

The Fairy with the Grey Beard.

BY WINIFRED GRAHAM.

I.

“WHEN Mr. Lionel comes in send him at once to my study.”

The words were spoken peremptorily by an elderly gentleman with a sharp, deeply-lined face, and narrow slit eyes. Morgan, the butler, knew from his master's tone that Mr. Lionel Trollope had in some way violated the paternal authority. With a sedate “Yes, sir,” Morgan retreated, feeling a sense of benign pity for the breezy, blue-eyed youth—the only son of a bookworm and recluse.

“Wonder what Mr. Lionel has been up to now,” Morgan remarked to his fellow-servants. “The master looks black as thunder this afternoon. I don't see he can expect a young gentleman to be always at home—when the place is as dull as ditch-water. But, there! master might as well be at the North Pole for all the company he sees. Folks don't want to call to be growled and grumbled at. The fact is there are only two thoughts in his head—books and roses. If he's indoors, then it's them fusty, musty volumes; if he's out in the garden—all he thinks of is killing grubs and snorting over gloire de Dijons!”

With this scathing assertion Morgan waived the subject, and collapsed into reverie.

Meanwhile the bookworm gazed unseeingly upon the open page before him. His brain was busy with wrath, he forgot the soft memories of youth, the clinging hand long mouldered into dust of a sweet-voiced wife who used to say: “Don't be hard on little Lionel.”

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And now “little Lionel” was a full-grown man—popular with everyone, through the effervescence of his sunny nature.

A glance round Mr. Trollope's study, the largest and most luxurious room in the house, showed him to be a man of taste and a collector. Besides his books, the Gobelin tapestry, the statue in bronze of St. Simon, and the model of the ship in which William Prince of Orange came to England, claimed attention. For these things were more to him than people of flesh and blood, inhabiting the outside world of Wolverditton, from which he withheld the patronage of his attention. Not entirely self-absorbed, he would on occasions assist the deserving poor, if the vicar of the parish brought the case under his notice, in a diplomatic and convincing manner.

Now he was thinking of his son, the lad from whom he expected great things, and even as he pondered the door opened unceremoniously. A tall young man with

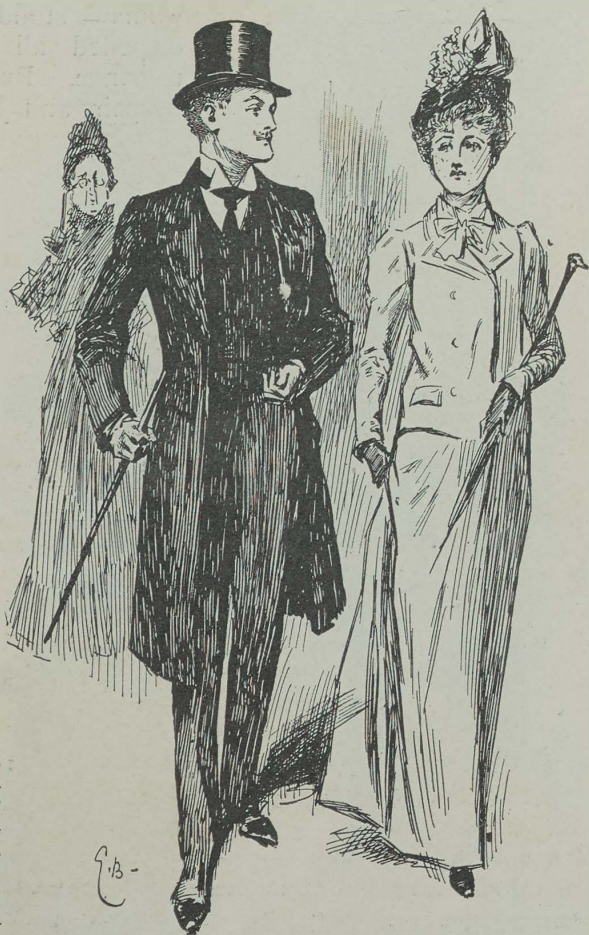
curly fair hair, and moustache of a deeper shade, stood before him.

