

BEAUTY'S SECRET

By ALAN MUIR.

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BOOK ONE.

LADY BEAUTY'S MOTHER.

CHAPTER I.

DARKNESS IN BEAUTY'S ABSENCE.

For the room had grown darker to a certainty. No doubt glass and silver shone as clearly as before, the damask was as white, the bloom of the flowers as rich, and the mingled lights—sunlight straight from off the green lawn outside, and lamplight just coming into radiance on the dinner table—had not lost a tincture by one ray. And yet the room was darker. Everybody felt that. I spoke it aloud, and we all looked round the table and the walls, and confessed that the room was several shades darker.

"It always is darker," whispered an old gentleman at my side, "when Lady Beauty leaves the room—always!"

There were six other men at the table; but as we spoke two of these fell into discussion upon the old theme of Tory and Whig. Two more—parsons—struck off into some conversation about "high" and "low." How the third pair employed themselves I forget, but they did not join our conversation. Plainly the elderly gentleman and myself were to start a dialogue of our own; and as plainly we should neither be interrupted nor overheard. I did not know my companion's name; but his fine figure and his cheerful face had already made me feel an interest in him, and I resolved to keep up the talk which he had so pleasantly begun.

"Who may Lady Beauty be?" I asked.

"You are a stranger here," replied the old man, with a smile which pleased me more than ever.

I confessed it.

"Or you would know who Lady Beauty is. Her praise is on everybody's lips."

"But," I said, "generally I pay every lady in a room the tribute of at least one look; and—and—I did not notice a young woman here this evening."

"I said nothing about a young woman," my friend continued, with a vivacity which gleamed in his eyes and carved scores of humorous little wrinkles round the corners of his mouth. "Lady Beauty is not young—by the almanac, that is."

"Then who can she be?" I reflected. "Not surely that spare aggressive-looking woman that sat between you and me and talked of female suffrage and the higher education of woman?"

"My old friend laughed with great relish. "That is her eldest sister."

"Well, surely not that tall, artificial-looking old maid—is she an old maid, by the way—who had such a fine outline and such a suspicious bloom upon her cheeks?"

"No, no; that is the second sister," the old gentleman answered, with another laugh. "A widow, too, my young friend."

"I have it!" cried I, slapping the table a little in my excitement, so that the Whig and Tory glanced up, but seeing it was nothing, resumed their argument. "It was that lady in black, with the silver hair, neither stout nor slim, who spoke so clear and low, and seemed to keep everybody in good humor about her. Pity I sat so far away! I was envying the people near her all dinner time. Am I right?"

"You are," he answered. "That was Lady Beauty; and when she left the table she did take some light away with her. You thought you were making a gallant sort of joke applied to the sex generally; but you spoke more truth than you fancied. The room was darker when she left. Darker to me it always is, and my old friend breathed a sigh, which interested me more than ever."

"I did not know it was she who carried the light away," I said. "I had scarcely noticed her."

"There is her praise," the old gentleman answered, warmly. "She does not force herself upon you. And I dare say many days you don't look at the sun; but when sunset comes you miss him none the less."

By such pleasant paths we entered into a conversation. My friend told me many things about "Lady Beauty," to which I listened with an attention which pleased him greatly; so much that, when we were about to leave the table, he took me gently by the sleeve, and said that, if I had nothing better to do that night, and liked a chat and a cigar, and would accept a seat in his carriage, he would tell me all the story of Lady Beauty. I was too much interested in himself and his narrative to say no; and the story, so commenced, and continued on several subsequent evenings, I have here recorded without any attempt at art, just in the simple way I heard it. I offer it here for the acceptance, amusement and instruction of that portion of creation who, as they are the fountain of life and its best prize, may, by the use of the gifts God has so choicely bestowed upon them, be not alone the ornament, but the joy of the men they love. In which high art I respectfully ask them to learn a lesson from "Lady Beauty."

CHAPTER II.

"MRS. BARBARA TEMPLE—THE MISSES TEMPLE."

