

'Margaret,' The GIRL ARTIST, OR, The Countess of Ferrers Court.

CHAPTER XI.

"What do you say?" said Lord Blair staring at Austin Ambrose with astonishment. "You wouldn't tell the earl?"

"No," said Ambrose, lighting a cigarette and stretching out his legs with comfortable indifference. "I certainly should not."

"But—why not?" demanded Lord Blair.

"Well," said Ambrose slowly, "you are awkwardly placed, you see. I imagined from all you have told me that you and the earl do not get on very well together as it is."

"You are right, we don't," admitted Lord Blair shortly.

"Just so. You have led—well, not to put it too plainly—you have been engaged in that branch of agriculture which is called sowing wild oats for a considerable period, and with a great deal of energy. You have had, I believe, rather a large sum of money from the earl?"

"Yes, I have," admitted Blair with a sigh and a frown.

"Not a penny of which he would regret, if you would only oblige him by marrying the woman he has chosen for you."

"Violet Graham?" "Exactly; Violet Graham," assented Austin Ambrose, knocking the ash off his cigarette and keeping his eyes fixed upon it. "And that, I take it, you don't care to do?"

"You know I don't. And Violet doesn't either. Why, you yourself advised me to release her, you know that she doesn't care a brass farthing for me!" exclaimed Blair, pacing to and fro.

"Oh, as to knowing, I don't go so far as that. You asked me for my opinion, and I gave it to you. I don't think she cares for you. I don't think Miss Graham is the kind of woman to care for any one."

"Very well, then, how the deuce could I marry her?" said Blair. "But what's the use of talking about that? Whatever I might have done before I saw Margaret, I certainly couldn't marry any one but her now, not to save a dukedom!"

"All right," assented Austin Ambrose, without permitting the slightest expression of the thrill of satisfaction that ran through him. "I quite understand, and I must say I think you are acting wisely. The man who marries one girl while he loves another is worse than wicked—he is foolish. But, all the same, the earl remains disappointed and displeased. Do you think, Blair, that his disappointment and displeasure would be lessened if you were to go to him and say, 'I can't marry Violet Graham, the woman you have chosen for me, and whose money would set me straight; but behold the girl I intend to make my wife and the future Countess of Ferrers!—she is your housekeeper's niece!'"

"Granddaughter," said Blair. "And what if she is? I tell you, Austin, Margaret is a lady, from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet!"

"I dare say. I am sure she is, if you say so. You are a very good judge. But, my dear Blair, you can't expect everybody to see her with your eyes, especially an old man who has outlived the age of romance! Miss Margaret, with all her beauty, and grace, and refinement, will be his housekeeper's granddaughter—and nothing more to him. He will, to put it plainly, be very mad, my dear Blair."

"Well!" said Blair, with the Leyton

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own on his handsome face, and the firm look about his lips which when seen by his friends was understood by them to mean that he had made up his mind—"what then?"

Austin Ambrose raised his eyebrows and looked just over Blair's head with a smile.

"What then? Well, you ought to know better than I whether you can afford to quarrel right out with your uncle, the great earl."

Blair flushed.

"What can he do to me—or her?" he asked.

"He can't order you off to instant execution, as he would no doubt like to do," said Ambrose, "but he can injure your prospects very materially, my dear Blair. Oh, I know about the title and estate," he went on, as Blair opened his lips. "Those must come to you—lucky-beggar that you are! But there is something more and beyond those. The earl has a large personal property, a vast sum of money, that he can leave as he pleases—"

"How do you know that?" demanded Blair, with a faint surprise.

The slightest flush rose to Austin Ambrose's face.

"Well," he replied, "I only imagine so. Like most people, I know that the earl has not lived up to a half, or a quarter of his income for years. And what an income it is! He must have saved an enormous sum of money—"

"Let him do what he likes with it!" exclaimed Blair, bluntly. "I have had more than my share already. Let him leave it to anybody he likes. It is his own."

"Whom is he to leave it to?" said Ambrose. "The Home for Lost Dogs?"

"Or Sick Cats. I don't care!" said Blair impetuously.

"That is all very well, and very noble, and all that, my dear Blair," said the cool, quiet voice. "But—pardon me—you haven't only yourself to think about, you know. There is

your wife—the fair Margaret—" "Heaven bless her, my darling!" murmured Blair.

"Just so," retorted Ambrose, with a cynical smile. "But when you say Heaven bless her, you mean that you wish Providence to pour out the good things of this life upon her with a liberal hand, but at the same moment you declare your intention of depriving her and her children of a large sum of money. Rather inconsistent, isn't it?"

Blair stood and looked down at him. "What a head you have, Austin!" he said. "You ought to have been a lawyer. All this never struck me. I—I never look forward to the future."

Austin Ambrose shrugged his shoulders.

"If we don't look forward to the future, the future has an awkward knack of looking back upon us!" he said indolently. "Depend upon it, my friend, that if you let the earl's money slip, you'll live to be sorry for it, not for your own sake, I dare say; you don't care about money, but for your wife and children's."

"We shouldn't be paupers exactly!" said Blair, with a laugh.

"No!" assented Ambrose; and he shot a glance of envy, hatred, and all uncharitableness at the frank, handsome face. "No, you will be one of the richest men in England, but all the same—"

"And—and I hate anything like concealment and deceit," Blair broke in impatiently; "especially in connection with her."

Austin Ambrose nodded.

