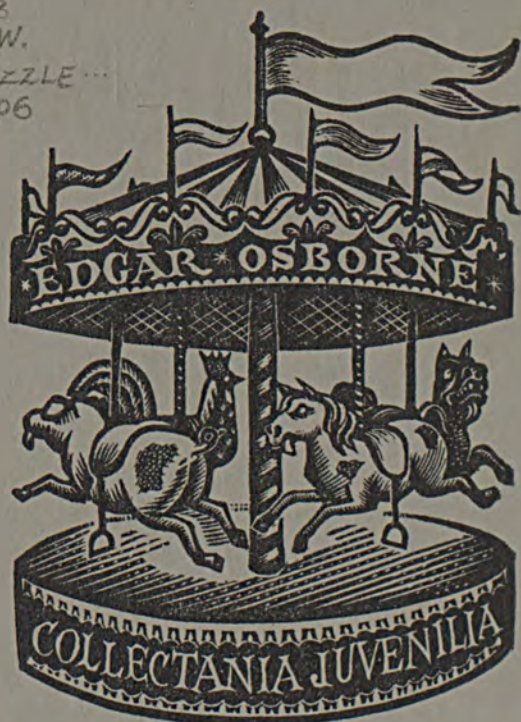




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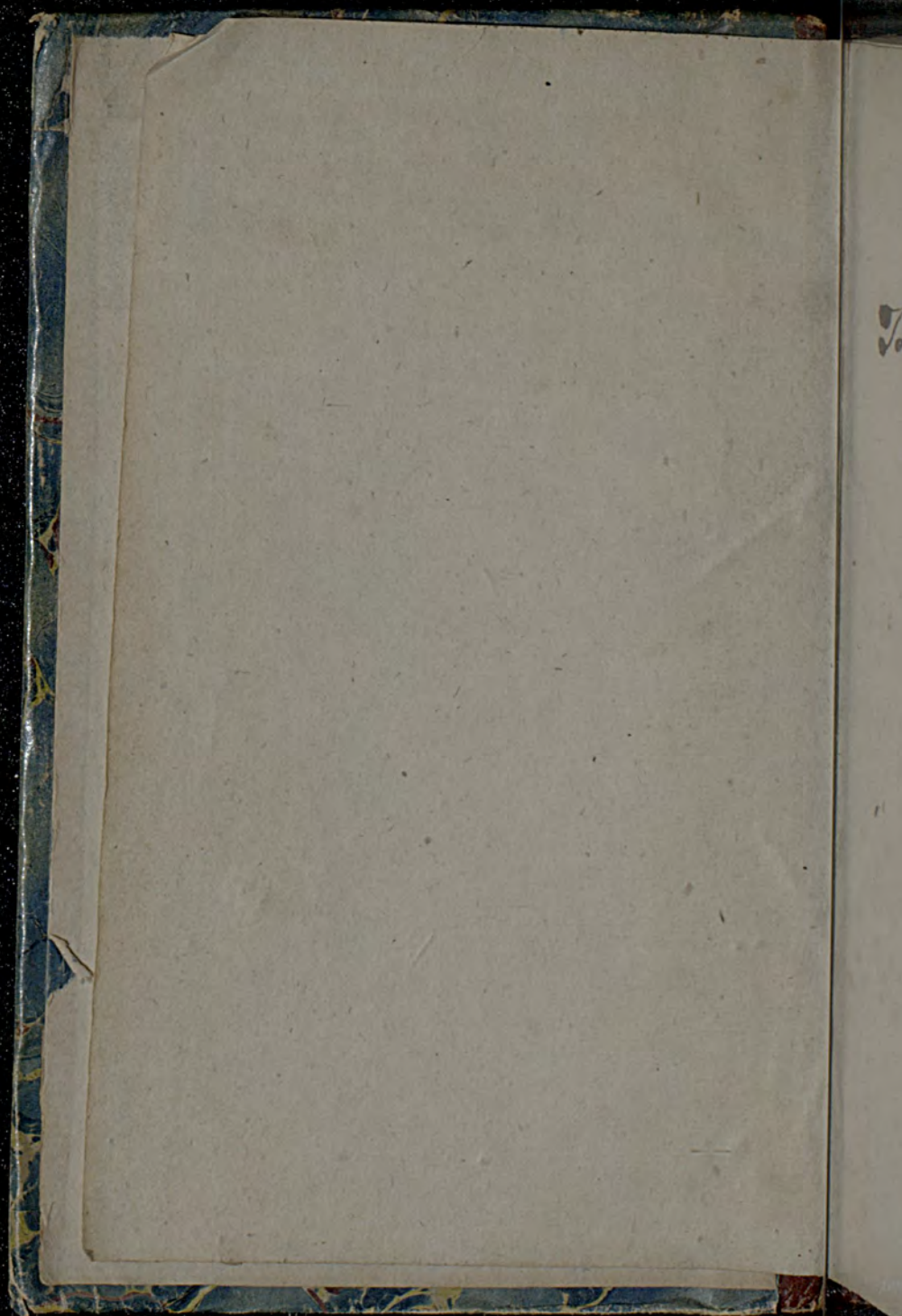
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Eliza Foster
Whore
1826

To Mary Anne Fletcher
With kind love
1826

FRONTISPIECE



PUZZLE for a curious GIRL

London. Published by Tabart & Co. Oct. 9. 1804

A
PUZZLE
FOR
A CURIOUS GIRL.

Trifles light as air
Are, to the *curious*, confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ. SHAKSPEARE.

A NEW EDITION.

LONDON:
Printed by C. Squire, Furnival's-Inn-Court,
FOR TABART AND CO. AT THE JUVENILE AND SCHOOL
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1806.

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CHAP. I.

CURIOSITY EXCITED.

“OH! I had intended to stop,” exclaimed Mrs. Belfast, as her carriage turned down a lane out of Kensington, the place of her residence. “Do, my dear,” continued she, addressing herself to her daughter, “pull the

check-string." "Why, mamma—why mamma?" eagerly enquired Laura. "Be quick, my dear," replied her mother; "we shall have gone too far for me to turn back." Laura pulled the check-string, and let down the glass.

"I meant to have stopped," said Mrs. Belfast to her coachman, "before we had left the town; but as the lane is narrow, you need not turn back; I'll alight here."

The moment the coach door was opened, Laura was jumping out. "You may wait for me," said Mrs. Belfast; "I shall not be gone five minutes." "Pray, mamma, let me go with you," said Laura. "No, my dear, it does not suit me," answered her mother. "Now do, pray, let me come, I wish for it so

very much." Mrs. Belfast, however, without staying to hear her finish her entreaty, desired the footman to shut the door.

Laura continued teasing, with her head out of window, till she saw her mother turn round into Kensington; and then throwing herself upon the seat, "What can be mamma's objection," said she, "to my going with her? I am sure there can be no reason against it. She said she should not be gone five minutes. How provoking it is!"

Five minutes, ten minutes, elapsed, and no Mrs. Belfast returned. "Where can my mamma be gone!" exclaimed Laura. "I am sure I wish I had jumped out; she would then, perhaps, have taken me with her." Her curiosity now passed all bounds.

“Did you see which way my mamma went, Thomas?” said she to the footman, who was walking backwards and forwards by the side of the coach. “No, miss, how should I?” replied the man. “Oh, I wish I knew,” said she.

Half an hour passed, which, to Laura’s impatience, appeared double the time. “Open the door, if you please, Thomas,” said she; “I must go and see after my mamma.”

The moment she had alighted, Mrs. Belfast appeared in sight. Laura skipped back into the coach, “Where were you going, my dear?” said Mrs. Belfast, as soon as they were seated. “I—I—I began to be uneasy,” replied her daughter, blushing.

“Thank you, Laura, for your anxiety on my account,” said Mrs.

Belfast, looking earnestly at her; "I was detained longer than I had expected."

"Mamma," said Laura, trying to assume a smile, after a few moments' silence, "where have you been such a long time?"

"Laura," replied Mrs. Belfast, "I see plainly what will be the case; as usual, you will make yourself unhappy for the day, because there is a trifling circumstance with which I have not acquainted you. Do, my dear, take my advice in time, and try to suppress your insatiable curiosity."

"Yes; but you will tell me, will you not, where you have been?"

"Is this a proof, Laura, you are following my advice?"

"But I do wish so very much to

know. I never was so puzzled in all my life. Oh, mamma, if you would but answer me this one question, I would never be curious again."

"If I do, you will not be nearer satisfied; for it will introduce another, which I certainly shall not answer."

"Only tell me that, mamma, and I will not ask you any thing further. Did you call any where?"

"Yes."

"At Mrs. Green's?" "No."

"Upon Miss Harris?" "No."

"Upon any poor person?"

"Poor in comparison of some, and rich in comparison of others; not a person in absolute indigence."

"Did you see any body that I know?"

"Yes; six—seven people that you know."

“Six or seven gentlemen and ladies?”

“It is a nice point to determine who are gentlemen and ladies.”

“Mamma, you are determined not to understand me: you know very well what I mean.”

