ladies' school in the neighborhood of London, and to make all the necessary arrangements for your remaining there until you are eighteen years of age. Any written communications in the future are to pass, if you please, through the hands of the rector of Sandwich. The delicate health of the new Lady Damian makes it only too likely that the lives of her husband and herself will be passed, for the most part, in a milder climate than the climate of England. I am instructed to say this, and to convey to you Sir Gervase's best wishes."

By the rector's advice, I accepted the position offered to me in this unpleasantly formal manner--concluding (quite correctly, as I

afterward discovered) that I was indebted to Lady Damian for the arrangement which personally separated me from my benefactor. Her husband's kindness and my gratitude, meeting on the neutral ground of Garrum Park, were objects of conjugal distrust to this lady. Shocking! shocking! I left a sincerely grateful letter to be forwarded to Sir Gervase; and, escorted by the steward, I went to school--being then just fourteen years old.

I know I am a fool. Never mind. There is some pride in me, though I am only a small shopkeeper's daughter. My new life had its trials--my pride held me up.

For the four years during which I remained at the school, my poor welfare might be a subject of inquiry to the rector, and sometimes even the steward--never to Sir Gervase himself. His winters were no doubt passed abroad; but in the summer time he and Lady Damian were at home again. Not even for a day or two in the holiday time was there pity enough felt for my lonely position to ask me to be the guest of the housekeeper (I expected nothing more) at Garrum Park. But for my pride, I might have felt it bitterly. My pride said to me, "Do justice to yourself." I worked so hard, I behaved so well, that the mistress of the school wrote to Sir Gervase to tell him how thoroughly I had deserved the kindness that he had shown to me. No answer was received. (Oh, Lady Damian!) No change varied the monotony of my life--except when one of my schoolgirl friends sometimes took me home with her for a few days at vacation time. Never mind. My pride held me up.

As the last half-year of my time at school approached, I began to consider the serious question of my future life.

Of course, I could have lived on my eighty pounds a year; but what a lonely, barren existence it promised to be!--unless somebody married me; and where, if you please, was I to find him? My education had thoroughly fitted me to be a governess. Why not try my fortune, and see a little of the world in that way? Even if I fell among ill-conditioned people, I could be independent of them, and retire on my income.

The rector, visiting London, came to see me. He not only approved of my idea--he offered me a means of carrying it out. A worthy family, recently settled at Sandwich, were in want of a governess. The head of the household was partner in a business (the exact nature of which it is

needless to mention) having "branches" out of London. He had become superintendent of a new "branch"--tried as a commercial experiment, under special circumstances, at Sandwich. The idea of returning to my native place pleased me--dull as the place was to others. I accepted the situation.

When the steward's usual half-yearly letter arrived soon afterward, inquiring what plans I had formed on leaving school, and what he could do to help them, acting on behalf of Sir Gervase, a delicious tingling filled me from head to foot when I thought of my own independence. It was not ingratitude toward my benefactor; it was only my little private triumph over Lady Damian. Oh, my sisters of the sex, can you not understand and forgive me?

So to Sandwich I returned; and there, for three years, I remained with the kindest people who ever breathed the breath of life. Under their roof I was still living when I met with my lost gentleman in the street.

Ah, me! the end of that quiet, pleasant life was near. When I lightly spoke to the odd stranger of the expiring trade of the town, I never expected that my employer's trade was expiring too. The speculation had turned out to be a losing one; and all his savings had been embarked in it. He could no longer remain at Sandwich, or afford to keep a governess. His wife broke the sad news to me. I was so fond of the children, I proposed to her to give up my salary. Her husband refused even to consider the proposal. It was the old story of poor humanity over again. We cried, we kissed, we parted.

What was I to do next?--Write to Sir Gervase?

I had already written, soon after my return to Sandwich; breaking through the regulations by directly addressing Sir Gervase. I expressed my grateful sense of his generosity to a poor girl who had no family claim on him; and I promised to make the one return in my power by trying to be worthy of the interest he had taken in me. The letter was written without any alloy of mental reserve. My new life as a governess was such a happy one that I had forgotten my paltry bitterness of feeling against Lady Damian.

