

# Dearest.

IN TWO INSTALLMENTS.

## CHAPTER I.

I was up on the downs, my heart full of light as the larks singing over my head, my life as sunny as the scene below me.

Far stretches of fields, the first faint tint of ripening upon them; wide meadows, dotted over with cows lazily chewing the cud, the river winding through them like a silver ribbon; the church tower peeping out from among the trees, down in the village; the chimneys of the Hermitage, my home, visible among the dark foliage of its surrounding grounds.

The wind swept down, where I sat, bathed in sunshine, were alive with bees, butterflies, grasshoppers, and hillside flowers, with the blue sky spanning all.

I fancy I see it now, like a living picture. In the foreground, a tall girl of seventeen, her tawny hair not yet bound up, in quaint, trailing white gown, blue ribbons, and wide sun-hat.

I had violet eyes, full of shimmer and laughter, yet with dark depths of passion under the shimmer, not yet sounded—depths of love and devotion, very like the depths of some well-nigh fathomless pool.

A motherless bairn was I, as Jeanne my Scotch nurse, would have said, and I was wearing one of my grandmother's quaintly cut gowns, which made me look very like an old-world maiden stepped down from one of the frames in the picture-gallery.

But it pleased my grandfather, who had loved his wee, blue-eyed second wife with very much the same wild, passionate devotion as that with which I loved him, although she had lived but a year or two after her marriage.

I loved him, loved my beautiful home, loved my own happy life.

We Marsdens were not given to doing things by halves, loving, hating, or any thing else, and we always liked to have our way; and I was a Marsden of the Marsdens my grandfather said, turning up my face to look into my eyes—eyes answering to eyes, like face to face in water; only, his were harder, sterner; frowning eyes they were, but not to me.

Very handsome, stern, and unbending were the men of the Marsden family. Beauty and as much self will as they dared to use were the inheritance of its feminine portion.

Unfortunate in love, too, were their hapless woman-kind, as a quaint old couplet, cut in the stone archway over the door leading into the Lady's Garden, testified:

When their hearts a-mating go,  
Sap the Marsden maidens woe.

Very unhappy had many of their matings been, according to the old family annals, looked away in the library; my grandfather had told me scraps of these half-legendary stories.

One Marsden maiden had climbed the wall of the Lady's Garden, on the eve of her marriage to a bridegroom, not of her own choice, and ended both love and life in the dark waters of the moat on the other side.

Well, love was nothing to me but a name, a mysterious something that might never come to me.

For, as yet, as I chanted in childish carelessness, sitting up among the bluebells, wild thyme, and the like—

"Love has passed me by, ho-ho!  
Love has passed me by."

"Why, little lady, that's a mournful ditty!" said a voice near me, which made me start to my feet and step upon my trailing gown.

My hat I had tossed off.

This I replaced, and stood demurely shy blushing and confused as any little milk maid.

And no wonder, for I had been shut up with masters, governesses and Jeanne, never going from home, my grandfather seeing no one—save a few staid neighbors, who came to a state dinner or two in the course of the year—since the tragic death of my two uncles—one killed in the hunting field and carried home dead, the flush of youth not gone from his cheeks, as I had heard Jeanne say; the elder drowned, as was supposed, after a quarrel with his father for wilfully marrying the lady of his choice instead of one of his father's choosing.

My grandfather aged fast after this most unhappy passing away of my Uncle Lionel, and soon after followed the death of my grandmother.

These two sons were by his first marriage—a boy and girl match this must have been, and, it might be, not the heart to heart, soul to soul union of more mature years.

I believe there had been something lacking in their two lives.

Then death came and sundered them, and soon my pretty blue-eyed grandmother, a golden-haired spirit, danced about the Hermitage for a year or so—a sunbeam, here and gone, leaving my father, a poor little wailing reminder of what had been.

Her death was a great blow to my grandfather, following that of my Uncle Lionel, who sailed away in an ill-fated ship which never reached its destination, with his newly wedded bride, who, poor thing! was the cause of the rupture never to be bridged over this side of the grave.