“Well, my poor Laura, I will take pity upon you. The seven persons of your acquaintance whom I saw were not, according to your acceptance of the word, gentlemen and ladies.”

“Where is it possible you can have been? Surely not to any shop; you could not, in that case, have objected to my going with you.”

“Nevertheless it was to a shop that I went.”

“To a shop, mamma, what shop?”

“To Mrs. Hilcox’s, to purchase

something I had occasion for.

“ To purchase what, mamma?”

“ *A puzzle for a curious girl.*”

“ Now, mamma, how you do delight to worry me !” said Laura, peevishly. “ Speak,” continued she, bursting into tears of vexation, on finding her mother paid no attention to what she last said. “ Now do, pray, tell me what you went to buy.”

“ No; you are now come to the unanswerable question ; so with your leave we will change the subject.”

Laura, after this, ventured not to plead any further ; but she was silent and out of humour the remainder of the ride. Her mother very kindly attempted several times to lead her into conversation ; but finding all her endeavours fruitless, she took a book out of her pocket, and began to read.



CHAP. II.

THE MYSTERY RELATED TO A FRIEND.

LAURA, still vexed and dissatisfied, was by no means in her usual spirits at dinner. In the course of the afternoon, Ellen Green, a favourite playmate of nearly her own age, unex-

pectedly called upon her. Laura led her young friend into the garden, and putting her arm round her waist, immediately began to impart to her the grievance that oppressed her mind.

“O, my dear Ellen,” said she, “I am glad you are come; for such a *strange* thing has happened, that I wished to consult you. Do you know,” she continued with an air of importance, “my mamma and I went out this morning for an airing. We had no sooner turned down the lane that leads to Chelsea, than she desired me to pull the check-string for Jacob to stop. I asked her why, and she would not tell me. She would not have the coach turn round, but she got out, and away she walked, without listening to what I had to say; only telling me she should be

back in five minutes. I could not think what was the matter ; for she was gone, I dare say, near an hour. When she came back I found, after a great deal of guessing, that she had not called upon any of our acquaintance, but had only been to Mrs. Hilcox's ; but I am more puzzled than ever, to think why there should be so much mystery."

"Perhaps," said Ellen, "she went to buy a present for you. What are you most in want of?"

"I want a thousand things," returned Laura : "my huswife is so shabby, that I am almost ashamed of its being seen ; and I have long wished for a netting-weight, and a smelling-bottle like yours ; but what I should like best of all, would be that sweet little Tunbridge-ware writing-box we both admired so much."

“ Well, Laura,” rejoined Ellen, “ I do really think it is not impossible that your mamma should have bought that box for you. She saw the other day how much you were pleased with it.”

“ To be sure,” said Laura, “ it would be quite like her. She is always so good, and so indulgent. And now that you have put this into my head; dear Ellen, I begin to be sorry for my behaviour this morning. To speak the truth, I was a little out of humour; but it always provokes me to see a person make secrets for nothing.”

A summons to tea now broke off the conversation, and the two little girls had no opportunity to renew it the remainder of the evening; but before they parted Laura promised to give her friend a particular account,

the first time they met, of all she could discover relating to, this important mystery.

The following day was a restless one to the curious temper of Laura. Mrs. Belfast did not attempt to account for her wonderful disappearance. Her behaviour was the same as usual, nor did she appear to notice her daughter's uneasiness. She put her hand into her pocket several times, and once she even felt in it longer than usual. Laura watched her with eagerness. Her mamma had just commended her attention to her studies, and surely, thought she, *this* is the moment to reward it. Mrs. Belfast's countenance, too, as she drew out her hand, expressed to her raised imagination something more than ordinary. Alas! what a blank

did she experience, when she saw her at length put on her thimble, and quietly begin to work. Another time, as Laura was hastily running by the room in which her mother was sitting, she heard herself called. "Do you want me, mamma?" said she eagerly, flattering herself that she should at that moment receive her expected present. "I only wish you, my dear, to tell Nanny that I want to speak with her." A second severe mortification for the anxious Laura.

Evening came on, and happily brought with it some relief. "When you were at Mrs. Hilcox's yesterday," enquired she, "did you see the beautiful little writing-box?"

"No, my dear, it was sold."

This answer was a clue to unravel

the mystery. From her mother's knowing so positively it was sold, it was plain she had enquired after it; but as it might have been a day or two before she could procure another, the reason that it had not yet been mentioned was evident.

When Laura retired to bed, she amused herself by anticipating the pleasure the possession of so charming a treasure would afford her: and the next morning she contrived to send a note to Ellen, acquainting her that they had not been mistaken in their conjectures.

Nearly a week elapsed, and Laura began to grow very impatient for the arrival of the standish. She was one morning sitting with her mamma, when the maid came in and said that a person had brought a box, but was

not certain that he was at the right house.

“O yes,” said Mrs. Belfast, “it is for me; let it be taken in.”

“Shall I go and fetch it, mamma?” said Laura.

“No, my dear, Nanny will take it to my dressing-room; I am busy, and do not want it here.”

“Mamma, I will carry it up if you please.”

“I had much rather, Laura, you should mind your work. You know I wait for what you are doing.”

Laura was obliged to stifle her impatience, and continue her employment; but she pleased herself with the thought, that she was certain of soon receiving the long hoped-for present, and finding the mystery completely done away.



CHAP. III.

A PEEP INTO THE BOX.

Mrs. Belfast had an engagement for the evening; and Laura, who had not before had an opportunity, ran up into her mamma's dressing-room the moment the coach had driven from the door. After searching in

vain all over the room, and looking in every open drawer, a plain deal box, on the top of a high chest of drawers, attracted her attention; which, though of itself without either beauty or value, might, she hoped, contain the object of her wishes.

Her eyes sparkling with expectation she mounted upon a chair, and attempted to take it down: but after having reached it with a good deal of difficulty, as she was still too short to hold it securely, it unfortunately slipped from her hands, and falling upon a large swing-glass that stood upon a dressing-table beneath, smashed it into a thousand pieces.

Laura was, however, too much engaged to pay any attention to the accident. She sprang from the chair; but on lifting up the cover, how great

was her surprise to find that the box was empty!

“Oh dear!” she exclaimed, “how can this be? Surely every thing happens to tease me. I am not at all nearer knowing the secret than I was before.” And then she added, looking mournfully at the glass, “What an unlucky accident! Oh, what shall I say to my mamma?”

Having employed herself for some time in picking up the broken glass, she went to Nanny, and, after bewailing her misfortune, enquired if she could tell what it was that came in the fatal box? “Oh yes, miss,” said Nanny; “Miss Fenning sent home your mamma’s new bonnet in it. My mistress is gone out in it to-night.”

“Ah! is that all?” said Laura, in

a disappointed tone. "But pray, Nanny, can you tell whether any other box, or any parcel, has come to the house this last week without my knowing it?"

"No, that I can't," answered Nanny; "but I have not heard of any."

Laura then, with equal eagerness, repeated the same question to all the other servants, and received from each of them a similar answer.

Miss Belfast's disposition was ingenuous; she therefore determined to be the first to acquaint her mother with the accident. The moment she returned she ran to her, and summoning all her courage, tremblingly informed her of all that had happened.

"Is there no end to your restless curiosity?" enquired Mrs. Belfast, "Could you suppose that there was

any thing in that box that related to you?" Laura coloured and hung her head. "Speak, Laura," continued her mother; "did you imagine that the box contained any thing of yours? or what could induce you to be so insufferably inquisitive?"

"Mamma," returned the abashed girl, "you know you would not tell me the other day what you went to buy at Mrs. Hilcox's; and I took it into my head it was a present for me; and I thought it might be in that box; and so I looked to see what it was."

"I will forgive you this once," rejoined Mrs. Belfast, "in consideration of your honest confession; but let not the lesson of this afternoon be lost upon you. Do endeavour to check this prying propensity, which, believe me, Laura, if indulged, will

prove your tormentor through life. As to your present conjectures," continued she, after a pause, "they were quite without foundation; for I had not the smallest intention of buying any thing for you at Mrs. Hilcox's. The mighty occasion of my leaving you, I may possibly be at liberty one day to reveal."

A day or two past before Laura had an opportunity to relate her disappointment to Ellen; during which time her imagination was constantly on the stretch to find something mysterious in the most simple occurrence; and to trace in whatever was said some allusion to the wonderful visit to Mrs. Hilcox's.



CHAP. IV.

THE DISPUTE.

LAURA having obtained permission to visit her friend, immediately took her aside to relate all that had past. "And now, my dear Ellen," said she, "I do not know what to suppose. The more I think over every

circumstance, the more I am convinced my mamma left me for some very particular reason. She thought to impose upon me, that is very plain, by telling me she went to Mrs. Hilcox's to purchase something; but I am not to be caught so easily neither. It is very likely she did buy some trifling article; but that never was her motive for stopping the coach, and refusing to take me with her."

"Pooh!" said Ellen, "what other reason could she have for going to the shop?"

"That," said Laura, "I am sure I cannot tell; for I have puzzled to no purpose. She was saying yesterday, that people should, in some cases, be careful to assist privately those that are in distress; as it might hurt their feelings, if it should be

known that they accepted of relief: and this seemed to bring to her mind Mrs. Hilcox; for she spoke of her immediately after. So it came into my head, that she might possibly have called to carry her two or three guineas; for you know she lost her husband very lately."

