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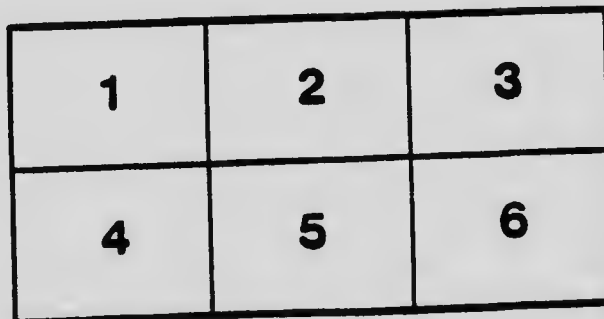
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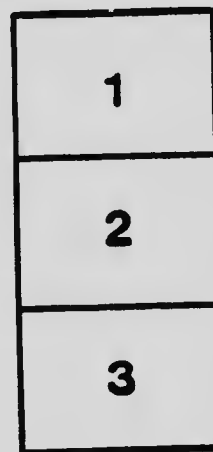
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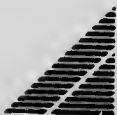
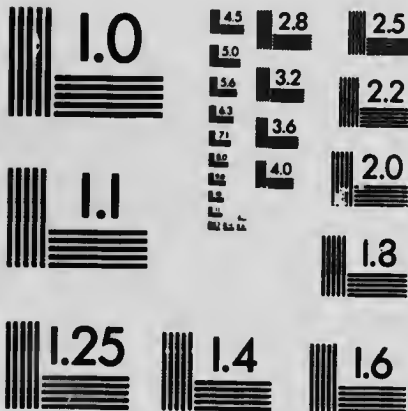
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**THE OTHER GIRL**



# THE OTHER GIRL

By

CHARLES GARVICE

TORONTO

THE MUSSON BOOK COMPANY, LIMITED

LONDON: HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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## NOTE TO THE INCRECULOUS

ONE is almost ashamed to remind the reader of the hackneyed truism, that 'Truth is stranger than Fiction'; but I feel compelled to do so, because I expect that some of those who may honour me by a perusal of the following pages will be disposed to accuse me of constructing a wildly improbable, not to say impossible, plot. But, as usual, the humble novelist has not only refrained from going beyond the region of fact and actual occurrence, but kept well within the boundary. The plot of this novel was suggested by a news paragraph which appeared in *The Evening News* of June 20, 1906. I will set down the report—which, of course, suppresses the names of persons and places—and, in doing so, I may assure the reader that I am not giving away the story of the novel; for my plot, though suggested by an extraordinary case of resemblance in real life, differs considerably from the true story, and does not demand so great an effort at credence on the part of the reader as does the actual occurrence which gave me the idea. Here is the case:—

'In 1889 a struggling young clerk, who is now a wealthy Parisian merchant, married a young woman of great beauty. A few months after the marriage she eloped with another man, but in April last she

reappeared and begged her husband's forgiveness. He decided to take her back.

'Subsequent inquiries have shown, however, that the woman whom the merchant has taken for his penitent wife is in reality her younger sister, who bears a striking resemblance to her, and who, acting on the suggestion of her elder sister, posed as the wife because she knew the merchant had acquired wealth.

'The merchant, however, has grown so fond of the "impostor" that he intends seeking a divorce from his real wife in order that he may marry her sister.'

I venture respectfully to submit that modest Fiction again is out-Heroded by the unblushing audacity of Truth.



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## CHAPTER I

### KITTIE

**K**IT! Kit—tie! Where are you?!

Kittie Norton's father opened the door of the sitting-room, and called down the stairs. After he had shouted for about half a dozen times, a clear, shrill voice, singularly musical for all its shrillness, floated up in the response from the room below.

'I'm here What is it, father?' cried the voice in a tone of good-tempered impatience.

Mr. Norton leant over the balusters, and, in a lower tone, said coaxingly—

'Run round to Bloggs's, the grocer's, will you, Kit; and get a bottle of Scotch—Prime Old Glenlivet, as usual: you know?'

'Yes; I know,' came up the young voice. 'But another one already!'

'Sure and there's six of us!' retorted Mr. Norton with just indignation. 'Be sharp now, there's a good girl!'

Norton went back to the room. He was a middle-aged man, tall, well made, and handsome; one of those men who look younger than their years. With his florid, nearly always smiling face, his bo' eyes nearly always twinkling with a sense of humour, his dyed but plentiful hair, his not ungraceful form—he still kept a waist—and his full, round, genial voice, which now and then had a touch of the Irish brogue in it, Mr. Norton—he called himself De Courcy Norton—was what used to be known as 'a fine, handsome figure of a man.' His face was more flushed than usual to-

night ; for he had a party on ; and the whisky had circulated freely, as Miss Kittie had remarked.

The room, of the usual size—not by any means large—of the small houses to be found in that portion of Chelsea which likes to call itself Kensington, was dense with tobacco smoke, and odorous with the fumes of hot toddy. Seated round the table were five guests each one of them as flushed as the host, and all of them evidently enjoying themselves amazingly. They were as varied in appearance as five different persons always must be ; but there was a peculiar likeness of tone to each other ; for they belonged to that now almost extinct race—the London Bohemian.

There was Teddy Wilson, who wrote the sensational reports for the *Daily Telephone* ; next him was a carelessly dressed man, who did the Men's Fashion column for *High Life* ; there was little Bickers, the dramatic critic, who wrote one-act farces, which were not always produced ; there was Percy Vilorne—whose real name was Jones—who supplied musicians with verses so full of tender sentiment and thrilling passion that they drew tears from drawing-room audiences : he was a fat man with a bald head ; and there was Herbert Mandeville, fifth-rate actor, at present out of an engagement—I should say, 'resting.'

Norton was as Bohemian as the rest ; but he was differentiated from the others by a certain refinement in his manner and voice, which his companions acknowledged by bestowing on him the nickname of the Dook ; they were aware that he was of a higher social position than themselves, though Norton never hinted at the fact nor ever gave himself the airs of one who had seen better days.

As the phrase goes, he was a person 'of varied experiences,' and a really gifted man. He had a ready and a fluent pen ; could write better farces than Bickers, and could play in them ; he could knock off a set of verses as full of tender sentiment as those of

Percy Vilorne ; and, what is more, could supply the accompaniment to them, and sing them ; for he had a beautiful voice, the echo of which had just now come up from Kitty. There was scarcely anything he could not do, and one would have thought that with such varied accomplishments he would have been prosperous ; but the man came of a reckless, improvident race ; he scarcely ever had a shilling in his pocket, was always in debt, and, in consequence, frequently compelled to 'shoot the moon'—that is, remove just before the rent was due, and dodge his creditors. Of his past history he never spoke ; for him sufficient for the day was the evil—and the pleasure—thereof ; and it only wanted the smallest slice of luck to make him jolly and happy and full of generous impulses.

At such a party as the present one, with himself as host, De Courcy Norton was at his best ; no one could tell a better story, no one of them could sing a lither or more tuneful song ; he was the soul of the gathering, full of the genial emotion in which his race is so rich, and as hospitable as the Arab. As he sank into his seat and refilled his pipe, Bickers said—

'Touching the whisky, Dook ?'

'It's all right,' said Norton, with a nod and a laugh and a twinkle in his eyes. 'Kit's gone round to Bloggs for it ; she'll bring it sure enough ; for Bloggs is a confiding soul, and I'm not in his bad books—as yet. I've promised to stand godfather to his last baby. It will be here directly—it's not the baby I mean, it's the whisky : Kit's gone after it.'

'Miss Kitty is growing up into a woman,' said Vilorne. 'She quite startled me when I met her as I came in just now. I hadn't seen her for some time. She will make you look old at last, Dook, if you don't take care.'

'Yes ; Miss Kitty is growing up now,' said Wilson, 'and it seems only the other day she was running around all legs and wings.'

Kitty's father nodded, as one acknowledging a com-

pliment ; but he did not encourage the subject ; for with all his Bohemianism, and notwithstanding that he had neglected his duty towards her, he exacted a respectful treatment of her from others ; for instance, no one of his boon companions and fellow-Bohemians would have dared to speak of her without the prefix of 'Miss.'

'Kit's all right,' he said. 'Pass the cards, Bickers ; it's my deal. I'm going nap this time, so get your pennies ready.'

Meanwhile, Kittie had laid aside the skirt she was making, and had slipped on her hat and jacket. She was a slip of a girl, tall for her age—she was in the last of her teens—and lithe and graceful. One might say with truth that she was singularly beautiful, with a girlish beauty which promised an actual loveliness later on. Her face was of the Irish type, the charm and fascination of which lies not only in its expression, but in its contrasting features.

For instance, her face, rather thin now, because she was growing so fast, was almost a pure oval, would have been quite pure but for the sharpening of the delicate chin, which indicated intelligence and wit, and the slight broadening of the cheekbones, which denoted strength of character and the audacity which revealed itself in the grey-blue eyes. Quite wonderful eyes they were, and capable of expressing the whole gamut of emotions ; one moment they were dancing with mirth, at another they would be dark and humid with tenderness, and before you had got over the charm of this, they would be brilliant with intelligence, with the keen sense of humour which was Kittie's birth-right ; but through it all, the audacity seemed to shine as if it were always lying dormant and ready to spring out, as a wild cat springs from the jungle.

She sang softly to herself as she put on her outdoor things before the cheap looking-glass ; for Kittie was usually as happy as a young colt frolicking in a spring

meadow; and, indeed, she very much resembled a young colt in her freedom of movement, her scorn of conventionalities, her ignorance of the restraining bit and the pressing load of life.

She had inherited her father's voice, his sunny, mercurial disposition; and with her also sufficient for the day was the evil and the pleasure thereof. She was her father's child in every sense of the word, for her mother had died when she was a baby. Her father never spoke to her of his past, and Kittie was in careless ignorance of her family history—careless, because she never gave the matter a thought; neither the past nor the present troubled her, nor did the future. Living from hand to mouth, running into debt, bolting just before quarter day were as natural to Kittie as respectability, a settled position, plenty of dresses and a liberal allowance are to other girls more fortunately placed.

She ran down the stair, with its threadbare carpet and hideous imitation marble paper, and, opening the door—the key was on her finger—she ran against an old man who was just about to knock. He was a tall, thin man with a close-shaven face wrinkled like a railway map; his eyes shone and glittered under thick lids, his thick hair was snowy white, but his eyebrows were jet black. In the shape of his nose, slightly hooked, and in the curve of his lips—in fact, in his features and expression, there were those unmistakable indications of the Jew which mark out one of that ancient and gifted race from all others. A Jew is always a Jew, and looks it though he clothe himself in broadcloth and call himself John Smith, or wear a kilt and take to himself the name of Rob Roy MacGregor. It is as if Fate had said to him, 'A Jew thou art, a Jew thou shalt remain; and yea, all men shall know it.'

'You made me jump, Mr. Levison!' cried Kittie with a laugh as she made way for him.

'Is your father in?' he asked.

'Yes; he's upstairs,' she replied, her eyes twink-

ling. 'It's a party—the usual lot. They're having a good time—songs and stories and nap. They've ran out of whisky, and I'm going for some.'

Consciously or unconsciously she mimicked her father's voice, imitated his very manner: she was a wonderful mimic, and could never tell a story, however short, never relate anything or speak of any one she had seen, without imitating the persons and acting the incident.

Levison watched her from under his heavy lids, and acknowledged her mimicry with a slight nod of approval and as faint a smile of admiration.

'I'll go for the whisky, Miss Kittie,' he said. 'You're getting too big a girl to run on errands—of that sort. Yes. Where do you get it?'

'At Bloggs's,' said Kittie; 'and if he looks as if he wouldn't give it to you—we must be running a decent bill there—ask after the baby; you'll get it then.'

She went back to her room, singing, and took up the skirt again. Presently she heard the door open—she had given Levison the key—and his step on the stairs; and she called to him through the open door of her room, her mouth full of pins—

'Take it up to them, Mr. Levison; I'm sure they will be glad to see you.'

Levison hesitated a moment; then he said in his low voice, which had just a faint touch of the Semitic, nasal twang—

'I don't think I'll go up, Miss Kitty; I wanted to have a quiet chat with your father. I'll wait here.' He took a chair in a corner of the little room, in which Norton wrote and Kittie did her needlework, as could be plainly seen by the plain deal table, splattered with ink-stains, and the litter of dress material, the sewing-machine, and other feminine requisites.

The chair was in quite the corner of the room, but Mr. Levison seated himself on it without bringing it



forward, and sat with that statuesque air of patience, of serene immobility, to which only the Jew can attain.

Kittie ran upstairs with the bottle, and her appearance was received with a shout of welcome, at once respectful and affectionate. She waved the bottle round her head, then planked it on the table in front of her father, and stood with her hands upon her hips, looking, with a smile, from face to face.

'Hebe herself!' said Vilorne. 'Hebe bringing nectar to the gods in Olympus. Miss Kittie, we are everlastingly grateful to you. There is only one other thing you could do to make us perfectly happy.—Dook, may we ask Miss Kittie to be so gracious as to sing us a song, just one song, now she's here?'

The toddy was telling upon him or he would not have ventured to make the request. Norton frowned slightly, and shook his head; but Kittie still continued to smile, and, slipping her arm round her father's neck, said coaxingly—

'Let me, Dad. I'd like to sing to them: they all look so happy.'

'Oh, well,' he said with a shrug of his shoulders. 'Only one song, mind! This is a bachelor party; and it's no place for you, Kit.'

She stood by his chair, laughingly beat back the volumes of smoke from before her face, and began to sing; and presently her father's face relaxed with a smile of fond pride, and he beat time with his long pipe; the others listened in silence to the sweet, clear, confident voice, the voice of the born artist; then, when the song was finished, burst into rapturous applause, with cries of 'Encore!' but Kittie shook her head, crossed her hands on her bosom, swept them a curtsy, and, pausing at the door to cry, 'No, no; only one; 'twas a bargain!' ran out of the room.

The party was not a late one; for the journalists had to get back to their newspaper work; and presently they trooped away, shouting 'Good-night' to

## THE OTHER GIRL

Norton, as he leant over the balusters, waving farewell with his pipe; then he went back to the room, and Levison came up.

The Dook was in the happiest frame of mind, nicely charged with toddy, and soothed by unlimited tobacco; perhaps Mr. Levison had waited for this auspicious condition: he was a Jew, be it remembered.

'Hullo, Levison!' exclaimed Norton. 'Where did you spring from? Why didn't you come up before? Been chatting with Kittie downstairs, eh? Have some toddy? By jingo, it's all gone! I'll send for some more.'

