

J. BARR  
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in a Thousand  
Robert Barr*

*Author of "Cardillac", "The Sword Maker", etc.*



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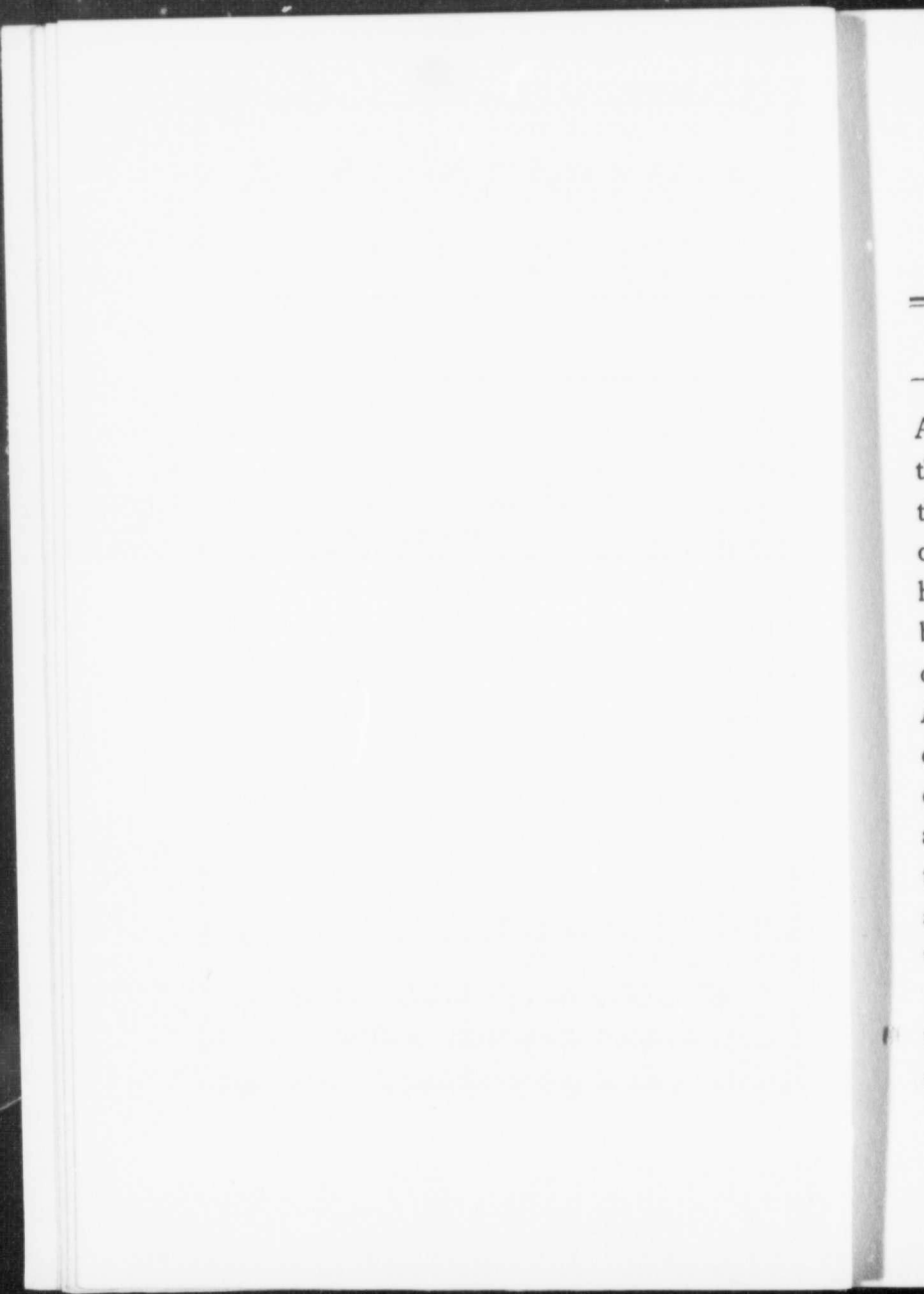
# A WOMAN IN A THOUSAND

BY

ROBERT BARR

AUTHOR OF "TEKLA," "STRANLEIGH'S MILLIONS,"  
"CARDILLAC," "THE FACE AND THE MASK,"  
"THE MUTABLE MANY," ETC.

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## CHAPTER I

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A STRANGER who, travelling by the footpath through the forest, emerged from the woods at the top of the hill, catching thus his first sight of Merivale Castle, might say that it stood in a hollow, while another approaching it by the beautiful, winding river road would, with equal confidence, allege that it was perched on a hill. As a matter of fact, Merivale Castle occupied the centre of a plateau which extended at the height of a hundred feet above the brawling little river, and was seven hundred feet or thereabouts below the summit of the thickly-wooded hill which, amphitheatre-shaped, sheltered the Castle from the north and east winds.

Our assumed stranger on the top of the hill to the south will enjoy the better view, for much of the Castle is concealed from the man walking

along the river road. The pedestrian on the hill-top is likely to take a seat upon the rustic bench set there for his accommodation, and, if the day be warm, fling off his hat and draw a handkerchief across his perspiring brow, for the path he has climbed is steep, and the prospect at which he has arrived is well worth a few minutes of his contemplation.

The owners of this soil did not always reside in that sheltered cove of forest, because seven hundred feet above it, grim against the blue sky, in a position as nearly inaccessible as the country allows, stands the strong, square donjon keep of the Merivale whose name you will find cut in stone at the end of the old church in Dives, by the Norman coast, showing that he came across with the conquering William. The Castle stood impregnable against all comers, including the four winds of heaven, for, situated on the highest point of land, every storm had unimpeded access to it. It seemed as if even the lightnings from the clouds could not rend its massive structure, but Roger Bacon, or some other man, two



hundred years after its erection, invented a black, granular substance that was ultimately to be the undoing of the old Castle, and now nothing remains of it but the square tower, badly broken at the top.

When the eye descends over the tree-tops until it reaches the present Castle of the Merivales, it must be unobservant not to notice that the older part, which bears a Norman severity of appearance, has been built with the already squared stones taken from the ancient stronghold, and although its architect probably knew that the doom of castles had been sounded by the first explosion of gunpowder, the top was machicolated as if its owner still supposed he might defend himself in his own house. But the fact that the later edifice was situated on a tableland commanded by surrounding hill-tops, shows he knew the jig was up.

Those who followed him chose a style more ornamental, and even less defensive, and our meditative man on the bench could trace the varying façades from the reign of Queen

Elizabeth to that of Queen Anne, and the wonder is that such a variety of forms produced an effect so harmonious and beautiful.

If our contemplative man who has left his pondering bench, and is now descending to the river road, has permission to visit the Castle, he will find from the great window of the hall, or from the terrace along the Castle front, a view unsurpassed for peace and loveliness.

Immediately beneath runs the silver river, excellent for trout, foaming here and there in rapids, winding entrancingly until it disappears among the hills. Beyond it glimpses of the white river road are visible, and to the left extends an undulating landscape with patches of glittering lakes here and there. If the sightseer be a man of local knowledge he is aware that nearly all this district within view is possessed by the owner of Merivale Castle; that it pays tribute to him, and will so long as the present laws of England prevail; that, without effort on his part, the master may live the luxurious life of a prince. It might be supposed, then, that this ideal palace

should be a home of much greater content than that of the writer of these words, whose tenure of this story will cease and determine according to the copyright law, within a very few years, although he made it; while the Marquess of Merivale did not make the landscape that produces him an income of forty thousand pounds a year or thereabouts. And yet, strange as it may appear, such is not the case. The author lives in sweet contentment, while the Marquess is the victim of eternal turmoil, besides being engaged upon an eager quest which has so far proved ineffectual.

He wished to find the ideal woman, and his mother very harshly told him that if he troubled his head about such nonsense as that he would never marry a wife. The Marchioness of Merivale, a large, domineering woman approaching her sixtieth year, the despot of this wide domain which produces forty thousand pounds annually, is perhaps the most discontented subject whom our Sovereign possesses. Her towering ambitions have been constantly thwarted.

The line of Merivales from time to time produced brave warriors and celebrated statesmen, and the Marchioness's husband bade fair to become Premier of England. As a young man he had been elected to the Commons, and just as he was making his mark there his father, the seventeenth Marquess, died, and thus he was forced into the House of Lords. In this somnolent assemblage he rose with even greater rapidity than in the more democratic Chamber, but he was killed in the hunting-field, where he had sought distraction while a General Election was going forward, in which, because he was a Peer, the law of England did not allow him to take part. At this General Election the Conservative Party was triumphant, and had the eighteenth Marquess lived he would have been certain of a place in the Cabinet.

His widow's ambitions, thus bitterly thwarted, now concentrated themselves upon her eldest son, but here again Fate played a trick. Rupert, nineteenth Marquess of Merivale, developed into a young man of careless, genial habits, who saw

no reason why he should trouble himself with politics or anything else while the forty thousand a year fell in with regularity. He was exasperatingly good-natured, and even his mother found it impossible to pick a quarrel with him. At thirty years of age he was still unmarried, and he smilingly refused to consider any of those estimable young ladies whom his mother selected as his bride. He was looking, he said, for the ideal woman; the only occupation, he averred, that was worth while to a man who did not need to work for his living.

He refused to attend the sessions of the House of Lords or to take the slightest interest in the concerns of the Conservative Party. He was so hopeless a case that he actually subscribed for the American comic papers, and was known to laugh consumedly at pictures and jokes which his mother regarded as vulgar beyond her powers of expression. Such a nonchalant, indifferent way of looking upon life would probably have filled the Marchioness with despair had Rupert been her only son. But the wavering flame of

her ambition had been fed by the hope that enveloped the younger brother of the Marquess, Lord John Bethen, aged twenty-six, who developed all his father's intense interests in politics, but without possessing that nobleman's suavity and persistence. Lord John inherited much of his mother's impatience and aristocratic disdain, and bitterly she regretted that he had not been born the elder son.

Lord John had taken a violent part in the fortunes of the Conservative Party, and several years before the date of this story had been the Tory candidate for the home division, which in the past had so faithfully returned his ancestors to the House of Commons. In an ordinary election Lord John would probably have been elected, despite the handicap of an arrogant temper, for by no stretch of imagination could he be called popular, although his easy-going elder brother was liked by everyone who knew him. At this General Election, however, the country was swept by a tidal wave of Liberalism, and under that wave Lord John was engulfed,

defeated disastrously in the constituency that never before had returned a Liberal—a constituency that had been looked upon as the private property of the Merivale family.

“This,” cried the indignant Marchioness, “is what comes of a secret ballot, and the deplorable installation of democratic principles which allow an elector to promise to vote one way, and then in stealth do the opposite.”

Lord John himself was even more enraged than the Marchioness. His defeat seemed to proclaim the end of Merivale power to all the world. He accused his own party of deserting him, and sulked for two years, spending most of the time shooting big game in Africa, and travelling in the United States. Against the latter country the Marchioness declared she harboured no prejudice, beyond a dislike for its humorous Press, but later on she changed her mind.

Lord John returned from the great Republic infected by the most grotesque ideas, whose elucidation first affected the Marchioness with

dismay, and then with righteous anger. He admitted holding heretical opinions about one man being as good as another, although his mother indignantly pointed out that of all lands where this was untrue, the United States was the foremost.

“Look at the enormous salaries they pay,” she said, “when their Trusts secure a man who shows himself to be efficient.”

But her wisdom proved ineffectual against the new Radicalism of her second son, and the climax was capped by his acceptance of the Liberal nomination for West Derrymore.



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## CHAPTER II

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THE distinguishing feature of the Merivale library was the tall, wide, square bay-window. It could scarcely be said to give an outlook over the pleasing landscape to the south, because the small diamond panes, leaded in between slender stone mullions, were of a roughened glass, tinged with two slightly varying shades of green, which allowed a subdued light to penetrate; a light similar to that which filters down through the leaves of a dense grove. The window alcove was a favourite retreat of Rupert's, especially when the London morning papers came in, but to counteract the green obscurity he caused to be arranged a hinged casement, which on being opened gave him light enough to read the news with comfort, as he sat or reclined in the long lounge chair that

had been part of his belongings at Oxford. The library was the least frequented room in the great house, haunted only by the elusive Margaret, a person so self-effacing that she took good care not to visit it while the London newspapers were being read.

It was a day warm and languorous, and the Marquess of Merivale allowed his partially perused newspaper to slip from his knees to the floor as he reclined in his Oxford lounge chair, closed his eyes, and thought of nothing in particular. The twittering of birds came to him through the open casement, rather faint, as if the July morning stifled strenuousness, even among the shady trees. Up from the river came a soothing murmur of water pouring over the weir, bringing with it a remembrance of coolness that was comforting.

But another sound struck the dreamy senses of the young man with a peremptory harshness absent from the whisperings of the birds, or the melody of the waterfall. The staccato footsteps were familiar enough to him. They suggested

weight, bulk, and untiring energy, and carried with them a reproach by no means gentle, that should have shamed his own indolence. The footsteps disdained the silencing rugs, trod with firm assurance the hard wood floor, and stopped abruptly near the Marquess's lounging-chair.

"Where's Margaret?" demanded the Marchioness.

"I'm sure I don't know, mother. I've seen nothing of her all the morning."

"It's extraordinary where that girl disappears to just when she's wanted most," cried the elderly woman, in tones of irritation.

"If I may make a suggestion, mother, I'd advise you to touch that bell on the table beside you. I'd offer to do it myself were it not that it lies more convenient to your own hand. The silvery sound of that bell usually produces Miss Elmer as speedily as a spiritualist can materialise the ghost of the late William Shakespeare."

His mother uttered an exclamation of impatience, then, with a heavy hand, smote the

bell, that rang echoing through the long room, and resounding down the corridor outside; but to its strident clangour there was no response.

"Where is that girl!" cried the lady, in anger.

"If she is wise," responded her son, "I should say she is somewhere in the shady wood, or down by the margin of the cool river. Only a very energetic person like you, or a very indolent person like me, would remain indoors on such a day as this."

"But she has no right to be out of reach when I am in need of her. I don't pay her for wandering by the river or strolling in the woods."

"How you exaggerate, mother. I hope I did not suggest either wandering or strolling. I trust the girl has taken an interesting book, and is now seated quietly somewhere near the weir. What did you want of her?"

"I dictated to her some most important letters, and I wish to know whether or not she has finished them."

"Oh, I can answer that question. She has

finished and posted them, if you told her to do so."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know Margaret. She is a most competent and conscientious young woman, therefore I'll venture six to one, any amount you like, that she has done exactly what you told her to do. Margaret's industry is a constant reproach to me. Indeed, the activity of two relatives, or three, if I count my brother John, emphasises my own uselessness in this busy world."

"You are not calling Margaret Elmer a relative, are you?"

"I thought she was by way of being a distant sort of cousin."

"Very distant indeed," said the Marchioness, severely.

"You mean by being beyond the sound of your bell?"

"I mean that her grandfather was second cousin to your father's grandfather."

"Ah, well, that's too much for my unmathe-

mathematical brain. I must ask the capable Margaret to figure out the relationship between us. What amazes me about her is that she understands decimals. I think women should not be taught such things. It must give them an undue sense of superiority over all the male sex except accountants. Yet Margaret pretends decimals are easy."

The Marchioness sat down, very upright on one of the rigid, straight-backed, leather-covered library chairs.

"I wish she understood less of decimals and more of her duty."

"Oh, come now, mother, Margaret is a slave to duty. Did you tell her to post the letters?"

"Yes, I did."

"Then if you will enter that small study of hers, which I call her business office, filled as it is with every plagued book of reference published, you will find her desk quite clear of all correspondence, showing that the letters have been posted. What is there so very important about this morning's correspondence, mother?"

“They are invitations,” replied the Marchioness, sharply.

“Really? Invitations to what?”

“To a very small and select house-party, beginning on the tenth, so you see there is no time to lose in sending them off.”

“A house-party in July, mother? Surely that is an innovation?”

“The Merivales, I should hope, are leaders of custom, rather than followers of it. They need not shirk from an innovation.”

“But what will you do with your guests? There is no hunting, no shooting, no anything out of doors except boating, and the river isn’t deep enough for that. People will be at Trouville and Dinard, or in house-boats, or camping out in the Lake region. They will be climbing in Switzerland, or yachting in Norway. You won’t get anybody to come.”

“Lady Dorothy Sinclair has already promised to come, and the rest do not so much matter.”

“Ah!” said the Marquess, in a long-drawn-out exclamation.

"Then," continued his mother, now on her mettle, "there is excellent trout fishing in our river; there is tennis; there are drives; and there is golf. Yes, if it comes to that, the motor gives you quick access to the sea, where you can lunch, and return in time for dinner."

"Ah!" drawled the young man again.

"There is no more charming woman in all England than Lady Dorothy," persisted his mother.

"She has a delightful figure," admitted Lord Rupert.

"Not only a delightful figure, but she is almost a very beautiful woman, fitted to grace the highest position in the land."

"When I spoke of her figure, I fear I did not express myself clearly. To put it more crudely, she enjoys an income of sixteen thousand pounds a year, or thereabouts."

"Yes, she does, and Lady Dorothy might have her pick of the best in the land."

"Then why doesn't she choose?"



“I daresay she will make her choice before long.”

“Mother, it would be affectation if I pretended not to understand your meaning. Of course, as the nominal head of our line, I take a natural interest in your plans, and sincerely hope they will succeed; nevertheless, I think your house-party is inopportune.”

“Why inopportune?”

“It should not take place until after the West Derrymore election.”

“What has the West Derrymore election to do with the case?”

“Perhaps, mother, I am surmising too confidently. If so, kindly put me right. I am taking it for granted that you desire Lady Dorothy as a daughter-in-law.”

“Frankly, I do.”

“Very well; as my dear and impetuous brother John is Liberal candidate at the West Derrymore by-election, and as the polling does not take place until the seventeenth, how the deuce can you expect him to give up

his electioneering to attend a house-party at Merivale Castle? My dear mother, he would lose the Labour vote to a man by such an action."

The back of the Marchioness became stiffer and straighter at the mention of her second son, who had forsaken all the traditions of his house by accepting a Radical nomination.

"Your brother John will not be here," she said, decisively.

"Not here?" asked Rupert, in mild surprise. "Then is it a case of absence making the heart grow fonder so far as Lady Dorothy is concerned?"

"Rupert, I don't know what you are talking about. I only know you are very exasperating. Lady Dorothy Sinclair would not look at your brother John."

"Good Heavens! Then why invite her?"

"Rupert, you are trifling with me. You know very well that if Lady Dorothy Sinclair forms an alliance with my family, it will be the Marquess of Merivale she marries."

“Nonsense, mother! That is carrying coals to Newcastle indeed. I don't need the money, and John does. They tell me a man cannot be successful in public life unless he has plenty of money to give away—subscriptions to cricket clubs, old ladies' tea-parties, donations to churches of all kinds, public benefits of various sorts. Now, as a peer, I'm denied the delights of electioneering, of nursing a constituency, of playing up for popularity; but if John is going in for that sort of thing, the sooner he makes up to Lady Dorothy, or someone equally rich, the better. So far as I am concerned, I deeply regret that I shall be unable to attend the house-party, because I am going to Switzerland on the ninth.”

“Rupert, you cannot have the heart to desert me like that.”

“No, mother, I wouldn't think of such a thing, so abandon your house-party and come with me.”

“But, Rupert, Rupert,” cried the good woman in dismay, “the invitations have gone!”

“You were afraid just now that they hadn't.

If the house-party must convene, send for John, and nail him for Lady Dorothy. I am a judge of such things, and I should call that a triumph of matchmaking. John and sixteen thousand a year would go splendidly together. I believe he will lose the election anyhow, so commandeer him, mother, and tell him that if he seeks first the sixteen thousand, many elections will be added unto him afterwards. John is putting the cart before the horse. A man with only a beggarly thousand a year, and that allowed him by an elder brother, has no business contesting constituencies. It's as expensive as keeping a yacht. Don't you see the eternal fitness of things? Nab that sixteen thousand for John, and all the lustre Parliament can give will gather round his serious head like a nimbus. John is just stupid enough to make a most successful statesman, and all he needs is wealth. I can afford to marry whom I please, but John can't."

The Marchioness, angry, and getting redder and redder in the face, smote the bell twice with violence. A trim, very good-looking maid, with

flashing black eyes that held a touch of slyness in them, promptly appeared even before the sonorous peal of the bell had died away.

“Have you seen anything of Miss Elmer?”

“Yes, my Lady; she’s gone to the post office with a bundle of letters.”

“There, mother, what did I tell you?” murmured the young Lord of Merivale.

“Gone to the post office?” cried the Marchioness. “Why did she not send Peters?”

The girl looked modestly down at the floor, as if hesitating to reply.

“Speak up! What is wrong with you?” demanded her Ladyship.

“Well, my Lady,” said the girl, as if reluctant to mention the circumstance, “Miss Elmer seemed rather agitated. A young man called upon her, and I heard her tell him he had no right to come to the Castle; but he said she must listen to him, and so, although she had called Peters, she went off with the stranger towards the village.”

The Marchioness stared in amazement.

"Margaret Elmer!" she said, as if speaking to herself.

The maid curtsied and withdrew.

"You mischief-making minx!" muttered the Marquess, now sitting up in his chair, as erect as his dismayed mother stood.

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### CHAPTER III

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THE Marquess of Merivale rose to his feet. Mother and son stood for a moment looking at one another. It was the mother who spoke first, and her words were uttered with decided firmness.

“I shall be interested to know,” she said, “what explanation Margaret Elmer gives of this. Her absence without leave asked or given was bad enough, but to march off to the village with a stranger, who, her own remark showed, was not a fit and proper person to enter the Castle, is an action that will require——”

“I venture to suggest,” interrupted the young man, “that this is a matter concerning Miss Elmer herself, and even if it were not, I should prefer nothing said about it. The malice

of that black-eyed firebrand was only too evident."

"Rupert, if there was malice on the part of the maid, it is due to Margaret Elmer herself that such malice should be exposed."

"Oh, nonsense! I am quite certain that Margaret's promenade to the village with this unknown young man is an excursion of the most innocent description."

"In that case, my son, Margaret Elmer should be glad of the opportunity for explanation which I shall give her."

"I'd much rather you said nothing about it, mother. It is really none of our affair. Margaret's position in this household is even at best somewhat an embarrassing one. She is related to our family, but so distantly, as you remarked, that the tie does not count. She is nevertheless in a position of dependence, being at the beck and call of anyone who wishes service from her, yet she is not a servant, and the servants, knowing she is not exactly treated like an equal by us, dislike her because she will



not consort with them. I rather fancy that Margaret is of a sensitive nature, and probably feels somewhat acutely her position of unclassified servitude, so I hope you will not make her position more uncomfortable than it is by asking questions about that man of mystery with whom she went off to the post office, and who will no doubt prove to be quite a commonplace, innocent person."

"If you are so confident of that, Rupert, why should you object to my asking a few questions to satisfy myself, for I am not so sure as you are that everything is as it should be."

Before her son could reply, if he intended to do so, Margaret Elmer walked into the library from the direction of what Rupert called her business office.

"Oh, by the way, Margaret," cried the Marquess, "shall you be very busy from now on?"

"That will depend on what my Lady wishes me to do," replied Margaret, quietly, looking

not at the smiling young man, but at the frowning old woman.

"I have a few words to say to Miss Elmer," proclaimed the Marchioness, with militant definiteness. "When she has answered my questions she will be at liberty for the rest of the day."

"Very well," said the young Marquess, with evident uneasiness. "I will wait in the reference-room."

He usually called it Margaret's business office, but probably thought on this occasion to soften his mother by using the term she invariably employed.

"No," said his mother, with decision. "I ask you to remain here. You heard the charge, therefore I wish you to hear the answer."

"The charge?" whispered Margaret, in tones scarcely audible.

"Oh!" cried the Marquess, impatiently, "it isn't a charge at all, Margaret; merely an un-called-for observation by an impudent servant,

because you went off to the village with someone whom she did not know."

"The charge," corrected the Marchioness, with icy exactness, "was that a young man called upon you, and his visit caused you such agitation that you told him in the maid's hearing that he had no right to come to the Castle. He insisted you must listen to him, and appeared to possess some power compelling you to do so. You were so much perturbed that, although Peters stood there, ready to convey the letters to the post, as was his duty, you forgot to give them to him, and carried them to the village yourself."

"I did not forget Peters," said Margaret, "but I invited the young man to walk with me to the post office so that no one might overhear our conversation."

"Oh, indeed! Who was this young man, and what was his business in my house?"

"I am sorry, Lady Merivale, that I cannot tell you."

"You mean you will not?"

"Yes, Lady Merivale, that is a more accurate

way of putting it. But in six months, or a year at furthest, I may be able to explain the matter fully. You will then understand why I cannot speak now, and I am quite confident you will approve of everything I have said and done."

"If your actions are so blameless, Miss Elmer, what harm will follow if you tell me now?"

"I have already said that I will not explain at present."

"Really! Do you quite fathom the consequences of that refusal?"

"I believe I do, Lady Merivale. Walking back to the village, I determined to resign my place here should you be displeased at my reticence."

"I think, my girl, you don't know when you are well off. I gave you a position in this household when your father died, leaving you penniless. I admit your industry, and your willingness to make yourself useful, but I imagine you will find it not so easy to obtain a similar position, with as good a salary as I pay you."

"Lady Merivale, you force me to tell you that I am offered a similar post in London."

"At what remuneration?"

"I would rather not say, if you please."

"How very secretive you have become! Are you offered more or less in London than I give you?"

"More."

"How much more?"

"Three times as much."

"Then the truth, I daresay, is that this crisis has been created so that there may be an excuse for leaving me."

"Oh, come now, mother," cried Rupert, who during this conversation had been fidgeting about among the books, "do be fair. There is no crisis, and if there were one, it would not be of Margaret's creation. The kind of crisis I foresee, mother, is financial—the sort of thing they enjoy in the City."

"What do you mean?" demanded his mother, sternly.

"I mean, my dear mother, that the metropolis

is trying to outbid us, and our pride of race must be such that we cannot allow these commercial people to filch from us what we desire for ourselves."

"I am sure, my son, I have not the slightest idea what you are talking about."

"I am talking about the question, or, rather, the momentary crisis, that has become disclosed during this conversation. To put it as we used to do at school, Miss Elmer here is paid a certain monthly sum, which we will designate as  $x$ . The Marchioness of Merivale pays to Margaret Elmer, for value received, the sum of  $x$ . Very well, London steps up, and says to Margaret Elmer: 'I will give you  $3x$ .' Now the valiant Marquess of Merivale moves forward into the fray and, like the dutiful son he is, stands by his mother. He says to Margaret Elmer: 'My mother pays you  $x$ , I will pay you  $2x$ —total,  $3x$ .' Miss Elmer, I have great pleasure in offering you a salary three times greater than that which you have been receiving. I admit it would have been much more gracious on the part of the

house of Merivale to have made this advance without having its hands forced by London. Still, we always were a penurious race, and, after all, it is better late than never."

Margaret Elmer turned upon the young Marquess eyes of protest and reproach.

"I had no intention of mentioning the offer made to me from London. I cannot accept your money."

"Of course you hadn't, and of course you will. An increased amount of salary is the easiest thing in the world to accept. You try it, and you'll find it requires no effort at all."

"Lord Merivale," said the girl, earnestly, "I am quite content with the position I occupy in this house, and with the remuneration I receive, so long as her Ladyship, the Marchioness, is satisfied with my work."

"Really, Margaret, a sensible girl like you must know you are talking nonsense. There is no such thing as a contented person in this world. I receive forty thousand pounds a year,

and wish it was fifty. The fellow who gets fifty is unhappy because it isn't a hundred, and thus we go on. Now, mademoiselle, listen to me: hear wisdom from the fountain-head. From this moment my mother is entitled to one-third of your time, while I am entitled to two-thirds. Mother has already had more than her third today, and at the present moment is encroaching on my time. I now command you to retire to the business office, where I will join you in a few moments. I find myself confronted with various knotty points of procedure upon which I wish your advice and assistance."