"Yes; but you know she is in a very good way of business."

"So every body supposes; but we often hear of shopkeepers going on for some time in a flourishing way, and then breaking all to nothing, to the surprise of all the world; and I should not wonder if that should soon be the case with the Hilcoxes. However, let my mamma have done for them what she would, there could certainly be no objection to her mentioning it to her

own daughter." Ellen smiled. "You cannot imagine," continued Laura, gravely, "how I am puzzled between my different fancies. There is one," added she, sighing, "that I fear is but too likely to be true; and yet it is so melancholy, that I cannot bear to think of it."

"Dear Laura, what can that be?" enquired Ellen.

"We went the night before last to drink tea with Mrs. Darwin and her daughter, who, you know, have the first floor at the Hilcoxes; and when we came away, my mamma praised Maria as the most amiable and accomplished girl she knew, and said she did so much credit to her instructress, that there was no school, to which she should so much like to send a daughter of her own, as to

Mrs. Hutchinson's, where Maria has been ever since she was eight years old. From this, and from a great many other circumstances, I cannot help fearing that she went to Mrs. Hilcox's to make enquiries of Mrs. Darwin; and that she means to send me to school with Maria, as soon as the Midsummer holidays are over."

"But did not your mamma tell you that she did not call upon any lady?"

Laura. "Not upon any lady according to *my* acceptation of the word: but she knows very well that I do not think Mrs. Darwin looks at all like one, with her slouch bonnet and morning cap; for she has heard me say so a thousand times."

Ellen. "Well, I think you have no occasion to make yourself uneasy."

Laura. "But when one is in 2

puzzle, such odd notions will come into one's head. However, I must own I sometimes think I am a great simpleton, to torment myself, while perhaps my mamma might only have intended to give me pleasure, and might have gone to Mrs. Hilcox's to bespeak her son to come and play to us some afternoon on his violin, while we danced upon the lawn."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Ellen, giving a sudden spring for joy, "what a charming evening we should have! But tell me, Laura, what reason have you for this supposition?"

Laura. "Oh, not much; only my mamma told me she wished I would practise the steps more by myself, for I had so forgotten them, she should be ashamed of any one seeing me dance. And another time, she

said she liked a summer's evening dance in the open air much better than a winter's ball ; and the night before last, as we were coming away, she told Miss Darwin she intended very shortly to invite a small number of Laura's young friends, and she hoped she would consent to join the party."

Ellen. "But if your mamma really went to speak to young Hilcox the day you suppose, I do not see why the dance should have been put off so long."

Laura. "Nor I neither ; only you know she might wait for a moon."

The delights of the dance were canvassed for some time, till Ellen observed with a smile, "that they seemed to have thoroughly arranged every particular ; and added, that she was grieved to think, that after all,

such a pretty plan was but an *airy castle*."

"You never will enter into any of my fancies, Ellen," exclaimed Laura, peevishly. "Tell me yourself, what do you suppose my mamma left me for in that unaccountable manner?"

Ellen. "Indeed I do not know; but I dare say for nothing that concerns me."

Laura. "I dare say, however, it concerns *me*. Therefore tell me, is there any one thing besides that I have mentioned, for which you can suppose it possible that she went to Mrs. Hilcox's?"

Ellen. "Yes, a great many."

Laura. "Oh then tell me, Ellen; make haste, I want to know, of all things in the world."

Ellen. "To buy something for your papa."

Laura. "I do not think that is at all likely. I do not see any thing that a man can want."

Ellen. "The last time I was at your house, he said the root-stands were so shabby he was ashamed of seeing them. Perhaps Mrs. Belfast bespoke a new pair to surprise him."

Laura. "And does that account for her not taking me with her?"

Ellen. "Yes, she might intend to surprise you too."

Laura. "Oh, I dare say, I should be as much pleased with the surprise of a pair of new root-stands, as with being in the secret from the very first!"

Ellen. "Well, then, she had a mind to play upon your curiosity."

Laura. "A very kind motive, truly, that would have been! But, however, Ellen, I can tell you I am

by no means curious ; I know I am of an open temper, and I hate reserve ; but I believe I am as little curious as any body in other people's affairs."

" *You not curious !*" retorted Ellen, scornfully ; *you* that are always miserable if there is any thing concealed from you. I wonder who *is* curious, if Laura Belfast is not?"

" I am *not* curious, I tell you," returned Laura, in a high tone. " My mamma might have bought every thing in the shop, and I should not have cared, only I cannot bear to be put off with a false excuse, and to be treated with a want of confidence."

Ellen. " A *mighty* want of confidence, if your mamma had bought a pair of root-stands, and had not told you of them till they were sent home !"

Laura. "But I am sure she went away for something a great deal more important. And now, upon thinking of it again, I feel quite positive it was to carry something to Mrs. Hilcox; for she sent us a basket of cherries the other day, and said they were the first she had gathered. She never did such a thing before, and it is very plain she would not now, if she had not had some particular cause to be grateful."

Ellen. "I see nothing so very surprising in that. She gave me a canary bird last summer, and I am sure I never did any thing to oblige her. But *you* perhaps may puzzle away and find some mystery in it."

Laura. "Well, Miss Ellen, I'll take care not to open my mind to you another time."

Ellen. "A great loss I shall have, Miss Laura, if all you have to tell me is as important as that your mamma went into a shop."

Laura was going to reply with much bitterness, when she received a hasty summons into the parlour, where her father was waiting to conduct her home. She coolly wished her friend good night, and they parted with mutual dissatisfaction.

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CHAP. V.

VARIOUS ENQUIRIES.

WHEN Laura arose the next morning, she determined, in the course of the day, to put such questions to her mother, as should oblige her to unravel the whole mystery. After

a good deal of thought she began, by saying, with apparent carelessness, as they sat at work, "Do not you think, mamma, it would be a good plan to let Mrs. Hilcox have some of those shirts to make?" "Mrs. Hilcox, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Belfast, in a voice of surprise. "Yes," answered Laura; "she and her daughter might find time for work of an evening, and it would be such a charity to employ them!"

Mrs. Belfast. "You certainly must be better acquainted with their affairs, Laura, than I am, if you know them to be in straitened circumstances."

"*You do not know them to be in distress?*" said Laura, looking archly in her mother's face, with a smile of triumph, at the idea how much

Mrs. Belfast would be disconcerted, when she found that her secret was discovered.

“No, indeed, my dear,” returned Mrs. Belfast, “I do assure you, I have not the smallest suspicion of it. Pray, Laura, may I enquire what gave rise to the idea?”

Laura. “Oh! I had no reason for it; only, you know she lost her husband very lately; and did not you once say something very like it?”

Mrs. Belfast. “You might very probably hear me pity her for the loss of her husband; but so far from his having left her in pecuniary distress, I believe Mr. Hilcox had been remarkably successful; and since his death every body seems to make it a point to continue to deal with her. Her children, you know, are

most of them grown up, and I believe settled very much to her satisfaction: so that I rather think, Laura, she would feel herself affronted at my offering her plain-work."

"What do you think could be her motive," enquired Laura, after a pause, "in sending you that basket of cherries the other day?"

Mrs. Belfast. "To show a pleasing mark of attention to a neighbour and a good customer. It did not strike me as any thing very extraordinary."

Laura blushed at the recollection of her positiveness and warmth the preceding evening. After a silence of some time, she enquired of her mother when she would give her leave to invite Miss Darwin and the

other young ladies she had mentioned.

Mrs. Belfast. "Next Thursday, my love, if nothing happens to prevent."

Laura. "And how shall we contrive to entertain them, mamma?"

Mrs. Belfast. "You may either have a ramble in the gardens, or look at prints, or play at traveller, or do any thing else they seem best to like. I cannot say I feel under any apprehensions that five or six little girls will not know how to amuse themselves."

Laura. "Does not Mrs. Hilcox's son play very well on the violin?"

Mrs. Belfast. "I believe he does."

Laura. "Do you know what he charges for playing for an evening?"

Mrs. Belfast. "No, indeed, I do

not exactly; but I believe about half-a-guinea."

Laura, after in vain allowing her mother time to make the expected proposal, ventured to enquire if she had not some intention of giving their visitors a dance upon the lawn, and sending for Mr. Hilcox to play to them.

Mrs. Belfast smiled. "No, my dear," said she, "I cannot say I have ever had a thought of the kind. If, when your friends are here, you are all disposed for a hop, I will play to you on the piano with great pleasure; but as for sending for a fiddler, and giving a regular dance, I cannot agree to that."

Laura, abashed and disappointed, sighed, on considering, that as all her other fancies had now been con-

tradicted, there was the more probability of her fancy relating to school being well founded.

