

Sir Harry had christened him, now exclaimed, "How d'ye do? have you seen Mrs. Ouncedale? I have been waiting two hours to go; my horses will catch cold; I feel a slight twinge of the gout; conceive Lady Graspall having past nine times at *ecarté*!"

"I saw Mrs. Ouncedale waltzing with Colonel Graindorge," replied Sidney, who had returned from ordering Emily's carriage, "and I can only say, that she desired me to tell you, if I met you, that you might go home, if you liked, as Lady Graspall would give her a place in her carriage to town."

"That odious Lady Graspall!" rejoined Mr. Ouncedale; "she is enough to corrupt all the young women in town;—she ought not to be admitted in society."

"Why," said Sir Harry, "it is true, though I never saw any thing wrong; indeed I like her very much, but the world does say very ill-natured things of her: at *ecarté*, for instance, they are cruel enough to say that she always claims double the sum she stakes when she wins; and when she loses, she contrives to change sides when she is betting, and generally seizes the stake of some young man who she thinks will be either too well-bred, or too timid to remonstrate with her."

"Not a word, Sir Harry!" now exclaimed Sidney; "she is a great friend of mine, and so fond of me, that she wanted to catch me for her daughter Lady Clara, and, indeed, I was within an ace of proposing."

"What the deuce prevented you?" asked Sir Harry.

"Why, my fear of her making a practical pun, which would have been worse even than your's," replied Sidney. "The fact was, I overheard Lady Clara tell her friend Mrs. Thornby, that she only intended marrying me for my fortune."

"Why, what in the world," rejoined Sir Harry, "do you imagine any one would marry you for?"

"The fact was," answered Sidney, good-humouredly, "I did flatter myself that I had made some slight impression on the little *ingenue*, who Lady Graspall told me was the most timid *naïve* creature in the world; when, as ill luck would have it for my vanity and for her Ladyship's schemes, I went to Mrs. Congreve's masquerade, where

being disguised in a domino, I heard her say to Mrs. Thornby, that she thought me an insufferable horse-dealing bore; that her mamma wished her to accept me for my property; and that she wished I was ruined, to which Mrs. Thornby very quietly replied, 'Marry him first, my dear, if it were only for the pleasure of ruining him afterwards.'"

"Oh!" exclaimed the *Tic*, "I wish to God I had been fortunate enough to have worn a domino for a few months prior to the time fixed for my marriage! But do see," added he, "what a fool that insufferable Mrs. Thornby is making of young Lord Tiverton!"

"There is nothing extraordinary in that," rejoined Sir Henry; "she would find it a much more difficult task to make a man of sense of him."

"As for that," added Sidney, "she is merely playing the same game with that boy that she has done with half the young men in London; no sooner does a young man make his *debut* in the world, or a young peer or baronet leave his paternal nest, or escape from his Alma Mater, than she forthwith seizes upon him, and plays with him like a cat, until the boy's ideas become more expanded, and he finds he has been throwing away his time and his attentions upon a cold-hearted, practised coquette, and that he is the laughing stock of London, with the advantage of being shown up in the 'Age,' or roasted by 'John Bull.'"

"And then, when he brings his action for a libel, he has the satisfaction of being convicted, by a jury, of being one of the ugliest men, or one of the greatest idiots living," added Mr. Ouncedale.

Emily's carriage being now announced, she left the party, which did not completely break up before the morning was far advanced; and I shall take the liberty of giving my readers some account of the ladies I have alluded to, before I proceed to the next chapter.

They were all of that mischievous, that pernicious set, whose example has such a baneful effect on the morals of the young men and women of fashion, especially the latter. When the young and inexperienced girl perceives that vice is in a great measure countenanced, levity of

conduct encouraged, and delicacy disregarded, in the highest society, to which the absence of virtue, and the total disregard of public opinion, are in most instances a necessary passport; when she discovers that she cannot obtain a footing in the most select society, without establishing an intrigue, or what is called a flirtation;—in fact, that the sacrifice of a certain portion of her reputation is almost a *sine qua non* to ensure her being ranked among the most fashionable; it is natural that she should quickly learn to look with contempt upon those principles of morality and virtue which are so dear to women in a less elevated, less perilous, and less mixed station of life.