'No, no,' said Levison with a wave of his hand. He took out a gold cigarette case, lit a cigarette, and smoked it deliberately: all his movements were deliberate.

'Yes; I've been chatting with Miss Kittie,' he said; 'it is always a pleasure to do that. She is like that woman Voltaire speaks of, who couldn't ask you to pass the salt without being interesting. She is a born actress. She sang that song just now with a sense of balance and a truth of expression which only an artist could arrive at.'

Norton listened and nodded; but he looked rather uneasy, and eyed Levison with a touch of suspicion; and at the word 'actress' he shifted uneasily and frowned. Levison regarded his cigarette intently, and went on in the slow, deliberate way of the Jew who is too astute to reveal his eagerness.

'I dined with Pockett, the manager of the Folly, you know——'

'I've known Pockett for years,' said Norton with increasing impatience.

He is very anxious to get some new blood; of course a man who is running three theatres always is on the look-out for new people. Pockett is a liberal man; he would give splendid terms to a girl—a young lady—who is at all promising; he'd pay a fair salary

at the beginning, and, of course, increase it. A splendid chance for a clever young girl, Norton; say—like Miss Kittie.'

'I dare say,' said Norton, with a kind of grunt and a more decided frown.

Levison knocked the ash off his cigarette, and looked at his well-made boots; he was always well dressed and in an inconspicuous fashion.

'Miss Kittie would make a great success on the stage; I am quite certain of that; and I thought you would like to know that Pockett would take her.'

'I dare say,' said Norton in a low voice; 'but I don't like the idea. Don't I know what the stage is?'

Levison shrugged his shoulders. 'It's like most things, my dear Norton; not nearly so black as it's painted. It is not what it was; it has changed, improved, very much of recent years. You must admit that.'

'Do you think you can tell me anything about it?' demanded Norton irritably. 'Haven't I been there? I hate it; and I have reason to hate it. It's bad enough for men, it is unwholesome enough for them—the excitement, the late hours, the devil-may-care nature it breeds in the best of them. Go to the men at the top of the tree in the profession; they'd agree with me. Why, there's Walton—he's always regretting, and bitterly, that he isn't a barrister, a doctor, anything but a famous actor; and he makes five thousand a year, and is run after by Society with a capital S. But the women—especially those who are not at the top of the tree! It's a dog's life for them.'

'Not for all,' said Levison quietly. 'Of course where a girl is amply provided for——' He paused significantly. 'If anything happened to you, for instance, Norton—we are all of us mortal—what would—become of Miss Kittie?'

Norton rose suddenly and began to pace the room;

he was much agitated. Presently he swung round upon Levison.

'I tell you I won't hear of it! I'm as poor as a rat; I should leave her to the mercy of the world; you know that—I'm in your debt—but I'd rather leave her to face the music than see her a star at one of Pockett's theatres. My Kittie!' His voice was low and smothered. 'You don't know what you're proposing; you don't know who she is, what I am. I've sunk low enough, and, God knows, I've been a poor kind of father to her; I've neglected her education, let her run wild; I've kept her in ignorance——' He paused and struggled with his emotion. 'But let her go on the stage! No, no; I won't do it! I tell you—you don't know——'

His voice broke, he sank into the chair, and gasped for breath as if overcome by a sudden faintness.

Levison rose, poured out a glass of water quickly and gave it to Norton, who managed to drink some and slowly recovered; but his voice was almost inaudible when he was able to speak again.

'No, no!' he said. 'My girl's worth something better than that. Don't speak to me of the stage again.—And don't speak of it to her,' he added almost fiercely. 'I won't have the idea put into her head.—Oh, I'm all right; it was only a sudden faintness. I get 'em sometimes; it's—it's my heart, I suppose. And don't say anything to Kittie about it.'

Levison took up his hat and gloves, and stood for a moment looking down from under his lowered lids at Norton, who was still pale and breathing with difficulty.

'Better see a doctor, Norton,' he said.

'Why should I?' returned Norton with a shrug of the shoulders and a laugh. 'I know as much about it as they could tell me. Push the 'bacca along the table. Good-night.'

## CHAPTER II

### THE FIRST MEETING

HER father was at work on a short story the following afternoon, when Kittie opened the door and put in her shapely head with its aureole of soft, rippling hair.

'Busy, Dad?' she inquired.

'Yes—very,' he replied rather shortly: he always had a headache after one of his bachelor parties, and he had quite a big headache at that moment. 'What is it?'

She came in, and sat on the edge of his chair, her arm round his neck.

'I want to go to the Exhibition to-night, Dad,' she said. 'May I?'

'No,' he said. 'I've got to do a play at one of the theatres, so I can't take you.'

"Nobody asked you, sir, she said." I'm going with Hagnes Hevangeline. Some one has given her a couple of tickets: it's her night off, and she wants to give me a treat. Don't be disagreeable, Dad, and break her heart—both our hearts.'

'I'm not disagreeable, Kit,' he said, leaning back and looking at her with a novel gravity born of self-reproach. 'I don't like the idea of your going to a crowded place like the Exhibition alone, or with only a servant girl to look after you. The fact is, Kittie, you gad about too much; you aren't a kid any longer; you're grown up—and—and——'

'And should behave as such,' finished Kittie, mimicking him lovingly. 'Why are you so particular all at

once, Dad? I've been out with Hagnes Hevangeline scores of times; she's a perfect dragon of propriety. And what could happen to me? You don't suppose I should be lost in the crowd, and have to be brought home by a policeman? And I haven't been anywhere for weeks and weeks, and we've got the tickets, so that there won't be any expense, and the poor little soul has been looking forward to taking me somewhere; and——

'Oh, very well!' he broke in with a gesture of resignation. 'Pon my soul, Kit, you'd talk the hind-leg off a donkey——'

'First time I knew you had any hindlegs, Dad, dear,' she said, kissing the top of his head, already bent over his work again. 'I'm glad you've said "yes," for both our sakes. I finished my new dress last night: it's a ripper; and Hagnes Hevangeline has got a new hat, a neat little thing in crimson and blue with a "haustrich" feather. We are going to have our tea there, spend a long evening, see all the sights, and get back early, so that my affectionate parent should not be anxious.'

Norton produced half a crown, looked at it sadly and wistfully as if he were parting from a valued friend, and Kittie tossed it up, and catching it dexterously, cried, 'Angel of a father!' kissed him once more, and pirouetted out of the room. Norton glanced up as the door closed, and sighed heavily, then returned to his work.

Kittie ran up to her room, singing, to don her new dress. As a matter of fact, there was no cause for anxiety on the part of her father, for the little servant, though young in years, was old in experience and wisdom, and the shrewdness which is a second nature to the Cockney; and she was quite capable of taking care not only of herself, but of Kittie.

To Kittie such a place as the Exhibition was an unalloyed delight; for, though its name does not sound

very promising to the youthful mind, it is very much more of a vast and varied show than a place of instruction and information. The two girls carefully avoided that part of the grounds devoted to buildings containing collections of more or less useful objects and to 'machinery in motion,' and devoted their attention to the gaily-lit stalls displaying objects which certainly could not be classed as useful whatever else they might be.

They went to the mimic representation of Venice, which occupied three-parts of the grounds; to the bandstand from which floated celestial music, and to the various side-shows which, more than the brilliantly-lit gardens, the music and the crowd which streamed, ebbed, and flowed like a living sea, fascinated Hagnes Hevangeline who, happy in the possession of an ostrich-feather, six inches longer than any she had yet seen in the garden, and proud of her companionship with Miss Kittie, was in the seventh heaven of delight.

Kittie also was very happy: light, music, the stir of a multitude, the atmosphere of excitement were as precious to her as the breath of her nostrils; and though she walked demurely by the side of Hagnes Hevangeline, her eyes were sparkling, her heart was beating time to the music which filled all the air.

They had had their shilling tea, taking it in a leisurely fashion, and leaning back in their chairs with the aristocratic air which you are entitled to assume after such an expensive meal; they had wandered through the streets of Venice, and floated through—apparently—miles of canal in a gondola; they had seen two or three of the side-shows, each more wonderful than the others; and they were now walking with a stream along one of the broad paths lined with booths and stalls, and vividly illuminated by countless electric lights.

'It's rather too much of a crush, isn't it, Hagnes?' said Kittie—the little maidservant would have been



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wounded if Kittie had omitted the H—' Let us go down here; it leads to another show I think.'

They turned down a side path, which was comparatively dark; but they emerged into the light again presently, and as they did so a lady and gentleman came towards them. The gentleman was an elderly man very upright, and rather grim and stern looking; the lady was a young girl. At the first glance, Kittie saw that they were what Hagnes Evangeline would call 'swells'; they came nearer, Kittie saw the young lady more plainly, then half-stopped, uttering a faint exclamation of surprise and amazement: for the girl was the very image of Kittie herself.

Her face was the same shape; there were the dark hair, the blue-grey eyes, the lips, with the peculiar curve of Kittie's own. Not only were they alike in face, but in figure; this girl's very walk, poise of her head and general carriage so closely resembled Kittie's that a strange feeling, almost like awe, swept over her. She wondered, while she stared, whether this other girl would see her and notice the resemblance; and she held her breath, expecting to hear the girl exclaim as she herself had done; but at that moment some people emerged from a side walk, and came between them; and the girl and the elderly gentleman passed by without either of them noticing Kittie and her humble companion.

Still half-hypnotized by her surprise, Kittie looked after the retreating pair, and, as they were being lost to her sight, she saw the young lady drop her pocket handkerchief.

'Wait there, I'll be back in a moment!' she said to Hagnes.

She went after the girl as quickly as possible, dodging the people in her way, and picked up the handkerchief. When she rose, the elderly gentleman and the girl had disappeared. Kittie saw at a glance that the handkerchief was of lace, and an expensive one; she wanted



to restore it, and she was also seized by a desire, a strange longing, to speak to the girl, to hear her speak, to discover whether in voice she was as exact a double as she was in face and figure and movement; so she looked this way and that, and thinking that she saw them going towards the broad walk she ran in that direction.

But she found that she was mistaken; she could not see them anywhere. Then she remembered Hagnes, and sought to return to her; but in her excitement, in the absorption of her quest, she had forgotten to note her way, and she lost herself. Very much annoyed, and just a trifle anxious, for she knew that Hagnes would be considerably alarmed, she went down a narrow path in the direction which led to the band and the centre of the gardens. She had almost gained the broad path again, when she heard shouting and cries of alarm, and the next moment, with the suddenness of a torrent pouring from a burst dam, a stream of people came rushing down upon her.

She turned to fly, with some other persons near her, but the living stream poured swiftly down upon her, and caught her up; she was carried along by it for some yards, and would have emerged with the rest quite safely on an open space, but unfortunately she trod on the hem of her skirt, which was a trifle too long. She staggered, stumbled, and would have gone down; but suddenly she saw some one swoop down on her, strong arms clasped her round the waist, she was lifted and swung out of the human torrent, and, the next moment, felt that she was standing safely on shore, so to speak.

She caught her breath, but she did not cry out; for Kittie was courage personified, and, as she set her hat straight, she looked up at her preserver, who was standing beside her. He was a young man, with a face that was not only handsome, but with an indication of some quality in it, which, even at that moment,

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affected Kittie strangely and curiously. She knew, by something more than his dress—which was that of what Hagnes would have called a 'swell,'—that he was a gentleman. He was looking down at her with a kindly regard, with a touch of anxiety, which made his face a very pleasant one.

'You are not hurt, I hope?' he said.

'Not in the least,' said Kittie quickly. 'But I should have been, if you had not been there, and hadn't pulled me up. I should have been trampled under foot,' she added cheerfully.

'I'm very glad I happened to be near,' he said.

'I'm very glad to hear that you are not hurt; but I am sure you must be rather frightened. Won't you sit down a moment—just to recover your breath. I know what you must feel like: I've been down in a football scrimmage.'

Mechanically Kittie sat down on the seat by which they had been standing; and he seated himself beside her; but he did not stare at her; instead, he looked before him rather thoughtfully. She appeared to be alone; she did not explain that she had lost her friends or wanted to go in instant search of them. Yes; she appeared to be alone; and yet his first glance at her face, her voice, had told him that she ought not to have been unaccompanied; that she was, in short, 'respectable;' he was almost convinced that she was a lady. If any doubts as to her respectability had been left in his mind, they would have been dispelled by Kittie, who at this point exclaimed—

'Oh, I must find Agnes!'

'Your sister?' he inquired. 'You have lost her?'

Kittie laughed in her frank way—she would have been frank and unabashed in the presence of Royalty itself.

'No; she's our servant. We came together, to take care of each other; and she'll think I'm lost,

and will be awfully upset. I must go and find her ! Good-bye—and thank you very much.’

As she sprang up the little lace handkerchief she had found slipped from her belt, and fluttered to the ground. The young man picked it up, and held it in his hand.

‘One moment,’ he said. ‘I don’t think I can let you go wandering about this place alone. It’s just possible that the idiotic crowd will get into another panic—they fancied just now that one of the lions had broken loose !—or that you will come to some real harm this time. You must allow me to accompany you in your search. I’ve no doubt we shall find your maid ; if not, you must let me take you home to your people.’

‘No, no !’ said Kittie, looking up at him as if she were aghast at the suggestion. ‘I could not let you do that. Dad—I mean my father—would be awfully angry if he knew that I had got into such a scrape as this, and lost Agnes.’

‘Then we must find Agnes,’ he said, with a smile. ‘Do you think she was in that crush ; what point do you think she would make for in the hope of meeting you ?’

‘Oh, I’m sure I don’t know,’ replied Kittie with a little shrug of despair. ‘There is no knowing what Hagnes Hevangeline’—she put on the H’s smilingly—‘would do if she lost her head. I expect she’s half-crazed with fright by this time.’

They were walking side by side now ; and as they came into the brighter light, the young man looked down at her with a thoughtful gravity, and he saw that she was exceedingly pretty : more than pretty, he decided ; and that she was as unembarrassed as—as, well a lady would have been ; indeed, she seemed to have forgotten his presence, and to be completely engrossed in her search for Agnes.

‘Do you like this kind of place ?’ he inquired. She looked up at him absently. ‘Do I—? Oh,

yes; it's delightful. The music, the lights, and the people, and all the things one sees. Don't you like it?' 'I suppose I ought to say yes,' he replied with a strange smile.

Kittie regarded him with slight surprise. 'That means you don't? Then why did you come?'