Stretching out his arm he pointed to the door, and melodramatically thundered the word "Go!"

Margaret Elmer, however, did not move, but said to the Marchioness: "Did you wish to say anything further to me?"

"No."

"I am very sorry, Lady Merivale, that I am unable to explain the incident of this morning, but I assure you that when the time comes that



I may speak you will approve of everything I have done."

"You said so before," replied the elder lady, in tones very far from confident. "You may go now, Miss Elmer. I shall have no further need of you to-day."

Margaret Elmer bowed, turned without a word, parted the heavy curtains, and disappeared from the library. The Marchioness stood with frowning brow, listening intently until she heard a distant door close, then she turned upon her son.

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## CHAPTER IV

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RUPERT had idly taken down from the shelves a dainty little Elzevir, and was turning its pages in an absent-minded manner. The angry expression of annoyance which marred his mother's face found no reflection in his own. Nothing could be more placid than the countenance of the young Marquess of Merivale.

"Rupert," said his mother, with sharp decision, "I cannot allow you to interfere between myself and my servants. I shall permit no tampering with my rules of discipline. The question of recompense received by those who serve me is adjudicated by myself alone. Miss Elmer has hitherto been dutiful enough, and I have had little fault to find with her. To-day

she has defied me, and that in the presence of a third person."

"You insisted on my remaining in the library, mother," interjected the young man, mildly. "I had no wish to overhear the conversation, and remained only in deference to your commands. My lamb-like obedience cost me a very uncomfortable ten minutes."

"I asked you to stay?"

"Yes, mother, you did. You said I had heard the charge, therefore I must hear the answer."

"Perhaps I said that; I had forgotten it. Well, there was no answer to hear—merely rebellion on Miss Elmer's part."

"I deeply regret to find myself in disagreement with you, mother. The answer given seemed to me to cover the ground completely. I am sure Miss Elmer showed no lack of deference, and she explained to you, evidently at considerable cost to herself, that circumstances prevented her going into the matter at the present moment; but she assured you that when she was at liberty to speak, you yourself would quite

appreciate the cause of her present silence. Such an assurance should be enough from one lady to another."

"From one lady to another?" repeated the angry Marchioness. "Do you mean to place Margaret Elmer on a level with me?"

"As both of you are relatives of mine, I think I may be——"

"Oh, if you persist in your insulting comparison, this conversation may as well cease."

The Marchioness had managed her husband during his life, and he, being a man of great pliability and good-nature, never once opposed her wishes. She had managed her two sons from their infancy to their manhood, without a word of complaint from either, although once, indeed, the strenuous John hinted that she overlooked the fact that they had crossed the line which separates the boy from the man. She managed with an iron hand her whole army of dependants, and discipline was maintained at all costs. The good woman received her own share of disappointments, meeting, as she said, the usual

amount of ingratitude from those who owed her strict obedience, either through the ties of blood or for wages paid. Whoever crossed her wishes was ungrateful; but while a servant could be dismissed instantly, and was, she could not thus summarily dispose of her son.

Up to the present moment Rupert had been as docile as was the case when he was a lad. She fell into the habit of expecting no opposition from him, although sometimes he good-naturedly bantered her, and, being a woman with no sense of humour, she naturally resented this; but in dealing with him she quite overlooked the hereditary fact that, although undoubtedly he possessed all the easy-going, careless, what-does-it-matter nature that had distinguished the Merivale family for generations, there had nevertheless been added to that something, at least, of her own stubbornness and determination to domineer.

Rupert's unexpected championship of one whom she regarded as a menial astonished her at the time, and now filled her with increasing

wrath, the more she thought of it. On the innocent head of Margaret, therefore, unconscious of all offence save that of refusing to disclose the identity of her unknown visitor, would descend the consequences of this ill-timed interference on the part of the son. Although Margaret had refused the additional recompense offered her, she would be compelled to accept it, not from the house of Merivale, but from the person in London who had tendered it.

The Marchioness marched half-way down the long library, but paused when the quiet accents of her son arrested her.

"I am sorry, mother, that you should resent what I have said. I assure you that nothing invidious was intended. You cannot deny that Margaret, by birth, descent, and education, is a lady."

"No," replied his mother, in tones quivering with indignation, "I do not deny it. Miss Elmer is a lady, and appears to imagine, therefore, that she is above her position. I shall replace her with one who is equal in education

and industry, but who does not consort with company she dare not explain."

"You do not accept her statement as true, then?"

"No, I do not. She may hoodwink you, but she cannot cozen me."

"A very distant cousin, as you remarked a while ago."

"Rupert, such ribaldry should be beneath you, but what can be expected of one who spends his time perusing such trashy journals as you take in."

"I think after all, mother, you do not quite appreciate how low my tastes are. Still, you should not allow any degradation on my part to jeopardise the position of a person quite blameless. So long as her work is satisfactory, I think Margaret should enjoy tenure of office."

"Her work is not satisfactory."

"Oh, I had been under the impression that it was."

"Neither is her conduct satisfactory. I shall

keep no one in my employ who receives surreptitious visits from unknown men, and then cannot give a rational account of the transaction when questioned by one in authority."

"Yes, I think Margaret was to blame in that. She seems to be deplorably upright. It would have been so easy for her to set up a cousin on her mother's side, who had come to borrow money which she refused to lend. Had I been driven into a corner, I should have entered into most harrowing details, adding verisimilitude to what otherwise might prove a bald and uninteresting narrative. There would have been no unpleasantness if fiction could avert it. So far from keeping the skeleton in the closet I should have dragged him forth, and rattled his bones until you were compelled to put your hands to your ears. However admirable Margaret's truth-telling qualities may be, on an occasion like this I think they are misplaced, and yet I am quite sure that I could no more teach her the art of diplomacy than I could persuade you that the quality of mercy is an admirable



thing in its way. I never did understand women, and I doubt whether I ever shall."

"That is so self-evident that you do not need to state it. If you understood women, you would think twice before countenancing the act of rebellion you have witnessed—a revolt against authority, which one in your position should be the last to favour."

"Why, you speak as if I were a partisan of the girl's."

"So you are."

"Nothing of the kind. I have just been censuring her. I say that she is a most disappointing person. If she possessed any of the wiles which we attribute to the sex, she would have glided over the situation like a skater on thin ice."

"In other words, you would have had her lie?"

"Oh, I don't put it so harshly as that. Still, there is little use in our pursuing the subject further. I will dismiss the theme, and you will dismiss the girl."

“ Yes, I shall.”

“ Very well. As I feel in some sort responsible, because of what you justly termed my interference, I shall render it unnecessary for her to seek a new slavery in London.”

“ A new slavery? You are now adding insult to interference. Do you mean to imply that at present she is a slave? ”

“ Yes. Slaves are those who are compelled to do as ordered, and who dare not utter any opinion or make any remarks that are displeasing to the person who owns their time. I shall therefore free her from that sort of thralldom by settling upon her three hundred pounds a year.”

It would not be proper to use so crude a word as “ glare ” when characterising any expression which one so highly placed as the Marchioness of Merivale deigned to use ; but if any woman of the commonality had gazed upon her son as the Marchioness was now doing, it would certainly have been termed a glare.

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## CHAPTER V

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"HAVE you gone quite mad?" she gasped at last.

"Not more than is usual with the Merivales. Their sanity has never been satisfactorily proven. I allow my brother John a thousand a year, yet his conduct does not in the least meet my approval. I am an old-fashioned, reactionary Tory, yet the man to whom I allow this yearly payment is Radical candidate for a plebeian constituency, who will enter Parliament pledged to abolish me. Now, you admit that Margaret is also my relative, and she seems to me aristocratic to the tips of her fingers; indeed, carrying it to such an extreme that she refuses to recognise the quite legitimate practices of diplomacy. Therefore, if I generously refrain from cutting off John

with a shilling when he displeases me, why should I not compensate myself by benefiting one who does please me thoroughly."

"Do you dare to make such a proposal?"

"If it is daring, I have just announced that I possess the courage, and also the cash, which, in these commercial days, is the main thing. I furthermore confessed that I am a reactionary, and I am about to give you proof of that fact. Blow Radicalism, say I. Let us get back to the delightful methods of feudal times. I suppose you do not deny that I am what they call in France the representative of my line? I am the head of the house of Merivale. Do you question that?"

"Of course I do not."

"Good! The course I have mapped out for myself is made all the easier by that admission. So far as I can learn, from the records of our house, the distinguishing characteristic of the representative seems to have been that his word was law. He ensured this by an iron-studded club, or whatever happened to be the fashionable

weapon during his time. The women who endured the terror of belonging to his family never harboured any thought even of advising him. Talking about daring, they did not dare to open their lips except when he gave them permission. He adopted what may be called the balmy-brutal method of life; balmy when he was in good humour and unworried, but brutal when there was the faintest show of independence. There was no woman question in those days. They didn't want a vote; they merely wished to keep out of his way when he became emphatic with the mace. Now, my dear mother, as a beginning in the exercise of my new assertion of authority, I ask you to write to those estimable people whom you have invited to my house and inform them that circumstances over which you have no control cause you to rescind the invitation."

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Even when I beg of you?"

"Even when you beg of me."

"Oh, well, that blocks my game. With my brother a Radical Member of Parliament, and

my mother refusing to concur in the good old-fashioned customs of our house, what chance has a besotted Conservative like myself? Still, there is no use of my pretending I thought you would agree, so the house-party goes on as arranged. To-morrow I leave for London, and when I return I'll bring home a daughter-in-law for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I say. I am disgusted with this free-for-all marriage market, in which I am put up, as it were, to the highest bidder. I know I'm foolish to object, for it's all a lottery, anyhow, and I daresay Lady This or Lady That would make me as good a wife as I deserve. However, I'll try another line, favoured by the shining lights of the aristocracy. I shall make a round of the London theatres. I am quite unknown in the metropolis. I shall appear incog. as R. Bethen, Esquire, and I intend to marry the prettiest ballet-girl or Gibson girl or actress in London who isn't already married to her manager. She shall not know that I'm a peer, and enjoy more than five hundred pounds a year.

As the man said who would not come out from under the bed when his wife threatened him with the poker, I *will* be master in my own house, and when I return to it the charming and beautiful and well-known Marchioness of Merivale comes with me."

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## CHAPTER VI

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THE king of an unlimited monarchy, when he learns that there is discontent and incipient rebellion among his subjects, is called upon to make the most momentous decision of his life. Practically only two courses are open to him. First, he may make graceful concession to those over whom he rules; second, he may attempt to crush the mutiny with an iron hand. These courses are almost equally dangerous. King Louis XVI. of France made concession after concession, until his head was cut off. King Charles of England tried the iron hand, and *his* head was cut off.

During her long rule, the authority of the Marchioness of Merivale had never before been questioned. If the conversation that took place



between herself and her son had been reported verbatim to a third party, that third party would probably not have considered the case at all serious. Almost to the end the young man spoke in rather a jesting, protesting fashion. He betrayed no signs of anger, nor was there any trace of the dictatorial either in his manner or his words. Nevertheless, the Marchioness could not conceal from herself that the intent of his final sentences was, to all practical purposes, an ultimatum. Indeed, he had delivered two ultimatums. If she dismissed Margaret Elmer, he would provide the girl with an income, and if she persisted in her matrimonially-directed house-party, he would take himself off to London, and return with a more or less undesirable wife.

When he delivered his final ultimatum, Rupert left his mother standing there in the library, and she stood thus for some time, a deep frown on her brow, pondering upon the situation that had arisen. For a while she thought her son would return, and practically withdraw what he had said. No discussion that ever occurred between

them had been so serious as this, but heretofore, when there was a shadow of disagreement, the young man always gave way completely, begging her forgiveness, and in general pouring oil on the troubled waters. She expected similar compliance on this occasion, and, therefore, was astonished and just a little perturbed when, hearing his step on the gravel outside, she glanced through the window and saw he had dressed himself in his most disreputable suit of knickerbockers, with a faded, ancient, cloth cap upon his head, a stout stick in his hand, and thick boots on his feet, more suitable for a labourer than for the Lord of the Manor. He had started off on tramp without coming to bid her good-bye or tell her where he was going.

The frown on her Ladyship's brow deepened, and the line of her firm lips became straighter and thinner. She passed out of the library into the wide hall, mounted the stair, and entered her own boudoir, where, standing at one of the windows, she saw the Marquess of Merivale swinging along up the avenue towards the North

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Gate, which opened out on the main public road. She watched him until he disappeared, then, with something almost resembling a sigh, sank into an easy chair, and continued to marshal her thoughts; but whether she marshalled them for peace or war, she herself had not yet determined. Hitherto her progress had been along a straight, broad road, untroubled with obstacles. Now she had come to a fork in the way—to the right, conciliation; to the left, coercion. The Marchioness paused, debating the question which way led to success. She came of a line that worshipped success, and success alone.

The natural trend of her mind led towards coercion, but if she had known that conciliation alone would bring her to success, she would have chosen that road without the slightest hesitation. Unfortunately, there were no finger-boards which recorded the destination of each thoroughfare, so she sat in her comfortable chair and conned the matter over in her practical mind.

Ordinarily, she would have reached a decision in an instant, but the sight of her departing

son had brought an unaccustomed hesitation to bear. There had been something in the set of his shoulders, as he strode independently down the avenue, which she never saw there before. It meant definiteness and strength: the wheel to which those shoulders were set would turn; the locked door which met the impact of those shoulders would give way. The last person on whom she had seen a pair of shoulders similarly expressive was the late Lord Brunton, her own father.

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## CHAPTER VII

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It was a sudden remembrance of that stern man—the late Lord Brunton—which now unnerved the Marchioness's resolution. If she had been given to introspection, which she was not, the Marchioness might have looked upon that unexpected set of shoulders as a wild swan is supposed to gaze at her own feather on the shaft which has checked her flight. Could it be possible, after all, that her son held in his blood some of the iron she had brought into the family? Hitherto he seemed nonchalant, careless, humorous, a true Merivale, yet a few moments ago he strode out of her sight a true grandson of one Brunton and a great-grandson of another. If it were John, now, that would have been a different matter, for he, in habit of mind and bulk

of body, was much more a Brunton than a Merivale, and being in the unchartered position of a younger son, this was all to the good. Lord John needed to make his own way in the world, but the young Marquess, as he had said that very morning, was the representative of his race. In him, by the old-time law of England, was concentrated whatever power his line possessed, a power which hitherto he had yielded up to her without protest; but the veiled rebellion of today, which at first she thought appeared only to be crushed by whatever method she cared to choose, was suddenly seen to be backed by the Brunton shoulders, and that added a new ominousness to the situation.

And yet, in justice, there was much to be said favouring the determination of the elderly Marchioness of Merivale to rule. It was her money that had cleared the Merivale estate, and thus rendered the youthful Marquess of her own day independent, and, in a measure, opulent. Her grandfather, Thomas Brunton, was a worthy scion of the sturdy peasant class. By trade he

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was a blacksmith, who in those early days was gifted with a prophetic vision which showed him the possibilities of the material from which he pounded out his livelihood. The blacksmith's shop gave way to a small foundry, and the foundry increased, prospering always, for the shrewd Thomas never traded except at a profit. He chose his pitch well, as near as possible to the source of the ore, and alongside the open mouths of the coal-pits.

He was knighted as a captain of industry, and also as one who had supplied his party with money, besides coercing his ever-increasing army of employees to vote as he wished them to do. He left to his son, also named Thomas, an amazingly prosperous traffic in iron.

Wiseacres said that once the old man was gone, the great business was like to decline, in face of competition as fierce as the hot blasts of its furnaces ; but they were not observant enough to note that the old man had left his shoulders as well as his wealth to the younger Thomas. What one generation did in iron, the next did in

steel, and Sir Thomas Brunton the Second became Lord Brunton the First. There was now a second Lord Brunton, with whom we have nothing to do; but when his sister married the Marquess of Merivale, it was a union—to use Bismarck's phrase—of blood and iron. The marriage had been a long step upward for Adeline Brunton, coming from a family so rich and so new, uniting herself to one old in the history of England, and mortgaged up to the hilt—a family that for generations had been represented by spendthrifts and profligates. To this ancient house Adeline Brunton brought not only iron in her blood, but gold in her bank. Why, then, shouldn't she rule? The Merivale estates were hers by right of purchase as well as of conquest, even though her elder son was the nominal possessor of them.

It is likely that the impartial third person would have decided in the Marchioness's favour; but he might, at the same time, have pointed out that, after all, the game was entirely in her own hands. Although what the young man said to

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her bore some resemblance to an ultimatum, he would not put his veiled threats into force unless she took the action to which he objected; and the third person, if he were mild and unpugilistic, as we suppose, might hint that neither of the two points at issue were important in itself. Whether Margaret Elmer were dismissed or remained a member of the household was, surely, considering her subordinate position, a matter of little moment one way or another. It was not as if Margaret's attitude towards her employer had been at all defiant, or even independent. It must have been noticed by the third party that the girl was deeply distressed at being unable to explain the incident that, on the surface, told against her. Miss Elmer had been grieved and unaggressive throughout; and, when all was said and done, she appeared to be the victim of a malicious servant's tattle. Therefore, the Marchioness needed no assertion of authority to re-establish a sway that had never been disputed so far as Margaret Elmer was concerned.

Something of all this passed through the mind

of the Marchioness as she reviewed the past events; but, however innocent Margaret herself might be, however conciliatory her manner and her words, she nevertheless had been the unconscious cause of Rupert's recalcitrancy. He had injudiciously made himself Margaret's champion against his mother, and with feminine lack of strict justice she determined to strike, not at the aggressor, but at the unwitting cause of the aggression. So the fate of poor Margaret was sealed in that armchair, irrevocably, in spite of impartial intercession. Margaret Elmer must go, and thus the foot of the Marchioness turned towards the road of coercion. Having come to this decision Lady Adeline dismissed the subject from her mind, as preface to the dismissal of Margaret from her house.

The methodical woman, like her father before her, having finished with one point, gave her whole attention to the next. What should she do with regard to the house-party? This question was uncomplicated by the presence of any outsider—it rested solely between her son and her

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self. If she persisted in going on with the house-party, Rupert would depart for London, and commit goodness knew what folly, for the clear-sighted woman had no illusions regarding the wisdom of the Merivale race. His father had married sensibly and well, but that was no assurance the son would do likewise. His paternal grandfather had married an actress, and although she was a woman of intellect and distinction, her excellent mental qualifications proved of little advantage in overcoming the prejudices of the class to which she allied herself, despite the high position which her husband was able to bestow upon her, with the assistance, not of advertisement, but of a blacksmith at Gretna Green. Indeed, one of the jokes which Lady Adeline most detested in her noble husband was his laughing assertion, when she was more than usually strenuous, that he wished his father had married a blacksmith's daughter, as he himself had married a blacksmith's granddaughter, and thus he might be in a better position to contend with her.

Handicapped by such ancestry, noted for constant extravagance and occasional low marriages, what might not the young man do, once he let himself loose in London? Was the proposed house-party worth the risk? Lady Adeline concluded it was not, and although it was an unheard-of thing to cancel invitations already sent, she determined on this action, lest worse might follow. In the second problem, therefore, with which she had to deal on this eventful day, she chose the road of conciliation.

It is deplorable that in thus setting down the evolutions of a mind which usually knew what it wanted, the intention to establish the clear-sightedness of the lady may, between two stools, or rather two roads, fall to the ground. To resume the simile of the king, the Marchioness was following the example of the worst of them, James II., who, using alternately conciliation and coercion, came to irremediable grief.

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champion is still left—the champion of luck. The lady's star was fighting for her, and, as will presently be seen, was about to overrule on the side of her good luck the effect of one drastic decision at least.

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## CHAPTER VIII

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WITH a deep sigh of relief, rather than of weariness, Lady Adeline rose to her feet. It is refreshing to achieve a fixed plan of campaign when a contest, the outcome of which is uncertain, looms ahead. However firm in intention she might be, she would deal very gently with the girl. Reviewing all the circumstances in her mind, she saw that Margaret had prepared the way for her own dismissal with a thoroughness that even her worst enemy could not have bettered. Lady Adeline would say nothing at all about the original bone of contention. No mention would be made of the unknown man, or of the sinister expression which the servant overheard before Margaret's walk with him to the village.

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The dismissal would be accomplished entirely on the assumption of Lady Adeline's good-heartedness in wishing to forward the welfare of her late attendant. Margaret had refused the additional compensation which the Marquess offered. It was, therefore, impossible for either the Marquess or his mother to meet with money the proposal which came to her from London. Lady Adeline could not stand in the way of Margaret's advancement—London offered so many opportunities for getting on which were entirely lacking out here in the country. Lady Adeline would express her earnest desire for the girl's well-being, and proffer a letter of recommendation so eulogistically worded that, coming as it did from the house of Merivale, it must prove a potent instrument in the augmentation of her future prosperity. Although this would all be said with the utmost suavity, her Ladyship would take good care that Margaret could not escape from the path she had marked out for herself.

Yet the star would have something to say

about all this, as Lady Adeline was to learn a few minutes later.

Descending the stairs, the Marchioness made her way to what she called the reference-room, and there found Margaret Elmer busily arranging documents of various kinds in their respective files. Two sides of the room were lined with shelves carrying heavy tomes big with information. A revolving bookcase held the morocco-bound copies of an encyclopædia. Upright file-cases, exhibiting alphabetically-labelled drawers, stood against the walls that were unshelved. In a corner by the window a walnut typewriter desk supported a machine of the latest pattern.

Seated at a solid, leather-covered table, Margaret Elmer was classifying and labelling folded papers. Her stationery cabinet contained a compartment for each of the various letter-papers in use, from the hand-made, deckle-edged note size, embossed simply with the crest of the Merivales, to the more commercial-looking sheets on which were printed the name of the Castle, telegraphic address, and telephone



number. A bulky metal inkstand, and a rack containing numerous blunt-pointed pens, occupied a place on the right-hand end of the table, while at the opposite far-away corner, remotely within reach of an outstretched arm, stood a desk telephone. Over all was suspended a green-shaded electric light that could be raised or lowered at pleasure.

Of the three members of the Merivale family, the Marquess made the least demand on Margaret's industry. He wrote letters seldom, and always with his own hand. The Marchioness dictated hers, but, in spite of her business origin, regarded the typewriting machine as a modern abomination, and insisted that all her missives should be written by Margaret's pen, upon her own especial note-paper.

Lord John it was who installed the typewriter. The wide, commercial-looking sheets on which were printed in businesslike fashion postal, telegraphic, and telephone addresses, were used entirely for his work, for he sent many communi-

cations to political headquarters in London, and to various parts of the constituency for which he was standing. The rapid click of the typewriter was almost incessant while Lord John remained at home. Now, the by-election being on, Lord John was absent, canvassing West Derrymore, and a somewhat somnolent repose brooded over the great Manor House. Until that epoch-making, country-saving contest was decided, showing, as the case might be, that the flowing tide was still rushing landward, or had begun to ebb, Margaret might call much of her time and soul her own.

When the Marchioness entered she looked critically at the girl, who turned towards her a beautiful, unruffled countenance, and honest, frank grey eyes. If placidity of feature indicated tranquillity of mind, the conversation of the morning had left no disquiet behind it so far as Margaret Elmer was concerned.

"You posted all those invitations, I think you said?" began Lady Adeline.

"Yes; they are on the train by this time."

“Well, for once efficiency has its drawbacks. I have changed my mind regarding the house-party. With John absent on that wild-goose chase of his, and Rupert talking of Switzerland, I think, considering the season of the year, and the probability that at least half of those whom I wish to entertain will be unable to come, I must cancel the invitations. Luckily, the second letter so speedily follows the first that no inconvenience will be caused.”

“Very well, my Lady,” replied Margaret, selecting a pen, and drawing towards her some sheets of paper. “Shall I outline a letter for your approval?”

“Thank you, no. I will dictate it:

“‘DEAR LADY DOROTHY,—When I wrote to you earlier in the day I quite forgot that unfortunate political campaign in which my son John is engaged, which will prevent his being here until after the election. Furthermore, I did not know that Rupert had already made arrangements for a Continental visit. This being the case, I

have concluded to postpone the house-party I proposed.

“ ‘ I should have telegraphed to you, only my telegram would arrive before my invitation, and therefore might not be understandable. I trust that this letter will follow so soon after the first that you will be placed at no inconvenience by my change of mind.

“ ‘ Yours most sincerely——’ ”

Margaret wrote this out in long-hand as speedily as the Marchioness uttered it, then handed her the sheet of paper for revision. After making several corrections, Lady Adeline said :

“ You may write this to each of those who were invited.”

As Margaret went on with her work the Marchioness sat in silence at the end of the table, revolving in her mind the exact form of polite dismissal ; amending it here and there as she had amended the draft of her letter.

For a time nothing was heard but the sibilant sound of the flying pen. At last all the letters

were signed, sealed, and stamped. Margaret touched a bell, and when the servant appeared she handed the bunch to her, saying:

“Tell Peters to take these at once to the post office.”

As the maid disappeared the young woman turned to the elder, and said:

“I have been thinking, my Lady, about the conversation of this morning, in which you quite justly made inquiries regarding my visitor, which unfortunately I was unable to answer satisfactorily.”

“Oh, that does not matter in the least,” said the Marchioness, with unexpected gentleness. “Think no more about it, I beg of you.”

“It is very kind of you to say that, but I must censure myself for having gone further than was justified by the facts, when I said you would approve of what I had done. My mind at that moment was concentrated on only one side of the question. If that side had stood alone, I am still quite certain my action would have met with your favours, but unfortunately I ignored another

act of mine which indirectly led to this ill-timed visit, and that action I am equally sure you would condemn. As the greater includes the lesser, I now see that whatever merit might be accorded me for the conduct which I had in mind at the time would be entirely cancelled, swallowed up, by your disapproval in the first instance."

"My dear Margaret, you are talking in cryptograms. As I listen to you, I feel as if my mind were wandering through a maze. You have done something reprehensible which led to this man's visit?"

"Something which you would consider reprehensible, yes."

"You had forgotten that when you were talking to me?"

"Yes."

"You say what *I* should consider reprehensible. Does that mean that *you* do not consider it so?"

"Oh, no; otherwise I should not have done it."

"There is an action, then, that I should think bad which you think is good?"

"Yes."

"But you are talking nonsense. An act is either intrinsically good or intrinsically bad. Its goodness or badness does not depend upon what anyone thinks."

"A Scotch Presbyterian," said Margaret, with a slight smile, "thinks it is wicked to whistle on the Sabbath. An English Churchman thinks it isn't. Both are good men, yet they hold diametrically opposite opinions on a perfectly innocent action."

"Oh, if you wish to talk frivolously, Miss Elmer," said the Marchioness, with dignity, leaning back in her chair, "I have nothing further to say."

"No; I was merely trying to give an illustration. Perhaps it was ill-chosen. Still, my opinion does not matter in the least. What I wish now to say is that I have written to the firm in London which has offered me employment, accepting their proposition. I told them, how-

ever, that I cannot leave here until such time as entirely suits your Ladyship's convenience."

"You have accepted 'the London situation?'" cried the Marchioness, sitting up straight, and turning her piercing eyes on her subordinate, while the frown again wrinkled her brow.

"Yes, my Lady."

"Without giving me adequate notice?"

"Oh, no, no. I shall stop here just as long as you wish me to stay. The London situation will remain open indefinitely, within reason. I quite agree with your Ladyship that one who acted as I did this morning should no longer remain in your employ."

