AUNT DEBORAH

Mary Russell Mitford

Freeditorial

A crosser old woman than Mrs. Deborah Thornby was certainly not to be found in the whole village of Hilton. Worth, in country phrase, a power of money, and living (to borrow another rustic expression) upon her means, the exercise of her extraordinary faculty for grumbling and scolding seemed the sole occupation of her existence, her only pursuit, solace, and amusement; and really it would have been a great pity to have deprived the poor woman of a pastime so consolatory to herself, and which did harm to nobody: her family consisting only of an old labourer, to guard the house, take care of her horse, her cow, and her chaise and cart, and work in the garden, who was happily, for his comfort, stone deaf, and could not hear her vituperation, and of a parish girl of twelve, to do the indoor work, who had been so used to be scolded all her life, that she minded the noise no more than a miller minds the clack of his mill, or than people who live in a churchyard mind the sound of the church bells, and would probably, from long habit, have felt some miss of the sound had it ceased, of which, by the way, there was small danger, so long as Mrs. Deborah continued in this life. Her crossness was so far innocent that it hurt nobody except herself. But she was also cross-grained, and that evil quality is unluckily apt to injure other people; and did so very materially in the present instance.

Mrs. Deborah was the only daughter of old Simon Thornby, of Chalcott great farm; she had had one brother, who having married the rosy-cheeked daughter of the parish clerk, a girl with no portion except her modesty, her good-nature, and her prettiness, had been discarded by his father, and after trying various ways to gain a living, and failing in all, had finally died broken-hearted, leaving the unfortunate clerk's daughter, rosy-cheeked no longer, and one little boy, to the tender mercy of his family. Old Simon showed none. He drove his son's widow from the door as he had before driven off his son; and when he also died, an event which occurred within a year or two, bequeathed all his property to his daughter Deborah.

This bequest was exceedingly agreeable to Mrs. Deborah, (for she was already of an age to assume that title,) who valued money, not certainly for the comforts and luxuries which it may be the means of procuring, nor even for its own sake, as the phrase goes, but for that which, to a woman of her temper, was perhaps the highest that she was capable of enjoying, the power which wealth confers over all who are connected with or dependent on its possessor.

The principal subjects of her despotic dominion were the young widow and her boy, whom she placed in a cottage near her own house, and with whose comfort and happiness she dallied pretty much as a cat plays with the mouse which she has got into her clutches, and lets go only to catch again, or an angler with the trout which he has fairly hooked, and merely suffers to struggle in the stream until it is sufficiently exhausted to bring to land. She did not mean to be cruel, but she could not help it; so her poor mice were mocked with the semblance of liberty, although surrounded by restraints; and the awful paw seemingly sheathed in velvet, whilst they were in reality never out of reach of the horrors of the pat.

It sometimes, however, happens that the little mouse makes her escape from madam pussy at the very moment when she seems to have the unlucky trembler actually within her claws; and so it occurred in the present instance.

The dwelling to which Mrs. Deborah retired after the death of her father, was exceedingly romantic and beautiful in point of situation. It was a small but picturesque farm-house, on the very banks of the Loddon, a small branch of which, diverging from the parent stream, and crossed by a pretty footbridge, swept round the homestead, the orchard and garden, and went winding along the water meadows in a thousand glittering meanders, until it was lost in the rich woodlands which formed the back-ground of the picture. In the month of May, when the orchard was full of its rosy and pearly blossoms, a forest of lovely bloom, the meadows yellow with cowslips, and the clear brimming river, bordered by the golden tufts of the water ranunculus, and garlanded by the snowy flowers of the hawthorn and the wild cherry, the thin wreath of smoke curling from the tall, old-fashioned chimneys of the pretty irregular building, with its porch, and its baywindows, and gable-ends full of light and shadow,—in that month of beauty it would be difficult to imagine a more beautiful or a more English landscape.

On the other side of the narrow winding road, parted from Mrs. Deborah's demesne by a long low bridge of many arches, stood a little rustic mill, and its small low-browed cottage, with its own varied back-ground of garden and fruit trees and thickly wooded meadows, extending in long perspective, a smiling verdant valley of many miles.

