

with a greater tenderness. He had become at once her champion and her slave. When there was any playful quarrel between the young lady and her hostess, he took the side of Mary Avon with a seriousness that soon disposed of the contest. He studied her convenience to the smallest particular when she wished to paint on deck; and so far from hinting that he would like to have Tom Galbraith revise and improve her work, he now said that he would have pride in showing her productions to that famous artist. And perhaps it was not quite so much the actual fact of the stealing of the money as the manner and circumstance of it that now wholly upset his equilibrium and drove him into this passion of rage. "The scoundrel! the scoundrel!" he muttered to himself, in these angry pacings to and fro.

Then he surprised his hostess by suddenly stopping short, and uttering some brief chuckle of laughter.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said he, "for the liberty I have taken; but I was at the telegraph-office in any case; and I thought ye would not mind my sending for my nephew Howard. Ye were so good as to say—"

"Oh, we shall be most pleased to see him," said she, promptly. "I am sure he must have heard us talking about the yacht; he will not mind a little discomfort—"

"He will have to take what is given him, and be thankful," said the Laird, sharply. "In my opinion the young people of the present day are too much given to picking and choosing. They will not begin as their parents began. Only the best of everything is good enough for them."

But here the Laird checked himself.

"No no, ma'am," said he. "My nephew Howard is not like that. He is a good lad. And as for his comfort on board that yacht, I'm thinking it's not that, but the opposite, he has to fear most. Ye are spoiling us all, the crew included."

"Now we must go in to dinner," is the practical answer.

"Has she come down?" asks the Laird, in a whisper.

"I suppose so."

In the drawing-room we found Mary Avon. She was rather pale, and silent—that was all; and she seemed to wish to avoid observation. But when dinner was announced the Laird went over to her, and took her hand, and led her into the dining-room, just as he might have led a child. And he arranged her chair for her; and patted her on the back as he passed on, and said, cheerfully—

"Quite right—quite right—don't believe all the stories ye hear. *Nil desperandum*—we're not beaten down yet!"

She sat cold and white, with her eyes cast down. He did not know that in the interval her hostess had been forced to show the girl that paragraph of the *Hue and Cry*.

"*Nil desperandum*—that's it," continued the good-hearted Laird, in his blithest manner. "Keep your own conscience clear, and let other people do as they please—that is the philosophy of life. That is what Dr. Sutherland would say to ye, if he was here."

This chance reference to Angus Sutherland was surely made with the best intentions; but it produced a strange effect on the girl. For an instant or two she tried to maintain her composure—though her lips trembled; then she gave way, and bent her head, and burst out crying, and covered her face with her hands. Of course her kind friend and hostess was with her in a moment, and soothed her, and caressed her, and got her to dry her eyes. Then the Laird said, after a second or two of inward struggle—

"Oh, do you know that there is a steamer run on the rocks at the mouth of Loch Etive?"

"Oh, yes," his hostess—who had resumed her seat—said, cheerfully. "That is a good joke. They say the captain wanted to be very clever; and would not have a pilot, though he knows nothing about the coast. So he thought he would keep mid-channel in going into the Loch!"

The Laird looked puzzled; where was the joke?

"Oh," said she, noticing his bewilderment, "don't you know that at the mouth of Loch Etive the rocks are right in the middle, and the channel on each side? He chose precisely the straight line for bringing his vessel full tilt on the rocks!"

So this was the joke, then; that a valuable ship should be sunk! But it soon became apparent that any topic was of profound interest—was exceedingly facetious even—that could distract Mary Avon's attention. They would not let her brood over this thing. They would have found a joke in a coffin. And, indeed, amidst all this talking and laughing Mary Avon brightened up considerably; and took her part bravely; and seemed to have forgotten all about her uncle and his evil deeds. You could only have guessed from a certain preoccupation that, from time to time, these words must have been appearing before her mind, their commonplace and matter-of-fact phraseology in no way detracting from their horrible import: "Police officers and others are requested to make immediate search and inquiry for the above-named; and those stationed at sea-port towns are particularly requested to search outward-bound vessels." The description of Mr. Frederick Smethurst that preceded this injunction was not very flattering.

