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The Old Marquis

The Girl of the Cloisters

CHAPTER XXIX.
A NYMPH OF THE WOOD.

"It will be a long drive?" says Edith.

Lord Combermere shrugs his shoulders.

"Not too long. If Mrs. Drayton pleases she can go inside. Very comfortable inside, you know."

"Oh, don't think of me!" says the patient lady. "I shall enjoy it!"

"Then we shall say 'done,'" asks Lord Combermere, smiling.

"Yes, we will come," replies Edith, languidly. "What time?"

"The general will call for you at eleven," says Lord Combermere.

"Horribly early, I'm afraid, but if we are to get back by eight, we must start in time."

"We shall be ready," says Edith, gazing out at the square.

"Thanks. I'm awfully grateful," remarks his lordship. "I had doubts of the success of the thing, but I am confident now. I shall tell the rest of the people I mean to ask that you are coming, and shall meet with very few refusals."

He takes up his cane, and looks around with that expression of innate relief which men assume when they are about to take leave; but Edith Drayton brings him to a pause.

"Nearly everybody is out of town, I suppose?"

"Seeing that you are still in it—" he commences, gallantly, but she interrupts him.

"Have you," she says, turning the rings on her finger, and speaking in the most languid of tones—"have you seen Lord Fane lately?"

"Lord Fane?" he says, thoughtfully.

"No. By the way, I heard—"

Then he stops short, as if he had been on the point of committing himself.

"You heard?" she says, calmly, her dark eyes fixed upon him with languid interest.

Lord Combermere stretches on the left glove with delicate care.

"Oh, mere hearsay," he says, apologetically; "but I heard that he was in Spain."

Her face blanches for a moment, then resumes its ordinary color.

"In Spain! This is not the season in Spain—it is too early!"

"Yes," he says, staring at his boots—"yes, I know; but that is what I heard."

He shuffles—actually shuffles—with his patent-leather-clad feet, and holds out his hand.

"To-morrow, then, at eleven," he says, cheerily. "And don't be nervous. Although the general can't drive, you'll be quite safe. The horses are as quiet as cows."

"What did he mean by Lord Edgar being in Spain?" demands Mrs. Drayton, as soon as the door had closed on their visitor.

"I do not know. You heard him."

"Yes, and saw him. Edith, mark my words—there is something wrong about Lord Fane."

The crimson flushes the girl's face for a moment, then she says, coldly:

"Very likely. At any rate, it is no business of ours, mother."

On the morrow the general arrives in the square with the four-in-hand. It is a nice coach, and the horses look quiet, if not quite as quiet as cows. Lady Debenham is outside, in a pretty autumn costume, which has a touch of the sporting character in its double-capped dust protector. There

are one or two other women—all known to Edith—Lord Combermere, and a young marquis who is just fresh from college, and who regards the expedition as an elaborate spree spoiled by the presence of ladies, of whom he is immensely afraid. The two grooms drop down and adjust the ladder, and Lord Combermere gallantly assists Mrs. Drayton to ascend, but not until she has feebly suggested that she should be allowed to travel as an inside passenger.

"Impossible, my dear Mrs. Drayton; full of hampers and wine-boxes, to say nothing of a collection of waterproofs and umbrellas that would set up a second-hand clothes-shop. Claxtone, will you make room? I know you'd like to sit where you could see the horses, Miss Drayton."

The bashful young marquis, smitten dumb and crimson by the apparition of Edith's loveliness, scrambles out of the way, and after some minutes of shuffling they are all "packed," as Lord Combermere calls it; one of the grooms blows a horn, with some difficulty, and they start.

It is a lovely morning; the general doesn't manage the horses so badly when he gets them off the stones; and Edith would enjoy herself for the haunting care, the demon of unrest and jealousy that forever reigns in her bosom lord.

If he—Lord Edgar is always "he" in her thoughts—were but by her side, and that other girl whom he loves was at the other end of the world, or dead—yes, dead—she, Edith, could be happy.

But as it is, she plays her part; her sweet lips are set in a peaceful smile, her dark eyes flash now on Lord Combermere, and now on the boy marquis, with every sign of pleasant enjoyment, and when she speaks there is no touch in her tuneful voice of the never-ceasing ache which fills her heart.

"Going along first-rate, eh, Comby?" says the general, inwardly delighted that he has been able to bring them thus far without a direful accident.

"Pretty good pace, too? Do you like going fast, Miss Drayton?" he asks, without turning his head, because he dare not take his eyes off the horses.

"Very much. But isn't this fast enough? What time shall we get to—what is the name of the place?"