It was a relief to think of this change for the better, when the secretary at Garrum Park informed me that he had forwarded my letter to Sir Gervase, then at Madeira with his sick wife. She was slowly and steadily wasting away in a decline. Before another year had passed,

Sir Gervase was left a widower for the second time, with no child to console him under his loss. No answer came to my grateful letter. I should have been unreasonable indeed if I had expected the bereaved husband to remember me in his grief and loneliness. Could I write to him again, in my own trumpery little interests, under these circumstances? I thought (and still think) that the commonest feeling of delicacy forbade it. The only other alternative was to appeal to the ever-ready friends of the obscure and helpless public. I advertised in the newspapers.

The tone of one of the answers which I received impressed me so favorably, that I forwarded my references. The next post brought my written engagement, and the offer of a salary which doubled my income.

The story of the past is told; and now we may travel on again, with no more stoppages by the way.

III.

THE residence of my present employer was in the north of England. Having to pass through London, I arranged to stay in town for a few days to make some necessary additions to my wardrobe. An old servant of the rector, who kept a lodging-house in the suburbs, received me kindly, and guided my choice in the serious matter of a dressmaker. On the second morning after my arrival an event happened. The post brought me a letter forwarded from the rectory. Imagine my astonishment when my correspondent proved to be Sir Gervase Damian himself!

The letter was dated from his house in London. It briefly invited me to call and see him, for a reason which I should hear from his own lips. He naturally supposed that I was still at Sandwich, and requested me, in a postscript, to consider my journey as made at his expense.

I went to the house the same day. While I was giving my name, a gentleman came out into the hall. He spoke to me without ceremony.

"Sir Gervase," he said, "believes he is going to die. Don't encourage him in that idea. He may live for another year or more, if his friends will only persuade him to be hopeful about himself."

With that, the gentleman left me; the servant said it was the doctor.

The change in my benefactor, since I had seen him last, startled and distressed me. He lay back in a large arm-chair, wearing a grim black dressing-gown, and looking pitiably thin and pinched and worn. I do not think I should have known him again, if we had met by accident. He signed to me to be seated on a little chair by his side.

"I wanted to see you," he said quietly, "before I die. You must have thought me neglectful and unkind, with good reason. My child, you have not been forgotten. If years have passed without a meeting between us, it has not been altogether my fault--"

He stopped. A pained expression passed over his poor worn face; he was evidently thinking of the young wife whom he had lost. I repeated--fervently and sincerely repeated--what I had already said to him in writing. "I owe everything, sir, to your fatherly kindness." Saying this, I ventured a little further. I took his wan white hand, hanging over the arm of the chair, and respectfully put it to my lips.

He gently drew his hand away from me, and sighed as he did it. Perhaps she had sometimes kissed his hand.

"Now tell me about yourself," he said.

I told him of my new situation, and how I had got it. He listened with evident interest.

"I was not self-deceived," he said, "when I first took a fancy to you in the shop. I admire your independent feeling; it's the right kind of courage in a girl like you. But you must let me do something more for you--some little service to remember me by when the end has come. What shall it be?"

"Try to get better, sir; and let me write to you now and then," I answered. "Indeed, indeed, I want nothing more."

"You will accept a little present, at least?" With those words he took from the breast-pocket of his dressing-gown an enameled cross attached to a gold chain. "Think of me sometimes," he said, as he put the chain round my neck. He drew me to him gently, and kissed my forehead. It was too much for me. "Don't cry, my dear," he said; "don't remind me of another sad young face--"

Once more he stopped; once more he was thinking of the lost wife. I pulled down my veil, and ran out of the room.

IV.

THE next day I was on my way to the north. My narrative brightens again--but let us not forget Sir Gervase Damian.

I ask permission to introduce some persons of distinction:--Mrs. Fosdyke, of Carsham Hall, widow of General Fosdyke; also Master Frederick, Miss Ellen, and Miss Eva, the pupils of the new governess; also two ladies and three gentlemen, guests staying in the house.

Discreet and dignified; handsome and well-bred--such was my impression of Mrs. Fosdyke, while she harangued me on the subject of her children, and communicated her views on education. Having heard the views before from others, I assumed a listening position, and privately formed my opinion of the schoolroom. It was large, lofty, perfectly furnished for the purpose; it had a big window and a balcony looking out over the garden terrace and the park beyond--a wonderful schoolroom, in my limited experience. One of the two doors which it possessed was left open, and showed me a sweet little bedroom, with amber draperies and maplewood furniture, devoted to myself. Here were wealth and liberality, in the harmonious combination so seldom discovered by the spectator of small means. I controlled my first feeling of bewilderment just in time to answer Mrs. Fosdyke on the subject of reading and recitation--viewed as minor accomplishments which a good governess might be expected to teach.