But among all the subjects, grave and gay, on which the Laird touched during this repast, there was none so serious and so pertinent as the duty owed by young people

to their parents and guardians. It did not seem an opportune topic. He might, for example, have enlarged upon the duties of guardians towards their helpless and unprotected wards. However, on this matter he was most decided. He even cross-examined his hostess, with an unusual sternness, on the point. What was the limit—was there any limit—she would impose on the duty which young folks owed to those who were their parents or who stood to them in the relation of parents? Our sovereign mistress, a little bit frightened, said she had always found her boys obedient enough. But this would not do. Considering the care and affection bestowed on them—considering the hard-earned wealth spent on them—considering the easy fortune offered to them—was it not bounden on young people to consult and obey the wishes of those who had done so much for them? She admitted that such was the case. Pressed to say where the limit of such duty should lie, she said there was hardly any. So far good; and the Laird was satisfied.

It was not until two days afterwards that we obtained full information by letter of what was known regarding the proceedings of Frederick Smethurst, who, it appears, before he bolted, had laid hands on every farthing of money he could touch, and borrowed from the credulous among his friends; so that there remained no reasonable doubt that the story he had told his niece was among his other deceptions, and that she was left penniless. No one was surprised. It had been almost a foregone conclusion. Mary Avon seemed to care little about it; the loss of her fortune was less to her than the shame and dishonour that this scoundrel had brought on her mother's name.

But this further news only served to stir up once more the Laird's slumbering wrath. He kept looking at his watch.

"She'll be off Easdale now," said he to himself; and we knew he was speaking of the steamer that was bringing his nephew from the south.

By and by—"She'll be near Kerrara, now," he said, aloud. "Is it not time to drive to the quay?"

It was not time, but we set out. There was the usual crowd on the quay when we got there; and far off we could descry the red funnels and the smoke of the steamer. Mary Avon had not come with us.

"What a beautiful day your nephew must have had for his sail from the Crinan," said the Laird's gentle hostess to him.

Did he not hear her? Or was he absorbed in his own thoughts? His answer, at all events, was a strange one.

"It is the first time I have asked anything of him," he said, almost gloomily. "I have a right to expect him to do something for me now."

The steamer slows in: the ropes are thrown across; the gangways run up; and the crowd begins to pour out. And here is a tall and handsome young fellow who comes along with a pleasant smile of greeting on his face.

"How do you do, Mr. Smith?" says Queen T., very graciously—but she does not call him "Howard" as she calls Dr. Sutherland "Angus."

"Well, uncle," says he, brightly, when he has shaken hands all round, "what is the meaning of it all? Are you starting for Iceland in a hurry? I have brought a rifle as well as my breech-loader. But perhaps I had better wait to be invited!"

This young man with the clear, pale complexion, and the dark hair, and dark gray eyes, had good looks and a pleasant smile in his favor; he was accustomed to be made welcome; he was at ease with himself. He was not embarrassed that his uncle did not immediately answer; he merely turned and called out to the man who had got his luggage. And when he had got him into the wagonette, and were driving off, what must he needs talk about but the absconding of Mr. Frederick Smethurst, whom he knew to be the uncle of a young lady he had once met at our house.

"Catch him!" said he with a laugh. "They'll never catch him." His uncle said nothing at all.

When we reached Castle Osprey, the Laird said in the Hall, when he had satisfied himself that there was no one within hearing—

"Howard, I wish to have a few minutes' talk with ye; and perhaps our good friends here will come into the room too—"

We followed him into the dining-room, and shut the door.

"—just to see whether there is anything unreasonable in what I have got to say to ye."

The young man looked rather alarmed; there was an unusual coldness and austerity in the elder man's voice.

"We may as well sit down," he said: "it wants a little explanation."

We sat down in silence, Howard Smith looking more concerned than ever. He had a real affection, as we knew, for this pseudo-uncle of his, and was astounded that he should be spoken to in this formal and cold manner.

The Laird put one or two letters on the table before him.

"I have asked our friends here," said he, in a calm and measured voice, "to listen to what I have to say, and they will judge whether it is unreasonable. I have a service to ask of ye. I will say nothing of the relations between you and me before this time—but I may tell ye frankly—what doubtless ye have understood—that I had intended to leave ye Denny-mains at my death. I have neither kith nor kin of my own blood; and it was my intention that ye

should have Denny-mains—perhaps even before I was called way."