When once the mind has adopted an idea, however ridiculous it may be in itself, the most indifferent circumstance is arrested to confirm it. In the course of the afternoon a lady, who accidentally called, enquired of Mrs. Belfast, if she had not proposed that her daughter should learn music of Mr. Fleming, a gentleman who taught several families in the neighbourhood. "I did talk of it once," replied Mrs. Belfast; "but I am not sufficiently satisfied with Mr. Fleming's style of playing. Laura will learn music soon; but it will be of another master who has been greatly recommended to me by a lady of my ac-

quaintance.” Laura eagerly enquired his name; but as her mamma could not recollect it, she instantly set it down for granted, that the lady alluded to was Mrs. Darwin, and that the person she had recommended was the master who taught at Mrs. Hutchinson’s school.

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CHAP. VI.

A SERIOUS ALARM.

THE following Thursday a large party of young folks assembled at Mr. Belfast's. Mr. and Mrs. Belfast formed a variety of plans for their diversion, and Laura was the

only one who did not enjoy the evening. Soon after Miss Darwin came, she contrived privately to ask her, if her mamma had lately called at their lodgings. "She was so good as to come herself yesterday, to give me an invitation for this evening," replied Miss Darwin.

"But can you recollect," enquired the inquisitive Laura, "whether she called yesterday week, about half past two, and staid an hour with you? I have particular reasons for asking."

"I know she called one morning," answered Maria, "about a week ago; but I cannot recollect the day."

"I hope you will forgive me for seeming to be so impertinent; but pray did she say any thing about your school?"

“I remember my aunt Hutchinson was mentioned; but I did not hear much, for my mother soon sent me out of the room.”

Every fear of Laura was now confirmed. She felt that she could not have asked another question without bursting into tears; and though, in general, no one engaged in play with greater spirit, her heart was this evening so saddened at the thought of leaving home, that she heartily rejoiced when the hour came for her visitors' departure.

Before they went away, she obtained permission of her mamma to invite Ellen Green, who was one of the party, to spend the next day with her, as Mrs. Belfast had a particular engagement in town. “And then, my dear Ellen,” she faltered

out as she walked with her to the gate, "I will open my whole mind to you; for, indeed, I am very unhappy."

When Laura found herself in bed, secure from observation, she gave free vent to her grief. The parting scene she painted in the most dismal colours, and anticipated every feeling that would wring her heart, when at a distance from those she loved. Happily, however, she soon forgot her sorrows, and in less than an hour cried herself to sleep.

She awoke the next morning greatly refreshed by the slumbers of the night. Should she be sent to school, her sorrows, she began to think, might admit of more alleviations than the evening before she had imagined possible; but she was

willing to hope she had been too easily alarmed. The conversation of her parents at breakfast contributed to restore her to her usual spirits; and by degrees she looked forwards with the idea of laughing with Ellen at her self-made affliction, when an incident occurred that plunged her again into the most direful distress.



CHAP. VII.

THE PROSPECT OF PARTING.

Mrs. BELFAST was on the point of setting off, when a servant brought her a letter, which she hastily opened, to see if it required an answer. Laura's usual curiosity

made her extremely impatient to know from whom it came : but her mother, whose attention was engaged by the letter, for some time gave no answer to her repeated enquiries ; till, as she was locking it up in the desk, she replied “ from Mrs. Hutchinson ; ” and then, as her carriage was waiting, she hastily ran down stairs, not allowing time to the overpowered girl to enquire an explanation.

“ Oh dear ! oh dear ! ” exclaimed Laura, “ what will become of me ? ” and flinging herself into a sofa, she gave way to the most passionate expressions of grief. She was in this situation when Ellen entered the room, and eagerly enquired what was the matter. Laura, redoubling her sobs, grasped her hand, and hid

her face in her bosom. The tears started to the eyes of Ellen, and her voice failed her, as she endeavoured to sooth her friend, in whose grief she already sympathised, though she knew not its cause. At last the unhappy Laura sobbed out, that she was really going to school.

“Are you quite sure of it?” cried Ellen, bursting into tears; “has your mamma told you so?” Then, putting her arms round her waist, she clung to her, as if fearful she should lose her that moment.

As Laura grew, in some degree, more composed, she related, in an incoherent manner, all her reasons for supposing that it was finally settled she should be sent to Mrs. Hutchinson’s.

The day was spent in mutual la-

mentations. Miss Belfast declared she should not have an easy moment till she returned to Kensington; and Ellen, with equal sincerity maintained she could never be happy while her dear Laura was away. They both bitterly reproached themselves for their foolish dispute, the last time they were alone together. "How could we," exclaimed Ellen, "quarrel about such a trifle! we that do love each other so dearly."

"What a threat was mine," said Laura, "that I would not open my heart to you again! Oh! my dear Ellen, how miserable shall I be when I cannot tell you all my thoughts as I have been used to do!"

"When you are gone," rejoined Ellen, in a mournful tone, "what shall I not be willing to give for one

hour with you ; and we spoilt," she continued, again bursting into tears, " one of the last evenings we may have together."

Sometimes the conversation took a more cheerful turn. They agreed upon a strict correspondence, felt a momentary delight at the idea of the number of anecdotes they should have to communicate, and dwelt with rapture on their meeting at Christmas.

In the evening, as they were waiting in Mrs. Belfast's dressing-room till Ellen should be sent for, again talking over all the circumstances that had occasioned the dismal supposition, " Dear Laura," said Ellen, " after all, I am half inclined to hope you may be mistaken. Might not your mamma have said Mrs. Hutchins, or Mrs. Hudson, and you have mistaken it for Mrs. Hutchinson?"

“O that it might be so!” exclaimed Laura, clasping her hands together. “What would I not give for one peep at the letter! It is the top thing in this desk that we are lolling upon; and this is the key,” added she, selecting one from a bunch of keys, which she had been for some time twisting about her fingers; and which Mrs. Belfast, in her hurry, had left upon the table.

Ellen was silent, and Laura felt ashamed of having even hinted at a mean action. “I hope my mamma,” said she, “will come into my room, as she usually does, before she goes to bed. I am sure I shall be awake, and then I will ask her every thing.”

“I wish I could know before I go home,” said Ellen, with a sigh. “I

have been thinking there may be more than *one* Mrs. Hutchinson in the world."

Laura. "Well, there can be no harm in just looking at the letter, to see the post-mark. Do you think there can, Ellen?"

Ellen. "I do not know. It does not seem to me quite right."

Laura. "Nor to me neither. Well then, we will let it alone. But it would be *such* a satisfaction only to look at the outside of the letter; because, you know, if it has not the Norwich post-mark, we may make ourselves quite easy." So saying, she unlocked the desk. The post-mark was so carelessly stamped as to be wholly illegible. It plainly, however, began with an N, and the size of the word could leave little doubt for what it was intended.

“ I must,” said the trembling girl, “ just look to see if there is a date inside. I need not read another word you know.”

“ Stop, Laura,” cried Ellen ; “ you said you would not open it.”

“ Nay, Ellen, there can be no more harm in that than in looking at the outside of the letter. I must, and I will see if it comes from Mrs. Hutchinson the school-mistress.” On opening the letter the first word that met her eye was *Norwich*, and by a second glance she perceived that it began in the following manner : “ I am delighted to find, my dear madam, that you were satisfied in the enquiries you made of Mrs. Darwin——” Laura gave a shriek, and tossed the letter from her ; then, wringing her hands, she walked back-

wards and forwards in an agony of distress. Ellen, after vainly endeavouring to sooth her friend, threw herself upon a chair, and, hiding her face in her handkerchief, gave free vent to her tears. At this moment Nanny entered the room, and told Miss Green that her servant waited for her below.

They then took as solemn a parting as if they had been certain of not meeting for months; and, when her friend was gone, Laura remained for some time lost in anguish.

At length the fallen letter caught her attention, and she picked it up in order to replace it in the desk. Again she examined the word *Norwich*. "I may as well," thought she, "read the rest of the letter, only just to see what it says about me." The con-

science of Laura, which already reproached her for having acted meanly, opposed this determination ; but, after a short debate with herself, her impatience conquered her better principles, and, with an anxious mind, she perused the whole.

The beginning sentence only renewed her distress ; but how much was she overjoyed to find, that all the rest related to some business with which she was unacquainted, and that not a syllable had any reference to herself !

Her transport at this discovery for a time prevented her from considering the impropriety of her conduct ; but as her joy by degrees abated, the idea of meanness became painful to her, and she dreaded her mother's just displeasure in case of detection.

She therefore, with much care, replaced the letter exactly as she had found it, and strove to put the keys on the very same spot on which they had been left by Mrs. Belfast.

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CHAP. VIII.

LAURA'S REMORSE.

Miss Belfast's sensations the next morning, on the idea of meeting her parents, were very different from those she usually experienced after a day's separation. She was sensible

she merited their anger, and that if they treated her with their accustomed tenderness it could only proceed from their ignorance of her behaviour. Impressed with these feelings, she loitered in her own room till breakfast was half over; and when she went down she seated herself at a corner of the table, with an embarrassment their presence seldom excited.

“Well, Laura,” enquired her mamma, “had you a very lively day yesterday with Ellen Green?”

“I do not know, mamma,” replied she, deeply colouring.

“You seem doubtful, my dear,” resumed her mother. “Surely you did not engage in any dispute?”

“Oh, no! we never were better friends.”

