THE WHISPERER

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BY

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THE WHISPERER.

"I HAVE told you twenty times, Isabella, of that ugly habit of yours," said Aunt Tart to her niece. "Why do you not speak out? What can you possibly have to say to Clementine that all the world may not hear? And even if you had that great ambition of all young ladies to disclose—a 'real secret'—it is not polite to *whisper in company.*"

Isabella and Clementine looked what their brother called "goosish," and made no answer. Their brother—a large, awkward boy—who, with both his elbows on the table, and his red fingers wandering over his forehead, pretended, or, as children call it, "made believe," to look at a map, withdrew his hands, and after giving two or three preliminary kicks to the chair on

which he was seated, said, "Girls have always secrets about nothing, Aunt Tart; they *aint* like boys."

"I wish, Edward, you would not use those vulgar abbreviations," said Aunt Tart. "I assure you these 'aints,' and 'don'ts,' and 'wonts,' sound very underbred; and, what is of even more consequence, they are bad English."

"Lah, Aunt, you are such a one! The honourable Dick Dovecot, and Jack Lawless, and the very best *fellows* on our form, are *up to that sort of thing*. They aint—— But indeed I do beg your pardon, aunt. I don't—— There, I'm at it again, and I did *not* intend it! Dear aunt, I have made you look as if you were drinking vinegar!"

"Oh, Edward, for shame!" said Isabella.

"But aunt says I must always speak the truth," said Edward; "and she did look"——

"Hush!" whispered Clementine.

"Speak on, and speak out," observed their aunt, who, though she did often look much annoyed at what people, more accustomed to be troubled by children than she was, would certainly call "little things," was one of the kindest-hearted women in the world. "Speak

on, and speak out, Edward; your doing so troubles me less than your sisters' whisperings."

Edward cast a triumphant glance towards his sisters. "Well, then, aunt, you aint—— I mean you have—not—been—used—to—boys"——

"Nor to girls either," murmured Clementine.

"And so I think," continued Edward, "I must be a greater trouble to you, dear aunt, than I should be to any other body—I mean lady—who had run *neck-and-neck* with boys—I mean who had been used to be tormented by us all her life-long."

"Very likely," was his aunt's quiet reply.

"And indeed, aunt, I am sorry for it; everybody knows that, thanks to you, I have *more tin to sport*—I beg your pardon, aunt, I mean more money to spend—than any of the other lads; and I am sure I thrashed Joe Finch, though he is so much bigger and stronger than I am, because he said you were an old maid."

"That was only the truth, Edward, and no wrong to say it," said Aunt Tart; "and I am sorry you 'thrashed,' as you call it."

"Why, I *did* thrash him, and *no mistake*," repeated the incorrigible Edward—who certainly

was more extensively read in slang than in Homer. "And as to being sorry about whopping a fellow—I mean a schoolfellow, aunt—why, I should be set down as a *muff* if I didn't, that's all."

"Is there no language you can speak as correctly as fluently?" inquired Miss Tart.

"*I'm booked* if I know, aunt!" replied the youth, really distressed at the annoyance he gave his aunt, and yet hardly knowing how to give his thoughts utterance in pure gentlemanly English. "I have worked at the languages; but they *floor me* so! There, aunt, the girls are whispering again!" he added, not sorry to direct into a new channel the displeasure that was gathering against him.

"Indeed, aunty," whined Isabel, "we were talking no harm: it was nothing—only about *snipping* the ribbon you know, instead of its being drawn into rosettes—nothing else indeed, dear aunt; and Clem. said she liked it snipped best."

"Your sister's name is Clementine, my dear; and certainly Isabella and Clementine are more lady-like names than 'Clem.' and 'Bell.'"

Miss Tart's spirits were worn out; she dearly

loved her sister's three orphan children—the children of her sister Mrs Villiers: she was tremblingly alive to their defects, which, though really disagreeable, her affection magnified; and she deeply felt the responsibility of her situation as the guardian of those children. She was a lady of the "old school," which, however clever, and brilliant, and "off-hand" the new may be, had certainly the advantage of better manners, better English, and more graceful deportment. She had in her youth mingled with the highest and purest society: she was refined without the affectation of refinement; but she had lived thirty years in retirement, and heard only of the revolutions of empires beside the banks of the beautiful river which meandered round her cottage in North Wales, and never thought they could affect the manners of society. Circumstances which have nothing to do with this particular portion of her life had estranged her sister from her, though she was never estranged from her sister, so that she had had no opportunity of raising her voice against the "*no system*" of the children's education. Mrs Villiers, after her husband's death, had been so long an invalid, that the children had been left to the management