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## CHAPTER IX

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RUPERT, nineteenth Marquess of Merivale, strode along the avenue towards the North Gate, never dreaming that his mother was watching the set of his shoulders from the window of her boudoir. The young man was in what he had come to term his Lion-and-Unicorn state of mind. The Lion represented the heritage received from the iron-master, and the unique Unicorn that part of him which a long line of profligate Marquesses had bestowed. If either Unicorn or Lion had been definitely victorious, the young man who furnished the arena for their battle would have had an easier time of it. His mother was apparently determined on two actions, neither of which met his approval.

"Assert yourself; put down your foot," said the Lion.

"Oh, what's the odds, so long as you're happy," suggested the Unicorn.

When the Lion and the Unicorn were fighting for the crown of his independence, Rupert usually put on his most disreputable suit of walking clothes and trod the highways and byways of his county, so that until a decision were come to he should at least say nothing harsh to anyone.

On this occasion, however, his ramble had a definite objective point. It always soothed his perturbed spirit to enjoy a quiet conversation with Amory Tresdale, and he thought affectionately of this woman as a small boy from the lodge held open the North Gate for him. As he set out with a reliable five-miles-an-hour stride on the hard high road his thoughts turned to another woman, and then he laughed aloud.

"Poor Margaret!" he said to himself. "I wonder what her innocent little secret is, when she dared to brave the mater's anger rather than

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The young man marched on vigorously for a long distance, until the open land at his right came to an end, and for the next half-hour he walked in the grateful shade of a noble forest. Opening a gate, he left the highway, and now, with trees on every side of him, followed a wood-cutter's road, and meditated on the tragedy that had taken place somewhere in this neighbourhood before he was born.

Amory Tresdale was then the young wife of a forester, living in the cottage she now inhabited. One noon, as usual, she carried her husband's dinner through the woods to that section of the forest where he was at work. Usually she heard the sound of saw or of axe, where he and his mate were felling the timber, but on this occasion the glades were silent, until she woke the echoes with a call for her husband. The immediate answer was nearer than she expected, and it was a hoarse cry of horror.

“ Run, Amory, run! ” was the shout ; but she

stood transfixed, not knowing in which direction to fly, and when a glance upward showed her danger the warning came too late.

With a resounding crash the great oak fell, and she stood upright, immovable, in the very central tangle of its upper branches, surrounded by the gnarled inflictors of instant death. When her terrified husband and his helper, with billhook and axe, clove their way through to her, she still stood there like a pale statue.

So far as the doctors could learn not even a twig had struck her, yet she never rose again from the bed to which they carried her. Her mind was quite unaffected, but the power of motion which deserted her in the vital crisis did not return, although a year later she recovered the use of hands and arms, and could move head and shoulders as she pleased. In that instant of supreme fear, simultaneous with the crash of the tree, her nervous system had in some sort been wrecked, baffling all skill of the physicians who attempted its mending.

The then Marquess of Merivale had done

everything possible, calling to her aid specialists from London, and when all this proved without avail settled upon her a pension for life, ample for her needs whatever happened.

The calamity, however, was not without its compensations. The woman never, even from the first, suffered any pain, and time seemed to have forgotten her. The pallor of extreme fear still whitened her cheeks, but those cheeks showed little withering of age, and now only the abundant white hair gave indication of the passing years. Her face was almost ethereal in its sweetness and in its intelligence. Every malady passed her by, as if in that brief second her cup of evil had been drained.

Her stalwart husband became afflicted with pneumonia one winter's day, when overheated in the dank forest, and had fallen into death with a suddenness almost equalling the falling of the trees he laboured among. Now all belonging to her had gone, one after another.

It was possible for her, with aid, to be placed sitting upright on her couch, where she could

read or write as the fancy took her, and these were her sole occupations. The cottage was isolated, in a beautiful but lonely position, shielded on the north and the east, as if the forest which had encompassed her doom now strove to protect her from the bitter winds. To the south the view embraced a gentle valley, at the bottom of which ran a clear and rapid stream eager to join the river on the other side of the plantation. This favourite nook had once before held a residence much more important than the simple, flower-embroidered, thatched cottage, and its only remnant was a stout square tower, with crumbling top. Neither the founder nor any occupant of this olden-day dwelling was known, and it was in his exploration of the ruins so remote from his own castle that Rupert came upon the cottage, and learnt the story of its inhabitant, when the tragedy had long been forgotten, and was unknown, as he learnt, even to his mother, who had not been married to the Marquess at the time it occurred.

Mrs. Tresdale was waited upon by a woman

who looked much older than she, yet, in reality, was much younger. The pension was paid by a bank in a town five miles away, and delivered quarterly by a messenger, who wondered at each visit how many more journeys he would need to take, and grew old in wondering. Rupert had doubled the pension. He also constructed a tank in the old square tower, and arranged an automatic, hydraulic contrivance beside the rapid stream that worked quietly day and night, giving forth a gentle, subdued pulsation audible at the cottage on a calm evening, or when it was about to rain. This tank in the tower supplied the cottage and also a tinkling fountain, delightful to hear on a hot day, and visible to the invalid through the long, low window when Amory sat up in bed.

As the young man became better and better acquainted with the old woman, he was amazed at the amount of knowledge she had acquired from such odds and ends of reading matter as fell in her way. He arranged for a fortnightly packing-case of books from a London library,

which reached her by carrier; whatever she ordered by post was sent, and thus she enjoyed the oldest of the newest literature as effectually as if she lived in the West End of London.

This generosity was characteristic of the Unicorn strain in Rupert's blood, rather than of the Lion's share in his make-up. Even at their worst the Merivales were always lavish in their benefactions, if they happened to possess the money. But the Bruntons never gave away anything unless the gift brought back a definite, well-foreseen return in meal or malt. The late Lord Brunton had achieved a reputation for philanthropy, but his donations in every case had been notably large.

But what we give away we receive, even when the giving is done in secret. Rupert had never been a reading man, and in his younger days cared nothing about books. The Unicorn line went in mostly for sport or war or politics, although occasionally throughout the ages, by some freak of Nature, a clerkly man was sandwiched in between two spendthrifts, and thus

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the great library of Merivale Castle had been accumulated. The Bruntons, so far as is known, were not booklovers; and, indeed, if a historian went back a few generations, he would have discovered that the Bruntons of that day could not even read. There was, therefore, little in Rupert's ancestry which would have encouraged any of his friends to search for signs of scholarship in him.

Nevertheless, his frequent visits to the cottage at the edge of the wood had resulted in developing this side of his nature, partially through his acquiring the reading habit, but more because of the conversations he enjoyed with Amory Tresdale. She had become, in some sort, his literary adviser and secretary. No borrowed books entered Merivale Castle, but such volumes as Amory thought he should peruse were written on a separate list, purchased outright, and forwarded from London to the great Manor House, where they came under the care and cognisance of a very different sort of woman from her who had ordered them—a woman young, and strong,



and beautiful—Margaret Elmer, who took a delight in unpacking and arranging them in the study of the Marquess, for whose mental equipment she was coming to have a greater and greater admiration, because she thought their selection was due to him.

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## CHAPTER X

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ON this warm July day Rupert at last came within sight of the cottage, passed the tinkling fountain, and brought himself to a stand at the low window under the thick eaves of thatch, rested his arms on the sill, and greeted Mrs. Tresdale with his usual buoyant cheerfulness.

“How delightfully cool it is here, Auntie Amory,” he cried. “You have no idea how hot the sun shines out on the high road until you come within the shadow of the trees. And how have you been this long time?”

“Oh, excellently well, my dear Lord Rupert, although, womanlike, lonesome for a sight of your bonny face, Marquess of Merivale.”

“Auntie Amory, why, in spite of all my protests, will you continue to ‘Lord Marquess’

me? Surely, after all my devotion, my fetching and carrying, my humble and adoring demeanour, I am entitled to be called Rupert without prefix or sequence?"

The woman laughed; a pleasant little silvery laugh, that was almost girlish in its radiant joy.

"Why, Rupert, lad," she exclaimed, "you will never deprive me of the enjoyment the 'Lord Marquessing' of you brings? I have often confessed to you that I am a snob. Confessed, did I say? I have gloried in it! I dare say many a cottager throughout the land is visited by many a noble dame, but those visits are not like yours, my dear Rupert. There is nothing of condescension in your calls, and I like to think you like to come because you like to come. And, then, imagine the pleasure it gives me when I say, oh, so sonorously, to my caretaker: 'I wonder how soon my Lord Rupert, Marquess of Merivale, will be here to-day?' Oh, yes, I am quite willing, occasionally, to pamper your humility by calling you Rupert, but I must also pander to my own pride by refer-

ring to the Marquess. Won't you come in and sit down, most noble Lord of Merivale, although I suppose you are in a hurry to return in time for luncheon?"

"No; I shall not lunch at home to-day, and, by Jove! now that I think of it, I forgot to tell the mater I should be absent. Still, she won't mind, and lunch will be served to the second, though the heavens fell."

"Then perhaps you'll have a bite with me?"

"Nothing so respectable, auntie. Your most noble Marquess has a low streak in him, and loves upon occasions to frequent the Ploughman's Arms, three miles beyond, and revel in a banquet of bread and cheese, washed down by a huge tankard of old ale, not made artificially frigid by ice, but brought up deliciously cool from the deep cellar of my host, so you can't get rid of me prematurely, auntie, by any pretended anxiety about the lunch at home. If Betsy is here to chaperon us, I'll come under your roof; not to rest, being untired, but the better to see

you, my dear, as the wolf said to Red Riding Hood."

He lifted his arms from the window-sill, pushed open the door, and went in, patting the invalid affectionately on the shoulder, then throwing himself down in the old-fashioned, but very comfortable, armchair, which always stood on a certain spot beyond the foot of the bed for his reception.

"Well, Rupert," she said, more seriously, scrutinising his face, "what is troubling you?"

"Me? Why, nothing at all, auntie. What put such a strange notion as that into your head? I am perfectly care-free. I toil not, neither do I spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not half so jolly as I."

"Ah! Solomon!" murmured the old woman, in such a dubious tone that Rupert looked up at her and laughed.

"Why, auntie, what's wrong with Solomon? I hope the excavators at Jerusalem, if there are any, have not dug up more of his wisdom for the flagellation of fools, for, then I am likely to get

my share. Solomon's troubles must have been largely matrimonial. He was a much-married man, or so I am informed, and, therefore, his experience would scarcely apply in my case."

Mrs. Tresdale looked at the frivolous young man very quietly for some moments. "Has Madam the Marchioness been wishing you to qualify so that such experience may be of value?"

"Oh, the mater is always on that track, and we did have a little gentle conversation on the subject this morning."

"Lady Dorothy?"

"Lady Dorothy."

"Tell me the sort of person she is."

"Well, she has rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, whose jingle makes music wherever she goes, or words to that effect. Auntie, she's eligible—that's the most scathing criticism I can pass upon her. A marriage between us would be so absolutely reasonable that I fly to the Ploughman's Arms and drown my apprehensions in beer."



"Please tell me about her."

"She is tall, haughtily handsome, if I may call her so; an expert horsewoman, and talks the animal; rather mannish in her stride, and I fear she would reform me if she got the chance. Has a comfortable income now, and will have more by and by, so our union wouldn't lead to the Union."

"I don't understand."

"Oh yes you do, auntie. All my labourers refer to the workhouse as the Union."

"Then you don't care for her?"

"As I have frequently told you, I care for no one but you, auntie."

"Oh, but I am speaking seriously."

"So am I, Auntie Amory. I am deucedly serious. I'm also disappointed."

"What, in love?"

"Partly so. I am disappointed that my Auntie Amory, whom I love, should lure me in here and then talk upon disagreeable topics."

"Is matrimony a disagreeable topic?"

"Matrimony *per se* is merely dull and unin-

teresting, but applied matrimony, if I may so term it, by which I mean matrimony applied to me, is confoundedly disagreeable."

"Have you never been in love, Rupert?" asked his old friend, with a solemnity that brought a smile to his lips.

"How often have I confessed my love for you, Auntie Amory Tresdale, and yet you dare ask such a heartless question."

"Oh, my Lord Marquess, my Lord Marquess, cannot you be earnest?"

"Oh, Dame Tresdale, Dame Tresdale, am I not vainly struggling out of the slough of solemnity into which you have thrust me? And I did so yearn for a nice, genial, instructive, soothing conversation with you, instead of which, here's the discussion at the Castle to be continued in the cottage."

"I am sorry, and, therefore, will not say what I intended, which was to the effect that I quite agree with Madam the Marchioness that it is time for you to marry."

"Auntie, that was a narrow escape, but I

rejoice that your self-control prevented you from saying what you purposed. Was there anything good in the last parcel of books?"

"That is what one would call a judicious change of subject, so tactfully done that the other party never notices it. The last parcel of books has not yet been opened. I have been following the fortunes of 'Barbara Deems,' and am delighted to see that it has become the success of the season, both in England and America, which cheers one, proving that a book of excellence is not necessarily unappreciated in these prosaic days. But I suppose, my nonchalant friend, that notwithstanding my eulogies the book is still unopened in your study?"

"Mistress Amory, why will you slander an innocent fellow-creature? Do I not always bow down before your knowledge of good literature, dumb with admiration? Know, then, libellous person, and let this answer a former question—I am deeply, irrevocably in love with Barbara. I have read the book from cover to cover three times, dreaming through the Delectable Valley

as I turned its pages, only to wake up in Castle Despair at the word 'Finis' that no such charming lady exists outside the red binding of that volume."

As if the volume in question had reflected some of its colour to the pale, delicate face of Amory, her cheeks took on a faint sunset tinge, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"Oh," said she, "I'm very glad indeed that you like the story. That's one comforting thing about you, Rupert; you are so honest that a person never suspects you of saying pleasant things merely because they will please. I know now certainly that you appreciate the story, and I am glad."

"Still, auntie, it makes one dissatisfied with the world."

"Why?"

"Because there are no Barbaras about; only Lady Dorothys, who talk horse."

"Barbara exists, nevertheless, so come out of your Castle Despair. Someone, I forget who, says all good literature is autobiography. That

book has been written by a young girl, and quite unconsciously, I think and hope, she has depicted her own character."

"Well, auntie, you know, it didn't strike me that way. I'm sorry to disagree with you, but I believe the book was written by a man who is deeply, but for some reason hopelessly, in love with Barbara, and who endeavours to assuage his grief by portraying her to himself, for his own consolation, and in this way has touched the heart of the world. Castle Despair closes its gates on me once more, for I believe the girl existed but is now dead, and the author has made her live again on his pages."

"Oh! Rupert," she cried, with enthusiasm, her eyes aflame with delight, "I never heard you speak like this before. You have a true sense of appreciation. But I assure you that Barbara lives. There is nowhere in the book any trace of passion that would indicate the presence of a man, nor does it breathe that sense of regret which would have been there had the heroine died. And now, though spiritually and mentally

you come up to my expectations, I venture to believe that practically you have fallen short."

"In what way?"

"You have forgotten something I asked you to do."

"Asked me to do?" He pondered for a moment with knitted brows. "I fear you are right, Amory. I cannot remember any request of yours. Was it when I was here last time?"

"Yes."

"Then *mea culpa*. I have indeed forgotten."

"I thought you would, therefore I saw to the task myself."

"Good gracious! What was it?"

"I asked you to indulge an old woman's curiosity, and find out for me who wrote 'Barbara Deems.'"

"Aha, Mrs. Amory, you are hoist with your own petard. Was it likely I should forget *that*? Not so. I wrote *at once* to the publishers."

"Then who is she?"

"I tell you it is a 'he'."

“Well, who is he?” she questioned, with a note of disappointment in her voice.

“I thought,” he bantered, “that knowing I should fail you wrote to the publishers yourself?”

“So I did, but I learnt nothing.”

He laughed. “Neither did I, but I’ll lay a wager on the masculinity of the author when I discover him. A pensive, heart-broken man you’ll find him—that is why he remains anonymous.”

“A modest, self-depreciating girl, who has no notion of her own value—that’s why she remains anonymous.”

“Let’s see your letter, Amory.”

The woman laughed gently. “Oh, no; I have another theory that I wish to corroborate. Show me your letter first.”

“Oh, I say, Amory; play fair. Expound your theory before either of the letters are shown, then I’ll put my cards on the table beside yours, and we’ll see who wins the trick.”

“Very well; the estimable publishers, Messrs.

Snell and Musgrove, replied to me most curtly. I hold a theory that most of the world are conscious or unconscious snobs, and if they knew your letter came from the Marquess of Merivale I think their answer would be perhaps more polite."

Rupert laughed, drew forth a letter, and read :

" ' MY LORD MARQUESS,—It is with deep regret that we are compelled to inform you of our failure to afford the information you desire. We have pleaded with the author that in this case an exception should be made, giving our assurance that your Lordship would treat any disclosure made as strictly confidential. Despite several letters urging the author to give us the requisite permission, the sole answer we have received has been an inflexible negative; the author stipulating that we must not even say whether the book was written by a man or a woman.

" ' Disappointing as this result has been to us, we beg to assure your Lordship that we are not yet discouraged, and hope a little later on to



place the information sought at your Lordship's disposal.—We have the honour to be, my Lord Marquess, your Lordship's most obedient servants,

“ ‘SNELL AND MUSGROVE.’ ”

Amory laughed long and merrily. “Oh! my Lord Marquess,” she cried, “what a delicious letter that is. Listen now to your Lordship's most obedient servant, Amory Tresdale, reading her letter, and prepare for courtesy, and all the rest of it:

“ ‘MADAM,—The author of “Barbara Deems” desires to remain anonymous.—Yours,

“ ‘SNELL AND MUSGROVE.

“ ‘per A. G.’ ”

Now Rupert laughed. “If brevity is the soul of wit, Amory, that is the wittiest letter I ever heard.”

But the old woman appeared not to hear him. Her thoughtful eyes were gazing steadfastly over his head, and she spoke in a whisper to her-

self, rather than to him. "Bedridden as I am, I shall discover who wrote that book."

"Oh, I say, Amory, why are you so set upon it? Why, after all, should you be so anxious to know who she is?"

"Because," said Amory, in the same tone that a seeress might have used, "she is the woman that my Lord Marquess is to marry."

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## CHAPTER XI

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SLOWLY Rupert rose to his feet, looking reproachfully at his hostess. "So you also have joined the conspiracy! Auntie Amory, I never thought this of you."

"Surely you are not going already?" cried Mrs. Tresdale.

"What else is there for me to do? I am driven from mansion and cottage alike by that eternal question of matrimony. I expect to become a sort of Wandering Jew by and by, with no place to rest the sole of my foot."

"That was the dove from the Ark," commented his hostess, with a gentle smile. "You are mixing things up."

"No wonder; I am rather mixed myself. I do not doubt that when I reach the sanded

parlour of the Ploughman's Arms the landlord, as he brings in my tankard of ale, will remark: 'I say, young fellow, isn't it about time you thought of getting married?' If he does, I'll fling him out of the window—after he's put the ale in a place of safety, of course."

"You are not really offended with me, are you, Rupert?" she asked, anxiously.

"No, of course not. I am just chaffing you, Auntie Amory. I don't mind what people say, only I must admit that the mater gets a trifle tiresome on the subject sometimes. She comes of a persistent race that has always had a little too much of its own way."

"Ah! Prince Rupert, you do not realise the anxieties of a mother."

"No, I suppose not; and the mater does not realise the annoyances of a son. You see, Auntie Amory, I am really a man, after all is said and done, and have put away childish things some time ago. My pinafores are all laundered and packed up, or given away to the poor, I don't know which. Anyhow, I'm never going to wear

them again. Mother seems to think I still need the guiding hand, and probably takes credit that she does not use it for a more coercive purpose. Just imagine it; she sent out this morning invitations to a house-party. Think of that—a house-party in the middle of July!”

“I see. And there’s neither hunting nor shooting to amuse your guests?”

“Oh!” cried the young fellow, with a gesture of impatience, “there will be both hunting and shooting. Lady Dorothy will hunt me, and bring me down if she can. One defect about England is that humanitarianism has gone all awry. It protects the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, but there is no close time for an eligible bachelor.”

“It would be rather inexpedient to fill the house with guests, and not know what to do with them.”

“I know what to do with myself, Auntie Amory. I’ll bolt.”

“Where?”

“ Anywhere, anywhere out of the fashionable world. To Switzerland, perhaps, or maybe Norway. The Himalayan Mountains are rather far off, but I suppose some spot among them would be the only safe place, except, perhaps, Central Thibet. Anyhow, I’m off to Philadelphia in the morning.”

“ Wouldn’t such a course rather leave the Marchioness in the lurch? ”

“ Self-preservation is the first law of Nature, auntie.”

“ Surely a courageous young man like you isn’t afraid of the Ladies Diana whom your mother may select? From what I have read of the Merivale race, I understood they were brave, and never ran away from danger.”

“ That’s all very well. They never ran away from men, although they sometimes ran away with women. My grandfather ran away with an actress. After him a sane Merivale was due, and my father married most appropriately ; thus our estates were cleared. Now it’s my turn. I told the mater no later than this morning

that I shall go to London to-morrow, select the most suitable actress I can find, and marry her."

"You'd never do anything so foolish?"

"Oh, I don't know. Self-preservation, as I've said. I should pick up an actress merely as a shield. This man-hunting would then stop, so long as I kept out of a Mohammedan country, where a man is allowed four wives. Of course, if I married one woman in Turkey, the same trouble would arise about the selection of the other three. My case is so simple that I'm continually wondering at myself for not settling the matter by issuing a sort of declaration of independence such as the American papers are always bragging about. I don't want to be married because I am Marquess of Merivale or because I am a rich man."

"You wish to be a modern Lord Burleigh, then?"

"No; I'm quite content to be Lord Merivale. What did Lord Burleigh do?"

"He followed the example of King Cophetua."

"Oh, the Beggar-Maid chap! I know all about him. No, I don't want to do anything romantic or schoolboyish, but I feel I shall be driven to something of the sort if they don't leave me alone. You see, I have all the money anybody could possibly want, therefore it is not necessary for me to marry wealth. My ancestors came over with that Pirate of Penzance, William the Conqueror, so I don't need to marry a maiden of long descent, a Lady Clara Vere de Vere, accredited with a hundred Earls, from which it would seem that the founder of her house must have come over in a galleon with Julius Cæsar. I tell you, Auntie Amory, I'm going up to London to a remnant sale."

"A remnant sale?"

"Well, that's what I call it. I want to know, by personal inspection, how many attractive women our nobility has allowed to remain in the bright limelight that beats around a popular actress."

"You'd intend to marry her incognito, I suppose?"



"Oh, certainly. There comes in the charm of the quest."

"She would not look at you if she thought you were a mere penniless commoner."

"That's all right, then I wouldn't marry her. The case is as simple as A.B.C."

"Yes, and you talk like a simpleton, my Lord Marquess, though, of course, you don't mean a single word you are saying. Manlike, you are merely tormenting an old woman who loves you."

"After that blow, Auntie Amory, I'll sit down again." And with this, in mock despair, the young man flung himself once more into the comfortable armchair, and threw one leg indolently over the other. "I admit at once that I have no intention of going to London, and haunting either the stalls or the stage-door."

"One moment, Rupert. In that case my charge of cruelty falls to the ground. I thought by your talk you were about to do what so many foolish young men belonging to good families have done. You object to girls of wealth and long descent——"

"Oh, I don't object to them, but you see my difficulty. I hate to say it, for it sounds sentimental, but I could never be sure that I was not married for my title or my money."

"Still, Rupert, there are in all circles of society plenty of most estimable women, whom you could meet and become acquainted with under some other name than your own. You could continue the mystification until you had proposed and been accepted."

"In your wide reading, Auntie Amory," murmured the young man, with his eyes half-closed, leaning back, hands interlocked behind his head, "did you ever come across an individual called Duillius?"

"I don't remember him."

"Ah, then, there's a Roland for your Oliver. My Duillius matches your Lord Burleigh. Still, I mustn't brag, because I'm a little hazy about Duillius myself. He was a Roman, and, if I remember aright, did something drastic and inconvenient to the Carthaginians. I think his Dreadnought sunk theirs; but, anyhow, when he

returned, to the strains of 'See the Conquering Hero Comes,' they had a regular Mafeking Day in Rome, and the Senate, without any adverse vote from the Opposition, proclaimed that hereafter Duillius would be preceded by a torch-bearer, and followed by a flute-player, and so he wandered round Rome like a side-show that had strayed away from the main circus procession. His two attendants became deucedly inconvenient as time went on, and I forget at the moment whether Duillius extinguished the torch by throwing its bearer into the Tiber, and silenced the flute by massacring the musician, but my point is that until he did something of that sort the old man could not get away from them.

"Now, you speak of the number of estimable girls who are scattered over our land, but does it occur to you that it would be well-nigh impossible for me to abandon my title and get an introduction into their households? My title and my wealth would be like the torch-bearer and the flute-player—I could not get away from

either. They would precede or follow me wherever I went. I might call myself Billy Duillius, but I should be forced to give an account of myself, and if I started a line of fiction, would be tripped up and thrown out of society in disgrace. If I got any of my friends to introduce me, they'd be sure to whisper aside to someone: 'Billy is really the Marquess of Merivale,' and so the whisper would surround me as the torch nimbus surrounded the throbbing head of the original Duillius.

"Now, Auntie Amory, you, a model of propriety, would not counsel me to accost a beautiful girl in the street and say to her: 'I wish to become acquainted with you, that I may learn whether or not you are the Ideal Woman.' Would you advise me to do such a thing as that?"

"Certainly not. You are perfectly absurd, Rupert; but you are not in earnest, so I suppose I must forgive your fooling."

"Indeed, auntie, I am very much in earnest. I am trying to show you the difficulties that

encompass me should I attempt to step out of my class, and pretend to be someone else. Nearly every attractive young woman in the land is environed by parents or brother or uncles or dragons of some sort, before whom I must appear, and the first questions asked, in some shape or form, are: 'Who are you? What are your antecedents? How much money do you control?' Therefore, you see, auntie, a marriage by merit, as I might call it, uninfluenced by any mercenary consideration, is not so easily come by as you seem to think."

"Yes, my Lord Marquess, I see there are many Lions in the way."

"And Unicorns too, auntie. *You* may not think me hopelessly impractical, though everyone else on earth would, if I confess that when I am weighed in the balance by some charming girl I am anxious that neither rank nor gold shall be thrown into the scale to deflect the needle. At such a critical moment I want her to think of nothing but me, as I shall think of nothing but her."

"You are entirely in the right, Rupert, and I quite sympathise with your purpose. I see plainly the obstacles in your way, but surely a young man like you, with strength and resolution, may overcome those obstacles."

"Indeed, Amory, my family succumb to obstacles, rather than overcome them. The Merivales are proficient in getting into difficulties, but once up to the neck in trouble, they wait for someone else to pull them out."

"That may be true of the Merivales, but although you bear their name do not forget you are also half a Brunton, and that family not only overcame opponents, but slaughtered them."

"Yes, the Bruntons. Oh, my prophetic soul, my uncle, Lord Brunton! I go round in deadly terror of him. He regards me as a useless cumberer of the earth. I suppose if I entered his immense and ugly and dismal steel works as a labourer, I might in years win his grudging approval, but in doing that I should merely be keeping out of a job some useful fellow who could do the work much better than I. Besides,

I have no ambition to marry a labourer's daughter. The girl I have in view should be refined, cultured, educated, sympathetic, beautiful, and in every sense of the word a lady. I should like her to be rather poor in purse, for perhaps the study of economy might be one of her duties. I'd prefer her to know little of fashionable London, and nothing at all of Paris. I'd want to be the first to show her the grandeur of Switzerland, the charm of the Riviera, and the beauty of Italy. I dream of a honeymoon on a basis almost economical, where she would try to persuade me not to stay at an hotel quite so expensive. I fancy us figuring together whether we can journey so far east as Venice, or so far south as Naples. I anticipate arriving at a point where our finances demand that we shall immediately return, when an unexpected wind-fall tumbles in from London to me—a debt that I had never expected to receive—and so we might linger for another fortnight on the shores of Lake Como. When we had given up all thought of Capri or Pompeii, a distant forgotten

relative would expire, and the solicitor would send on funds that would carry us to Calabria and back."

