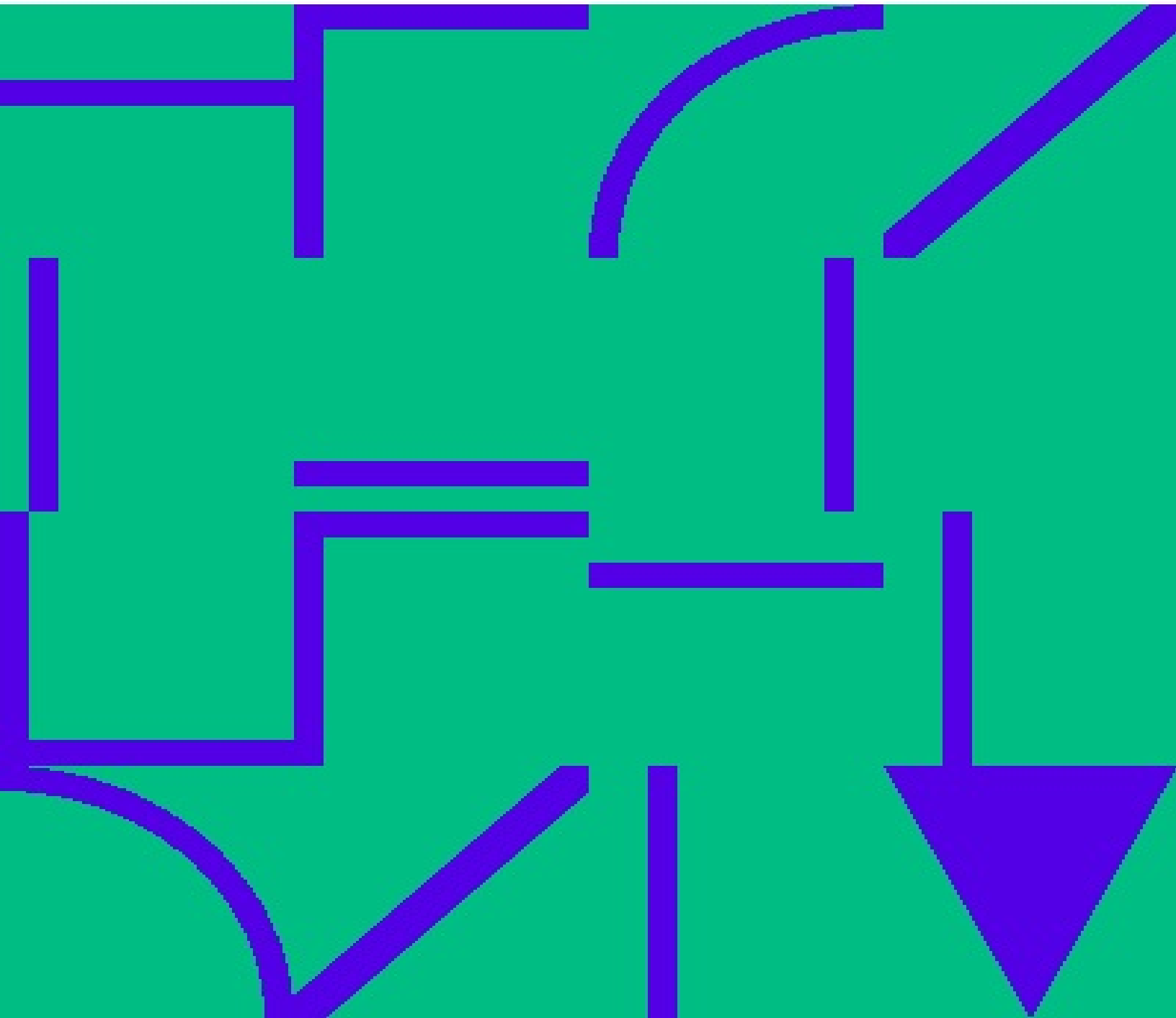
Country Lodgings

Mary Russell Mitford



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Author: Mary Russell Mitford

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COUNTRY LODGINGS

By Mary Russell Mitford

Between two and three years ago, the following pithy advertisement appeared in several of the London papers:—

> "Country Lodgings.—Apartments to let in a large farm-house, situate in a cheap and pleasant village, about forty miles from London. Apply (if by letter post-paid) to A. B., No. 7, Salisbury-street, Strand."