"While the organs are young and pliable," the lady remarked, "I regard it as of great importance to practice children in the art of reading aloud, with an agreeable variety of tone and correctness of emphasis. Trained in this way, they will produce a favorable impression on others, even in ordinary conversation, when they grow up. Poetry, committed to memory and recited, is a valuable means toward this end. May I hope that your studies have enabled you to carry out my views?"

Formal enough in language, but courteous and kind in manner. I relieved Mrs. Fosdyke from anxiety by informing her that we had a professor of elocution at school. And then I was left to improve my acquaintance with my three pupils.

They were fairly intelligent children; the boy, as usual, being slower than the girls. I did my best--with many a sad remembrance of the far dearer pupils whom I had left--to make them like me and trust me; and I succeeded in winning their confidence. In a week from the time of my arrival at Carsham Hall, we began to understand each other.

The first day in the week was one of our days for reciting poetry, in obedience to the instructions with which I had been favored by Mrs. Fosdyke. I had done with the girls, and had just opened (perhaps I ought to say profaned) Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar," in the elocutionary interests of Master Freddy. Half of Mark Antony's first glorious speech over Caesar's dead body he had learned by heart; and it was now my duty to teach him, to the best of my small ability, how to speak it. The morning was warm. We had our big window open; the delicious perfume of flowers in the garden beneath filled the room.

I recited the first eight lines, and stopped there feeling that I must not exact too much from the boy at first. "Now, Freddy," I said, "try if you can speak the poetry as I have spoken it."

"Don't do anything of the kind, Freddy," said a voice from the garden; "it's all spoken wrong."

Who was this insolent person? A man unquestionably--and, strange to say, there was something not entirely unfamiliar to me in his voice. The girls began to giggle. Their brother was more explicit. "Oh," says Freddy, "it's only Mr. Sax."

The one becoming course to pursue was to take no notice of the interruption. "Go on," I said. Freddy recited the lines, like a dear good boy, with as near an imitation of my style of elocution as could be expected from him.

"Poor devil!" cried the voice from the garden, insolently pitying my attentive pupil.

I imposed silence on the girls by a look--and then, without stirring from my chair, expressed my sense of the insolence of Mr. Sax in clear and commanding tones. "I shall be obliged to close the window if this is repeated." Having spoken to that effect, I waited in expectation of an apology. Silence was the only apology. It was enough for me that I had produced the right impression. I went on with my recitation.

"Here, under leave of Brutus, and the rest (For Brutus is an honorable man; So are they all, all honorable men), Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral. He was my friend, faithful and just to me--"

"Oh, good heavens, I can't stand _that!_ Why don't you speak the last line properly? Listen to me."

Dignity is a valuable quality, especially in a governess. But there are limits to the most highly trained endurance. I bounced out into the balcony--and there, on the terrace, smoking a cigar, was my lost stranger in the streets of Sandwich!

He recognized me, on his side, the instant I appeared. "Oh, Lord!" he cried in tones of horror, and ran round the corner of the terrace as if my eyes had been mad bulls in close pursuit of him. By this time it is, I fear, useless for me to set myself up as a discreet person in emergencies. Another woman might have controlled herself. I burst into fits of laughter. Freddy and the girls joined me. For the time, it was plainly useless to pursue the business of education. I shut up Shakespeare, and allowed--no, let me tell the truth, encouraged--the children to talk about Mr. Sax.

They only seemed to know what Mr. Sax himself had told them. His father and mother and brothers and sisters had all died in course of time. He was the sixth and last of the children, and he had been christened "Sextus" in consequence, which is Latin (here Freddy interposed) for sixth. Also christened "Cyril" (here the girls recovered the lead) by his mother's request; "Sextus" being such a hideous name. And which of his Christian names does he use? You wouldn't ask if you knew him! "Sextus," of course, because it is the ugliest. Sextus Sax? Not the romantic sort of name that one likes, when one is a woman. But I have no right to be particular. My own name (is it possible that I have not mentioned it in these pages yet?) is only Nancy Morris. Do not despise me--and let us return to Mr. Sax.

