

CHAPTER IX.

The Rivals.

There had been a pretence of fishing, but no fish had been caught. It was soon found that such an amusement would interfere with the ladies' dresses, and the affairs had become too serious to allow of any trivial interruption. "I really think, Mr. Cheesacre," an anxious mother had said, "that you'd better give it up. The water off the nasty cord has got all over Maria's dress, already." Maria made a faint protest that it did not signify in the least; but the fishing was given up,--not without an inward feeling on the part of Mr. Cheesacre that if Maria chose to come out with him in his boat, having been invited especially to fish, she ought to have put up with the natural results. "There are people who like to take everything and never like to give anything," he said to Kate afterwards, as he was walking up with her to the picnic dinner. But he was unreasonable and unjust. The girls had graced his party with their best hats and freshest muslins, not that they might see him catch a mackerel, but that they might flirt and dance to the best advantage. "You can't suppose that any girl will like to be drenched with sea-water when she has taken so much trouble with her starch," said Kate. "Then she shouldn't come fishing," said Mr. Cheesacre. "I hate such airs."

But when they arrived at the old boat, Mrs. Greenow shone forth pre-eminently as the mistress of the occasion, altogether overshadowing Mr. Cheesacre by the extent of her authority. There was a little contest for supremacy between them, invisible to the eyes of the multitude; but Mr. Cheesacre in such a matter had not a chance against Mrs. Greenow. I am disposed to think that she would have reigned even though she had not contributed to the eatables; but with that point in her favour, she was able to make herself supreme. Jeannette, too, was her servant, which was a great thing. Mr. Cheesacre soon gave way; and though he bustled about and was conspicuous, he bustled about in obedience to orders received, and became a head servant. Captain Bellfield also made himself useful, but he drove Mr. Cheesacre into paroxysms of suppressed anger by giving directions, and by having those directions obeyed. A man to whom he had lent twenty pounds the day before yesterday, and who had not contributed so much as a bottle of champagne!

"We're to dine at four, and now it's half-past three," said Mrs. Greenow, addressing herself to the multitude.

"And to begin to dance at six," said an eager young lady.

"Maria, hold your tongue," said the young lady's mother.

"Yes, we'll dine at four," said Mr. Cheesacre. "And as for the music, I've ordered it to be here punctual at half-past five. We're to have three horns, cymbals, triangle, and a drum."

"How very nice; isn't it, Mrs. Greenow?" said Charlie Fairstairs.

"And now suppose we begin to unpack," said Captain Bellfield. "Half the fun is in arranging the things."

"Oh, dear, yes; more than half," said Fanny Fairstairs.

"Bellfield, don't mind about the hampers," said Cheesacre. "Wine is a ticklish thing to handle, and there's my man there to manage it."

"It's odd if I don't know more about wine than the boots from the hotel," said Bellfield. This allusion to the boots almost cowed Mr. Cheesacre, and made him turn away, leaving Bellfield with the widow.

There was a great unpacking, during which Captain Bellfield and Mrs. Greenow constantly had their heads in the same hamper. I by no means intend to insinuate that there was anything wrong in this. People engaged together in unpacking pies and cold chickens must have their heads in the same hamper. But a great intimacy was thereby produced, and the widow seemed to have laid aside altogether that prejudice of hers with reference to the washerwoman. There was a long table placed on the sand, sheltered by the upturned boat from the land side, but open towards the sea, and over this, supported on poles, there was an awning. Upon the whole the arrangement was not an uncomfortable one for people who had selected so very uncomfortable a dining-room as the sand of the sea-shore. Much was certainly due to Mr. Cheesacre for the expenditure he had incurred,--and something perhaps to Captain Bellfield for his ingenuity in having suggested it.