Something like forty years ago there fell vacant at the other end of this town a large house with a spacious and splendid garden. Its original proprietor had lived in it for sixty years, and being a man of great wealth and fine taste he had transformed what was once a comfortable family residence into a mansion, filled with all luxuries, and surrounded with green houses, hot houses, vinerias, stables, coach houses and all the other appurtenances of a grand house. He died, and his hundreds of thousands ran off in a golden river of good luck to a nephew in the north of England, who had his own estate. Immediately the question was asked in our little provincial set: "Who will take the Beeches?" for by that simple name the mansion was known. Everybody was afraid of the Beeches; afraid of its gilded rooms, its noble halls, its green houses, hot houses, vinerias, stables and coach houses; afraid of its splendid traditions, gone, we felt, never to return; afraid of comparison with the former owner—a poor sickly shadow in later days, but even then such a lord at the head of his table, such a judge of wines, so plentiful with his choice vintages, too; such an expert in gardeners and cooks, as our town of Kettlewell never saw before, and was never likely to see again. So the great house stood vacant month after month, and year after year, haunted by no ghosts except memories of magnificence, which did indeed seem to glide through the vast damp rooms, down the wide stairs, or through the noble garden, now returning to wilderness season by season. Everybody was afraid of the Beeches. We all said, "The Beeches will never let again."

Let it did, however. There came a little lady one day, erect, commanding in her manner and rich in her attire. She asked to see the house. She went from room to room,

and marked with approving eye how glorious was the place; and sharply she inquired of the agent if there was any reason why the house had not let, except too alleged one of its extraordinary grandeur. He assured her that there was none. At this she broke into a little laugh, which meant, "Kettlewell people must be fools." "What rooms for dancing?" she ejaculated. "What staircases, up and down?" And then she set her own dapper figure in one of the glasses of the console tables, and murmured, "Admirable, admirable taste!" "I shall take this house," she said aloud, as she set her foot on the threshold. And as she went from room to room she kept repeating, "I shall take this house." "Bedroom," "dressing room," "morning room," "library," "boudoir," "servants' hall." With such words of assignment on her lips she went about, and the whole mansion was allotted to separate uses when she had completed her inspecting tour. She came back into the empty dining room, and the young man who, full of awe, had followed her round the house, heard her say to herself, "O, what a room for a dance!" Then he, going out on some errand, and suddenly returning, saw the little dame step down the empty floor in some formal dance, most mystic in his eyes, and bowing with aristocratic grace to some invisible partner. The young man recalled his own hops at the citizens' ball, and wondered what this grave measure could be. But the little lady pulled up all of a sudden, with a whistle of her silks, and repeated for the fifth time, "I shall take this house."

"Mrs. Barbara Temple" was her reply when the agent asked her name. She delivered it with decided emphasis, as if the syllables might be pondered; and forthwith she gave orders for many things to be done to the house and grounds, saying that she would come in next month. You may be sure we were all alive with curiosity to know everything about Mrs. Barbara Temple. She turned out to be a widow—a widow for the second time, we heard—and with three daughters. She had first married an old man of vast wealth, who died when she was two-and-twenty, leaving her with no children and a great fortune settled on her. Next, to avenge herself for the privations of her first marriage, she allied herself to a young ensign of twenty-five, handsome and penniless. During which time she gave birth to three daughters. Then the young officer died; and so, having got a fortune by the first husband and a family by the second, Mrs. Barbara Temple was now making ready to lead the remainder of her life according to her own fancy.

The family came into residence on the last Friday in April, 1888. Nothing was seen of them, you may guess, on Saturday, and everybody was on tiptoe expectation for their entry into the parish church on Sunday morning. Thither they came, regularly enough, like good worshippers, having, by the way, spoiled the worship of everybody beside. First comes my little dame, natty and brisk, and with something in her movements that almost made you fancy she must be a puppet animated by enchantment. Silks, feathers of the rarest sort, a fan—the weather being hot—and her frame braced up into such erectness, that each of her inches was worth two; so Mrs. Barbara Temple walked into church. There was spirit in the eye which went round the building, not with unpleasing boldness, but with most unmistakable courage. There was a vigor in her step which told of a good constitution, and she held her fan in a way that signified temper. Indeed, when the pew-opener blundered over the latch of the door, and kept her waiting in the aisle, she dealt one glance at the woman—one only—but what a rebuke was in it! At sight of the flash, old Sparkins, the doctor, who had been watching the new-comer rather obtrusively, was struck with fear that he might catch the next; and he dropped into his prayer book like a bird shot in mid air, trying to look as if he had seen nothing since service began.