"Rupert, you are selfishly cruel. Please remember that I have never seen any of those places, and never can hope to see them."

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## CHAPTER XII

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"FORGIVE me, auntie. Still, I'm not sure but that may be accomplished, after all. However, my bride and I have returned to cosy old England again, and now there remains the homecoming, when I shall take the dear girl by the shoulders, and say: 'Madam, you are not Mrs. Bethen at all, as you suppose, but the Marchioness of Merivale, and here is your smiling Castle welcoming you home!'"

"Ah, my Lord of Burleigh again!"

"I suppose so. I must look up that chap, and learn what he did."

"You will find him very well set forth in Tennyson's works."

"What tricks imagination plays us, Auntie Amory. Here I have nearly materialised the future Marchioness of Merivale, and wake up to

find nothing but air. The Unicorn has been dreaming, while the Lion rages at obstacles not yet attacked."

"You will never conjure up such a Marchioness at the stage-door of a theatre, my Lord of Merivale."

"I suppose not, but I told you I did not intend to become acquainted with that portal. Now, here is my plan. There is one profession which sometimes proves lucrative, but often the reverse, where your antecedents are not inquired into so long as you command the cash. No one wishes to learn where the manager of a theatre came from so long as he is able to pay salaries. I shall place to my credit, or rather, to the credit of R. Bethen, Esquire, in a London bank, the sum of twenty thousand pounds. I understand that with one or two exceptions the theatrical managers of London ask only one thing of a play, which is that it will bring in money. This, of course, is proper enough. Indeed, in these commercial days, any business must pay dividends or cease. There are but two roads—

one leading to the bank, the other to bankruptcy. Naturally, the average manager wishes to trudge along to the bank with his deposit. Very well. I have enough money to ignore the bank, and yet keep out of bankruptcy, although that is more than could be said of my paternal grandfather who married the actress.

“ If one may believe all that appears in the newspapers, there exist a number of talented dramatists who never get an opportunity with the public. My theatre will afford them that opportunity. There are two women in whose literary judgment I feel great confidence, even though I may be shaky in my own opinion. I shall advertise for unacted plays by unknown dramatists, and those two literary women shall read them, and select the best. The question they must ask of each play is not whether it will pay or not, but whether it is good or bad. I intend to choose the best actors and actresses I can for the stars of my company, and to pick out the rest from among those who, like my dramatists, are unknown. It cannot be denied

that the stage has attracted, and always will attract, some of the most charming, the most talented, and the best women in the world. I shall quietly study the ladies of my company. A manager, they tell me, sees all the pettinesses, all the jealousies, with which poor human nature is afflicted. If, then, I discover a girl who is not jealous, who is not mean, who is a woman of talent and of charm, well educated, too—who, in fact, comes up to the specification with which I furnished you a while ago, why, then, I'll marry her, if she will condescend to accept me."

Mrs Amory laughed quietly and long.

"I see you don't approve of my project," said the Marquess.

"It wouldn't fulfil the conditions you have set down. There is every likelihood that the actress who, as you said, came up to your specification, would not be one of the stars, but an unknown member of your company. It would speedily become known among the players that you had twenty thousand pounds in the bank, and prob-

ably rumour would wildly exaggerate the sum ; but even if it didn't, twenty thousand represents to an unknown girl illimitable wealth, so you still run the dreaded danger of being married for your money."

"Wait a moment, Amory——"

"No, *you* wait a moment. Although you might not be suspected of rank, they would know you were clothed in power, which, in such a company, would militate against your being chosen for yourself alone quite as much as your rank does now. When even the stars knew that at a word from you they would be fallen stars, every member of your company would be looking to you for advancement. I understand that celebrated actresses nearly always marry their managers, when they do not enter the sacred circle of the aristocracy, so it seems to me that in carrying out your fantastic plan you merely exchange one set of conditions for another equally subversive of the object you have in view. I should much rather risk marrying Lady Dorothy as Marquess of Merivale, than taking

Dolly Dimple for your bride as manager of a theatre."

"Well, Amory, that is all very true, but your criticism arises from the imperfection of my outline of plan. I should be neither the manager of the theatre nor the capitalist. I should select the best manager I could find—a married man for preference—and the capitalist would be some unknown rich person in Australia, I enacting the part of his private secretary, poor but honest. I should have nothing to do with the advancement or the retarding of any member of the company. Whenever my manager wished me to plunge financially, I might say that if the money were my own I should not hesitate, but being merely a trustee, I must preach economy. I should make it a proviso that I was always present with the manager during rehearsals, and when complaints were made, being thus an energetic looker-on, 'a chiel among them, takin' notes,' but saying very little. Oh, no; I should not be such a fool as to pose either as a man of power or a man of riches."

" You have thought it all out, then? "

" Yes; I have devoted much time and study to the proposal, and that is why it is so complete. I have pondered about it ever since the house-party was proposed this morning. It is the result of the cogitations of several hours, so, you see, it is not hastily come at, but is as well matured as a plan of invasion."

Amory sat silent, meditating; then she said: " Two women are to be your dramatic advisers. May I flatter myself that I am one of them? "

" Yes, Auntie Amory."

" But I see the world only through books. I know nothing of cities or society. So far as I am concerned, you are leaning on a broken reed in every sense of the word."

" Your literary judgment is unimpeachable, and it is literature that I wish to place on the stage."

" What a finished courtier you are, Rupert! "

" No, a courtier flatters; I do not."

" Shall I be considered too inquisitive if I ask who the other woman is? "

"She is Margaret Elmer."

"Ah, and who is Margaret Elmer?"

"Margaret is by way of being my mother's secretary. She is expert at shorthand, with fingers bewilderingly nimble on the typewriter."

"Does the Marchioness favour machine-made correspondence, then?"

"No. Margaret writes out all my mother's letters with her own pen."

"Then the typewriter is used for your theatrical communications, I suppose?"

"No; I told you I hadn't thought of the theatre until late this morning. My brother John, the politician of the family, is the owner and the patron of the typewriter. As Liberal candidate for West Derrymore, he is away at present pursuing his nefarious trade of politician. Margaret seems to have an intuitive grasp of anything requiring order or organisation. She is a girl of great tact, and will bring cosmos out of chaos quicker than anyone else I ever knew. These qualities are most useful to my brother John, who is an impetuous, blunder-headed



fellow, continually involving himself in all sorts of unnecessary difficulties."

"I should think he would resent being set right by a secretary—by a servant, as it were."

"Oh! Margaret is not a servant, you know; indeed, she is a distant connection of our family, and her father was a clergyman. He held the living at Merivale village until his death. But you must not suppose for a moment that Margaret is so clumsy as to let John know she is managing him. No; she is much too subtle for that. She seems to recognise intuitively when to bend before the gale. With equal intuition, she knows when the storm is past, and insinuates her own perfectly correct ideas into John's head so deftly that he thinks they arose there. She always waits till the clouds roll by, if you understand me."

"A rather dangerous, crafty person, I should think."

"Oh, no, no; that thought arises through my awkward way of describing her. There is nothing underhand about Margaret. I look upon her as honesty personified. She will always give

way in trifles, having an unerring perception of what is important and what is immaterial. When it comes to an essential point, Margaret is quite placidly immovable. We had an instance of that this very morning. The mater made what I considered was an unjust demand upon Margaret, and the girl was mild as a summery zephyr, but firm as a rock, if I am not mixing my similes a bit."

"Did she refuse?"

"Well, she didn't comply. Refusal seems too harsh a term."

"From what you tell me of the Marchioness, I should think she would not stand that sort of conduct from a subordinate."

"Oh, she thinks she won't, either. She is going to dismiss Margaret, but I can't have that, you know. Miss Elmer was in the right, and I make no doubt I shall succeed in persuading my mother so."

"My Lord Marquess, in that case you had better practise on me."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Amory."

"You have not succeeded in convincing me that a young woman has any right to defy her employer, a lady so much older than herself."

"I fear I am presenting her case very badly. The word 'defy' has no relationship to Margaret Elmer. I could not imagine Margaret defying a sparrow. She is the least combative of created beings, eternally sacrificing herself to the convenience of other people. I have known her to work till daylight on that precious clattering machine, merely to get off by the first post some of the stuff and nonsense that John had been dictating. John has not the slightest notion of the limit of human endurance in other people. I study my younger brother with interest and amazement. He has all the boisterous, bourgeois, overbearing boorishness of his uncle, Lord Brunton, without any of that business man's method and order. To this he unites the arrogance of the Merivales with very little of their innate courtesy. A Merivale would browbeat an equal, but never scold a servant who was palpably doing his best. John will do both."

"How old is she?"

"Who?" asked the Marquess, in surprise.

"This young woman. What did you call her?"

"Miss Elmer? Oh, she's twenty-two or twenty-four, or somewhere thereabouts."

"Is she good-looking?"

"Yes, now that you mention it I should call her a very beautiful girl, though she doesn't in the least suspect it."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, Margaret is one of the most modest and retiring of young women, who dresses very simply, and never wishes to go to London for the shopping."

"Dear me, what a paragon! I suppose she acts as your secretary also?"

"No, as a matter of fact, she doesn't. You see, I am by way of being the loafer of the family."

"You'll be busy enough when the theatrical speculation is set on foot."

"I won't be busy, but the other fellows will.

As I told you before, I'm to be merely a looker-on. What is the use of a man working when he possesses the money to hire other people's aid?"

"I was thinking Margaret would perhaps be your secretary then."

"Oh, it's very likely, but I had intended to enlist her assistance in the choosing of plays."

"How do you know she is capable of doing that?"

"Because Margaret has exceedingly good judgment so far as books are concerned."

"You mean that her taste agrees with that of Lord Merivale?"

"No, Madam Amory, I do not. I mean that her taste agrees with *yours*. I have risen very highly in Margaret's estimation, simply because of the books she thinks I have chosen in London. But you chose those books, and in her mind I have fraudulently taken credit that really belongs to you. Miss Elmer is devoted to books, and every minute she can spare from her tasks is spent in the library. She has come to

look on those volumes you order from London as a mental oasis in her daily round."

For a long time Mrs. Tresdale made no reply, and asked no further questions. Once more she seemed to have fallen into a waking trance.

"It is remarkable," she said at last, "that having so little to do with Miss Elmer you know so much about her."

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## CHAPTER XIII

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WHEN the Marquess of Merivale swung into the Ploughman's Arms he was instantly recognised and boisterously greeted by the jovial host.

"Hallo, Mr. Smith!" cried the innkeeper, "so you're on tramp again."

"Yes, I am, and quite as hungry as when I was here last. I hope there is bread and cheese in the locker, and plenty of ale in the cellar."

"There is that, sir," the tavern-keeper assured him, "but on this occasion I can do better for you than usual. If you'd been here an hour ago, you might have had a cut of prime hot roast beef, but now I can give you some cold, or a bit of chicken and ham, if you'd prefer it."

"Heavens and earth, landlord, what's come

over you? Are you trying to rival the big hotels of London? You don't happen to have a band of musicians on the premises to render popular selections while I am enjoying a late but sumptuous lunch?"

"I can give you a lilt on the flute," said the landlord, laughing. "That's the only instrument I can play, though I'm not improving on it, through increasing stiffness of the finger-joints."

"Well, landlord, I'll take a mug of ale to begin with. The day is hot, the road is dusty, and I'm thirsty. What's the cause of all this enterprise on your part?"

"Well, you see, sir, I've got a lodger. Been here for two or three days, and as he goes in for both bed and board, I have to provide more than simple bread and cheese."

"That accounts for it, eh? What's he doing in an out-of-the-way place like this—a wayside inn by a country road? Here for his health, I suppose?"

"That I don't know, Mr. Smith. He's one



of those London chaps that a breath of country air will do a deal of good to ; a pasty-faced fellow, with shoulders that have bent over a desk most of his life, I should say. Brought a cycle with him, comes in for his meals regular, and then is off again."

"Quite a mysterious guest, like one you read about in penny novelettes: the lonely tavern in the depths of the country; the taciturn, white-faced stranger, with a furtive eye—— I'm sure he must have a furtive eye. Does he start when the door is opened? Have you a watch-window that gives a sight of the road? Is the cycle always standing ready to be sprung upon, as if it were made to carry a modern Dick Turpin? Does he wear a haunted expression?"

The landlord laughed as he set down the mug of ale, and shouted to some unseen person to prepare a lunch for one.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Smith, you'd be disappointed with our lodger. Spiker's his name—William J. Spiker. No, there ain't no haunted look about

him at all. He's just a plain, common, everyday young man about your own age, who looks something like a commercial traveller, and something like a clerk. There's no secrecy about him. He'll talk with anybody, and tell them all he knows, and he thinks he knows a lot. He was a commercial traveller in his time, he tells me, and has been all over England and Scotland, not to mention Ireland and Wales."

"You're right, landlord; the estimable Mr. Spiker is a disappointment. Does he say why he stops at this out-of-the-way place? Fishing, or anything of that sort?"

"Bless you, Mr. Smith, he doesn't know anything about fishing; doesn't know anything about the country at all. He's a town man, born and bred, and when a fox darted across the road he asked me what it was. He thought it was a wolf. But as to why he stops here, it does seem a little strange when you come to think of it. He told me he didn't want to be in Merivale village, for fear people would ask too many questions."

“ Ah, that’s better, landlord! That’s something like. I feel cheered up once more, whether it is the new turn in the conversation, or this excellent old ale ; probably both combined. He didn’t want questions asked, eh? I return to my former opinion of Mr. Spiker.”

“ Well, I didn’t ask him any questions, you may believe. When a gentleman comes into my house, and behaves as a gentleman should, it’s none of my business what he’s up to.”

“ Oh, but you’re an exceptional man, landlord. Now, I’m all of a tremble to know what the deuce Spiker is doing in this part of the country, and why he doesn’t wish questions asked.”

“ One doesn’t need to ask questions so far as Spiker’s concerned. He’ll tell you everything. His business up here is to see the young Marquess of Merivale, and”—the landlord paused and laughed—“ he’s baffled every time.”

“ How baffled? ”

“ Because he can’t get past the servants.

Nothing that he can do gets him into the presence of the Marquess."

"Why doesn't he write to him?"

"That's exactly what I told him to do. 'You write a note to him,' I says. 'Here's pen, ink, and paper,' I says. 'You address it to the Marquess of Merivale, Merivale Castle, and there you are.'"

"Did he do it?"

"No, he didn't. Now, that's a funny thing. Here am I meeting travellers of all kinds, and I took Spiker for an ordinary sort of chap until you began talking about him. Why, he says to me: 'Landlord,' he says, 'it isn't a writing matter. This is a thing that mustn't be put down on paper. What I want is the chance of five minutes' talk with the Marquess of Merivale, and nobody listening.'"

"Bless my soul, landlord, you amaze me! Here have you been knocking down my preconceived notions of Spiker, and here's Spiker—William J., I think you said, probably called Billy by his friends—looming up exactly like the

villain in a play. Landlord, you have misled me. I begin to fancy I am a detective on his trail. Daren't put it down in writing! Why, there you are! Billy Spiker and the Lonely Inn. But another horrible thought strikes me. Do you happen to know the Marquess of Merivale?"

"No, I don't. I have never set eyes on him, but I knew his father very well, and a jolly old nobleman he was. Many a time he has come here, just as you're doing, and quite as off-hand with me as you are. The young fellow I have never seen, but they do tell me he's a first-rate chap. No begad nonsense about him—just like his father. A generous landlord and a generous employer. Indeed, to tell you the truth," said the landlord, lowering his voice, as if about to talk treason, "I wish my pub was on the Merivale estate."

"Oh, does the young Marquess drink so much as all that?"

"I don't know that he drinks at all," said the landlord, with something almost approaching a frown coming to his brow, as if he did not like

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the flippant manner in which the stranger spoke of the great.

“ Well, I was about to suggest that the mystery extends to the Marquess. Here is a man whom even the popular landlord of the Ploughman’s Arms has never seen. For some reason, cause unknown, he hides himself away from the searching Mr. Spiker? Why? In Heaven’s name, why? What dreadful link chains these two men together? Or, perhaps I should say, what dreadful chain links the pair? Why does he refuse to see the cycling Spiker? Why does the cycling Spiker persist in chasing the disappearing Marquess? ”

“ I see, Mr. Smith, that you are one as likes his bit of fun ; but what astonishes me is the cheek of this Spiker man, that thinks he can trot out here from London, and step in at the front door of Merivale Castle as if he were walking into a pub.”

“ You think, then, the Marquess has no guilty secret he is trying to shield? ”

“ That’s as may be. If he has, it’s neither

your business nor mine, but it may be Spiker's. And now, Mr. Smith," said the landlord, suddenly changing the subject, for apparently his respect for the nobility was so deep-seated that he objected to the off-hand comments of the traveller, and did not at all esteem the trend the talk had taken, "now, Mr. Smith, your lunch is quite ready."

"Well," said Smith, hastily, "it isn't more ready than I am," and with that he disappeared into what stood for the coffee-room of the Ploughman's Arms. Youth and a hearty appetite made the meal thoroughly enjoyable, and he blessed the invisible Spiker in that he had saved him from depending solely on bread and cheese.

Paying his bill to the landlord, he bade him good-bye, saying: "Keep your eye on Spiker, and tell me next time I come by whether or not he succeeded in seeing the Marquess."

The landlord, who had recovered from his slight temporary annoyance, promised to be on

the watch, and to give full details next time they met.

Rupert strode up the road to the next left-hand turning, then made towards the west, and after a wandering journey along by-roads and through leafy lanes, he arrived at one of the western entrances to his own property, looking more like a dusty tramp than the owner of so ample an estate.

He was still something over two miles distant from Merivale Castle. The smooth road from the lodge-gates was as well kept as a billiard-table. To his right, towards the south, the declivity was studded with large trees, situated at some distance from one another, and as the ground was unencumbered by underbrush, the traveller along the private road enjoyed constant glimpses of the brawling river of foaming silver, far beneath the level of the quiet thoroughfare. Northward to the left the road was bounded by a high bank, whose side was completely concealed by shrubbery and trailing vegetation. The forest here was more dense, and an almost impene-



trable thicket filled the interval between the trees, shutting out all view towards the north, but giving the road a delightful sense of seclusion, whose solitude was broken only by the singing of the birds.

Rupert slowed down his pace to a leisurely saunter, enjoying the illuminated green shade after the hot rays of the sun outside, and thus he strode towards the east, from which direction came the Wise Men, pondering on what course of wisdom or folly he himself would pursue in the near future.

His meditations were interrupted by a crashing in the spinney above him to the left, and he paused mid-road, wondering what large animal was threshing its way through the thicket. Suddenly there was a yell, and down into the lane, on all fours, tumbled a dishevelled young man, who turned a very red, perspiring face this way and that, as though wondering where in creation he had got to, seeming startled and bewildered by his unexpected fall, and presenting so comical a picture of helplessness and

dismay, resting thus on hands and knees, that a smile came to the lips of the Marquess. But the smile vanished instantly as the dominant thought of a property owner came upwards in his mind, for here, sprawling before him, was evidence of the unforgivable crime of trespass.

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## CHAPTER XIV

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"MAY I ask, sir," said the Marquess, severely, "what you are doing here?"

"Well, by the look of it," said the intruder, still too dazed to rise, "I seem to have come to say my prayers, but I give you my word, I feel more like saying something of an opposite nature. This is a fine sort of trap to lay for an innocent fellow-citizen."

"The innocent fellow-citizen," returned Rupert, "probably is unaware that he was travelling over private property, and therefore should not have been surprised had he tumbled into a man-trap, or set off a spring gun."

The stranger rose slowly to his feet, rubbed one elbow, and then felt his knees, finally brushing a few leaves and some of the Marquess's real

estate from his trousers. Straightening himself up at last, he turned an untroubled face towards his Lordship.

"As to man-traps and spring guns," he said, "I believe those belong to the Dark Ages, and I venture to assert that their use is illegal."

"If you come to legality," commented the Marquess, "you will perhaps not deny that you are a trespasser, and that trespassing is an act contrary to the statutes made and provided."

"On no point of law," returned the unabashed young man, "is there so much popular misapprehension as that which gathers round the subject of trespass. I see examples of that everywhere in this district, reading on notice boards the words, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted as the law directs.' Now, as a matter of fact, the law does not direct one man to prosecute another for trespassing or anything else. The law may permit it, but that is all. Many gamekeepers appear to believe that trespass in itself is a punishable offence. Such, however,

is not the case. It is true that a trespasser may be forced to make good whatever damage he causes, but the prosecutor would be compelled to prove such damage."

"You are very learned, sir, and I see that, without advice, I shall be unable to contend with you. Nevertheless, as I listened to you crashing through the shrubbery, some of which I may say is rather valuable, I should find little difficulty, I think, in proving damage to the vegetation, and a more serious claim upon you might be the disturbance you have caused to game, which receives very definite protection from the laws of our common country."

"I assure you that the only damage I did was to my knees and my clothes. However, I meet all such cases by the proffer of a sixpence, which I tender in full payment of whatever harm I may have done."

"I, on my part," replied the Marquess, "refuse to accept such a sum of money in payment of anything."

"Oh, that's perfectly satisfactory, so long as

you avoid perjury, and admit that the money offer was made."

The protagonist, who had taken a sixpence from his trousers' pocket, now replaced it, and went on with his discourse.

"You, my friend, are completely at a disadvantage, because we are here alone together, therefore if the case came to the court it would be my word against yours, and we are all equal before the law."

"Am I to gather, then, that you would not shrink from adding perjury to trespass?"

"I don't go so far as to say that, but you must remember that no man is forced to incriminate himself, and I venture to believe that my story would tell in my favour."

"Technically the case may be as you say, but there is one slight inconvenience perhaps unknown to you. The court before which you would appear is that of the nearest magistrate. The nearest magistrate happens to be the owner of this property on which you are trespassing."

"Really! And do you think he would be

permitted to decide a case in which he was intimately concerned, and where impartiality on his side was not to be expected?"

"I cannot pronounce off-hand what course a magistrate might logically pursue in such a contingency, but I can tell with certainty what method the Marquess of Merivale would adopt, and, indeed, has adopted, when vagabonds like you were brought before him. If you came up before the Bench of magistrates, he would retire, temporarily, saying to his colleagues that as the offence had been committed against him, he preferred to take no part in the trial, and I assure you that such a withdrawal would be one of the worst things that could happen to you. Although I am a little shaky on the law of the case, I am quite certain about its etiquette."

"I daresay you have taken part in many such unfair contests, by bringing up before these nabobs some poor wretch who is just as good as they, and probably a much more useful member of society, and no doubt these Johnnies would at once take your word in preference to mine."

"You may bet your sixpence on that, because the magistrates know I'm no trespasser, and if you appeared before them in your present dishevelled state they would easily believe you were."

"If it comes to that, I don't know that my state is any more disreputable than your own. You, I take it, are one of the keepers on this estate."

"My dear sir, I am the head keeper."

"In that case, I beg your pardon for offering you so insignificant a sum as a tanner. Still, you seem a decent sort of chap, and if half-a-crown will pay for the damage——"

"Oh, certainly, certainly," cried the Marquess, eagerly.

"Wait a bit, wait a bit," exclaimed the cautious investor. "I don't fling half-crowns away recklessly, you know. The Marquess's shrubs may be valuable, but you can't pick silver pieces from them, now, can you?"

"There is no silver plant on this estate, so far as I am aware," admitted the head keeper.



“Very well, then. I’m a man that likes to get the worth of my money.”

“I gathered as much from our brief acquaintance. Proceed, I beg of you. What am I expected to do for the half-crown?”

“You are expected to give me some information.”

“As far as information goes, you seem already well stocked with it, and have more than once exposed my own poverty in that line. Still, for two-and-sixpence I’ll do the best I can.”

The stranger flipped the half-crown up into the air by releasing his thumb suddenly from under his forefinger, then caught the coin in his open palm very deftly as it came down. He thus gave the head keeper a glimmer of the silver, as if to prove that he possessed the wherewithal, but his shrewdness prevented him from giving up the money until he had received more definite assurances.

“I want a few minutes’ conversation with the Marquess of Merivale.”

“I have already given you a hint that I can

easily accomplish that feat by bringing you before him in his capacity of magistrate."

"Thanks, I am not taking any. Besides, the rest of the Bench would be there listening, and I want to have a little talk with his Nibs in confidence, as between man and man."

"Very well," replied the head keeper, "if you will give me half-a-crown I'll guarantee that you meet the Marquess, quite alone, with ample opportunity to say to him whatever you please."

"Right you are, my boy, but before you bring us together would you mind telling me in confidence what sort of a chap he is?"

"I'll tell you anything you want to know, but what I'm afraid of is that you'll pump me dry, and when I ask for the half-crown you'll slip it into your pocket as you did the sixpence."

The young man laughed, and for answer tossed the half-crown, this time horizontally, and the Marquess, who was an excellent cricketer, reached out and secured it.

"Well caught!" cried the other. "Now let's

sit down here, where we can talk in confidence. Is there any chance of us being interrupted?"

"Not very much, but even if someone happens to stroll along, he dare neither interrupt nor say anything to you, for, as I told you, I'm head man on this estate. If you'll stroll with me a few hundred yards nearer the Castle we shall find a bench where we can sit down and talk in comfort."

The bench proved to be a spot of vantage; always in the shade, it afforded a view through a clearing in the forest down to a very pretty waterfall, where the river tore and tumbled over a reef of rocks.

"By Jove!" commented the stranger, "this is a pretty spot. It doesn't look the least like Fleet Street."

"No, and there ain't no 'buses running," said the Marquess. "I take it you are from London?"

"Right you are. My name's Spiker—William J."

"Mr. Spiker, I am very glad to meet an

open-hearted, well-informed, and, I may add, open-handed gentleman like yourself. My own name is Bethen, generally called Rupert by my intimates."

"Pleased to become acquainted with you, Mr. Bethen. Aren't you rather a young man to be head keeper on an estate like this?"

"Oh, I don't know about that. The great thing is to know one's duties, and to be able to perform them."

"Quite so. I suppose your father was head keeper here before you?"

"Yes."

"And his father before him?"

"Exactly."

"You come, then, from a race of keepers, as one might say."

"That's it."

"Have you ever been in town?"

"Oh, yes. You mustn't think we live in the backwoods here. I was up in London only a few weeks ago, choosing a new gun."

"Well, now, did it ever occur to you, Mr.

Bethen, that the members of your family have never once risen above the position of servants on this estate?"

"Why should it occur to me?"

"Haven't you any ambition?"

"No."

"Well, you are a wonder! Do you mean to say that seeing all this wealth round you you never wanted any of it for yourself?"

"I can't say that I did."

"Quite contented, eh?"

"Reasonably so. The position of keeper on a place like this isn't at all a bad job. The pay is sure, and there's a pension when one becomes too old to work. The estate, as you have pointed out, is a very pleasant one. I can stroll about it as I please. I get all the shooting I want, and, indeed, I have often thought that the Marquess himself doesn't get much more enjoyment out of it than I do."

"Oh, that's all very well, but don't you sometimes wish you had more money than you possess?"

"Ah, which of us doesn't! There you touch upon the universal desire."

"I thought so," said Mr. Spiker, confidentially laying his hand on the other's knee. "Now, my son, I can put you in the way of earning a bit more than you do tramping over this landscape. Isn't this Marquess as rich as old Cræsus?"

"I don't know the amount of Income Tax Cræsus paid, but I think the Marquess is reasonably well off."

"How much? Put it into figures."