“Oh! so you've come at last?” muttered the bookworm, closing the heavy volume on his desk, and tapping its cover with nervous, irritable fingers.

“Yes, I did not know you wanted me till Morgan gave me your message,” replied Lionel, “or I should have been in sooner.”

Mr. Trollope made a sound like a little growl.

“Hum!” he said, “you think because I don't go out and about in the world, that I sit at home hearing and seeing nothing. Allow me to tell you, sir, that in this you are mistaken.... I do see—



“ESCORTING MISS ARCHVILLE FROM THE THEATRE.”

and I do hear—I am neither deaf nor blind—and rumour carries fast, evil rumour especially. Now explain, if you can, why you violate my expressed wishes and make for yourself associates of low-born actresses—women of the stage?”

“Really, I don’t understand you,” exclaimed Lionel, nevertheless flushing slightly.

“Well, put it in the singular,” continued Mr. Trollope, relentlessly. “Can you deny that yesterday afternoon you were seen escorting a certain Miss Archville from the theatre at which she is playing, after the Wednesday *matinée*?”

“No—I do not deny it.”

“There, you see I was right, and I repeat again—a low-born actress, a penniless——”

Lionel rose to his feet, an angry gleam in the blue eyes usually so smiling and tranquil.

“She is not low-born—nor penniless, for the matter of that,” he burst out, hotly, “and I must beg you will not use these insulting terms to a lady who is a friend of mine.”

“Oh! I know the sort of friend!” sneered Mr. Trollope, with bitter emphasis. “I’m not such a hermit but I remember the way of the world. When young men make friends with such women—they generally end——”

“Father,” broke in Lionel, “take care what you are saying! Don’t you see you are talking in the dark? When you hear all the circumstances you will be sorry for your hasty judgment. Miss Archville is——”

“I don’t want to know anything about her, I refuse to listen,” thundered Mr. Trollope, glaring at the offender through his spectacles. “But mark my words, sir, I’ll stand no nonsense. If this liaison continue, if I don’t assure myself of its ceasing instantly, I will cut you off with a shilling—you shall be no son of mine!”

Mr. Trollope struck the desk with his fist violently. When his temper was thoroughly roused argument be-

came useless. Lionel, forbidden to speak in his own defence, ended the interview by withdrawing his presence and undiplomatically slamming the door after him.

II.

A SMALL girl, with large brown eyes, set in a plump, rosy face, danced along the asphalt walks of Wolverditton. It was not from sheer lightness of heart, but merely to avoid the dulness of Maria’s slow, even steps. Maria, the nursemaid, called her back, and clutched her by the hand.

“Come and walk like a little lady,” she said; “I can’t have you rushing about all over the place!”

“Don’t want to be a little lady,” pouted Miss Joan Egerton.

Maria looked shocked.