Three daughters came behind. The first impression they gave us was of a profusion of rich dress, chosen and worn with taste which was simply faultless. The next impression was of tallness of figure, the more conspicuous for the tiny dame who led the way. The third impression was of beauty, set out in style and fashion such as our little town could not rival; and we did not think ourselves provincial in any but the geographical sense. After this, we had time to judge and praise the beauties girl by girl.

Girl the first, walked with a mincing step, and a toss of her head which, though strictly within the limits of good breeding, was noticeable and significant. Clever she looked, too, and her eyes were clear gray, eyes that could search you—and did search you—reading your face with great rapidity and apprehension. She was the most striking figure of the three, being very tall, and with splendid shoulders. Her face, it is true, would not bear much looking into; and had you taken it feature by feature, as the children were taught to break the fatigues in the fable, you might have proved it a poor face enough. But taken in its wholeness, and set upon that superb bust, it was a face which I should not have recommended a young fellow to gaze at too long unless he meant matrimony. And then her dress—her dress! O, never tell me that a woman cannot double—treble—her looks if she has money in her pocket and taste in her eye!

But the next was prettier; indeed, pretty was not the word appropriate to a woman who was unquestionably handsome, who knew her beauty and was proud of it. The second Miss Temple had a nose of most exquisite shape, large melting eyes of gray, ready to turn blue, and she had a lovely mouth, perhaps with a little too much of the chisel about it, too finely finished, wanting in expression, and with a slight hint of disdain carved on its fine corners. Beauty, professed beauty, confessed beauty, and clad to distraction; so she glided into her pew, and we had time to consider girl the third.

Girl the third! Shall I ever forget her face, then in the first sweet flush of youth! She fell ever forget the light that shone in those deep serious eyes—the thousand possibilities of tender or delicate expression that seemed to hover around that mouth, ready to alight and unfold themselves whenever summoned! I had been thinking a thousand frivolous and misplaced thoughts, but something in this face restored me by the most delightful of recalls to the mood of a worshipper. Never, never, outside heaven, shall I see such a face again. It was like the dream of a painter, and he a painter whose fancy had drunk of some celestial stream of feeling and idea, until he had caught on his canvas a face which had in it all that could be heavenly in a thing of earth, and all that could be earthly in a thing of heaven. Laugh not at me, neither call me irreverent; if I say that one could have fancied her some painted Madonna descending from the walls of a church, taking human form, and wearing modern vesture. On this girl vesture gave you no hint of fashion; her countenance characterized her attire, so that she might have been wearing an angel's floating drapery instead of the last Paris fashion. But I see you still; and is not every rare emotion bound to hide itself, best, being seen, it should be ridiculed for eccentricity?

These eyes could shine with earthly or heavenly love. In each case it would be love, pure, intense, with not a thought of evil on its white and living page. That mouth could kiss a daughter, or mistress, or mother, and which kiss would be sweetest who could foretell from one who seemed fit to perform every womanly duty in the most womanly way! In her look there was something neither of age nor youth, but of what I should try to describe as fullness; the median of the nature when the early and the later sentiments meet, in equal strength, the simplicity of youth, the graveness of serious life. She was fair, and her hair light brown; and I saw a trace of a little foot as she turned into her pew. But when she knelt and covered her face, I did the same quite unconsciously. It seemed right after the vision of her.

CHAPTER III.

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY.

