

"Have the goodness to tell me how many years you have been in Sir Harry's service?"

Startel struggled for breath.

"By what right, Mr. Thussington," he hissed. "Do you ask these questions?"

"We will waive that for the present," said Arthur. "Please answer my question."

For a moment the steward remained silent; then he said, with a sneer—

"I don't see how it can concern you, Mr. Thussington, but, if you must know, say over forty years."

"A good and faithful ser—over forty years," said Arthur Thussington; "and during the whole of that time you have kept the books and managed the money matters of the estates?"

"I have," was the reply.

"Then I request you," said Arthur Thussington, "to produce all the books and papers relating to the estate during that term of years, and deliver them to me."

Startel clutched the table.

"Deliver them to you!" he said, "you are mad!"

"You will deliver them to me, that I may send them to a London accountant, and if I find that you have, as I suspect, any discrepancies in your account, rest assured I will hold you accountable for them."

Breathless, livid, and bursting with passion, Startel hobbled up to him.

"You are mad!" he hissed; "how dare you come and domineer at the Hall? Give you my papers! Give you my keys! Be accountable to you! Pshaw! I tell you you are mad to try and play the master here. I ask you again, by what right you claim these?"

Arthur Thussington sank easily into the chair, and crossed his legs.

"By the right every man has of demanding his own."

Startel staggered, and clutched at the mantel-piece for support.

"His own—yours!" he exclaimed, in a low hiss; "it is not yours, it is Sir Roderick Edgecombe's."

"My cousin, Mr. Roderick Edgecombe," said Arthur, slowly, pausing and eyeing the distorted face with fawning enjoyment, "is dead."

"You lie!" almost shrieked the quivering lips; "you lie!"

"You must moderate your language, or I must refuse to talk any further with you, and must teach you respect by flinging you out of doors," said Arthur, his voice for one moment losing its calmness.

"You fling me out of doors!" said Startel, "it's a vile plot—a plot. You are an impostor. Sir Roderick Edgecombe is not dead."

"You will be sorry to hear," said Arthur, rising and standing before the fire in his old position, "that Mr. Roderick Edgecombe is indeed dead; he was drowned in the 'Annie,' which sailed for Melbourne in August last."

Startel stood staring at him with bewildered eyes for one moment, then staggered towards the table, and dropping into a chair, leaned his head upon his hands.

Arthur Thussington stood looking at him with eyes that devoured every expression and attitude eagerly. Suddenly the huddled form started up.

"The proofs—the proofs," he asked, huskily.

"I do not recognize your right to ask for them," said Arthur; "but as you are an old servant of the family, I will show them to you. There is an official account of the loss of the ship, and the necessary documents drawn up by the solicitors, acknowledging my right to the title and estates of Edgecombe," and he laid open upon the table a number of papers.

The old man seized them with

shaking hands, and with almost blinded eyes examined them.

Then, biting his lips, he turned round and tried to speak, but could not, and instead turned again to the table, and with an absent air commenced collecting the scattered accounts.

Arthur held up his hand.

"Leave those papers alone," he said; "I think it better, perhaps, under the circumstances, that they should be collected and examined by my solicitor."

Startel turned round sharply, and with a wolfish scowl hobbled up to him.

"Sir Arthur Thussington, you have not got it all your own way yet, though you think you have; as I told you, I have been over forty years in the service and the secrets—mark ye, the secrets of Sir Harry—a d I know something that you'd give your fox-head to learn; I know something that—but no matter, I am going. I won't wait to be turned out of the place where I have spent my life and learned my secrets—my secrets, mind ye; and I warn you, if you try to touch me, I'll turn and bite!"

And half clutching, half shaking his fist, he hobbled from the room pausing at the door, to cast a malignant glare upon the triumphant face of the new master of Edgecombe.

## CHAPTER XLI.

### LUCY.

"There are the players"

Before the moon had paled in the face of the rising sun, and left the heavens vanquished and outshone, the solitude of the waste around the dreary hut, rendered ten thousand times more dreary by its awful, silent tenant, was disturbed and awakened by the distant hum of human voices and the regular tread of a number of horses, and the rattle of wheels.

Had the closed eyes of the still, silent figure had any sight in them, and been looking out to the east, they would have seen a lengthy caravan, the human members of which were straggling along beside, behind, or in front of it, in irregular procedure.

It was approaching at a slow pace, and consisted of three huge square-looking buildings, very similar to the show cars of the English fairs, but of a larger size; two or three small miniature dwelling-houses on wheels, and a line of horses of good breed and in capital condition, some of them ridden by strong well-built countrymen, others plodding impatiently behind the string of strange-looking vehicles.

In front of the whole two figures were walking—man and woman; and as they plodded on, in the step required only by persons accustomed to much pedestrian exercise, they exchanged remarks, looking back occasionally, or forward towards the destination which they could not as yet see.

"Where are we, Mark?" asked the woman, looking round at the waste.

"'Pon my soul, Lucy, I don't know," said the man, with a theatrical shrug of the shoulders, adding, as he struck an attitude, and waved his hand with a domestic flourish above his head—

"My foot is not upon my native heath, and my name is not Mac—gree—gor!"

The woman smiled a smile, that with all its sweetness had something sad and subdued in it.

"Don't be absurd, Mark, but answer my question. How many days are we off Melbourne?"

"Seven, about—" replied Mark Douglas, after a moment's reflection; "seven, I should say, altho' it's only guess work. For my part, I don't very much care if it's seventy, for I'm a bit sick of work, and should be glad of a change."

The woman smiled again.