Mrs. Hunt, the housekeeper, had told me that my grandfather averred he saw him on the night of the storm and supposed ship wreck, looking in at the library window, a poor droned, white-faced outsider.

She herself said it must have been poor daff David, as he was called—an imbecile, always abroad on stormy nights; but my grandfather persisted it was my Uncle Lionel's face, and no other.

No wonder his hair whitened so fast after that. He never mentioned Lionel's name to me; it was never spoken in the house in his hearing; my uncle's picture was taken from the gallery, and looked away in the room that was once his.

Not in malice, slight, or anything of the kind, the old lady assured me; but because as my grandfather expressed it, he could not bear the remorseful agony of looking at it.

So much for the skeleton in the cupboard of my grandfather's life; and now as to the stranger on the breezy downs.

He was tall, dark and handsome, with the bearing of one who had roamed much in foreign lands, as I decided later when I knew him better.

He stood bareheaded before me, smiling down at me with the most winsome eyes—dark grey, I believe they were—I had never seen.

"I don't think it mournful at all," I made answer, my girlish tongue getting the better of my shyness.

"Ah! that's because you think it will never come true in your case."

"And why?" I asked, constrained, I knew not why, to answer him.

"Well, a young lady like you ought to be able to settle that question herself," was the response, the winsome dark eyes still smiling down at me.

I flushed like a schoolgirl.

"But come, we will let that knotty point be. Isn't it a perfect day?" said he.

To this I answered, "Yes," wondering who and what he was.

"Now, could you tell me whose is that mansion, hidden away among the trees yonder?" and he pointed with his finger.

"That's the Hermitage, my home," I told him, glancing away at its chimneys with loving pride.

"Is it worth seeing?" There now, that isn't a fair question," he corrected himself.

"It's the dearest, the grandest old place in all the world to me," said I, tossing off my hat in my girlish enthusiasm, and letting the wind toy with my hair.

"Just so. You stay-at-home English people love your homes, as we wanderers never can."

I fancied a sigh followed his words.

"Are you a wanderer?" I asked, eyeing him over, and replacing my hat.

"Yes."

He did not put his on, but, tossing aside a tourist's knapsack, sat down on the turf, and I, like the guileless child I was, took my seat near him.

I knew no better, and soon we were deep in conversation.

He told me tales of the countries he had passed through.

His real home had been in Australia, until his father died, but they had both been wanderers in many lands.

He was an artist "down on his luck," he said; and had come to England for the first time, to try and bury grief for his father's death in hard work.

Now, did I know anyone who wanted their portraits taken, or pictures retouched, or of anything else to bring him in an honest penny?

"You see, artists must live, and fame isn't won in a day, any more than Rome was built in the same limited space of time. I mean to do what the song says about the cobbler—to make it my pride the best of artists to be, or one of the best, one of these days; but there's no royal road to anything worth doing; it must be drudge, drudge, wait, wait, wait; and so he talked on.

I told him I believed my grandfather had some pictures in the gallery he wanted retouched and cleaned, and that I would mention it to him.

Then we parted, and I, as I descended the hill side, in the afternoon sunshine, and went tripping home, seemed a heroine stepped out of some old-world romance.

I have been talking to a real artist!

—more, I held his card in my hand. Herbert Maitland was the name upon it, and by that name I mentioned him to my grandfather.

## CHAPTER II.

"Grandfather," I said, I met a Mr. Maitland, an artist, out on the downs this afternoon, and he gave me his card, and asked, did you want any pictures cleaned and retouched, and would I mention him to you? See, here is his card."

"Lettie, I think you are almost old to

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go roaming, and forming the acquaintance of wandering artists and the like," was my grandfather's answer, as he scanned the card with knitted brow.

"Where's the harm, grandfather? He's a perfect gentleman, and he's going to call on you to-morrow," said I undauntedly.

"Like his impudence!" he exclaimed.