"I daresay he has all of forty thousand pounds a year."

"Great jumping Jupiter! Do you tell me so! And what sort of a man is he? If he wants a thing pretty badly is he willing to pay for it?"

"That has been one characteristic of the Merivales for centuries. They have paid for what they wanted right along, and from what I know of them, very seldom counted the cost."

"Good. You can see the Marquess whenever you like, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes."

"Does he allow you to talk to him as freely as I do?"

"Quite."

"Well, now, my son, you are wasting a simply heaven-sent opportunity. If I'd been in your boots for the last five years I wouldn't have thrown away my chances as you have done. I'd have had a slash at that forty thousand."

"That's easier said than done."

"Not a bit of it, my boy. All it needs is brains, which I've got, and opportunity, which you've got."

"Don't be fulsomely complimentary, Mr. Spiker."

"Oh, I'm not saying you haven't any brains, but you're letting them run to seed for lack of use. You might have made your fortune before this time."

"Again I ask how?"

"Don't you see how? Here's a young fool with more money than intellect."

" True."

" You yourself say that what he wants he'll buy, and won't haggle over the price, either. Now, all a man of brains needs is to find out something the Marquess wants, get a clutch on that thing, and make his Highness pay through the nose for it."

" That is very simple. You wish me, then, to learn the heart's desire of the Marquess at this present moment? "

" I don't wish anything of the sort. I know what he wants, but if you get me into the Castle, and arrange a meeting between me and the Marquess, I'll give you ten per cent., which is the amount of an agent's commission in London, of all the loot I lift."

" Really, my young friend, you are too generous, and appear to be as much of a spend-thrift as the Marquess himself. It seemed to me at first sight that the difficult point was to discover what the Marquess would pay for, but as you know that the whole game is in your hands. You don't need my intervention at all, and by



following my advice may save ten per cent. Go boldly in by the front door of the Castle, hand your card to one of the servants (and perhaps it might be wise to place a half-crown piece upon the card, just as if you were betting at Monte Carlo) then ask for the card to be delivered, and I am quite certain the Marquess will receive you."

"My dear Mr. Bethen, it wasn't to talk such nonsense that I gave you half-a-crown."

"You interrupted me, Mr. Spiker. If you'd waited a moment I should have told you that because my advice is so obvious, and, although quite effective, apparently valueless, I shall return to you the half-crown, in order that you may not be the least out of pocket by following my counsel."

"You don't live at the Castle, and therefore may be excused for not understanding how things are managed there. The house of the Marquess contains a very crafty young woman, who is determined that I shall not see his Lordship. Half-a-crown or half-a-sovereign wouldn't

gain me admittance. Indeed, I'd give a five-pound note if I were allowed to see him."

"Then I must say you are undercutting in the most miserly manner when you expect me to do a five-pound job for a half-crown fee."

"The two-and-sixpence was merely a retainer. I've just told you I'd give you much more than that if I pull it off with his Nibs, for I'm going to insist that before doing what he wants I must have five hundred pounds down on the nail, therefore your commission wouldn't be half-a-crown, but fifty pounds."

"I see. Don't you think it would be better to let me know your secret, for as I understand his Lordship's ways better than you do, I shall be more successful at the looting, as you call it. Indeed, I can guarantee that if what you want to sell is considered by the Marquess worth five hundred pounds, you shall have the money before nightfall, and you may trust me to hand it over to you."

Mr. Spiker smiled the smile of one who is

not to be duped, and quietly winked with his left eye.

“ My dear fellow, I come from London, and I’m up to snuff, if I do say it myself. The moment I tell the secret to anyone, my goose is cooked. My friend, William J. Spiker was not born yesterday, and all he asks of you is to arrange for him a meeting with the Marquess. As I said just now, there’s a mighty clever young woman that for reasons of her own which can’t be mentioned is determined that I shall not see his Lordship.”

“ Really? And her name? ”

“ Her name is Margaret Elmer.”

“ Oh,” said Rupert, drawing himself up. “ It is she whom you designated as crafty? Well, let me tell you that you are entirely mistaken. Miss Elmer is as honest a girl as lives, and I shall not listen to anything against her.”

The Marquess was now sitting very erect, a slight frown on his brow. He shifted his position towards the end of the seat, removing his knee from the familiarity of Mr. Spiker’s

hand. A step sounded on the gravel, and round the corner came the genuine article, as anyone not city-bred would recognise the moment his stalwart figure hove in sight. He was clad in rough Harris tweed, somewhat affected by the weather. His face was ruddy, and seamed with deep lines. Under his arm he carried a double-barrelled, hammerless gun. Here was a head keeper indeed.

Rupert rose to his feet, and Mr. Spiker looked impatiently over his shoulder, plainly annoyed at the interruption. The real keeper took no notice of the stranger, but his rugged hand went up to his cap in deferential salute.

"My Lord Marquess," he said, "your brother, Lord John, returned unexpected from Derry-more about two hours ago. He wants to see your Lordship, and has sent everybody in search of you."

"Very good, Palmer. I shall get back to the house at once. Here is half-a-crown that this gentleman, Mr. Spiker, wished to bestow upon you"—and with that he gave the keeper the

coin. "Kindly show Mr. Spiker anything he wishes to see about the estate. Good afternoon, Mr. Spiker."

The gentleman addressed was now standing, but for a moment was too much taken aback by the circumstances to give utterance to his feelings. Finding his tongue at last, he cried to his retreating host:

"One moment, one moment, my Lord! I wish a word with you."

"Take him away, Palmer," said his Lordship, waving a dismissing hand.

"Look here, my Lord," shouted Spiker, "I have something to tell you about Miss Elmer. She is not what you think her."

"Throw him over the wall, Palmer," commanded the Marquess.

The huge, powerful hand of the head keeper dropped on the shoulder of William J. Spiker with a clutch like that of a ninety-horse-power automobile.

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## CHAPTER XV

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WHEN Rupert, rested from sitting so long on the rustic bench, set out on his last lap for home, he found himself wondering who Spiker was, and what his business might be. He began to doubt the wisdom of the order so hastily given to Palmer, for the head keeper was a man of deep seriousness, who took everything in its most literal sense, and it was quite possible that if the unfortunate Spiker made any resistance he would indeed be flung over the stone wall with exceedingly little ceremony. He would be but an infant in the hands of the stalwart head keeper.

Next Rupert pondered over the statement that had called forth the drastic order. Margaret was not what she pretended to be! What did

Spiker mean by that, and how came he to have any knowledge whatever of Miss Elmer? Meditation on this problem brought to his mind the surmise that Spiker must be the man who walked to the post office that morning with Margaret Elmer, concerning whom she refused to make any disclosure when his mother had demanded an explanation.

Apparently Spiker had been staying for some time in the neighbourhood, and both his own statements and the conversation of the inn-keeper indicated that someone in the Merivale household was interested in frustrating the amiable trespasser's desire for a conference. Could that person be Margaret Elmer, and if so, why had she adopted such a course? The young Marquess had always been most accessible to those who wished to see him, and he could think of no reason why this stranger at his gates should be turned away without even his message being brought to him.

At first he thought of speaking to Margaret about the matter, but finally decided not to

embarrass the girl by raising a question which she was evidently unwilling to discuss. Rupert arrived at this conclusion and his house at the same time. Dismissing Spiker from his mind, and turning his thoughts towards the arrival of Lord John, puzzled that the candidate should have left his constituency as the crisis of the election was approaching, he determined to seek out his brother at once. He was deflected from this course by meeting a servant, who told him that Miss Elmer instructed her to tell his Lordship the moment he came in that the secretary wished to see him as soon as possible in the business room.

As the Marquess approached the door of this chamber of commerce he received audible evidence that his brother had returned, for the rapid click of the typewriter greeted him. Margaret ceased work and turned round as the door opened, springing up when she recognised her visitor.

“Oh!” she cried, “have you seen the Marchioness or Lord John?”



"No, I have only just returned from a tramp over the hills and far away, and was about to seek out my brother, but being told you wished to see me I came here direct. My first duty must be to apologise for appearing in the garb of a tramp before a lady so charmingly dressed as you are."

Margaret looked at him with a smile, and then glanced down at her own dainty attire.

"I like to see you in your tramp clothes," she said, simply; "and as for my costume, I think this *is* rather a pretty frock. I anticipated a long and lazy afternoon, but the schemes of mice and myself have gone agley."

"The arrival of my brother, eh?"

"Yes. There are many letters to be written and signed, but the silver lining is that I have ample time to finish them, as they are not to be posted until morning."

"Which means, Margaret, that you will work all night on this idiotic electioneering business."

"Oh, no; I may work late, perhaps, but that is nothing, for I can work at leisure. I object

only when I am called on to do ten hours' work in about ten minutes, which is not the case in the present instance."

"The typewriter didn't sound at all leisurely. It seemed to be running a regular Marathon race ahead of all competitors."

"It is quite as easy for me to write fast as to write slowly; indeed, more so. These letters are all the same, with the exception of the receiver's name and address, and already I have their contents at my finger-ends. I think I could run them off automatically, even if I were asleep."

"You have been working at them some time, then?"

"About two hours, or ever since Lord John arrived. I have written a good many, and there are only a hundred or so to do."

"A hundred or so!" cried the Marquess, in amazement. "What a selfish brute John is. Why couldn't he have his letters printed in Derrymore, if they are all alike?"

"Oh, that would never do. These are personal

appeals that go out to his constituents to-morrow, and each must bear the appearance of being specially written to its recipient. It is my duty to sign Lord John's name to every letter, in my best imitation of his handwriting, to address the envelopes from a list he has given me, seal them, and stamp them."

"You forget the posting," said the Marquess, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"No, I don't. They must not be posted in Merivale, as Lord John wishes them to bear the postmark of Derrymore. The letters will be packed in his portmanteau, so that he may take them with him when he returns to his constituency by the first train to-morrow morning, and I believe that it is his intention to drive direct to the post office and send them off without the knowledge of those who are managing his candidature."

"Ah, John's taken the bit between his teeth, then? There is dissension in the camp, and John is going to steal a march on his advisers."

"Yes. Your brother is in his most impossible

mood, and, little as I know of or care for politics, I think this is a very injudicious letter to send out. I tried to hint as much, but was practically told to mind my own business, which is always good advice, sometimes easier to give than to accept." The girl laughed, without any touch of resentment in her laughter. "Indeed, so little good has his advice done me, that tomorrow I shall again endeavour to dissuade him."

"What, and do all this work to no purpose?"

"Oh, I don't mind that in the least. If I can persuade him not to send the letters, even though the stamps are upon them, I shall be quite satisfied."

"I should like to persuade him with a cudgel," commented Rupert. "Still, in one thing John acts up to the motto of 'Excelsior.' When he is a fool, undoubtedly there is no bigger or more pig-headed fool in the realm than himself. John is a worthy descendant of the Brunton blacksmiths."

"There is no need for you to use the cudgel,

my Lord Marquess. I fear his constituency will do that, which is one reason I wished to see you before you met your brother, and is another matter that is none of my business. Won't you sit down?"

The Marquess first placed a chair at the disposal of the girl, and then threw himself down in another.

"I also wish to tell you," she went on, "and this luckily is my business, that I am about to leave Merivale Castle."

"What! Has my mother been saying anything to you?"

"No; I have been saying something to your mother. Please do not look alarmed. Our relations are perfectly amicable. I think the Marchioness was perfectly right in her desire for an explanation from me this morning, and I deeply regretted I could not fall in with that desire."

"I don't agree with you. You were quite justified in refusing to discuss a matter personal to yourself. We Merivales should take to

ourselves the counsel of 'Mind your own business.'"

"There are circumstances in the case unknown to you. You heard me tell the Marchioness this morning that I was sure she would approve of what I had done when I was able to place full particulars before her, and I honestly thought so at the time I spoke, but perhaps you noticed that I was rather perturbed just then."

"Yes. I realised that you did not wish any assistance from me, and I also observed that you ignored every suggestion I made, scorning all my attempts to pour oil on the troubled waters."

"Indeed, I did not scorn them, and was very grateful to you for your kindness. There was one point I had forgotten, however, and when I remembered it afterwards I knew the Marchioness would not approve of what I had done in the first instance, and as that led to what happened in the second instance I found myself in the position of having, through forgetfulness, misled my Lady. I at once realised that I could not remain longer in the employ of one who

might justifiably regard my conduct as being in a measure a course of deception. I have become tangled up, as it were, in a skein of my own spinning. The episode of this morning was a consequence of that entanglement, and if I explained it I should be compelled to explain next the cause, which is one that I am sure the Marchioness would not forgive, however much she might approve of what happened to-day. Oh dear! I see I am tangling you up by my lame attempts at excusing myself, as your look of bewilderment shows."

"I do seem to have got a little out of my depth, but that is because my mind is not so agile as it should be. Of one thing I am perfectly certain, Margaret, which is that from beginning to end you have done nothing you need be ashamed of."

"I am glad you think that, and I hope some day to justify your confidence in me. Still, all that has happened makes a further stay in the Castle impossible, for my own sake as well as in justice to the Marchioness. I therefore wrote at

once to the London people and accepted their offer of employment."

"Miss Margaret Elmer, I am sorry to add another letter to those you must write to-night, but please let me persuade you to recall that London acceptance."

"It is quite impossible, my Lord Marquess. I cannot recall it, and would not if I could."

"Oh, nothing is impossible if one has money enough. When a man in a fit of despondency accepts the King's shilling, he can always buy himself free from the authorities. I'll buy you off from those London people, and will give you double the salary they promise."

The girl slowly shook her head.

"You see, I'm counting upon you."

"Since when?"

"To be exact, since I took my walks abroad on the high road just before lunch. I have determined to inaugurate an important theatrical venture, which I hope will produce other effects than the mere elevation of the drama. In this I need, and relied upon, your active co-operation.



Indeed, I cannot do without you, although that is an injudicious remark to make from a business point of view. Nevertheless, I am willing to stand the consequences of it, and pay any salary you like to fix."

"I shall take no advantage of your indiscretion. Perhaps we may make an arrangement that will be convenient to each of us. A theatrical project cannot be carried on in Merivale, therefore, probably the scene of your operations will be London."

"Yes; I intend to secure a London theatre, if I find one that is suitable."

"In that case I may be able to assist you, for I shall be in London."

But the young man demurred. "You can do the work I wish much better here than anywhere else, and I am sure that you would rather live in Merivale Castle than in a Bloomsbury boarding-house."

"Yes, I would, but that is quite out of the question. What is it you wished me to do?"

"I wanted you to read manuscripts, and to

give me your opinion of plays that would be submitted."

The girl's face brightened. "I should like that very much," she said, "and it fits in exactly with what I am to do in London. The position offered me is that of publisher's reader. I shall not enter an office, but do my work in my own rooms, so I could read your plays there as well. However," she added, with a look of alarm, "you would not depend solely on my judgment in the matter of the dramas submitted? That would be too great a responsibility for me to undertake."

"No, there would be other readers—myself among the number. All I'd want to be sure of is that any work accepted would be original and literary. If you are thinking of financial responsibility you need not worry, for I do not care a rap whether the theatre pays or not."

"What, then, is your object?"

"To produce plays of merit that cannot get a chance in a commercial theatre, and to find the Ideal Woman."

“ You mean the ideal actress? ”

“ Partly. She would be an actress, of course, and I should judge from her deportment whether she was suitable for taking her part in the drama of life for which I should cast her.”

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## CHAPTER XVI

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MARGARET'S elbow was on the table, and her chin in her open palm. She looked fixedly at him, and the expression of bewilderment which she had previously noticed in his face now became evident on her own.

"That is rather cryptic and obscure," she said.

"I'll explain my intentions fully later on," he said, rising. "I have not the heart to keep you longer just now, when there is so much work to do."

"Wait a moment, wait a moment," she cried, eagerly. "Don't trouble about the work. It will be finished in time. I have been talking about myself so much that for the moment I forgot the subject on which I wished to speak with you."

"Ah, yes, what was that?" asked Rupert, sitting down again.

"It is about Lord John. He has returned from Derrymore in quest of a thousand pounds, which he says it is necessary he should spend if he is to win the election. I am afraid that the Marchioness and he have had rather a heated argument on the question already, and I thought you should be warned before meeting either of them. The air within the Castle this afternoon is dangerously electric."

"Oh, I don't mind," said Rupert, carelessly. "I am rather accustomed to that condition of the atmosphere."

"You may say, as Lord John did on another matter, and with equal truth, that this is none of my business, but I sympathise greatly with Lord John. He is very much in earnest."

"Yes; and he's a turncoat."

"I hope you will not make a remark like that to him in his present state of mind. Besides, you surely admit that a man may honestly

change his mind. Many of our political leaders have done so."

"What you want me to do, then, Margaret, is to keep a civil tongue in my head?"

The girl laughed merrily. "Indeed, I am more exacting than you think. Besides the civil tongue in your head, I want you to put a generous hand into your pocket. Please give Lord John the thousand pounds when he asks for it."

"But hang it all, Margaret, I gave him six thousand pounds at the beginning of the contest, and a dreadful wiggling I got from my mother for doing so. What has the simpleton done with all that money?"

"The election has proved much more expensive than he thought it would be. He says that another thousand pounds will see him through, and ensure him a substantial majority."

"Oh, he said that at the beginning about the six thousand, and if his estimate was wrong then, it is quite as apt to be wrong now. I could

understand all this money being spent if we were living in the good old bribery days, but in these virtuous times I declare I can't see how a man can run through seven thousand pounds in a comparatively few days. It is against the law to give the honest voter a little something for his franchise."

"But you will let Lord John have the money, won't you?"

"Why?"

"For this reason. He has been defeated once in his desire to enter Parliament, and I very much fear is about to be defeated again. Should that happen, he will always blame you for the disaster if you refuse your assistance now, and that will engender a bitterness between you; entirely on his part, I admit, for you could not be bitter with anyone."

"Oh, I say, Margaret, that's handsome of you, though rather undeserved, I fear."

"Well, is it not worth the expenditure or the loss even of a thousand pounds to prevent this bitterness on his part, this feeling of being

deserted at a critical moment by those he would naturally look to for help?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then you will give him the money?"

"Margaret, I will do exactly what you tell me, but the case is not quite so simple as you suppose. I admitted to you that I got myself into trouble with my mother because of my former contribution. She is a much fiercer Conservative than I am; indeed, it is she who drives me to vote in the House of Lords on those frequent occasions when the Empire is to be saved. She is as strenuously Conservative and quite as honestly so as John is earnest in his newly found Radicalism. My gift of six thousand pounds to assist the Liberal Party seemed to her treachery to my race and my country. That's all rot, you know, for there are good and earnest men even among the Conservatives. Indeed, I could pick out a few from that about-to-be-abolished sink of iniquity, the House of Lords. My mother expressed her opinion of my action in terse and vehement language that left me no



loophole of escape from its meaning, and she wrung from me a solemn promise that I would not allow John another penny for the purposes of his campaign. With my usual weakness I gave this promise, for the sake of peace, and to prevent the engendering of that bitterness which you just now mentioned.

“John had assured me that five thousand pounds would be enough, and I added the extra thousand to keep up the measure. Now he enacts *Oliver Twist*, and takes me at a disadvantage. Being a man of no moral stamina whatever, but having nevertheless some slight respect for a promise solemnly given, I will pay to John the thousand pounds if you say I am justified in doing so, as an honourable man who has pledged his word.”

For some minutes there was silence between the two. Margaret's head bent lower and lower; her fair brow wrinkled with thought. At last she looked up at him.

“Your mother must release you from that promise,” she said.

“Must and Marchioness and mother possess an initial in common, but there ends all likeness between the first word and the other two. If I said to my mother that she must do so-and-so, my insistence wouldn't do the slightest good. She and John are both Bruntons to the backbone, and I rather dread intervening between them. I shall ask my mother to release me from the promise, but I know perfectly well she won't do it. In that case, what course of action do you prescribe for me? Shall I leave the money on the library table, where John can pick it up, or is there some other surreptitious method by which I can keep my word to the letter while breaking it in the spirit.”

Margaret answered at once.

“No; I am sorry to say it, but without your mother's permission you cannot give Lord John the money he needs.”

Rupert pushed back the chair and stood up. A quizzical smile hovered round his lips as he looked down in kindly fashion upon the girl seated by the table.

"Margaret, wish me success," he said. "I will try to soften the mater, but as I left her this morning not too well pleased with me I fear I shall fail, unless your prayers on my behalf prevail."

"If it do you will succeed," said Margaret, glancing up at him sympathetically.

Thoughtfully the Marquess turned away, while Margaret sat down at her typewriting machine. Turning down the long corridor that led to his own apartments, Rupert saw his brother standing by one of the windows, gloomily regarding the landscape. His face was flushed with subsiding anger, his white lips were set, and a deep, ill-natured frown wrinkled his brow. It was evident at once to the elder that the discussion with their mother had been more than usually strenuous, and he further surmised that Lord John had retired defeated.

"Hallo, Johnnie, boy!" he cried, cheerily. "This is an unexpected pleasure. How is the flowing tide at Derrymore?"

The young Lord turned with almost savage truculence upon his brother.

“Look here, Rupert, I want a thousand pounds, and I want it now.”

“You shall have it with pleasure, Johnnie, if you will sign a receipt saying——”

The Marquess was interrupted by a strident, domineering voice.

“I’ll sign any blessed thing you want, so long as I get the money.”

“Don’t be so impetuous, John, but listen— if you will sign a receipt saying that you wish the money to make experiments in ameliorating the condition of our agricultural and labouring classes.”

“I want the money to secure my election, as you know very well.”

“No, no, John, you don’t. You got six thousand pounds for that purpose, and I have promised not to throw good money after bad. You require the thousand for the purpose I have stated, or for some similarly innocent object.”

“ I told you what I want the money for.”

“ If you paid more attention to what I said, you would see at once that there is a distinction without a difference. I believe there is a large agricultural and labour vote in your constituency, and—please don't force me into further explanations! ”

“ Can you never be serious? Must you always play the frivolous ninny? You know perfectly well why I want the money, and why I must have it, yet you prattle away like a drivelling idiot.”

Rupert sighed. “ Yes, I know why you want the money, and if the prattling idiot was not compelled to deal with a stolid wooden-head, you would have it. As it is, I must ask my mother to release me from my promise to advance you nothing further.”

“ That's but a sneaking method of getting out of it.”

“ All right. It is my only course, and I shall adhere to it. See you at dinner, John, and I hope in a little better temper.”

With that Rupert passed down the corridor to his own room.

As usual, the Marquess was reasonably prompt when the dinner-bell rang, and arriving at the dining-room found his mother already seated at the table, like an upright, elderly, but enraged goddess, about to launch the thunders of her displeasure at all who offended her.

"Hasn't John come down yet?" asked her elder son.

"No, he hasn't, and if there is any sense of decency about him, he will never show his face at my table again until he has apologised for his language to me this afternoon."

"Oh, I wouldn't be too severe, mother, if I were you. John's a Brunton, you know, and lacks the chivalry and polish of a Merivale like myself."

This was a most injudicious remark, but before the indignant Marchioness found words to express her feeling the door was flung open, and the impetuous Lord John came in, crashing it to behind him. The storm which Rupert had

last seen on his face had given place to an expression of triumph and content. He waved aloft what appeared to be a signed cheque.

“There, you two shuffling misers!” he cried. “I’ve got my money, and no thanks to you.”

His mother’s anger could not overcome her curiosity. “From whom?” she demanded.

“From Margaret Elmer, one of your servants.”

“Not a servant, you know, John,” murmured Rupert. “But, good Heavens, how did Margaret ever obtain a thousand pounds?”

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## CHAPTER XVII

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NEXT morning the great Manor House was abnormally quiet. The stormy Lord John had been whirled away to catch the earliest train, carrying with him his portmanteau of letters, at which Margaret had worked almost to the moment of his departure. Her task completed, the girl went upstairs, and did not appear again until the early afternoon. Upon entering the study she found that the Marquess had brought in his lounging Oxford chair from the library, and was reclining upon it, reading a book, which he placed on the small table at his elbow on seeing the girl. He clasped his fingers behind his head, and looked up at her, murmuring:

“ ‘ Worn and wan with midnight prayer,  
Is the pale face——’ ”

He paused, and did not finish his misquotation.



"There was nothing of devotion about my midnight work," said Margaret, "if you are alluding to that."

"Indeed," replied the Marquess; "there I disagree with you. I regard you as the very spirit of devotion."

"The task I had to accomplish required the spirit of perseverance and industry more than anything else, for I assure you that writing the same words over and over again becomes rather monotonous after the clock strikes twelve. An electioneering letter is the most commonplace of all written things."

"I daresay it is; nevertheless

'Who sweeps a room as by Thy laws,  
Makes that and the action fine.'

Still, mademoiselle, I am not going to pay you compliments, neither do I intend to commend your actions. I am here as a protest."

"A protest? Oh, I am sorry."

"So am I, mademoiselle, very sorry. It was with great regret that I took my place in this room several hours ago. I thought that when

you came in the sight of me marooned here, a picture of despair and loneliness, would cause you to smite your forehead with your open palm, and cry: 'What have I done? What have I done?'"

Margaret laughed a little sleepily at his nonsense, then said: "Without calling in the assistance of the palm and the forehead, may I put the question you expected me to ask? Please tell me what I have done. If you have been in need of me, I say again I am sorry I was absent. Why did you not send for me?"

"I did call for a servant, but had not the heart to have you disturbed. No, I magnanimously resolved to heap coals of fire on your head, which has always struck me as a particularly mean kind of revenge. I told the maid that I wished her to prepare, in one of the library alcoves, a cold collation for me, nominating the refectations. Coals red-hot and white-hot I ordered; in other words, late plump strawberries and nice sweet cream, waited upon by

cakes of various kinds, for I suspected that Mademoiselle Margaret would come down here quite willing to commence work without having had either breakfast or lunch."

"The cold collation is for me, then? Isn't that rather the reversal of the feminine advice: 'Feed the brute'?"

"Yes; it is the beauty, and not the beast, who is to be fed on this occasion."

"But tell me the crime for which a dish of strawberries and cream is the delightful punishment."

"All in good time, Margaret. First endure the penalty, then I shall make my complaint. When you return from the library you will find me on my feet, ready for the attack. Meantime, I must finish this chapter."

She glanced at the book face downwards on the little table, and saw it was that much-lauded, popular work, "Barbara Deems." A slight expression of displeasure flitted across her face, then, without a word, she passed through to the library, and the Marquess resumed his reading.

When she returned the young man had put away his book and stood there, cap in hand.

"Well?" she inquired, not coming in further than the threshold.

"It is rather stuffy indoors a hot afternoon like this, so I propose we go down the hill to the river and walk along the water path."

"I thought you wished me to work. I am already late, you know."

"Oh, yes, of course, but first there must be some explanations, and they may as well be made under the shade of the trees as in this breathless room. The truth is, Margaret, you and I are about to quarrel, and as we might be overheard in the house, I propose an adjournment to the woods, hoping those sylvan solitudes may temper our anger. It will be a very bitter quarrel, I assure you."

"A quarrel? Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. I do not intend to brawl and shout so that my voice is heard for half a mile, but it will be a rather definite quarrel nevertheless, although carried on in choice

language, I hope ; at least, I shall try to restrain myself, and I am sure your voice will not rise half a note. Come along, Margaret!" And making no protest she went with him, descending the steep hillside to the margin of the river, then walking along the edge of the forest until a shady natural arbour invited them to sit down.

Margaret rested her slim, capable white hands on her lap, looked at him, and said:

"Begin, please."

"I am the most patient and uncomplaining of men."

"A martyr."

"Exactly. Thanks so much. I am sure you will help me out whenever I am in a difficulty for the correct word, since you seem to have all correct words at your command. Well, this martyr being a martyr, allows himself to be put upon. Indignity after indignity is heaped upon his downtrodden shoulders——"

"Tut-tut!" interrupted Margaret; "shoulders cannot be downtrodden. Except in acrobatic

displays, no one sets foot on the shoulders of another."