Little did I think, whilst admiring in the broad page of the Morning Chronicle the compendious brevity of this announcement, that the pleasant village referred to was our own dear Aberleigh; and that the first tenant of those apartments should be a lady whose family I had long known, and in whose fortunes and destiny I took a more than common interest!

Upton Court was a manor-house of considerable extent, which had in former times been the residence of a distinguished Catholic family, but which, in the changes of property incident to our fluctuating neighbourhood, was now "fallen from its high estate," and degraded into the homestead of a farm so small, that the tenant, a yeoman of the poorest class, was fain to eke out his rent by entering into an agreement with a speculating Belford upholsterer, and letting off a part of the fine old mansion in the shape of furnished lodgings.

Nothing could be finer than the situation of Upton, placed on the summit of a steep acclivity, looking over a rich and fertile valley to a range of woody hills; nothing more beautiful than the approach from Belford, the road leading across a common between a double row of noble oaks, the ground on one side sinking with the abruptness of a north-country burn, whilst a clear spring, bursting from the hill side, made its way to the bottom between patches of shaggy underwood and a grove of smaller trees; a vine-covered cottage just peeping between the foliage, and the picturesque outline of the Court, with its old-fashioned porch, its long windows, and its tall, clustered chimneys towering in the distance. It was the prettiest prospect in all Aberleigh.

The house itself retained strong marks of former stateliness, especially in one projecting wing, too remote from the yard to be devoted to the domestic purposes of the farmer's family. The fine proportions of the lofty and spacious apartments, the rich mouldings of the ceilings, the carved chimney-pieces, and the panelled walls, all attested the former grandeur of the mansion; whilst the fragments of stained glass in the windows of the great gallery, the half-effaced coats of arms over the door-way, the faded family portraits, grim black-visaged knights, and pale shadowy ladies, or the reliques of mouldering tapestry that fluttered against the walls, and, above all, the secret chamber constructed for the priest's hiding-place in days of Protestant persecution, for in darker ages neither of the dominant churches was free from that foul stain,—each of these vestiges of the manners and the history of times long gone by appealed to the imagination, and conspired to give a Mrs. Radcliffe-like, Castle-of-Udolpho-sort of romance to the manor-house. Really, when the wind swept through the overgrown espaliers of that neglected but luxuriant wilderness, the terraced garden; when the screech-owl shrieked from the ivy which clustered up one side of the walls, and "rats and mice, and such small deer," were playing their pranks behind the wainscot, it would have formed as pretty a locality for a supernatural adventure, as ever decayed hunting lodge in the recesses of the Hartz, or ruined fortress on the castled Rhine. Nothing was wanting but the ghost, and a ghost of any taste would have been proud of such a habitation.

Less like a ghost than the inhabitant who did arrive, no human being well could be.

Mrs. Cameron was a young widow. Her father, a Scotch officer, well-born, sickly, and poor, had been but too happy to bestow the hand of his only child upon an old friend and fellow-countryman, the principal clerk in a government office, whose respectable station, easy fortune, excellent sense, and super-excellent character, were, as he thought, and as fathers, right or wrong, are apt to think, advantages more than sufficient to counterbalance a disparity of years and appearance, which some daughters might have thought startling,—the bride being a beautiful girl of seventeen, the bridegroom a plain man of seven-and-fifty. In this case, at least, the father was right. He lived long enough to see that the young wife was unusually attached to her kind and indulgent husband, and died, about a twelve-month after the marriage, with the fullest confidence in her respectability and happiness. Mr. Cameron did not long survive him. Before she was nineteen the fair Helen Cameron was a widow and an orphan, with one beautiful boy, to whom she was left sole personal guardian, an income being secured to her ample for her rank in life, but clogged with the one condition of her not marrying again.

Such was the tenant, who, wearied of her dull suburban home, a red brick house in the middle of a row of red brick houses; tired of the loneliness which never presses so much upon the spirits as when left solitary in the environs of a great city; pining for country liberty, for green trees, and fresh air; much caught by the picturesque-ness of Upton, and its mixture of old-fashioned stateliness and village rusticity; and, perhaps, a little swayed by a desire to be near an old friend and correspondent of the mother, to whose memory she was so strongly attached, came in the budding spring time, the showery, flowery month of April, to spend the ensuing summer at the Court.