“ In what manner did you amuse yourselves ?”

Laura's confusion now increased ; and it was not without hesitation she answered : “ Part of the time we walked in the garden, and afterwards we talked.”

“ Upon my word, two very sedate ladies ! But I have some news for you, Laura, which I think will give you pleasure. I have engaged Mr. Brandini to teach you music, as soon as the midsummer holidays are over. He is at present too much engaged with private scholars to have leisure to attend you.”

Laura, who would at all times have been delighted with the prospect of learning music, at this moment heard the news with particular pleasure, as it seemed to preclude the possibility

of her being sent to Mrs. Hutchinson's. Happy, likewise, in an opportunity to avoid the former topic of conversation, she replied in the most animated terms, and warmly expressed her gratitude.

But though the cause of her late uneasiness was thus removed, she could not dwell without poignant regret on the distress in which, by her folly, her beloved Ellen was involved. Had her mamma been acquainted with it, she knew that she would readily have permitted her to have called upon her friend, to quiet her fears ; but she was afraid of hinting a wish to go to Mrs. Green's, lest her motive should be enquired into ; and though the affection she bore her mother, and her natural openness of temper, made her often on the point

of confessing her fault, yet her courage as constantly failed her, on the recollection of the extreme detestation Mrs. Belfast always expressed of every act that bordered upon meanness.



CHAP. IX.

FRESH GAME STARTED.

A DAY or two after the vexations mentioned in the last chapter, when the cause that excited them was nearly forgotten, Laura was sitting with her parents in the bow-window

of the saloon. Mr. Belfast was employed in looking over the newspaper, when suddenly leaning against the chair of his wife, and putting one arm round her waist, "See, my dear," said he, directing her eye to an advertisement, "here is the very cottage we were wishing for, and exactly in the spot that Mrs. Darwin so much recommended for those who wish to retrench."

Mrs. Belfast smiled. "Indeed," said she, "I think there is no time to be lost." "What! what!" exclaimed Laura, skipping behind her parents in order to overlook the paper—"what is it you say, papa?"

"Your mother understood me, *ma petite curieuse*," returned he, patting her on the head; "I only alluded to a conversation we had the other evening."

This answer did not satisfy the eager Laura, whose curiosity, once excited, was not easily suppressed; and from the above cursory mention of Mrs. Darwin, her quick imagination instantly connected the present *mystery* of the *cottage*, as she termed it, with the subject of her late perplexity. What strengthened her suspicions was an imperfect recollection of something to the following effect, in the letter of which she had clandestinely obtained a perusal; after a sentence she had totally forgotten, Mrs. Hutchinson added, ‘ that she felt herself truly concerned at the alteration in the circumstances of her friends; that the change must be keenly felt; but that she trusted their fortitude would enable them to bear with cheerfulness every sacrifice they

should be compelled to make.' On reading this paragraph, Laura had paused for a moment, to consider to whom it could allude; but her mind being then occupied by a more interesting subject, it had made but little impression. Now, however, she did not doubt but her own parents were the friends spoken of by Mrs. Hutchinson.

The enquiries made of Mrs. Darwin, mentioned in the first sentence, she presumed, related to the situation of some place in the country; and though the contents of the rest of the letter had entirely slipped her memory she felt certain they so plainly referred to the same circumstance, she only wondered that her penetration had not sooner made the discovery.

Laura waited impatiently till the newspaper was laid upon the table;

when, taking it up, she ran over with eager haste the advertisements relating to houses.

After some consideration, she selected the following as the one her father had pointed out:

“ To be let, and entered upon at
“ Michaelmas next, an eligible farm,
“ known by the name of Clare-hall,
“ delightfully situated in a romantic
“ valley in the county of Devon,
“ within ten miles of Exmouth; consisting of a small farm-house,
“ thatched, and neatly fitted up in
“ the cottage style, together with a
“ garden, orchard, and about 200
“ acres of arable and meadow land.
“ Particulars may be had by applying, &c.”

That very evening Laura heard her father mention to a gentleman that he should be absent from home for

two or three weeks, as he intended accompanying a friend on a tour on the south-west coast. What could be stronger confirmation? Laura gave a significant smile, on the consciousness of being well acquainted with the motive of his journey; but it escaped the notice of Mr. Belfast. "I hope the house will not be taken; do not you, mamma?" said she to her mother the next day.

"What house, my dear?"

"Why, that charming cottage in Devonshire my papa is going into the country to see after."

"What makes you suppose he has any such intention?"

"Oh, *I* know very well. You need not pretend to hide it from me. Did not I see him point it out to you yesterday in the newspaper?"

"And on that circumstance *only*

have you contrived to form such a pretty story?" said Mrs. Belfast.

Laura blushed, whose strongest reason for her conjecture, was such as she dared not disclose. She was hesitating in what manner to reply, when a loud ring at the bell, announcing the arrival of company, effectually prevented further enquiry.

Fearful of being again interrogated she never ventured to renew the subject. A reserve to which she was so little accustomed cost her much; but she endeavoured to atone for the silence she forced herself to observe towards her parents, by enlarging to every one else on the plans which occupied her thoughts.

"Oh, Nanny, Nanny," said she, the first opportunity, "we are going to live in the country, a great way

off, in a pretty little farm ; and we shall have horses, and cows, and sheep, and poultry, and every thing you can think of ; and a nice orchard, and such plenty of fruit ! And I dare say there will be a little poney for me to ride upon. Oh ! we shall be so happy," said she, skipping about, " in our pretty cottage !"

" Your *cottage* !" said Nanny.

" Yes, a nice little snug farmhouse, fitted up in the cottage style. It is in Devonshire. It is called Clare-hall."

" And what is the meaning of this moving ?" enquired Nanny.

Laura. " I cannot tell you exactly ; but by what I can find out, I fancy my papa must have had great losses in trade, and so he thinks it better to go into the country, where he can live cheap."

Nanny. "Great losses ! Does not that make you very uneasy ?"

Laura. "Oh dear, not at all. I am sure I shall enjoy myself a great deal more than I do now. We shall have my papa with us all day ; and he will have nothing to do but to see about the farm, and read to us when we are at work, and ride and walk with us."

Nanny. "What servants does your mamma take with her ?"

Laura. "I dare say she will not take any, as we are going to save all the money we can. We shall hire a strong maid in the country, I suppose, to do the work of the house, and to wash ; and *I* shall help to churn, and take care of little Henry : and we shall not want much washing ; for I shall not often wear white frocks.

my straw hat, tied under my chin with pink ribbons, will do very well for the country, you know; and I shall put a garland of natural flowers round to make me look like a shepherdess."

Nanny. "What do you suppose will be done with the coach?"

Laura. "We certainly shall not take that with us."

Nanny. "Why! it was new but a few months ago."

Laura. "That does not signify; we shall get the more for it. It is very likely we shall have a country cart to ride about in. How often I have longed to ride in a cart!"

Nanny. "Well, I must enquire what my mistress means to do; for if I am to be turned off, it is time I should begin to look about me."

Laura. "Pray, Nanny, do not say any thing to mamma about it: she will not like I should have mentioned it to you. Besides we cannot go before Michaelmas, and you know her well enough, to be sure she will not turn you away unhandsomely. I do not know, perhaps she may take you along with us. Indeed I know nothing for certain; for mamma has not said a word to *me* about it."

Nanny. "What am I to believe, then, of all this fine story you have been telling me?"

Laura. "Oh, I have very good reasons for believing it to be all true, though I cannot exactly tell you what they are. I have heard my papa and mamma talking together; and, I believe, I can be pretty certain my papa is going into the country to settle about the house."



CHAP. X.

ANOTHER VIEW OF THE SAME SUBJECT.

NOTWITHSTANDING the rapture with which Laura thus dwelt on the scheme of retiring into the country, her heart almost failed her when, a few days after, she came to unfold the particulars to Ellen; she felt

doubtful whether all the rural pleasures she had promised herself would counterbalance the pain she should feel on quitting her friend.

She had accidentally met her one evening, when she was walking with her father and mother, and had only time in a whisper, to inform her that her fears, relating to school, were without foundation. This was all she saw of her from the mournful day the letter was opened, till the afternoon of her father's departure for the country; when she was called by Mrs. Belfast to accompany her to Mrs. Green's.

"I am going to tell you a piece of news that will surprise you," said Laura the moment she was alone with her friend: "I have now, Ellen, *really* found out the secret. I *know*

the reason my mamma went to Mrs. Hilcox's. It *was* to make enquiries of Mrs. Darwin, but *not* about school."

"What is the matter *now*?" said Ellen, half affrighted at Laura's manner, which seemed to imply a certainty that what she had to communicate would afflict her friend, though she herself hardly knew whether to be pleased or not.

Laura. "Do not frighten yourself so, Ellen; I shall be afraid of telling you, if you do. It is only that I fancy my papa is going to take a house."

Ellen. "A house! — Where? — How! You are not going to leave Kensington, are you?"

Laura. "I fancy we shall soon, but certainly not before Michaelmas. Now, my dear girl, do not tremble

in this way, and I'll tell you all about it.—We are going to Clare-hall, a charming cottage; just such a one I fancy, by the description, as you and I have often wished to live in. It is in a valley in Devonshire, a delightful romantic part of the country."