"Right, Margaret, as always. What should I have said?"

"I suggest 'bent shoulders,' or perhaps 'bowed' would be the better word."

"Very good. Upon my bowed shoulders has been heaped indignity after——"

"Oh, you said that before!"

"Pardon me, I said 'downtrodden' before. I am merely trying to get this sentence right."

"What follows the second indignity?"

"What follows? Why patience, Margaret, long-suffering patience, until at last — at last——" The young man seemed to have reached the end of his vocabulary, and with frowning brow flung twigs into the current.

"As you were talking of shoulders, and burdens upon them, you might say, perhaps, that at last there comes the final straw which breaks the camel's back?"

"That's it, Margaret; that's it exactly, and

the enduring camel begins to whimper, if such is the method by which camels express their feelings. In the first place, when I endeavour to enlist your aid, this aid is proffered with reluctance, and ends in futility."

"Dear me, that is a serious indictment. What have I done?"

"In the second place," went on the Marquess, with doleful voice, "when my dear brother John falls from the clouds down among us, you willingly sit up all night to carry on his nefarious work, and therefore add to the neglecting of my behest an inferential contempt of myself. You prefer John to me, which is a perfectly absurd proceeding."

"I don't see why it is absurd. Everyone else kow-tows so much to you that I have even heard you complain of it. If these complaints were sincere you should welcome the cold douches of neglect which you pretend I administer."

"True, Margaret, I should, and yet, strangely enough, I don't. Do you think that I am insincere?"

“ I strongly suspect it.”

“ This will never do. It is I who should be making the complaints, and here you are trenching on my preserves.”

“ I apologise, and now let us get at the really serious kernel of your charge. You say I have neglected some task you gave me to do. What was that? ”

“ You saw the book I was reading when you came in? ”

“ ‘ Barbara Deems ’? Yes.”

“ Weeks and weeks have passed since I commissioned you to learn who the author is. Have you done so? ”

“ I have done what occurred to me. I communicated with the publishers, and they refused to divulge the identity of the author.”

“ Then does that end the search? ”

“ What more can I do? ”

“ I am sure I don't know, Margaret.”

“ Are you still as anxious as ever to discover the author? ”

“ As anxious as ever? I get more and more



anxious every day. If this mystery continues, I shall be worn to a shadow."

The girl looked at him smilingly. "I see no evidences of decline so far," she said.

"No outward evidences. There are inner shadows, Margaret, although you may know nothing of them. I am being worn to an inner shadow, and my sleep is troubled."

The girl laughed outright, and, in spite of his effort to appear pained, the young man smiled in sympathy with her mirth.

"Your Ideal Woman has good cause to be jealous. Here are you pretending undying affection for the woman of the book——"

"Pretending? Oh, Margaret, how can you be so cruel and so unjust?"

"And no longer ago than last evening you said that your search for the Ideal Woman was to begin in the limelight of the stage. I call that fickle."

"It isn't fickleness, Margaret; it is despair. My ideal book-woman refuses to emerge, although I have several people in search for her."

"I am not the only amateur detective, then?"

"No, but the Ideal Woman baffles them all."

"If I were quite sure you would remain in the same mind from one mood to another, I'd find your book-woman for you."

"Never mind the moods. Why don't you do it, anyway? Why not do it simply because you know I am depending upon you?"

"That cannot be so, for you have just confessed that you have enlisted several others."

"Simply a further proof of my despair. If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try another person."

"I can do nothing at Merivale; at least, nothing more than write to the publishers and abide by their answer, but when I reach London I guarantee that before a week is past I will send you the name of the author of 'Barbara Deems.'"

"Oh, you're not going to London, Margaret," cried the Marquess, forgetting at once his Ideal Woman; and, perceiving this, Margaret looked

sidelong at him with a quaint little expression of satisfaction. She would be missed at Merivale by one person at least: yes, by two, for who else could have the patience to do Lord John's voluminous work, and put up with all his uncertainty of mood and temper. She very well knew that Lord John would miss her.

"Have you reached the end of your complaints?" she asked.

"Was I complaining? Oh, yes, I had forgotten. Reached the end of them? Why, I've hardly begun. But my third is much the most serious of the packet. I complain of you even talking of going to London. I cannot permit it."

"Cannot?"

"No; I'll imprison you in one of the dungeons first. I thought we threshed that out yesterday. I can pay you more money than any of those London chaps, which settles the financial question. You've no excuse to leave us for a matter of salary, to better yourself, as people say, for I ask you to fix your own salary, and I'll pay it. If

every employer was as open-minded as I am, I'm sure there would be no strikes."

"Open-handed, you mean," suggested Margaret; but the earnest young man went on unheeding.

"Then, as a place of residence, how can two or three rooms in a London suburb compare with Merivale Castle? Why, it's absurd even to suggest such a thing, so that settles the question of residence. These two points being disposed of, what remains?"

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## CHAPTER XVIII

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MARGARET clasped her long fingers round her knee, bent forward, and gazed thoughtfully at the clear and rapid little river. She realised that the Marquess was in earnest, and did not wish her to leave Merivale. She spoke as if talking to herself.

“ I intend to take up a course of study. In London I have access to libraries——”

“ Libraries! ” cried the Marquess. “ Where will you find a better library than ours? The London library may be larger, but it is not nearly so select. Then, as for study, what better academy than under the groves of Merivale? Let us get back to the simplicity of the Ancients in the matter of learning. I shall order at once any books you may need

for your course of study, yes, and professors, too, if you want them."

"There are the picture galleries, the concerts, and all that London means to the intelligent person. You cannot order them in a box to Merivale."

"Margaret," said the young man, touching her shoulder, causing the young woman to sit up abruptly, and his hand to fall away, "I told you we were going to quarrel, and the unpleasantness begins right at this juncture. You know you are talking nonsense. You say I cannot bring London here? True, but I can do a much easier thing. I can transport a stubborn young woman into London as often as she cares to go. It's all a matter of money, and I told you we had settled the financial part of the business. There stands Merivale House, on the best side of Grosvenor Square, empty for the greater part of the year, because, as you know, we never let it. You will choose in that house whatever room best suits you, and it shall be reserved for your use. There are servants to look after you.

You can leave Merivale Castle any time you choose, and be safely in Merivale House, Grosvenor Square, within three hours. Mademoiselle, I make you a present of London. I refuse to be deserted at this pinch."

"At what pinch?"

"You don't pay much attention to what I say—that's the fifth complaint."

"No; only the fourth."

"I told you, no later ago than last evening, that I had developed and maturely considered for the greater part of an afternoon an all-embracing theatrical scheme."

"I remember—to search for the Ideal Actress?"

"Oh, that isn't what I meant by all-embracing. The Ideal Actress will probably emerge; but even if she doesn't, there is the chance of giving to the world some ideal plays, which might otherwise have been lost."

"I see. A sort of Court Theatre project?"

"Yes. The Court Theatre, plus Margaret Elmer."

"Plus the Marquess of Merivale, you mean."

"Plus him, too, of course."

"You promised to tell me about this theatre plan."

"Little use in doing that," said the Marquess, dejectedly.

"Why?"

"Because you're going to London. I therefore must give it up."

She looked at him to see how far his dejection was pretended.

"I never know," she said at last, "when you are speaking seriously and when you are merely baffling your listener. You remind me of this river at our feet; sometimes you seem very deep, and sometimes very shallow. Are you in earnest about this theatre project, or is it a mere fad of the moment?"

"I am in earnest."

"Then what exactly is its object? The promotion of acting as it should be done, aside from commercial considerations; the discovery



of notable plays, aside from commercial considerations; or the finding of the Ideal Woman?"

The Marquess made a grimace, and added: "Aside from commercial considerations."

"There, you see," said Margaret, with a sigh, "you are merely trifling again."

"No, I am not. I repeated your phrase, which is more important in its third conjunction than in the two preceding. I answer, then, seriously enough, I should rather find the Ideal Woman than the supreme actor or the supreme dramatist."

"In that case, I may save you the trouble, risk, and expense of your theatre by discovering, before I have been in London a week, the author of 'Barbara Deems.'"

"Margaret, I have told you definitely that I shall not allow you to go to London."

"Not in exchange for Barbara?"

"Not in exchange for anyone."

"Was it on this point we were to quarrel?"

"Oh, bless you, no! I had forgotten about

our quarrel. In this instance, I exert my brutal authority. My foot is on my native heath, and my name it is Macgregor, or whatever they called that other chap. On Merivale estate I am monarch of all I survey. My right there is none to dispute."

"I dispute it."

"I know you do, but I overrule your protest, and further contumely on your part will mean the dungeon and bread and water, instead of the library and strawberries and cream. No, our quarrel was to be on a different subject altogether."

As he spoke, he put his finger and thumb in the right-hand pocket of his waistcoat and took out a folded slip of paper, which he proffered to her.

"I ask you," he said, "to accept that."

She saw at once it was a cheque, and made no motion to take it.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Examine, and see."

The girl shook her head.

"It is a cheque in your favour," said the young man slowly, "for a thousand pounds."

"Why do you offer me a cheque for a thousand pounds?"

"Already you know why."

"I am aware of no reason why you should make such a generous donation to me."

"Margaret, don't be a humbug."

"Do you think I am one? Tell me why you offer that cheque."

"Don't you know why?"

"I am questioning you now, my Lord Marquess."

"Excellent, excellent!" cried Rupert. "That is quite the correct tone for this stage of the quarrel. We are getting on famously. You might, perhaps, have thrown back your shoulders a little, and I think a frown should be gathering on your brow by this time."

The girl tried to keep a serious face, but there was a slight quiver at the corners of her lips, as she spoke with honest directness.

"Yes, perhaps I am a humbug, as you dis-

courteously put it. Has Lord John been speaking to you?"

"Speaking? Why, he came into the dining-room last night waving your cheque and shouting."

"Ah! I am sorry for that. I told him to say nothing, but I suppose he forgot."

"What anyone says makes no impression on John. You see, the securing of a thousand pounds which we had refused was a triumph over the head of the Merivale family, and over our mutual mother. I would gladly have given him the money, only John is so much more honest than I that he would not accept it through any indirection I could suggest. I hinted that he might need a thousand pounds to help the agricultural depression, but John would have none of my subterfuges, and it was impossible for me to give him money for electioneering purposes when I had promised the mater not to."

"Will you think me too curious if I ask what the Marchioness said when her Ladyship learnt I gave the thousand pounds?"

“ Said? She didn’t say anything.”

“ Too astonished, perhaps?”

“ I don’t know.”

“ I wonder what she must think of me? ”

“ We all think nothing but good of you, Margaret.”

“ What! after my disgraceful conduct with an unknown and unexplainable man at the Castle door? ”

“ Oh, that was nobody’s business but your own, and anyone who knows you is certain that you have done nothing wrong.”

“ I seem to be pursued by Fate—first the suspicious incident of the morning, and then the even more questionable thousand pounds in the evening. While I stop here, I must try to prevent such incidents happening again. Now, why do you offer that cheque to me? ”

“ Because I am certain my brother will never think of it again; that you will never ask him for it, and, therefore, will never be repaid.”

“ But why should I accept repayment from you? ”

“Because I am the head of the Merivale family, and hold myself responsible for the delinquencies of the others.”

“Instead of offering the money to me, you should have given it to your brother John, telling him to repay me.”

“As a matter of fact, I attempted that very thing. I got up with unnecessary earliness this morning, and, much against his will, I accompanied my brother to the station. I offered him the cheque, and he spurned it. John was in a high-and-mighty huff this morning, and seemed specially annoyed with me.”

“I resemble him in this, that I cannot accept your cheque.”

“There, I knew it. Now our quarrel has reached its bitterest height.”

“No, the crisis passed long ago. I promise you to dun Lord John like a money-lender, and if he does not pay, I shall go direct to his elder brother and demand the thousand pounds.”

“Right you are, Margaret. That is a bargain. Let us shake hands on it.”

They did so, but Margaret withdrew her hand quickly, as she heard a discreet cough in the offing.

A servant appeared.

“What do you want?” demanded the Marquess, with an abruptness quite unusual to him.

“If you please, my Lord, a gentleman has called who says he must see you on important business, on account of a letter you wrote to his people.”

“A letter?” echoed the Marquess, taking the card the servant held out to him; then, his brow clearing, he gave utterance to a joyful cry.

“Aha! Now we shall find the root of our mystery. No name on this card, but merely ‘Confidential Representative of Snell and Musgrove, publishers, London.’ Certainly I will see him.”

Margaret had risen, and her cheeks were colourless. “My Lord Marquess,” she said, very quietly, but with intense earnestness, “I ask you not to see this man.”

Rupert looked at her for a moment, then, turning to the waiting servant, said carelessly: "Tell the gentleman I am engaged, and that it will be useless for him to call here again."



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## CHAPTER XIX

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LORD JOHN BETHEN did the one judicious thing that can be set down to his credit during the contest when he left Derrymore at the close of the poll, on the evening of election day, and took the first train to Merivale. He thus secured a safe refuge from reporters, and could make no more of those indiscreet utterances which, when published, were so difficult for his friends to explain away, exasperating to the point of profanity the editors who championed his cause.

When, towards eleven o'clock, Lord John emerged from the station he found his brother sitting in a dog-cart awaiting him.

"What are *you* doing here?" demanded the candidate, in no pleasant tone of voice. "I telegraphed to the Arms for a trap."

"So I heard," said Rupert, nonchalantly, "but as it was a nice cool night after a hot day, I thought I might as well enjoy the jaunt myself. Jump in, Johnnie."

Johnnie did not jump, but clambered into the trap with the clumsy slowness of an old man.

"When will the result be announced?" asked the Marquess.

"To-morrow, between ten and eleven."

The horse was a high-stepper, the Marquess an excellent whip, and they bowled along the road between the railway and the Castle, neither man saying another word until their home was reached.

In the dining-room supper was laid out, but John ignored it, going to the sideboard and pouring himself out a stiff glass of whisky-and-soda.

"Has Margaret gone to bed?" he asked.

"Everyone has gone to bed, I think. It's getting a little late, you know."

"Did Margaret know I was coming?"

"I suppose so. She called me to the telephone when the inn-keeper's message arrived."

John consumed his whisky in gulps, the nervous fingers of his disengaged hand beating a tattoo on the dining-room table. Although he said nothing further, it was evident he was in one of his blackest moods, and Rupert saw that however much of a joke an election might be to the world at large, it was a trying ordeal to those most vitally concerned.

"You couldn't expect the girl to wait up all night, especially as you had given her no warning," said the Marquess, with a lack of tact not at all characteristic of him. Before the other could reply, a pleasant voice addressed him.

"Don't you wish any supper, Lord John? You must be hungry after your long ride."

"Oh, is that you, Margaret? Thanks, I don't care for anything to eat. I suppose it's too late for me to dictate a——"

The girl interrupted him cheerily. "Oh, not at all. I thought perhaps there might be some-

thing you wished done to-night, and so I waited for you. Do you know the result yet?"

"No, not till to-morrow. We ought to have the figures before luncheon. The poll was very heavy, and there is likely to be some delay in the count. Of course I'm defeated. I know that. I've been involved in a quagmire of treachery, of venality and incompetence. I've got something to say to the newspapers about it, and it may as well be said now. I've been thinking about it during the railway journey, and I shan't sleep to-night if I don't get it off my mind. It's to go by telegram first thing in the morning to the London Journals, the Liberal headquarters, and elsewhere. If you're tired you don't need to wait up. I'll write it out with my own hand."

"Oh, I'm not in the least tired, but before you begin you must fortify yourself. Here is some delicious chicken and ham, and an exquisite *pâté de foie gras*. Shall I open a half-bottle of champagne?"

"No, thank you. I'll take another whisky-

and-soda. Yes, the chicken does look tempting. Have you your notebook and pencil?"

"Oh, yes; at least, they're in the study. Shall I bring them in here?"

"Yes, please."

Margaret disappeared, and John, mixing himself another glass of inspiration, sat down at the table. His brother put a hand gently on his shoulder.

"John, chuck this political business for to-night. Wait till you've got the figures. There will be ample time to-morrow afternoon to telegraph anything you like to the London morning papers. They cannot publish the result of the election until the day after to-morrow, and whatever comments you care to send them will appear simultaneously with the announcement."

Lord John roughly shook the hand of the other off his shoulder.

"Will you kindly mind your own business?" he asked in an acrid voice.

"Well, Johnnie, it is partly my business, you know."

Although the words of the Marquess were mild enough, there was a hint of peremptoriness in their tone. John's haggard face flushed, and the flame leaped up in the eyes he turned upon his brother. He was evident'y eager for battle with anyone. The frown on the Marquess's brow deepened, but before his brother could speak there came a cheery little laugh from the other end of the room. Margaret approached and laid her notebook on the dining table.

"Now, my Lord Marquess," she cried airily, "you are dismissed, if you please. I never can do myself justice in shorthand if there is a third person in the room."

"Good-night, Margaret," said Rupert, and without further words turned and left the room.

John pushed away his plate, with its scarcely-tasted refection, gulped down a mouthful from the glass, and began the diatribe to his party. There was not a moment's hesitation in his dictation. He poured forth language as if he were a living Thesaurus, and the silent Margaret set it all down with deft fingers that seemed

strangely unhurried when one remembered that each sound must leave in its train a dot or a little crooked mark. Rarely had a pencil recorded such scathing satire; such scorching invective; such malignant denunciation of all and sundry. John spared no one, from the Premier of the country to the chairman of his committee. If there had been a listener he might have wondered that blue flame did not follow the pencil point.

Never once did Margaret interrupt, or even look towards him. For the time being she was a mere machine, a semi-automatic recording angel, and if Lord John had been Rhadamanthus himself his denunciations could not have been more fierce.

At last the terrible tirade ended, and his Lordship drained the last drop of liquor in his glass.

"There," he cried, with a weary sigh of satisfaction, "that will make them sit up!"

His voice was now without rancour—the tone of one who had finished a task well done. The transference of all this venom from his mind to

sheets of paper had evidently put him in a good humour, tired as he was. The girl rose, notebook in hand, and gathered up the pencils. There was not the slightest shade of criticism in her tones when she spoke; if the full violence of the article was known to her she betrayed no hint of it.

"At what time do you wish the typewritten copy?" she asked.

"Oh, any hour to-morrow morning will do," he said. "Still, if you are not sleepy I should advise you to type if off to-night. I may get up early, and I wish to look over it critically. It is an important pronouncement."

"I shall finish it to-night," she said, "and will leave the duplicate copies on the typewriter desk, where you may find them if I am not down."

"All right; thanks. Good-night," and he reached a third time for the whisky bottle and the syphon.

"Good-night," said Margaret, gently.

Once more in her own study she turned on the electric light, propped up the notebook,



inserted in the typewriter duplicate white sheets of paper, with a thin film of carbon between them, then her fingers rippled over the keys as though she were playing a sonata. When her task was about half-finished she heard the heavy steps of Lord John going upstairs somewhat uncertainly. He was muttering to himself, as if declaiming some denunciation he had forgotten to dictate. There followed the distant bang of a door—his Lordship cared little at any time whom he disturbed—and after that the great house sank into silence, save only for the chatter of the machine.

When at last the task was completed, Margaret raised her hands high above her head and indulged in the luxury of a yawn. Even she was compelled to acknowledge tiredness. At her touch the typewriter disappeared into the centre of its desk, like the demon in a pantomime sinking through the stage. She assorted the sheets into two heaps respectively of original and of copy, placed a paper-weight on each, and raised her hand to extinguish the electric light, when

there came to her the startling sound of her own name. Her hand came fluttering to her throat.

"Who is that?" she whispered.

"Only the wicked Markiss," said Rupert, as he parted the curtains and appeared before her.

"Oh, how you startled me!" she gasped.

"I'm sorry. I did not wish to disturb you, and so sat in the library until I heard the closing of your desk. I feared you would slip away, and that I might not be able to find the manuscript you have been working at. What have you done with it?"

"There it is on the desk, but it belongs to Lord John."

"Yes, I know it does, Margaret, but it is intended to belong to the people of England to-morrow. As one of those people, I mean to anticipate general knowledge by a premature reading of the effort, but so that you shall not participate in my crime I order you off to bed. Are you aware, mademoiselle, that it is two o'clock in the morning?"

“ Have you been sitting in the library all this time? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Without a light? ”

“ Yes.”

“ How creepy. Had I known anyone was there I should have become nervous.”

“ Not if you knew I was the person, I hope? ”

“ No; I shouldn't have minded you.”

“ I'm glad of that. I came near to dropping off to sleep once or twice, but my anxiety enabled me to keep awake. I suppose that proclamation of John's does not err on the side of smoothness, moderation, and conciliation? ”

“ No, it doesn't.”

“ As a political manifesto, what do you think of it, Margaret? ”

“ It seems to me rather ill-advised.”

With a weary smile the Marquess picked up the manuscript. “ I fancy I shall agree with you,” he said.

He read the first page and a half without comment, then with a sigh of despair placed the packet on the desk again, Margaret watching him with interest.

"This is deplorable," he remarked. "I cannot allow it to be issued. Once it gets into the papers, it will make my brother and our family the laughing-stock of England."

"What do you propose to to?"

"I suppose I must tackle John in the morning. What I should like to do is to put him in a tight-fitting jacket for a week."

In spite of the seriousness with which both regarded the effusion, a mutual expression of drollery came into their faces, as, standing beneath the electric light, they looked at one another.

"How mediæval you are," she said at last. "You turn as naturally to physical coercion as Lord John—much the more modern of you two—delights in mental violence. You would prevent my going to London by immuring me in

a dungeon, and Lord John you would confine to a padded cell."

"It's the only punishment that fits the crime."

"Do you intend to speak with him about it to-morrow?"

"I must. I cannot allow this to go over the wires."

"May I try persuasion before you call upon force?"

"I shall be delighted if you can influence him."

"I shall act in this matter as I promised to do with regard to the thousand pounds. I shall appeal to Lord John, and if I fail, I shall call upon you. I advise you to avoid him, in case you may be led into a discussion, which always seems to make him more firm than before."

"Stubborn, you mean—bull-headed, to put it plainly. All right; I will not arouse his pugnacity. From early morning, until you call me, I shall be in my workshop. John never comes there. If he will not listen to reason, you

know where to find me. You had better not allow this manuscript out of your possession, or he may send it off by messenger before either of us gets a word with him. Take it with you to your room."

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## CHAPTER XX

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NOTWITHSTANDING the lateness of the hour at which she retired, Margaret was the first down next morning, and was working at the typewriter when the candidate for West Derrymore made his appearance. A night's rest seemed to have subdued him to some extent, and the truculence of manner which characterised him the previous evening had in a large measure departed. There was, however, disquieting evidence of his having had a little too much to drink the day before. His hand trembled slightly, and wrinkles in his forehead indicated the physical regrets of the morning after.

“ No telegram has arrived yet? ”

The eagerness of his voice showed that hope had revived, the morning light driving away the doubts of the darkness.

"Nothing has come, so far," replied Margaret.

"Did you type what I dictated last night?"

"Yes; here it is."

He sat down and very carefully read the pages, while Margaret watched him intently. She saw with dismay that his own eloquence was producing a bracing-up effect on him. His eyes became brighter as he read, and the colour returned to his cheeks. Coming to the last line he drew up his chair to the table, dipped his pen in the ink, and began to correct the manuscript. Great is the god of self-conceit! All hope that the excessive virulence of his work would shock its author when read in the clear light of day vanished from Margaret's mind, and she turned with a sigh to the correction of a manuscript of her own.

Finishing his amendations at last, Lord John, with a snarl of satisfaction, almost repeated his phrase of the night before:

"That will make them squirm!"

Margaret saw that he was a-tingle with fighting spirit once more, and feared she had



lost the psychological moment for inaugurating councils of polemical courtesy.

"I daresay," she said, "they deserve it."

"Yes, they do. It serves them right. How many copies can you type at one time on that machine?"

"About six, although one or two will be rather dim."

"Very well. Just dash this off, and pay particular attention to the changes I've made. I've added a stinger or two."

He glanced impatiently at his watch, and Margaret began arranging her carbon-interleaved sheets, when the telephone bell rang. She placed the receiver to her ear.

"Yes—yes—yes," he heard her say, with pauses between; then she took a pencil, and drew a sheet of paper towards her. "2-9-4-7. Is that right? Two thousand nine hundred and forty-seven. Thanks very much. That was very good of you. You may send the telegram along in the ordinary course. Yes. Thank you."

She hung up the receiver, and said to him in a low voice: "Unionist majority, two thousand nine hundred and forty-seven. They have telephoned from the telegraph office. The despatch has just come in from Derrymore."

Lord John's lips closed to a thin line, and a deep frown seemed to draw down brows over eyes lurid with anger, which for the moment was suppressed. He rose to his feet and began pacing the room, not noticing that he was crumpling up his precious manuscript in his nervous right hand. Margaret went on steadily with her preparations for copying until John shouted rather than spoke: "Stop!" and she thought for one brief moment that the crushing nature of his defeat had accomplished what she hoped to do through diplomacy.

"Wait a moment," he commanded. "I shall re-dictate this. Last night I used whips; now I shall lash them with scorpions."

Margaret sat still as he paced up and down the room. After a while he said to her:

"What did you say the figures were?"

"Two thousand nine hundred and forty-seven. I am very glad," she added, softly.

"Glad!" he roared. "What have you to be glad about?"

"The result, you see, is definite. If you had been defeated by a mere forty-seven you might be troubled by the thought that a little further effort on your part, or a little more money spent, would have changed defeat into victory, but now you enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that nothing you or your friends could have done would have produced any practical effect."

"Humph!" grunted Lord John.

"It shows that the candidate was not at fault. He was merely leading a forlorn hope against an overwhelming change of public opinion. No Liberal could have carried West Derry-more."

Lord John ceased his perambulations, sat down on the foot of his brother's Oxford lounge, and buried his head in his hands.

"This pronouncement that you have written,

although it is so powerful, will nevertheless fail to produce the effect you intend."

"How is that?" demanded Lord John, without raising his head.

"There have been numerous defections, as the result shows, within your own party, but those who plotted against you did not all change their opinions in one night. This morning, when they realise the overwhelming nature of the avalanche they have assisted in causing, when they see the jubilation of men they have fought in former elections, and will fight again, there will be some bitter searchings of heart among them. They won't say anything aloud, but there will be some very deep thinking. Their party in West Derrymore is almost annihilated."

"Well, confound 'em, what do I say in my proclamation but that their treachery has brought about this result?"

"True, but when you lash out at them as you do in this open letter, you place in their hands exactly the weapon that this morning they need.

At one stroke you anger every Liberal in the constituency and in the country, guilty and innocent alike.

“‘There,’ they will say, ‘what other result could we expect with such a candidate!’”

Now Lord John raised his head abruptly and glared across at the girl.

“Miss Elmer,” he cried, anger turning from his followers to her, “are you venturing to criticise me?”

“Oh, no, no. I am trying to show you what the newspapers and the rank and file will say. You see, no one with the slightest pretence of being a Liberal can do any shouting to-day in West Derrymore. These misguided creatures have contributed to a victory which they dare not celebrate, or even acknowledge. Each is looking with a certain distrust on his fellow. All jubilation is with the Unionists. Now, if I were in your place, I’d put in force the motto ‘*Noblesse oblige.*’ I’d take the whole blame upon myself.”

“What!” bellowed Lord John, springing to

his feet. "Have you gone mad? Take the blame upon myself? Why, I have addressed meeting after meeting, and have been treated with the utmost rudeness—badgered and baited like a bull in a Spanish ring. Do you think I am going to let those swine trample on me, and——"

"That makes it all the more noble."

"Makes what more noble? The swine?"