"Pangley. About half-past two. All

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most as fast as the train, don't you know, because the line wanders about so, and we are going nearly as the crow flies. Pretty place, Pangley, eh, Claxtone?"

"Oh, yes, awfully jolly," stammers the lad; then he summons up courage to address Edith for the first time. "Hope you are comfortable, Miss Drayton?"

"Yes, thanks," she says, turning her eyes upon him, so that he wishes he hadn't spoken, so completely has the serene glance overcome him. "I am ashamed to have turned you out of your seat."

"Don't—don't mention it. I like sitting behind the driver; always used to sit there on Fane's coach."

"On whose?" she says, quietly; she can not hear the name without a thrill and tremor.

"On Fane's, young Farintosh, you know. He used to keep a four-in-hand at college. First-rate whip he is too. But he's first-rate all around. Never saw such a fellow to ride: take anything, good or bad, stick on or fall!"

"Claxtone's got on his favorite topic," said Lord Combermere, with a laugh. "He'll talk about young Fane all day, if you'll let him, Miss Dray-

ton."

Lord Claxtone blushed, and would have retreated into a silence lasting for the remainder of the drive, but Edith smiled encouragingly at him, and said, softly:

"It is pleasant to hear one friend speak so admiringly of another. Besides, Lord Fane is a friend of mine."

"Is he?" said the lad, delightedly. "I'm glad of that. We used to be great chums at college—at least, he used to be good to me, as an old hand to a freshman. I called upon him yesterday, but he's out of town."

Edith's heart beat fast; perhaps she would now hear where he was.

"Yes," she said, encouragingly. "Come abroad, I suppose?"

Lord Claxtone shook his head.

"I don't know. His man didn't seem to know, either. Neither did Clifford Revel, whom I met and asked. He said he thought Fane was yachting, but wasn't sure. At any rate, he—Lord Fane, I mean—must be in town in a fortnight, because he is entered for the gentleman's race at Badmore."

"Oh!" said Lord Combermere, leaning forward with an interested look. "Going to ride in the steeple-chase, eh? How do you know that, Claxtone?"

"Saw it in the lists a week ago," answered the lad, proud of his knowledge.

"Strange," said Lord Combermere. "I fancied Fane had decided to cut the turf."

"So he had," said the general, without turning his head. "But Clifford Revel persuaded him to enter for this. I heard him at the club. Fane stood out for a time, but gave in eventually—Revel can always persuade him into anything if he sticks to him long enough—and he consented."

Edith listened with the same smile on her face, but a troubled perplexity in her heart. She never saw Clifford Revel, never heard his name mentioned but she experienced a sudden chill of fear. She fancied she saw a motive in everything he said and did; she fancied that nothing he did but had some subtle scheme in it to advance him nearer to his coveted prize. Why should he be so anxious for Lord Edgar to ride in this race? She listened, her face slightly sheltered by the sunshade.

"Hem!" said Lord Combermere, thoughtfully. "I wonder what horse Fane means to ride? I'd back him for a hundred or two if I knew the horse; Claxtone is right, Fane can ride."

"Well, I can tell you," said Lord Claxtone, with a little air of gratified importance. "He's going to ride Assassin—"

"Assassin!" said Edith, flashing her eyes upon him with a faint shudder. "What a fearful name!"

Lord Combermere laughed.

"Isn't it? Fact is, almost all the names are getting used up, and men are at their wits' end for a good name."

"I don't call Assassin overgood!" said Lady Debenham, languidly.

"No, not very pleasant, is it?" assented Lord Combermere; "but, by George, it fits the brute!"

"Why?" asked Edith, sharply, with a little catch in her voice.

"Because he kills anyone who comes within reach of his heels," said Lord Claxtone, decisively.

"Steady, Clax!" laughed Lord Combermere. "He's not so bad as that! He has won the name because he kills all the other horses—that is, outruns them, if he gets a good start."

"But as he only starts decently once in five times, he doesn't stand much chance," said the general, who was supposed to be up in turf matters.

"But if any one can start him, Fane can!" exclaimed Lord Claxtone, stanchly.

Lord Combermere nodded.

"Yes; and he means to ride him? Well, I'd rather be excused! I have seen the animal—in one of his tempers—fling a jockey from the saddle like a stone from a catapult—what's the matter, Miss Drayton?" for she had turned her head aside, and not so soon but that she saw how deathly white the lovely face had grown.

She swung around to him in an instant with a smile in her eyes.

"Nothing! How coolly you talk of what must have been a frightful accident, Lord Combermere."

"I beg your pardon! I ought to have remembered. Ah! Miss Drayton, if you had attended Badmore as often as I have done you'd get hardened."

(To be Continued.)

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