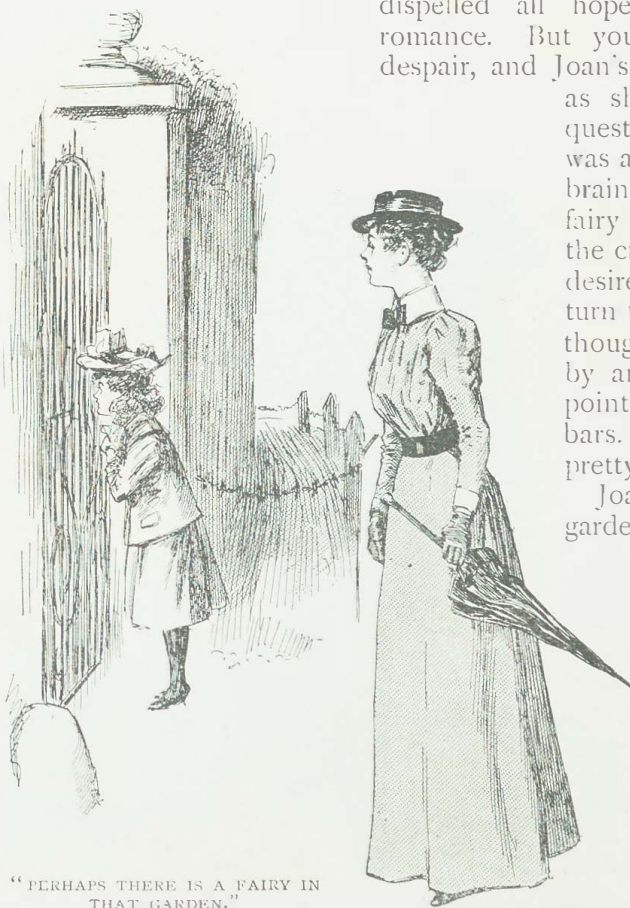
“You see,” Joan continued, wisely, “little ladies, as you call them, have always to be so stupidly good. They must not go out alone, or climb trees, or—or break things,” she added, vaguely. “If you make me walk, instead of run, you must just tell me stories—fairy stories for choice.”

The child glanced up plaintively at Maria’s unimaginative face. To an older mind the woman’s stolid expression would have dispelled all hope of a possible romance. But young hearts never despair, and Joan’s anticipation rose

as she made her request. Maria’s mind was a blank; her stolid brain could weave no fairy fantasy to satisfy the craving of a child’s desire. In order to turn the train of Joan’s thoughts she paused by an iron gate, and pointed through the bars. “Look at the pretty flowers,” she said.

Joan peered into the garden, with her nose against the gate rails. A long line of rose trees in full bloom arrested her attention.

“White, pink, red, yellow”—she counted the colours on her



“PERHAPS THERE IS A FAIRY IN THAT GARDEN.”

fingers. "Perhaps there is a fairy in that garden—a rose-fairy, like the one in the pantomime last winter."

Maria considered a minute. She knew the house and its master well. Then she nodded her head and answered, mysteriously: "Yes, you are right, Miss Joan: a fairy lives in there, just as kind a fairy as ever you could hope to meet, and, if you are a good girl, I'll tell you all about it."

With this alluring prospect in view, Joan consented to walk demurely by Maria's side.

"It was the winter when mother fell ill, before I went out to service," she explained. "Father was not strong enough to work, and we hadn't any money. Suddenly one day, when things was just at their worst, help came. It appears the vicar found a good fairy in that very house, with plenty of money to spare, and the fairy sent the money to us just at Christmas time, with a bunch of roses for mother. In fairy gardens the roses never die."

This strange intelligence made a deeper impression on Joan than Maria could have guessed. A bewildering thrill passed through the silk-frocked frame, while the brown eyes grew big with wonder—and sudden hope.

"You—you were very unhappy," the child gasped, "and the fairy put everything right?"

Joan's fingers tightened with excitement over Maria's hand. The latter nodded in reply to the eager question.

"Everything," she said. "Mother got well, and father went away for a sea trip—he was able to work when he came home."

"What was the fairy like?" asked Joan, eagerly, her mind full of magic wands, spangles, and white wings.

"He was a funny-looking fairy," laughed Maria; "a fairy with a grey beard."

Joan paled from disappointment.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and her jaw dropped.

"But they are the best kind of fairies; they can do the most for you," Maria declared.

Her tone was singularly convincing.

For a long while Joan walked in silence, busy with her own thoughts. When Maria

turned to go back, a breathless wonder seized the child, as step by step they drew nearer to the rose garden.

"You will let me look just once again," she pleaded, when the iron gates came in sight. She had grown accustomed to the thought of a fairy with a grey beard, the first paralyzing effect having worn off after reflection. Maria smiled at the keen interest displayed, lingering a moment, while Joan feasted her eyes upon the magic garden where this strange freak of a fairy lived.

The moment Joan got home she crept softly to her sister's room and pushed the door open.