"Work? Mark. You don't know what it is. Playing *Macbeth* and *George Barnwell* four nights a-week, and clown the other two, isn't work, man. Now, if you dug in the fields for twelve hours a-day, or drove a team of oxen for nine, or—or—anything of that sort, I could sympathize with you; but when you—the pet of Gordon's Acting Troupe, who never soil your hands, except to count the takings—complain of over-work, I only smile."

The man laughed good-humoredly, replying, with an affectation of pique—

"Oh! so you don't call coaching a gang of blockheads into 'Mercutio's' and 'Poloniuses,' *Charles his Friend* and *Randolf the Innkeeper*, building up a stage, painting the scenery, writing the bill, dressing the entire company, and touting for special patronage, praise-worthy and laborious work, eh, madam?"

"No, I don't," replied the woman, smiling more determinedly than ever; "because you don't do it as work, you do it for amusement. You know if you hadn't the blockheads, as you call them, to drill, the scenery to paint, and the dresses to touch up, you would be the unhappiest mortal alive; now, wouldn't you?" and she laid her hand upon his arm.

"Well, perhaps I should," he said, with a light laugh and a sigh. "Perhaps I should. I am not unhappy, Lucy; far from it, indeed I only want one thing"—here his voice faltered, and he laid his finger upon her arm lightly—"only one thing to make me the happiest man alive."

She hung her head, and her eyes filled sadly.

"Let us go back, or wait for them," she said, in a low voice. "Gordon will wonder where we have gone—see, they are out of sight."

He dropped his head, and turned from her.

"You never will let me speak, Lucy," he said.

"Never, dear, dear, Mar," the woman replied, in her turn touching his arm. "Never, dear Mark, for it pains not only me, but you. Why will you harp upon the string that has broken long ago? Why will you ask for that which I have no longer to give?"

"I don't ask you to love me, Lucy," he cried, his eyes wet and glistening, and his manly voice trembling. "I only want you to give me the right to protect and watch over you! I will be satisfied with loving you, and will not expect you to give me all your heart, if you cannot. Oh, Lucy—!" he stopped suddenly, as she turned and shook her head.

"Is it always to be so—always the same answer?" he said bitterly.

"Always, dear Mark," she said, laying her hand upon his shoulder.

"Why? why?" he asked.

"Mark, would you love me if you thought me dishonest and dishonorable?" she asked, looking up into his face with a grave earnestness.

"You cannot be," he said, sadly, but decidedly.

"You are right, Mark," she said; "but I should be if I gave you my hand without my heart. I cannot give you that, for I gave it to him who left me one winter's dawn and took it with him. God help him and me! but I cannot take it back."

"You will never forget him, the man who left you to—('starve and die,' he had almost said in his bitterness, but his love stopped him.)"

"Never," she said; and there fell a silence upon them both until the caravan reached them, and a hale, hearty

man, whose gray hair hinted at many years, though his youthful bearing and keen blue eyes denied them, approached, smacking his whip, and crying in a clear but theatrical voice—

"Ar! ar! my children in the wood. I thought that ye were lost! Remember, whithersoever ye flee—Gordon follow-eth after ye."

Mark Douglas laughed, as he always did, at his old friend and manager's jokes and tales, and said—

"Don't be afraid, you won't lose your walking gentleman and leading lady in a hurry—until there's a rival house, any way. We're going very slow, are we not?"

"Very," said Joe Gordon, well known in England and Australia as a fast goer, not only in matters theatrical, but in affairs of the heart. "Slow cattle, but the women are tired, and the children want to sleep—which they can't if they are jolted."

Then looking round he smacked his whip again, and cried to the stragglers. Whereupon a couple of pretty girls and two rather lusty-looking men mended their pace. "Seven days to Melbourne, Montmorency, remember," he said to the first. "No more lagging, Reynolds; wake that old cob up; and tell Jackson to hurry on," and, adding to the girls a piece of advice, to the effect that they had better retire to rest—meaning the eligible family mansion on wheels behind—he started on—with sixty summers on his shoulders—as steadily as if he had not seen twenty.

The woman addressed to as Lucy joined the two girls, and, calling them respectively as Adelaide and Mary, entered the last van with them to follow the advice of the manager, while Mark Douglas strode on at the side, talking of the prospects of the dramatic season which they were to open at the town they were approaching.

"Yes, I think we're all right," the elder man was saying. "The theatre," jerking his whip in the direction of the huge boxes, "is in prime condition, and the scenery's all first rate. As for the cast, there's you for the heavy business and the broad comic; Lucy for the pathetic and leading lady; nothing better could be wished for. Adelaide does the chambermaid and second bit very nicely, and Mary and the rest are useful. Reynolds is very clever with the Mercutio and lead up, and so is Montmorency. As for the others they ain't much use, except for crowds and processions, and now and then the tipsy servant dodge. Altogether, we master pretty strong, eh, Mark?"

"Yes," replied the younger man; "very decent company. Not all that could be wished for, though. Lucy is your strong card. Poor girl she's lost in these wilds here. She should be in England—in London—to do her credit."

"Humph! I don't know so much about that," said Gordon. "Mind, Lucy's a fine actress—she's a genius—but they don't particularly mind a genius in London. Mark, I've seen many a Mrs. Siddons and Macready die of hunger, mind you."

"Aye, aye, that's true," assented the other, sadly. "Perhaps you're right. But to go on. I'm not so sure about my being such a good card. I'm about played out."

"Nonsense," interrupted the manager warmly.

"Yes, but I am," rejoined Mark. "They're pretty well tired of me, I think. They've seen my face too often. Besides which, I'm not up to the mark, Gordon. Ah, you may shake your head; but I know I'm not. I'm very good—very passable—at your Bar—alls and your