Now came the placing of the guests for dinner, and Mr. Cheesacre made another great effort. "I'll tell you what," he said, aloud, "Bellfield and I will take the two ends of the table, and Mrs. Greenow shall sit at my right hand." This was not only boldly done, but there was a propriety in it which at first sight seemed to be irresistible. Much as he had hated and did hate the captain, he had skilfully made the proposition in such a way as to flatter him, and it seemed for a few moments as though he were going to have it all his own way. But Captain Bellfield was not a man to submit to defeat in such a matter as this without an effort. "I don't think that will do," said he. "Mrs. Greenow gives the dinner, and Cheesacre gives the wine. We must have them at the two ends of the table. I am sure Mrs. Greenow won't refuse to allow me to hand her to the place which belongs to her. I will sit at her right hand and be her minister." Mrs. Greenow did not refuse,--and so the matter was adjusted.

Mr. Cheesacre took his seat in despair. It was nothing to him that he had Kate Vavasor at his left hand. He liked talking to Kate very well, but he could not enjoy that pleasure while Captain Bellfield was in the very act of making progress with the widow. "One would think that he had given it himself; wouldn't you?" he said to Maria's mother, who sat at his right hand.

The lady did not in the least understand him. "Given what?" said she.

"Why, the music and the wine and all the rest of it. There are some people full of that kind of impudence. How they manage to carry it on without ever paying a shilling, I never could tell. I know I have to pay my way, and something over and beyond generally."

Maria's mother said, "Yes, indeed." She had other daughters there besides Maria, and was looking down the table to see whether they were judiciously placed. Her beauty,

her youngest one, Ophelia, was sitting next to that ne'er-do-well Joe Fairstairs, and this made her unhappy. "Ophelia, my dear, you are dreadfully in the draught; there's a seat up here, just opposite, where you'll be more comfortable."

"There's no draught here, mamma," said Ophelia, without the slightest sign of moving. Perhaps Ophelia liked the society of that lanky, idle, useless young man.

The mirth of the table certainly came from Mrs. Greenow's end. The widow had hardly taken her place before she got up again and changed with the captain. It was found that the captain could better carve the great grouse pie from the end than from the side. Cheesacre, when he saw this, absolutely threw down his knife and fork violently upon the table. "Is anything the matter?" said Maria's mother.

"Matter!" said he. Then he shook his head in grief of heart and vexation of spirit, and resumed his knife and fork. Kate watched it all, and was greatly amused. "I never saw a man so nearly broken-hearted," she said, in her letter to Alice the next day. "Eleven, thirteen, eighteen, twenty-one," said Cheesacre to himself, reckoning up in his misery the number of pounds sterling which he would have to pay for being ill-treated in this way.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Captain Bellfield, as soon as the eating was over, "if I may be permitted to get upon my legs for two minutes, I am going to propose a toast to you." The real patron of the feast had actually not yet swallowed his last bit of cheese. The thing was indecent in the violence of its injustice.

[Illustration: Captain Bellfield proposes a toast.]

"If you please, Captain Bellfield," said the patron, indifferent to the cheese in his throat, "I'll propose the toast."

"Nothing on earth could be better, my dear fellow," said the captain, "and I'm sure I should be the last man in the world to take the job out of the hands of one who would do it so much better than I can; but as it's your health that we're going to drink, I really don't see how you are to do it."

Cheesacre grunted and sat down. He certainly could not propose his own health, nor did he complain of the honour that was to be done him. It was very proper that his health should be drunk, and he had now to think of the words in which he would return thanks. But the extent of his horror may be imagined when Bellfield got up and made a most brilliant speech in praise of Mrs. Greenow. For full five minutes he went on without mentioning the name of Cheesacre. Yarmouth, he said, had never in his days been so blessed as it had been this year by the presence of the lady who was now with them. She had come among them, he declared, forgetful of herself and of her great sorrows, with the sole desire of adding something to the happiness of others. Then Mrs. Greenow had taken out her pocket-handkerchief, sweeping back the broad ribbons of her cap over her shoulders. Altogether the scene was very affecting, and Cheesacre was driven to madness. They were the very words that he had intended to speak himself.

"I hate all this kind of thing," he said to Kate. "It's so fulsome."

"After-dinner speeches never mean anything," said Kate.