"It's only me, Patricia."

A tall girl, gowned in white, stood before a mirror, brushing a cloud of golden hair, which positively gleamed in the morning sunshine.

"Oh! are you getting up?" from the small questioner. "Is your headache better?"

"Yes, dear."

"And you're not crying now?"

"No," with a faint smile.

"I'm so glad," cooed Joan, as she nestled against the soft folds of Patricia's gown, "because it is going to come all right, and you need not be unhappy any more."

Patricia's eyes flashed with sudden light,



"A TALL GIRL STOOD BEFORE A MIRROR."

as she turned them eagerly upon Joan's flushed face. The brush fell from her hand.

"What do you mean? How do you know? You can't have heard."

"I—I mean," stammered Joan, "I am going to ask a good fairy; it's a wonderful secret of mine!"

Patricia stifled a sigh of disappointment — a sigh that was almost a groan.

"Oh, I see," she said. The glimmer of tears hung trembling under her long lashes.

III.

SINCE the previous day when Lionel left his father's study, with set lips and a dangerous glint in his blue eyes, the two men had not spoken. Mr. Trollope nursed his resentment in sulky silence — a settled cloud on his wrinkled brow.

"If he dare!" the old man muttered to himself, as he sat alone in his sanctum; "if he dare flout me!"

The window leading to the garden stood open, to admit a cool breeze, and the roses peeped in, their faces warm from contact with the sun. Involuntarily, Mr. Trollope turned his eyes towards the garden, as if compelled. Was it that his ear caught the sound of a light footfall on the gravel, or had he seen a tiny shadow mingling with the sunshine, as it played upon the curtains? Anyhow, he kept his gaze riveted upon the open window, as if expecting something.

A lovely child, dressed in the pink of the rose petals, strayed to the threshold, with hesitating steps. Hatless she stood, her hair loosely framing her eager face, from which a pair of bright eyes, twinkling like stars, looked straight across at Mr. Trollope, sitting in his big arm-chair.

He was too astonished to speak, as the bold intruder advanced, walking bravely enough now towards the amazed old man. She came right up to him, laying one hand on the arm of the chair, and just feeling him with the tips of her disengaged fingers, as if to make sure he was real. Having satisfied herself on this point, she smiled up at him confidentially. He smiled back, somewhat grimly, it is true, but still he smiled.

"Are you a fairy?" she asked, in one of those big, childish whispers which travel round a room resonantly.

Mr. Trollope gave a start of surprise; he drew his eyebrows together, and coughed nervously.



"ARE YOU A FAIRY? SHE ASKED."

"A fairy, my little girl! Whatever makes you think that?"

"Oh, I don't think—I know," she answered, triumphantly; "because Maria, my nurse, told me. I know it is you—Maria said the fairy had a grey beard!" Joan stammered out the words, so great was her excitement.

Mr. Trollope listened to the intelligence with profound interest.

"You can do everything," the child continued, leaning up against him coaxingly; "that is why I came here to-day. Why, even your roses grow in the winter, because it's a magic garden!"

"Do they really?" exclaimed the old man, becoming engrossed in the conversation.

"Yes—you know they do," laughing, "and Maria said you were just as good a fairy as anyone could hope to meet, though you had got a grey beard!"

"Most obliging of Maria to give me such an estimable character, I'm sure," murmured Mr. Trollope, gratified as well as amused at the child's confidence.

"Oh! Maria knows," his uninvited guest informed him; "so I thought I would just get you to make it all right for Patricia. She is my sister, and I simply can't bear to

see her cry. She's ever so unhappy about something, that was why I came here to-day. I had to slip away when nobody was looking, and I could not wait to get my hat. It is the first time I have been out alone, and I ran all the way. I asked a lady to open your gate for me, it was so heavy, and the handle seemed rather high up. I was looking for you a long time in the garden, for I thought fairies always lived out of doors."

"No; I come in sometimes just for a change."

"And do you like the house?" she inquired, politely.