The young man said nothing; but the manner in which the Laird spoke of his intentions in the past sense might have made the most disinterested of heirs look frightened. After all, he had certainly been brought up on the understanding that he was to succeed to the property.

"Now," said he, slowly, "I may say I have shown ye some kindness—"

"Indeed you have, sir!" said the other, warmly.

"—and I have asked nothing from ye in return. I would ask nothing now, if I was your age. If I was twenty years younger, I would not have telegraphed for ye—indeed no, I would have taken the matter into my own hands—"

Here the Laird paused for a moment or so to regain that coldness of demeanour with which he had started.

"Ay, just so. Well, ye were talking about the man Smethurst as we were coming along. His niece, as you may be aware, is in this house—a better lass was never seen within any house."

The Laird hesitated more and more as he came to the climax of his discourse; it was obviously difficult for him to put this restraint on himself.

"Yes," said he, speaking a little more hurriedly, "and that scoundrel—that scoundrel—has made off with every penny the poor lass had—every penny of it—and she is left an orphan—without a farthing to maintain her wif—and that infernal scoundrel—"

The Laird jumped from his seat; his anger was too much for him.

"I mean to stand by her," said he, pacing up and down the room, and speaking in short ejaculations. "She will not be without a farthing. I will reach him, too, if I can. Ay, ay, if I was but twenty years younger, and had that man before me!"

He stopped short opposite his nephew, and controlled himself so as to speak quite calmly.

"I would like to see ye settled at Denny-mains, Howard," said he. "And ye would want a wife. Now if ye were to marry this young leddy, it would be the delight of my old age to see ye both comfortable and well provided for. And a better wife ye would not get within this country. Not a better!"

Howard Smith stared.

"Why, uncle!" said he, as if he thought some joke was going forward. We, who had been aware of certain profound plans on the part of Denny-mains, were less startled by this abrupt disclosure of them.

"That is one of two things," said the Laird, with forced composure, "that I wished to put before ye. If it is impossible, I am sorely vexed. But there is another; and one or the other, as I have been thinking, I am fairly entitled to ask of ye. So far I have not thought of any return for what I have done; it has been a pleasure to me to look after your up-bringing."

"Well, uncle," said the young man, beginning to look a little frightened, "I would rather hear of the other thing. You know—eh—that is—a girl does not take anybody who is flung at her, as it were—it would be an insult—and—people's inclinations and affections—"

"I know—I know—I know," said the Laird, impatiently. "I have gone over all that. Do ye think I am a fool? If the lass will not have ye, there is an end to it; do your best to get her, and that is enough for me."

"There was another thing—," the young man suggested, timidly.

"Yes, there is," said the Laird, with a sudden change in his manner. "It is a duty, sir, ye owe not to me, but to humanity. Ye are young, strong, have plenty of time, and I will give ye the money. Find me out that man Smethurst; get him face to face; and tell him! Tell him!"—the Laird brought his fist down on the table with a bang that made everything jump, and his eyes were like coals of fire. "None o' your pistols or rapiers or trash like that!—no, no!—a mark on his face for the rest of his life—the brand of a scoundrel between his eyes—there! I will ye do that for me?"

"But, uncle," cried the young man, finding this alternative about as startling as the other, "how on earth can I find him? He is off to Brazil, or Mexico, or California, long ere now, ye may depend on it."

The Laird had pulled himself together again.

"I have put two things before ye," said he, calmly. "It is the first time I have asked ye for a service, after having brought ye up as few lads have been brought up. If you think it is unfair of me to make a bargain about such things, I will tell ye frankly that I have more concern in that young thing left to herself than in any creature now living on earth; and I will be a friend to her as well as an old man can. I have asked our friends here to listen to what I had to say; they will tell ye whether I am unreasonable. I will leave ye to talk it over."

He went to the door. Then he turned for a moment to his hostess.

"I am going to see, ma'am, if Mary will go for a bit walk wi' me—down to the shore, or the lake; but we will be back before the hour for dinner."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE NEW SUITOR.