'Upon my word, I don't know,' he said, musingly. 'To pass away an hour or two, I suppose. I happen to be all alone in London; and a man who happens to be alone in London finds it rather a dull place.'

Her wondering eyes returned to his face. 'Yes; I should think so,' she said. 'How strange to be alone in London! Do you mean to say that you haven't any friends, any relations?' she asked, her interest aroused.

'Pretty nearly that; in fact, quite that,' he said. 'Now you, of course, have father, mother, no end of relations and friends?'

'I've a father,' assented Kittie, 'but no mother, and no relations. Now I come to think of it, to be without relations isn't so curious, after all. But I've lots of friends.—Oh, I wish I could see Agnes! I think I'm getting a little tired.'

'I'm not surprised,' he said; 'we've been on the hunt for some time. Do you know, I think it would be better for us if we sat down at this table here and kept a look-out; we can cover a lot of ground from here.'

Kittie sank into the chair with a sigh, and leant forward, beating an impatient tattoo on the table with her slim fingers, while she kept her anxious eyes on the various paths. The young man beckoned to a waiter, and quietly ordered two cups of coffee.

'Oh, it's very kind of you,' said Kittie, when the coffee was brought, 'but I don't want any.'

It struck her that this was rather ungracious, so she took a little; then, as if she had suddenly remembered him, she said—

'Need you wait? I shall be sure to see Agnes directly; she wouldn't dream of going home without me. Please don't wait!'

'I hope you will let me stay with you until you have found your maid,' he said. 'I shouldn't like to leave you in this place alone. By the way,' he smiled faintly, 'I hope I may say that I am quite a capable—and respectable—guardian? My name is Lashmore.' He paused and waited, and, her attention arrested by the pause, Kittie turned to him.

'My name——,' she began; then she stopped, and, for the first time, the colour rose to her face: and at that moment the young man knew that she was not merely pretty, but that she was beautiful. 'I don't think I want to tell you my name,' she said, her eyes meeting his frankly and pleadingly. 'No; I don't want you to know. I know it isn't right to be here alone, sitting here with you; father would be very angry, if he knew it.'

'Then neither he nor any one else shall know it from me,' he said very quietly, but with a genuineness so evident that Kittie gave a nod and breathed a little sigh of relief. He nodded in response. 'I will give you a promise if you like, that I will not only never mention my meeting you this evening, but, if I should be so fortunate as to see you again——'

'That's not likely,' put in Kittie.

'I will not even remind you of it.'

'Thank you very much,' said Kittie; 'that's very nice of you. And,' she laughed, 'I'll promise the same.'

He returned her laugh just as he returned her little nod.

'And, just to show you what an honest Injun I am, I will not ask you to tell me your name, though I must confess,' he added slowly, and with a little touch of colour in his face this time, 'I should like to know it.'

Kittie might have told him; for there was something

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in his eyes, in his smile, which inspired confidence ; but at that moment she caught sight of the servant, and sprang to her feet, exclaiming—

‘There she is ! The girl with her back to us, that one with the ostrich feather. Oh, I’m so glad ! Good-bye, and thank you very much !’

She held out her hand—she really was very much obliged to him ; he took it in his, and held it for a second, raising his hat. As she sped away, she looked over her shoulder, and said half-laughingly, half-seriously—

‘Remember your promise !’

‘Right ! I won’t forget,’ he responded with a nod.

He stood and watched her as she ran after and joined the girl with the ostrich feather ; and he noticed that they did not turn round and look in his direction, as they would have done if his late companion had spoken to the other girl about him. He was turning away, musingly, when he suddenly remembered the pocket-handkerchief ; and he drew it from his pocket, and took a step or two after the girls ; but it occurred to him that he would, so to speak, be breaking his promise, betraying her confidence. He stopped, and mechanically turned the handkerchief over in his hand ; the light was very strong where he stood, and he saw a name marked on the dainty piece of cambric and lace, and could read it quite distinctly.

‘I know her name, after all,’ he said to himself with a smile. ‘Eva Lyndhurst.’

He folded the handkerchief neatly, and put it in his breast pocket ; then he lit another cigarette, and went slowly towards the exit. As Kittie, with her quick eye, had noticed, all his movements, deliberate or quick, were marked by a freedom of limb, which to one more experienced than Kittie would have indicated that the young man had moved in broader spheres than the limited one of a London life. He looked not only a gentleman and somewhat of an aristocrat ; but there

was that indefinable air of the wilds and the woods about him ; and for one so young, there was a touch of sadness and gravity in the eyes, of suggestion, of resolution and firmness in the set of the lips and the chin that were somewhat remarkable.

As he rose from the seat, a man, who was sitting at a table at some little distance behind the young fellow, rose also, and followed slowly in his footsteps. Lashmore paused at the gate, the man stopped also, and still behind him at a little distance ; and when Lashmore sauntered on again, the man sauntered on likewise. Traversing a part of what has been impolitely called the howling wilderness of Kensington, Lashmore reached one of the quiet streets in Chelsea.

He stopped before an old house, the windows of which showed not the least sign of life, and opening the door with a latchkey passed in. A minute or two afterwards the man who had followed him in the gap came down the street. He was walking a shade more quickly now ; and, as he passed under the light of one of the lamps, he bore a striking resemblance to Kittie's friend, Mr. Levison.

## CHAPTER III

### LASHMORE'S ORDEAL

**J**UST as Lashmore entered the modest little house in Chelsea, a door on the ground floor opened, and a little old man stood aside for Lashmore to pass in. The old man was neatly but rather shabbily dressed in the garb of a butler: he had been butler to Lashmore's father, and Lashmore could remember Forbes as far back as he could remember anything.

'You've got back, my lord—I mean, Master Harry. I've laid some supper for you, sir,' said the old man in a tone of not only the deepest respect and affection, but of sympathy and tenderness; and his eyes dwelt upon the young man with an expression which harmonized with the tone.

'Yes; I've got back, Forbes,' said Lashmore, seating himself in the armchair, and beginning to unlace his boots; but with a murmured 'Allow me, sir,' Forbes went down on his knees, and exchanged the boots for slippers.

'Thank you, Forbes,' said Lashmore, with something deeper than the usual perfunctory acknowledgment of a service. 'I've been to the Exhibition: it's a fine show.'

'I hope you enjoyed it—my lord—Master Harry,' said Forbes in his thin voice as he moved about the table, and set a chair in front of a dish of cutlets. 'Will you, please, take your seat, sir; it's all ready?'

'Enjoyed it?' said Harry, as he seated himself at the table. 'I'm afraid not, Forbes. I feel as if I should never enjoy anything again.'



'Oh, don't say that, sir,' murmured the old man. 'Time is a wonderful healer—my lo—Master Harry, wonderful.'

'So I've heard, Forbes,' said the young man; 'but one finds it hard to believe in copy-book headings when one has had such a blow as mine.' His face darkened, but he cleared it as if with an effort, and went on almost lightly. 'I had an adventure to-night, Forbes. Behold in me a hero of romance!'

'You always were a hero, Master Harry,' quavered Forbes.

'In your eyes, you old goose! No; but seriously: some idiots took it into their heads that one of the performing lions had escaped, and they got up a panic, and made a stampede of it. A young girl was caught up in the midst of them, stumbled, and would have gone under, and been trampled by their hoofs; but I was lucky enough to grab her in time, and—Well, that's the whole of the adventure, Forbes. Splendid outlets these. What a cook you are!—An awfully pretty girl; more than pretty,' he went on, rather to himself than Forbes; but the old man was listening intently. 'Soft black hair, deep grey eyes; almost violet at times, you know? I believe it's what they call an Irish face. She had a sweet and pleasant voice too; one of those voices that linger in your memory.'

'A lady?' inquired the old man with a touch of apprehension.

'Oh, yes,' replied Lashmore. 'A lady, though she was all alone when I played Perseus: she had lost her maid, and I took charge of her until the girl was found. She wouldn't tell me her name; but I discovered it for myself. It was——'

He pulled up suddenly and coloured. 'By George!' he exclaimed, with slight remorse and annoyance. 'I promised her that I would not tell any one. Well, I haven't told you much, Forbes, have I? What I have told you you'll forget, eh?'

'Certainly, my lord, certainly, sir,' said Forbes promptly. 'Will you have white wine or red?'

'Eh? Oh, red,' replied Lashmore absently. The old butler deftly and carefully drew the cork, and poured out a glass. Lashmore took a drink; then glanced at the bottle.

'Château Margaux, Forbes!' he said. 'Now, look here, this won't do!' He laid down his knife and fork, thrust his hands in his pockets, and looked steadily at the old man, who hung his head and fidgeted with his hands as if he had been discovered committing a crime. 'Paupers, or next door to paupers, can't afford Château Margaux.'

'I—I didn't buy it, Master Harry; I happened to have some by me: and knowing it was your favourite wine—the wine you used to drink—I hope you will forgive the liberty, my lord?'

'You old fraud! D'you think I don't know that you've bought the wine for me; d'you think I don't know that you'd give me the roof over your head, your silly old head itself, if I'd take it? 'Pon my word, that's about what I'm doing. Look here, Forbes, you don't seem to realize the situation: you don't seem to be able to understand that I'm not'—his voice broke slightly, but he mastered it after a moment—'what I was. This is the situation—'

'Don't go over it again, Master Harry,' pleaded the old man.

'Why not?' said Lashmore, his lips drawn straight. 'Seems to me the oftener I go over it, the better it will be for me. I've got to face the music, to get accustomed to the tune; but a pretty ugly tune it is. No; Forbes, I can't be surprised at your not realizing it; for I myself can't realize the nasty knock Fate has dealt me. I suppose if I had done so all at once, I should have gone down under it like many a better man?'

'No, no, my lord,' quavered Forbes. 'You come of a race——' he stopped awkwardly, and Lashmore laughed grimly.

'Yes ; I come of a good race. I have got its blood in my veins, though I've no right to bear its name ; there's something in that. But, all the same, I should have gone down under it if I had realized it all of a sudden. Think of it, Forbes ! To be brought up in what is called the lap of luxury, to pride yourself upon the fact that you are the heir to a fine old title, the son of an earl, to be allowed to swagger over it, if you were inclined to swagger——'

'You never swaggered, my lord—Master Harry,' murmured Forbes.

'To be permitted to call yourself a lord, a viscount ; to be as happy as the day, in the belief that the world was made for you ; and then to be brought back from a spree on the veldt, just in time to see your father die, and to learn from his own lips that, because he had failed to go through the marriage ceremony with your mother, you were no lord at all, no heir to an earldom, had no right to any name whatever. In short, that you are a kind of thing which men shrug their shoulders at and enjoy pitying ; a man with a stain upon him from his birth, a man no girl would marry ; an outcast, a pariah. How does it sound, Forbes ? I say it to myself fifty times a day—and curse myself for saying it—for I'm resolved to face the music. No ; that's not the way to put it ; for, come to think of it, I haven't faced the music. I've hidden myself under one of my poor mother's names ; I've slunk away like a hound that's been badly whipped ; and but for you, you foolish old man, I haven't a friend in the world.'

The old man's eyes were full of tears ; he wiped them away with a trembling hand, but steadied it to fill the young man's glass.

'Thank you, Forbes. Yes ; I'll drink your wine, as I've taken shelter under your roof, and received your friendship and sympathy—gratefully.'

'Don't, my lord—sir !' pleaded the old man

'Every penny I've got and saved came from the family but for the family I shouldn't have been able to retire— I shouldn't have a house in which to have the honour of receiving you.'

'I don't even understand it yet,' said Lashmore musingly. 'How my father—how my mother—— It's true I don't remember her very well; but I've heard him speak of her goodness——'

'Her ladyship—your mother—was an angel of goodness, Master Harry,' said the old man. 'It wasn't her fault—if fault there was on either side. His lordship, your father, sir, was a passionate man and a masterful. He met her ladyship, your mother, abroad, and he fell in love, as the Herndales always did, when they fell in love at all; what you might call madly, Master Harry. There was trouble with her people and with his lordship, so I've heard—you know how things reach the servants' hall, sir—and the young people being set on each other, and his lordship being so wilful and masterful, they ran away. They were away some time; and when your father came into the title, and returned to England, everybody thought that her ladyship was married to him, like any other lady. She was so good, my mistress, so sweet and gentle, that no one suspected.—Then you were born, my lord, and the mistress never recovered from her illness, and languished away, and died.'

The old man's voice broke, and he went to the sideboard for a moment; then he went on—

'We all thought it was her ladyship's death that made his lordship so heartbroken; but it was the wrong he had done you, my lord, that was preying upon him, and shortened his life. He kept the secret until he was on his own deathbed——'

'Yes,' said Lashmore, with a long sigh, 'my father was a good father to me and a kind; but he wronged me doubly in keeping me in ignorance of the truth. He should not have stuck me up before the world

as his legitimate son, and let me think myself Lord Heronford—But I won't think hardly of him, Forbes.'

'No, no, my lord,' said Forbes—'I mean, Master Harry. There's the same blood in your veins—why, you're every inch a Herndale—'

'A jay in an eagle's plumage, an ass in a lion's skin, eh, Forbes?' said Lashmore bitterly. Then seeing that he hurt the old man, he laid a hand on his arm caressingly. 'Well, we'll say no more about it, Forbes; though the question still remains—What am I to do? Here I am, strong as a mule, and about as ignorant—I mean, so far as knowing anything that will get my living—with one friend in the world, a chuckle-headed old man, with a silly, soft heart, that won't permit him to turn his back upon a man who's down on his luck—just because he nursed him when he was a baby! I've got five hundred pounds; at least, I had; some of it's gone, of course; and I've got to make my way in the world. For, mind you, Forbes,' shaking his finger at the old man, 'I'm going to do it. I'm not going to live on your charity.—You hold your tongue. I know your little ways! You'd be happy enough to see me spend every penny I'd got, and then live on your savings. Château Margaux, you old villain! I know your game, but I'm going to baulk you.'

'Certainly, my lord—Master Harry, certainly,' assented the old man soothingly and deprecatingly. 'Here's your pipe, my lord—I mean, sir—and here's the tobacco.'

As he arranged them on the mantelshelf, he touched a letter lying there, and took it up with a 'Tut, tut!' of apology and self-reproach.

'I'm very sorry, my lord—Master Harry—but here's a letter. It came this evening, after you'd left. I meant to give it to you directly you'd finished your supper, but your lordship's conversation drove it out of my head.'

Lashmore took the letter with surprise, and regarded the envelope curiously.

'Why, it's addressed to you, Forbes,' he said.

