CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH MR. MERRILL ABANDONS A HABIT

"You must not come." Had Cynthia made the prohibition strong enough? Ought she not to have said, "If you do come, I will not see you"? Her knowledge of the motives of the men and women in the greater world was largely confined to that which she had gathered from novels — not trashy novels, but those by standard authors of English life. And many another girl of nineteen has taken a novel for a guide when she has been suddenly confronted with the first great problem outside of her experience. Somebody has declared that there are only seven plots in the world. There are many parallels in English literature to Cynthia's position, — so far as she was able to define that position, — the wealthy young peer, the parson's or physician's daughter, and the worldly, inexorable parents who had other plans.

Cynthia was, of course, foolish. She would not look ahead, yet there was the mirage in the sky when she allowed herself to dream. It can truthfully be said that she was not in love with Bob Worthington. She felt, rather than knew, that if love came to her the feeling she had for Jethro Bass — strong though that was — would be as nothing to it. The girl felt the intensity of her nature, and shrank from it when her thoughts ran that way, for it frightened her.

"Mrs. Merrill," she said, a few days later, when she found herself alone with that lady, "you once told me you would have no objection if a friend came to see me here."

"None whatever, my dear," answered Mrs. Merrill. "I have asked you to have your friends here."

Mrs. Merrill knew that a young man had called on Cynthia. The girls had discussed the event excitedly, had teased Cynthia about it; they had discovered, moreover, that the young man had not been a tiller of the soil or a clerk in a country store. Ellen, with the enthusiasm of her race, had painted him in glowing colors — but she had neglected to read the name on his card.

"Bob Worthington came to see me last week, and he wants to come again. He lives in Brampton," Cynthia explained, "and is at Harvard College."

Mrs. Merrill was decidedly surprised. She went on with her sewing, however, and did not betray the fact. She knew of Dudley Worthington as one of the richest and most important men in his state; she had heard her husband speak of him often; but she had never meddled with politics and railroad affairs.

"By all means let him come, Cynthia," she replied.

When Mr. Merrill got home that evening she spoke of the matter to him.

"Cynthia is a strange character," she said. "Sometimes I can't understand her — she seems so much older than our girls, Stephen. Think of her keeping this to herself for four days!"

Mr. Merrill laughed, but he went off to a little writing room he had and sat for a long time looking into the glowing coals. Then he laughed again. Mr. Merrill was a philosopher. After all, he could not forbid Dudley Worthington's son coming to his house, nor did he wish to.

That same evening Cynthia wrote a letter and posted it. She found it a very difficult letter to write, and almost as difficult to drop into the mail-box. She reflected that the holidays were close at hand, and then he would go to Brampton and forget, even as he had forgotten before. And she determined when Wednesday afternoon came around that she would take a long walk in the direction of Brookline. Cynthia loved these walks, — for she sadly missed the country air, — and they had kept the color in her cheeks and the courage in her heart that winter. She had amazed the Merrill girls by the distances

she covered, and on more than one occasion she had trudged many miles to a spot from which there was a view of Blue Hills. They reminded her faintly of Coniston.

Who can speak or write with any certainty of the feminine character, or declare what unexpected twists perversity and curiosity may give to it? Wednesday afternoon came, and Cynthia did not go to Brookline. She put on her coat, and took it off again. Would he dare to come in the face of the mandate he had received? If he did come, she wouldn't see him. Ellen had received her orders.

At four o'clock the doorbell rang, and shortly thereafter Ellen appeared, simpering and apologetic enough, with a card. She had taken the trouble to read it this time. Cynthia was angry, or thought she was, and her cheeks were very red.

