

"May I ask what you are laughing at?" I said with severity.

"I was only fancying how such a man must feel—if what your blessed father believes be true—when he is stripped all at once of every possible source of consequence—stripped of position, funds, house, including cellar—clothes, body, including stomach—"

"There, there! don't be vulgar. It is not like you, Percivale."

"My love, there is far greater vulgarity in refusing to acknowledge the inevitable, either in society or in physiology. Just ask my brother his experience in regard of the word to which you object."

"I will leave that to you."

"Don't be vexed with me, my wife," he said.

"I don't like not to be allowed to pay my debts."

"Back to the starting point like a hunted hare! A woman's way," he said, merrily, hoping to make me laugh, for he could not doubt I should see the absurdity of my position with a moment's reflection. But I was out of temper, and chose to pounce upon the liberty taken with my sex and regard it as an insult. Without a word I rose, pressed my baby to my bosom as if her mother had been left a widow, and swept away. Percivale started to his feet; I did not see, but I knew he gazed after me for a moment; then I heard him sit down to his painting as if nothing had happened, but, I knew, with a sharp pain inside his great chest. For me, I found the precipice, or Jacob's ladder, I had to climb very subversive of my dignity; for when a woman has to hold a baby in one arm, and with the hand of the other lift the front of her skirt in order to walk up an almost perpendicular staircase, it is quite impossible for her to *sweep* any more.

When I reached the top—I don't know how it was, but the picture he had made of me, with the sunset-shine coming through the window, flashed upon my memory. All dignity forgotten, I bolted through the door at the top, flung my baby into the arms of her nurse, turned, almost tumbled headlong down the precipice, and altogether tumbled down at my husband's chair. I couldn't speak; I could only lay my head on his knees.

"Darling," he said, "you shall ask the great Pan Jan with his button atop, if you like. I'll do my best for him."

Between crying and laughing I nearly did what I have never really done yet—I nearly *went off*. There! I am sure that phrase is quite as objectionable as the word I wrote a little while ago, and there it shall stand as a penance for having called any word my husband used *vulgar*.

"I was very naughty, Percivale," I said. "I will give a dinner-party, and it shall be such as you shall enjoy, and I won't ask Mr. Morley."

"Thank you, my love," he said; "and the next time Mr. Morley asks us I will go without a grumble, and make myself as agreeable as I can."

#### CHAPTER XIV.—MY FIRST DINNER PARTY.

IT may have seemed to some of my readers occasion for surprise that the mistress of a household should have got so far in the construction of a book without saying a word about her own or other people's servants—without even a remark on servants in general. Such occasion shall no longer be afforded them, for now I am going to say several things about one of mine, and thereby introduce a few results of much experience and some thought. I do not pretend to have made a single discovery—but only to have achieved what I count a certain measure of success, which, however, I owe largely to my own poverty, and the stupidity of my cook.

I have had a good many servants since, but Jemima seems a fixture. How this has come about it would be impossible to say in ever so many words. Over and over I have felt, and may feel again before the day is ended, a profound sympathy with Sinbad the sailor, when the old man of the sea was on his back, and the hope of ever getting him off it had not yet begun to dawn. She has by turns every fault under the sun—I say *fault* only—will struggle with one for a day, and succumb to it for a month; while the smallest amount of praise is sufficient to render her incapable of deserving a word of commendation for a week. She is intensely stupid, with a remarkable genius—yes, genius—for cooking. My father says that all stupidity is caused, or at least maintained, by conceit. I cannot quite accompany him to his conclusions, but I have seen plainly enough that the stupidest people are the most conceited, which in some degree favours them. It was long an impossibility to make her see, or at least own, that she was to blame for anything. If the dish she had last time cooked to perfection made its appearance the next time uneatable, she would lay it all to the *silly* oven, was too hot or too cold; or the silly pepper pot, the top of which fell off as she was using it. She had no sense of the value of proportion—would insist, for instance, that she had made the cake precisely as she had been told, but suddenly betray that she had not weighed the flour, which *could* be of no consequence, seeing she had weighed everything else.

"Please, 'm, could you eat your dinner now,

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