That week everybody called upon the Temples. The universal impression was favorable, and we all rejoiced over so vivacious an addition to our society, and already the question was flying from lip to lip among the ladies: "Whom will the Misses Temple marry?" That on the grounds of social position and education the new comers would stand high amongst us was not doubted for a moment, while their easy fortune was proclaimed by their dress, the furniture of their house and their manner of life generally. Each successive visitor had something new to tell. One remarked how finely the furniture and ornaments were fancied. Another marked the glories of the harp and the piano. "The pictures are lovely," said a third; "not a poor one on the walls!" And carpets, and oil-cloths and the coloring of the walls came in for commendation in due course. All of us were delighted with the lively conversation of the girls, and we marveled unanimously at Mrs. Temple's wide knowledge of the world and the briskness with which she uttered it. Her was one of these praises undeserved. The drawing room of the Temples was a charming contrast to most of those around. Ease, cultivation, liveliness, whatever is choicest in social intercourse, seemed to pervade the very air and you felt as you entered the room that you had passed into a region where refinement reigned supreme. The Temples were, somehow, above us all. We felt it, and with increasing diffidence, as we realized our inferiority, was the question asked, "Whom will the Misses Temple marry?"



MRS. BARBARA TEMPLE.

But old Sparking, who was our shrewdest head by a long way, hearing this question asked at Miss Whiffles' house one afternoon, remarked, with a comical face to fix our attention, that we had not disposed of the matter yet. Surprising that so natural a thought had not suggested itself before! Mrs. Temple, as we understood, had been married very early, and our most competent female critics declared that she could not be more than forty-five, or, rather, I should say, they put it that she could not be less. We had several widows and spinners of ripe years, and these agreed that forty-five was still a marrying age; indeed, some of the ladies declared that it was the best time of all—an opinion in which Sparking concurred with much vehemence and solemnity, only the old fellow was caught winking slyly at a confidential friend immediately after, which aroused some suspicion. That Mrs. Barbara Temple might be married before any of her daughters, that she was yet an attractive and marrying woman, we all admitted. There was that in her manner with men which told that she had not yet abandoned either the hope or the methods of conquest; and it was plain to us all that less likely women are married every day of the year. Besides, the fortune was hers—absolutely—as we had discovered on undoubted testimony; and since the fortune could not be less than three thousand a year, we began to see that for the present it was Mrs. Temple, not her daughters, who was likely to be the prize in our next matrimonial race. So, having settled this in our minds, we proceeded like rational beings to choose a husband for the animated widow; and with scarcely a dissentient opinion, we came to the conclusion that our rector, the Rev. Anthony Brent, would be the happy man. We were not altogether wrong in this conjecture, as my story shall disclose. But Mr. Brent does not emerge on our historic page at present.

Let me tell you here that, in the course of a long life, I have never met a woman who could match Mrs. Barbara Temple. Cleverer women, handsomer women, wittier women I have met in scores; but the secret of Mrs. Barbara Temple was her utter and hearty love of this present world. Of this present world she was, I believe, the sincerest and most unquestioning worshiper that ever lived. She put no strain upon herself to become what she was; she quenched no aspiration and repressed no misgiving. Worldliness was the simple honest expression of her natural disposition and her judgment on affairs. Never religious devotee was so completely inclosed in a creed as she. For, indeed, it was a creed, and a life, too, and Mrs. Barbara Temple loved the world just as a flower loves sunlight; she obeyed a law of her own nature. But the cheerfulness with which she obeyed it; her unquestioning faith in the power of the world to satisfy every want; the absence of suspicion in life, or, indeed, any other motive at all, and the cheerfulness and alacrity with which she followed out her convictions, made her of necessity a vigorous and original character. All that makes what such people call "the world" she longed for and prized. Accomplishments, money, taste, health, the good opinion of society, these and a thousand kindred matters, she regarded as severally constituents of happiness, to be sought with the utmost solicitude every hour of the day. She was grateful to the world for being what it was to her—an ever-running fountain of desire or pleasure.