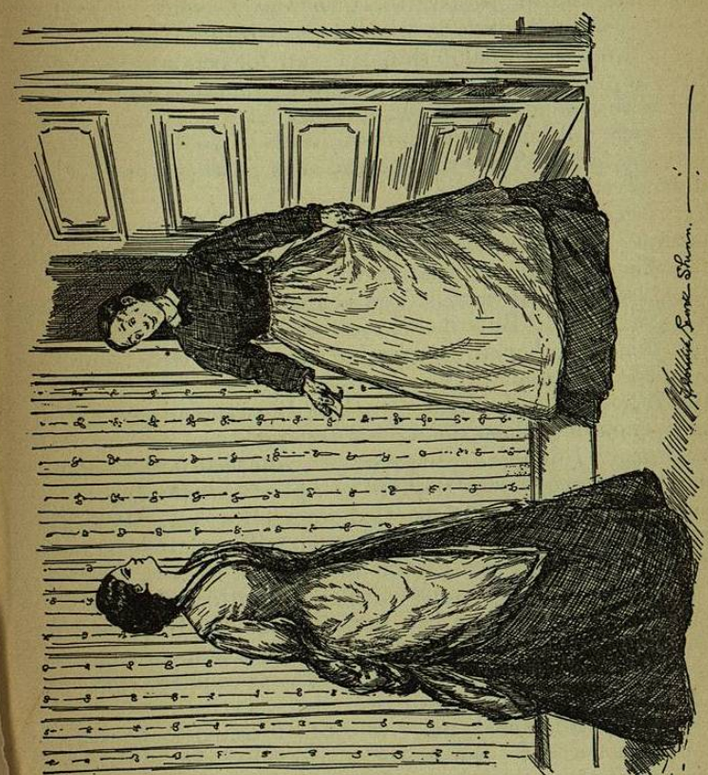
"I told you to excuse me, Ellen. Why did you let him in?"

"Miss Cynthia, darlin'," said Ellen, "if it was made of flint I was, wouldn't he bring the tears out of me with his wheedlin' an' coaxin'? An' him such a fine young gintleman! And whin he took to commandin' like, sure I couldn't say no to him at all at all. 'Take the card to her, Ellen,' he says — didn't he know me name! — 'an' if she says she won't see me, thin I won't trouble her more.' Thim were his words, Miss."

There he was before the fire, his feet slightly apart and his hands in his pockets, waiting for her. She got a glimpse of him standing thus, as she came down the stairs. It was not the attitude of a culprit. Nor did he bear the faintest resemblance to a culprit as he came up to her in the doorway. The chief recollection she carried away of that moment was that his teeth were very white and even when he smiled. He had the impudence to smile. He had the impudence to seize one of her hands in his, and to hold aloft a sheet of paper in the other.

"What does this mean?" said he.

"What do you think it means?" retorted Cynthia, with dignity.



"'An' him such a fine young gintleman!'"

"A summons to stay away," said Bob, thereby more or less accurately describing it. "What would you have thought of me if I had not come?"

Cynthia was not prepared for any such question as this. She had meant to ask the questions herself. But she never lacked for words to protect herself.

"I'll tell you what I think of you for coming, Bob, for insisting upon seeing me as you did," she said, remembering with shame Ellen's account of that proceeding. "It was very unkind and very thoughtless of you."

"Unkind?" Thus she succeeded in putting him on the defensive.

"Yes, unkind, because I know it is best for you not to come to see me, and you know it, and yet you will not help me when I try to do what is right. I shall be blamed for these visits," she said. The young ladies in the novels always were. But it was a serious matter for poor Cynthia, and her voice trembled a little. Her troubles seemed very real.

"Who will blame you?" asked Bob, though he knew well enough. Then he added, seeing that she did not answer: "I don't at all agree with you that it is best for me not to see you. I know of nobody in the world it does me more good to see than yourself. Let's sit down and talk it all over," he said, for she still remained standing uncompromisingly by the door.

The suspicion of a smile came over Cynthia's face. She remembered how Ellen had been wheedled. Her instinct told her that now was the time to make a stand or never.

"It wouldn't do any good, Bob," she replied, shaking her head; "we talked it all over last week."

"Not at all," said he, "we only touched upon a few points last week. We ought to thrash it out. Various aspects of the matter have occurred to me which I ought to call to your attention."

He could not avoid this bantering tone, but she saw that he was very much in earnest, too. He realized the necessity of winning, likewise, and he had got in and meant to stay.