Is he married? The eldest girl thought not. She had heard mamma say to a lady, "An old German family, my dear, and, in spite of his oddities, an excellent man; but so poor--barely enough to live on--and blurts out the truth, if people ask his opinion, as if he had twenty thousand a year!" "Your mamma knows him well, of course?" "I should think so, and so do we. He often comes here. They say he's not

good company among grown-up people. _We_ think him jolly. He understands dolls, and he's the best back at leap-frog in the whole of England." Thus far we had advanced in the praise of Sextus Sax, when one of the maids came in with a note for me. She smiled mysteriously, and said, "I'm to wait for an answer, miss."

I opened the note, and read these lines:--

"I am so ashamed of myself, I daren't attempt to make my apologies personally. Will you accept my written excuses? Upon my honor, nobody told me when I got here yesterday that you were in the house. I heard the recitation, and--can you excuse my stupidity?--I thought it was a stage-struck housemaid amusing herself with the children. May I accompany you when you go out with the young ones for your daily walk? One word will do. Yes or no. Penitently yours--S. S."

In my position, there was but one possible answer to this. Governesses must not make appointments with strange gentlemen--even when the children are present in the capacity of witnesses. I said, No. Am I claiming too much for my readiness to forgive injuries, when I add that I should have preferred saying Yes?

We had our early dinner, and then got ready to go out walking as usual. These pages contain a true confession. Let me own that I hoped Mr. Sax would understand my refusal, and ask Mrs. Fosdyke's leave to accompany us. Lingering a little as we went downstairs, I heard him in the hall--actually speaking to Mrs. Fosdyke! What was he saying? That darling boy, Freddy, got into a difficulty with one of his boot-laces exactly at the right moment. I could help him, and listen--and be sadly disappointed by the result. Mr. Sax was offended with me.

"You needn't introduce me to the new governess," I heard him say. "We have met on a former occasion, and I produced a disagreeable impression on her. I beg you will not speak of me to Miss Morris."

Before Mrs. Fosdyke could say a word in reply, Master Freddy changed suddenly from a darling boy to a detestable imp. "I say, Mr. Sax!" he called out, "Miss Morris doesn't mind you a bit--she only laughs at you."

The answer to this was the sudden closing of a door. Mr. Sax had taken refuge from me in one of the ground-floor rooms. I was so mortified, I could almost have cried.

Getting down into the hall, we found Mrs. Fosdyke with her garden hat on, and one of the two ladies who were staying in the house (the unmarried one) whispering to her at the door of the morning-room. The lady--Miss Melbury--looked at me with a certain appearance of curiosity which I was quite at a loss to understand, and suddenly turned away toward the further end of the hall.

"I will walk with you and the children," Mrs. Fosdyke said to me. "Freddy, you can ride your tricycle if you like." She turned to the girls. "My dears, it's cool under the trees. You may take your skipping-ropes."

She had evidently something special to say to me; and she had adopted the necessary measures for keeping the children in front of us, well out of hearing. Freddy led the way on his horse on three wheels; the girls followed, skipping merrily. Mrs. Fosdyke opened the business by the most embarrassing remark that she could possibly have made under the circumstances.

"I find that you are acquainted with Mr. Sax," she began; "and I am surprised to hear that you dislike him."

She smiled pleasantly, as if my supposed dislike of Mr. Sax rather amused her. What "the ruling passion" may be among men, I cannot presume to consider. My own sex, however, I may claim to understand. The ruling passion among women is Conceit. My ridiculous notion of my own consequence was wounded in some way. I assumed a position of the loftiest indifference.

"Really, ma'am," I said, "I can't undertake to answer for any impression that Mr. Sax may have formed. We met by the merest accident. I know nothing about him."

Mrs. Fosdyke eyed me slyly, and appeared to be more amused than ever.

"He is a very odd man," she admitted, "but I can tell you there is a fine nature under that strange surface of his. However," she went on, "I am forgetting that he forbids me to talk about him in your presence. When

the opportunity offers, I shall take my own way of teaching you two to understand each other: you will both be grateful to me when I have succeeded. In the meantime, there is a third person who will be sadly disappointed to hear that you know nothing about Mr. Sax."

"May I ask, ma'am, who the person is?"

