

"No, no," I answered. "We are going to have a jolly evening of it, with nobody present who will make you either anxious or annoyed. Mr. Blackstone"—he wasn't married then—"Miss Clare, I think—and—"

"What do you ask her for?"

"I won't if you don't like her, but—"

"I haven't had a chance of liking or disliking her yet."

"That is partly why I want to ask her—I am so sure you would like her if you knew her."

"Where did you tell me you had met her?"

"At Cousin Judy's. I must have one lady to keep me in countenance with so many gentlemen, you know. I have another reason for asking her, which I would rather you should find out than I tell you. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least, if you don't think she will spoil the fun."

"I am sure she won't. Then there's your brother Roger."

"Of course. Who more?"

"I think that will do. There will be six of us then—quite a large enough party for our little dining-room."

"Why shouldn't we dine here? It wouldn't be so hot, and we should have more room."

I liked the idea. The night before Percivale arranged everything, so that not only his paintings, of which he had far too many, and which were huddled about the room, but all his *properties* as well, should be accessory to a picturesque effect. And when the table was covered with the glass and plate—of which latter my mother had taken care I should not be destitute—and adorned with the flowers which Roger brought me from Covent Garden, assisted by some of our own, I thought the bird's-eye view from the top of Jacob's ladder a very pretty one.

Resolved that Percivale should have no cause of complaint as regarded the simplicity of my arrangements, I gave orders that our little Ethel, who at that time of the evening was always asleep, should be laid on the couch in my room off the study, with the door ajar, so that Sarah, who was now her nurse, might wait with an easy mind. The dinner was brought in by the outer door of the study, to avoid the awkwardness and possible disaster of the private precipice.

The principal dish—a small sirloin of beef—was at the foot of the table, and a couple of boiled fowls, as I thought, before me. But when the cover was removed, to my surprise I found they were roasted.

"What have you got there, Percivale?" I asked. "Isn't it sirloin?"

"I'm not an adept in such matters," he replied. "I should say it was."

My father gave a glance at the joint. Something seemed to be wrong. I rose and went to my husband's side. Powers of cuisine! Jemima had roasted the fowls, and boiled the sirloin! My exclamation was the signal for an outbreak of laughter, led by my father. I was trembling in the balance between mortification on my own account, and sympathy with the evident amusement of my father and Mr. Blackstone. But the thought that Mr. Morley might have been and was not of the party came with such a pang and such a relief that it settled the point, and I burst out laughing.

"I dare say it's all right," said Roger. "Why shouldn't a sirloin be boiled as well as roasted? I venture to assert that it is all a whim, and we are on the verge of a new discovery to swell the number of those which already owe their being to blunders."

"Let us all try a slice, then," said Mr. Blackstone, "and compare results."

This was agreed to, and a solemn silence followed, during which each sought acquaintance with the new dish.

"I am sorry to say," remarked my father, speaking first, "that Roger is all wrong, and we have only made the discovery that custom is right. It is plain enough why sirloin is always roasted."

"I yield myself convinced," said Roger.

"And I am certain," said Mr. Blackstone, "that if the loin set before the king, whoever he was, had been boiled, he would never have knighted it."

Thanks to the loin, the last possible touch of constraint had vanished, and the party grew a very merry one. The apple pudding which followed was declared perfect and eaten up. Percivale produced some good wine from somewhere, which evidently added to the enjoyment of the gentlemen, my father included, who likes a good glass of wine as well as anybody. But a tiny little whimper called me away, and Miss Clare accompanied me, the gentlemen insisting that we should return as soon as possible and bring the homuncle, as Roger called the baby, with us.

When we returned the two clergymen were in close conversation, and the other two gentlemen were chiefly listening. My father was saying:

"My dear sir, I don't see how any man can do his duty as a clergyman who doesn't visit his parishioners."

"In London it is simply impossible," returned Mr. Blackstone. "Besides—in the country you are welcome wherever you go; any visit I might pay would most likely be regarded either as an intrusion, or as giving the right to pecuniary aid, of which evils the latter is the worse. There are

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)