"Well, I don't exactly mind it," Mr. Trollope owned, with a glance round his spacious study. He felt for the moment as if the unexpected advent of this pretty, confiding child had cast a spell over the sombre room, making it verily and indeed a charmed palace.

He found himself half unconsciously stroking her tumbled hair, and the silky texture of those sunny locks stirred some hidden chord of emotion in his breast.

"Little girl," he said, "you are very sure of your fancies, but even fairies may fail us sometimes, however deeply we trust in them. When you grow older you will find the fairies drifting farther away, and the hard things of the world creeping in! I don't want to shatter your illusions—Heaven knows, they are precious enough, though they perish so soon—but you must not be too disappointed if you find out I am not a fairy after all."

He spoke with intense earnestness, and a mist gathered before his eyes, blotting out the grave face upturned to his, for Joan's smiles were fading now.

"Oh!" she cried, "I knew it all along—I knew you were only a gnome!"

This was a fresh surprise for Mr. Trollope; he blinked his eyelids, while his mind groped back to the folk-lore of his forgotten childhood.

"Let me see, what is a gnome?" he asked, acknowledging his ignorance, frankly.

"Oh! you know," Joan persisted, speaking incredulously, "a little thing that runs about in a wood. But I think you look too nice for a gnome," she added, on second thoughts; "and, then, Maria always speaks the truth, because she says if people don't, they'll never get to Heaven. You see, Maria has several relations there already, so she has to be particular."

Mr. Trollope did not understand children in the least, yet he keenly appreciated Joan. The wonder with which her eyes were

riveted upon him made the old man feel a stranger to himself; her quaint speech pleased his imagination.

"Are you quite alone here?" she asked. "Haven't you any subjects under you? Perhaps there is a fairy queen—I should like to see her!"

"There was a queen once," he answered, his voice dropping almost to a whisper. "But she has gone away. Would you like to see her portrait?"

He fumbled with something at his watch-chain—a gold locket, which opened as he pressed a spring. Joan clambered on his knee in order to inspect the picture. A sweet face peeped out of the locket, seeming to smile at the child.

"Isn't she lovely!" Joan exclaimed. "I wish she had not gone; it is a pity! Where is she now?"

"In Heaven," murmured the old man, staring down at the picture, a far-away expression in his eyes.

"Oh! with Maria's friends!"

As she spoke the door opened, and Morgan, with his solemn face and stately bearing, entered the room. He was carrying a card on a silver salver, which he nearly dropped at the sight of his master earnestly conversing with a hatless mite in a pink smock.

Mr. Trollope started too at being thus discovered, and half pushed the child from him. She was so sure of his good-nature that the action failed to shatter her confidence, but, attracted at that moment by the model ship, she strayed away, leaving Mr. Trollope under Morgan's stern eye.

"A lady has called, sir."

Mr. Trollope peered at the card through his glasses.

"Miss Egerton," he said. "Who the dickens is Miss Egerton?"

"Lives in the big house at the corner, sir," replied Morgan, in an undertone; "the Hon. Miss Egerton. She is thought a deal of in the neighbourhood. I think she has come after the little girl." As he spoke he indicated Joan, flitting about amongst Mr. Trollope's treasures.

"Show her in, Morgan."

The words came sharply from the old man's lips; he drew his brows together to a puzzled frown, and thought deeply.

Miss Egerton, the Hon. Miss Egerton—the class of woman with whom Lionel might have been expected to fall in love! Instead, he was wasting himself on an actress—some brazen favourite of the boards, born most

likely in the gutter, risen from the last realm of—nowhere!

An excited childish voice dispelled his reverie.

"You really must settle about Patricia," it was saying in his ear, "because that is why I came. Oh!" as the door opened again,

"I am only too pleased to think little Miss Joan strayed in such a safe direction. I rather fancy my roses attracted her. I have a fine show of blossoms which can be seen from the road."

