

'It's absurd, I must admit, this notion of Vivienne's,' went on the first speaker, picking up an opened letter which lay by her plate, and rereading it. 'Just a fad she has taken up.'

The letter, the cause of this tempest in a teacup, ran as follows:

Dear Lady Althorp,—Shall be with you on the 18th. Can you put up Davis (my maid) in a room near my own? If so, thanks awfully! Tell you why later on. Hope all are well.

Yours, etc.,

Vivienne I. Charteris.

The laconic, jerky style befitted a young lady of advanced ideals, most of whose correspondence was carried on by the medium of picture post-cards. Vivienne Charteris was to form one of the house party at Lismona, the Irish seat of Sir George Althorp, where he had elected to spend the coming half year. Sir George was an English landowner, but possessed also this small estate in the South of Ireland. Hither had likewise come, very much against their will, his wife and only daughter. The exquisite natural beauty of their surroundings did not appeal to either lady. For them, Piccadilly and the 'Row' held a charm more potent than nature in her loveliest aspect. By way of compensation for their enforced exile, they had planned a series of home parties. The present one promised to be a brilliant success, as, among other notabilities, it comprised a bright particular star of London society—the greatly admired and much sought after Miss Charteris, the belle of two seasons. Lady Althorp plumed herself on having secured such a catch, who would not fail to bring in her train one or two notable young men of Mayfair.

'What a good thing it is,' she confided to her daughter, 'that Vivienne happens to have taken up a wish for country life! 'Tis only a passing idea, I know; but it serves our purpose just as well.'

Maud Althorp gave a short, incredulous laugh. She had a very shrewd suspicion as to the reality of Miss Charteris' newly-developed admiration for rural life. Perhaps it will be admitted there was ample ground for such, when these facts of the case are considered. Some four or five miles from Lismona was the fine old estate of Darramore. It was a beautiful place, cradled in a gentle hollow of the blue Galtees, with the silvery Anner gleaming through its miles of woodland, and mighty Galteemore towering at its back. But beautiful Darramore was lonely. Its last owner, Lord Glenult, had died as he had lived, in solitary state. He had been a rather eccentric old bachelor; and his heir, a distant cousin, had not yet come to take up his abode under the ancestral roof-tree. So Darramore was left to take care of itself more or less; and Mr. Freke, the agent, was popularly supposed to be making hay while the sun shone, and filling his pockets at the expense of the absentee lord of the soil.

Now, however, a change was at hand. The heir, it was reported, had decided to take up his residence on his estate. Orders had been issued, and were being carried out, to put all in readiness for his coming. Darramore would soon have a master. Should it not also, in the due order of things, have a mistress? Such was the burning question addressed to herself and to the unappropriated fair ones of her flock by many an anxious mother of daughters. Such likewise was the magnet which was drawing Miss Charteris from across the sea. For, somehow or other, that much-admired young lady had so far failed to carry off a prize in the matrimonial field of competition. Younger sons and impecunious professionals by the score had worshipped at her shrine, but of these she would have none. A coronet, with the means to wear it with splendour as well as with grace, was the end to be encompassed. Here, now, was the means at hand—a noble estate, and an owner who, if report spoke truly, was none too well fitted for the honors that had fallen to him.

The new holder of the title was, so far, an unknown quantity in the land. There had been, indeed, some little difficulty in tracing his whereabouts; and when he was at length found, his instructions had been imperative that his movements should be kept secret until such time as he should think well to make himself known on his new horizon. Naturally, conjecture was rife. Probably the new Peer, whose remote kinship had brought him to the title only by the death of several intervening links, labored under social disabilities. All the more reason, then, that he should seek a helpmate. And who more fitted for the position than the eminently capable Miss Charteris?

Meanwhile the vexed question of Davis' room had been settled. Miss Charteris, on her arrival was effusive in her thanks.

'I don't know that we'd have been able to manage it,' Maud admitted, in their confidential evening chat, 'only that Eileen was so good-humored about it. She insisted on giving up her room the minute she heard mother lamenting over the matter.'

'Eileen?' questioned her friend. 'Do I know her?'

'Oh, I don't suppose she has come much in your way!' returned Maud, coloring a little. 'It's like this, you know. Dad's youngest sister married an Irish barrister as poor as Job—a Catholic, too, by the way. They both died some years ago. Eileen was their only child. She has lived with us ever since.'

'A Catholic also?'