'I know, sir; but it's about you, Master Harry. It's from an old friend of his lordship's, your father; at least, they used to be very friendly; but they quarrelled. It was before your time, Master Harry; but it's evident that Sir Talbot still kept a friendly feeling for your father; for he has written to me, as you will see, Master Harry, to ask if I know where you are.'

'That is very kind of him,' said Lashmore; 'especially as he doesn't know me; but I don't remember any Sir Talbot——. What is the rest of his name?' he broke off to inquire.

'Lyndhurst, sir; Sir Talbot Lyndhurst. No, my lord, he doesn't know you; you have never met him that I am aware of——' He stopped, and looked at the young fellow with surprise; for Lashmore had coloured deeply, and was staring at him with amazement.

Lyndhurst! What an extraordinary coincidence! Instinctively his hand went towards his breast pocket, where the tiny handkerchief still lay; but he did not take it out, and he smoked his pipe in silence for quite a minute; then he said—

'And I'm to read the letter, eh, Forbes?' He read it, and pondered for a while. 'It's a kind sort of letter, Forbes,' he said. 'I see that it is dated from Gordon Gardens, here in London; but that Sir Talbot says he is returning to his place, Ripley Court, to-morrow; so you'll have to write there. What are you going to say, Forbes?'

'Just what you wish me to, my lord, of course,' replied the old man meekly.

Harry considered for a while; then he said very quietly, 'You mustn't give me away, you know. These are just the kind of people I want to avoid. They were my equals; and I am now so greatly their inferior that no one of their servants——' The old

man made a gesture of piteous entreaty. 'All right, Forbes; I won't harrow your feelings any more. But I don't want to know these people, to meet them. You must write and say—that I have left England, which may be true before they get your letter, and that you don't know my address.'

'Yes, Master Harry,' said Forbes, as he cleared the table.

Lashmore smoked steadily, his brows knit; he was still impressed by the strangeness of the coincidence.

'Has this Sir Talbot Lyndhurst any family?' he asked casually.

'Yes, Master Harry; one daughter—I forget her name. No; it's come back to me. It's Eva.' Lashmore drew a long breath. 'Sir Talbot's a widower; her ladyship died some years ago, and Miss Eva is their only child. I was at the Court years ago, Master Harry, valeting his lordship, your father; that was before you were born.'

'Then this daughter, this Miss Eva, must be older than I am?' said Lashmore quickly, and with a sense of disappointment; but Forbes's reply dispelled it.

'No, Master Harry; she was born some years after her parents' marriage; she must be about your own age; no, a little younger.'

Lashmore nodded; and when Forbes went out of the room with the tray, the young man took the handkerchief from his pocket, and looked at the name daintily marked on it.

'Yes; it's the same name right enough,' he said. 'Eva Lyndhurst.'



## CHAPTER IV

### THE OTHER GIRL

THE girl who bore such an extraordinary, resemblance to Kittie Norton stood, some days later, at the breakfast-room window of Ripley Court, looking out at the sunlit scene. It is worth looking at, for the Court is one of the most beautiful places in England. The house is Elizabethan, and is surrounded by a park which has been the pride of many generations of Lyndhursts. The estate is a large one; but when Sir Talbot came into it, he found it much encumbered; so much so that it produced an income quite inadequate to the needs of a man of his position. While there had been the prospect of a son and heir, Sir Talbot, by the strictest economy, had paid off some of the mortgages; but no son had been born to him, most of the property was entailed, and Sir Talbot, during recent years, had made well-nigh futile efforts—it is a bad time for landlords—to save money wherewith to provide for his daughter.

Sir Talbot's lot was one of carking care; and, of course, it had told upon him, as the struggle to extract twenty-one shillings from a sovereign must always do. But he had kept his difficulties from Eva, and allowed her to remain in ignorance of the uncertainty which attended on her future; so at this time, while her father was gloomily reading his letters in the library, Eva as she waited for him, was singing softly and happily to herself.

Sir Talbot came in presently with her letters in his hand: he had left his own in the library—a bad sign



this ; and Eva went to him, and gave him her morning kiss.

'Three letters for me ; what a budget !' she said brightly. 'And two of them bills. Madame Cerise wants her money : can I have it, father ?'

Sir Talbot stretched out his hand for the account, and his face fell as he saw the total ; and with reason, for Madame Cerise's totals are formidable things ; but he suppressed a sigh that threatened to be a groan, and said with assumed indifference—

'Certainly, my dear.'

'And you may as well give me the money for this other one, the furrier's.'

Sir Talbot nodded, and pecked at a piece of toast nervously.

'The other letter, the real one, is from Aunt Lucy,' said Eva. 'Quite a long one. She has had—I can't read the word, it's "neu" something or other ; and she is back at Eaton Square ; and she wants me to go and see her——'

Sir Talbot looked up quickly, as the shadow of new dresses came over him.

'You have just been up to town——'

'I know, dear. And, of course, I could not go up again. Besides, I don't want to leave you. My visit to Aunt Lucy can wait. The rest of the letter is all about a young man she has met.' She laughed. 'All Aunt Lucy's new friends are the most interesting and charming she has ever known.—Oh, father, she says, could you ask him down here : she says for "the shooting," but evidently remembered that there is no shooting in the summer, and has changed it to "the fishing."'

Sir Talbot fidgeted in his chair and frowned. Few visitors came to the Court, because visitors meant additional servants, and an increase of the household expenses.

'Listen, dear,' Eva laughed again. 'She says—"He

is the most interesting and amusing of men. And so clever. Your father, I know, is fond of clever young men, and he is exceptionally clever and brilliant : and remarkably good-looking too.”

‘Who is it?’ asked Sir Talbot, with repressed irritation.

‘She hasn’t said yet,’ replied Eva, returning to the early pages of the closely scrawled letter. ‘She has forgotten to mention that ; and will probably have done so to the end : you know Aunt Lucy’s elusiveness. —Oh, here it is. His name is—really, aunt’s writing gets worse every letter!—is—Lord Herndale.’

Sir Talbot set down his coffee cup, and gazed over Eva’s head with a sudden interest and a certain embarrassment ; then, as Eva looked up, he lowered his eyes.

‘According to Aunt Lucy, he is quite a paragon, and something of a hero of romance,’ she went on smilingly. ‘She says that until quite recently he was a struggling barrister—I thought that barristers were not permitted to struggle, but were compelled by legal etiquette to sit still and wait?—and that he has come into his title and estates by a fluke : what can she mean, father?’

With his eyes still on his plate, Sir Talbot answered—

‘It is not always easy to discover what your aunt means ; but go on.’

‘Oh, there is ever so much more of it,’ said Eva. ‘He is the most charming of human beings ; and an intellectual Admirable Crichton, who will make his mark in—I think it’s the political world ; but I’m not sure ; but the gist of it is that aunt is willing to share her paragon with us, and wants you to invite him for “the shooting”—she has forgotten again! What shall I say : you have the influenza, or I have caught the measles? Either excuse will do.’

To Eva’s surprise he did not nod an assent, but remained silent and thoughtful.

‘I knew this young man’s uncle, the late Lord

Herndale,' he said slowly, almost guardedly. 'We quarrelled, and I had not seen him for a long time; years. Would it be much of a bother to have him? I suppose your aunt has told him that she has asked us to invite him?'

'Most probably,' laughed Eva, as she laid the letter aside and attacked her breakfast with the appetite of a healthy, open-air girl. 'No; it would not be much bother; but wouldn't it bore you terribly, father?'

Sir Talbot glanced up for a moment, and shrugged his shoulders.

'I dare say it would,' he replied. 'But if we shirked all the duties that bored us, we should——'

'We should lie in the sun, and eat lotuses all day, and be always comfy and good-tempered,' put in Eva lightly. 'That means that you would like him to come?'

'How do you feel about it?' he asked, looking at her rather curiously.

'Oh, I don't care one way or the other,' she answered indifferently. 'Aunt Lucy's description of him is rather daunting; but he may not be so bad as she paints him. I will write and tell her that Lord'—she referred to the letter—'Herndale can come; and you will write to him, and say that we shall be delighted to see him, that we have been just living for the opportunity of making his acquaintance. You won't forget, dear?'

'No,' he said thoughtfully. 'I will ask him for a fortnight hence. What are you going to do this morning?'

'What I am not going to do would be a more easily answered question. At first I am going down to the village to see Mrs. Styles. Mrs. Styles has been "down" with "the rheumatics." I shall walk and take the dogs for a run. Oh, father, when you are making out the cheque, I want five pounds for the Dorcas Club;

we've got behind with our accounts. Anything I can do for you in the village, dear ?'

'No,' he said with a momentary bitterness, 'unless you can come upon a gold mine.'

She rubbed his ear softly, as she passed him, and laughed.

'You wouldn't know what to do with it, if I did,' she retorted. 'Besides, the Socialists would step in, and take it from you. Even now, old Billy Blake says that you've got more than your share—meaning his.'

Billy Blake was the village Socialist orator, and, possessing the courage of his opinions, was in the habit of declaiming them to Eva whenever she met him.

Sir Talbot watched her from the window, when, half an hour later, she passed down the drive, a pack of dogs jumping and yelping round her. She was a beautiful girl and a charming ; he was up to his neck in money difficulties : and this young man, Lord Herndale, was wealthy as well as the possessor of an old peerage. Women are not your only matchmakers.

With the dogs scampering in front of her, Eva passed the lodge, after a little chat with Mrs. Bowe, the gate-keeper, and made her way to the village. She was a familiar and welcome figure, and she had to run the gauntlet of a pack of women and children before she reached the old woman with the rheumatism. Having listened to a long and detailed account of the invalid's sufferings, and assuaged them with the contents of a basket, which Mrs. Styles had been eyeing hungrily during her dramatic recital, Eva went on her way again.

Old Blake was sitting in the sun outside the inn with a pot of beer ; and he rose to approach her to tell her what he thought of her and the rest of 'the idle rich ;' but Eva, with a laugh and a nod, quickened her pace, and, leaving the tiny village, got out on to the road through the open fields, much to the satisfaction of the dogs, who did not appreciate Billy, and would

persist in smelling at him in a contemptuous and offensive fashion.

She had gone nearly a mile, and the whole party were enjoying themselves amazingly, when suddenly Tim, the fox terrier, emitted a warning growl; and Eva, looking up, saw an ugly-looking dog coming towards them. He was a cur, and a tramp, every inch of him, and as they approached, he cast a surly glance at them from his bloodshot eyes, and slunk to the other side of the road. Eva called the dogs to heel and cracked her whip; and they all obeyed, save Tim, to whom a strange dog was irresistible. With his short hair erect, and walking as if he were on stilts, he went across and evidently insulted the tramp; for he gave an ominous growl; there was a snap, a yell of pain and indignation from the outraged Tim; the other dogs bolted across to be in the fray, and in less than half a minute a pandemonium raged in the quiet countryside.

Eva succeeded in beating off some of the pack; but Tim and a special pal of his, and his equal in mischievousness, Bill by name, were still engaged, and the tramp, showing more pluck than one would have expected, held on to Tim, and was mauling him rather badly. He was now howling for assistance; and Eva, at her wits' end, fell to belabouring all three dogs with indiscriminate and quite futile energy. It was a lonely road, all the men of the village were away at work, and Eva was in despair of rescuing her pet from martyrdom, when a young man came strolling up the road. His hands were in his pockets and a pipe in his mouth; and for a moment he did not take in the significance of the scene; then, when he saw what the trouble was, he hurried up, knocking out his pipe as he came.

At this moment Eva, driven to desperation, had abandoned the whip, and, at the risk of a bite, was endeavouring to tear Tim from his opponent's formidable jaws, and the young man's first words were—  
'Don't do that!'

'What?—Oh, please, help me!' cried Eva, without looking up.

'Certainly. If you'll stand back,' responded the young man; and, with commendable coolness, he kicked the tramp off Tim, and thrust Bill aside. All would have been well, but unfortunately Tim, who never lost a chance of playing to the gallery, thought that he would get in a parting snap at the enemy, and the tramp, resenting this breach of a truce, laid on to him again.

'That's the worst of fox terriers,' remarked the stranger. 'Let go, stupid!'

He kicked the tramp again, and caught Tim a sharp knock on the nose; the tramp yielded, and retired growling; and Tim, of course, turned and bit his preserver in the hand; but the young man, who had expected something of the kind, held on to him, and Eva, when she could make herself heard, expressed her thanks in agitated incoherence.

'I am so sorry!' she said apologetically. 'It was all Tim's fault! I really do not know what I should have done if you had not come up——'

She stopped suddenly, for the heroic rescuer was staring at her with anything but heroic complacency. Surprise, embarrassment, were so eloquent in his face that Eva stared back with something like a reflection of his expression.

He seemed to be waiting for something, some word from her, for his eyes dwelt upon her questioningly, doubtfully; then, as if he had suddenly remembered his manners, he raised his cap, and said in the most banal of tones—

'Don't—don't mention it. I'm glad I happened to be here——' then he coloured, and a faint smile crossed his lips, as if called there by some memory; but the smile brought no responsive one to Eva, who was still rather agitated.

'Do you think he is much hurt?' she asked anx-

iously. 'It was a big dog, and I saw him bite Tim several times.'

The stranger eyed Tim, who was sitting a little apart with an injured air, and licking his wounds.

'I don't know. I'll see,' he said. He picked up the terrier, who protested strongly, and overhauled him. 'He has been bitten, certainly,' he said; 'but I don't think he is badly hurt. Fox terriers can take a lot of this kind of thing. There is nothing broken any way; but he's in a frightful mess.'

'Oh, yes, yes! He is all over blood, poor thing! Please put him down! He will make you—there's some blood on your wrist already—please put him down!'

The young man set the dog on its feet, and unobtrusively put his hand behind him; but Eva's eyes were sharp, and the little action betrayed him.

'You were bitten,' she said very quietly, and as if she were accusing him of meanness in attempting to conceal the fact.

'I think not,' he returned casually.

'Let me see, please,' she said as quietly as before, but with the dignified air of command which, when it is displayed by a woman, and a young and beautiful one, no man can disobey. So he held out his hand, and she looked at the now bleeding wound with a frown and a sudden pallor. 'You have been bitten badly. Which—which dog did it?'

'I don't know,' he replied carelessly; and he did not. 'It doesn't matter. I've been bitten scores of times—well, half a dozen times—'

'But not by a strange dog,' she broke in; 'and that was a strange one. What shall I do?'

She looked at him and then at the surrounding scenery, and bit her lip with a mixture of responsibility and annoyance on her charming face that made the young man want to smile.