We, on our part, regarded her arrival with no common interest. To me it seemed but yesterday since I had received an epistle of thanks for a present of one of dear Mary Howitt's charming children's books,—an epistle undoubtedly not indited by the writer,—in huge round text, between double pencil lines, with certain small errors of orthography corrected in as mailer hand above; followed in due time by postscripts to her mother's letters, upon one single line, and the spelling much amended; then by a short, very short note, in French; and at last, by a despatch of unquestionable authenticity, all about doves and rabbits,—a holiday scrawl, rambling, scrambling, and uneven, and free from restraint as heart could desire. It appeared but yesterday since Helen Graham was herself a child; and here she was, within two miles of us, a widow and a mother!

Our correspondence had been broken off by the death of Mrs. Graham when she was about ten years old, and although I had twice called upon her in my casual visits to town during the lifetime of Mr. Cameron; and although these visits had been most punctually returned, it had happened, as those things do happen in dear, provoking London, where one is sure to miss the people one wishes most to see, that neither party had ever been at home; so that we had never met, and I was at full liberty to indulge in my foolish propensity of sketching in my mind's eye a fancy portrait of my unknown friend.

Il Penseroso is not more different from L'Allegro than was my anticipation from the charming reality. Remembering well her mother's delicate and fragile grace of figure and countenance, and coupling with that recollection her own unprotected and solitary state, and somewhat melancholy story, I had pictured to myself (as if contrast were not in this world of ours much more frequent than congruity) a mild, pensive, interesting, fair-haired beauty, tall, pale, and slender;—I found a Hebe, an Euphrosyne,—a round, rosy, joyous creature, the very impersonation of youth, health, sweetness, and gaiety, laughter flashing from her hazel eyes, smiles dimpling round her coral lips, and the rich curls of her chestnut hair,—for having been fourteen months a widow, she had, of course, laid aside the peculiar dress,—the glossy ringlets of her "bonny brown hair" literally bursting from the comb that attempted to confine them.

We soon found that her mind was as charming as her person. Indeed, her face, lovely as it was, derived the best part of its loveliness from her sunny temper, her frank and ardent spirit, her affectionate and

generous heart. It was the ever-varying expression, an expression which could not deceive, that lent such matchless charms to her glowing and animated countenance, and to the round and musical voice sweet as the spoken voice of Malibran, or the still fuller and more exquisite tones of Mrs. Jordan, which, true to the feeling of the moment, vibrated alike to the wildest gaiety and the deepest pathos. In a word, the chief beauty of Helen Cameron was her sensibility. It was the perfume to the rose.

Her little boy, born just before his father's death, and upon whom she doated, was a magnificent piece of still life. Calm, placid, dignified, an infant Hercules for strength and fair proportions, grave as a judge, quiet as a flower, he was, in point of age, exactly at that most delightful period when children are very pleasant to look upon, and require no other sort of notice whatsoever. Of course this state of perfection could not be expected to continue. The young gentleman would soon aspire to the accomplishments of walking and talking—and then!—but as that hour of turmoil and commotion to which his mamma looked forward with ecstacy was yet at some months distance, I contented myself with saying of master Archy, with considerably less than the usual falsehood, that which everybody does say of only children, that he was the finest baby that ever was seen.

We met almost every day. Mrs. Cameron was never weary of driving about our beautiful lanes in her little pony-carriage, and usually called upon us in her way home, we being not merely her oldest, but almost her only friends; for lively and social as was her temper, there was a little touch of shyness about her, which induced her rather to shun than to covet the company of strangers. And indeed the cheerfulness of temper, and activity of mind, which made her so charming an acquisition to a small circle, rendered her independent of general society. Busy as a bee, sportive as a butterfly, she passed the greater part of her time in the open air, and having caught from me that very contagious and engrossing passion, a love of floriculture, had actually undertaken the operation of restoring the old garden at the Court—a coppice of brambles, thistles, and weeds of every description, mixed with flowering shrubs, and overgrown fruit-trees—to something like its original order. The farmer, to be sure, had abandoned the job in despair, contenting himself with growing his cabbages and potatoes in a field hard by. But she was certain that she and her maid Martha, and the boy Bill, who looked after her pony, would weed the paths, and fill the flower-borders in no time. We should see; I had need take good care of my reputation, for she meant her garden to beat mine.

