CHAPTER . THE HENDERSONS AT HOLLINGFORD.

It was at last the day when Cynthia and Mr. Henderson were expected; and she stepped out of the carriage with a radiant face, her eyes sparkling with pleasure, for she had much to tell about her new life in London--about her husband, whom she loved so dearly, and who was so kind and good to her; and then she wanted to show off her beautiful dresses, and talk over all that she had seen and heard since their parting. But underneath all this brightness there was an unconscious touch of nervousness. Would not Molly and her mother be surprised at seeing her as "Mrs. Henderson," a rich man's wife? How would they receive her? Would they still think of her as the old Cynthia, or would they look upon her as changed, perhaps even as superior?

Mr. Henderson, however, was quite another personage from his wife. He was a picture of calm and composure. He bowed politely to every one he met, but he did not speak unless spoken to. His eyes were sharpened into keenness by long practice in observing men and things. He was a business-man, and his quick perceptions had been trained by many years of dealing with people and circumstances.

"Mr. Henderson," said Mrs. Gibson, "I am so glad you have come! I do hope you will like us here!" And then she went off into a long speech of welcome, which was very much interrupted by her own exclamations of admiration for Cynthia's beauty and grace, and Mr. Henderson's success and sophistication.

The housekeeper had been instructed to prepare all sorts of favourite dishes for the visitors; the rooms were made ready with unusual care; everything was done to make them feel perfectly at home. But there seemed to be something special reserved for Mr. Henderson. He was the object of Mrs. Gibson's particular solicitude. She was always watching over him, seeing that he wanted nothing, and making sure that he should enjoy himself thoroughly. It did not seem to matter whether he liked or disliked what she talked about; if he laughed at any of her jokes, or listened patiently to her stories, she thought she had succeeded in pleasing him. If she could only get him to say one good thing about her housekeeping, how happy she would be! So she tried hard to interest him in subjects likely to appeal to him,--art, literature, and politics. Whenever he spoke of anything she knew little about, she pretended to understand, and laughed heartily at his jokes. In short, she put forth all her powers to win his approval. This was noticed by others in the house, who saw how much pleasure she took in being able to do anything for Mr. Henderson, and how constantly she strove to please him.

"How different is life as a married woman!" said Cynthia; "I shall tell you all my adventures--the parties I went to, the people I saw, the places I visited. You must be very patient, dearest, or else we shan't get through it all by bedtime."

Molly listened attentively enough, though there was a little pang at heart, which made her listen rather wistfully than eagerly. It seemed so strange to think that Cynthia should now be living such an entirely different kind of life from herself,--so full of pleasure, gaiety, excitement, and change!

But Cynthia perceived the change in Molly's manner, and tried to reassure her by saying,--

"Oh, don't think my marriage has altered our friendship! It only makes me

more anxious to come over here, and see you again, and write to you oftener, and you shall send me long letters describing everything that happens to you. Don't you see?"

Molly felt quite relieved by this speech, which brought a sense of

comfort after the painful momentary sense of loss. Still, however, she

could not help thinking that things would never be just what they had been

before. And yet she knew that their bond was strong enough to bear any

changes or separations that might arise from circumstances. So she said

with a sigh,--

"Yes, dear, I am sure we shall always be friends, whatever happens."

But at last the party sat down to dinner; and then came out all the

delicacies of the house--the roast pheasant, the stewed rabbit, the hot

plum-pudding, the mince-pie, the currant-jelly, the apple-charlotte, the

gooseberry-fritters, the cream-cakes, and the jellies. There was not one

thing that did not smell like heaven itself. And so the conversation flowed

on, from the latest gossip of London society (for both Cynthia and Mr.

Henderson were now thoroughly versed in its ways), through descriptions

of their life together in the great town, and their journeys into every

part of the country, till they had painted such a vivid picture of their

new mode of existence, that Molly found herself almost forgetting her own

troubles in listening to them. She liked Mr. Henderson's way of telling

his tales. He was a good listener himself, and gave thoughtful answers,

and showed an evident interest in whatever was said by any one else. But

though he listened attentively enough to Cynthia's accounts of her

adventures, she felt that there was something wanting in the perfect sympathy between him and Cynthia. There was no want of intelligence or of wit in either of them; but somehow there seemed to be a little want of hearty cordiality in their intercourse. It might have been only fancy; yet it was so slight, so subtle, that one could hardly call it by any name more definite than "feeling," if indeed that word did not express too strongly the vague sense of uneasiness which came over Molly when she tried to analyse the cause of her discomfort. She could not quite make out how it was; but it was there. As the evening went on, however, she began to think less of it, and to enjoy the pleasantness of the scene around her.