Now Chalcott mill, reckoned by everybody else the prettiest point in her prospect, was to Mrs. Deborah not merely an eye-sore, but a heart-sore, not on its own account; cantankerous as she was, she had no quarrel with the innocent buildings, but for the sake of its inhabitants.

Honest John Stokes, the miller, was her cousin-german. People did say that some forty years before there had been question of a marriage between the parlies; and really they both denied the thing with so much vehemence and fury, that one should almost be tempted to believe there was some truth in the report. Certain it is, that if they had been that wretched thing a mismatched couple, and had gone on snarling together all their lives, they could not have hated each other more zealously. One shall not often meet with anything so perfect in its way as that aversion. It was none of your silent hatreds that never come to words; nor of your civil hatreds, that veil themselves under smooth phrases and smiling looks. Their ill-will was frank, open, and above-board. They could not afford to come to an absolute breach, because it would have deprived them of the pleasure of quarrelling; and in spite of the frequent complaints they were wont to make of their near neighbourhood, I am convinced that they derived no small gratification from the opportunities which it afforded them of saying disagreeable things to each other.

And yet Mr. John Stokes was a well-meaning man, and Mrs. Deborah Thornby was not an ill-meaning woman. But she was, as I have said before, cross in the grain; and he—why he was one of those plain-dealing personages who will speak their whole mind, and who pique themselves upon that sort of sincerity which is comprised in telling to another all the ill that they have ever heard, or thought, or

imagined concerning him, in repeating, as if it were a point of duty, all the harm that one neighbour says of another, and in denouncing, as if it were a sin, whatever the unlucky person whom they address may happen to do, or to leave undone.

"I am none of your palavering chaps, to flummer over an old vixen for the sake of her strong-box. I hate such falseness. I speak the truth and care for no man," quoth John Stokes.

And accordingly John Stokes never saw Mrs. Deborah Thornby but he saluted her, pretty much as his mastiff accosted her favourite cat; erected his bristles, looked at her with savage bloodshot eyes, showed his teeth, and vented a sound something between a snarl and a growl; whilst she, (like the fourfooted tabby,) set up her back and spit at him in return.

They met often, as I have said, for the enjoyment of quarrelling; and as whatever he advised she was pretty sure *not* to do, it is probable that his remonstrances in favour of her friendless relations served to confirm her in the small tyranny which she exercised towards them.

Such being the state of feeling between these two jangling cousins, it may be imagined with what indignation Mrs. Deborah found John Stokes, upon the death of his wife, removing her widowed sister-in-law from the cottage in which she had placed her, and bringing her home to the mill, to officiate as his housekeeper, and take charge of a lovely little girl, his only child. She vowed one of those vows of anger which I fear are oftener kept than the vows of love, to strike both mother and son out of her will, (by the way, she had a superstitious horror of that disagreeable ceremony, and even the temptation of choosing new legatees whenever the old displeased her, had not been sufficient to induce her to make one,—the threat did as well,) and never to speak to either of them again as long as she lived.

She proclaimed this resolution at the rate of twelve times an hour, (that is to say, once in five minutes,) every day for a fortnight; and in spite of her well-known caprice, there seemed for once in her life reason to believe that she would keep her word.

Those prudent and sagacious persons who are so good as to take the superintendence of other people's affairs, and to tell by the look of the foot where the shoe pinches and where it does not, all united in blaming the poor widow for withdrawing herself and her son from Mrs. Deborah's protection. But besides that no human being can adequately estimate the misery of leading a life of dependence upon one to whom scolding was as the air she breathed, without it she must die, a penurious dependence too, which supplied grudgingly the humblest wants, and yet would not permit the exertions by which she would joyfully have endeavoured to support herself;—besides the temptation to exchange Mrs. Deborah's incessant maundering for the Miller's rough kindness, and her scanty fare for the coarse plenty of his board,—besides these homely but natural temptations—hardly to be adequately allowed for by those who have passed their lives amidst smiling kindness and luxurious abundance; besides these motives she had a stronger and dearer in her desire to rescue her boy from the dangers of an enforced and miserable idleness, and to put him in the way of earning his bread by honest industry.