Lady Graspall was a leader of one of these sets. Money was her ruling passion; whether at *ecarté*, elections, the marriage of her daughters, or in her own flirtations, this sordid passion showed itself in the strongest colours, and had rendered the intrigues and adventures of her younger days still more scandalous.

Born to occupy a leading position in society, she was not, however, content with the advantages which she derived from her rank and connexions, but she determined to form a supreme junta, of which she was to be the chief, and her conduct the precedent for that of all the members. Her great object was to induce all the women enrolled in this band of "Free Doers," to brave the opinion of the world; to set at defiance the advice of their husbands; to look with contempt on the reputation of their own names, or the credit of their families;—in short, to arrive at that complete disregard for every principle of decency and virtue, which had marked her own conduct through life.

Her Ladyship's daughters educated in this school of deceit and immorality, were as selfish, hollow-hearted, and mercenary as their mamma could desire; indeed, so well did they play their parts, so admirably did they act up to the lessons of the Countess, that the ladies Clara and Helen Mount Lewis were looked upon by all those who had not penetration enough to discover the *dessous des cartes*, as two of the most single-hearted, ingenuous young women in London. In the course of two or three seasons, the young ladies succeeded, the one in marrying a rich young

nobleman, and the other a half-furled baronet of immense property, who had just returned from his travels. Though Lady Helen, the youngest, showed greater symptoms of feeling on this occasion, than was either to be expected from her, or than at all suited her mother's ideas of filial obedience. The conversation between the mother and daughter on this occasion, was a curious specimen of Lady Graspall's principles, as well as those of her daughter.

"Helen," said her Ladyship, one night, as they returned from Almack's, "so you chose to play the fool, and speak your opinions openly of that horrid bore, Mr. Sidney?"

"I only said it in a whisper to Mrs. Thornby," replied the daughter; "and I did not think the man would have been listening at my elbow."

"Well, he has just told me, that he's off, that's all; and you've lost——"

"An ass!" exclaimed Lady Helen, "and the stock is not exhausted."

"You've lost twenty thousand pounds a-year, by your stupid *bavardage*. I thought you would have had the sense to have deferred speaking out until the fortune was your own."

"La, mamma! I'm sure it is all the same to me, whether I marry one fool or another: for you know I never liked any body much, except Captain Acton, Mr. Corbin, Charles Norval, and Lord Henry."

"None of them will have a sous until their father's death," retorted Lady Graspall; "and I have no idea of people *having*—what does your brother call that sort of thing?"

"Going to Heaven by the devil's bridge, mamma," answered Lady Helen.

"It's going to the devil at once," rejoined her Ladyship. "No, it does not suit my views to have to *chaperone* you about, after your marriage. I will not be pestered with petitions for the carriage, and your saddling yourself and a tribe of squalling children on me, both in town and country. I will not have you marry to remain a burthen on me; and your waiting until some disgusting old man dies, before you can have an Opera box, or, in fact, any of the most common necessities."

"Common indeed, mamma, they are now! Why the great double box next to ours belongs to papa's attorney, and the box on the left to a man who cleans the streets, or the sewers, or something."

"Never mind those low people," replied the mamma, "but thank Heaven that you have one of the most affectionate, indulgent mothers in the world, who is slaving night and day to repair your errors and establish your fortune."

Lady Helen, during this speech, hung down her head, and her conscience told her that her mamma's exertions were never more necessary than at present.

"Any body else would have been outrageous," continued the Countess, "at her daughter's making such a fool of herself as to throw away twenty thousand a-year!"

"It is very good of you, my dear ma'," replied Lady Helen, "and, to show you my sense of your kindness, I am ready to marry any body you please directly."