Once dinner was over they found a quiet corner where they could talk without being interrupted;

Cynthia looking as much a lady of fashion as ever, though her eyes had something of sadness about

them which did not belong to her usual expression. "I am very happy," said she, after a pause--"very happy indeed--but I do miss you so! You mustn't think me ungrateful if I say

that it does seem lonely sometimes."

Molly felt quite touched by these words, though she knew how much Cynthia enjoyed the gaiety of London, and how little she cared about meeting any one else. But she did not say anything, only kissed her step-sister tenderly, and promised to write often, and to come up to town as often as she possibly could.

Many days later the happy visit came to an end

with Mr. Henderson expressing his gratitude to Mrs. Gibson

for all her kind attentions; he had never been so well entertained

in his life before--he was sure of that; he praised the neatness of the house,

the delicacy of the dinner, which made poor Mrs. Gibson

blush with pleasure at being so much appreciated by one

so distinguished as Mr. Henderson. But Cynthia had a little

private word with Molly before they parted. She kissed her

very tenderly, and promised to write

regularly every week or fortnight, telling how she liked London,

what she saw, who she met, and how she got on generally. And Molly

promised to answer regularly, and to tell everything that happened

in Hollingford. So the carriage drove off, leaving Molly standing

waving after it till it disappeared round the corner of the street,

while Mrs. Gibson stood beside her, already thinking out plans for

their next visit.

After Cynthia's departure, there was a vague feeling of longing and expectation in the Gibson family; and Molly, in the silence of her own room, found herself thinking of Roger. He had been so good to her--so gentle and considerate! His eyes were so deep!--and he had looked into hers so often, and smiled upon her so kindly! How much she missed him! how she longed for his coming back again! It brought such a flutter of hope, such a thrill of delightful excitement, to think of seeing him once more, hearing his voice, looking up into those dark eyes which seemed to have read all her secrets, and yet to hold some mystery still unrevealed. And then, perhaps, if he came back, things might be altered between them? Perhaps he might care for her now as he did before? Perhaps he might love her? Oh, what a difference it made to think of being anything else than a mere friend to Roger Hamley!

And then across the house, in her luxuriously furnished room, Mrs. Gibson also sat musing. She saw before her a picture of Cynthia's return, and of the splendour which she would bring with her. Her mother would be able to show off her daughter to advantage. There would be dinners of state, and visits from fashionable people who would wonder at the prosperity of the Gibsons. It was very pleasant to think about.

CHAPTER LXI. ROGER RETURNS FROM AFRICA.

Roger Hamley returned home at last; news had reached Hollingford that he was due to return shortly from his African expedition. The whole town was buzzing with excitement and curiosity as to what he might have seen or done during those long months of absence. Mrs. Gibson was eager to make a good impression upon him when he came home again--she thought it not unlikely that there might be some chance of a match between Molly and Roger if she could only manage things properly.

And as the days went on, and the time drew nearer, Molly's feelings of expectation became more intense. What changes must he have undergone! How different he must look after his long wanderings through savage countries! Would his heart still hold the same place towards her? Oh, if only he could tell her everything, and put an end to these doubts and fears! If only they could meet again, and then she felt sure that she should know exactly where she stood. At last the day came. He was really there once more, and the news spread like wildfire over the town. Everybody wanted to hear his stories of travel, his descriptions of strange sights and people, his accounts of the dangers he had encountered. But for Molly it was not the most interesting part of the affair.