"No; your ignoring of them. A gentleman cannot condescend to be a swine-beater. That duty falls upon the herdsman."

John uttered an exclamation of dissatisfaction, not unlike the grunt of the animals he was contemning.

"Don't you remember the story of the gentleman who met a boor on the wrong side of a road that elsewhere was muddy?"

"'I never give way to a hog,' said the boor.

"'I always do,' said the gentleman, politely raising his hat, stepping into the mud, and passing on.

"Now, I should like to see you say something

pleasant, raise your hat, and pass on as if nothing particular had happened."

John scowled, but made no reply, although he was badly crumpling the copy he had so carefully corrected.

"I was thinking over all that this morning," Margaret went on; and somehow her voice sounded soothing and healing. John, in spite of himself, felt less sore as he listened to it. "And I jotted down a few things that I imagined you saying to these people."

"Let's hear them."

Margaret took up the sheet of paper on which she had been typing.

"'Now that the result for West Derrymore has been announced, I desire to return to my friends in that constituency my heartfelt thanks for their sympathy and support.'"

"Their treachery and desertion," growled John.

"'Doubtless the Opposition newspapers will make much of this victory, and claim, quite erroneously, that the great principles of Liberal-

ism have, through such an outcome, received a check.’”

“Great principles of fiddlesticks!”

Margaret smiled, but went on calmly:

“‘This, however, is not the case. Our cause suffered defeat through its candidate; therefore the candidate, and not the cause, is to blame. Our opponents possessed the great advantage of being represented by a local man of the very highest standing, respected alike by Liberals and Conservatives, and well worthy of their esteem.’”

“He is simply a rich, vulgar, ignorant tradesman.”

“‘I laboured under the disadvantage of being an outsider, practically unknown to the constituency until within two weeks of polling day, and had thus scarcely time to become acquainted with those whose support I solicited, much less to win their confidence. When to this is added my own inexperience, and a deplorable inaptitude upon the platform, the wonder is that the majority against me did not exceed the three



thousand, rather than remain short of that number.

“‘ Taking all these facts into consideration, I am deeply grateful for the courtesy extended to me, and although naturally regretting my defeat, I shall nevertheless ever think of West Derrymore with feelings of gratitude and pleasure.’ ”

“ Good Heavens! Is that all? ”

“ Yes. Isn't it enough? ”

“ Too much, I should say off-hand. Would you really like me to sign that screed? ”

“ Yes, I would. I'm revengeful, you see. ”

“ Revengeful? Where is there any revenge in that? It's like new milk, and I wish to give them a dose of vitriol. ”

“ The vitriol is concealed in the milk, nevertheless. You knock away the prop that the traitors have been leaning upon, which is that you were a hot-headed, obstreperous, impossible candidate. This with the extremists who to-day are rather shaken at what they have done. But do not forget the hundreds of moderate

men who with reluctance in some cases, and misgivings in others, have voted against you."

"They are the worst, curse them!"

"Exactly. So you mete out to them the worst of all punishments—the upbraiding of their own consciences—the tormenting assurance that they have made a mistake which they cannot remedy. These men are fervently hoping that you will issue a blistering indictment, even if only to justify themselves to themselves. I propose that you shall disappoint this hope by refusing to play their game. Now you see how mean-spirited I am—how revengeful."

John had been pacing up and down the room with bent head. Suddenly he stopped, sat down at the table, and dashed his signature across the end of Margaret's manifesto.

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## CHAPTER XXI

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WE may leave theologians to settle the question whether or not there is a purgatory in the next world, being quite assured that there are certainly a thousand purgatories in our present existence. The purgatory idea is an excellent one, based on the usefulness of the smelting furnace. Into the smelting furnace are thrown gnarled, ugly lumps of shapeless ore, whose outward appearance gives no hint of what is within. They may be worthless, or they may contain a precious metal. In their pre-furnaced state these masses of ore are useless enough, cumbersome, and disagreeable to handle.

Dumped into the furnace, the lump of ore, if conscious, might reasonably complain. The climate into which it is heaved is oppressively

warm. It may well be excused for believing the world is treating it badly, for it is going through pain and travail of the most intense disagreeableness. It finds itself disintegrated—the heat is senseless in its extreme cruelty. It knows this torture cannot be right, cannot be just, cannot serve any good purpose, but by and by there flows out the stream of molten silver that hardens into an ingot of purity and worth; something capable of beautiful things and valuable things in the hands of that educator, the silversmith. The dross has all been burnt away into vapour, or discarded as slag.

Lord John Bethen passed through the furnace heat of an election contest. He met uncouth men by the hundred who did not care twopence for his name and family. They treated him with an intolerance that made every nerve in his body tingle. It had been shown that he possessed neither the tact nor the patience to prove himself master of the mob, and the outcome was that all through the turmoil he was but a football, kicked hither and thither at the

caprice of his conquerors. Never once did he overpower a public meeting with his personality or his eloquence, holding them in thrall with the message he felt called upon to deliver, and the result was that they crushed him and flung him out. He came home like a bear with a sore head, and now, at the last, he exhibited such weakness that a girl of no account whatever was allowed to deflect him from the stern purpose of showing up these wretches in their true colours.

Reflecting on all this, John gave himself up to moroseness and despair. The sending out of such a milk-and-water apologetic message to his late constituents was the final humiliation through which his political ambitions had led him. It was the end. He had not only permitted himself to be browbeaten by men, but he was cajoled by a girl into an action directly the opposite of the course he intended to pursue.

He said nothing to Margaret when they met, but he watched her with careful scrutiny. Had he seen one gleam of triumph in her eyes, had he received a single hint that she estimated

correctly his feebleness, he would likely have fished up the abandoned proclamation and flung it abroad as a second thought, which is supposed to be the best. But Margaret was as demure, as self-effacing as ever. Indeed, he was conscious of a subtle bond of sympathy between her and himself, for her unexpressed idea seemed to be that he was all in all rather a noble fellow, condemned to live in a turbulent world not half good enough for him. This soothed his lessening vanity, and also set him a-thinking.

Gradually meditation began to get in its work, especially as his pondering took the disquieting but healthful tonic tendency that perhaps, after all, he had been rather a fool.

What if, earlier in the game, he had taken more counsel with Margaret? What if he had put into practice her mild, conciliatory methods? Why had he always cursed his hecklers, and answered them with insult rather than with argument? Of course, their object was evident enough. They wished his discomfiture. They determined to nullify the effect of his meeting,

but now when it was all over he could not conceal the fact that he himself, in the continued heat of his anger, had put the cap-sheaf on their success. Why had he never once unbent, and when they turned the laugh upon him why had he not joined in it, at least once or twice, instead of standing there scowling, a self-confessed but—a living monument to his enemies' triumph and his own undoing.

The few days that followed the despatch of what he regarded as his political Swan Song was the time that he descended into the lowest depths of his humiliation. On Margaret's table the newspapers were piling up higher and higher every morning, but although he knew they were placed there for his perusal, he never looked at them, and she, with an intuitive perception of the period of depression through which he was passing, made no allusion to their contents, favourable or the reverse.

It was on Saturday afternoon, when the weekly reviews had come in, that at last she spoke. They met in the corridor, and Margaret was

carrying in her hand her favourite serious weekly, the one to which she always turned first when the parcel came in on Saturday. John was slowly advancing towards her with head bent, and she stood aside to let him pass, but as he glanced up he saw a certain hesitation in her manner, as if she wished to accost him, but was not sure that the moment was opportune. Then John did an unaccustomed thing. He smiled at her, and she realised that the deep despondency was passing.

“Lord John, you have not looked at any of the newspapers since the election.”

“No; nothing they say can interest me.” He laughed a little bitterly. “An avalanche is an avalanche, and no amount of talk will convert it to a summer zephyr.”

“I’m afraid you don’t think of my position at all,” protested Margaret.

“I don’t understand; what is your position?”

“Why, I am responsible for it all. I was responsible for the message you sent out, which you seem now deeply to regret.”



“To tell you the truth, Margaret,” said John, honestly, “I did at first, but at last I see that you were right. If a man cannot defeat his enemies, he should not bark at them. The bark of the biteless is a dog’s work, and the work of a cowardly dog at that. I am quite convinced that your proclamation was right.”

“Our proclamation,” corrected Margaret.

Again John smiled. “No; I’ll go a step further, *my* proclamation,” he asserted; “for the moment I put my signature to it I made it mine, and I would not take back a word of it if I could.”

“I am very glad to hear you say that, Lord John. It takes off my mind a great weight that has been growing heavier and heavier as the days passed.”

“Oh, I’m sorry you have worried. I fear I have been thinking too much of myself, a bad habit that I shall endeavour to throw off. I assure you I see quite plainly that my own precious production—it is no excuse to say it was part of the nightmare through which I

passed—I see it was an ignoble thing, and you must not think because I have said nothing that I am ungrateful for what you have done.”

“ Then, Lord John, will you read the article in this review, entitled ‘ *Despitefully Use You* ’? This journal is a supporter of the Administration, yet it says practically what you said in the first article, although its utterances have all the dignity of diction and the weight of authority that belong to the better class of English journalism. I have been consoling myself by reading it over and over again.”

She handed him the journal, and he stood by the window and read the article pointed out to him, then gave it back to her, saying: “ It’s a fine eulogy of you. It must be jolly to be the sort of chap this paper thinks I am.”

“ Are you not? ”

“ You know very well I am not.”

“ How abruptly you say that, Lord John. You speak as if you were a rather severe school-master correcting me.”

"I'm sorry."

"But that's not the worst. You are imputing to me a lack of candour."

"All I can say is I had no intention of doing so, and again I repeat I am sorry."

"Being sorry doesn't mend it, Lord John. I rather despise that perfunctory phrase 'I'm sorry.'"

John looked at her with a frown of displeasure, which gradually changed into an expression of surprise.

"If a man commits a fault, what more can he do than apologise?"

"He can amend the fault."

"Why, Margaret, I am all at sea. What have I done? The rôle of schoolmaster, if I ever assumed it, has fled from me to you. You are censuring me in your mild but effective way. I am experiencing all the sensations of a convicted culprit. I know that on general principles I deserve anything that may be said to me, but I am very hazy on the particular crime of which I have just now been guilty."

“ You were disclaiming the praise which this journal accorded you. I ventured to hint that the journal was right. You answered, quite in your old dogmatic manner, that I knew very well you did not deserve the commendation. If I knew that, and said the contrary, then am I a person whose word is not to be trusted.”

“ Why, Margaret, I had no more intention of imputing lack of good faith to you than of attempting to win a Marathon race. For these last few days I have been doing what I understand men of business do with frequency. I have been taking stock, and find I possess a quantity of goods it would be better to get rid of. Among other bad qualities is a certain domineering selfishness of which you particularly have been the victim. I have made you slave at my worthless political business—well, I won't attempt to apologise. You don't like the phrase 'I'm sorry,' so I shan't use it any more ; but I now see how an impartial third person would look upon my preemptory conduct. That's what I meant

when I said that you, of all persons, knew by experience how undeserved was the tribute of this journal."

"The faults you attribute to yourself, Lord John, are rather those of manner than of character. They are on the surface. When you give yourself time to think, you always do the right thing. For instance, near the beginning of this conversation you somewhat harshly contradicted me, but later you amended it all in the most complimentary way, therefore I consider that I am quite right when I say you have really earned the good words bestowed upon you by the Press. Come into the reference-room with me, and read what the papers have been saying about you."

Without waiting for his assent, Margaret led the way to the typewriting-room, and John followed, clothed in his new meekness. The various papers were marked, docketed, arranged in their proper order, and the young man sat there and read them one by one, without comment, to the end. When he finished the last

line, he looked across at her with a sort of sheepish grin.

"After so much fuss," he said, "it seems like another case of 'all's well that ends well,' doesn't it?"

"Yes, and it is amazing of how little importance a by-election is despite the reams that were written before it took place. You will notice that the day the result was announced great space is given to it in the newspapers, but next day's papers contain much less. A few letters are printed explaining this, that, or the other; some protests are made at the unfair inferences drawn from the facts, but on the third day there is not a word. The great fight seems to be forgotten."

"I'll never forget it," said Lord John, ruefully.

"Oh yes you will," laughed Margaret, taking down the telephone receiver as the bell tinkled.

It was the amiable and obliging habit of the operator in the telegraph office two miles away to telephone to Merivale Castle the contents of any telegram arriving for the great house, and

so before the boy got out his red cycle to carry the official document the actual words were being whispered at Margaret's desk.

"A long telegram from Scotland, miss, for Lord John Bethen. Shall I repeat it?"

"If you will be so kind."

"'FROM DUNDRUGGET, N.B. TO LORD JOHN BETHEN, MERIVALE CASTLE. MY LORD: The Liberal Committee of Dundrugget have read with much appreciation and sympathy your address to the electors of West Derrymore, and they desire to express their deep regret at your defeat in that constituency. Sir Norval MacKinnel, the representative of this division, has been offered a peerage, which he will accept. This will necessitate a by-election here, which we expect to take place within a month. The Committee unanimously invite you to stand as Liberal candidate for this division.'"

Margaret had taken this down in shorthand as it was spoken, and now typed it out on her

machine. Lord John sat at the end of the table, languidly turning over the leaves of the weekly journals. Before handing him the message, she took down a reference-book and looked up the political record of Dundrugget. Replacing the book, she said, as she handed to her *vis-à-vis* the typewritten slip of paper:

“The telegram is for you, Lord John.”

The young man read the sentences once or twice, then, placing the sheet on the table, he remarked indifferently:

“It is very good of them, but I shall not accept. I know when I have had enough.”

“Guess again,” said Margaret, with a little laugh.

“I don’t understand. I’m not guessing. I shall acknowledge the invitation with the utmost courtesy, but my Parliamentary ambition is at an end.”

“Oh, that’s boyish. You have stubbed your toe, and so you won’t play. I thought, from the way you talked this morning, that you had reformed, but now you are back at the old game



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of disappointing your friends and rejoicing your enemies."

"That's all very well, Margaret, but I think the part of wisdom is to let the commotion I have stirred up die out before I launch into any new enterprise."

"Such a decision is not in accordance with the wisdom of the ages, Lord John. The man who gets on in this world appears to be he who seizes opportunity when it comes to him. This is a case of 'He who will not when he may.' I have just read the political history of Dundrugget. It is not a contest they offer you, but what a slangy person would call a 'walk-over.' Dundrugget has never yet returned a Conservative. Sometimes the majority has been smaller than usual, but it has always been great. Sir Norval MacKinnel was returned unopposed at the last two elections. If the seat is vacant as soon as they expect you may take your place at the opening of Parliament in the House of Commons, on the same day that your opponent at West Derrymore is seated. I call that a

triumph. The boy will be here with the written telegram in a few minutes, which allows you ample time to write your reply and send it back with him to the telegraph office."

"Do you really wish me to accept?"

"Certainly I do."

"Very well; that settles it. Hurrah for Dun-what-do-you-call-it, but I give you fair warning, Margaret, that this is going to mean a lot of extra work for you. I shall give up my habit of extempore oratory. That seems to be a trap for the catching of injudicious utterances. I shall dictate my speeches to you. You will type them out, criticising them as we go along, and I'll learn them by heart."

"I shall type them out with pleasure, Lord John, but as for criticism, the Marquess will prove a much abler adviser than I am. He is well versed in public affairs, and is more richly gifted with common sense than is usual with a man in his sheltered position."

"Oh, Rupert will be dead against me."

"You are quite wrong in that belief. Of

course, he has inherited opinions diametrically opposite to those you have acquired, but blood is thicker than political sentiment. He was very much depressed by your recent defeat."

"Rupert is a good fellow, but a dawdler. He cannot take a serious view of anything."

"You are very much mistaken, Lord John. He takes a more practical view of things than you do."

"The old Adam counsels me to say 'Nonsense,' which would be rude, but my new politeness respectfully inquires how you arrive at such a conclusion."

"You may remember that upon election night he drove alone to the station to meet you."

"It was certainly very good of him, but he was merely interfering with arrangements I had already made."

"Yes; but he knew you were defeated, and he drove you home in the dog-cart so that you might talk or not, just as you wished."

"Oh, if it comes to that, I knew I was defeated too."

"Nevertheless, Lord John, hope revived next morning, and you were certainly stunned by the size of the majority against you."

"I admit that."

"Well, your brother, being a practical man, was under no delusion in the matter. A week before the election day he sent quietly from here to West Derrymore a trusted agent, accustomed to electoral business, with *carte blanche* to have two canvasses made of your division; one by a Liberal, one by a Unionist. The Marquess told me on election day that your organisation was deplorable, and was flattering you with false hope. He wrote down in this room what the majority against you would be, and it came within fifty of the official count."

As the girl talked, Lord John's brow drew down with displeasure at what he heard, but almost instantly his face cleared again, the new Adam once more getting the upper hand.

"I see what you mean, Margaret," he said. "I shall certainly take Rupert into my confidence, and pay attention to what both you and he say. I shall be very amenable. But I hear the footsteps of the servant coming with that telegram, so do get on with your draft of my reply."

Margaret turned to her desk, but it was not a servant who entered. The curtains parted, and the genial face of the Marquess appeared between them.

"I believe the correct phrase is 'I hope I don't intrude.' If I am *de trop*, please send me away ruthlessly."

"Oh, no," cried Margaret, over her shoulder; "you are just the person we want to see. Do come in."

The Marquess entered, showing himself in his most disreputable suit of knickers, which meant "back to the land again," so far as along the highways and over the fields was concerned.

"I was ambitious," continued the Marquess

to Margaret, "of persuading you to come for a walk. There is a friend of mine to whom I should like to introduce you, but from the absorbed manner of you two it would seem that important matters are at hand."

"An affair of State," said Margaret, promptly.

"Really! Is it so serious as that?"

"Yes, and we want your counsel, aid, and goodwill."

"You shall have all three," he responded, cordially.

"Don't make rash promises, Rupert," said his brother. "You know that's a failing of yours. Read this paper, and then we'll give you an opportunity to withdraw your countenance from us if you think we have induced you to pledge your word in ignorance of what I'm letting you in for."

The Marquess read the message, and blew a long whistle of surprise.

"No," he said. "I stand pat. By Jove! John, this is first rate. Dundrugget is one of the safest seats in Scotland."

“How do you know that? A peer has no right to interfere in the affairs of we free and independent electors. What do you know of Dundrugget?”

“Oh, everybody knows that Sir Norval MacKinnel has been returned unopposed twice, so, John, I congratulate you, and, furthermore, I think you’ll make a much better representative than old MacKinnel.”

Margaret looked across at Lord John with a smile on her lips, enjoying his surprise on learning that his brother knew something of a subject on which he himself, most concerned, was totally ignorant.

“Let me begin with the advice at once, John. I ask you to accept this tip from me. Don’t say a word to the mater until the whole thing is over. She never reads the papers, and will learn nothing about it. Remember Jowett’s expression: ‘Never apologise, never explain, get the thing done and let them howl.’ Meanwhile, John, you may draw on me for all the money you want. I suppose I mustn’t

ask you to come with me?" he added to Margaret.

"Not to-day. We have a great deal to do."

"All right. Good-bye, and good luck to you."



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## CHAPTER XXII

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THE Marquess left the Castle and proceeded by the North Gate to the highway. As he walked along in the shade of the forest, a real scorcher, bent like a note of interrogation, met him and whizzed past; but, despite the pace at which he was travelling, the man on the wheel recognised the pedestrian, put on his brakes, stopped a little distance down the road, turned round, and overtook him.

“How do you do, Marquess?” he cried, hopping off his machine.

“Ah! how are you, Mr. Spiker? You went by so quick, covering me with dust, that I didn’t know you.”

“Oh, it’s easy to throw dust in your eyes, Marquess. There’s lots of people doing it. Now, I want a word with you.”

"Sir," said the Marquess, genially, "you cannot have a word, but you can have a blow."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I intend to thrash you within an inch of your life."

"Why?"

"Because I find you anxious to tell what a lady doesn't wish known. I despise that sort of thing, and, therefore, am going to disable you."

"Sure you can do it?" asked the Londoner.

"Quite certain."

"What will you bet?"

"Do you mean we're to fight for money?"

"Certainly. I never do anything except for money. I'll bet you a ten-pound note you can't thrash me, big as you are, and stalwart as you are."

"I don't want to both thrash you and take your money."

"Oh, that's all right. I take the risk, and the drubbing, too, if you can do it. Have you got ten pounds on you?"

"I don't know. I'll see."

The Marquess fished in his pockets, but all he could produce was two sovereigns and a five-pound note, together with some loose silver. The other produced two five-pound notes, which he put back into his pocket again.

"Now," said Mr. Spiker, airily, as if his proposal were the most natural in the world, "as there is no stakeholder, let's place both sums here by the roadside, and put a stone over the paper to keep it from blowing away."

"Very well."

This was done, but while the Marquess was taking off his Norfolk jacket the nimble Spiker scooped up the money, thrust it into his pocket, sprang on his cycle, and fled, shouting over his shoulder a long "Yah!" then the good advice, "'First catch your hare.'"

The Marquess, laughing, put on his jacket again.

"He won the money all right," he said to himself, "for I haven't thrashed him. What an ass I am!"

Amory Tresdale was very pleased to see him, and she laughed heartily when he related to her his adventure with the capable and speedy Mr. Spiker, who now cycles right out of this recital.

"Well," said Amory, "I sent to the author of 'Barbara Deems' a letter describing my position here, telling her how much I admired her book, and also my great desire to see her. She has written me a note, and has promised to come."

"It is a woman, then?"

"The subtle evidence would not convince you. The letter is typewritten throughout, and not signed. She promises to telegraph the day she sets out, and will drive here from the station."

"What was the postmark on her letter?"

"It came from London."

"Amory, you're a wonder! Here, you, a prisoner, have accomplished what all the rest of us failed in."

"Yes, and now my conscience begins to trouble me."

“Oh, mine has troubled me for a long time. I feel like a sneak, and I think the real reason why I wanted to thrash Spiker was merely so that I could get some punishment myself. You will meet her, of course, and then tell me all you honestly can about her.”

“You would not consent to drop in while she is here?”

“You know perfectly well, Amory, that you would not permit it even if I consented.”

“I suppose not,” said Amory, with the deep sigh of a disappointed matchmaker.

The Marquess walked jauntily home, and arrived just in time to dress for dinner. John proved to be in high spirits, and Rupert thought it was on account of his Parliamentary prospects, for during the meal he constantly made allusions to the coming contest, which Rupert understood, but the Marchioness did not. Indeed, she paid very little attention to the conversation that was going on. She had not yet become thoroughly reconciled to her younger son, despite his crushing defeat. In fact, the

defeat added to the unforgiveness of his offence. So great a worshipper of success was she that he could have been forgiven easily had he won, much as she despised the party with which he was affiliated.

At last, to Rupert's dismay, John called out: "Mother, you are not paying attention. A very bright prospect has opened out to me, and I think you should know about it."

"I say, Johnny, my boy," protested Rupert across the table, "you haven't taken wine enough to cause unnecessary garrulity. I hope you haven't been indulging during the afternoon. You should drink fairly, and remember the counsel I gave you before I went for my walk."

"But this is something I think my mother should know, and I propose to tell it. Mother," he cried, "I have determined to become Prime Minister of England."

"Humph!" growled his mother, while Rupert stared across at him in wonder.

"To reach this height of ambition, I propose

to marry the most capable woman I know, and her name is Margaret Elmer."

If a bombshell had dropped upon the table it could not have caused more consternation than this announcement. The Marchioness rose, speechless with anger, and without a word left the room.

A new light seemed to break on the countenance of the Marquess. "Johnny, my boy," he whispered, "do you mean that?"

"I do," replied Lord John, firmly.

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## CHAPTER XXIII

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OF all the inhabitants of Merivale Castle, gentle and simple, the first one up and out of doors next morning was the young Marquess himself. He had spent a dreary, restless night, and arose in a state of deep despondency. He called himself a mean-spirited hound for not responding more cordially to the important announcement his brother had made the evening before. Rupert remembered with what cordiality he congratulated his brother on the constituency offered him, and promised his own cordial support, although John represented a party to whom the Marquess was strongly opposed. Why, then, when his brother later in the same day announced his preference for a young woman whom the Marquess regarded as



in every way worthy of him, did the felicitations which came so readily in one case falter on his lips in the other? The Marquess of Merivale determined to fight the question out with himself, and so departed early on a twenty-mile walk, at the end of which he understood the difficulty somewhat better than when he started.

Another member of the household slept badly, but the same malady produces different effects on different persons, and the Marchioness rose late instead of early. Before falling asleep in the small hours of the morning she had formulated a plan of campaign. When Lord John the previous night had so jauntily proclaimed his matrimonial intentions his mother instantly recognised the seriousness of the situation, and this recognition brought with it such presence of mind that she was enabled, by strenuous force of will, to leave the table without giving expression to the indignation she felt. She knew that any outburst of anger would merely harden her son in his determination, and widen the breach between them. The crisis

required prompt but not premature action. It needed thinking over.

The solution, when it came to her about midnight, was delightfully simple, as, indeed all great plans are. Early in her meditations she discarded any thought of appeal to the young man. He would become stupidly stubborn, and remain so. She must avoid a contest with him until the danger zone was crossed. The Marchioness, quite rightly, surmised that John had not yet spoken to the girl. This gave the elder lady a momentary advantage, for if the honour in reserve for Margaret Elmer was concealed from her, the Marchioness believed that she could deal promptly with her secretary, so long as that secretary believed herself merely a dependent, and not a prospective daughter-in-law.

It was nearing eleven o'clock next day when Margaret sat at her table, surrounded by piles of forbidding-looking books, together with volumes of speeches, pamphlets of the same, and all the raw material from which political ammuni-

tion is manufactured. She looked as little like a young lady with a parcel of books from Mudie's as could be imagined, and was absorbed in making notes from the collection when the Marchioness, with that majestic dignity she knew so well how to assume, bore down upon her like a frigate in full sail upon a trim little yacht. Margaret looked up and smiled a welcome, pushing aside a mass of the controversial debris, and taking up her notebook and pencil, ready to receive any letters Lady Adeline might care to dictate. The great lady, as she slowly took a seat, waved her hand in dismissal of these preparations, then fired the first shot of the battle.

"Miss Elmer, you told me some time ago that you wished to leave my service."

"Yes, my Lady."

"I thereupon made other arrangements."

"Oh, yes."

"Would it be convenient, therefore, for you to take up your position in London to-morrow morning?"

"To-morrow morning!" cried Margaret, look-

ing with some dismay at the scattered sheets on the table. "That means leaving for London this afternoon?"

"There is an excellent train at ten minutes to four," said the Marchioness.

"Well, really," protested Margaret, "this is rather short notice."

"I do not think so. Some time has elapsed since you told me of your intention, and I have been expecting each day that you would take your departure. In half an hour you could pack up what you need immediately, and the rest of your things could be sent on."

"Yes, it is possible, of course, but as a matter of fact, my Lady, I have undertaken certain obligations."

"Obligations? You are perhaps thinking of the promise that you would stay with me until I was suited with another secretary? Well, that need no longer detain you, as I have made my choice."

"So I understood when you first spoke. No, I was not thinking of that. I have given a

promise that will detain me here a few days longer at least."

"A promise to whom?"

Margaret hesitated, and looked down at the floor, while the colour mounted to her cheeks. She remembered the Marquess's warning to Lord John that their mother was not to know of the Dundrugget election, and Margaret was at a loss how to explain her pledge of political assistance to one who supposed that Lord John had done with all such frivolities. Meanwhile, the sharp eyes of the Marchioness, who was rapidly arriving at an erroneous conclusion, growing more and more piercing, seemed to search the very soul of the perplexed girl. This talk of a promise, of an obligation, not to her, but to another whom Margaret apparently dare not mention, accompanied by the downcast eyes and the flushed cheeks, at once overturned the Marchioness's belief that Lord John had not spoken; and now, remembering his unrestrained, impetuous nature, she was amazed at herself for ever supposing he would exercise the least restraint

when once the fancy had taken him. Of course he had proposed, and been accepted. The plan of campaign which Lady Adeline previously outlined for herself went to instant wreck, and an anger, fierce as that which had inflamed her son in the presence of his hecklers, burnt up all counsels of prudence as a wisp of straw is consumed in a barn fire.