He was terribly afraid lest Miss Egerton should discover the fallacy of the fairy, for in feminine society Mr. Trollope was intensely shy. He flew to his roses for protection, though Joan was quite ready to contradict him.

"I came because Maria said——" broke in the little voice, but Mr. Trollope interrupted hastily:—

"Perhaps you would like to see some specimen trees; roses are a hobby of mine. I am quite learned on the subject!"

He hustled Joan into the garden, as Miss Egerton gladly consented. Her eyes wore an enigmatical expression as they followed the figure of the old man.

Once amongst his rose trees he appeared entirely at his ease, discoursing upon the various species animatedly, now and again plucking the choicest for his fair companion.

"There's that son of mine," he said, pointing across the lawn to a figure in a riding-suit making its way towards the stables.

"He is a wild young beggar, but I should like to introduce him to you, Miss Egerton, if you have no objection. He will be somewhat surprised to find me with visitors, for you may have heard I am quite a recluse."

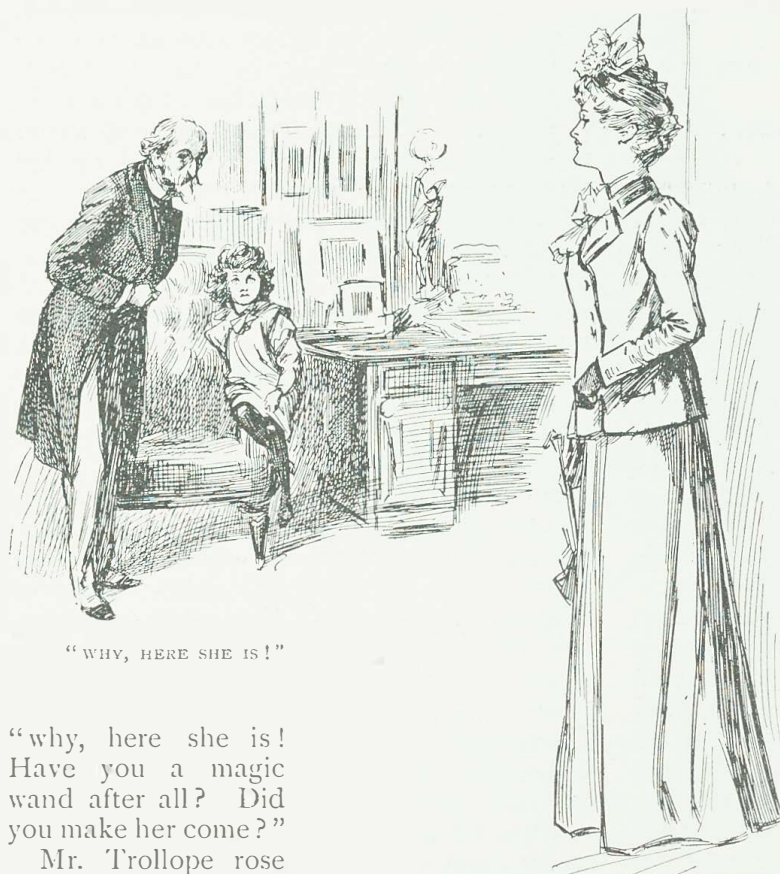
Miss Egerton smiled.

"Then you are being very good to us," she said, and her eyes travelled across the lawn.

"Lionel!" shouted Mr. Trollope. "Li-o-nel!"

He had not spoken to his son since the previous day, but his anger temporarily thawed under the magnetic influence of Patricia.

Lionel looked round astonished at seeing the strangers. To discover his father busily entertaining a beautiful girl, while a small, pink-clad child played at his feet, was a



"WHY, HERE SHE IS!"

"why, here she is! Have you a magic wand after all? Did you make her come?"

Mr. Trollope rose to bow courteously. A tall, golden-haired girl stood before him.

Her eyes were large and hazel, with those strange dark spots in them which make for beauty. A trifle pale, her face lit up with a wonderful smile at sight of little Joan perched on the arm of Mr. Trollope's chair.