No sooner had Roger set foot upon English ground again than he went straight to Molly, and asked for a private interview. His heart beat fast; there was an excitement mingled with anxiety which made him feel as if he could hardly breathe. This was the very thing that he had so often thought about during those weary months when he lay ill at Gibraltar, or wandered over the African plains--the one great object towards which all his thoughts turned. He had rehearsed what he should say, how she would look, how she would speak, and how he himself would act under these circumstances. Now it was come, and he felt as if he must be dumb before such a wonderful event. But he did not lose courage. He looked full into her eyes, and saw their dark lashes drooping downwards, while they seemed to answer his question by their expression. Then he said,--

"Molly! I have come back to tell you that I love you."

His voice faltered a little over these words, but he went on bravely:--

"And I want you to be my wife!"

He could hardly believe himself speaking such words, but they were true enough, and spoken with all the sincerity and earnestness of his nature. She did not answer immediately, only gazed up at him with those soft eyes of hers, till he felt almost afraid lest she should refuse him.

Molly was so taken aback at Roger's confession and proposal, that she could not speak for some minutes; she was too much overcome by the suddenness of his avowal, the heart-felt sincerity of his declaration of love, and his proposal made without any previous warning or preparation. All these things combined together were enough to deprive her of the power of speech.It seemed too good to be true! He

had come back safe and sound, and he loved

her! But after

a minute or two of silent astonishment, she began to recover herself. There were various conflicting sensations within her breast,--surprise, pleasure,

confusion,--but there was also one dominant sentiment, which made itself felt, strong enough to master all others, and that was a profound sense

of relief. All the tension of mind and body relaxed, as if some great weight

had been suddenly lifted off her shoulders. When she could speak again, she said:--

"Roger! I have something to show you!" And she drew forth from her desk-drawer the delicate little blossom which he had given her, long ago, when he parted from her. "I kept this," said she, softly, "as a token of your friendship--and also--" She hesitated, but only for a moment or two. "Of my love for you, too."

The sight of the little dried flower

in his hand filled his heart with an exquisite pleasure; it was like

the confirmation of some great truth which he had longed to believe, but

had never quite dared to hope. It seemed to say, "I am yours--you are mine,"

and he took it as a sign of her acceptance of his proposal. In its original

state it had only been a token of friendship; now it had become a symbol

of their love. His heart beat fast within his breast as he waited for her

to speak, the silence between them being so full of expectation. At last

she said,--

"Yes!"

There was no need for any other word. She held out her hand to take back

his gift, and their fingers touched lightly together. Then there came a

rush of blood to both their faces, and each felt the other's heart beating

fast against their own palms. Roger drew her towards him, and they stood thus for many minutes,

holding one another close, and looking into each other's eyes. When at

length they spoke again, it was not in words, but by kisses.

At last Roger said--

"Molly! we shall be married soon; but before then I want you to tell me what your

dreams are. What do you most long for? You know how much I care about these things."

Then she told him, without reserve, all her hopes and wishes, which were very

simple ones,--the wish to live near some beautiful place, where there was plenty

of wild scenery to explore, and time enough to enjoy it. She wanted a home full

of love and mutual sympathy, and she wished to have leisure to devote herself

to reading and study, and to help her husband in his work. And so, when she had

finished speaking, he took both her hands in his, and looking down into her eyes

with an expression of infinite tenderness, he said,--

"I promise you, dearest, I shall always be ready to help you; whatever may

befall us we must meet it together--you know how much I love you, my darling!"

She replied to these words of his with one glance,

and then putting out her hand to him, she said,--

"You need not tell me what you feel about me, Roger. But if ever I can do anything

for your beloved science--" here she paused, and looked at him with such a sweet smile

that he could hardly bear to look back again at her--"if ever I can help you or assist you in any way, I will gladly give myself up to doing so."

The engagement was received with great joy in the Gibson household. Mr. Gibson was greatly relieved and pleased that his daughter should be so happily settled; he thought her choice had been very wise, for she could not have found a more noble or kindly nature than Roger Hamley possessed. . It was a matter of course that the news of the engagement should soon reach every one in Hollingford, and bring joy and excitement into many homes. People who had seen Molly and Roger growing up together were delighted to think they had found such happiness in each other. There was a grand party given at the Gibsons', when all the town came to congratulate the young couple, and wish them long life and prosperity. And thus began a new chapter in the lives of both Molly and Roger, which promised to be full of love and happiness.