'There is nothing to be done,' he said. 'I assure



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you that this'—he touched his hand, which was already beginning to be disagreeably hot and painful—'is not of the least consequence. I am thankful that he didn't turn on you. That would have been really serious.'

She put this illogical assertion aside with a little gesture of impatience.

'You ought to have it cauterized,' she said emphatically; 'and there is no chemist nearer than Okefield. Will you go there at once?'

He had been looking at her with a strange intentness while they had been speaking, and now he seemed to awaken from a kind of reverie.

'Oh, I think not,' he said. 'Oh, no; there is no need.'

'Where are you staying?' she asked. 'At the Temple's?' she added, this being the nearest family.

'No; I'm staying at the inn,' he replied. 'I am a stranger here. I came down for some fishing.' He paused a moment, his eyes fixed steadily on hers, then he added slowly and distinctly, 'My name is—Lashmore.'

His tone, the pause, seemed to indicate an expectation of some response on her part other than the usual and conventional one; and he lowered his eyes with a touch of embarrassment as she merely inclined her head, and said—

'Mine is Lyndhurst. I live near here,' she moved her hand slightly towards the Court. 'If you would not mind coming with me—it is quite close— Oh, do be quiet, dogs! One can't hear oneself speak! What is it now!'

It was a carriage, coming down the road, and at the sight of it, Eva exclaimed with joy and relief—

'Here is my father!—Father!'

The carriage stopped, and Sir Talbot got out, and approached them quickly.

'Eva! What is the matter?' he demanded.



With a slightly heightened colour, Eva explained, none too coherently, and introduced Tim's preserver and victim; and Sir Talbot, at first much alarmed on her account, turned to Lashmore with genuine gratitude.

'I am very much obliged to you, sir,' he said. 'It is evident that you've saved my daughter from being bitten, and have paid the penalty invariably exacted of those who interfere in quarrels—especially canine ones. The wound should be cauterized at once. Fortunately I have some caustic at home; if you will come on with us, we will, at any rate, take all the precautions that are available.'

He waved his hand towards the carriage, but Lashmore hesitated.

'I—I really—I can't think of bothering you,' he said, with a touch of colour in his face. 'As I have assured Miss Lyndhurst, the bite is a mere nothing. A little warm water——'

'We have warm water also,' said Sir Talbot, with a smile. There was something attractive about the young man, and his hesitation in accepting the invitation pleased Sir Talbot. 'Pray, don't rob us of the opportunity of expressing our gratitude in something more than mere thanks.'

To stand out any longer seemed impossible; Lashmore followed Eva into the carriage, and they drove off. On the way, Eva gave a clearer and more detailed account of the incident, and Sir Talbot seeing more plainly the risk she had run, and the service Lashmore had rendered, grew still more favourably impressed by the young man, who sat in well-bred silence, as if it were quite unnecessary for him to protest against the charge of heroism.

'Now, if you'll come into the library with me,' said Sir Talbot, as they entered the hall. 'Eva, ring for some warm water and a towel.'

'I'll bring it myself,' said Eva.

She ran off, and presently returned with the water

and the towel, and stood by while Sir Talbot washed the wound, and applied the stick of caustic.

'Isn't— isn't it a nasty bite?' she asked in a low voice.

'Not at all, I assure you,' said Lashmore, who had submitted to the fussing with an impatient resignation.

'We will hope that it will be all right,' said Sir Talbot. 'That is the luncheon bell. You will stay, I hope, Mr. Lashmore?' he added, somewhat to Eva's surprise.

'Thank you, no,' said Lashmore decidedly; but Sir Talbot courteously put the refusal aside.

'I think you had better stay,' he said. 'The wound may require cauterizing again. We shall see.'

Lashmore stood for a moment, with the feeling of a man who is being driven by an irresistible fate; the father and daughter took his silence for assent, and after Lashmore had washed the stains of battle from his hands, he joined his host and hostess in the dining-room. After a while a certain restraint wore off the young man, and he volunteered the information that he had come down from London for a few days' fishing; that he had no friends in the place, and that he had pitched upon it from reading an account of the river in *The Field*. The information was scanty, but Sir Talbot appeared satisfied. Like most of us, he knew a gentleman when he saw him—and heard him speak, and his gratitude had not yet cooled.

'You are fishing the water allotted to the inn, I suppose?' he said. 'You will find the higher water much better, and I hope you will try it. The march brown and the blue upright are still our best flies. I should like to go with you some evening—the evening is the best time at this season of the year—if you will permit me?'

This was all very gracious, and Lashmore gave up the struggle, and, with a stifled sigh, surrendered. It was a pleasant and a bright meal; Eva listened to the

men's talk with evident interest, and joined in now and again with her musical voice and happy laugh. When they had got through the lunch—they had lingered over it—Lashmore declining a cigarette, rose to go, and Eva and Sir Talbot accompanied him to the terrace. As Lashmore was bidding them good-bye, the butler approached Sir Talbot, and the baronet, murmuring, 'It's Nokes, the keeper, again,' turned back to the house, and Lashmore and Eva were left alone together.

'I am so glad my father is going out fishing with you,' she said. 'He is very fond of it, but he has dropped it lately; I suppose because he found it lonely by himself. I fish sometimes, but I haven't been out recently; though I really must take to it again. By the way, have you been to the Exhibition at Earl's Court?'

Lashmore stopped short—they were walking across the lawn in the direction of the lodge—looked straight before him for a moment, then turned his eyes to hers. She met his gaze with a smiling, a perfect, serenity.

'Yes——' he said, and waited, the colour rising to his face, his eyes holding hers. There was so plain a hint of some kind of significance in his tone that she paused, and looked at him almost interrogatively.

'Isn't it a delightful place! I was there about three weeks ago. Did you see those new cane rods?'

'No—yes,' he replied, colouring and evading her eyes. 'Yes; they—they are very good.'

'I ordered one,' she said. 'I wonder whether you will think it as good as it looks? I must try it.—Good-bye, and please take care of your wrist!'

Lashmore walked on, his brain whirling. During the time they had been together, there had been moments when he had doubted, when he had been almost sure, that a strange resemblance had deceived him; but now—! When he got out of sight of the house he stopped, took off his cap, and wiped his brow, with the air of a man utterly bewildered.

'Phew!' he murmured, almost gasped. '"Do I

dream, do I wake—are visions about ? ” She hasn’t shown a sign, not the twitch of an eyelash. What—what an actress ! And she looks so good, so innocent ! And she is good and innocent : didn’t I see that for myself the other night ! She’s as good and innocent as she is beautiful. And how beautiful she is ! The loveliest woman I have ever seen. But what an actress !—And what are you doing in this galley, Master Harry Lashmore ? You’d better saddle up, and be off ! But how can I ? Nothing easier. Send a line to say that you’ve been called back to town. It was madness to come ; it would be madness to stay. Be a man, Harry Lashmore. You’re sailing under false colours. If they knew— ! ’ He set his teeth, and his brows came together. Then he repeated in a kind of maze : “ Have you been to the Exhibition at Earl’s Court ? ” and wiped his brow again.

‘ Mr. Lashmore gone ? ’ said Sir Talbot, as Eva entered the hall. ‘ A pleasant young fellow, and a plucky one.’

‘ Yes,’ assented Eva. ‘ I wonder who he is, father ? ’

Sir Talbot shrugged his shoulders. ‘ I don’t know. He was not very communicative. A gentleman, and well bred ; one could see that at the first glance.—Eva, about those wretched dogs ; I really must insist—’

‘ I know, dear ; I know,’ she broke in, putting her soft palm on his lips. ‘ Let us consider that I’ve been properly scolded.’ She turned away to pick up a racquet Tim had knocked down. ‘ Shall you go fishing with him ? ’

‘ Yes,’ said Sir Talbot. ‘ You mean that it would be too friendly with a man we know nothing about ? Yes ; but still, he saved you from what might have been a nasty—’

Still with her face averted, she laughed. ‘ If you are going to make a hero of him, father ! ’

‘ Tut, tut ! ’ he said, rather shamefacedly. ‘ One must be civil, at any rate. And I like the young fellow.’

He paused and knit his brows. 'Strange, he reminds me of some one or other ; but I can't think whom. Yes ; I will show him that upper reach of the river, if I can do so before he goes. He said he was going to stay a few days only.'

'Three, I think,' said Eva absently.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ACCIDENT

**H**ARRY LASHMORE went straight to the inn, borrowed writing materials from the landlord, and wrote a polite note to Sir Talbot regretting that an urgent summons had rendered his return to London immediate and imperative. Then he sat and gazed at the epistolary fiction and—tore it up. The temptation to see more of this young lady, who seemed the most innocent and unsophisticated of girls, and the most perfect of actresses, was irresistible.

Conscience in no uncertain tone said, 'Fly !' but he soothed the obtrusive monitor with the reflection that, after all, there could be no harm in his staying for a few days, and enjoying the histrionic treat which Miss Eva Lyndhurst offered him. Not for a moment would he admit that sentiment had anything to do with his decision. Miss Lyndhurst was beautiful and charming ; but however beautiful and charming she might be—well, she was not for him. Was there any one woman in the world, worth loving, with whom he could dare to fall in love, who would not scorn the offer of his hand and heart ?

No ; it was the strange series of coincidences which encircled their acquaintance which influenced him. He had met this girl in a place of public resort in London ; had, by a mere accident, discovered her name ; had, that same night, learnt from Forbes that her father had been inquiring for him, notwithstanding his resolution to avoid them ; and, being drawn to the place where she lived by something that seemed like Fate, had discovered that the daughter of Sir Talbot, his father's

old friend, was the girl whom he had rescued from the panic-stricken mob at Earl's Court, and the fighting dogs.

Lashmore was young, and had not yet, perhaps, fully realized his position, or rather lack of position; and he succumbed to the temptation to see more of the girl who could so completely ignore their former meeting.

Silencing his conscience, he decided that he would remain for, say, three or four days. Then he would take his departure, and pass out of the life of Sir Talbot and his beautiful daughter—who should certainly have been the leading lady at a West End theatre!

On the following morning a groom rode over from the Court with a note for Mr. Lashmore. Would he join Sir Talbot at the weir at four o'clock, and try the trout?

Lashmore, despite a last despairing effort on the part of his outraged conscience, replied that it would give him much pleasure to do so; and four o'clock found him, and his rod, at the appointed place, where Sir Talbot, who was always punctual, was awaiting him.

'How is the wrist, Mr. Lashmore?' he asked.

'Quite all right, Sir Talbot,' replied Lashmore. 'As I assured you, it was nothing. I trust Miss Lyndhurst is none the worse for the—incident?'

Sir Talbot made a suitable response, and the two men began to fish. Harry Lashmore threw a good fly—he was one of those men to whom all kinds of sport come naturally. Without being a 'flannelled fool' or an 'oaf,' he played cricket as the game should be played, rode and shot well, and, in short, could hold his own in most of the outdoor pastimes in which Englishmen disport themselves: and long may they disport!

Sir Talbot, who was rather out of practice, yielded a ready admiration to the young man's skill.

'You get your line well out,' he said approvingly, as they met at the bend of the river; 'and that's half



the battle. I speak with some experience ; for I have known some first-rate anglers. The best I ever met was, perhaps, an old friend of mine,' he sighed and hesitated a moment, 'Lord Herndale.'

Lashmore was putting on a fresh fly, and he let it fall, and had to hunt in the grass for it.

'I used to fish with him,' Sir Talbot continued ; 'and I was always scored off in the matter of the basket. I mention him, because you throw your fly in the same way.'

'Yes ?' said Lashmore, a lump rising in his throat ; and he walked on.

He fished to the west bend, and was landing rather a good trout, when a voice, close behind him, cried—

'Oh, that will want a net, won't it ? Take this !'

He looked over his shoulder, and saw that the voice, with its faint suggestion of an almost vanished Celtic brogue, belonged to Miss Lyndhurst. She was dressed in a workman-like fashion, with a rod and net in her hand, and stepped up to him with a frank and cordial smile ; so frank and free from embarrassment that Lashmore, in his amazement at her aplomb and coolness, lost his trout.

'What a pity !' she said sympathetically. 'Are they rising well ? I hope so, for I want to try the rod I told you of.'

'They're rising all right,' he said. 'So that's the rod, is it ? Let me put it up for you.'

He put it together and stuck on a fly ; and she stood beside him as calmly and serenely as if no such place as Earl's Court had ever existed.

'Is my father doing well ?' she asked. 'I saw him on the lower reach.'

'Sir Talbot is doing all right,' he replied.

'I've told them to take tea to the spinney, up there on that little hill. Let me see what you have got. What a lot ! You will have a big basket before you finish.'



Of course, he stayed beside her, and equally, of course, he gave her some tips, which she received with a charming meekness ; and they talked as they fished, or rather, she fished and he instructed.

' Father has some good sea-trout fishing in Galway,' she said in the course of their conversation. ' We are Irish, or partly so. Perhaps you noticed a slight accent, brogue, the first time we met ? '

' Yes, I did,' said Lashmore, half-stupefied by her coolness.

' Father has lost nearly all his : but he says I've got it still, and teases me about it.—Is that a trout rising there ? '

' It is,' he said ; ' and you've got him.'

She landed her fish neatly, and they moved up the stream, talking as they went. Every now and then Lashmore glanced at her expectantly. He was waiting to see if she would openly allude to their first meeting ; but no such allusion came. She seemed absorbed in the sport, and absolutely free from any irking memories.

They reached the spinney, and found a couple of footmen awaiting them with tea. Sir Talbot joined them presently, and they dawdled over the cups till the sun got low enough for the bank to throw shadows on the water. Then they took to their rods again, and Eva, thanks to Lashmore's useful tips, got a fairly good basket.

He was enjoying the sport, was enjoying the companionship of this beautiful girl, with her frank voice and sweet, innocent smile ; and when Sir Talbot coming up to them said, ' You will dine with us to-night, I hope, Mr. Lashmore ? ' Lashmore, stamping his conscience under foot, accepted.

He went up to the Court two hours later feeling like a hound : for he knew that he was going there on false pretences. But a vague power drew him on, and he could not resist it.

It was a very pleasant little dinner. Sir Talbot was

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rather tired, and most of the talking was done by Lashmore and Eva. He had travelled a great deal, it seemed, and he had something to say about most of the places and people he had seen. Eva listened, putting in a word now and then to encourage him; and Lashmore did his utmost, half unconsciously, to interest her.