"Can you keep a secret, Miss Morris? Of course you can! The person is Miss Melbury."

(Miss Melbury was a dark woman. It cannot be because I am a fair woman myself--I hope I am above such narrow prejudices as that--but it is certainly true that I don't admire dark women.)

"She heard Mr. Sax telling me that you particularly disliked him," Mrs. Fosdyke proceeded. "And just as you appeared in the hall, she was asking me to find out what your reason was. My own opinion of Mr. Sax, I ought to tell you, doesn't satisfy her; I am his old friend, and I present him of course from my own favorable point of view. Miss Melbury is anxious to be made acquainted with his faults--and she expected you to be a valuable witness against him."

Thus far we had been walking on. We now stopped, as if by common consent, and looked at one another.

In my previous experience of Mrs. Fosdyke, I had only seen the more constrained and formal side of her character. Without being aware of my own success, I had won the mother's heart in winning the goodwill of her children. Constraint now seized its first opportunity of melting away; the latent sense of humor in the great lady showed itself, while I was inwardly wondering what the nature of Miss Melbury's extraordinary interest in Mr. Sax might be. Easily penetrating my thoughts, she satisfied my curiosity without committing herself to a reply in words. Her large gray eyes sparkled as they rested on my face, and she hummed the tune of the old French song, _"C'est l'amour, l'amour, l'amour!"_ There is no disguising it--something in this disclosure made me excessively angry. Was I angry with Miss Melbury? or with Mr. Sax? or with myself? I think it must have been with myself.

Finding that I had nothing to say on my side, Mrs. Fosdyke looked at her watch, and remembered her domestic duties. To my relief, our interview came to an end.

"I have a dinner-party to-day," she said, "and I have not seen the housekeeper yet. Make yourself beautiful, Miss Morris, and join us in the drawing-room after dinner."

V.

I WORE my best dress; and, in all my life before, I never took such pains with my hair. Nobody will be foolish enough, I hope, to suppose that I did this on Mr. Sax's account. How could I possibly care about a man who was little better than a stranger to me? No! the person I dressed at was Miss Melbury.

She gave me a look, as I modestly placed myself in a corner, which amply rewarded me for the time spent on my toilet. The gentlemen came in. I looked at Mr. Sax (mere curiosity) under shelter of my fan. His appearance was greatly improved by evening dress. He discovered me in my corner, and seemed doubtful whether to approach me or not. I was reminded of our first odd meeting; and I could not help smiling as I called it to mind. Did he presume to think that I was encouraging him? Before I could decide that question, he took the vacant place on the sofa. In any other man--after what had passed in the morning--this would have been an audacious proceeding. He looked so painfully embarrassed, that it became a species of Christian duty to pity him.

"Won't you shake hands?" he said, just as he had said it at Sandwich.

I peeped round the corner of my fan at Miss Melbury. She was looking at us. I shook hands with Mr. Sax.

"What sort of sensation is it," he asked, "when you shake hands with a man whom you hate?"

"I really can't tell you," I answered innocently; "I have never done such a thing."

"You would not lunch with me at Sandwich," he protested; "and, after the humblest apology on my part, you won't forgive me for what I did this morning. Do you expect me to believe that I am not the special object of your antipathy? I wish I had never met with you! At my age, a man gets angry when he is treated cruelly and doesn't deserve it. You don't understand that, I dare say."

"Oh, yes, I do. I heard what you said about me to Mrs. Fosdyke, and I heard you bang the door when you got out of my way."

He received this reply with every appearance of satisfaction. "So you listened, did you? I'm glad to hear that."

"Why?"

"It shows you take some interest in me, after all."

Throughout this frivolous talk (I only venture to report it because it shows that I bore no malice on my side) Miss Melbury was looking at us like the basilisk of the ancients. She owned to being on the wrong side of thirty; and she had a little money--but these were surely no reasons why she should glare at a poor governess. Had some secret understanding of the tender sort been already established between Mr. Sax and herself? She provoked me into trying to find out--especially as the last words he had said offered me the opportunity.

"I can prove that I feel a sincere interest in you," I resumed. "I can resign you to a lady who has a far better claim to your attention than mine. You are neglecting her shamefully."