At last, when Bellfield had come to an end of praising Mrs. Greenow, he told the guests that he wished to join his friend Mr. Cheesacre in the toast, the more so as it could hardly be hoped that Mrs. Greenow would herself rise to return thanks. There was no better fellow than his friend Cheesacre, whom he had known for he would not say how many years. He was quite sure they would all have the most sincere pleasure in joining the health of Mr. Cheesacre with that of Mrs. Greenow. Then there was a clattering of glasses and a murmuring of healths, and Mr. Cheesacre slowly got upon his legs.

"I'm very much obliged to this company," said he, "and to my friend Bellfield, who really is,--but perhaps that doesn't signify now. I've had the greatest pleasure in getting up this little thing, and I'd made up my mind to propose Mrs. Greenow's health; but, h'm, ha, no doubt it has been in better hands. Perhaps, considering all things, Bellfield might have waited."

"With such a subject on my hands, I couldn't wait a moment."

"I didn't interrupt you, Captain Bellfield, and perhaps you'll let me go on without interrupting me. We've all drunk Mrs. Greenow's health, and I'm sure she's very much obliged. So am I for the honour you've done me. I have taken some trouble in getting up this little thing, and I hope you like it. I think somebody said something about liberality. I beg to assure you that I don't think of that for a moment. Somebody must pay for these sort of things, and I'm always very glad to take my turn. I dare say Bellfield will give us the next picnic, and if he'll appoint a day before the end of the month, I shall be happy to be one of the party." Then he sat down with some inward satisfaction, fully convinced that he had given his enemy a fatal blow.

"Nothing on earth would give me so much pleasure," said Bellfield. After that he turned again to Mrs. Greenow and went on with his private conversation.

There was no more speaking, nor was there much time for other after-dinner ceremonies. The three horns, the cymbals, the triangle, and the drum were soon heard tuning-up behind the banqueting-hall, and the ladies went to the further end of the old boat to make their preparations for the dance. Then it was that the thoughtful care of Mrs. Greenow, in having sent Jeannette with brushes, combs, clean handkerchiefs, and other little knick-knackereries, became so apparent. It was said that the widow herself actually changed her cap,--which was considered by some to be very unfair, as there had been an understanding that there should be no dressing. On such occasions ladies are generally willing to forego the advantage of dressing on the condition that other ladies shall forego the same advantage; but when this compact is broken by any special lady, the treason is thought to be very treacherous. It is as though a fencer should remove the button from the end of his foil. But Mrs. Greenow was so good-natured in tendering the services of Jeannette to all the young ladies, and was so willing to share with others those good things of the toilet which her care had provided, that her cap was forgiven her by the most of those present.

When ladies have made up their minds to dance they will dance let the circumstances of the moment be ever so antagonistic to that exercise. A ploughed field in February

would not be too wet, nor the side of a house too uneven. In honest truth the sands of the seashore are not adapted for the exercise. It was all very well for Venus to make the promise, but when making it she knew that Adonis would not keep her to her word. Let any lightest-limbed nymph try it, and she will find that she leaves most palpable footing. The sands in question were doubtless compact, firm, and sufficiently moist to make walking on them comfortable; but they ruffled themselves most uncomfortably under the unwonted pressure to which they were subjected. Nevertheless our friends did dance on the sands; finding, however, that quadrilles and Sir Roger de Coverley suited them better than polkas and waltzes.

"No, my friend, no," Mrs. Greenow said to Mr. Cheesacre when that gentleman endeavoured to persuade her to stand up; "Kate will be delighted I am sure to join you,--but as for me, you must excuse me."

But Mr. Cheesacre was not inclined at that moment to ask Kate Vavasor to dance with him. He was possessed by an undefined idea that Kate had snubbed him, and as Kate's fortune was, as he said, literally nothing, he was not at all disposed to court her favour at the expense of such suffering to himself.