Have I sufficiently sketched her figure? Will a few strokes more make her a clearer image in your mind's eye? She was short, as I have said, trimly built, perhaps a trifle too stout, but that might be disputed. Her nose was rather large, but finely cut, like her second daughter's, and she dressed her brown hair in short rings, which well suited the style of her face. Her color was good and high enough to make people ask questions, and her eyebrows were not free from suspicious traces of making up. Her dress was always rich and admirably suited to her figure and years; for she was careful to look full forty-five. She avoided all absurd affectation of youth, and although a kind of sprightly dancing step, which she often fell into, might have seemed rather a fault in this direction, most of us considered this nothing but surplus vitality acting on a frame so light and plump that it seemed made to skip, or bound like a ball.

CHAPTER IV.

FIFTY AND FORTY-FIVE.

Our little town of Kettlewell had inhabitants to the number of ten thousand, and three churches; but of these latter, two were what at that date were called district churches, and the great ancient parish church was the ecclesiastical center of the town. Like many another such noble structure, it was but poorly endowed, and the rewards which it offered to its minister were chiefly the contemplation of venerable architecture, and a social position of considerable importance. The saying always was that none but a man of fortune could be rector of Kettlewell. Consequently, at each vacancy the bishop was in a difficulty. Rich men he could find, able men he could find; but to find one rich, able, too, was not so easy, and at the last appointment, being unable to meet with a clergyman thus doubly qualified he had chosen a wealthy parson of rather meager abilities, who was now our spiritual chief. The Rev. Anthony Brent was a cheerful man, undersized, with a merry nose of ruby, and a countenance denoting neither deep learning nor that isolation of character which is natural in men who live above the world. Indeed, Mr. Brent did not live, nor affect to live, one inch above the level of commonplace cheerful life. He told us from his pulpit that human things are frail and nothing worth, and that man is full of misery; but having folded up his sermon, he seemed to have folded up his theology too, for when you met him on week days he was full of comfort and good cheer. Perhaps we are fastidious people; perhaps we are ignorant; certain it is that we never could quite satisfy ourselves that Mr. Brent was altogether a gentleman. His manners were no better than a blithesome creature such as he might have picked up in ten years between twenty-five and thirty-five. He had a way of alluding to "my gardener" and "my banker" which seemed to show, so Sparking said—Mr. Brent employed the rival practitioner—that some time in his life he had neither bank nor garden. It is very possible that had not been so good natured, his vulgarity might have been obvious, which it never was; for, indeed, we could not be quite sure that he was vulgar at all. Another thing puzzled us; where had his fortune come from? He was very wealthy and a widower, and our idea was that Mrs. Brent had brought the money. This, too, was guess, and nothing but guess. Such, then, was our rector; a man liked, but not greatly respected, and yet a man whom none could condemn or fairly despise; a shallow man, equal to reading his newspaper, and no more; on good terms with the world, able without any strain of conscience to preach saintly sermons, copied out from standard divines, and at the same time live an easy average life; a comfortable man, with good intentions, sound digestion, a full purse and cellar, and one who never let his kitchen chimney freeze.