What progress Helen and her forces, a shatter-brain boy who did not know a violet from a nettle, and a London-bred girl who had hardly seen a rose-bush in her life, would have made in clearing this forest of underwood, might easily be foretold. Accident, however, that frequent favourer of bold projects, came to her aid in the shape of a more efficient coadjutor.

Late one evening the fair Helen arrived at our cottage with a face of unwonted gravity. Mrs. Davies (her landlady) had used her very ill. She had taken the west wing in total ignorance of there being other apartments to let at the Court, or she would have secured them. And now a new lodger had arrived, had actually taken possession of two rooms in the centre of the house; and Martha, who had seen him, said he was a young man, and a handsome man—and she herself a young woman unprotected and alone!—It was awkward, very awkward! Was it not very awkward? What was she to do?

Nothing could be done that night; so far was clear; but we praised her prudence, promised to call at Upton the next day, and if necessary, to speak to this new lodger, who might, after all, be no very formidable person; and quite relieved by the vent which she had given to her scruples, she departed in her usual good spirits.

Early the next morning she re-appeared. "She would not have the new lodger disturbed for the world! He was a Pole. One doubtless of those unfortunate exiles. He had told Mrs. Davies that he was a Polish gentleman desirous chiefly of good air, cheapness, and retirement Beyond a doubt he was one of those unhappy fugitives. He looked grave, and pale, and thoughtful, quite like a hero of romance. Besides, he

was the very person who a week before had caught hold of the reins when that little restive pony had taken fright at the baker's cart, and nearly backed Bill and herself into the great gravel-pit on Lanton Common. Bill had entirely lost all command over the pony, and but for the stranger's presence of mind, she did not know what would have become of them. Surely I must remember her telling me the circumstance? Besides, he was unfortunate! He was poor! He was an exile! She would not be the means of driving him from the asylum which he had chosen for all the world!—No! not for all my geraniums!" an expression which is by no means the anti-climax that it seems—for in the eyes of a florist, and that florist an enthusiast and a woman, what is this rusty fusty dusty musty bit of earth, called the world, compared to a stand of bright flowers?

And finding, upon inquiry, that M. Choynowski (so he called himself) had brought a letter of recommendation from a respectable London tradesman, and that there was every appearance of his being, as our fair young friend had conjectured, a foreigner in distress, my father not only agreed that it would be a cruel attempt to drive him from his new home, (a piece of tyranny which, even in this land of freedom, might, I suspect, have been managed in the form of an offer of double rent, by that grand despot, money,) but resolved to offer the few attentions in our poor power, to one whom every look and word proclaimed him to be, in the largest sense of the word, a gentleman.

My father had seen him, not on his visit of inquiry, but on a few days after, bill-hook in hand, hacking away manfully at the briers and brambles of the garden. My first view of him was in a position even less romantic, assisting a Belford tradesman to put up a stove in the nursery.

One of Mrs. Cameron's few causes of complaint in her country lodgings had been the tendency to smoke in that important apartment. We all know that when those two subtle essences, smoke and wind, once come to do battle in a wide, open chimney, the invisible agent is pretty sure to have the best of the day, and to drive his vapoury enemy at full speed before him. M. Choynowski, who by this time had established a gardening acquaintance, not merely with Bill and Martha, but with their fair mistress, happening to see her, one windy evening, in a paroxysm of smoky distress, not merely recommended a stove, after the fashion of the northern nations' notions, but immediately walked into Belford to give his own orders to a respectable ironmonger; and they were in the very act of erecting this admirable accessary to warmth and comfort (really these words are synonymous) when I happened to call.

I could hardly have seen him under circumstances better calculated to display his intelligence, his delicacy, or his good-breeding. The patience, gentleness, and kind feeling, with which he contrived at once to excuse and to remedy certain blunders made by the workmen in the execution of his orders, and the clearness with which, in perfectly correct and idiomatic English, slightly tinged with a foreign accent, he explained the mechanical and scientific reasons for the construction he had suggested, gave evidence at once of no common talent, and of a considerate-ness and good-nature in its exercise more valuable than all the talent in the world. If trifling and every-day occurrences afford, as I believe they do, the surest and safest indications of character, we could have no hesitation in pronouncing upon the amiable qualities of M. Choynowski.