"I'm not quite sure that I'll dance myself," said he, seating himself in a corner of the tent by Mrs. Greenow's side. Captain Bellfield at that moment was seen leading Miss Vavasor away to a new place on the sands, whither he was followed by a score of dancers; and Mr. Cheesacre saw that now at last he might reap the reward for which he had laboured. He was alone with the widow, and having been made bold by wine, had an opportunity of fighting his battle, than which none better could ever be found. He was himself by no means a poor man, and he despised poverty in others. It was well that there should be poor gentry, in order that they might act as satellites to those who, like himself, had money. As to Mrs. Greenow's money, there was no doubt. He knew it all to a fraction. She had spread for herself, or some one else had spread for her, a report that her wealth was almost unlimited; but the forty thousand pounds was a fact, and any such innocent fault as that little fiction might well be forgiven to a woman endorsed with such substantial virtues. And she was handsome too. Mr. Cheesacre, as he regarded her matured charms, sometimes felt that he should have been smitten even without the forty thousand pounds. "By George! there's flesh and blood," he had once said to his friend Bellfield before he had begun to suspect that man's treachery. His admiration must then have been sincere, for at that time the forty thousand pounds was not an ascertained fact. Looking at the matter in all its bearings Mr. Cheesacre thought that he couldn't do better. His wooing should be fair, honest, and above board. He was a thriving man, and what might not they two do in Norfolk if they put their wealth together?

"Oh, Mr. Cheesacre, you should join them," said Mrs. Greenow; "they'll not half enjoy themselves without you. Kate will think that you mean to neglect her."

"I shan't dance, Mrs. Greenow, unless you like to stand up for a set."

"No, my friend, no; I shall not do that. I fear you forget how recent has been my bereavement. Your asking me is the bitterest reproach to me for having ventured to join your festive board."

"Upon my honour I didn't mean it, Mrs. Greenow. I didn't mean it, indeed."

"I do not suspect you. It would have been unmanly."

"And nobody can say that of me. There isn't a man or woman in Norfolk that wouldn't say I was manly."

"I'm quite sure of that."

"I have my faults, I'm aware."

"And what are your faults, Mr. Cheesacre?"

"Well; perhaps I'm extravagant. But it's only in these kind of things you know, when I spend a little money for the sake of making my friends happy. When I'm about, on the lands at home, I ain't extravagant, I can tell you."

"Extravagance is a great vice."

"Oh, I ain't extravagant in that sense;--not a bit in the world. But when a man's enamoured, and perhaps looking out for a wife, he does like to be a little free, you know."

"And are you looking out for a wife, Mr. Cheesacre?"

"If I told you I suppose you'd only laugh at me."

"No; indeed I would not. I am not given to joking when any one that I regard speaks to me seriously."

"Ain't you though? I'm so glad of that. When one has really got a serious thing to say, one doesn't like to have fun poked at one."

"And, besides, how could I laugh at marriages, seeing how happy I have been in that condition?--so--very--happy," and Mrs. Greenow put up her handkerchief to her eyes.

"So happy that you'll try it again some day; won't you?"

"Never, Mr. Cheesacre; never. Is that the way you talk of serious things without joking? Anything like love--love of that sort--is over for me. It lies buried under the sod with my poor dear departed saint."

"But, Mrs. Greenow,"--and Cheesacre, as he prepared to argue the question with her, got nearer to her in the corner behind the table,--"But, Mrs. Greenow, care killed a cat, you know."

"And sometimes I think that care will kill me."

"No, by George; not if I can prevent it."

"You're very kind, Mr. Cheesacre; but there's no preventing such care as mine."

