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CHAPTER I.

SOTHERNE COURT.

A FAIR flat valley wherein a river winds and winds like a streak of light ; low rounded hills, purple with evening shadows, melting away into a yellow sky ; russet woods, wide meadows, cows waiting at the farm gates, waggons jogging wearily homeward through the lanes, and over all the golden hazy glow of an autumn sunset.

This is what Sotherne Court—red-gabled and many-windowed, standing aloft on the slope of the hills—looks down upon, whilst Juliet Blair, fair queen of the old house and of the many rich acres on every side of it, sits alone under the sycamore tree on the lawn.

She had thrown off her hat, and the slanting sunlight flickered through the drooping branches over the small dark head and among the rich laces and draperies of her dress. Here and there a yellow leaf had fluttered down upon her from the tree above. A little shower of rose leaves lay at her feet, and a sleepy bumble bee kept on buzzing backwards and forwards in front of her.

She had neither work nor book ; her slight hands were clasped together idly upon her

knee, and her face was turned towards the fast sinking sun across the valley below.

It needed not the warm glow of the sunshine to set that face alight.

The small mobile features, the rich curves of the sensitive mouth, the dark passionate eyes inherited from the young Spanish mother who has lain for years in the churchyard below, all speak of an ardent and impulsive nature ; a nature that is intense in its capabilities of loving and suffering, yet with that strange mixture of weakness and recklessness that is so often the fatal curse of an impetuous character.

Miss Blair, of Sotherne Court, is by no means an unimportant personage in her native county. For years she had been the idol of a doting father, who, after the unhappy death of his young wife in the first year of their marriage, had centred every hope and thought in the child whose birth had cost its mother her life.

Miss Blair—she had never even in her baby days been called anything else—was in her father's eyes a person of the greatest importance ; everything was done with a view to her comfort and in accordance with her wishes. From the time she could speak her own mind—and it was pretty early in life that she learned to do so—Mr. Blair

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