“A promise to whom?” she repeated, vehemently.

“To Lord John,” timidly admitted the girl.

“You hussy!” hissed her ladyship, trembling with rage. “You deceitful, sneaking baggage, pretending that butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth! You serpent, that I’ve warmed all these years at my own hearthstone, and now you strike the hand that fed you!”

Margaret’s eyes were no longer half-veiled. They stared with alarm at this stout, passion-trembling, red-faced woman, fearing she had gone demented.

“So Lord John told you to conceal it from me!”

"It—it—it wasn't Lord John," stammered the terrified girl. "The Marquess made the suggestion, and Lord John agreed to say nothing at this time. I regret if any indiscretion of mine has betrayed him."

"You regret! You double-faced creature! Then the Marquess knew of it, although he pretended surprise?"

"Well, since you know all about it, you must be aware it was the Marquess's proposal that nothing should be said until after the event. Both Lord John and I were quite willing you should be informed, but the Marquess thought it would upset you, and, considering the effect it has had, I think he was in the right."

The agitated Marchioness had risen to her feet, and Margaret rose also, her face now as pale as the sheet of paper on which she had been working.

"And when was this marriage to take place, and where, that I was to know nothing of it?"

"Marriage?" echoed Margaret.

"Yes; a runaway match, I suppose, like his grandfather's with the ballet girl."

"My Lady, what are you talking about?" asked Margaret, calmly, her excitement subsiding.

"I am talking of the infatuation of my younger son, who would ruin his career by eloping with a creature like you."

"Oh!" Margaret sat down again. "There has been a mistake, Lady Adeline."

"Yes; a mistake I mean to remedy. I shall not allow such a *mésalliance* to take place."

"My Lady, are you referring to a prospective marriage between Lord John Bethen and myself?"

"You know very well that I am."

"I did not know it, but I begin to understand. Why did you term it a *mésalliance*?"

"Because you, a dependent, a servant in fact if not in name, are no match for my son."

"I am neither a dependent nor a servant, my Lady. For the money I receive, I give value. I am not a dependent, for I can go elsewhere,



and obtain a higher salary than I receive here. I explained that to you on a previous occasion ; but I am quite in agreement with you that such a union as you suggest would be a *mésalliance*. Lord John is not my equal in descent."

"Not your equal, you impudent——"

"No. His great-grandfather, on his mother's side, was a blacksmith. My great-grandfather, on my mother's side, was the Marquess of Merivale. Now, I at once assent that the blacksmith was the more useful man of the two ; but that is not the line you are taking. If Lord John Bethen were to propose marriage to me— which I beg you to believe he has never done, and which, so far as I am aware, he has no thought of doing—I should refuse him."

"You—you—you dare to say that?"

"Yes, madam. I not only say it, but I should adhere to it. Nothing on earth would induce me to marry Lord John Bethen!"

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## CHAPTER XXIV

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THE Marchioness looked her amazement.

“ I don't believe it,” she replied. “ If, however, you mean that, you will leave Merivale at once.”

“ Pardon me, madam, I shall do nothing of the kind.”

“ You refuse?”

“ Yes, I do.”

“ You will put me to the annoyance of bundling you out as I would an impudent cook?”

“ My Lady, you will, of course, act in whatever manner most accords with your own sense of courtesy. It would be strange indeed if you took an action that might bring about the very disaster you are so anxious to prevent.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I believed you intended to resort to force, I should be compelled to appeal to Lord John, for apparently it is through some indiscretion of his that I am involved in this unpleasant discussion. I should make such an appeal to him only as a last resort, but if I did, and if he asked me for a favour in return, I should be very likely to grant it.”

“So that is the course you have outlined for yourself. I might be certain that a scheming hussy like you would concoct some plan to bring about what she wished, and throw the blame on someone else.”

“The blame certainly would rest entirely on your own shoulders if you took the drastic action you threaten.”

“Then why don't you, for a moment at least, pretend to be a lady, and quit a house where you know you are not wanted?”

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure, madam, but if I did you would always think that your driving me away had saved your son from

what you term a *mésalliance*. I shall remain in this house until Lord John proposes to me, if he intends to do so. I shall refuse him, then leave at once for London. It is likely, however, that you are as much mistaken in Lord John's intentions as you have shown yourself to be in mine. What cause have you for stating that your son wishes to marry me?"

"Cause enough. He proclaimed it last night at dinner."

"Did he? Well, of course, it was only an ill-timed and rather ill-mannered joke."

"John never jokes," said the Marchioness, firmly.

"In that case, I do not know what excuse to make for him."

Lady Adeline sat down, still visibly perturbed, but nevertheless beginning to realise that instead of controlling the discussion as she had intended, she had allowed herself to be swept away in its flood. It was still incredible to her that any woman in her senses could refuse her son if he proposed to her, but she had never known

Margaret to tell an untruth. The girl always faced consequences bravely enough when, as had happened on several occasions, a very slight diversion into fiction would have saved her a troublesome half-hour.

“Will you tell me what you meant,” asked her Ladyship, more quietly than she had hitherto spoken, “when you spoke of a promise given to Lord John?”

“Oh, that related merely to his work. I promised to give him what help I could, and you found me engaged at my task. I undertook to read these books, and note down the points I supposed might be of value to him in future. This would have occupied some weeks, but I shall see Lord John at once and tell him it is necessary for me to leave Merivale on the day after to-morrow. I can complete my compilation by taking these books up to London with me.”

“What is the necessity for this work? My son surely does not intend to contest another constituency?”

“ Ah! you must make any further inquiry of him. I am explaining merely what I promised to do. I have no right to discuss his intentions, even if I knew them.”

“ That is all very well, Margaret Elmer; but if your relations with my son John are as innocent as you pretend, why should my son Rupert counsel that they be kept from me?”

“ As I have already stated, Lady Adeline, anything that pertains to either of your sons is for them solely to discuss. Their purposes neither interest nor concern me.”

“ But they concern me,” wailed the Marchioness, her impulsive temper seeming to have oozed away, leaving her almost in a state of collapse. “ If you knew the trouble and anxiety I have suffered through both my sons, you would not be as harsh with me as you are, Margaret.”

“ Dear Lady Adeline, I am not harsh with you. I am merely trying, as best I can, to defend myself. You have said some things to me to-day that are almost unforgivable. I have been what you call a dependent——”

“ Oh, I did not mean that. I should not have said it.”

“ On the contrary, I should not have resented it, for at one time it was true, although it is not true any longer. Circumstances have made me independent, but no matter for that. I have been in this family for some years, and the thing that amazes me is the combined stupidity of the Merivales.”

“ What do you mean? ” demanded the Marchioness, bridleing up again. “ Do you dare to criticise? ”

“ Yes; I am doing it. The second best thing Lord John could do would be to marry me, yet so blinded are you with pride that you cannot see it, and in trying to prevent such an event you take the very method that is most likely to bring it about.”

“ The second best thing? What, then, is the first? ”

“ Why, not to marry me,” said Margaret, with a little laugh. She had now completely recovered her composure. “ But if you want to

know, I will tell you. You arrogate to yourself the right to nominate who Lord John shall or shall not marry."

"A mother must do everything in her power to see that her son forms a suitable union."

"Certainly. But the point I wished to make was this. During the period of tribulation through which Lord John has passed, never a word of sympathy has he received from you, and when in despair he came home and asked for a thousand pounds it was refused."

"He got it from you."

"Yes; and where was the pride of the Merivale family that allowed him to be subsidised by a servant?"

"Now, Margaret, that is unkind. I have already withdrawn the terms 'servant' and 'dependent.' But if you insist upon them, tell me how one in service came to have in her possession so considerable a sum as a thousand pounds."

"Marchioness, I have already confessed to



you that I am independent. How I became so I shall tell you the day after to-morrow, when I finally leave this house. But it is about the Merivale family, as it is going on, that I wish to speak, and my right to do so is that I am a distant connection of the family, and am interested in its welfare. In the first place, Lord John has as much right to be a Liberal as the Marquess has to be a Conservative. I think a family should stand together. I think Lord John should not have been deserted as he was in the recent contest, and this brings me to the proper marriage for Lord John. He should propose to Lady Dorothy Sinclair, who possesses eight thousand pounds a year in her own right."

"You are a madwoman. I intend that Lady Dorothy Sinclair shall marry my elder son, Rupert."

"Of course you do, and there, again, Lady Adeline, you are blind. I have been an interested looker-on at your parties and assemblages here, and I tell you that Lady Dorothy is in love with your younger son, and would not

accept the Marquess of Merivale if he made her an offer of marriage."

"No woman in England would refuse the Marquess of Merivale."

"Dozens of them. Don't you realise what it was that first aroused Lady Dorothy's interest in Lord John? She comes of an old Scottish Liberal family. Her brother is Chairman of Committee, and chief man in the Dundrugget division, where Lady Dorothy's home is situated. She knew that Lord John, quite unsupported by his own family, braved them all, and fought, single-handed, a forlorn hope in West Derrymore. She must have read the eulogies of this young man that have appeared in the newspapers of both parties in England and Scotland, and although I saw, last time she was here, that her interest in Lord John was intense enough, it is surely greatly augmented by this time."

"But this is all merely surmise on your part," said the Marchioness, loath to abandon those predilections she had cherished so long.

“Not altogether surmise,” resumed Margaret. “Lady Dorothy was always very friendly with me. When you sent an invitation to your proposed house-party you may remember that your first letter went off in the morning, and was soon followed by a withdrawal.”

“Yes; Rupert threatened to go to Switzerland.”

“The Marquess is shrewd enough to see how the land lies, although he says nothing.”

“Bless my soul!” cried the Marchioness, impatiently, recollection suddenly coming to her. “He told me at the time it was useless to invite Lady Dorothy Sinclair, as John could not leave his electioneering.”

“I have always believed that the Marquess was cognisant of her preference for Lord John.”

“But that is so absurd; so unreasonable. John is nothing, while the elder son is everything.”

“Women are unreasonable sometimes, whether they are ladies of high degree or dairymaids. What I was about to say is this,

that after your first letter reached Lady Dorothy she wrote privately to me, asking whether or not Lord John would be present, and saying quite frankly that if not she would decline your invitation."

"You amaze me," cried the Marchioness—"and all this has been going on before my very eyes."

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## CHAPTER XXV

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FOR the moment Lady Adeline forgot she was a Marchioness, and became merely an old woman, listening to gossip about events that interested her.

“Now,” Margaret went on, “I will tell you what the Marquess wished concealed from you. *I* gave him no promise of silence. If you use this knowledge to increase the chasm between your sons and yourself I shall regret that I told you, and you will be sorry yourself later on. I said a while ago that this was none of my affair, and advised you to ask your sons if you wished to know more about it, but I am quite sure you would not learn the facts by that course of action. Yet I think you should know, because your strong common sense, if given a chance,

will enable you to deal judiciously with the circumstances, and I am certain you will succeed if you do not adopt that method with your sons which you have tried with me. Yesterday Lord John had the honour of being very cordially invited to accept the Liberal nomination for Dundrugget, in Scotland. Here is the telegram."

The Marchioness adjusted her glasses, and read it with care.

"Yes," she said at last, "he has reason to be proud of such an invitation. Why should he wish to conceal this from me?"

"The Marquess, who is a man of peace, thought it best that you should not know until after the contest. He imagined, I suppose, that the news would disturb you because you had been so strongly opposed to Lord John's former attempt to enter Parliament."

"I should not like to see him defeated again."

"He will not be defeated this time. He is quite sure of election at Dundrugget. Now I come to a matter that may interest you, but

which is quite unsuspected by either the Marquess or Lord John. Lord John thinks he has received this invitation from Scotland because of the contest he fought at West Derrymore, and on account of a letter he wrote after his defeat. The telegram which came yesterday bears this out, but, if you notice, that telegram was signed by Lady Dorothy Sinclair's brother, who is Chairman of the Liberal Committee in Dundrugget. Sinclair House is in Dundrugget, and the Sinclairs would know, before it was announced to the rest of the world, that there was to be a vacancy in the division. Now, here is surmise if you like. I believe that Lady Dorothy asked her brother to nominate Lord John, and it is likely that his Lordship will receive an invitation to stay at Sinclair House during the contest. Lady Dorothy, as she has always done, will take an active interest in the candidate, and I anticipate that before long the announcement of her engagement to your son will appear in the paper, so Lady Dorothy will be your daughter-in-law after all."

For a long time the two women sat in silence, the Marchioness pondering on what had been said to her, readjusting her views of events. Her strong, deeply-lined face took on an unaccustomed expression of pathos. In her long, forceful life she had bent people and circumstances to her will, but now she had come to see that the earth is the heritage of the young, and, from the way the reins were slipping out of her hands into the possession of others, realised at last that she was growing old. Her power was departing from her.

Finally she breathed a deep sigh, and turned to the girl a face that seemed years older than when she entered the room, but despite its age the face was redeemed by an unaccustomed look—a look almost of kindness. What she was about to say the girl never knew, for they were interrupted by the entrance of Lord John, who held an open letter in his hand.

“Hallo, mother,” he cried, jauntily; “this political life I have been leading has taught me the bad habit of late rising. By the way, I find



I must leave for Scotland to-morrow; short visit; unexpected business in the North."

His mother made no reply, but Margaret rose and extended her hand.

"In that case, Lord John, I must bid you good-bye."

"Good-bye? Oh, I shan't be long away; not more than a week."

"Yes, but as I am leaving for London the day after to-morrow I shall not see you on your return."

"Leaving for London? What nonsense is this? You must not leave for London or anywhere else. How about those speeches you were to write out?"

"Oh, I can attend to them quite as well in London as at Merivale Castle. I shall take all these books with me, and will send the manuscript to you from London."

"But, my dear girl, I must consult with you now and then; often, indeed. This sudden determination on your part is quite absurd. I can't get along without you."

He had taken her proffered hand, and now placed his left over her right. He had completely forgotten the presence of his mother, and the grim old woman sat there like a statue.

“It is very good of you to pay me such a genuine compliment, Lord John, but I accepted a situation in London some time ago, and must now get to my new duties. Indeed, I intended to leave before this, but I thought I might be of some assistance to you in the business you had on hand, and I am glad to know, by your cordiality, that my efforts have not been without avail.”

“Without avail! I should think not! Why, my dear, I should have been ruined politically if it had not been for you. I tell you, I can't get along without you. If you assist me I shall be Prime Minister of England some time, but I can't do it on my own. Margaret, you must marry me.”

“Oh, no, no, Lord John. That is absurd. Besides, I am a selfish person, and have my own career to look after.”

“The proper career of a woman is to——”

Margaret laughed a little. “Yes, I know all about that. It is to look after a husband, but my own ambitions point in another direction. You are no more in love with me, Lord John, than I am with you, so let’s dismiss the subject, after I have acknowledged that you do me very great honour in making the proposal you did.”

Lord John dropped her hand, and gazed at her in stupefied amazement and incredulity. He looked marvellously like his mother as he stood there.

“You mean to say that you will refuse me?”

“My dear Lord John, I have already done so. Please do not look cross, for it is only your pride and not your heart that is injured, and do wish me good luck, because I am off to London, as I told you, the day after to-morrow.”

Both were rather startled when the Marchioness spoke in her deep, decisive, still domineering voice.

“No, Margaret, I cannot allow you to go,” she said.

Rarely was the Marquess late for dinner, and never before had he missed that important meal altogether, without sending a message that he would be detained, but it was after ten o'clock that night when he arrived at the Castle, dusty, footsore, and dog-tired. He found a cold supper awaiting him in the dining-room, and while he was refreshing himself his mother came in, and sat down at the opposite side of the table.

"Where have you been all day, Rupert?" she asked him; and the query was put in a tone so subdued and almost apologetic that he looked across at her in surprise.

"I'm very sorry," he said, "but I forgot to send you a telegram when I had the opportunity, and when I remembered it I was miles away from any post office. I hope you did not wait dinner for me?"

"No," she replied. "Indeed, John and I partook of dinner a little earlier than usual. He left on the night train for Scotland."

"The deuce he did! What is that for?"

"He received an invitation from the Sinclairs

this morning, and has gone to their house in the Highlands."

"Really! That's very odd. He must have made up his mind in a hurry. I am sure he had no intention of doing this when I saw him last."

"It seems," his mother went on, quietly, "that the Sinclairs live in the constituency of Dundrugget. Lady Dorothy's brother is chief of the clan there, as one may say, and a strong Liberal. There is to be a vacancy in Dundrugget soon, and John has been invited to stand. The Sinclairs are anxious he should become acquainted with the inhabitants of the division as soon as possible."

"They are quite right," said the Marquess, who jumped at once to the conclusion that John had confided in his mother, despite the advice and warning received. Apparently, however, the disclosure did not harm, and that was something to be thankful for.

"So John is going to travel all night! What an energetic fellow he is! He puts my indo-

lence quite to shame. I hope he started off in good spirits?"

"Yes, he did."

"With his mother's blessing?"

"Yes."

"Then you and John have come to an understanding, and I am very glad to hear it. There was another matter, even more important than the Dundrugget election. Are you at one on that subject also?"

"You mean about Margaret Elmer? That, too, is settled. John proposed to her to-day, and much to his surprise, and, I confess, to my own, was refused."

Rupert put down his knife and fork and looked across at his mother, as if he also found it difficult to credit the intelligence.

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## CHAPTER XXVI

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"JOHN refused?" Rupert echoed his mother's words.

"Yes. I do not know what to make of the present-day girl, and this nonsensical talk of careers. As if any career was so suitable for an unprotected young woman as a marriage far beyond her deserts."

"Oh, if you are talking of Margaret, mother, it would perhaps not be so easy as you think for such a girl to get her deserts in the marriage market. I hold a very high opinion of Miss Elmer."

"So do I, so do I," replied his mother, hastily. "By the way, she insists on leaving us the day after to-morrow. I have asked her to stop, even commanded her; but she is quite as stubborn as

everyone else with whom I am connected. John tried persuasion, but without success. I wish in the morning you would show her that what has happened need not affect her position here in the least. We all respect and value her; and indeed it would grieve me greatly if she went away. I feel old, and rather discouraged."

"Nonsense, mother; you are in the very prime of life."

The Marchioness shook her head sadly. "All my former energy and courage seem to have departed, and I am afraid of making mistakes. I should not get at cross-purposes with my sons, as has been the case recently."

"If you mean John's political furore, remember I was quite as much against him as you were. You must not imagine, mother, that anything could alienate from you the affection of your sons."

"I hope such is the case, Rupert; nevertheless, I have become somewhat shaken in my belief in the infallibility of my judgment. I should like Margaret to remain with me, for she



seems to take a very clear view of things, and more and more, as time goes on, I shall need her assistance, so I hope you will succeed where John and I have failed, and persuade her not to leave Merivale."

"I will do my best," said the Marquess.

Next morning Rupert was pacing up and down the long terrace that fronted Merivale Castle, gazing now and then at the beautiful outlook down to the river and across to the distant hills. He was arranging in his own mind the course of procedure for the day. Anxious to commit no error, and following the example of his mother, he thought it best to arrange his forces beforehand. While he was formulating in his own mind the method of attack, the person to be conquered appeared on the terrace, and instantly all his carefully-docketed thoughts departed from him.

Margaret was arrayed in walking costume, and never had he seen her look more charming.

"Oh, my Lord Marquess, it is here you are! I have been searching for you everywhere. I

looked for you yesterday afternoon, but no one could tell me where you had gone."

"I went for a very long walk; indeed, I was enacting the rôle of Prodigal Son, and lived on husks all day."

"Oh, then perhaps you are too tired to take to the road again?"

"Not a bit of it, Margaret. I never felt more fit."

"Then I am fortunate. The day before yesterday, when you wished me to go for a walk with you, I was so busy with Lord John's important concerns that I could not spare the time. You heard of his visit to Scotland, I suppose?"

"Yes; mother told me last night. Doubtless John thinks that where politics are concerned, a stitch in time saves nine."

"Oh, he will meet great good fortune in that division, and I, for one, am very happy about it. You wished me to see your invalid friend, did you not?"

"Yes; it was my intention to stroll out to the

cottage with you whenever you were in the mood Am I to enjoy the pleasure of escorting you there this morning?"

"Yes; if you have no other appointment."

"Even if I had, it should go by the board. Wait just a second, Margaret, until I get a cap and a stick." When he returned equipped, he said to her: "Instead of trudging along the dusty high road, will you trust my guidance through the forest? There are paths all the way, more or less indirect, nevertheless shady, and, to my mind, very beautiful."

"I daresay I have explored most of them before now," said Margaret. "I don't think there are many parts of this estate with which I am unacquainted. Oh dear me," she sighed, "blessings brighten as they take their flight. I am afraid Hyde Park or Kensington Gardens will never take the place of Merivale Woods in my affections."

"They shall never have the opportunity of trying to do such a thing if I can help it. I dislike seeing old friends ousted by new, even

where the old friends are trees and paths and hills and dales."

They were already in the depths of the glade. She looked up at him.

"I must go to London to-morrow," she said.

"You are ignoring the dungeon. You're forgetting the bread-and-water. When you found me on the terrace a few moments ago, I was wondering what was the latest fashion in thumb-screws, and where they are to be obtained. I suppose every respectable iron-monger stocks them."

"I always said you were mediæval, but, then, your great drawback is kindheartedness. At my first shriek, as your minions began turning the screws, you would relent, and conduct me most politely to the London train."

"Margaret, I have heard you say things that mark you out as being a person of subtle perception and deep knowledge of human moods. When did you first discover that I was in love with you?"

Margaret stopped for a moment, then went on

again. "Such a question, my Lord Marquess," she said at last, "rather takes one's breath away. To begin at the beginning——"

"Yes, at the beginning," interrupted Rupert. "When did it begin?"

"To begin at the beginning," Margaret repeated, having, as it were, got herself in hand again, "I must disclaim those fine qualities you attribute to me. I fear that my outlook upon life, and upon human motives, is distinctly commonplace. I am gifted with little of the fine feminine intuition about which I have read so much. As to your ever being in love with me, such a contingency is absurd."

"Why?"

"For one thing, because you are so accustomed to me. I have been a member of the Merivale household for some years now, and although they say that propinquity is one of the strongest forces that bring a man and a woman together, I always doubted it. I fancy that when you fall in love it will be suddenly, and with one who hitherto had been a stranger to you."

"Again I ask why?"

"Because your analytical mind leads you to examine closely. The close examination reveals flaws, and as you have previously handicapped yourself by several quite impracticable conditions, you will either never fall in love at all, or will be swept suddenly off your feet, conditions and all, and captured before you are aware of it."

"What are some of those impracticable conditions?"

"One is that the lady shall not know your position in society; another that she shall be ignorant of your wealth. Now a woman—that is, a woman worth marrying—who consented to become the wife of a man surrounded by mystery would be a very foolish person."

"She might be carried away by a passion for me. That is always possible, if not probable."

"True; but you have set a very high standard for the woman. She must be ideal, and if she is, she would not be so carried away."

“ Well, Margaret, it cheers me to hear you say that.”

“ What particular thing have I said that cheers you?”

“ You say that when I fall in love, my conditions will go by the board. This has happened in your case; therefore, I am encouraged.”

“ I don't quite understand.”

“ I have often discussed with you the correct method of setting about finding the Ideal Woman, and it seemed to me then, fool that I was, that those conditions you mention were necessary. She should know me, but not my financial standing, for instance. However, now that I am proposing to you, these conditions seem trivial. I am ashamed that I ever considered them, and yet I look back with deep delight to all those talks we have had together.”

“ Am I to regard this as a proposal then?”

“ I should be delighted if you would, and if I fail to put it in the proper form, please give me a hint or two. Oh, I'm like the Bruntons. All I wish for now is success, and I am ready to beg

assistance in the most abject manner. I was thinking about it all day yesterday."

"So long ago as that?"

"Ah, well, now you mention it, I am quite sure that I fell in love with you ages ago; that is the reason I asked you if you knew just when. But yesterday certain circumstances suddenly brought the whole question to a focus. Do you know to what I compared myself?"

"I haven't the least idea," said Margaret, with a nervous little laugh.

"To a Kaffir."

"Why? Because his possessions secure him his wives?"

"No. I was thinking of one particular Kaffir; the chap who first found the great Kimberley diamond, possessed it six months or more, and never once suspected its value."

"Am I the diamond in this instance?"

"If I'm allowed to mix up my similes a bit—and a man in an agitated frame of mind must be permitted some latitude—I should call you the pearl of great price. Margaret, in spite of



our being in the woods, we will not beat about the bush any longer. So far from wishing all knowledge of my possessions concealed from you, I am delighted that you know what they are, so that they may in a measure make up for the deficiencies of their owner; the premium, as it were, that induces a subscriber to take in a worthless penny paper. I am conceited enough to believe, however, that I can make you very happy, and I give you my word that I shall try, if you will look upon me with favour. Margaret, what do you say?"

She walked along for some time in silence by his side, then she said: "I like you very much indeed—I believe that I am in love with you, but I am not quite sure. It is on your account, and not on my own, that I hesitate to give you a definite answer at once. May I think it over until we reach this spot on our return? That won't be very long."

To this, of course, he readily assented, and they walked on together under the trees, neither saying very much, until they came out at the

clearing with the tinkling fountain sparkling in the sunlight.

Margaret was delighted with the beauty and the seclusion of the place. Together they entered the cottage, and the girl speedily found herself more charmed with its invalid inmate than she could have believed possible, for she had often been disappointed at meeting the friends of other people after hearing many eulogies in their favour.

Margaret sat down close to the head of the bed, while Rupert flung himself into his accustomed armchair, where he could see and hear both of the women. Very soon Amory had taken Margaret's hand, and all three chatted together like old friends met after a long parting. Nevertheless, Amory, always sensitive, felt some constraint in the air, and Margaret herself was conscious of a slight embarrassment which she could not shake off. At last she rose to go, but before saying good-bye took a folded paper from the little bag that hung at her wrist and laid it on the coverlet before Mrs. Tresdale, saying

with a smile: "I promised to telegraph, but you see I have come without doing so."

Amory's eyes opened wide as she recognised her own handwriting on the sheet.

"Then—then you—you are the author of 'Barbara Deems'?"

"Yes."

"You clever, clever woman," said Amory, taking her in her arms. "You have no idea how delighted I am to know you."

When the two left the cottage on their return, Margaret said: "This will explain to you all my unaccountable actions for some time past. The energetic Mr. Spiker was discharged from the publisher's office, but knowing me to be the author of the book you had inquired about—your letter passed through his hands—he tried to tell you about it, and I wished to prevent him doing so. My book explains also the thousand pounds I gave to Lord John, for 'Barbara Deems' has made me a great deal of money. It is the cause, too, of my situation in London. The publishers have offered me very generous

terms to join them in the capacity of reader and adviser."

"Then Spiker was the man who annoyed you that morning when my mother wished to know the whys and wherefores of things?"

"Yes. The writing of the book, however, was something I knew the Marchioness would never forgive, so I accepted the situation in London."

"But you will now write and decline the position? You see, I am encouraged to believe you will marry me, after all."

She looked up at him with a smile. "That will depend. I cannot marry you unless your mother consents to welcome me as a daughter."

"Oh, that's all right," cried the Marquess. "I promised my mother last night, at her earnest insistence, to do my best to prevent you leaving us. I have done my best, Margaret, and, having succeeded, the good lady cannot possibly object."

THE END

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