It was the reverend widower Brent whom we upon consideration had assigned to our lively Mrs. Barbara Temple's third husband; and events went rapidly to show that our forecast was not inexact. Mr. Brent was about fifty; Mrs. Barbara Temple was well known to be about forty-five; so that on the score of age there was nothing against the match; and as to inclination, the rector soon made it evident that there was no obstacle on his side. Everybody remarked that he took the Temples up with remarkable warmth. He gave dainty little lunches and snug little dinners for them; and he was forever calling in his carriage to take one or other of the girls a drive, the little mother attending as chaperon. At first we were in doubt as to which he was pursuing—mother or daughters; and we even thought that grave Sophia, with her evenly face, had attracted him; but we were not long in seeing that he was a man of some common sense. Mrs. Temple was his choice; her vivacity, her polish, her knowledge of the world, her untiring energy, were all after his own heart. He soon began to drop hints, as men do who have matrimony in their heads. "Mrs. Temple was a remarkably fine woman," "Forty-five was the exact age that the wife of a man of fifty should be—the exact age," "Mrs. Temple did not look forty-five" (he admitted that), "but—and he would drop his voice—"he knew she was every day of it." The intimation was that he had either seen the register of her baptism or she had told him the fact direct, and he declared over and over again, with amusing earnestness and publicity, that forty-five was the age he approved of; that for a man of his standing one year younger would be one year too young, and one year older one year too old. Of course, so far he had not said that he hoped or wished to marry Mrs. Temple, but the drift of his conversation and conduct was unmistakable. In the meantime it was evident that the lively widow did not dislike attentions which had now become so marked that even those who saw them who could see nothing. She exchanged compliments freely with the rector, invited him to her house, praised his sermons, and she was actually found one evening at a missionary meeting over which he presided. She listened to his speech with the utmost attention, sitting erect, and keeping her eyes fixed upon him, although it would have been hard to say whether she knew or cared less about the subject. She could not have told in which continent the district spoken of lay, nor whether the people were white, brown or black; but she listened attentively as if she had been hearing of dear relations in a far-off land. In short, with garden parties and lunches and dinners and drives, things went so far that we all considered the matter settled; and when we heard that no proposals had yet been made, we all agreed that there must be a tacit engagement, which, for some private reasons, was not just yet to be avowed. To all intents and purposes, we regarded Mrs. Temple and Mr. Brent as affianced; and, on the whole, we approved of our rector's choice. Certainly we should have liked a lady more interested in religious affairs; but then, we argued, it was much better that if he had married a young woman. So, balancing matters, we accepted the event with satisfaction.

The rector was in ecstasies. He was in his element, dancing attendance on these four brilliant women; and really a careless observer might have been puzzled to tell which of the four he was pursuing. In the most polished of hats, the newest of suits, the most faultless lavender gloves, and looking all over a comfortable coxswain, he would fit around them, glowing and beaming with satisfaction. The girls, for their part, accepted his civilities with charming freedom; and their mother—shrewd woman—never manifested the smallest jealousy. In this, beside proving her own good sense, she paid her admirer a compliment which he fully deserved; for he looked upon the three girls as daughters already, and was fond of them in the most parental fashion.

"Ah, Mrs. Temple," he said one day, when he was getting hot, as the children say in their hide-and-seek game, "I have but one child—a son, a dear good fellow, away in Australia. I always longed for daughters."

Whereupon Mrs. Barbara Temple turned full upon him one of her keen looks, which said: "I understand," but a good humored look all the time; and then she broke into a little loud laugh and made herself more comfortable in her seat, for they were driving. The rector was just going to propose then and there; but it happened that the carriage, speeding down the dusty road, met the curate, who was footing it home from some remote part of the parish, where he had been

CHAPTER V.

VANITY CAN VANQUISH LOVE.

The following morning Mr. Brent received a letter from his son in Australia, announcing his intention of returning to England for a few months. The reason of this return the letter went on to furnish. The son said he feared his father would think him very foolish; but love was bringing him home, and here was the worst of the matter—love under very peculiar circumstances. He had fallen in love with a picture! He had seen the portrait of a girl whose face had impressed him as never the living face of any woman had, and having ascertained that the original of the picture really lived, and was English, and not a duchess or a princess, which well she might be, but a girl of his own rank in life, young Brent was determined to find her out and try to secure her for himself. The letter wound up in very ingenious language, admitting the apparent absurdity of the whole proceeding; but protesting that the passion was true and deep, and that nothing could end it except realization or absolute and ascertained hopelessness.

Rector Brent was a good natured man and a kind father; so he shook his head and smiled over his son's folly, being a sage himself. But he wrote a kind reply, saying that his son would be always welcome home under any conceivable circumstances, and that though he must confess the expedition seemed rather wild, yet he well knew that in the later scenes of the affair his son would be ruled by his own good sense and his father's counsel.