In person he was tall and graceful, and very noble-looking. His head was particularly intellectual, and there was a calm sweetness about the mouth that was singularly prepossessing. Helen had likened him to a hero of romance. In my eyes he bore much more plainly the stamp of a man of fashion—of that very highest fashion which is too refined for finery, too full of self-respect for affectation. Simple, natural, mild, and gracious, the gentle reserve of his manner added, under the circumstances, to the interest which he inspired. Somewhat of that reserve continued even after our acquaintance had ripened into intimacy.

He never spoke of his own past history, or future prospects, shunned all political discourse, and was with difficulty drawn into conversation upon the scenery and manners of the North of Europe. He seemed afraid of the subject.

Upon general topics, whether of literature or art, he was remarkably open and candid. He possessed in an eminent degree the talent of acquiring languages for which his countrymen are distinguished, and had made the best use of those keys of knowledge. I have never met with any person whose mind was more richly cultivated, or who was more calculated to adorn the highest station. And here he was wasting life in a secluded village in a foreign country! What would become of him after his present apparently slender resources should be exhausted, was painful to imagine. The more painful, that the accidental discovery of the direction of a letter had disclosed his former rank. It was part of an envelope addressed, "A Monsieur Monsieur le Comte Choynowski," and left as a mark in a book, all except the name being torn off. But the fact needed no confirmation. All his habits and ways of thinking bore marks of high station. What would become of him?

It was but too evident that another calamity was impending over the unfortunate exile. Although most discreet in word and guarded in manner, every action bespoke his devotion to his lovely fellow inmate. Her wishes were his law. His attentions to her little boy were such as young men rarely show to infants except for love of the mother; and the garden, that garden abandoned since the memory of man, (for the Court, previous to the arrival of the present tenant, had been for years uninhabited,) was, under his exertions and superintendence, rapidly assuming an aspect of luxuriance and order. It was not impossible but Helen might realise her playful vaunt, and beat me in my own art after all.

John (our gardening lad) was as near being jealous as possible, and, considering the estimation in which John is known to hold our doings in the flower way, such jealousy must be accepted as the most flattering testimony to his rival's success. To go beyond our garden was, in John's opinion, to be great indeed!

Every thought of the Count Choynowski was engrossed by the fair Helen; and we saw with some anxiety that she in her turn was but too sensible of his attentions, and that everything belonging to his country assumed in her eyes an absorbing importance. She sent to London for all the books that could be obtained respecting Poland; ordered all the journals that interested themselves in that interesting though apparently hopeless cause; turned liberal,—she who had been reared in the lap of conservatism, and whom my father used laughingly to call the little Tory;—turned Radical, turned Republican,—for she far out-soared the moderate doctrines of whiggism in her political flights; denounced the Emperor Nicholas as a tyrant; spoke of the Russians as a nation of savages; and in spite of the evident uneasiness with which the Polish exile listened to any allusion to the wrongs of his country, for he never mingled in such discussions, omitted no opportunity of proving her sympathy by declaiming with an animation and vehemence, as becoming as anything so like scolding well could be, against the cruelty and wickedness of the oppressors of that most unfortunate of nations.

It was clear that the peace of both was endangered, perhaps gone; and that it had become the painful duty of friendship to awaken them from their too bewitching dream.

We had made an excursion, on one sunny summer's day, as far as the Everley Hills. Helen, always impassioned, had been wrought into a passionate recollection of her own native country, by the sight of the heather just bursting into its purple bloom; and M. Choynowski, usually so self-possessed, had been betrayed into the expression of a kindred feeling by the delicious odour of the fir plantations, which served to transport him in imagination to the balm-breathing forests of the North. This sympathy was a new, and a strong bond of union between two spirits but too congenial; and I determined no longer to defer informing the gentleman, in whose honour I placed the most implicit reliance, of the peculiar position of our fair friend.

Detaining him, therefore, to coffee, (we had taken an early dinner in the fir grove,) and suffering Helen to go home to her little boy, I contrived, by leading the conversation to capricious wills, to communicate

to him, as if accidentally, the fact of her forfeiting her whole income in the event of a second marriage.—He listened with grave attention.

"Is she also deprived," inquired he, "of the guardianship of her child?"