Through the interest of his grandfather the parish clerk, the little Edward had been early placed in the Hilton free school, where he had acquitted himself so much to the satisfaction of the master, that at twelve years old he was the head boy on the foundation, and took precedence of the other nine-and-twenty wearers of the full-skirted blue coats, leathern belts, and tasseled caps, in the various arts of reading, writing, cyphering, and mensuration. He could flourish a swan without ever taking his pen from the paper. Nay, there is little doubt but from long habit he could have flourished it blindfold, like the man who had so often modelled the wit of Ferney in breadcrumbs, that he could produce little busts of Voltaire with his hands under the table; he had not his equal in Practice or the Rule of Three, and his piece, when sent round at Christmas, was the admiration of the whole parish.

Unfortunately, his arrival at this pre-eminence was also the signal of his dismissal from the free school. He returned home to his mother, and as Mrs. Deborah, although hourly complaining of the expense of supporting a great lubberly boy in idleness, refused to appentice him to any trade, and even forbade his finding employment in helping her deaf man of all work to cultivate her garden, which the poor lad, naturally industrious and active, begged her permission to do, his mother, considering that no uncertain expectations of money at the death of his kinswoman could counterbalance the certain evil of dragging on his days in penury and indolence during her life, wisely determined to betake herself to the mill, and accept John Stokes's offer of sending Edward to a friend in town, for the purpose of being placed with a civil engineer:—a destination with which the boy himself—a fine intelligent youth, by the way, tall and manly, with black eyes that talked and laughed, and curling dark hair,—was delighted in every point of view. He longed for a profession for which he had a decided turn; he longed to see the world as personified by the city of cities, the unparagoned London; and he longed more than either to get away from Aunt Deborah, the storm of whose vituperation seemed ringing in his ears so long as he continued within sight of her dwelling. One would think the clack of the mill and the prattle of his pretty cousin Cicely might have drowned it, but it did not. Nothing short of leaving the spinster fifty miles behind, and setting the great city between him and her, could efface the impression.

"I hope I am not ungrateful," thought Edward to himself, as he was trudging London-ward after taking a tender leave of all at the mill; "I hope I am not ungrateful. I do not think I am, for I would give my right arm, ay, or my life, if it would serve master John Stokes or please dear Cissy. But really I do hope never to come within hearing of Aunt Deborah again, she storms so. I wonder whether all old women are so cross. I don't think my mother will be, nor Cissy. I am sure Cissy won't Poor Aunt Deborah! I suppose she can't help it." And with this indulgent conclusion, Edward wended on his way.

Aunt Deborah's mood was by no means so pacific. She staid at home fretting, fuming, and chafing, and storming herself hoarse—which, as the people at the mill took care to keep out of earshot, was all so much good scolding thrown away. The state of things since Edward's departure had been so decisive, that even John Stokes thought it wiser to keep himself aloof for a time; and although they pretty well guessed that she would take measures to put in effect her threat of disinheritance, the first outward demonstration came in the shape of a young man

(gentleman I suppose he called himself—ay, there is no doubt but he wrote himself Esquire) who attended her to church a few Sundays after, and was admitted to the honour of sitting in the same pew.

Nothing could be more unlike our friend Edward than the stranger. Fair, freckled, light-haired, light-eyed, with invisible eye-brows and eye-lashes, insignificant in feature, pert and perking in expression, and in figure so dwarfed and stunted, that though in point of age he had evidently attained his full growth, (if one may use the expression to such a he-doll,) Robert at fifteen would have made two of him,—such was the new favourite. So far as appearance went, for certain Mrs. Deborah had not changed for the better.

Gradually it oozed out, as, somehow or other, news, like water, will find a vent, however small the cranny,—by slow degrees it came to be understood that Mrs. Deborah's visiter was a certain Mr. Adolphus Lynfield, clerk to an attorney of no great note in the good town of Belford Regis, and nearly related, as he affirmed, to the Thornby family.

Upon hearing these tidings, John Stokes, the son of old Simon Thornly's sister, marched across the road, and finding the door upon the latch, entered unannounced into the presence of his enemy.