Sir Talbot fell asleep in the drawing-room; and the two young people chatted in an undertone, which increased their intimacy, Lashmore gradually began to feel as if he had known her for years instead of a couple of days: the meeting at Earl's Court must not be counted. Every now and then he pulled himself up, and glanced at her, wondering whether now, now that she had grown so friendly, she would speak, and so give him permission to refer to their adventure at the Exhibition; but there was no response, not the least sign of consciousness in her frank, girlish eyes. He began to wonder whether their first meeting was a dream, a vision, a delirium in his past. But the solid fact was always there. He *had* met her: she herself had told him that she had been at the Exhibition.

She sang for them later on in the evening, when Sir Talbot awoke; and Lashmore went to the inn with her voice ringing in his ears; it was a voice as sweet and beautiful as her face.

They met daily; for Sir Talbot, having returned to the fascinatingsport, wanted to fish on every likely day: and Lashmore still lingered. Sir Talbot's liking for the unknown tourist-visitor increased; and Lashmore might have spent most of his time at the Court if he had availed himself of the standing invitation Sir Talbot had given him. But the young man's conscience was not quite dead, and now and then it made itself heard. On these occasions Lashmore compounded with it by avoiding the Court; though he compromised by fishing the Lyndhurst waters.

But it cost him something to keep away from the

Lyndhursts ; for though he would not acknowledge it to himself, his interest in Miss Lyndhurst was increasing day by day. He had almost forgotten the mysterious reserve and silence she persisted in maintaining respecting their first meeting : indeed, he had arrived at the conclusion that she had been guilty of a little escapade, had slipped out to the Exhibition with her maid, unknown to her father, and did not wish to refer to it. Yes, his interest had now centred in Eva herself, though he thrust the fact from him. He caught himself thinking of her over his pipe and while he was walking or fishing ; and when she came in sight his heart gave a distinct bound, and something ran through him like a warm cloud.

Yes ; he must go, he told himself. Though, of course, he had not the least intention of committing the criminal folly of falling in love with Sir Talbot's daughter, it was time he quitted idling by the stream, and sought a means of livelihood : his money was running short, and when it went—— !

He was occupied by these cheerful reflections one afternoon, as he absently whipped the weir water, when he heard a light step in the grass on the other side of the river. He did not look up for a moment, for he knew the step—alas ! too well for his honour and his peace of mind !—and he felt that his face had grown red, a guilty red ; then with well-simulated surprise he raised his hat.

‘It was so beautiful an evening, and such a good fishing one, that father could not resist it. I thought I should like to come too, and as I was ready first, I walked on,’ said Eva. ‘What fly ? March brown, as usual, I suppose ?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Try it, any way.’

‘I thought you had gone,’ she remarked cheerfully. ‘You’ve not been up to the Court for three days, have you ?’

‘I—I think it is three days,’ said Lashmore, with a beautiful affectation of uncertainty.

'My father missed you. He had found an old angling book in the library, the one you were talking about one night, and he wanted to show it you.'

'Very kind of Sir Talbot. Perhaps he will let me come up and see it,' he said, suppressing a sigh: who could resist this innocent, unconscious temptress? But what a cur he was to yield!

'Do. And please come in the daytime. I want you to look at my mare's foot. You remember you said that you thought she would go lame?'

'I did,' he assented. 'I will come in the daytime, and look at her. To-morrow, perhaps.' And, a few minutes before, he had decided to go on the morrow!

'Thank you so very much!' said Eva. 'I suppose that we ought not to talk? Father says that the trout have very sharp ears.'

'Oh, I don't think they'd mind: so long as we don't shout. Have you got that fly on?'

'Y—es; but I can't throw it properly. I believe I'm on the wrong side of the stream. I thought I was right, but I'm sure I am not.'

'No; you are throwing against the wind,' he said.

'There is a bridge—or what serves as a bridge—a little higher up. I'll cross by it.'

Lashmore stopped fishing, and watched her as she moved away. Beautiful as Diana, with the sweetness of the woman added unto her, Eva's personality smote him with that sharp, swift pain which is Love's first indication. He walked slowly along the bank and still watched her as she approached the trunk of the tree which had been thrown across the stream so that the farm hands and shepherds might cross. It was a narrow, a very narrow bridge, and some one had nailed up a slight handrail, but it was so slight and so rotten that it was rather a snare than otherwise; and Lashmore quickened his pace so that he could meet her on the bridge, and give her a helping hand; but she had

quicken her pace also, and was on the bridge before he could reach it.

'Take care!' he called out discreetly. 'I don't put much faith in that rail——'

Almost before the words had left his lips, he heard a snap, the rail broke off just where Eva's hand was leaning, and, startled by the sudden loss of even so slight a support, she lost her balance on the narrow trunk and fell into the water.

Unfortunately it was shallow at this spot, and Eva fell on her head and lay, with her arms extended, quite still.

Even as he sprang down the bank and caught her up, Lashmore was conscious of the strange Fate which thrust and drove him before it. For the third time in their short acquaintance she had been forced to rely on him for protection, succour. The thought was scarcely formed, for he was swept away by the sight of her helplessness, and as he laid her on the bank and knelt beside her, frantically rubbing her hands, and wiping the water from her face, he was, all unconsciously calling upon her name.

'Eva! Eva! Dearest!' he murmured. 'You are all right. Don't faint! What shall I do!'

He raised her head—he had never before seen a woman in a swoon, and was as helpless and useless as a man always is on such occasions—and smoothed the hair from her forehead.

'Dearest!' he pleaded. 'You are all right! Are you hurt? What shall I do!' He felt for his flask, but, of course, he had left it at the inn that evening. 'Eva! Dearest——'

He felt her quiver in his arms, and pressed her still closer in his gratitude and thankfulness; and when her eyes opened slowly they looked up into his, which poured pity—and love in a lavish stream. Her colour came slowly at first, then with a burning rush, and she put out her hand to the ground so that she might rise; but he still held her.

'Don't move—for a moment. Are—are you hurt?' he asked, too moved and agitated to note his words or their tone. 'I shall never forgive myself for not warning you in time. Eva——!'

He stopped short, suddenly conscious of what he was saying. Still with the blush burning on her cheeks, she gazed up at him with a kind of wonder. And at that look Lashmore came to himself, and knew what he had done. His arms fell from her, and as she rose he still knelt looking, not at her but away beyond her, his face white, his teeth clenched. For he knew at that moment that he was playing the part of a cur and a scoundrel.

She stood trembling and with downcast eyes, as if waiting—yes, waiting for him to speak. But his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. She had heard him call her—Great Heaven! what had he called her, what had he said in his frenzy of fear, of passion! At last he got out a word or two—a word of commonplace inquiry which, in his own ears, sounded like a hideous mockery of the words that had burst from him a few moments before.

'I—I hope you are not hurt, Miss Lyndhurst?' She did not start, but as she raised her eyes with a shock of surprise to his, almost as if he had struck her, she said coldly, and in a low voice—

'Thank you—no. I must have struck my head in falling. I am quite all right now. I see my father in the distance. I should not like him to know: he would be anxious and upset.' She paused a moment, and he stood tongue-tied, his eyes on the ground, like the guilty hound he felt. 'I will go across the fields to the house. Please meet him, and keep him until I get out of sight.'

He made a gesture of assent, of obedience, and without another glance at him, she turned and walked away. He saw that her gait was slow, unsteady, and he sprang up the bank to follow and help her: but he stopped.

He felt the lash of that look in her eyes cutting into his heart. He dared not go to her, lest he should sink still deeper in the mire of shame and dishonour. With a groan, with a step almost as unsteady as hers, he went to meet Sir Talbot.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE 'DOUBLE' AGAIN

**K**ITTIE and Hagnes Hevangeline got home from Earl's Court without any further adventures. Hagnes was in the best of spirits, having got over her anxiety on Miss Kittie's account, and was as voluble as usual, as they walked through the quiet streets; but Kittie seemed rather tired, and was very quiet. She was glad to get to her own room, and out of the sound of Hagnes's voice; for the two incidents in which she had played a part naturally occupied her mind. She had read—Kittie was a voracious reader, and had therefore succeeded in some measure in making up for her father's fitful neglect of her education—several stories of 'doubles,' historic and otherwise, but hitherto she had regarded them as, well, just fiction founded on an exaggeration of fact; it had never seemed possible to her that any human being could be so exactly like another as the young lady she had seen in the gardens could be like Kittie herself. As she was dwelling upon the extraordinary likeness, she felt in her pocket for the handkerchief, and was annoyed to find that she had lost it.

Then her mind flitted to the other adventure, the real adventure of the evening; and she gave a great deal more attention to her memory of her 'preserver' than she had given to Lashmore when she was with him.

Women are swift to give or withhold their liking; and Kittie at the first glance at the young man's face, the first word he had spoken, had been prepossessed by him. In the first place there was gratitude, of



course ; but she knew that she would have liked him if she had met him in the most ordinary way. There are some men to whom women are naturally drawn, and Lashmore was one of them.

And Kittie thoroughly appreciated his manner towards her, appreciated it with the swift intuition of the woman who is a lady at heart, though her surroundings may be common and even vulgar. She knew, mere girl as she was, that not for a single moment had his manner towards her lapsed into the familiarity which is the deepest kind of disrespect. No ; he—quite evidently a gentleman—had treated her as if she were his sister or one of his friends.

Yes ; it was quite a little adventure ; like the opening chapter of a present-day novel ; but Kittie was convinced that the story would break off at the first chapter ; and—she was rather sorry. Lashmore was not the first gentleman she had met ; her father often brought home some of the men of rank and fashion he had run against at the theatre or one of his clubs, but none of them had interested Kittie very much, certainly none of them had impressed her as Lashmore had done : it is true that none of them had lifted her out of a panic-mad crowd, and saved her from disaster.

She was conscious of a desire to meet him again—both him and the young lady ; and as her active mind flew back to her, she sighed and instinctively went up to the glass, and looked at herself.

Yes ; they were wonderfully, weirdly alike ; but with a difference, she felt. The other girl had been beautifully dressed ; the gentleman with her—her father no doubt—was well-groomed, and carried himself like a person of importance. They were evidently people of position, of wealth, belonging to that upper class which seemed so high above and far away from Kittie's. It must be nice, she thought, wistfully, to wear clothes like those which became the other girl so well ; to be rich, well-born, to know and be an equal

and on friendly terms with—well, such men as the young fellow who had come to her aid that night. She looked in the glass critically as well as wistfully, and half-unconsciously formed the resolution to be more careful of her manners, less careless of speech; more—more—like the other girl, in fact. After all, she, Kittie, was the daughter of a gentleman—her father, in moments of expansiveness, had told her so, their Bohemian friends tacitly admitted it. Yes; she would take that other girl as a pattern, and try to live up to her double.

As her father's step came up the stairs slowly, a trifle, only a trifle, uncertainly, Kittie swiftly asked herself whether she should tell him; and as swiftly decided that she would not. She had said nothing about either adventure to Hagnes Hevangeline, and she would say nothing to her father: if she were to do so, he would be annoyed, angry, and, worse, would probably, in his anxiety, forbid her to go out again with the servant or any one but himself.

She ran to the sitting-room, where Norton had already dropped into a chair, and he looked up at her in a tired fashion.

'So you've got back, Kit—but, of course; hours ago, I hope?' he said, and his voice sounded weary and strained. 'Had a good time?'

'Yes,' she replied, with a nod and a little uneasy, guilty pang; for this was her first concealment from him. 'You look tired, dear.'

'I am,' he said. 'Stupid play; and the theatre was beastly hot. I wrote the notice at the office, thank goodness; so that I can go to bed at once. I'll have just one glass.' She got the whisky and water for him, and he watched her thoughtfully and somewhat moodily. 'Mr. Levison been here?' he asked.

'No,' said Kittie. 'Did you want to see him, expect him?'

Norton shook his head. 'Thought he might drop

in. Good chap, Mr. Levison,' he added tentatively, and looking straight before him.

Kittie nodded. 'Oh, yes; of course,' she laughed casually. 'I've known him so long that he seems quite like a relation.—By the way, father, haven't we any relations?' she broke off, as she brought his old and frayed dressing-gown.

De Courcy Norton had his dress-coat half off, and stopped at that as he looked at her.

'No,' he said rather curtly. 'What on earth made you ask that—that silly question?'

She looked at him with surprise. 'What is the matter, dear? Why should I not ask?'

'Oh, no matter,' he replied evasively. 'It seemed to me rather late for conundrums, that's all.—But about Levison——'

'Yes; let us talk about him,' said Kittie, as she put the cracked tobacco jar at her father's elbow. 'If I might venture on another conundrum, I should like to ask what he does for a living—or is he rich enough to live without working?'

Norton lit his pipe, and made a sudden impatient gesture with it.

'I don't know. He has always been a sort of mystery. I believe that he acts as a kind of agent for Pockett and some of the other managers.'

'I can't imagine Mr. Levison as a mystery,' remarked Kittie, as she tidied the room. 'He looks—and always has looked ever since I can remember—the type of amiable simplicity.'

'Ah!' commented Norton cynically. 'When you know as much of the world as I do, Kit—which Heaven and all the angels forfend!—you'll appreciate the fact that the amiable and simple-looking individuals are the sharpest and the 'cutest. I have known the most turnip-headed of chawbacons as cunning as—as a monkey. So I keep my eye on Levison—— Look here, Kit, I'd made up my mind not to speak to you about

it, but it's been haunting me all day, and I've come to the conclusion to give you a word of warning——'

His voice had grown grave, and as she turned to look at him with surprise, she saw that his face had become pale and anxious.

'What is it, dear?' she said, going to him and seating herself on the arm of the chair. 'What is it worrying you?'

'Levison—or rather, something he said to me the other night, the night of the party; and it wasn't for the first time. Kit——' he stopped, and bit hard at his pipe. 'You asked me just now if we had any relations: and I—lied. We have——'

'Father!' she cried in a low voice, with a note of pleasure in it.

'Yes; but hold on. So far as we're concerned, they might not exist. See?—No, no; don't ask any questions,' he broke off almost vehemently. 'But—but I'll tell you this much, and I'm reckoning that it won't be news to you. We—we aren't quite what we seem. No; by the Lord Harry, we are a deuced sight better!' He had poured some more whisky into the half-emptied glass, and he took a big, quick drink; then with his tired face flushed, and his lips moving restlessly round the pipe stem, he went on, 'We're well born and bred—there's good blood in us, some of the best—but that's not what I was going to say, excepting as it bears out on what Levison said. We've cut adrift from all that!'