"I don't want to argue," said Cynthia. "I've thought it all out."

"So have I," said Bob. "I haven't thought of anything else, to speak of. And by the way," he declared, shaking the envelope, "I never got a colder and more formal letter in my life. You must have taken it from one of Miss Sadler's copy books."

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to equal the warmth of your other correspondents," said Cynthia, smiling at the mention of Miss Sadler.

"You've got a good many degrees yet to go," he replied.

"I have no idea of doing so," said Cynthia.

If Cynthia had lured him there, and had carefully thought out a plan of fanning his admiration into a flame, she could not have done better than to stand obstinately by the door. Nothing appeals to a man like resistance: resistance for a principle appealed to Bob, although he did not care a fig about that particular principle. In his former dealings with young women — and they had not been few — the son of Dudley Worthington had encountered no resistance worth the mentioning. He looked at the girl before him, and his blood leaped at the thought of a conquest over her. She was often demure, but behind that demureness was firmness: she was mistress of herself, and yet possessed a marvellous vitality.

"And now," said Cynthia, "don't you think you had better go?"

Go! He laughed outright. Never! He would sit down under that fortress, and some day he meant to scale the walls. Like John Paul Jones, he had not yet begun to fight. But he did not sit down just yet, because Cynthia remained standing.

"I'm here now," he said, "what's the good of going away? I might as well stay the rest of the afternoon."

"You will find a photograph album on the table," said Cynthia, "with pictures of all the Merrill family and their friends and relations."

In spite of the threat this remark conveyed, he could

not help laughing at it. Mrs. Merrill in her sitting room heard the laugh, and felt that she would like Bob Worthington.

"It's a heavy album, Cynthia," he said; "perhaps you would hold up one side of it."

It was Cynthia's turn to laugh. She could not decide whether he were a man or a boy. Sometimes, she had to admit, he was very much of a man.

"Where are you going?" he cried.

"Upstairs, of course," she answered.

This was really alarming. But fate thrust a final weapon into his hands.

"All right," said he, "I'll look at the album. What time does Mr. Merrill get home?"

"About six," answered Cynthia. "Why?"

"When he comes," said Bob, "I shall put on my most disconsolate expression. He'll ask me what I'm doing, and I'll tell him you went upstairs at half-past four and haven't come down. He'll sympathize, I'll bet anything."

Whether Bob were really capable of doing this, Cynthia could not tell. She believed he was. Perhaps she really did not intend to go upstairs just then. To his intense relief she seated herself on a straight-backed chair near the door, although she had the air of being about to get up again at any minute. It was not a surrender, not at all — but a parley, at least.

"I really want to talk to you seriously, Bob," she said, and her voice was serious. "I like you very much — I always have — and I want you to listen seriously. All of us have friends. Some people — you, for instance — have a great many. We have but one father." Her voice failed a little at the word. "No friend can ever be the same to you as your father, and no friendship can make up what his displeasure will cost you. I do not mean to say that I shan't always be your friend, for I shall be."

Young men seldom arrive at maturity by gradual steps — something sets them thinking, a week passes, and suddenly the world has a different aspect. Bob had thought

much of his father during that week, and had considered their relationship very carefully. He had a few precious memories of his mother before she had been laid to rest under that hideous and pretentious monument in the Brampton hill cemetery. How unlike her was that monument! Even as a young boy, when on occasions he had wandered into the cemetery, he used to stand before it with a lump in his throat and bitter resentment in his heart, and once he had shaken his fist at it. He had grown up out of sympathy with his father, but he had never until now began to analyze the reasons for it. His father had given him everything except that communion of which Cynthia spoke so feelingly. Mr. Worthington had acted according to his lights: of all the people in the world he thought first of his son. But his thoughts and care had been alone of what the son would be to the world: how that son would carry on the wealth and greatness of Isaac D. Worthington.