"In *Devonshire!*" said Ellen, bursting into tears.

Laura. "Dear Ellen, do not disturb yourself so. I shall be sorry I have said any thing to you on the subject. I dare say your mamma will give you leave to come down with us, and we shall keep you three or four months, and then you know we shall be together the whole day, and take so many new walks. Besides we shall be within ten miles of Exmouth, and that is by the sea-side; and you know how long you *have* wished to see the sea."

“ Ah, Laura !” said Ellen, with a sigh, “ how differently you talk of a separation *now*, from what you did the last time we were together !”

Laura. “ To be sure, when you have left me, I shall not enjoy any thing so much ; but then I shall hope to see you again the next summer ; and I assure you I mean to come and stay with you very often, so that we shall see more of each other than we have ever done before.”

Ellen. “ But that is very different from being able to pop in and out when we please. But tell me, Laura, do you really *know* all you are saying to be true, or are you again making a fool of me with one of your fancies !”

Laura. No, this time I am sure I am not mistaken. My papa set off to-day to see after the house.”

80 *The Subject continued.*

Ellen. "Did he *tell* you so?"

Laura. "No, he did not *tell* me so, but I am certain of it for all that."

Ellen. "How are you certain of it? My dear friend, do not keep me in suspence."

Laura. "Now you are a little better, I will not."

She then exactly related every circumstance that had occurred, from the time of her reading Mrs. Hutchinson's letter to the present moment, as her raised imagination, and fondness for the marvellous, would admit.

"Oh, if this is all the reason you have for supposing you are going away," said Ellen, "I think I need not make myself very uneasy. How improbable if your father and mother found themselves in reduced circumstances, that they should talk to Mrs.

Darwin, and write to Mrs. Hutchinson, about it !”

Laura. “ No, not at all improbable. I’ll tell you how I have settled it : Though they are not very intimate with Mrs. Darwin, yet I know they have a great respect for her ; and as she has travelled all over England, when they wished to retire into some cheap country, it was very likely they should ask her opinion upon the subject. And as Mrs. Darwin travelled with Mrs. Hutchinson, what could be more natural than that she should write to her, and say, ‘ What part of the country, sister, do you think we found the cheapest ? Do not you think Devonshire would be best for a small family that wishes to retire upon a saving plan ? ’ ”

Ellen. “ And this accounts for

Mrs. Hutchinson, an entire stranger, writing to your mamma !”

Laura. “ She is not an entire stranger, as I have found out since I saw you. She and mamma were school fellows, and used to be very intimate when they were young.”

Ellen. “ But was there any thing in the letter about Devonshire ?”

Laura. “ Indeed I hardly know ; I read it in such a hurry, and was in such agitation of mind. But this I very well remember, that Mrs. Hutchinson said, she was very sorry my mamma should be in low circumstances.”

Ellen. “ The letter *said* that your mamma was in low circumstances !”

Laura. “ It did not say those very words, but something quite to that purpose, I know it meant the same thing.”

Ellen. “ But have you any other reasons for believing this sad story ? ”

Laura. “ Every thing that has passed since confirms it more and more. Nanny told me yesterday that cook said she was not at all surprised on hearing we were grown poor ; for mamma had seemed very stingy lately ; and had said a great deal about the butter and meat being wasted. ”

Ellen. “ But, Laura, how very much you are to blame to talk to the servants about what you have reason to believe your mamma wishes not to be known. ”

Laura. “ If my mamma placed confidence in me, my dear, she should find that I could keep a secret as well as any body ; but, as she has not thought fit to do that, I am under no tie whatever ; I am at full liberty to tell any body what I can find out. ”

Ellen. “ Well, Laura, go on with your proofs.”

Laura. “ The night you met us walking on the Hammersmith road, a man passed in a cart and asked if we would ride. ‘ No, thank you, my friend,’ said my papa; and then turning to mamma, he said, ‘ When we are in the country, my dear, if we are tired, we shall not refuse such an offer.’ And yesterday, when he had Henry in his arms, he said, ‘ Why, you chubby-faced boy, you are quite fit for the farmer: and then he looked at mamma; and they smiled as if they understood each other very well.”

Ellen. “ And these, Laura, are all your reasons.”

Laura. “ No; I have one stronger than all the rest, but I am ashamed of telling you that.”

Ellen. "How so? Surely you are not afraid of *my* knowing it?"

Laura. "Indeed I am, but I suppose I shall not be able to keep it from you. Mrs. Darwin called this morning. As we do not often see her, I quite fancied she was come upon business, and I was going to run into the parlour, when my mamma insisted upon my staying in the study till I had finished learning my lesson. You may be sure I made haste; and I was hurrying down stairs, when I heard Mrs. Darwin and my mamma in earnest conversation; so I stopped a few minutes at the door, to try if I could learn any more particulars."

Ellen. "Oh fie, Laura, I should not have thought you would have done such a thing!"

Laura. "No more I would, if my mamma would be but a little more confidential; but it is such an abominable thing for a mother to be talking to a stranger, about what she conceals from her own daughter."

Ellen. "That does not excuse you. But do pray let me know whether you heard any thing more relating to this terrible moving?"

Laura. "Yes, a great deal. I first heard Mrs. Darwin say, 'It is a sweet place.' My mamma then seemed to be making enquiries about Clare-hall, and Mrs. Darwin answered that to be sure it was small for our family, but very convenient; and then she said something about being cheerful under a reverse of fortune; and my mamma said, 'I am perfectly convinced that riches are not essential to

happiness.' Those I remember were her words. I do not know what came next; but afterwards Mrs. Darwin said, she should make a point of calling if she came into that part of the country; and, from what I could hear, my mamma said she should be glad to see her, and pressed her to stay with us; and then I thought I heard somebody on the stairs, so I bounced into the room; and I was so angry with them, for, on my going in, the conversation was changed in a moment."

Ellen. "I was very unwilling to believe what you have been telling me, but I am afraid you are but too much in the right. However there is one thing that gives me some hopes. Do you think if this was the case, you would be beginning to learn music?"

Laura. "I think that *very* circumstance makes my supposition the more probable. If I was going to stay at Kensington, perhaps I should not have begun music so soon, and certainly not of such a capital master. But now my mamma wants me to be well grounded, and then she will go on instructing me herself. We shall take the piano into the country, and I intend to be very accomplished,"

Ellen. "I shall enquire this evening what my mother has heard from Mrs. Belfast."

Laura. "No, pray, Ellen, do not say a syllable about what I have told you."

Ellen. "Why not? Have you not spoken of it openly to the servants?"

Laura. “But if your mamma should ask *you*, as mine did me, how I came to know so much of the affair, you would be obliged to tell her of my opening the letter, and listening at the door; and what an opinion would that give Mrs. Green of me! I know I have behaved very wrong, and I feel quite ashamed of myself; but I would not have it come round to my mamma, or indeed have any body know it but *you*, for all the world.”

Ellen. “Well, I will not betray you; I will only mention it to my cousin Sidney, and I am sure she will make no particular enquiries.”



CHAP. XI.

A FINAL EXPLANATION IN VIEW.

For some days after the conversation related in the last chapter, Laura was scarcely a moment separated from her mother, so that she had no opportunity of having a private conversation even with Nanny. Not being

able to *talk* of her airy castles, she began likewise by degrees to *think* less of them.

Mr. Brandini, to her no small delight, having unexpectedly a day's leisure, called to give her her first lesson. She felt herself much interested in the distresses of a poor family, whom she went with her mother to visit, and on her return home she immediately set about making clothes for the children. Her time and thoughts thus busily engaged, her mind scarcely dwelt for a moment upon the country scheme; till one day as her mother was going up stairs after dinner, she told her she should be busy writing for an hour, "but at six o'clock," said she, "you may come into my dressing-room, and then I will unfold to you the

mystery of my going to Mrs. Hilcox's, which at the time I remember appeared a good deal to perplex you. It was not then in my power to explain my motive for leaving you; but as I am now at liberty to satisfy every enquiry, my Laura shall not find that her mother treats her with unnecessary reserve."

The joy, the rapture, with which Laura would naturally have received this promise, was embittered by the consciousness that she was undeserving of her mother's generosity; and by the dread lest such questions should be put to her, in the course of their conversation, as would oblige her to discover the meanness of which she was heartily ashamed. By degrees, however, her natural vivacity, and turn for invention, prevailed over her

remorse ; and not admitting a doubt of the truth of her last supposition, she gave herself up to the warmest delight, on the near prospect of her plans being realised. Mrs. Belfast had that morning received a letter from her husband. Laura had observed her peruse it with eagerness. What could it contain but the tidings that the house was taken ? How great would be her joy, when she could dwell upon every circumstance with her mamma, who had promised to answer all her enquiries !

Already she saw the thatched-roof cottage embowered among the trees, screened by hills from the northern blast ; the shrubbery of roses and eglantine in which she should delight to wander ; the sheep grazing on the downs to the south ; while a distant

view of the sea bounded the ideal prospect.