"Oh! grandfather, don't!" I cried, going and clasping him round the neck from behind, and putting my hand over his mouth.

We were at dinner, and alone.

I often teased him to dine, we two by ourselves, I waiting upon him, instead of James, and Bond the old butler.

"Well, don't throttle me, child."

"And you will see him, won't you, and let him do the do the pictures? You know you said, the other day some of them wanted retouching."

And he does want to make his way in the world. He is poor, and his father is dead—think of that," I urged.

"Poor orphan!" and grandfather laughed grimly.

"Well, we will see—we will see," was the outcome of my pleading; and, on the morrow, I saw Mr. Maitland mounting the terrace steps as I wandered about in the rose garden.

I wondered how he had sped, as I watched him depart awhile after, but thought it not well to rush after him and inquire.

Nor did I go to grandfather, but he, to my joy, came to me soon after, as I sat on the terrace steps, humming my ditty of yesterday.

"Love has passed me by, ho-ho!  
Love has passed me by!"

the words haunting me like a refrain.

"Well, Lettie," said he, "your swan hasn't turned out to be a duck, as so many of your swans do. Mr. Maitland seems a gentlemanly young fellow, alive to his art, and I've engaged him. He's gone now to fetch his belongings from the Marsden Arms, down in the village, where he's staying."

"Oh, thank you, grandfather!" I cried, and reached up and kissed him.

How was I to know—how was he to know what was to be the outcome of it all?

Well, Mr. Maitland came to the Hermitage, had rooms assigned him, and painted in the gallery that looked out over the Lady's garden.

At my rate, the one window did where he encoined himself with his easel.

But he never looked my way when I roamed there among the sweet tangle of flowers and greenery I had coaxed the gardener to let it become—archways festooned and festooned again with flowering creepers; the green alleys dense, dark, and even chilly, for want of being trimmed.

Anyhow, it pleased me, this flowery wilderness all ablaze now with bloom.

And my grandfather never came there, it reminded him too sadly of my sweet, young grandmother.

He often sat on the steps leading down from my own suite of pretty rooms, singing and playing the guitar that had been my grandmother's doing this and that pretty make-belief of embroidery, and dreaming dreams never likely to become true.

Our guest—if I might call him so—dined with us, a sort of stately courtesy accorded him by grandfather; his other meals he took in his own rooms.

And this dinner was a constrained sort of meal, my grandfather and Mr. Maitland talking of art and other subjects not likely to interest me, a little white robed maiden, sitting so demurely at the head of the table an honour accorded me at the advent of this stranger, neither use ornament, as I told Jeanne, my nurse.

But "Twere time, Miss Lettie, you were taking your place as mistress of the house in the and that, for you're fast growing up," was her reply.

And, not many days afterwards, my grandfather, much to my astonishment, bade me turn up my hair. "For you're stepping into young ladyhood," said he "and—well, I wish it."

This was when our artists had been at work a week or two, and I, that very morning, a drenchingly wet one, had crossed the wide picture gallery to where he sat, brush in hand.

"So last, you've found me out, Miss Lettie?" said he, clearing one of the quaint old gallery chairs of art litter for me to sit down in.

"Did you expect me to come before?" I asked with a laugh.

"Yes, of course I did!"

"Why?"

"Because two together are better than one alone."

"Oh, yes!" said I, "and it's always that with you."

"Always what, Miss Lettie?"

"One alone."

"Well—yes—'tis man's destiny till—"

Here he paused.

"Till what?"

I smile now to think what a child I was to ask that question.

"Well, you know what happened to Adam at the beginning of that tangled coil called human life?"

"Oh, yes!"

And somehow, my awakening womanhood brought a blush to my cheeks.

At this he bit his lip under his moustache to hide a smile, and I blushed deeper. Still.

"Come do you think I've made good use of my time?" questioned he.

"Oh! yes; even more, if that can be," said I admiringly, as the face for a beautiful maiden, in ruffs and stomacher of olden time, smiled at me from the canvases he was busy over.