It is only those who have lived with her for a number of years who can tell when a certain person becomes possessed with the demon of mischief, and allows sarcasm and malignant

laughter and other unholy delights to run riot in her brain. The chief symptom is the assumption of an abnormal gravity, and a look of simple and confiding innocence that appears in the eyes. The eyes tell most of all. The dark pupils seem even clearer than is their wont, as if they would let you read them through and through; and there is a sympathetic appeal in them; the woman seems so anxious to be kind, and friendly, and considerate. And all the time—especially if it be a man who is hopelessly dumbfounded—she is revenging the many wrongs of her sex by covertly laughing at him and enjoying his discomfort.

And no doubt the expression on Howard Smith's face, as he sat there in a bewildered silence, was ludicrous enough. He was inclined to laugh the thing away as a joke, but he knew that the Laird was not given to practical jokes. And yet—and yet—

"Do you really think he is serious?" he blurted out at length, and he spoke to this lady with the gentle innocent eyes.

"Oh, undoubtedly," she answered, with perfect gravity.

"Oh, no; it is impossible!" he said, as if arguing with himself. "Why, my uncle, of all men in the world, and pretending it was serious—of course people often do wish their sons or daughters to marry a particular person—for a sensible reason, to keep estates together, or to join the fortunes of a family—but this—no, no; this is a joke, or else he wants to drive me into giving that fellow a licking. And that, you know, is quite absurd: you might as well drag the Atlantic for a penknife."

"I am afraid your uncle is quite serious," said she, demurely.

"But it was to be left to you," he answered, quickly. "You were to say whether it was unreasonable. Surely you must see it is not reasonable. Neither the one thing nor the other is possible."

Here the young man paused for a moment.

"Surely," he said, "my uncle can't mean, by putting these impossible things before me, to justify his leaving his property to somebody else? There was no need for any such excuse; I have no claim on him; he has a right to do what he pleases."

"That has nothing to do with it," said Queen T., promptly. "Your uncle is quite resolved, I know, that you should have Denny-mains."

"Yes—and a wife," responded the young man, with a somewhat wry smile. "Oh, but you know, it is quite absurd; you will reason him out of it, won't you? He has such a high opinion of your judgment, I know."

The ingenious youth!

"Besides," said he, warmly, "do you think it very complimentary to your friend, Miss Avon, that any one should be asked to come and marry her?"

This was better: it was an artful thrust. But the bland, sympathetic eyes only paid him a respectful attention.

"I know my uncle is pretty firm when he has got a notion into his head," said he, "and—and—no doubt he is quite right in thinking that the young lady has been badly treated, and that somebody should give the absconder a thrashing. All that is quite right; but why should I be made responsible for it? I can't do impossible things."

"Well, you see," said his sage adviser, with a highly matter-of-fact air, "your uncle may not regard either the one thing or the other as impossible."

"But they are impossible," said he.

"Then I am very sorry," said she, with great sweetness. "Because Denny-mains is really a beautiful place. And the house would lend itself splendidly to a thorough scheme of redecoration; the hall could be made perfectly lovely. I would have the wooden dado painted a dark bottle-green, and the wall over it a rich Pompeian red—I don't believe the colours of a hall can be too bold if the tones are good in themselves. Pompeian red is a capital background for pictures, too; and I like to see pictures in the hall; the gentlemen can look at them while they are waiting for their wives. Don't you think Indian matting makes a very nice, serviceable, sober-coloured dado for a dining-room—so long as it does not drive your pictures too high on the wall?"

The fiendishness of this woman! Denny-mains was being withdrawn from him at this very moment; and she was bothering him with questions about its decoration. What did he think of Indian matting?

"Well," said he, "if I am to lose my chance of Denny-mains through this piece of absurdity, I can't help it."

"I beg your pardon," said she, most amiably; "but I don't think your uncle's proposal so very absurd. It is the commonest thing in the world for people to wish persons in whom they are interested to marry each other; and very often they succeed by merely getting the young people to meet, and so forth. You say yourself that it is reasonable in certain cases. Well, in this case, you probably don't know how great an interest your uncle takes in Miss Avon, and the affection he has for her. It is quite remarkable. And he has been dwelling on this possibility of a match between you—of seeing you both settled at Denny-mains—until he almost regards it as arranged. 'Put yourself in his place,' as Mr. Reade says. It seems to him the most natural thing in the world, and I am afraid he will consider you very ungrateful if you don't fall in with his plan."

Deeper and deeper grew the shadow of per-