"I think it my duty to let you know, cousin Deborah, that this here chap's an impostor—a sham—and that you are a fool," was his conciliatory opening. "Search the register. The Thornlys have been yeomen of this parish ever since the time of Elizabeth—more shame to you for forcing the last of the race to seek his bread elsewhere; and if you can find such a name as Lynfield amongst 'em, I'll give you leave to turn me into a pettifogging lawyer—that's all. Saunderses, and Symondses, and Stokeses, and Mays, you'll find in plenty, but never a Lynfield. Lynfield, quotha! it sounds like a made-up name in a story-book! And as for 'Dolphus, why there never was anything like it in all the generation, except my good old great aunt Dolly, and that stood for Dorothy. All our names have been christian-like and English, Toms, and Jacks, and Jems, and Bills, and Sims, and Neds—poor fellow! None of your outlandish 'Dolphuses. Dang it, I believe the foolish woman likes the chap the better for having a name she can't speak! Remember, I warn you he's a sham!" And off strode the honest miller, leaving Mrs. Deborah too angry for reply, and confirmed both in her prejudice and prepossession by the natural effect of that spirit of contradiction which formed so large an ingredient in her composition, and was not wholly wanting in that of John Stokes.

Years passed away, and in spite of frequent ebbs and flows, the tide of Mrs. Deborah's favour continued to set towards Mr. Adolphus Lynfield. Once or twice indeed, report had said that he was fairly discarded, but the very appearance of the good miller, anxious to improve the opportunity for his protégé, had been sufficient to determine his cousin to reinstate Mr. Adolphus in her good graces. Whether she really liked him is doubtful. He entertained too good an opinion of himself to be very successful in gaining that of other people.

That the gentleman was not deficient in "left-handed wisdom," was proved pretty clearly by most of his actions; for instance, when routed by the downright miller from the position which he had taken up of a near kinsman by the father's side, he, like an able tactician, wheeled about and called cousins with Mrs. Deborah's

mother; and as that good lady happened to have borne the very general, almost universal, name of Smith, which is next to anonymous, even John Stokes could not dislodge him from that entrenchment But he was not always so dexterous. Cunning in him lacked the crowning perfection of hiding itself under the appearance of honesty. His art never looked like nature. It stared you in the face, and could not deceive the dullest observer. His very flattery had a tone of falseness that affronted the person flattered; and Mrs. Deborah, in particular, who did not want for shrewdness, found it so distasteful, that she would certainly have discarded him upon that one ground of offence, had not her love of power been unconsciously propitiated by the perception of the efforts which he made, and the degradation to which he submitted, in the vain attempt to please her. She liked the homage offered to "*les beaux yeux de sa cassette*" pretty much as a young beauty likes the devotion extorted by her charms, and for the sake of the incense tolerated the worshipper.

Nevertheless there were moments when the conceit which I have mentioned as the leading characteristic of Mr. Adolphus Lynfield had well nigh banished him from Chalcott. Piquing himself on the variety and extent of his knowledge, the universality of his genius, he of course paid the penalty of other universal geniuses, by being in no small degree superficial. Not content with understanding every trade better than those who had followed it all their lives, he had a most unlucky propensity to put his devices into execution, and as his information was, for the most part, picked up from the column headed "varieties," in the county newspaper, where of course there is some chaff mingled with the grain, and as the figments in question were generally ill understood and imperfectly recollected, it is really surprising that the young gentleman did not occasion more mischief than actually occurred by the quips and quiddities which he delighted to put in practice whenever he met with any one simple enough to permit the exercise of his talents.

Some damage he did effect by his experiments, as Mrs. Deborah found to her cost. He killed a bed of old-fashioned spice cloves, the pride of her heart, by salting the ground to get rid of the worms. Her broods of geese also, and of turkeys, fell victims to a new and infallible mode of feeding, which was to make them twice as fat in half the time. Somehow or other, they all died under the operation. So did half a score of fine apple-trees, under an improved method of grafting; whilst a magnificent brown Bury pear, that covered one end of the house, perished of the grand discovery of severing the bark to increase the crop. He lamed Mrs. Deborah's old horse by doctoring him for a prick in shoeing, and ruined her favourite cow, the best milch cow in the county, by a most needless attempt to increase her milk.