"There are some beautiful faces here," he remarked.

"Yes, the Marsdens are considered to be a handsome family," I told him as if I were not of them.

"So I should think; and self-willed to a degree."

"Oh, yes, we all like our own way!" I laughed. "Yet it's no laughing matter," I added, correcting myself. "It sent one to her death—Othello's, in that far-off corner," and I pointed with my finger.

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He rose and went to look at the ill-fated Marsden maiden, in her shady corner, and I followed him.

"It sent her to her death," I repeated.

"What did?" he questioned.

"Wanting to marry the man she loved, when her father bade her marry another."

"And what happened?"

"She threw herself into the moat."

"And then?"

"She was drowned, of course."

"Poor lady! Better if your ditty of the other day had overruled her life."

"Yes," returned I soberly. "The Marsden ladies are not happy in their love, and you may read something very like a warning carved over the doorway leading into the Lady's Garden."

"I don't know where the Lady's Garden is."

"Haven't you seen me walking there?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"How funny!" said I, like the veriest child, and yet with something of the pique of a girl at seeing I was of so small account to him, that he had failed to see me when I passed under his very nose, as Jeanne would have said.

"Where is it?" he asked, so serenely unconscious that he had been guilty of a slight to me that I laughed.

"I have half a mind not to tell you," I said.

"Yes, do; and I promise to be more observant another time," he pleaded.

"Why, it's down there," said I, pointing below at the dripping bower of beauty, looking so desolate and disconsolate under the downpour of rain. "But I don't want you to peep after me like a cat after a mouse."

"You surely don't suppose we're to be no better friends than a cat and a mouse, which, in fact, are no friends at all?"

"Oh, I don't know!" returned I archly.

He glanced at me so quizzically that I looked saucily scornful in my turn.

"But I must be going," I remarked, and I tripped abruptly away downstairs to get ready for my music master.

Cat and mouse!

Certainly it was not like that we met and met again in the old picture gallery; for, after that wet day, I very soon began to wander across every morning to peep at his work.

But what I enjoyed most was to go, in the hush of the golden afternoon, when the old house—at least, up there—seemed asleep, and sit in the quaint old carved chair, always empty and waiting for me, like a girl in some old-world romance, and watch this clever-handed friend of mine.

Friend! I scarce knew what he was to me; I gave him no designation, even in my thoughts.

I only knew that he had brought a charm, a glow, a something new and exceedingly sweet, into my life—that I had turned up my hair, or Jeanne had for me, without regret, and was a child no longer.

Well, it was a fool's! and I was in a paradise I sunned myself in, but it was in an amazingly sweet while it lasted; for ere Mr. Maitland found his way round to the Lady's Garden, and he and I together read the old rhyme over the doorway—

When their hearts a-mating go,  
Sap the Marsden maidens woe;

and talked of the loves, joys and hopes, mayhap never realized, of the many young maidens who had dreamt and wandered in the flowery tangle, just as we ourselves were doing—whose very existence had become but a name, and it may be, a beautiful face looking down here and there from its frame into the old gallery above.

Sometimes we sat on the steps leading up to my suite of rooms, and I played my guitar and sang

Sometimes he took it from me, and poured such music as I had never dreamt of—he and I singing together.

That was when the lilies were blooming in the garden below, the air was heavy with their perfume.

Ah, me! how it all comes back to me—the golden, hot, hushful afternoons, so stifling and oppressive everywhere, save in my own cool retreat.

## CHAPTER III.

"Little Lettie," said my grandfather, in the midst of those halcyon days, when I went about and played my part like a girl toying with her destiny; "Little Lettie, I am going to let our friend, Mr. Maitland, paint your portrait in 'black.' I've told him to put everything else aside, and to begin it at once—this very morning."

This announcement well nigh took away my breath, with a sort of thrilling surprise which brought the blushes to my face.

"Ah, little girl! blushing over the thought of what her own loveliness will be portrayed on canvas?" said grandfather, patting my hot cheeks, and laughing. Run away, dearest, and get ready."