He was getting a little hazy, and Kittie suppressed a sigh. Naturally she had hoped that he was going to tell her something about their family, those unknown relations.

'Mr. Levison——?' she said gently.

'Ah, yes! Look here, Kit; he wants you to go on the stage.'

She did not start, but the colour rose to her face, and she gazed thoughtfully at the opposite wall.

'On the stage! Confound his impudence! But then he doesn't know. Stage is no place for a lady.— And, mark me, Kit, that is what you are by right of birth—— Besides,' he caught himself up, 'it's no fit place for any young girl, or woman either. That's my opinion. I may be right or wrong; but that's my honest opinion; and I'm your father, and it should weigh with you. You're a kid no longer, and you'll have to decide. Levison's a persistent fellow, and he'll be whispering to you——'

Kittie slid her arm round his neck, her usual way of restraining, soothing him.

'Mr. Levison would not get me to listen to him, father,' she said, with a quiet dignity, which seemed to impress De Courcy Norton's fuddled mind, for he looked at her, and nodded approval.

'That's the tone,' he said; 'that's the proper tone. You speak like a lady. But you might yield, Kit; there's a beastly fascination in the thing, and—by Heaven, I'd rather see you dead than on the stage!— I've good reason for saying it, mark me!—and I want you to promise me that—that whatever happens, you'll keep off it! I want you to promise, d'you understand?'

She was silent a moment or two, then she said very quietly—

'I promise, Dad. Yes'—slowly and very gravely, 'I promise.'

He drew a long breath of relief, and was silent a moment, frowning moodily over his pipe: then as she kissed him and was moving away, he said—

'You've been a good girl to me, Kit, and I've been a deuced bad father—.' She flew back to him—'Yes; I have; and I've known it all along. You ought to have had a first-rate education; instead of which—— Kit, should you like to go to school again? I think I could manage it; yes, for a while, at any rate.'

'Too late, father,' she said gravely. 'No; I couldn't leave you.'

'I suppose not,' he said with a sigh.

'Besides,' she laughed, 'I shouldn't be able to stand it. No; if you're bent on improving my mind'—the way she said it compelled a smile from the careworn man—'there's another way, as the cookery books say. I've got some books, lesson books, from the last school, you know, and I can have a worry at them. In fact, I have had a turn at them once or twice lately. Yes, that is what I will do; and presently you will find that you have such a highly finished article for a daughter that you won't know her.' Her voice changed suddenly, and took to itself a highly refined tone, just a little prim, but scarcely an exaggeration of that which she had heard used by the leading ladies at the theatre, and by the ladies, who were the real article, in the stalls. 'Do you not think it is time to retire, father dear?'

He rose unsteadily and laughed at her. 'By George, Kit, education or no education, you can do it! It might be Lady——' he stopped—'Lady anybody! There—be off with you! I do think it is time to retire, my child!'

In his own mimicry of her mimicry, it was easy to see from whom Kittie had got her undoubted histrionic ability. She lay awake for some hours after she had 'retired,' thinking of her father's arrested disclosure about their family, and the promise she had given. She had yielded it readily enough, though she had an intuition that the profession which her father detested was the one to which she was most suited. The stage being closed to her, there remained, if she should need to earn her livelihood—what?

With a newly awakened ambition for something vague and indefinite, she hunted up the books she had brought away from the last of the schools at which she had put in a fitful attendance, and fell with avidity

upon a course of what is called 'self-education.' It was unfortunately cut short by the modern fiend, before which the bravest of us quail and tremble.

'It's influenza, father, right enough,' she said when he came home one night, and found her in bed with a flushed face and unnaturally bright eyes. 'I nursed Hagnes Hevangeline through it, "and now I know," as the song says; and now, to her infinite satisfaction, Hagnes has to nurse me. So everything comes square in this best of possible worlds. Oh, how hot I am! Don't come near me!—don't dream of kissing me, or you'll catch it——!'

Norton hurried off for a friendly doctor, who was always ready to desert one of his best-paying patients for one of his Bohemian pals, for he was a bit of a Bohemian himself, and he at once endorsed Kittie's diagnosis.

You may have influenza badly or lightly; but the after effects are pretty much the same however you have it; and at the end of a week Kittie rose from her bed the mere shadow of her old self; so wan and weak, indeed, that her father was almost beside himself with terror and anxiety. He spent most of his time in the sick-room; abjured or—er—almost abjured whisky, and neglected the Bohemian haunts in which he shone as a bright and particular star. But his friends did not desert him; and daily the faithful little band of literary men and artists came round to inquire after Miss Kittie; knocking at the door gently, and holding whispered conferences with Hagnes Hevangeline in the narrow, grimy little passage.

Teddy Wilson brought flowers; Percy Vilorne sent half a dozen of 'invalid's' port, addressed in a disguised hand; and a little later, Herbert Mandeville lugged round a parcel of the latest 'sixpennies' where-with the convalescent could while away the tedious hours. No one of them—these men whom with a smile, we, nobly born reader, should speak of as—



'er—not quite gentlemen, you know'—came empty-handed; and Kittie, to whom tears came readily just then, used to cry a little over the flowers and the rest, and send loving messages to her devoted worshippers.

But notwithstanding the skill of the clever doctor, the unremitting care of Hagnes Hevangeline, the strengthening qualities of the port, the flowers, fruit, and other offerings, the young goddess tarried on the road back to health.

'She'll have to go away,' said the doctor decisively. 'London's the healthiest place in the world, excepting in the summer and most parts of the other seasons; but you'll have to send her into the country, Norton, at once.'

Now, Norton, absorbed in his anxiety on Kittie's account, had done very little or no work lately, and his funds were exhausted. He was too proud to ask a loan of the doctor, and 'the boys'—well, they were hopelessly and perennially stoney-broke. But the most stonily broken of the lot—little Bickers—came forward at the critical moment with a proposal that promised to solve the financial difficulty.

'By George, Dook, it's—it's Providence itself!' he cried in a hushed voice, for Kittie was sitting-up in the adjoining 'workroom.' 'If it's the country Miss Kittie wants, she can have it by the ton. I have a mother——'

'Well, don't brag about it,' murmured Teddy Wilson, who was at the conference. 'There are others!'

'—A mother who lives in one of the healthiest places you can imagine. It's a cottage by a wood.—Shut up, Teddy; this is serious!'

Teddy, who had begun to hum the well-known song, 'My Cottage by the Wood,' looked penitent, and Bickers went on to explain that his mother, a widow, lived by herself in a quiet country place; that she was the dearest of mothers, and would be proud and delighted to have Miss Kittie for—just as long as Miss



Kittie liked to stay. He'd write by that night's post, to tell Mrs. Bickers that Kittie was coming; and—Well, there they were! the good fellow wound up, his face flushed, his eyes all aglow.

The Dook pressed his hand. 'It's a kind heart you have, Bickers,' he said, his eyes moist; 'and I accept for Kittie. I can't take her away, because—'

'Of course not; there's your work,' Bickers put in quickly, and with impressive gravity. 'I'll arrange it all; you leave it to me. It's not much of a journey, and the fare—ahem——!'

'I can manage the fare,' said the Dook with simple dignity. 'But you'd better tell me where it is she's going,' he added with a laugh, in which the rest joined.

'My mother lives at Deerbrook,' said Bickers.

Norton's brows came together, and he bit his lip; he seemed about to speak, but did not do so, and Bickers, repeating earnestly that the cottage was, though humble, as healthy as even a cottage could be, hurried off to inform Mrs. Bickers of the coming of her guest.

Three days later 'the boys' met at the station to see Kittie off, and, as the train started with the girl clinging to her father's hand—as if she were going to Australia, as the distracted guard pathetically and indignantly remonstrated—she managed to murmur to the others—

'Take care of him. All of you! And—and good-bye!'

They would have cheered, if the Dook himself had not been present; and if they had done so, Kittie would have forgiven them; for her heart was aching, and her eyes were blurred with tears.

At the little country station, a fly, with a dear, sweet-looking, and extremely near-sighted old lady were waiting for her; and Mrs. Bickers justified her motherhood to the good-hearted Bickers by at once enfolding the thin, pale-looking girl in a large embrace.

'Ah, we'll soon have the roses back in those pretty cheeks, Miss Norton,' she said. 'Well, "Kittie," then, if I may, dear; and a very nice name it is, and matches you to a T. Oh, I know all about you, my dear: from my son, of course. And about your good father: such a clever gentleman, my William says! Let me put this shawl round you; it's warm, but still the country air after London—and it's well to be careful. Dear, dear, I'm so glad to have you. You see'—she nodded and smiled through a sudden blurr of tears—'I lost my only gel.—It isn't far; but you must lean back,' and so on.

The cottage proved to be about a mile from the station, and to be quite, as Kittie called it, 'a picture postcard' of a cottage. It stood, as Bickers had poetically said, beside a wood, and the air was odorous of the health-giving terebene emitted by the tall pines which shaded the little nest from the sun and the wind. It was as cosy inside as it was pretty out, and Kittie sank into a grandfather's chair with a sense of well-being and of gratitude to the old lady, which threatened tears again.

Mrs. Bickers 'did for herself,' with the occasional aid of one of the village girls, so that Kittie, as soon as Mrs. Bickers would permit it, found some employment and amusement in assisting in keeping the box of a place in the precise order which was dear to the old lady's heart.

For the first few days, Kittie was not up to walking, and spent most of her time in the little garden, which was all ablaze with the simple flowers, which are so easily grown, that most people do not think them worth growing; and so go about raving of "the flowers one sees in the cottage gardens, you know!" But as she grew stronger she went for strolls in the wood, which was so unfrequented that it might have belonged to Mrs. Bickers.

'I hope I'm not trespassing,' Kittie remarked on returning from it one day.

'Oh, dear, no,' the old lady assured her with a touch of pride and satisfaction. 'Sir Talbot expressly gave me permission, my dear. He is a most good-natured gentleman, one of the real kind of gentlemen—a nobleman, I suppose I ought to say; and I am sure he'd be only too pleased for you to walk there. And it isn't as if the Court were near; it's quite a long way off, at the other end of the wood, where the park begins. Some day when you are stronger we will go up there and see the gardens. They are very large and beautiful, of course; and I know Mr. MacDonald, the gardener. Quite a gentleman he is, I assure you.—You must try and manage a whole tea-cake to-day, my dear.'

'I feel as if I could manage a dozen,' said Kittie, laughing. 'Mr. Bickers was right in saying this was a healthy place; he ought to have added, the hungriest.'

The old lady served up the tea-cakes piping hot, and with gratification watched Kittie devour some: Kittie had a way of getting direct to most people's hearts, and little Bickers's old mother had already grown fond of the pretty girl who had been placed under her care.

It was on the following morning that Kittie essayed a real walk. Leaving the wood behind her, she sauntered across a field, and was picking some meadow-sweet and cowslips to adorn the tea table, when she heard voices which seemed to be close to her, though she could not see the speakers. She stopped and looked in the direction of the sound, and discovered that they came from below the bank of the river, which just there ran through a steep decline. She turned to go, for she felt that, notwithstanding Mrs. Bickers's assurance, she might be trespassing, and she had gained the edge of the wood, when the voices sounded more loudly, and two figures, that of a girl and a young man, came to the top of the bank.

Kittie instinctively, mechanically, slipped behind a

tree, and looked at them ; and as she did so, an exclamation of surprise escaped her, and she stood clutching the flowers, and staring with an almost incredulous amazement.

For the girl was her 'double,' and the young man was the 'Mr. Lashmore' who had rescued her at Earl's Court.

## CHAPTER. VII

### THE PINK DRESS

**K**ITTIE watched the two figures breathlessly. She was not conscious that she was playing the part of a spy; and if she had been, she would not have stepped forward and revealed herself; for she was held in the thrall of a natural and an absorbing curiosity. She did not know enough of the world to be aware that coincidences are the rule rather than the exception in life, and that the one which was presenting itself to her was by no means extraordinary; for the world is small, and it is in the most unlikely places and at the most unlikely times we meet people whom we little expected to see. For proof of this assertion, see the newspapers.

But though she knew so comparatively little of the world, Kittie was sharp enough to perceive that these two persons were on—well, very friendly terms; they strolled along the bank talking and laughing, as if they knew and understood each other very well. And she saw something else: that the young man was intensely interested in the beautiful girl at his side. When a man is in love, or even beginning to be in love with a woman, he reveals the fact by the expression of his eyes, by the very movements of his body. Lashmore's eyes were eloquent as they dwelt on the girl's face, and as he bent towards her there was something in his attitude, a touch of appeal, of mute worship, which plainly discovered his secret, if secret it was, to the acutely intelligent Kittie.

Presently she saw the old gentleman who had accompanied her double at Earl's Court approaching the

young people ; and at once she guessed that he was the ' Sir Talbot ' of whom Mrs. Bickers had spoken so proudly.

She waited until the three had moved on ; then, recovering from the kind of spell that had held her, she turned into the wood, and, choosing the thickest part of it, made her way home. And as she went, slowly and thoughtfully, she was conscious of a sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction.

Kittie would not have been a woman, if she had not been favourably impressed by the young man who had rescued her from the panic-stricken mob, and had afterwards treated her with so much gentleness and delicate consideration. As has been said, she had thought of him very often and very favourably ; and although she was not one of those foolish girls who weave romances, in which they themselves, of course, figure prominently, about every presentable young man they meet, she had come to regard him as the nearest approach to a hero she had yet seen.

It hurt her vaguely that this unknown girl, who resembled her so closely, should not only possess the good things of this life, but that she should also have Mr. Lashmore for an intimate friend, if not a lover. She laboured under a sense of wrong, injustice, which would have oppressed a higher nature than that of poor Kittie.

She looked and felt tired as she entered the cottage and sank into a chair beside the fire ; and Mrs. Bickers, peering at her short-sightedly, said chidingly—

' You've been too far, dear, I can see ; you're doing too much.'

She hastened to get some broth she had been preparing, and sat down by Kittie while she drank it.

' Where did you go, my dear ? ' she asked, as she got out the knitting, which she did so mechanically that Kittie declared the old lady could do it in her sleep.

' Through the woods and down towards the river,'

she replied ; then she went on after a slight hesitation, 'I saw some people there. Is Sir Talbot a thin, tall, old gentleman, very upright and stately-looking ?'

'That's Sir Talbot, my dear. He was fishing, no doubt ; the river belongs to him, of course.'

'There was a young lady,' said Kittie slowly and much engrossed in her broth. 'A slim girl, about—about my height : and pretty.'

