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"Here?" she echoed, invitingly, in the voice that could be so sweet and soft when she chose.

"Here it is different. One is no longer a man, but a servant—an inferior—"

"Have you no masters and servants in Australia?" she asked.

"Yes; but the difference is not so great, the gulf not so wide and deep. We are both men, master and servant, of the same flesh and blood; and the man may become master; but here—Ah, well! surely God used different clay for the gentleman and the man—"

"That is—nonsense," she said. "It is wicked!"

"I daresay," he said, with a grim smile; "but it's true. I have decided to go to-morrow."

"Have you told Burchett?" her voice was very low, her eyes downcast—"that you were going, and your reason?"

"No," he said. "There is time enough. He will be no worse off than before I came."

"And will you not tell me?" she asked in liquid tones. "I may be able to—remove the obstacle to your remaining, to make it possible, pleasant for you to stay?"

Her eyes, violet of violet, were raised to his face; her heart was beating fast; she could see his broad chest heaving under the strain; but she had no mercy: was she not torturing herself?

"No," he replied, almost roughly. "You have no right to ask—"

"I know," she admitted meekly, so that he felt like a brute; "but you have been very kind to me, and we women are not all ungrateful, proud, and contemptuous, as we may be thought. Fate has thrown us together—The shame dyed her face, then left it pale; but still, "Tell me!" she murmured.

Ralph was "but human."

"You force me," he said, hoarsely.

"Why don't you let me go without—without any more words? I want to go with the memory of your goodwill, your kindness, not with your scorn and contempt! But you won't let me. You won't be content till you've wrung my secret out of me. Take it then!"

He leant against the side of the harbour, his arms folded, his eyes fixed on her sternly, and yet with a reluctant tenderness which thrilled while it frightened her.

"I am going because I cannot remain here any longer—near you! I think of you all day, and dream of you all night! Yes, I, the gamekeeper; you, the great lady of the Court! I'm mad, of course! Why don't you laugh? I'm waiting for it! You want to hear the whole of it! You shall; then you can enjoy your laugh to the full. I'm so mad that I love you. That first day, on the moor, your face, your voice, went to my heart; and they've stopped there. I can't throw them out. And since the day I had you in my arms my madness has grown until it has taken possession of me. And you have been kind to me— God knows whether you were playing with me, whether you were only amusing yourself—"

The crimson dyed her cheek, then left it paler than before, and her lips quivered. Every word he spoke, every intonation of the deep, musical voice awakened an echo in her heart.

"Perhaps so. It's likely. Even when you were telling me that you were once poor like myself, you may have been leading me on— No, no, I won't say that! I can't believe it! You didn't know, didn't guess—how should you? I, the gamekeeper, the servant, the serf—for it's little better here in this cursed England—to fall in love with my master's niece! It's too fantastic to be dreamed of! And yet it's true! All the heart's gone out of me—and you have got it! I'd die to win a word from you! I'd go to the stake for just a smile from those beautiful lips— Oh, forgive me! I'm sorry, sorry! Why did you force me to speak?"

His face was white and wan, his chest heaved.

"You won't forgive me. I know that. And that will haunt me! If I could have got away without speaking, without offending you, I should have had nothing but pleasant memories of you, of your kindness to me, of your graciousness—but now!"

(To be Continued.)

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The Earl's Son; —OR— TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER XVI.

"I hope you have enjoyed your drive, Veronica?" he said, in an impassive voice.

"Oh, yes," she replied, "and I am much better. I can walk quite well, or very nearly so."

He nodded but made no response, and she went up to her room. Ever since she had left Ralph she was haunted by the idea that his resolve to leave the Court had been born the moment he had seen her that afternoon, and she could not be rid of the idea.

It hovered about her for the rest of the day, made an accompaniment to the song she sang to the two men in the drawing room after dinner, and nestled at her heart as she fell asleep after hours of musing.

The next morning seemed to drag its weary length like a wounded snake. Every now and then she was tormented by the idea that Ralph would go, notwithstanding his promise, before she could see him again. She dared not ask herself the meaning of her strange interest in him, her

desire to be near him, to hear his voice.

She felt as if she were drifting in a kind of stupor to the edge of the cataract, without the power of staying her fatal course, without the capacity of summoning her pride, her common sense, to her aid to save her.

As she went through the hall to the pony jingle she hesitated for a moment, trying to turn back. If she could find some excuse!

"The earl—will you tell his lordship that I am going out, and ask him if he wants me?" she said to the butler, desperately.

"His lordship went out some time ago, miss," was the reply, and Veronica, with a mixture of relief and dread, got into the jingle and drove off.

She made a longer round than that of yesterday, feeling all the time that she was being drawn to the harbour, and at last, with a reckless movement of her head, she turned the pony in the direction to which her heart pointed.

Ralph was there leaning against one of the posts of the arbour, his gun beside him. The dogs were with Burchett as they had been yesterday, and the deep, intense stillness of the afternoon reigned unbroken save by the twitter of a bird or the murmur of a bee in the convolvulus that climbed over the arbour.

She saw that he looked haggard and wan as if from sleeplessness, and

her heart gave a little leap of sympathy. Sir John Suckling's lines flashed through her mind:

"Why so pale and wan, fond lover?
Prithee, why so pale?
Will, when looking well, can't move her,
Looking ill prevail?
Prithee, why so pale?"

She was wise enough to know that there is danger when the sight of a man suggests poetry, and a faint colour rose to her face that had been a moment before, and was a moment afterwards, as pale as his own.

He came to the side of the jingle. "I've brought—"

"I will get out, I think," she said, calmly. "One gets so cramped in these little carts. Thanks! You have brought the handkerchief?"

He took it, not from his breast-pocket, but from the game-bag.

"Thanks!" she said again. She took it, glanced at it, and, with seeming carelessness, thrust it into the bosom of her blouse. She saw, with a woman's quickness, though her eyes were hidden behind her lashes, that his eyes had noticed the action and that his face had crimsoned for a second.

"I have been thinking since yesterday that it is a great pity that you should leave the Court," she said, leaning back in the seat and looking steadily at the ground. "You say that you like the place, the country—"

He nodded. His eyes were fixed on hers with the lover's abstraction in his, the look which no woman fails to understand.

"—And I think you are—are so suited to the work. You seem to understand so many things. The weir, for instance, and the felling of the trees for the good of the birds, wasn't it? You remember?"

He inclined his head again.

"Yes; I remember."

"—And you have made many friends here—the Masons—"

"Yes," he assented. "But—"

"But—what?" she asked, persistently, her eyes raised and transfixed his. "There is something, someone,

you do not like. There must be something."

He looked from side to side like a bird endeavouring to avoid the Fowler's net.

"There is something," he said, rather huskily. "It's—it's of no consequence—I mean you wouldn't understand."

"Oh, perhaps not," she assented, easily, her heart beating with a mixture of grief and shame, grief at his going, shame that she should be bent on keeping him. "And have you decided where to go yet?"

"Yes; I've been thinking it out. I'll go back to Australia, to the ranching or the gold-digging; it does not matter. There one feels as if one were a man, one man's as good as another; here—"



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