'Yes; a thoroughgoing one. She keeps pretty much to herself, and doesn't care to go about.'

'I see!' commented Miss Charteris.

Yes, she could quite clearly see much more than Miss Maud had volunteered to explain. She well remembered the slender young figure, the white brow under a wealth of sunny auburn hair, the deep blue 'Irish eyes' of the girl she had once or twice noticed during 'At homes' at the Althorps. So this was she—a modern Cinderella, doubtless. And, with a shrug, she dismissed the subject from her mind.

The Lismona house party that month was a great success. Only one crumpled rose leaf appeared in the person of an additional guest, whom Sir George, with masculine disregard for times and places, introduced to the select circle.

'So unreasonable of your father!' remarked Lady Althorp plaintively to her daughter. 'He brings this Mr. Jeffries among us, of all time in the year, just now, when I have to be so particular! What to do with him I'm sure I don't know.'

'Where in the world did Dad pick him up, I wonder?'

'He says he's the son of some one he knew long ago at college, and that he's coming down here on some business. The man may be a commercial traveller; though Dad seems to know him and to think a great deal of him. Heaven help us all!'

This dialogue occurred shortly before the arrival of the obnoxious Mr. Jeffries. He proved to be a stalwart man, of fine physique, aged about thirty or thirty-five, without being at all shy, he was rather quiet, and was promptly voted by the very smart set in which he found himself, 'not in the swim, you know'—which judgment, subtly conveyed to him, did not in the least trouble the young man. But what did impress him was the gentle kindness with which Eileen Darcy treated him, and the unobtrusive thoughtfulness with which she strove to cover the thinly-veiled discourtesy of the others. Those keen grey eyes of his took in the whole situation. He appraised her position in the household; and realised that she, like himself, was relegated to the ranks of outsiders.

That Mr. Jeffries was not without the saving sense of humor was evident from his appreciation of Lady Althorp's spasmodic attentions as hostess. On one of these occasions his eyes accidentally met Eileen's, which were brimful of fun; and the little episode seemed to form a link between them. On another occasion a chance word elicited the information that Jeffries had shot big game in the 'Rockies'—a fact which very greatly impressed some of the youths with eyeglasses, whose feats as Nimrods had been limited to bringing down a couple of moor hens at short range.

'I had thought him a regular duffer!' confided one of her admirers to Miss Charteris. 'By jove, you could have knocked me into a cocked hat!'

A surprise of a different character was given to the company by this undesirable guest when, on the Saturday evening following his arrival, he asked his hostess, en plein salon, where he could find a Catholic church at which he could attend Mass on the morrow. Lady Althorp frigidly referred him to her niece. They walked together next morning to the little village church, finding new pleasure in yet another bond of union.

That union was destined to be lifelong; for before Max Jeffries' visit came to an end, sweet Eileen Darcy had consented to cast in her lot with his. The wooing was not long adorning; but it met with Sir George's hearty approval, and Lady Althorp secretly congratulated herself on getting rid of Eileen. The engagement was not to be made public until her fiancé had settled some business of importance on which he was engaged; so for a little while Eileen had time in which to realise the great happiness that had come into her life, and to bless the Giver of all good gifts therefor.

Meanwhile things were moving rapidly to a climax at Darramore. Lord Glenult was to arrive in a few days, and his coming was to be celebrated by a ball, to which the principal county families were invited. Bewildering toilettes were planned for the occasion by all the ladies of Lismona—with one exception. It was intimated to Eileen by Lady Althorp that she was not expected to appear at the gay scene. Various reasons were alleged by the lady. Eileen knew them all by heart, as they were old acquaintances. Her pride forbade her to appeal to her uncle; so, much as she would have enjoyed the ball, she accepted the decision that debarred her from the evening's pleasure. Wistfully, when the night came, she watched the carriages rolling off to Darramore. Poor little Cinderella! But it was a role she was by this time well accustomed to play.

Quite a long time had passed since the last carriage drove away, when Eileen, sitting all alone in her little room at the top of the house, heard a sudden commotion downstairs. A clamour of voices in the hall, exclamations from the servants, the shrill barking of Lady Althorp's pugs, and, above the din, a woman's thin treble issuing directions in no uncertain tone.

Eileen jumped to her feet, exclaiming:

'What on earth can all this be about?'

She ran out on the landing, peeped over the staircase into the hall beneath, and added:

'Why, it's Aunt Pen! Now, what could have brought her out at so late an hour?'