He stared at me with an appearance of bewilderment, which seemed to imply that the attachment was on the lady's side, so far. It was of course impossible to mention names; I merely turned my eyes in the right direction. He looked where I looked--and his shyness revealed itself, in spite of his resolution to conceal it. His face flushed; he looked mortified and surprised. Miss Melbury could endure it no longer. She rose, took a song from the music-stand, and approached us.

"I am going to sing," she said, handing the music to him. "Please turn over for me, Mr. Sax."

I think he hesitated--but I cannot feel sure that I observed him correctly. It matters little. With or without hesitation, he followed her to the piano.

Miss Melbury sang--with perfect self-possession, and an immense compass of voice. A gentleman near me said she ought to be on the stage. I thought so too. Big as it was, our drawing-room was not large enough for her. The gentleman sang next. No voice at all--but so

sweet, such true feeling! I turned over the leaves for him. A dear old lady, sitting near the piano, entered into conversation with me. She spoke of the great singers at the beginning of the present century. Mr. Sax hovered about, with Miss Melbury's eye on him. I was so entranced by the anecdotes of my venerable friend, that I could take no notice of Mr. Sax. Later, when the dinner-party was over, and we were retiring for the night, he still hovered about, and ended in offering me a bedroom candle. I immediately handed it to Miss Melbury. Really a most enjoyable evening!

VI.

THE next morning we were startled by an extraordinary proceeding on the part of one of the guests. Mr. Sax had left Carsham Hall by the first train--nobody knew why.

Nature has laid--so, at least, philosophers say--some heavy burdens upon women. Do those learned persons include in their list the burden of hysterics? If so, I cordially agree with them. It is hardly worth speaking of in my case--a constitutional outbreak in the solitude of my own room, treated with eau-de-cologne and water, and quite forgotten afterward in the absorbing employment of education. My favorite pupil, Freddy, had been up earlier than the rest of us--breathing the morning air in the fruit-garden. He had seen Mr. Sax and had asked him when he was coming back again. And Mr. Sax had said, "I shall be back again next month." (Dear little Freddy!)

In the meanwhile we, in the schoolroom, had the prospect before us of a dull time in an empty house. The remaining guests were to go away at the end of the week, their hostess being engaged to pay a visit to some old friends in Scotland.

During the next three or four days, though I was often alone with Mrs. Fosdyke, she never said one word on the subject of Mr. Sax. Once or twice I caught her looking at me with that unendurably significant smile of hers. Miss Melbury was equally unpleasant in another way. When we accidentally met on the stairs, her black eyes shot at me passing glances of hatred and scorn. Did these two ladies presume to think--?

No; I abstained from completing that inquiry at the time, and I abstain from completing it here.

The end of the week came, and I and the children were left alone at Carsham Hall.

I took advantage of the leisure hours at my disposal to write to Sir Gervase; respectfully inquiring after his health, and informing him that I had been again most fortunate in my engagement as a governess. By return of post an answer arrived. I eagerly opened it. The first lines informed me of Sir Gervase Damian's death.

The letter dropped from my hand. I looked at my little enameled cross. It is not for me to say what I felt. Think of all that I owed to him; and remember how lonely my lot was in the world. I gave the children a holiday; it was only the truth to tell them that I was not well.

How long an interval passed before I could call to mind that I had only read the first lines of the letter, I am not able to say. When I did take it up I was surprised to see that the writing covered two pages. Beginning again where I had left off, my head, in a moment more, began to swim. A horrid fear overpowered me that I might not be in my right mind, after I had read the first three sentences. Here they are, to answer for me that I exaggerate nothing:--

"The will of our deceased client is not yet proved. But, with the sanction of the executors, I inform you confidentially that you are the person chiefly interested in it. Sir Gervase Damian bequeaths to you, absolutely, the whole of his personal property, amounting to the sum of seventy thousand pounds."

If the letter had ended there, I really cannot imagine what extravagances I might not have committed. But the writer (head partner in the firm of Sir Gervase's lawyers) had something more to say on his own behalf. The manner in which he said it strung up my nerves in an instant. I can not, and will not, copy the words here. It is quite revolting enough to give the substance of them.