One consideration only was painful: that the time must come when her Ellen would be obliged to leave her; but nothing was difficult to the fertile imagination of Laura. Mr. and Mrs. Green both liked the country, and when their daughter returned she would give such a description of Devonshire, as would soon induce them to follow their old friends into retirement; and the view of their habitation, not a quarter of a mile distant, served to embellish the landscape her fancy had before delineated.

She was employed in making a little gown for one of the poor children above alluded to; and her benevolent heart instantly dictated the good she should do in the neighbour-

hood to which she was going. The clock struck six as she was in imagination surrounded by a group of cottage children, to whom she had taken upon herself the office of instructress.

She flew like lightning to her mother's door, but paused for a moment, with her hand upon the lock, withheld from entering by the dread of examination, and the consciousness of guilt.



CHAP. XII.

THE MYSTERY DISCLOSED!!!

Mrs. Belfast, on her daughter's entrance, laid aside her writing, and seating herself by her, thus began: "Not to keep you in suspence, my only motive for going to Mrs. Hilcox's was to purchase a pound of wax."

Laura. “A pound of wax! Dear mamma, is it possible? Then why did you make such a mystery of it?”

Mrs. Belfast. “I had promised to buy it for the lame Miss Herbert, who wished to make some wax ornaments for her chimney-piece; but as she had been several times laughed at for not succeeding in her experiments, she particularly begged me not to mention it to any one till the work was completed; and that being now the case, there is no longer any occasion for secrecy.”

Laura. “And why were you gone such an age? and who were the people of my acquaintance whom you saw?”

Mrs. Belfast. “Three or four customers were in the shop when I went in, and as they appeared to

be in a hurry, I waited till they were served. The wax was by accident mislaid, and it was some time before it could be found; and afterwards they were obliged to send out for change."

Laura. "And who was with you all that time? You said you saw somebody you knew."

Mrs. Belfast. "Yes, Mrs. Hilcox, and her son and daughter, who were in the shop; and the biscuit baker, who passed by with two or three of his children."

"And this was all, mamma?" said Laura, abashed at the recollection of her folly.

Mrs. Belfast. "The whole, Laura. And now, having gratified *your* curiosity, I have a claim upon you to satisfy mine. Tell me, therefore, on

what foundation you have raised the report from which it is concluded, that your mother's extravagance and your father's gaming have ruined their family?"

Laura. "Who can have said such a thing? What a story!—I am sure, mamma—How can any body—I *never had* such a thought in my life."—

Mrs. Belfast. "I will give you my authority. Mrs. Norton called this morning—"

Laura. "Mrs. Norton! Has *she* dared—"

Mrs. Belfast. "Allow me to proceed. Mrs. Norton told me, that she was in a large company last night, where it was publicly mentioned that our fortune was so exhausted, that we were under the necessity of im-

mediately retiring into the country. (Laura's confusion now betrayed that she was not wholly ignorant of the ground of her mother's accusation.) The very place was mentioned," continued Mrs. Belfast. "A small cottage in Devonshire, known by the name of Clare-hall, with about an acre or two of ground, was the retreat in which we were to hide ourselves from the pursuit of our creditors.

"Mrs. Norton, as my intimate friend, ventured to contradict the assertion, and maintained that, on the terms we were upon, no such plan would have been formed without her knowledge. All she could urge was, however, only laughed at as pretended ignorance. Every one had the strongest reasons to believe that we intended immediately to quit Kensington.

“ And your father’s journey to the south was alleged as an undoubted confirmation of the report. Some traced it from the very servants of the family. One lady named Miss Sydney as her informant, who had heard the news at her uncle Green’s, and the intimate connection of his family with the Belfasts rendered this evidence unquestionable. The fact thus established, each one was at liberty to form her own conclusions. Mrs. Ward observed, that she was not in the least surprised at what she had heard. Mr. Belfast was much to be pitied, for his wife had a turn for expence, that would out-run the largest fortune ; as instances of which she adduced my grand piano-forte, and the new green-house which had lately been built under my direction.

‘For that matter,’ said Miss Harris, ‘their stile of living cannot exceed their income. It is well known that Mr. Belfast is in a capital way of business, and his father left him a very handsome fortune. I can therefore only account for it by supposing him to have ruined himself by gaming; and in that case I feel most for his wife.’ ‘I begin to be alarmed,’ said Mrs. Hermes, who had not before heard the report; ‘I must put Mr. Hermes on his guard, for I know he is engaged with Mr. Belfast for very large sums.’ They then all joined in condemning us, for bringing up our daughter as if she had large expectations, when it would most probably be necessary for her to work for her subsistence. Our cheerfulness was attributed to insen-

sibility; and one lady maliciously insinuated, that it was easy for those to be *charitable*, who did not scruple defrauding their creditors."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" said Laura, clasping her hands together.

"Mrs. Norton, determined to discover the origin of the report," continued Mrs. Belfast, "called this morning on Mrs. Green, but as she was not able to give her the least information, she desired to speak with Ellen."

"And did Ellen betray me?" exclaimed Laura.

Mrs. Belfast. "Ellen replied that her friend Laura had certainly good reasons for believing that her parents intended to remove into the country; but what those reasons were, she was in honour bound to conceal. Mrs

Norton then enquired whether the scheme had been long in agitation; to which Ellen answered, that it was about three weeks since Mrs. Belfast, in an airing with her daughter, had suddenly stopt the coach, and in a very mysterious manner gone to Mrs. Hilcox's; and that there was every reason to suppose she had then been to consult Mrs. Darwin on the subject.

“And now, Laura, tell me, *could* you, on so slight a circumstance, fabricate the story which has been spread through the neighbourhood?”

“Mamma,” said Laura, as audibly as she could, “*I will* tell you the truth. O how I wish I had never kept any thing from you!”

In as coherent a manner as her agitation would permit, she then related every circumstance which had

occasioned her various suppositions, without in the least degree palliating the faults of which she had been guilty. Ashamed of beholding her mother, she hid her face in her bosom as she concluded her narrative, softly adding, "And now I am ready to submit to any punishment you shall think proper to inflict."

"See, Laura," said Mrs. Belfast, "the sad consequences of indulging a restless curiosity. How often, when I have warned you against this propensity, have you exclaimed, 'Dear, mamma, surely curiosity is not such a great fault!' but I hope what has now occurred, will make a more forcible impression than all the lessons I have endeavoured to inculcate.

"I went to a shop to purchase a trifling article, and neither took

you with me, nor told you what I had bought. This was the intricate mystery, which has produced such a complicated train of errors and disasters.

“ Offended that a single circumstance should be concealed from your knowledge, you were out of humour during the whole ride. The very idea which restored you to cheerfulness, was the occasion of a mortifying disappointment; and you remember the accident which was produced by your impatience to get a sight of the present, which you imagined I had procured for you. With all her faults, my Laura has a disposition so affectionate, that I can easily fancy what must have been her feelings, when she imagined that she was shortly about to leave her friends. But how

entirely without reason did you imbibe this distressing idea! When I mentioned Mrs. Hutchinson at Mrs. Darwin's, which you would not have known had you not made such impertinent enquiries of Maria, it was merely to ask after her health. When Miss Darwin was sent out of the room, I had some conversation with her mother, respecting a gentleman in reduced circumstances, for whom she wished your father to procure a place in the bank; and it was on the same subject that I received the letter from her sister, which occasioned you so much disturbance. You seem so sensible of the impropriety of your behaviour, in opening that letter, that it is unnecessary for me to enlarge upon it; further than to remark it as an instance of the baneful

effects of a foible, which could lead to the commission of so base and dishonourable an action.

“ You may fancy that on first reading the letter, you were rather rewarded than punished, as it served immediately to remove your distress ; but had you possessed sufficient command over yourself to wait with patience till you could talk to me upon the subject, your fears would have been equally removed, and all those evils might have been avoided, which have arisen in consequence of the supposition which the letter gave you. There is no incident too trifling to afford food for curiosity. Your father at the *time* explained the true motive of his pointing out the advertisement ; he merely alluded to a joke we had had a day or two before,

when we had been fancying the pleasures of a retired life. Again; he had not any motive for his journey except to see that part of the country, which was entirely new to him. And the conversation between Mrs. Darwin and me, which you have made so interesting, merely related to some French nuns who are settled in Suffolk, and on whom Mrs. Darwin said she intended to call, the next time she went to stay with her sister. From these circumstances, trifling as they were in themselves, and wholly independent of each other, added to my supposed mysterious visit to Mrs. Darwin, you not only formed in your own mind, but sent abroad into the world, the story which has circulated to our disadvantage. In this life the guilty can sel-

dom suffer alone. Your poor Ellen, how has she been the victim of her affection for you, and your various fancies! And how much is your father's and my character sunk in the neighbourhood, by the report that has been so widely spread!"

Laura, who had not been able to refrain from tears on the mention of Ellen, now in sobbing accents exclaimed "But, my dear mamma, though I have been much to blame, you should not lay to *my* charge all that those ladies so wickedly said against you. Do you suppose that *I* ever thought *you* had been extravagant, and *my* *papa* a gamester?"