"No. But as the sum allowed for the maintenance is also to cease from the day of her nuptials, and the money to accumulate until he is of age, she would, by marrying a poor man, do irreparable injury to her son, by cramping his education. It is a grievous restraint."

He made no answer. And after two or three attempts at conversation, which his mind was too completely pre-occupied to sustain, he bade us good-night, and returned to the Court. The next morning we heard that he had left Upton and gone, they said, to Oxford. And I could not help hoping that he had seen his danger, and would not return until the peril was past.

I was mistaken. In two or three days he returned, exhibiting less self-command than I had been led to anticipate. The fair lady, too, I took occasion to remind of this terrible will, in hopes, since he would not go, that she would have had the wisdom to have taken her departure. No such thing; neither party would move a jot I might as well have bestowed my counsel upon the two stone figures on the great gateway. And heartily sorry, and a little angry, I resolved to let matters take their own course.

Several weeks passed on, when one morning she came to me in the sweetest confusion, the loveliest mixture of bashfulness and joy.

"He loves me!" she said; "he has told me that he loves me!"

"Well?"

"And I have referred him to you. That clause——"

"He already knows it." And then I told her, word for word, what had passed.

"He knows of that clause, and he still wishes to marry me! He loves me for myself! Loves me, knowing me to be a beggar! It is true, pure, disinterested affection!"

"Beyond all doubt it is. And if you could live upon true love——"

"Oh, but where *that* exists, and youth, and health, and strength, and education, may we not be well content to try to earn a living together? think of the happiness comprised in that word! I could give lessons;—I am sure that I could. I would teach music, and drawing, and dancing—anything for him! or we could keep a school here at Upton—anywhere with him!"

"And I am to tell him this?"

"Not the words!" replied she, blushing like a rose at her own earnestness; "not those words!"

Of course, it was not very long before M. le Comte made his appearance.

"God bless her, noble, generous creature!" cried he, when I had fulfilled my commission. "God for ever bless her!"

"And you intend, then, to take her at her word, and set up school together?" exclaimed I, a little provoked at his unscrupulous acceptance of her proffered sacrifice. "You really intend to keep a lady's boarding-school here at the Court?"

"I intend to take her at her word, most certainly," replied he, very composedly; "but I should like to know, my good friend, what has put it into her head, and into yours, that if Helen marries me she must needs earn her own living? Suppose I should tell you," continued he, smiling, "that my father, one of the richest of the Polish nobility, was a favourite friend of the Emperor Alexander; that the Emperor Nicholas continued to me the kindness which his brother had shown to my father, and that I thought, as he had done, (gratitude and personal attachment apart,) that I could better serve my country, and more effectually ameliorate the condition of my tenants and vassals, by submitting to the Russian government, than by a

hopeless struggle for national independence? Suppose that I were to confess, that chancing in the course of a three-years' travel to walk through this pretty village of yours, I saw Helen, and could not rest until I had seen more of her;—supposing all this, would you pardon the deception, or rather the allowing you to deceive yourselves? Oh, if you could but imagine how delightful it is to a man, upon whom the humbling conviction has been forced, that his society is courted and his alliance sought for the accidents of rank and fortune, to feel that he is, for once in his life, honestly liked, fervently loved for himself, such as he is, his own very self,—if you could but fancy how proud he is of such friendship, how happy in such love, you would pardon him, I am sure you would; you would never have the heart to be angry. And now that the Imperial consent to a foreign union—the gracious consent for which I so anxiously waited to authorize my proposals—has at length arrived, do you think," added the Count, with some seriousness, "that there is any chance of reconciling this dear Helen to my august master? or will she still continue a rebel?"

At this question, so gravely put, I laughed outright "Why really, my dear Count, I cannot pretend to answer decidedly for the turn that the affair might take; but my impression—to speak in that idiomatic English, more racy than elegant, which you pique yourself upon understanding—my full impression is, that Helen having for no reason upon earth but her interest in you, *ratted* from Conservatism to Radicalism, will for the same cause lose no time in ratting back again. A woman's politics, especially if she be a young woman, are generally the result of feeling rather than of opinion, and our fair friend strikes me as a most unlikely subject to form an exception to the rule. However, if you doubt my authority in this matter, you have nothing to do but to inquire at the fountain-head. There she sits, in the arbour. Go and ask."

And before the words were well spoken, the lover, radiant with happiness, was at the side of his beloved.

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