"Well, you asked for my opinion, and you are quite at liberty to reject it as per usual," he said carelessly. "But, though I am not a rich man, I don't mind betting you fifty to one—in farthings—that if you declare your purpose of marrying this young lady to the earl, that before many years

are over you will come to me and wish to Heaven you had taken my advice." Blair bit at his cigar and sidged in the chair he had thrown himself into.

"I hate the idea of secrecy, Austin," he said at last; "and yet—but there! ten to one Margaret would refuse a clandestine marriage."

Austin Ambrose did not sneer, but he lowered his lids till they covered the cold gray eyes.

"Yes? I think not. Not if you told her all that you would lose by an open declaration. Women—forgive me, my dear fellow, but I know a little about them, though you think I don't—women have a better idea of the value of money than we men have. I think Miss Hale will consent to a quiet wedding when she knows that by so doing she will save several score of thousands to her husband, and to her future children."

There was silence for a moment, then Blair spoke. His fate and Margaret's, and more than theirs, had hung in the balance while he had hesitated.

"I think you're right, Austin," he said. "You always are, I know, and though I hate doing it, I'll take your advice. It—it will be only for a short time."

"Yes, the earl is quite an old man—"

"I didn't mean that," said Blair, quickly. "I don't want him to die. Heaven knows! I am not at all anxious to be the Earl of Ferrers. I shouldn't make half as fine an earl as he does."

"Just so," said Austin Ambrose. "But I am glad you intend to take my advice."

"Of course it all depends upon what Margaret says," said Lord Blair, gravely. "She may tell me that she will not marry me"—Austin Ambrose smoothed away a smile that was more than half a sneer—"but if she should say 'Yes,' then I will ask her to marry me quietly, though I hate the idea of any secrecy."

There was silence for a moment, then Austin Ambrose said, with a meditative smile:

"And you are going to turn over a new leaf, eh, Blair? What will the gay world do without you? What will they all say?—Lottie Belvoir, for instance?"

Lord Blair colored and frowned.

"What has my marriage to do with Lottie Belvoir?" he said. "I have not seen her for months."

"Oh, nothing," assented Ambrose. "But you and she were so very thick, that I expect she will be a little heart-broken, you know."

Lord Blair made an impatient movement.

"I wish to Heaven I had never seen her or any of her kind," he said, remorsefully. "What fools men are, Austin! If we could only live our lives over again—but there, I mean to begin afresh now. And you will help me, old fellow!" and he laid his hand on the other man's shoulder. "You have always been the best friend I ever had, and you will help me now?"

"Of course, I'll help you; but I don't see what I can do," said Austin Ambrose, quietly. "If Miss Hale says 'Yes,' I should beg her to marry me as soon as possible. All you have to do then is to go down to some out-of-the-way place where there is a church—and there are churches everywhere—get the bans put up, or, better still, get a special license. You can be married as snugly as possible, and no one will be any the wiser. Such marriages are managed every day. Who knew that old Fortesque was married? We all thought him a bachelor, and yet, he'd had a wife seven years! I'll help you all I can. I can't do less, having given you my advice to keep the thing a secret from the earl. Of course, I'd rather not have anything to do with it, but—he shrugged his shoulders—"you can't refuse anything to a man who saved your life, you know! Have some more wine?"

"No, thanks; no more," said Lord Blair, jumping up. "I'll take a stroll in the park. I want to think it all over. I am to see her the day after to-morrow, to know if I am to be the happiest or the most miserable of men. Ah, Austin, if you could only see her!"

(To be continued.)

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War News.

Messages Received Previous to 9 A.M.

FRENCH OFFICIAL. PARIS, March 25. The French official statement says the past night was quiet in Verdun region, both east and west of the Meuse. Artillery duels were in progress in Woerreg region.

BERLIN SAYS VERDUN IN FLAMES. BERLIN, March 25. Verdun is in flames, according to an official statement made by the German army headquarters.

ST. PIERRE BULLETIN. PARIS, March 25. (Official.) We have bombarded the enemy's trenches of Basinghe and near Hetas. In the Argonne artillery action was quite violent, also in the sector of the Meuse on the second line east of Poivre Hill and Douaumont. In Woerreg and in Cotes de Meuse sectors there were no new actions of infantry during the day. Calm on the rest of the front.

IRISH STRUGGLE CONTINUED. LONDON, March 25. Verdun struggle is continued. Infantry actions yesterday, says French official reports. The Channel steamer was torpedoed and passengers from the Sussex are held as captives.

great reports further advance Bear gained ground in the sector and Drinsk district. French official reports that destroyed gunboats have destroyed sailing vessels in the Black Sea. A number of other advantages which will appear in due course.

BRITISH OFFICIAL. LONDON, March 25. The following official statement was issued: An engagement occurred on February 29th in the North Sea between the armed German raider Greif, disguised as a Norwegian merchant vessel, and the British armed merchant cruiser Alcantara. Capt. T. R. Wordie; it resulted in the loss of both vessels, the German raider being sunk by gun fire and the Alcantara apparently by a torpedo. Five German officers and 115 men were picked up and taken prisoners. The rest of the total complement believed to have been over 300. The British losses amounted to five officers and 40 men. It should be noted that during the whole engagement the enemy fleet over Norwegian coast pointed on the side of the ship. This news is now published as it is made clear by receipt of a German wireless message that the enemy has learned that the Greif, a similar ship to the Alcantara had been destroyed before she succeeded in passing our line of patrols.

BRITISH OFFICIAL. LONDON, March 25. Last night the enemy sprang a mine near the Hohenlorenz redoubt and opened one trench, but was driven back.

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