"Isn't there though? I'll tell you what, Mrs. Greenow; I'm in earnest, I am indeed. If you'll inquire, you'll find there isn't a fellow in Norfolk pays his way better than I do, or is better able to do it. I don't pay a sixpence of rent, and I sit upon seven hundred acres of as good land as there is in the county. There's not an acre that won't do me a bullock and a half. Just put that and that together, and see what it comes to. And, mind you, some of these fellows that farm their own land are worse off than if they'd rent to pay. They've borrowed so much to carry on with, that the interest is more than rent. I don't owe a sixpence to ere a man or ere a company in the world. I can walk into every bank in Norwich without seeing my master. There ain't any of my paper flying about, Mrs. Greenow. I'm Samuel Cheesacre of Oileymead, and it's all my own." Mr. Cheesacre, as he thus spoke of his good fortunes and firm standing in the world, became impetuous in the energy of the moment, and brought down his fist powerfully on the slight table before them. The whole fabric rattled, and the boat resounded, but the noise he had made seemed to assist him. "It's all my own, Mrs. Greenow, and the half of it shall be yours if you'll please to take it;" then he stretched out his hand to her, not as though he intended to grasp hers in a grasp of love, but as if he expected some hand-pledge from her as a token that she accepted the bargain.

"If you'd known Greenow, Mr. Cheesacre--"

"I've no doubt he was a very good sort of man."

"If you'd known him, you would not have addressed me in this way."

"What difference would that make? My idea is that care killed a cat, as I said before. I never knew what was the good of being unhappy. If I find early mangels don't do on a bit of land, then I sow late turnips; and never cry after spilt milk. Greenow was the early mangels; I'll be the late turnips. Come then, say the word. There ain't a bedroom in my house,--not one of the front ones,--that isn't mahogany furnished!"

"What's furniture to me?" said Mrs. Greenow, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

Just at this moment Maria's mother stepped in under the canvas. It was most inopportune. Mr. Cheesacre felt that he was progressing well, and was conscious that he had got safely over those fences in the race which his bashfulness would naturally make difficult to him. He knew that he had done this under the influence of the champagne, and was aware that it might not be easy to procure again a combination of circumstances that would be so beneficial to him. But now he was interrupted just as he was expecting success. He was interrupted, and felt himself to be looking like a guilty creature under the eye of the strange lady. He had not a word to say; but drawing himself suddenly a foot and half away from the widow's side, sat there confessing his guilt in his face.

Mrs. Greenow felt no guilt, and was afraid of no strange eyes. "Mr. Cheesacre and I are talking about farming," she said.

"Oh; farming!" answered Maria's mother.

"Mr. Cheesacre thinks that turnips are better than early mangels," said Mrs. Greenow.

"Yes, I do," said Cheesacre,

"I prefer the early mangels," said Mrs. Greenow. "I don't think nature ever intended those late crops. What do you say, Mrs. Walker?"

"I daresay Mr. Cheesacre understands what he's about when he's at home," said the lady.

"I know what a bit of land can do as well as any man in Norfolk," said the gentleman.

"It may be very well in Norfolk," said Mrs. Greenow, rising from her seat; "but the practice isn't thought much of in the other counties with which I am better acquainted."

"I'd just come in to say that I thought we might be getting to the boats," said Mrs. Walker. "My Ophelia is so delicate." At this moment the delicate Ophelia was to be seen, under the influence of the music, taking a distant range upon the sands with Joe Fairstairs' arm round her waist. The attitude was justified by the tune that was in progress, and there is no reason why a gallop on the sands should have any special termination in distance, as it must have in a room. But, under such circumstances, Mrs. Walker's solicitude was not unreasonable.

The erratic steps of the distant dancers were recalled and preparations were made for the return journey. Others had strayed besides the delicate Ophelia and the idle Joe, and some little time was taken up in collecting the party. The boats had to be drawn down, and the boatmen fetched from their cans and tobacco-pipes. "I hope they're sober," said Mrs. Walker, with a look of great dismay.

"Sober as judges," said Bellfield, who had himself been looking after the remains of Mr. Cheesacre's hampers, while that gentleman had been so much better engaged in the tent.

"Because," continued Mrs. Walker, "I know that they play all manner of tricks when they're--in liquor. They'd think nothing of taking us out to sea, Mrs. Greenow."

"Oh, I do wish they would," said Ophelia.

