

The confession evidently cost the poor woman dearly, and she looked piteously at her husband as she made it. It was not however received as solemnly as it was made, for, after looking at her for a moment, as if thunderstruck, Jack burst into a peal of laughter.

"My dear child, you are demented!" he gasped between the paroxysms. "What on earth put such a notion into your silly little head?"

"I expect I'd better tell you everything, Jack. You see, this morning, when we were in the garden, we got to talking of the future—mine and hers—and she burst out into a tirade that frightened me more effectually than her old callous condition ever did. You know aunt Eleanor—"

"Yes, dear, I know aunt Eleanor meant me to act as an artistic scarecrow, and it certainly would be very disgraceful of me if I became, however involuntarily, a bait. But really your notion is too absurd, 'pon my word it is!"—and a fresh burst of laughter interrupted Jack's protest.

A little reassured by her husband's amusement at her terror, Mrs. Melford allowed herself to be reasoned out of most of it, and, much comforted, left Jack to resume his work.

No sooner was she gone however than Jack's manner changed. He still looked amused; but he was worried too, and smoked fast and furiously, as he walked up and down the studio.

"Bother the women!" he muttered. "A nice pickle that old woman has got the lot of us into! Poor little Madge! 'Twas a shame to laugh at her in that way; but what could I do? Maude, poor girl, would break her heart if she thought we had either of us guessed her silly little secret; and, beside, the idea of aunt Eleanor's rage if she knew the truth is too absurd! That's what comes of my setting up as a Mentor to female youth and beauty with a taste for theatricals and art. Oh, hang the women! No wonder those old fellows painted the tempter as a snake with a woman's head. As soon as a second woman gets into the matrimonial Eden, there's bound to be a row! I might have known what the young woman was by that freak about her name—Miss Thornleigh, indeed!

"Poor girl! I suppose she fancies every man, woman and child is after those money-bags of hers! Well, its a form of trial I'm not likely to suffer from, any way!" As he turned, he caught sight of a photograph lying on the floor, and unconsciously picked it up and looked at it. "Dear old Gerald! How well he looks! Wouldn't he laugh

if he knew of my predicament! By Jove, what a notion! See if I don't pay you out of all this bother, Miss Alverton—Thornleigh!" And he sat down and began writing as follows—

"Dear old Jerry—If you have not totally forgotten your promise or changed your mind, it may interest you to know that we—*i. e.*, myself and the partner of my joys and woes—have returned from Italy and have set up for the present at Hatton, a jolly little village on the G. W. R. As we have a fairly comfortable spare room, the sooner you redeem your pledge and come and see us the better I shall like it. I am not going to write a yarn about your welcome, *et cætera*. If you are the same Gerald Foulis as of old at Eton and Oxford, you know how glad I shall be to see you, and, thank goodness, in the matter of my old friends, at all events, Margaret and I are one. I heard from Deventry of your return from India, and of your accession of rank. From what he told me, I fear the latter is no great subject of congratulation, and that you were far better off in the old days.

"Do, for charity's sake, come and stay with us! My wife is a dear, cheery little body, a *tete-a-tete* with whom I enjoy immensely; but she has lately developed a she-cousin, and I feel daily more and more that, alone and unassisted, I cannot any longer make head against the pair of them; so do come and oblige. Your old friend,
"JACK."

"P. S.—Look here! Don't for goodness sake, fall in love with either of the girls. Both are pretty; but one's engaged, and the other hasn't a half-penny. By-the-way, I've dropped the 'Lord' in your case, and announced you as plain 'Gerald Foulis.'"

Jack gave a sigh of relief when this letter was finished, and soon after dropped it himself into the post.

That evening, sitting under the cedar with his wife and her cousin, he remarked casually—

"By-the-by, Madge, you'll have to make the gable-room tidy. I half expect an old friend, Gerald, commonly called Jerry Foulis, for a few days' visit. I think you'll both like him; he's an artist like myself, only, having a large enough income to save him from absolute starvation, he's a good deal less industrious."

Little Mrs. Melford's bright eyes opened wide at this sudden announcement, but she said nothing. Maude likewise was silent; and what Jack called her "spoilt-child" expression deepened visibly.

"My dear Jack," exclaimed Mrs. Melford, a little later, when they were alone together, "who on earth is this friend? Oh, dear! Why did you ask him, with Maude here? An artist too, and good-looking, and young of course!"

"One question at a time, my dear girl. Take it easy, and I'll do my best to satisfy you; so now to begin. He is Gerald Foulis, an old school-mate and