Now these mischances and misdemeanors, ay, or the half of them, would undoubtedly have occasioned Mr. Adolphus's dismission, and the recall of poor Edward, every account of whom was in the highest degree favourable, had the worthy miller been able to refrain from lecturing his cousin upon her neglect of the one, and her partiality for the other. It was really astonishing that John Stokes, a man of sagacity in all other respects, never could understand that scolding was of all devisable processes the least likely to succeed in carrying his point with one who was such a proficient in that accomplishment, that if the old penalty for female scolds, the ducking-stool, had continued in fashion, she would have stood an excellent chance of attaining to that distinction. But so it was. The same blood

coursed through their veins, and his tempestuous good-will and her fiery anger took the same form of violence and passion.

Nothing but these lectures *could* have kept Mrs. Deborah constant in the train of such a trumpery, jiggetting, fidgetty little personage as Mr. Adolphus,—the more especially as her heart was assailed in its better and softer parts, by the quiet respectfulness of Mrs. Thornly's demeanour, who never forgot that she had experienced her protection in the hour of need, and by the irresistible good-nature of Cicely, a smiling, rosy, sunny-looking creature, whose only vocation in this world seemed to be the trying to make everybody as happy as herself.

Mrs. Deborah (with such a humanising taste, she could not, in spite of her cantankerous temper, be all bad) loved flowers: and Cicely, a rover of the woods and fields from early childhood, and no despicable practical gardener, took care to keep her beaupots constantly supplied from the first snowdrop to the last china rose. Nothing was too large for Cicely's good-will, nothing too small. Huge chimney jars of lilacs, laburnums, horse-chestnuts, peonies, and the golden and gorgeous double furze; china jugs filled with magnificent double stocks, and rich wallflowers,* with their bitter-sweet odour, like the taste of orange marmalade, pinks, sweet-peas, and mignonette, from her own little garden, or woodland posies that might beseem the hand of the faerie queen, composed of those gems of flowers, the scarlet pimpernel, and the blue anagallis, the rosy star of the wild geranium, with its aromatic crimson-tipped leaves, the snowy star of the white ochil, and that third starry flower the yellow loose-strife, the milk vetch, purple, or pink, or cream coloured, backed by moss-like leaves and lilac blossoms of the lousewort, and overhung by the fragrant bells and cool green leaves of the lily of the valley.

> ** Few flowers, (and almost all look best when arranged each sort in its separate vase,)—few look so well together as the four sorts of double wallflowers. The common dark, (the old bloody warrior)—I have a love for those graphic names—words which paint the common dark, the common yellow, the newer and more intensely coloured dark, and that new gold colour still so rare, which is in tint, form, growth, hardiness, and profusion, one of the most valuable acquisitions to the flower garden. When placed together in ajar, the brighter blossoms seem to stand out from those of deeper hue, with exactly the sort of relief, the harmonious combination of light and shade, that one sometimes sees in the rich gilt carving of an old flower-wreathed picture-frame, or, better still, it might seem a pot of flowers chased in gold, by Benvenuto Cellini, in which the workmanship outvalued the metal. Many beaupots are gayer, many sweeter, but this is the richest, both for scent and colour, that I have ever seen.*

It would puzzle a gardener to surpass the elegance and delicacy of such a nosegay.

Offerings like these did our miller's maiden delight to bring at all seasons, and under all circumstances, whether of peace or war between the heads of the two opposite houses; and whenever there chanced to be a lull in the storm, she availed

herself of the opportunity to add to her simple tribute a dish of eels from the mill-stream, or perch from the river. That the thought of Edward ("dear Edward," as she always called him,) might not add somewhat of alacrity to her attentions to his wayward aunt, I will not venture to deny, but she would have done the same if Edward had not been in existence, from the mere effect of her own peacemaking spirit, and a generosity of nature which found more pleasure in giving than in possessing. A sweet and happy creature was Cicely; it was difficult even for Mrs. Deborah to resist her gentle voice and artless smiles.