"Ophelia, mind you come in the boat with me," said her mother, and she looked very savage when she gave the order. It was Mrs. Walker's intention that that boat should not carry Joe Fairstairs. But Joe and her daughter together were too clever for her. When the boats went off she found herself to be in that one over which Mr. Cheesacre presided, while the sinning Ophelia with her good-for-nothing admirer were under the more mirthful protection of Captain Bellfield.

"Mamma will be so angry," said Ophelia, "and it was all your fault. I did mean to go into the other boat. Don't, Mr. Fairstairs." Then they got settled down in their seats, to the satisfaction, let us hope, of them both.

Mr. Cheesacre had vainly endeavoured to arrange that Mrs. Greenow should return with him. But not only was Captain Bellfield opposed to such a change in their positions, but so also was Mrs. Greenow. "I think we'd better go back as we came," she said, giving her hand to the Captain.

"Oh, certainly," said Captain Bellfield. "Why should there be any change? Cheesacre, old fellow, mind you look after Mrs. Walker. Come along, my hearty." It really almost appeared that Captain Bellfield was addressing Mrs. Greenow as "his hearty," but it must be presumed that the term of genial endearment was intended for the whole boat's load. Mrs. Greenow took her place on the comfortable broad bench in the stern, and Bellfield seated himself beside her, with the tiller in his hand.

"If you're going to steer, Captain Bellfield, I beg that you'll be careful."

"Careful,--and with you on board!" said the Captain. "Don't you know that I would sooner perish beneath the waves than that a drop of water should touch you roughly?"

"But you see, we might perish beneath the waves together."

"Together! What a sweet word that is;--perish together! If it were not that there might be something better even than that, I would wish to perish in such company."

"But I should not wish anything of the kind, Captain Bellfield, and therefore pray be careful."

There was no perishing by water on that occasion. Mr. Cheesacre's boat reached the pier at Yarmouth first, and gave up its load without accident. Very shortly afterwards Captain Bellfield's crew reached the same place in the same state of preservation.

"There," said he, as he handed out Mrs. Greenow. "I have brought you to no harm, at any rate as yet."

"And, as I hope, will not do so hereafter."

"May the heavens forbid it, Mrs. Greenow! Whatever may be our lots hereafter,--yours I mean and mine,--I trust that yours may be free from all disaster. Oh, that I might venture to hope that, at some future day, the privilege might be mine of protecting you from all danger!"

"I can protect myself very well, I can assure you. Good night, Captain Bellfield. We won't take you and Mr. Cheesacre out of your way;--will we, Kate? We have had a most pleasant day."

They were now upon the esplanade, and Mrs. Greenow's house was to the right, whereas the lodgings of both the gentlemen were to the left. Each of them fought hard for the privilege of accompanying the widow to her door; but Mrs. Greenow was self-willed, and upon this occasion would have neither of them. "Mr. Joe Fairstairs must pass the house," said she, "and he will see us home. Mr. Cheesacre, good night. Indeed you shall not;--not a step." There was that in her voice which induced Mr. Cheesacre to obey her, and which made Captain Bellfield aware that he would only

injure his cause if he endeavoured to make further progress in it on the present occasion.

"Well, Kate, what do you think of the day?" the aunt said when she was alone with her niece.

"I never think much about such days, aunt. It was all very well, but I fear I have not the temperament fitted for enjoying the fun. I envied Ophelia Walker because she made herself thoroughly happy."

"I do like to see girls enjoy themselves," said Mrs. Greenow, "I do, indeed;--and young men too. It seems so natural; why shouldn't young people flirt?"

"Or old people either for the matter of that?"

"Or old people either,--if they don't do any harm to anybody. I'll tell you what it is, Kate; people have become so very virtuous, that they're driven into all manner of abominable resources for amusement and occupation. If I had sons and daughters I should think a little flirting the very best thing for them as a safety valve. When people get to be old, there's a difficulty. They want to flirt with the young people and the young people don't want them. If the old people would be content to flirt together, I don't see why they should ever give it up;--till they're obliged to give up every thing, and go away."

That was Mrs. Greenow's doctrine on the subject of flirtation.