Mrs. Belfast. "It is not for *you*, Laura, who have taken such unwarrantable liberties, in openly relating a story respecting your own parents,

which you yourself imagined they wished to be kept secret, to be severe upon strangers, who, when they hear it as they fancy upon such undoubted authority, venture to ascribe those motives for the determination, which appear to them the most probable. I do not, however, wholly justify the party in question; and we may observe from this instance, how extremely cautious we should be in believing reports of our neighbours, and in commenting upon them to their disadvantage. A disposition to tattling, which has been so often ascribed to women, that for the honour of our sex we should be particularly on our guard against it, generally accompanies curiosity. Those who fancy they have discovered a *secret* are too proud of their penetration

to let it be concealed ; or else they tell what they know, that in so doing they may have an opportunity of making further enquiries."

Laura. " I am sure, mamma, whenever you have told me a secret, I have been very careful not to divulge it ; but I thought where no confidence was reposed, no secrecy could be expected."

Mrs. Belfast. " You have a very imperfect notion of honour, Laura, if such can be your opinion. In the present case, I *could* tell you nothing, for there was nothing to *tell* ; but it may occasionally happen, that we may have good reasons for wishing to conceal an affair from all the world, which *you*, by being constantly with us, may in part discover. But shall you deal generously, shall you deal

kindly by your parents, if you run the risk of doing them a real injury; by relating what you know, as a kind of punishment to them for not having entrusted you with the *whole*?"

Laura. "Indeed I *will* be more careful. But do not you sometimes say that you hate secrets, and that you like an open temper?"

Mrs. Belfast. "I do hate unnecessary secrets, and an affectation of mystery; but I never pretended to say, there were no cases in which concealment was needful. Openness is not more essential to friendship, than an indiscriminate communicativeness is prejudicial to it. No one would choose to fix upon that person as a friend, who does not consider in almost as sacred a light the discoveries which her situation enables her to

make, as those secrets which are more immediately entrusted to her fidelity."

Laura. "How very, very sorry, I am for the mischief I have done! What can I do to repair it?"

Mrs. Belfast. "As the mistake is so soon discovered, I am in hopes our reputation will not receive any permanent injury. I shall inform Mrs. Norton in what manner the report originated, and request her to undeceive her friends."

Laura. "Oh! what an opinion will they have of me!"

Mrs. Belfast. "Can you, in justice, wish them to continue in their present error?"

Laura. "Oh no! that is true; and if any body should ask me about our moving, I will certainly own the

truth. But how ashamed I shall feel! I shall be ashamed of seeing my dear Ellen too, after having frightened her a second time about our parting. Oh! my dear mamma, do you think I shall ever recover my character?"

Mrs. Belfast. "I will not, my dear, deceive you by saying, that it will not suffer by what has happened. It will long be remembered, that Laura Belfast was capable of meanness and treachery.

"And as we have seen that a story is seldom simply told, you must not be surprised if what has passed should be related with many aggravations. Yet by a steady course of good behaviour you will, I hope, in time, regain the good opinion of your acquaintance. And I do flatter myself,

that my Laura, instructed by what has now passed, will exert her utmost endeavours to correct her greatest fault, and then she will be almost all that my fondest affection could desire."

Laura flung her arms about her mother's neck. "I will, I will try to be all you can wish me. But by what means can I get the better of my curiosity? I know the first time I think there is a secret, I shall be in as great a fidget as ever. And how can I help it?"

Mrs. Belfast. "When you would restrain any undue propensity, your first recourse must be to Heaven. Let it be one subject of your daily addresses to that God, who has promised to strengthen our weakness, and aid every virtuous endeavour,

that he would enable you to overcome this, your prevailing foible. And when you feel yourself on the point of losing your temper, because you cannot immediately discover what you wish, then, in a mental ejaculation, implore the Almighty to calm that eagerness which is so contrary to the spirit of Christianity.

“ Do not suppose, that curiosity is such a trifle, as to stand in no need of being combated by divine grace. Nothing is a trifle which leads the way to vice. When you fancy that the secret relates to yourself, endeavour to attain a degree of calmness by reflecting that all your concerns are in the hands of an infinite Protector, who will unravel to you, as he sees fit, the hidden events of futurity.

“ When the secret relates to your friends, strive to suppress the painful idea that they do not love you, because they do not confide to you all their concerns. Remember that you are but a child, and that your judgment must of course be unformed. As you grow older, we shall certainly have less to conceal ; but at any age it would be unfair, from an occasional instance of reserve, which might perhaps be unavoidable, to suspect the sincerity of our affection. As to that foolish habit of prying into the affairs of neighbours and common acquaintance, on whose confidence you have no claim, and whose reserve you cannot pretend to say wounds your feelings, the best preservative I can recommend against it is a habit of con-

stant employment. The wonders of nature open a wide field to the most inquisitive mind ; and your turn for invention, if properly directed, may prove to you a fund of real amusement. If by these means you cannot attain the inward serenity at which you aim, you may at least control your actions. You may, by exertion, keep yourself from being guilty of any breach of honour with a view to discover a secret.

“ Let me also recommend you, when again you feel yourself perplexed, to look back on the incident which has occasioned this conversation ; and you will say to yourself, ‘ Well ! it is not worth while to distress myself ; perhaps the *mighty mystery* may only relate to a *pound of wax*. ’ ”

THE END.

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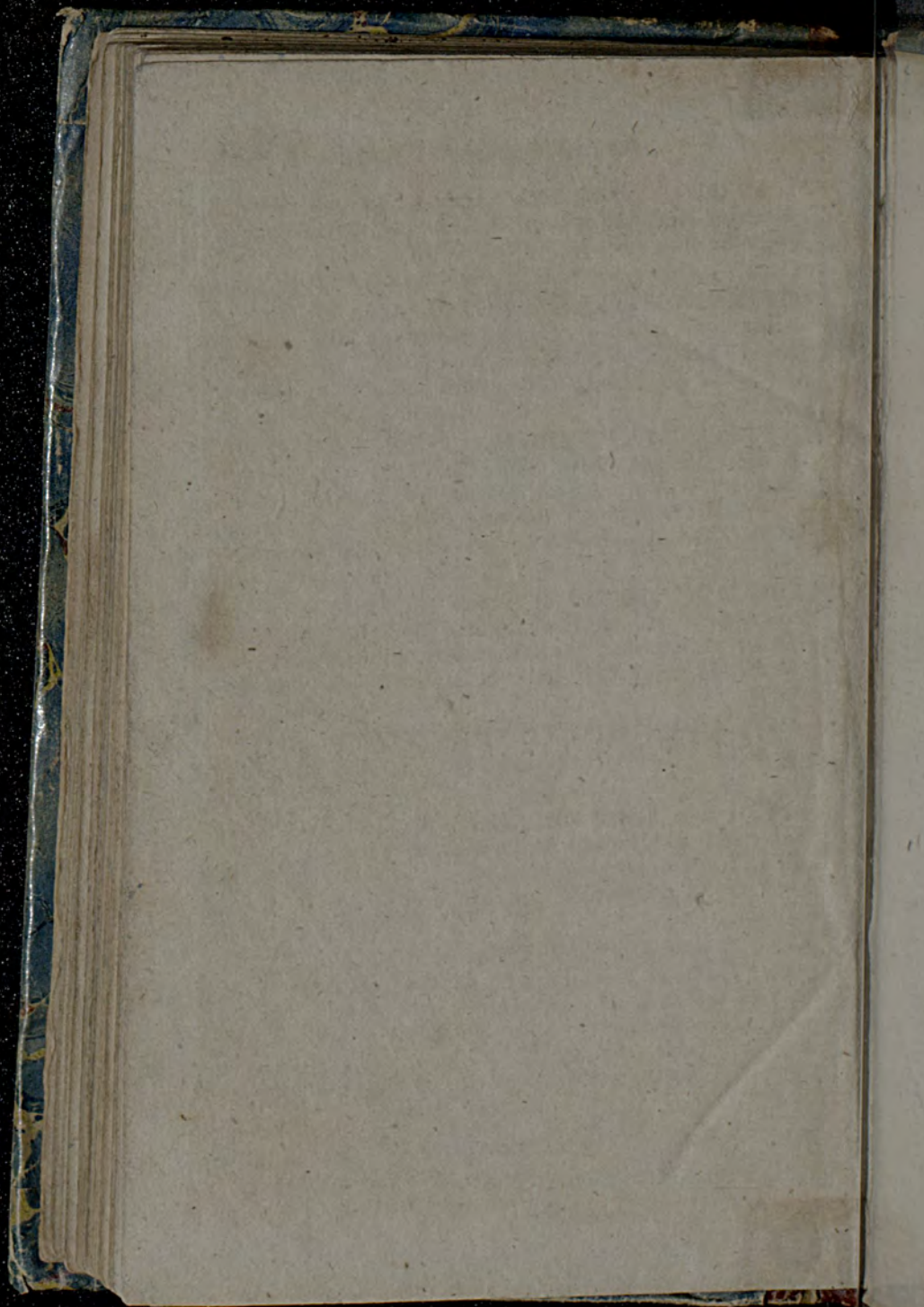
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