Affairs were in this posture between the belligerents, sometimes war to the knife, sometimes a truce under favour of Cissy's white flag, when one October evening, John Stokes entered the dwelling of his kinswoman to inform her that Edward's apprenticeship had been some time at an end, that he had come of age about a month ago, and that his master, for whom he had continued to work, was so satisfied of his talents, industry, and integrity, that he had offered to take him into partnership for a sum incredibly moderate, considering the advantages which such a connexion would ensure.

"You have more than the money wanted in the Belford Bank, money that ought to have been his," quoth John Stokes, "besides all your property in land and houses and the funds; and if you did advance this sum, which all the world knows is only a small part of what should have belonged to him in right of his father, it would be as safe as if it was in the Bank of England, and the interest paid half-yearly. You ought to give it him out and out; but of course you won't even lend it," pursued this judicious negotiator; "you keep all your money for that precious chap, Mr. 'Dolphus, to make ducks and drakes with after you are dead; a fine jig he'll dance over your grave. You know, I suppose, that we've got the fellow in a cleft stick about that petition the other day? He persuaded old Jacob, who's as deaf as a post, to put his mark to it, and when he was gone, Jacob came to me (I'm the only man in the parish who can make him hear) to ask what it was about. So upon my explaining the matter, Jacob found he had got into the wrong box. But as the chap had taken away his petition, and Jacob could not scratch out his name, what does he do but set his mark to ours o' t'other side; and we've wrote all about it to Sir Robert to explain to the Parliament, lest seeing Jacob's name both ways like, they should think 'twas he, poor fellow, that meant to humbug 'em. A pretty figure Mr. 'Dolphus 'll cut when the story comes to be told in the House of Commons! But that's not the worst. He took the petition to the workhouse, and meeting with little Fan Ropley, who had been taught to write at our charity-school, and is quick at her pen, he makes her sign her name at full length, and then strikes a dot over the *e* to turn it into Francis, and persuade the great folk up at Lunnun, that little Fan's a grown-up man. If that chap won't come someday to be transported for forgery, my name's not John Stokes! Well, dame, will you let Ned have the money? Yes or no?"

That Mrs. Deborah should have suffered the good miller to proceed with his harangue without interruption, can only be accounted for on the score of the loudness of tone on which he piqued himself with so much justice. When she did take up the word, her reply made up in volubility and virulence for any deficiency in sound, concluding by a formal renunciation of her nephew, and a command to

his zealous advocate never again to appear within her doors. Upon which, honest John vowed he never would, and departed.

Two or three days after this quarrel, Mr. Adolphus having arrived, as happened not un-frequently, to spend the afternoon at Chalcott, persuaded his hostess to accompany him to see a pond drawn at the Hall, to which, as the daughter of one of Sir Robert's old tenants, she would undoubtedly have the right of *entrée*; and Mrs. Deborah assented to his request, partly because the weather was fine, and the distance short, partly, it may be, from a lurking desire to take her chance as a bystander of a dish of fish; they who need such windfalls least, being commonly those who are most desirous to put themselves in their way.

Mr. Adolphus Lynfield's reasons were obvious enough. Besides the *ennui* of a tête-a-tête, all flattery on one side and contradiction on the other, he was naturally of the fidgetty restless temperament which hates to be long confined to one place or one occupation, and can never hear of a gathering of people, whatever might be the occasion, without longing to find himself amongst them.

Moreover, he had, or professed to have, a passion for field sports of every description; and having that very season contrived, with his usual curious infelicity, to get into as many scrapes in shooting as shall last most sportsmen their whole lives—having shot a spaniel instead of a hare, a keeper instead of a partridge, and his own foot instead of a pheasant, and finally, having been taken up for a poacher, although wholly innocent of the death of any bird that ever wore feathers,—after all these woeful experiences, (to say nothing of mischances in angling which might put to shame those of our friend Mr. Thompson,) he found himself particularly well disposed to a diversion which appeared to combine in most choice union the appearance of sporting, which he considered essential to his reputation, with a most happy exemption from the usual sporting requisites, exertion or skill. All that he would have to do would be to look on and talk,—to throw out a hint here and a suggestion there, and find fault with everything and everybody, like a man who understood what was going forward.

