

GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART!"

BY

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“GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART!”

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT JEMIMA SAYS.

THAT evening fate, in the shape of a sleek little widow, wills that we shall have a small dinner-party. We should all have much preferred to have kept to our family circle, and, lounging in our chairs, have wooed little contraband sleeps, in recollection of our last night's fatigues, and preparation for those of the next. But Sylvia is obdurate. “Say what you please,” she says, pronouncing each word very distinctly. “Call me a prude if you like—it will not be the first time—I cannot help it, but it does feel so *odd*, we three quite young women sitting down and hobnobbing with those two young men; nobody *belonging* to anybody else, don't you know.”

“I beg to say I *do* belong to somebody,” interrupts Lenore, holding up her head.

“I am sure nobody can feel more kind and sisterly than I do to Paul,” continues Sylvia, with an air of conscious modest merit; “but still there is no use denying that he is a comparative stranger, and I confess I *should* like him to see that we have *some* idea of civilisation.”

So to prove our civilisation, we enlarge our little circle by the addition of the three Websters, of a couple of stray marauding girls, and of three diffident foot-soldiers from the —— Barracks.

“*Good-bye, Sweetheart!*” II.

"We used to have really *nice* regiments always," Sylvia says, in apology for these poor young gentlemen, before their arrival, as she stands with one round white elbow leant on the mantelpiece, looking up with her large appealing eyes to Paul—Sylvia's eyes have appealed and besought and implored all their life, but what for, nobody ever could make out—"really *nice* regiments—the Enniskillens, and the 9th Lancers, don't you know; but now we have only those nasty walking things."

Paul laughs: "I like nasty walking things; I was one myself."

There are no mistakes as to pairing to-day. I, who have no claim upon anybody—I, to whom it is absolutely indifferent *who* leads me, so that I ultimately reach the savoury haven of dinner, and Mr. Scrope, who also has no right to anybody present, march in together. During soup, he tries to make feverish and unnatural love to me, which I rightly attribute to the fact of Lenore's blue ribbons and sweet peas being fluttering and flowering opposite; but as I indignantly decline to be the victim of any such imposture, he relapses into a sulky silence, and I into my usual trite vein of moralizing.

If people could but hear the comments made on them. For instance, if Miss Webster had but lurked behind the window-curtains at luncheon to-day, how clothed and lowered and quiet would her shoulders be. I look: they are still playfully shrugged and lifted in all their lean and virgin nakedness.

It is evening. Tea has re-united those whom claret parted. The footmen have wheeled in the card-table, and are now

clearing another table for a round game—that noisy refuge of those who cannot talk—whereat loud and inarticulate sounds, like to the bray of the ass, the shrill clucking and calling of a distracted hen-roost, take the place of low-voiced and rational conversation. We are all making our selection between the two games: there are far more candidates for the boisterous mirth of the one than for the silent dignity of the other. The infantry, and their attendant houris, the Websters, in short all the *externes*, distinctly decline a rubber.

Major Webster has arrived at the age when a man insists on being classed among "the young people." Being ten years his sister's senior, he is almost as old for a man as she for a woman. He likes to get near the youngest girl in the company—he *loves* bread and butter, that surest sign of advancing age—to bank with her, look over her cards, and tell her all about himself. Paul chooses whist: I am amused to hear Lenore (the amount of whose knowledge of the game I am acquainted with) follow suit. Mr. Scrope does the same; so does Sylvia. As for me, I am nobody. I have been a spectator all my life. I am a spectator still. Lenore has walked over to a cabinet, close to where I am sitting, to look for some whist-markers. Scrope has followed her on the same pretence.

"Why do not you join the round game?" I hear her ask him hurriedly, in a low voice. "I wish you would—three-lived commerce and a pony—just the game for a nice little schoolboy."

"Just" (flushing a little and looking rather mulish).