"We were so frightened," she said. "Joan disappeared! A friend told us she had been seen in this garden. I could hardly believe it, but I came to find out. I don't know how to apologize sufficiently for her intrusion."

The girl had a low, sweet voice, which reminded Mr. Trollope of the voice which used to say: "Don't be hard on little Lionel."

And this was the sister whose sorrow he had been asked to cure, who was "ever so unhappy about something."

"Pray—pray—don't apologize," he begged.

revelation indeed! No wonder the young man came eagerly forward, amazed to see, and relieved at, this sudden change.

Without explaining the reason of Miss Egerton's presence, Mr. Trollope murmured an introduction, noting, with inward satisfaction, that the lady seemed favourably impressed with his scapegrace son. She smiled, and grew unexpectedly red, till her cheeks were the colour of the scarlet roses. Lionel looked equally pleased. Mr. Trollope, observing this, became suddenly engrossed with little Joan, allowing the child to drag him away on an exploring expedition.

"And how do you like my magic garden?" he asked, when they were out of earshot.

"It isn't so very different to other gardens," Joan confessed, a touch of disappointment in her tone.

"Perhaps," Mr. Trollope replied, "you will now believe I was not a fairy after all—perhaps, my dear, without knowing it, you were the fairy yourself."

"Oh, no," laughed Joan, "I wash, and eat, and go to bed. I couldn't be a fairy!"

The old man sighed.

"Of course," the child continued, "I see Maria was right. Patricia looks quite happy—since you worked the spell."

Joan's simple faith staggered Mr. Trollope! As she made this calm assertion he glanced back, catching sight of Miss Egerton's face, which brought the force of the child's words home to him.

"By Jove!" he muttered to himself; "I believe the boy is making love to her already! What a gay young dog he is! Yet only yesterday his head was turned by a designing minx of the — Theatre. Well, I'll get him out of that, if the luck turns and he settles his affections on something decent!"

IV.

MR. TROLLOPE and his son stood side by side at the garden gate, watching two figures as they vanished down the road. One—tall, graceful, and slim—did not look back; the other turned repeatedly to wave an energetic hand.

"A beautiful girl, Miss Egerton!" muttered Mr. Trollope, senior, with a shake of his grey head. "Everything to recommend her.

Youth, position, looks, fortune! Why on earth can't you fall in love with a girl like that?"

"I *have* fallen in love with her!" said Lionel.

A low whistle escaped the old man. He looked at his son critically.

"Not taken long about it, eh? Well, well, I don't know what this generation is coming to! In my day, young men's hearts were not quite so susceptible; but you know my opinion of your other affair—so I can but be glad. Miss Egerton has intelligence as well as beauty: she would be a prize worth the winning!"

They were strolling back to the house, apparently forgetful of the quarrel which had divided them since the previous afternoon.

"Oh, yes," replied Lionel, "if you had not so entirely given up the world and society, you would know that Miss Egerton is remarkably talented—in fact, one of the cleverest women of the day. She has written the most popular comedy now running in London. Her people encourage her to write, and are proud of her success. Her last play was accepted on the condition that, for the first few weeks at least, she would herself embody the character of the heroine. She takes no salary, but plays from the sheer love of art, under the name of Archville. I asked her to be my wife only two nights ago. Though deigning to love me, she made me promise to keep our engagement secret, till she relinquished her part in the play. I pledged her my word, and for that reason could not speak when you took me to task. I wrote detailing our quarrel, and she has been fretting all day at the thought of our estrangement. She now begs me to tell you the whole truth, she nearly told you herself—but Joan was all ears and eyes!"

Lionel paused—the words had literally tumbled out of his mouth. He stood before his father, panting as if for breath. Mr. Trollope appeared dazed; he stared at his son blankly. At last he spoke.

"Say that all over again, Lionel, I can't take it in!"

The younger man laughed merrily, ignoring the request. Then they walked on, and a moment later Mr. Trollope was laughing too.