The weather was most propitious; a bright breezy sunny October day, with light snowy clouds, chased by a keen crisp wind across the deep blue heavens,—and the beautiful park, the turf of an emerald green, contrasting with the brown fern and tawny woods, rivalling in richness and brightness the vivid hues of the autumnal sky. Nothing could exceed the gorgeous tinting of the magnificent trees, which, whether in detached clumps or forest-like masses, formed the pride and glory of the place. The oak still retaining its dark and heavy verdure; the elm letting fall a shower of yellow leaves, that tinged the ground beneath; the deep orange of the horse-chestnut, the beech varying from ruddy gold to greenish brown; and above all, the shining green of the holly, and the rich purplish red of the old thorns, those hoary thorns, the growth of centuries, gave to this old English gentleman's seat much of the variety and beauty of the American backwoods. The house, a stately ancient mansion, from the porch of which you might expect to see Sir Roger de Coverley issue, stood half-way up a gentle hill, finely backed by woods of great extent; and the pond, which was the object of the visit, was within sight of the windows, but so skilfully veiled by trees, as to appear of much greater extent than it really was. The master and mistress of the Hall, with their pretty daughters, were

absent on a tour:—Is any English country family ever at home in the month of October in these days of fashionable enterprise? They were gone to visit the temples of Thebes, or the ruins of Carthage, the Fountains of the Nile or the Falls of Niagara, St. Sophia, or the Kremlin, or some such pretty little excursion, which ladies and gentlemen now talk of as familiarly "as maids of puppy dogs." They were away. But enough of the household remained at Chalcott, to compose, with a few visiters, a sufficiently numerous and animated group.

The first person whom Mrs. Deborah espied, (and it is remarkable that we always see first those whom we had rather not see at all,) was her old enemy the miller,—a fisherman of so much experience and celebrity, that his presence might have been reckoned upon as certain—busily engaged, together with some half-dozen stout and active coadjutors, in dragging the net ashore, amidst a chorus of exclamations and cautions from the various assistants, and the breathless expectation of the spectators on the bank, amongst whom were Mrs. Thornly and Cicely, accompanied by a tall, athletic young man of dark complexion, with peculiarly bright eyes and curling hair, whom his aunt immediately recognised as Edward.

"How improved he is!" was the thought that flashed across her mind, as with an air of respectful alacrity he stepped forward to meet her; but the miller, in tugging at his nets, happened to look towards them, and ashamed that he of all men should see her change of feeling, she turned away abruptly, without acknowledging his salutation, and walked off to the other side with her attendant, Mr. Adolphus.

"Drat the perverse old jade!" exclaimed John Stokes, involuntarily, as he gave a mighty tug, which brought half the net ashore.

"She's heavy, my good sir!" observed the pompous butler, conceiving that the honest miller's exclamation had reference to the sport; "only see how full she is! We shall have a magnificent hawl!"

And the spectators, male and female, crowded round, and the fishermen exerted themselves so efficiently, that in two minutes the net was on dry land.

"Nothing but weeds and rubbish!" ejaculated the disappointed butler, a peculiarly blank look taking the place of his usual self-importance. "What can have become of the fish?"

"The net has been improperly drawn," observed Mr. Adolphus; "I myself saw four or five large carp just before it was dragged ashore!"

"Better fling you in, master 'Dolphus, by way of bait!" ejaculated our friend the miller; "I've seen jacks in this pond that would make no more bones of swallowing a leg or an arm of such an atomy as you, if they did not have a try at the whole body, than a shark would of bolting down Punch in the show; as to carp, everybody that ever fished a pond knows their tricks. Catch them in a net if you can. They swim round and round, just to let you look at 'em, and then they drop plump into the mud, and lie as still and as close as so many stones. But come, Mr. Tomkins," continued honest John, addressing the butler, "we'll try again. I'm minded that we shall have better luck this time. Here are some brave large tench, which never move till the water is disturbed; we shall have a good chance for them as well as

for the jacks. Now, steady there, you in the boat Throw her in, boys, and mind you don't draw too fast!" So to work they all went again.