"And now," the rector said, as he sealed this praiseworthy epistle, "I think before Percival comes home I had better have my affairs settled." This he said, and as he spoke he looked at his own likeness in the chimney glass. Something struck him. "Dear me," he exclaimed, "I must get some new teeth!" For fifty years of good living had told upon this portion of his mechanism; and now reflecting that he was about to marry, he reasoned thus: "At such times we refurbish our houses, and not refurbishing his mouth! If I am to have a new dining table, I ought to have a new set of teeth to use it. Besides—" He grinned in the glass. "Yes," he said, shaking his head, "not at all prepossessing." He grinned again, and this time by the power of fancy set new white teeth in the vacant spaces. "Not a doubt of it," he murmured; "the greatest improvement!"

So that morning, instead of making a proposal of marriage to the lively widow, he went to an adjacent town, where a notable dentist practiced, and here he had his jaws overhauled and a plan of the projected improvements drawn out. The dentist was a man of chat, and when he ascertained whence the parson came he had all sorts of questions to ask about various people in the neighborhood, and curious stories to tell, and gossip to exchange; so that our little rector, perched in the operating chair, laughed and chirruped and looked the image of enjoyment. Short-sighted man!

"By the way," said the dentist, pausing a moment with one of his tools in his hand, "has not a Mrs. Temple settled in Kettlewell during the past year?"

Rector Brent knew that a faint blush shot out of his cheek as he answered "Yes."

"A remarkable woman," the dentist continued, forgetting his task, while with a meditative face he seemed to contemplate bygone days. "A very remarkable woman."

"A very, very remarkable woman," the rector replied, determined to add an adverb in this very peculiar case.

"Wonderful energy," said the dentist. "Most wonderful!" the rector rejoined, still on the augmentation principle.

"And such a face and figure!" the operator said again.

"Ah, such a face and figure!" repeated the rector, unable to refrain from rubbing his hands together.

"For her years," the dentist remarked, in an explanatory voice.

"O, come, come!" cried the rector, in tones of remonstrance. "I don't see that. She is youthful, certainly, and sprightly; but still women are not old at forty-five."

"Polly," the curate remarked—"Polly Spearman."

"In visiting about a parish like mine"—he turned to Mrs. Temple—"one's head gets so full of Pollys and Sallies and Billies that one is apt to take the name that comes first. I am sorry for poor Han—Polly. But what can you do in a case of natural decay?"

"It is not natural decay," the curate answered, with a vaguish dryness in his manner. "She fell down stairs."

"To be sure she fell down stairs!" little Mr. Brent cried, reproving his faulty memory by a gesture of his gloved hand. "How came I to confound the two—complaints?"

"Perhaps because you are suffering from a third," retorted the curate. He loved a joke and had before this broken a jest on his own bishop. And our rector was a tempting object, being not apt to take offense, and not one to inspire great respect or fear.

The carriage drove on; but for once little Mr. Brent was downright angry.

"Rather an impertinent speech," he said, glancing diffidently at Mrs. Temple.

"Impertinent!" cried easy-humored Mrs. Temple. "Nothing of the sort."

"Milligan has no sense of propriety," she gave a little laugh.

"I like Mr. Milligan."

At this Mr. Brent took heart, changed his view of the matter, reddened with pleasure, and gave himself up to laughter, which lasted until the tears were chasing each other down his rosy cheeks. But somehow the proposal was not made that day.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING MR. BRENT RECEIVED

a letter from his son in Australia, announcing his intention of returning to England for a few months. The reason of this return the letter went on to furnish. The son said he feared his father would think him very foolish; but love was bringing him home, and here was the worst of the matter—love under very peculiar circumstances. He had fallen in love with a picture! He had seen the portrait of a girl whose face had impressed him as never the living face of any woman had, and having ascertained that the original of the picture really lived, and was English, and not a duchess or a princess, which well she might be, but a girl of his own rank in life, young Brent was determined to find her out and try to secure her for himself. The letter wound up in very ingenious language, admitting the apparent absurdity of the whole proceeding; but protesting that the passion was true and deep, and that nothing could end it except realization or absolute and ascertained hopelessness.