Grandfather was the same imperious, impatient Marsden in his old age that he had been in youth, brooking no delay.

"But how must I get ready—how dress?" I asked, my heart in a tumult of emotions.

"Dress just as you are, just my bonny little girl in white, a rose in your bosom, and one of your grandmother's caps on your head. Jeanne knows where to find one for you. Just so. I saw your dear grandmother for the first time."

"But, grandfather, to make me look like my own grandmother, for ever and ever, on canvas?"

I pouted, my lips taking a curve of laughter the while.

"Ay, child, you might do worse! Your grandmother was one of the sweetest-browed women I ever saw. Though you are a very Marsden of the Marsdens, I sometimes see a likeness to her in your young face—a sweet, ingenuous innocent, nothing concealed nor kept back. I do not think she ever had a secret from me during our short life together, and my darling grandchild is like her—open as the day, guileless as she was."

It was well my grandfather folded me in his arms and kissed me; I was all too conscious to look him in the face, for I had a secret from him, though never sweeter lay hid in maiden's soul than this one hid away in mine.

It came to me like a revelation, and, somehow, made my eyes smart with tears, I ran and gathered my roses—my only ornament, if I might call it so, besides my cap, which Jeanne set jauntily on my sunny, tawny hair, piled high on my head—a tangle of wilful rings and curls on my forehead; a Marsden maiden, about to make ready to range herself among her sisters in the gallery, grandfather told me, taking me for my first sitting himself, and remaining with us.

Would that he had always done so; would that many things had been different! Yet, it may be, that all these were in higher hands, working together for a lady little maiden's good, viewed at the end of life instead of at the beginning.

Grandfather left us much alone together during the sittings that followed, on those breezy, yet intensely hot, glowing summer mornings—all coolness, and hush, and quiet in the old shady gallery; we two sitting alone, listening to the coo of the doves the cry of the cuckoo, and later on, the hoarse, rasping note of the corncrake coming from over the fields.

I never heard the cry of the corncrake for years after without its bringing back to me a certain ever-to-be-remembered evening the outcome, so to speak, of all those swiftly flying golden mornings.

My grandfather, when he came with his newspaper to sit with us, was so often called away for it and that.

At such times, Mr. Maitland and I talked of little, and when we did speak, it was of poetry and art, never a word of love.

Still, I wondered at grandfather leaving us so much alone; but then, he fancied me the child I was not.

When Jeanne mounted guard, which she occasionally did in his place, she never vacated her post, but sat precociously knitting the click-click of her needles ringing out through the stillness.

So the days and weeks passed on, and a bright, proud, eager face grew upon the canvas—stroke by stroke, daub by daub, as I sometimes laughingly expressed it, to Mr. Maitland's make-belief disgust at my poor appreciation of his art.

It truly was a lovely picture that was growing beneath his brush.

It was my face, yet transformed.

"Transformed with what?" I sometimes questioned, blushing over it, when I stole across to the easel, and drew aside the covering to take a look at it in the absence of Mr. Maitland.

"Child, you little guess for whom the picture is intended," said my grandfather, one day, when we had both been to take a stolen peep at it.

Mr. Maitland had given himself a half-holiday, and so was absent sketching.

"For whom can it be, but for you, grandfather, to hang in the gallery?" I wonderingly replied.

"No, dear; not for me. I have the original," and he stroked my head. "But it's a secret, to be told some day to my darling—a sweet secret to most maidens' hearts."

A sweet secret!

What could be sweeter than the one which was thrilling and throbbing to make itself known to my shy, reticent heart?

Surely, surely—and a pang shot through my very being as the thought came—surely it was not to be given, this picture to Mr. Maitland, to remind him of the maiden he had seen, loved, and lost?

Nay, true love can never be lost; yet I felt my face growing pathetically wistful.

"What is it dear; does the picture puzzle trouble you?" asked the dear old man, noticing it.