Bob had known this before, but it had had no such significance for him then as now. He was by no means lacking in shrewdness, and as he had grown older he had perceived clearly enough Mr. Worthington's reasons for throwing him socially with the Duncans. Mr. Worthington had never been a plain-spoken man, but he had as much as told his son that it was decreed that he should marry the heiress of the state. There were other plans connected with this. Mr. Worthington meant that his son should eventually own the state itself, for he saw that the man who controlled the highways of a state could snap his fingers at governor and council and legislature and judiciary: could, indeed, do more — could own them even more completely than Jethro Bass now owned them, and without effort. The dividends would do the work: would canvass the counties and persuade this man and that with sufficient eloquence. By such tokens it will be seen that Isaac D. Worthington is destined to become great, though the greatness will be akin to that possessed by those gentlemen who in past ages had built castles across the highway between Venice and the

North Sea. All this was in store for Bob Worthington, if he could only be brought to see it. These things would be given him, if he would but confine his worship to the god of wealth.

We are running ahead, however, of Bob's reflections in Mr. Merrill's parlor in Mount Vernon Street, and the ceremony of showing him the cities of his world from Brampton hill was yet to be gone through. Bob knew his father's plans only in a general way, but in the past week he had come to know his father with a fair amount of thoroughness. If Isaac D. Worthington had but chosen a worldly wife, he might have had a more worldly son. As it was, Bob's thoughts were a little bitter when Cynthia spoke of his father, and he tried to think instead what his mother would have him do. He could not, indeed, speak of Mr. Worthington's shortcomings as he understood them, but he answered Cynthia vigorously enough — even if his words were not as serious as she desired.

"I tell you I am old enough to judge for myself, Cynthia," said he, "and I intend to judge for myself. I don't pretend to be a paragon of virtue, but I have a kind of a conscience which tells me when I am doing wrong, if I listen to it. I have not always listened to it. It tells me I'm doing right now, and I mean to listen to it."

Cynthia could not but think there was very little self-denial attached to this. Men are not given largely to self-denial.

"It is easy enough to listen to your conscience when you think it impels you to do that which you want to do, Bob," she answered, laughing at his argument in spite of herself.

"Are you wicked?" he demanded abruptly.

"Why, no, I don't think I am," said Cynthia, taken aback. But she corrected herself swiftly, perceiving his bent. "I should be doing wrong to let you come here."

He ignored the qualification.

"Are you vain and frivolous?"

She remembered that she had looked in the glass before she had come down to him, and bit her lip.

"Are you given over to idle pursuits, to leading young men from their occupations and duties?"

"If you've come here to recite the Blue Laws," said she, laughing again, "I have something better to do than to listen to them."

"Cynthia," he cried, "I'll tell you what you are. I'll draw your character for you, and then, if you can give me one good reason why I should not associate with you, I'll go away and never come back."

"That's all very well," said Cynthia, "but suppose I don't admit your qualifications for drawing my character. And I don't admit them, not for a minute."

"I will draw it," said he, standing up in front of her. "Oh, confound it!"

This exclamation, astonishing and out of place as it was, was caused by a ring at the doorbell. The ring was followed by a whispering and giggling in the hall, and then by the entrance of the Misses Merrill into the parlor. Curiosity had been too strong for them. Susan was human, and here was the opportunity for a little revenge. In justice to her, she meant the revenge to be very slight.

"Well, Cynthia, you should have come to the concert," she said; "it was fine, wasn't it, Jane? Is this Mr. Worthington? How do you do. I'm Miss Susan Merrill, and this is Miss Jane Merrill."

Susan only intended to stay a minute, but how was Bob to know that? She was tempted into staying longer. Bob lighted the gas, and she inspected him and approved. Her approval increased when he began to talk to her in his bantering way, as if he had known her always. Then, when she was fully intending to go, he rose to take his leave.

"I'm awfully glad to have met you at last," he said to Susan, "I've heard so much about you." His leave-taking of Jane was less effusive, and then he turned to Cynthia and took her hand. "I'm going to Brampton on Friday," he said, "for the holidays. I wish you were going."

"We couldn't think of letting her go, Mr. Worthington," cried Susan, for the thought of the hills had made