The man's object was evidently to let me perceive that he disapproved of the will. So far I do not complain of him--he had, no doubt, good reason for the view he took. But, in expressing his surprise "at this extraordinary proof of the testator's interest in a perfect stranger to the family," he hinted his suspicion of an influence, on my part, exercised over Sir Gervase, so utterly shameful, that I cannot dwell on the subject. The language, I should add, was cunningly guarded. Even I

could see that it would bear more than one interpretation, and would thus put me in the wrong if I openly resented it. But the meaning was plain; and part at least of the motive came out in the following sentences:

"The present Sir Gervase, as you are doubtless aware, is not seriously affected by his father's will. He is already more liberally provided for, as heir under the entail to the whole of the landed property. But, to say nothing of old friends who are forgotten, there is a surviving relative of the late Sir Gervase passed over, who is nearly akin to him by blood. In the event of this person disputing the will, you will of course hear from us again, and refer us to your legal adviser."

The letter ended with an apology for delay in writing to me, caused by difficulty in discovering my address.

And what did I do?--Write to the rector, or to Mrs. Fosdyke, for advice? Not I!

At first I was too indignant to be able to think of what I ought to do. Our post-time was late, and my head ached as if it would burst into pieces. I had plenty of leisure to rest and compose myself. When I got cool again, I felt able to take my own part, without asking any one to help me.

Even if I had been treated kindly, I should certainly not have taken the money when there was a relative living with a claim to it. What did I want with a large fortune! To buy a husband with it, perhaps? No, no! from all that I have heard, the great Lord Chancellor was quite right when he said that a woman with money at her own disposal was "either kissed out of it or kicked out of it, six weeks after her marriage." The one difficulty before me was not to give up my legacy, but to express my reply with sufficient severity, and at the same time with due regard to my own self-respect. Here is what I wrote:

"SIR--I will not trouble you by attempting to express my sorrow on hearing of Sir Gervase Damian's death. You would probably form your own opinion on that subject also; and I have no wish to be judged by your unenviable experience of humanity for the second time.

"With regard to the legacy, feeling the sincerest gratitude to my generous benefactor, I nevertheless refuse to receive the money.

"Be pleased to send me the necessary document to sign, for transferring my fortune to that relative of Sir Gervase mentioned in your letter. The one condition on which I insist is, that no expression of thanks shall be addressed to me by the person in whose favor I resign the money. I do not desire (even supposing that justice is done to my motives on this occasion) to be made the object of expressions of gratitude for only doing my duty."

So it ended. I may be wrong, but I call that strong writing.

In due course of post a formal acknowledgment arrived. I was requested to wait for the document until the will had been proved, and was informed that my name should be kept strictly secret in the interval. On this occasion the executors were almost as insolent as the lawyer. They felt it their duty to give me time to reconsider a decision which had been evidently formed on impulse. Ah, how hard men are--at least, some of them! I locked up the acknowledgment in disgust, resolved to think no more of it until the time came for getting rid of my legacy. I kissed poor Sir Gervase's little keepsake. While I was still looking at it, the good children came in, of their own accord, to ask how I was. I was obliged to draw down the blind in my room, or they would have seen the tears in my eyes. For the first time since my mother's death, I felt the heartache. Perhaps the children made me think of the happier time when I was a child myself.

VII.

THE will had been proved, and I was informed that the document was in course of preparation when Mrs. Fosdyke returned from her visit to Scotland.

She thought me looking pale and worn.

"The time seems to me to have come," she said, "when I had better make you and Mr. Sax understand each other. Have you been thinking penitently of your own bad behavior?"

I felt myself blushing. I had been thinking of my conduct to Mr. Sax--and I was heartily ashamed of it, too.

Mrs. Fosdyke went on, half in jest, half in earnest. "Consult your own sense of propriety!" she said. "Was the poor man to blame for not

being rude enough to say No, when a lady asked him to turn over her music? Could he help it, if the same lady persisted in flirting with him? He ran away from her the next morning. Did you deserve to be told why he left us? Certainly not--after the vixenish manner in which you handed the bedroom candle to Miss Melbury. You foolish girl! Do you think I couldn't see that you were in love with him? Thank Heaven, he's too poor to marry you, and take you away from my children, for some time to come. There will be a long marriage engagement, even if he is magnanimous enough to forgive you. Shall I ask Miss Melbury to come back with him?"

She took pity on me at last, and sat down to write to Mr. Sax. His reply, dated from a country house some twenty miles distant, announced that he would be at Carsham Hall in three days' time.