Rector Brent was a good natured man and a kind father; so he shook his head and smiled over his son's folly, being a sage himself. But he wrote a kind reply, saying that his son would be always welcome home under any conceivable circumstances, and that though he must confess the expedition seemed rather wild, yet he well knew that in the later scenes of the affair his son would be ruled by his own good sense and his father's counsel.

"And now," the rector said, as he sealed this praiseworthy epistle, "I think before Percival comes home I had better have my affairs settled." This he said, and as he spoke he looked at his own likeness in the chimney glass. Something struck him. "Dear me," he exclaimed, "I must get some new teeth!" For fifty years of good living had told upon this portion of his mechanism; and now reflecting that he was about to marry, he reasoned thus: "At such times we refurbish our houses, and not refurbishing his mouth! If I am to have a new dining table, I ought to have a new set of teeth to use it. Besides—" He grinned in the glass. "Yes," he said, shaking his head, "not at all prepossessing." He grinned again, and this time by the power of fancy set new white teeth in the vacant spaces. "Not a doubt of it," he murmured; "the greatest improvement!"

So that morning, instead of making a proposal of marriage to the lively widow, he went to an adjacent town, where a notable dentist practiced, and here he had his jaws overhauled and a plan of the projected improvements drawn out. The dentist was a man of chat, and when he ascertained whence the parson came he had all sorts of questions to ask about various people in the neighborhood, and curious stories to tell, and gossip to exchange; so that our little rector, perched in the operating chair, laughed and chirruped and looked the image of enjoyment. Short-sighted man!

"By the way," said the dentist, pausing a moment with one of his tools in his hand, "has not a Mrs. Temple settled in Kettlewell during the past year?"

Rector Brent knew that a faint blush shot out of his cheek as he answered "Yes."

"A remarkable woman," the dentist continued, forgetting his task, while with a meditative face he seemed to contemplate bygone days. "A very remarkable woman."

"A very, very remarkable woman," the rector replied, determined to add an adverb in this very peculiar case.

"Wonderful energy," said the dentist. "Most wonderful!" the rector rejoined, still on the augmentation principle.

"And such a face and figure!" the operator said again.

"Ah, such a face and figure!" repeated the rector, unable to refrain from rubbing his hands together.

"For her years," the dentist remarked, in an explanatory voice.

"O, come, come!" cried the rector, in tones of remonstrance. "I don't see that. She is youthful, certainly, and sprightly; but still women are not old at forty-five."

"At what five?" asked the dentist, not having caught the first word.

"Forty-five," repeated the rector, boldly and emphatically.

"Seventy-five, more likely," the blunt dentist said, now intent on his tool, which was out of repair.

"O, I see, I see!" cried rector Brent; "you are talking of her mother. We don't know the mother. The mother does not live with them now."

"Unless Mrs. Barbara Temple is herself and her mother at the same time I am not talking of her mother," the dentist answered. "That lady is seventy years of age, if she is seven."

Saying this with great unconcern, he advanced to take some further measurement of the clergyman's mouth, and observing his face of horror, he said, reassuringly: "Don't be uneasy; I am not going to take anything out."

The rector, gasping, waved him away. So convulsive were his movements that for a moment the dentist feared that he might have left one of his minor implements in the patient's mouth, which implement, having been inadvertently swallowed, was, from its unaccommodating material and unusual shape, doing violence to nature in one or other of the canals which traverse the human continent.

"Do you mean to say," said the astounded clergyman at last, "that Mrs. Barbara Temple—the lady who has three fine daughters—is more than forty-five?"

"Before one of those young ladies was

born," the dentist replied, little thinking how dreadful were his words, "I made a front tooth for Mrs. Temple—not Mrs. Temple then. She was a remarkably handsome woman, something over forty—just a tint of gray in her hair. I was not surprised when I heard, a few months after, that young Captain Temple was going to marry her. But I was a little surprised when I heard subsequently that his wife was going to present him with a child; and when I heard that this child was followed by a second, and that by a third, I was, I confess, surprised not a little."

"But Mrs. Temple was only about two-and-twenty when she married the second time," the rector said, still unable to credit what he heard.

"My dear sir," the dentist said,