"Well, then," rejoined the Countess, "while you have been *bavardé*ing, I have been acting; and I have got another to supply Sidney's place."

"Who is it, mamma?" demanded the young lady.

"Oh, Sir Maurice D'Orville, who has an immense fortune."

"La, mamma! the young man whom you were speaking to in the corner, and who looked at me so strangely; why he's quite mad, they say. Lord! he had his keeper waiting on the staircase."

"So much the better, my dear; marry him, and then nothing will be more easy than to take out a statute of lunacy against him, and have him put into confinement for life."

"But, mamma," rejoined Lady Helen, with real sensations of terror and disgust, "you would not have me marry an absolute maniac? Good God! how horrid to be left alone with such a creature! I should die of fright; and then only think of entailing the horrid (and here Lady Helen shuddered) malady on one's children; for it is of no use to mince the matter, mamma: indeed I can't—any one but him!"

"Helen!" returned Lady Graspall sternly, "marry him

you must! remember, I know all that has passed between you and Colonel Acton."

Lady Helen now hung back in the corner of the carriage, and became pale and faint as death.

"Any other parent but myself, Helen," continued the Countess, "upon such a discovery, would have turned you out of doors; but I refrained from communicating the circumstance to your brothers, with the hopes that we could marry you without the disclosure of your conduct being made necessary, and in order to save us all from disgrace."

Lady Helen still continued silent.

"I shall say no more on the subject, Helen," added her mother; "you are aware, that I know there remains little time now, unless you marry Sir Maurice, ere the world, as well as your brothers, must be informed of the circumstances. You may do what you please, when once you are married; but I will not have you bring disgrace upon me, while you are under my roof. You will decide, therefore, to-night, whether you will receive Sir Maurice as a lover, or whether you choose to be sent out of the country with one of your brothers. As for your qualms of conscience, they are too absurd, for you have taken care to render them entirely superfluous."

Briefly—in less than three weeks, Lady Helen was the wife of the unfortunate Baronet, who, before many months, became sufficiently mad to warrant his being placed in custody, and her Ladyship was appointed guardian and manager of their only child, and of her husband's vast estates.

Poor Mr. Ouncedale was among those who had reason to lament his wife's enrolment in this corps of female croats. Mrs. Ouncedale was a pretty, cold-hearted little woman, who had married the *Tic* for his fortune, and they had continued for some years to vegetate in a very negative state of composure, until Mrs. Ouncedale took it into her head to become a woman of fashion. Mrs. Ouncedale soon perceived that all the most fashionable women rendered themselves more or less notorious, for some little scandal, and she determined, therefore, immediately to establish for herself a trifling flirtation, of course, with some

marked man of fashion. By dint of carrying off Colonel Graindorge from a competitor, and by attaching four or five particular men to her train, she contrived, in due time, to qualify herself for Lady Graspall's set.

Whenever her husband attempted to remonstrate with her, she either treated his advice with contempt, or accused him of being a jealous tyrant, who wished to deprive her of the most innocent amusements.

Once, indeed, the *Tic* had the courage to adopt decisive measures, which were met with not less decision by the lady.

"You shall not have the carriage, madam, to go with Graindorge and the Thornby party : I will not be made a fool of any longer."

"That which is done cannot be undone," quietly replied the lady.

"By God ! I will not be undone," rejoined the husband "by you or any one else !"

"I think you are a very absurd old man," rejoined the wife : "perhaps, you have sense enough, however, to ring the bell ?"

"What for, madam ?" retorted the husband. "I will not be trifled with, and bearded to my face."

"Ring the bell, Mr. Ouncedale, I say, that I may order the carriage ; and order the butler to wait in the room until it is ready, or perhaps you will beat me."

"Madam ! I repeat, you shall not have the carriage to go to Richmond."

"Oh !" exclaimed the wife, getting up quietly, and ringing the bell herself : "oh, it is all the same to me. I can go in a hackney coach as far as Lady Graspall's, and then all the world will hear of your absurd jealousy."

"Madam ! by God ! you shall not quit this house without my permission !"