On that third day the legal paper that I was to sign arrived by post. It was Sunday morning; I was alone in the schoolroom.

In writing to me, the lawyer had only alluded to "a surviving relative of Sir Gervase, nearly akin to him by blood." The document was more explicit. It described the relative as being a nephew of Sir Gervase, the son of his sister. The name followed.

It was Sextus Cyril Sax.

I have tried on three different sheets of paper to describe the effect which this discovery produced on me--and I have torn them up one after another. When I only think of it, my mind seems to fall back into the helpless surprise and confusion of that time. After all that had passed between us--the man himself being then on his way to the house! what would he think of me when he saw my name at the bottom of the document? what, in Heaven's name, was I to do?

How long I sat petrified, with the document on my lap, I never knew. Somebody knocked at the schoolroom door, and looked in and said something, and went out again. Then there was an interval. Then the door was opened again. A hand was laid kindly on my shoulder. I looked up--and there was Mrs. Fosdyke, asking, in the greatest alarm, what was the matter with me.

The tone of her voice roused me into speaking. I could think of nothing but Mr. Sax; I could only say, "Has he come?"

"Yes--and waiting to see you."

Answering in those terms, she glanced at the paper in my lap. In the extremity of my helplessness, I acted like a sensible creature at last. I told Mrs. Fosdyke all that I have told here.

She neither moved nor spoke until I had done. Her first proceeding, after that, was to take me in her arms and give me a kiss. Having so far encouraged me, she next spoke of poor Sir Gervase.

"We all acted like fools," she announced, "in needlessly offending him by protesting against his second marriage. I don't mean you--I mean his son, his nephew, and myself. If his second marriage made him happy, what business had we with the disparity of years between husband and wife? I can tell you this, Sextus was the first of us to regret what he had done. But for his stupid fear of being suspected of an interested motive, Sir Gervase might have known there was that much good in his sister's son."

She snatched up a copy of the will, which I had not even noticed thus far.

"See what the kind old man says of you," she went on, pointing to the words. I could not see them; she was obliged to read them for me. "I leave my money to the one person living who has been more than worthy of the little I have done for her, and whose simple unselfish nature I know that I can trust."

I pressed Mrs. Fosdyke's hand; I was not able to speak. She took up the legal paper next.

"Do justice to yourself, and be above contemptible scruples," she said. "Sextus is fond enough of you to be almost worthy of the sacrifice that you are making. Sign--and I will sign next as the witness."

I hesitated.

"What will he think of me?" I said.

"Sign!" she repeated, "and we will see to that."

I obeyed. She asked for the lawyer's letter. I gave it to her, with the lines which contained the man's vile insinuation folded down, so that

only the words above were visible, which proved that I had renounced my legacy, not even knowing whether the person to be benefited was a man or a woman. She took this, with the rough draft of my own letter, and the signed renunciation--and opened the door.

"Pray come back, and tell me about it!" I pleaded.

She smiled, nodded, and went out.

Oh, what a long time passed before I heard the long-expected knock at the door! "Come in," I cried impatiently.

Mrs. Fosdyke had deceived me. Mr. Sax had returned in her place. He closed the door. We two were alone.

He was deadly pale; his eyes, as they rested on me, had a wild startled look. With icy cold fingers he took my hand, and lifted it in silence to his lips. The sight of his agitation encouraged me--I don't to this day know why, unless it appealed in some way to my compassion. I was bold enough to look at him. Still silent, he placed the letters on the table--and then he laid the signed paper beside them. When I saw that, I was bolder still. I spoke first.

"Surely you don't refuse me?" I said.

He answered, "I thank you with my whole heart; I admire you more than words can say. But I can't take it."

"Why not?"

"The fortune is yours," he said gently. "Remember how poor I am, and feel for me if I say no more."

His head sank on his breast. He stretched out one hand, silently imploring me to understand him. I could endure it no longer. I forgot every consideration which a woman, in my position, ought to have remembered. Out came the desperate words, before I could stop them.

"You won't take my gift by itself?" I said.

"No."

"Will you take Me with it?"

That evening, Mrs. Fosdyke indulged her sly sense of humor in a new way. She handed me an almanac.

"After all, my dear," she remarked, "you needn't be ashamed of having spoken first. You have only used the ancient privilege of the sex. This is Leap Year."