All was proceeding prosperously, and the net, evidently well filled with fish, was dragging slowly to land, when John Stokes shouted suddenly from the other side of the pond—"Dang it, if that unlucky chap, master 'Dolphus there, has not got hold of the top of the net! He'll pull it over. See, that great jack has got out already. Take the net from him, Tom! He'll let all the fish loose, and tumble in himself, and the water at that part is deep enough to drown twenty such mannikins. Not that I think drowning likely to be his fate—witness that petition business," muttered John to himself in a sort of parenthesis. "Let go, I say, or you will be in. Let go, can't ye?" added he, in his loudest tone.

And with the word, Mr. Adolphus, still struggling to retain his hold of the net, lost his balance and fell in, and catching at the person next him, who happened to be Mrs. Deborah, with the hope of saving himself, dragged her in after him.

Both sank, and amidst the confusion that ensued, the shrieks and sobs of the women, the oaths and exclamations of the men, the danger was so imminent that both might have been drowned, had not Edward Thornly, hastily flinging off his coat and hat, plunged in and rescued Mrs. Deborah, whilst good John Stokes, running round the head of the pond as nimbly as a boy, did the same kind office for his prime aversion, the attorney's clerk. What a sound kernel is sometimes hidden under a rough and rugged rind!

Mr. Adolphus, more frightened than hurt, and with so much of the conceit washed out of him by his involuntary cold bath, that it might be accounted one of the most fortunate accidents in his life, was conveyed to the Hall; but her own house being almost equally near, Mrs. Deborah was at once taken home, and put comfortably to bed in her own chamber.

About two hours afterwards, the whole of the miller's family, Mrs. Thornly still pallid and trembling, Cicely smiling through her tears, and her father as blunt and freespoken as ever, were assembled round the homely couch of their maiden cousin.

"I tell you I must have the lawyer fetched directly. I can't sleep till I have made my will;" said Mrs. Deborah.

"Better not," responded John Stokes; "you'll want it altered to-morrow."

"What's that you say, cousin John?" inquired the spinster.

"That if you make your will to night, you'll change your mind to-morrow," reiterated John Stokes. "Ned's going to be married to my Cicely," added he, "and that you mayn't like, or if you did like it this week, you might not like it next So you'd better let matters rest as they are."

"You're a provoking man, John Stokes," said his cousin—"a very provoking, obstinate man. But I'll convince you for once. Take that key, Mrs. Thornly," quoth she, raising herself in bed, and fumbling in an immense pair of pockets for a small old-fashioned key, "and open the 'scrutoire, and give me the pen and ink, and the old narrow brown book, that you'll find at the top. Not like his marrying Cicely! Why I always have loved that child—don't cry, Cissy!—and have always had cause, for she has been a kind little creature to me. Those dahlias came from her,

and the sweet posy," pursued Mrs. Deborah, pointing to a nosegay of autumn flowers, the old fragrant monthly rose, mignionette, heliotrope, cloves, and jessamine, which stood by the bedside. "Ay, that's the book, Mrs. Thornly; and there, Cissy," continued Aunt Deborah, filling up the check, with a sum far larger than that required for the partnership— "there, Cissy, is your marriage portion. Don't cry so, child!" said she, as the affectionate girl hung round her neck in a passion of grateful tears—"don't cry, but find out Edward, and send for the lawyer, for I'm determined to settle my affairs to night And now, John Stokes, I know I've been a cross old woman, but...."

"Cousin Deborah," interrupted John, seizing her withered hand with a gripe like a smith's vice,—"Cousin Deborah, thou hast acted nobly, and I beg thy pardon once for all. God bless thee!—Dang it," added the honest miller to himself, "I do verily believe that this squabbling has been mainly my fault, and that if I had not been so provoking she would not have been so contrary. Well, she has made us all happy, and we must try to make her happy in return. If we did not, we should deserve to be soused in the fish-pond along with that unhappy chap, Master 'Dolphus. For my part," continued the good yeoman, forming with great earnestness a solemn resolution—"for my part, I've fully made up my mind never to contradict her again, say what she will. No, not if she says black's white! It's contradiction that makes women contrary; it sets their backs up, like. I'll never contradict her again so long as my name's John Stokes."