"You are an insignificant tyrant, rejoined the lady, rapping the ground with the most provoking *nonchalance* with her foot—"you are falling into your dotage : "and then, as the servant answered the summons of the bell, she said, "Thomas, order me a hackney-coach :—your master says I cannot have the carriage ;" and then seating herself at the piano, she endeavoured, by playing as loud

as possible, to drown the voice of poor Mr. Ouncedale, who, to save himself from being laughed at, was at last obliged to yield the point; and as his wife mounted her *brichtska*, to proceed to Richmond, he took up his hat, to walk with one of his boys in the retired part of Regent's Park.

Ouncedale was not, however, the only person who had to lament his wife's connexion with this set; others there were, who, like himself, felt all the misery, the disgrace, which must fall on themselves and their families, by their wives pursuing a course of life so dangerous to their reputation, so inconsistent with their characters as mothers, and women of birth and education. Night after night they heard, as well as the world, of the heavy losses of these ladies at play. Day after day they were witnesses to the demands made upon them by tradesmen for the payment of immense bills for dresses, hats, and *bijouterie*, to an amount which was often far beyond the immediate means of the husbands to pay, and which in every case was at least quadruple the lady's pin-money. The bills, however, of the tradesmen might be pardoned and discharged; but the play debts were of a different nature, vicious and inexcusable. Beginning with the trifling loss of a few pounds, and a few tears; but ending, in most cases, in the abandonment of honour, the ruin of domestic peace, the destruction of every moral tie, and the verdict of a jury.

Mrs. Thornby was another of this set, who possessed almost all the bad qualities of Lady Graspall, except her passion for money; but she yielded nothing to her in want of heart, and utter disregard of feeling or principle. The Misses Thornby were yet too young either to profit or suffer by their mother's example; and it was perhaps a fortunate circumstance for them, that, during the London season, they often remained many days, nay weeks, without seeing their mother, who, to say the truth, would willingly see anybody else's husband, or any one else's children, rather than her own. The one bored her to death with his society, and his prosing about the levity of her conduct, and the difficulty he made about paying her expensive bills, which were often purposely augmented by twenty or thirty pounds, on an understanding with her tradesmen.

in order that she might obtain money to cover her losses at *ecarté*, which she was afraid to confess to her husband. Her children were also fast growing up, and nearly at an age to remind the world that Mrs. Thornby was now too old to be perpetually flirting with all the young boys who had just left school, or entered the Guards. So far did Mrs. Thornby carry her utter want of feeling for her children, that she made it a point never to see her infants until three or four years after their birth: if she met them accidentally on the stairs, she would ask the governess their names, pat them on the head, and say "There, there; you are very nice children—which are you, a boy or a girl?" and as the little innocents would press around her, with the instinctive fondness of nature, to obtain some mark of maternal tenderness, she would exclaim, "There now, you nasty little pigs, do not slobber one; come, do not tread on my flounce." And she would then direct the governess always to take the children in future up and down the back-stairs. With a heart too callous and cold to feel attachment for any one but herself, and with too much calculation to permit herself to fall into that abyss into which others, too many others, had been hurried by the effects of some unhappy and fatal passion, by the seductions of the other sex, or the brutal conduct of their own husbands, Mrs. Thornby contrived to steer clear of absolute shipwreck, though she was utterly indifferent to the loss of reputation, or the scandals to which she gave rise. Virtue had no share in her salvation, calculation was her great safeguard. Her greatest delight, as Sidney observed, was to throw herself on the youngest men. Year after year the greenest, the newest comers out, were to be seen in her train; and if she saw any very young man of rank or fashion engaged in a pursuit which was likely to terminate in marriage, she would put forth all her powers of intrigue and seduction to carry him off, and to prevent it. Had she done this for the sake of marrying her daughters, there might have been some excuse; but her sole object was mischief, vanity, and wanton pleasure in destroying the happiness of others. A proof of her skill, and its consequences, will appear in a subsequent chapter.