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Lady Marjorie's Love

This was a return slap for the lunch which Mr. Chadburn had had and which he should not have had. The Countess, coming slowly down the steps in her usual graceful deliberate fashion, holding the train of her handsome dress in her white hand—her robes and rich—did not at all change the placid expression of her fair, calm face. She was well used to her stepdaughter's girlish sarcasms, and never heeded them in the least—nay, they did not even amuse her, for she had no sense of humor. "Handsome and stately ladies, who never make a joke any more than they see one, who never lose their tempers, but possess an exquisite faculty for putting other people out of their, never do possess any, perhaps. The Countess did not, and she was totally unaware of it."

"Your father is as usual," she said composedly. "He is a little tired, no doubt, but he feels exertion so quickly. It is rather a pity as I have told him, that he should have appointed this evening to see Mr. Petherick."

"Mr. Petherick?" Marjorie echoed. "Mr. Petherick was the Castle Marling lawyer, and if there was any one whom its somewhat unobscure man could be said to regard as a confidential friend, Petherick was that man."

"It would have been no doubt better, to postpone it until to-morrow morning," the Countess pursued. "But the appointment is made and he does not wish me to send to alter it. You had better not disturb him this afternoon, Marjorie; it will be better for him to be quiet—he may sleep."

The tone made the words sound merely like a suggestion; in reality they were a command, and a pretty severe command too. It was Lady Marlingford's habit to speak to all her household in much the same way, and not a man or woman of them all would have dared to disregard or disobey her faintest hint, as they valued their situations. Her stepdaughter understood her thoroughly and as well as her maid did, and nodded.

"All right, Fenella, I won't disturb him. I hate to see him looking so dreadfully nervous and tired, poor dear," she murmured half the steps and turned back, struck with a sudden thought, and leaning her arms on the broad balustrade. "Oh Fenella, I quite forgot, Lotius is here."

"Lotius?" The Countess, echoing the name not unnaturally looked round for its owner. Marjorie laughed and stood leaning on the balustrade while she explained.

"Oh, not here—that is, not in the house," she said. "He found me in the wood, but he couldn't stay. He has come down from town with Frank Pemberton, and had promised to go back and lunch with him. He'll be here to dinner, though."

"Unless, I presume, Mr. Pemberton should chance to meet Lotius," she said. "The Countess with a faint questioning inflection. She smiled a slight odd smile. 'Does he intend to remain here my dear, or is it one of his flying visits?'"

"Remain? Oh, no. He means to go to the hotel," she said. "Upon what night—no, absent, as if he couldn't just as well have stopped here—and to go back by the first train in the morning."

"To be sure—it is scarcely likely that he would care to give up even the fog end of the season," assented her ladyship placidly.

"No—why should he?" agreed the girl readily. "He loves that sort of thing—he hates it. And it is dull for him here, with nobody in the house."

I said to him I wondered he took the journey to stay such a very little while, but he said he had nothing particular on and thought he might as well. But he has an engagement for to-morrow—the last ball of the season that will be worth going to," he says, so of course he can't stay."

"Of course not," said the Countess. Marjorie did not see the curious smile with which the fine blue eyes rested upon her, or notice the satirically-amused inflection of the clear cold voice, for she was used to both. It has long been a settled article of belief with her that her stepmother did not like her lover, and she never expected her to be 'nice,' as she childishly phrased it, when talking of him. Now she stood and watched the Countess walk majestically across the hall to the stairs and slowly mount them, and then she ran off with Jack to get her lunch in the dining room, untroubled in mind. If Mr. Bligh supported his absence from her very coolly, she bore hers from him with a philosophy that was equally untroubled. Indeed, she was not thinking of Lotius at all as she ate her lunch and fed Jack, and possibly had not remembered his coming appearance at dinner when she in due time came down arrayed for that meal and found her stepmother also ready

in a costume as becoming as it was elaborate. Lady Marlingford did not believe in simplicity of attire for herself by any means, although most of Marjorie's little gowns deserved the title that she gave them, and were mere frocks. "Young girls really needed nothing more," the Countess said. But on the present occasion she did not approve of the severe straightness and plainness of the white garment which robed the slight young figure, and frowned as much as she ever allowed herself to frown as she looked at her.

