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Mamie Esdaile and her father's guest, Captain Hemsley, were dawdling away the half-hour before dressing for dinner beside the glowing fire that burned on the wide hearth in the entrance-hall.

They had been riding together that afternoon, braving muddy roads and gloomy skies, and now declared themselves too dirty and dishevelled to join their friends at afternoon-tea in the drawing-room.

Besides, letters for Mamie had come by the second post, and she never could enjoy her correspondence with a buzz of talk around her.

Not that the presence of Wyatt Hemsley seemed to inconvenience her at all, but then words had been spoken during that afternoon's ride which had made their interests, like their hearts, one.

"An invitation for Lady Carby's ball—shall we accept it—Wyatt?" Captain Hemsley, after a hasty glance around to assure himself that they were alone, snatched a kiss from the lips that breathed his name so prettily.

"If you will promise to keep all your waltzes for me." Mamie called him a greedy boy, but gave the required pledge, and opened another envelope.

To this she gave a pettish tap as soon as she had mastered its contents. "Was there ever anything so provoking! Sibyl Hardress was to have come to us to-morrow, and now she writes to excuse herself. As she was aware I should not be satisfied without knowing why, she adds her reason. She is so sick of being pointed out as a great heiress and besieged with the attentions of men she despises, that she intends to go to Girton and devote herself to study. There's a Miss Misanthrope for you! Young, pretty, and tired of admiration at four-and-twenty!"

"Humph! this is odd!" exclaimed her lover. "Your friend writes in precisely the same strain as Gerald Lowther did this morning. I wanted you to know him, and despatched your father's kind invitation urging him to accept it. But he says—let me see, what does he say? Ah! here is his letter. 'Pray excuse me, dear Wyatt; I am not up to the gay life of a country house, and feel safer and happier among my books.'"

"Please interpret," said Mamie. "Of what is the unfortunate man afraid?"

"Of women's eyes, my precious!" was the laughing reply. "When he and I were at Edinburgh last year I happen to know that poor Gerald encountered your fair and learned friend. They were becoming quite intimate when someone whispered in his ear that she was an heiress, and perhaps the same kind friend warned her that poor scholars do marry for money. At any rate, the lady looked coldly on her admirer, and he took the alarm and went back to Cambridge directly."

"But Mr. Lowther is not——"

"A money-hunter? My dearest Mamie, he is one of the proudest, the most honorable of men!"

"And Sibyl is a dear girl in spite of her learning. How I wish we could have brought them together and made them as happy as we are!"

"Is it impossible?" queried Wyatt.

"N—n—o!" replied Mamie, after a little consideration. "With your assistance I think it could be done."

"You shall have my help as far as the carrying out of your scheme, but don't ask me to invent or suggest. Beyond military tactics I am duffer at finessing."

"Perhaps that is why I love—I mean, why I feel a sort of friendly liking for you," responded the young lady, demurely. "No, sir, you are not to kiss me again. If grandmamma were to come this way she would be horrified. Bring me that writing-case and we will commence operations at once. I shall write to Sibyl and you must pen a few lines to Mr. Lowther."

"What am I to say?" asked the captain, when both were seated with the ink-stand between them.

"Simply that you have just proposed and been accepted—that the young lady is staying here, and you cannot be content till your dear old friend has seen and approved your choice. Take no excuses—say you shall meet every train, and so on. Be quick, that our letters may go out this evening. Of course I shall write to Sibyl in a similar strain."

"Yes? But I don't see the drift of your arrangement. I had already intended to tell Lowther what a happy fellow your sweet confession has made me."

"But you must not mention names," and Mamie held up a warning finger. "You are to leave him in doubt whether it is Sibyl Hardress who is or is not your fiancée."

"Hum—well—I have no objection to mystifying him a little. But let about Miss Hardress? What are you going to say to her?"

"I shall hint and insinuate that Mr. Lowther's talents have been so much for my susceptibility."

Still Captain Hemsley looked perplexed.

"And so, by rousing their jealousy as well as their curiosity, you think you shall secure their coming to Esdaile Abbey? But then they will sooner see you and I together than they will understand the state of affairs."

"They shall not be allowed to see us together," interposed Mamie.

"Sibyl must be the object of your devotion, whilst I——"

"Whilst you walk, ride, and chat with Gerald Lowther! I could stand that, Mamie—I couldn't, really."

Miss Esdaile gave him a reproachful look. "Have you so little faith in me? Cannot you make a small sacrifice to secure your friend's happiness?"

"Small do you call it? If you loved as fondly as I do, you would know that it would exasperate me to madness to see you smiling on another."