"Dear me, Marjorie—that dress again? Could you not have found another? What is Alice thinking about? She does not turn you out well at all."

"Turn me out?" My goodness Fenella, one would think I was jelly. The girl's brown eyes brightened mirthfully as she glanced down at herself. "There is nothing the matter with it, is there?" she said. "I didn't tell Alice I wanted another frock—why should I? I wore this one last night."

"Frock?" repeated the Countess. It was a word to which she had objected. "I should have thought," she said, with some slight impatience, "that you would have liked to make rather a special toilette to-night for Mr. Bligh."

"Lotius? Oh I didn't think of it," said Marjorie carelessly. She opened her big heart at her side, the only touch of color about the simple little dress—a fan which had been used so much and so vigorously that it presented a decidedly mottled appearance. "I'll apologise to him if you like, Fenella—tell him that I would have got myself up in a perfectly lovely manner if only I had thought of it."

He will pay me a charming compliment on the spot, you'll see. They are always so neat that I believe that he practises them."

"Possibly," the Countess smiled very much as she had smiled before. "I must confess that I have heard but few of his efforts. But when you are married my dear, I think you will find it worth while to dress for him."

"Shall I? Then when I am married it will be quite time enough to bother myself about it. At present I do not believe that Lotius ever knows one of my frocks from another. Will the Earl come in to dinner, Fenella?"

"No," he prefers to keep quite until Mr. Petherick comes. Very wisely, too, for the seems to be highly nervous, quite flushed and feverish."

Lady Marlingford answered, idly playing with the bracelet that clasped her large firm white arm. "Do pray keep that dog down, child. Your dress will look only the worse for his crumpling."

Marjorie pushed Jack away with such unusual decision and severity that he stared at her in remonstratory amazement, and sat quietly down with a suddenly grave and anxious face. It scarcely changed or lightened when presently Mr. Bligh was seen to enter the hall, and to come towards them with a water with her usual admiration and satisfaction as he crossed to greet Lady Marlingford. The cloud of her father's failing health was a cloud that deepened and darkened over the affectionate little creature day by day. "The Countess," she sometimes thought of herself with a thrill of terror that chilled her, and then drew back frightened by a dread something that she dared not face. She never got

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beyond that 'if' from the misery that it conjured up she shrank shuddering away.

CHAPTER III

Perhaps it was not to be wondered at that so fashionable and fastidious a personage as Mr. Bligh should find Castle Marling dull. The dinner was unquestionably dull. Marjorie, her heart with her father, was openly out of spirits and almost silent; and a young man, who was merely her husband's nephew, and whom she did not particularly like, was not the young man to enlist the best conventional efforts of the Countess. And Lotius presented no contrast to the two ladies, for he was plainly out of spirits too. This was so apparent that later when they were together in one of the window recesses of the great drawing room, a recess so large that it would have made a respectable sized room in itself, while the Countess absorbed herself in a certain Socialistic magazine whose cover was scarlet and whose doctrine was inflammatory, Marjorie asked her lover what was the matter.

"The matter?" He had not been looking at her, although against the straight fall of a heavy purple curtain behind her white frock, her red fan, and her brown head made a pretty picture, but out across the terrace-garden, with a face so clouded and absent that it was little wonder that she asked the question, well used as she was to his being, on carelessness and silt in her company. Now, as he looked round and down at her his change of expression was a little too sudden and bright to be genuine, just as his tone was a shade too light and indifferent. "What should be the matter?" he asked easily.

"Nothing but I thought something might be up. You seem dull and out of spirits you know," said the girl straightforwardly. "For Lotius was generally so amusing when he chose to exert himself that he must know that he had failed to exert himself, but had been on the contrary downright stupid."

(To be Continued.)

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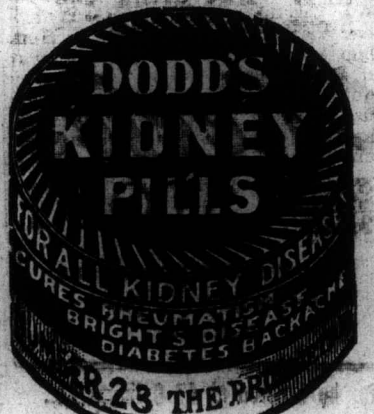
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