'That must have been Sir Talbot's daughter,' said the old lady. 'Miss Lyndhurst ; Miss Eva, as we all call her. Yes ; she is very pretty, quite a lovely girl, I am told. I've not seen her closely ; and I'm so short-sighted, as you may have noticed, dear, that I can't say for myself ; but she has the reputation of being very beautiful. She called at the cottage twice,' she added with intense satisfaction ; 'but unfortunately I happened to be out. No doubt she will call again, and I shall have the happiness of seeing her. Sir Talbot is devoted to her ; in fact, they are devoted to each other, as is only natural and proper, seeing that they've only each other, and that she's Sir Talbot's only child. She has been away a great deal, staying with her aunt, Lady Lorchester. One would think it would be rather a dull life up at the Court there for her ; for Sir Talbot has very few visitors ; but Miss Eva seems to be very happy, by all accounts.'

Kittie was on the point of saying that Miss Lyndhurst had a visitor or a friend with her now ; but she checked herself. She feared that Mrs. Bickers might ask her for some particulars about the young man ; and Kitty shrank instinctively from discussing him, and much more from telling of her meeting with him. Mrs. Bickers ran on with the garrulity of her age and class ; and Kittie, as she leant back with her hands clasped loosely in her lap, listened intently.

'They say that Sir Talbot is rather poorly off, for a gentleman of his position ; that the estate is very much encumbered—mortgaged, don't you call it, my



dear?—and that it is because he is trying to save money for Miss Eva that they live so quietly and keep so little company at the Court. But, there!! my dear, we're all in the hands of Providence; and Miss Eva is almost sure to marry a gentleman of her own rank with heaps of money; in fact, I don't suppose Sir Talbot would allow her to marry any one else.'

Mrs. Bickers said a great deal more than this. The great family at the Court was a topic dearly loved by her, and for some time she rambled on, repeating stories she had heard of Miss Eva's childhood and girlhood; and seemed to be so well acquainted with incidents which had occurred in that young lady's immediate past, not to say present, life, that Kittie, raising her eyelids for a moment, said, with a smile—

'You appear to know everything that has happened to Miss Lyndhurst, Mrs. Bickers.'

The old lady bridled a little. 'Well so I do, my dear,' she admitted. 'The fact is that Selina Brown, Miss Eva's maid, is a friend of mine, and drops in very frequently for a cup of tea. I'm teaching her knitting; and, of course, we have a chat. Selina is naturally very fond of talking of her young lady. And I trust,' bridling again, 'there's no harm in it.'

'Not in the very least,' Kittie hastened to assure her. 'I have been very much interested.'

'Well, I should have thought you'd have been rather tired of my gossip,' said the old lady, her usual amiability quite restored. 'And now, my dear, you must go and lie down, and take a long rest; or else I shall have you bad again; and then what would your dear good father say, to say nothing of William?'

'You take too much care of me; you are spoiling me,' said Kittie, with a kiss; 'and the least I can do is to be a good and obedient girl.'

She went up to her room, and lay on the outside of the bed. She generally slept whenever she wanted to do so; but she could not sleep now, for her mind



dwelt persistently upon all that Mrs. Bickers had told her. The interest, curiosity, which she had felt on first seeing the other girl was now so intensified as to be almost an obsession. Amongst other gifts the gods had endowed Kittie with was a marvellously retentive memory ; she was one of those happy persons who can run over a poem twice or thrice and remember it for life, who never forget a name or a face ; and of the many names Mrs. Bickers had spoken, Kittie had lost not one ; they were all packed away safely in the back of that shapely little head, and would remain there.

She fell asleep at last, but slept lightly, and was wakened by the sound of voices which ascended by the open staircase from the room below. Kittie lay and listened languidly ; but presently she heard Mrs. Bickers addressing some one as 'Selina,' and Kittie knew that the lady's maid had dropped in for a knitting lesson and a cup of tea. Kittie raised herself on her elbow, and listened absently. The lady's maid was recounting, with the fullest detail, the incident of Lashmore's rescue of Eva from the dogs. She did it so well that she might have been present at the affair ; and she had evidently seen, probably through the open doorway, the cauterizing operation and Miss Eva's close attention on it.

'Such a nice young gentleman, and handsome, too,' said Selina. 'And so brave, you know, Mrs. Bickers. Sir Talbot seems to have taken quite a fancy to him ; and he's up at our place most every day. And Miss Eva and the two gentlemen go a-fishing together. And, of course, she's very nice to him.'

'Perhaps something may come of it ?' suggested Mrs. Bickers, with an appropriate smile, but Selina gave a lady's-maid toss of her head.

'Lor' bless you, no, Mrs. Bickers,' she said ; 'there couldn't be anything of that kind ; for though he's a very pleasant, handsome young gentleman—quite a

gentleman in every way, I do assure you,' she put in emphatically as she remembered the half-sovereign with which Lashmore had tipped her—'I'm afraid he's what you'd call a nobody. I mean that Miss Eva would naturally look higher than him.—Do you count twenty now? I'm getting on famously, ain't I?—There's a gentleman coming to stay with us—quite a rare thing, isn't it!—he's a Lord—Lord Herndale, a very high nobleman, and very rich. He's a friend of Lady Lorchester—Miss Eva's Aunt Lucy, as we call her. Now, something might come of that; for he'd be a very suitable match, we all think.'

She told all she knew about the coming visitor, and it was wonderful how much she knew; or it would be wonderful if our servants' knowledge of our most intimate affairs had not long ceased to surprise us. 'But, Lor', how I do run on! I declare it's getting quite late, and I must be going. How is your young lady? I haven't seen her yet. I suppose the quieter she's kept the better? Yes, I must be going. Oh, that new dress has come down from Madame Cerise's for Miss Eva—the one of the new colour of pink, a kind of pale rose d barri. Miss Eva wore it for the first time on Tuesday night. Mr. Lashmore was dining with us that evening, and he knocked over his claret glass. I never saw a man so upset in my life, for he thought that some of the wine had gone on her dress. I happened to be passing in the hall at the time, and just looked in as I sometimes do, and I saw and heard him. "That beautiful dress! I've been admiring it all the evening," says he; but he was looking at Miss Eva as he spoke, not at the frock. There was a spot or two on it, a mere nothing for most persons; but I thought Miss Eva would not wear it again; but she asked for it this morning, and I've got to see if those spots will come out. It's a beautiful shade, but it wouldn't fetch me a lot of money; those kind of dresses never do, especially from the dealers.'

She had got on her things by this time, and had moved towards the door, but it was evident that her mind was still harping on the dress, for she said—

‘The dealers give so little. I suppose your young lady,’ she added suddenly, as if an idea had struck her, ‘wouldn’t like to buy such a thing? It’s just as likely as not Miss Eva won’t wear it again; and I could sell it really cheap.’

‘I can but ask her, my dear,’ replied Mrs. Bickers. ‘It all depends upon what you call cheap; I don’t think the dear child’s very well off.’

As Kittie heard the visitor take her departure, she dropped lightly from the bed, and went to the window to look at her, and found that she was just an ordinary looking girl on whom her mistress’s cast-off clothes sat not unbecomingly. When Kittie went downstairs, after an interval of reflection during which she had pigeon-holed every word the girl had said, Mrs. Bickers gave her an account of the visit, and the conversation; thus fixing it permanently in Kittie’s memory.

‘Would you care to have the dress, my dear;’ asked Mrs. Bickers; ‘if Miss Eva gave it to Selina, which she is very likely to do?’

Before Kittie’s eyes was a vision of herself, clad for once in a dress of her double; and she felt an overwhelming desire to see how she would look, and if the resemblance would be heightened by the similarity of apparel. But the money? She shook her head and sighed.

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t afford it,’ she said wistfully.

Mrs. Bickers opened her lips to say something, but closed them again without speaking, and bent over her knitting with a little smile.

Kittie was feverish the next day, and Mrs. Bickers, very sensibly, would not let her go out for several days, and almost kept her to her room, sitting beside her and talking while she plied her knitting needles; the subject was nearly always that of the Court and its

occupants ; and Kittie strangely enough did not seem to grow weary of the topic. She gleaned an amazing amount of information about everything connected with the great house and with Sir Talbot and his daughter.

Her mind was filled with the Court and its people. The existence, the doings, the very speeches of her double began to seem to her so distinct as to belong to Kittie herself. She longed to see the girl again, to know if Lashmore was still with her, still fishing, walking with her, with that eloquent look in his eyes, that expressive attitude of imploration, of mute worship. So, when Mrs. Bickers at last allowed her to go out, she went through the wood in the direction of the river ; and as chance would have it, she saw Eva and Lashmore.

She stood behind the tree that had screened her before, and she watched them with intent eyes. It did occur to her on this occasion that she was spying on them, but she soothed her conscience with the reflection that she was watching them with no object, and that her watching could not matter to them. She saw them as they stood on opposite sides of the river, and she could hear their voices, though she could not distinguish what they said ; she saw Eva attempt to cross the bridge and fall, and Lashmore plunge down the bank. In her agitation, caused by the accident, Kittie was about to run forward to offer assistance : but the sight of Lashmore with Eva in his arms checked her. She pressed her hand fiercely against her heart, and stood, as if incapable of movement, watching them.

She saw presently that there was no need for her interference, no need for her to go to their assistance. Miss Lyndhurst had evidently recovered. And something else had happened ; for she was standing on the bank erect, and proudly, almost resentfully, regarding her companion, whose head was bowed, whose whole attitude was one of humility and dismay. In an in-

stant Kittie knew what it meant, as certainly as if she had heard the words which Eva had spoken ; or it seemed to her that she knew as certainly as if she had heard them. The young man had avowed his love for Miss Lyndhurst, and she had refused him with dignity, if not with scorn.

Kittie drew a long breath, and her hand fell from her heart to her side ; a thrill of satisfaction ran through her, the colour that had suffused her face while Eva had rested in Lashmore's arms died down. She leant against the tree, and watched them part, and saw Lashmore go up the river with the dejected air of a rejected suitor. She felt like a person who has been witnessing a comedy, in which he ought to have had a vital part ; and she turned homewards with a thrill of satisfaction, a sense of victory which she could not analyze. The man who had rescued her from the panic-stricken mob was not going to be Miss Eva Lyndhurst's husband. Why the fact should afford her any satisfaction Kittie did not know ; but that it did she was almost painfully conscious.

She reached the cottage, looking tired and somewhat pale, and Mrs. Bickers at once ordered her to bed ; and Kittie was not sorry to go ; for she had witnessed a comedy, a tragedy, in which she still felt that she had a part and lot. It was almost as if she herself had listened to Lashmore's avowal, and refused him. But would she have refused him ? The colour rose to her face as she asked the question, and knew, with all a woman's insight, that she would not have done so.

Mrs. Bickers kept her in bed for breakfast the next morning ; and later in the day came in with a dress-maker's box.

'Here, my dear,' she said, smiling nervously. 'Here's something I've got for you. It's the dress Miss Eva got spotted with wine. She gave it last night to Selina Brown—her lady's-maid, you know ? Miss Eva said she never wanted to see it again ; and I

bought it for you. Now, don't be foolish,' for Kittie had exclaimed and protested. 'It will become you very well. I know you wear evening dresses, for William tells me that your father moves in the best of society. And you needn't have any scruples about accepting it, for I know from my son's letters that your father is William's best friend, and has often helped him. Just slip it on, dear, and let us see how it looks.'

Still protesting, Eva put on the dress; and Mrs. Bickers surveyed her with evident pride and satisfaction.

'My dear!' she exclaimed. 'It suits you beautifully, beautifully! You might be a real lady, like Miss Eva herself.—I beg your pardon! Of course, you *are* a real lady; any one could see that.'

'Do you think so?' said Kittie, with a curious gravity, as she eyed herself in the glass.

## CHAPTER VIII

'MISS LYNDHURST!'

SOME ONE has cleverly said that one of the proofs of immortality lies in the fact that the worst of us are capable of remorse. Lashmore was just one mass of remorse as, with bent head and shame-stricken soul, he went to meet Sir Talbot, whose kindness and hospitality he had abused by speaking words of love to his daughter.

Sir Talbot could not fail to see the young man's agitation; and when Lashmore, in husky and faltering accents, said that he had received a telegram which necessitated his immediate return to London, Sir Talbot expressed very genuine regret, and as genuine a hope that Lashmore had not received bad news.

'We shall miss you very much,' said Sir Talbot. 'Your presence here has brightened us up; and I trust that we shall see you again.'

His very evident sincerity only deepened Lashmore's remorse; and he was scarcely capable of speech, as he took the hand which he felt unworthy to touch. He went to the inn, packed his portmanteau, and took the next train. It need scarcely be said that it was anything but a pleasant journey; for he had plenty of time in which to realize the enormity of his offence. Youth has a fatal tendency to act on impulse; and Lashmore realized now that he had yielded to a weak and discreditable impulse in coming into the vicinity of the Court.

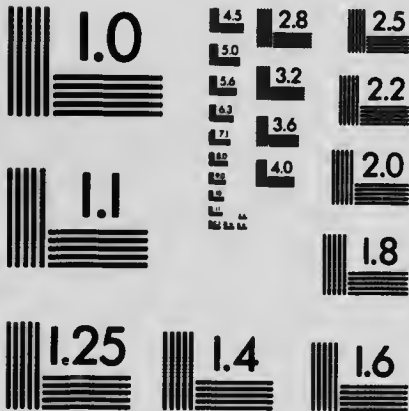
Since the day he had been informed of the terrible fact that he was a nameless outcast, he had felt like a rudderless vessel, drifting at the mercy of the waves





# MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

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and wind ; he had no occupation, no work, to divert his mind from his great trouble ; and he had yielded to the temptation to run into the country, ostensibly for fishing, but really to catch a glimpse of the girl who had made so great an impression on him at Earl's Court. He had not foreseen that Fate would throw them together again, and that he should fall in love with her. In telling her of his love he had been guilty of little less than a social crime ; and he felt like a criminal as he stared out of the window, and recalled with indescribable sensations the expression her face had worn when she had turned away from him. It seemed to him that there could be no expiation of his fault, but that the very least he could do, if he meant to regain a shred of self-respect, would be to find some work, out of England if possible, and plunge into it in search of forgetfulness.

Forbes was shocked and distressed at the sight of his young master's pale and haggard face ; but, of course, he did not ask any questions ; and in silent sympathy he accompanied Lashmore in a survey of 'accounts.' Lashmore found that he had about four hundred pounds remaining ; and he at once announced his intention of going abroad : an intention against which the fond and faithful old man would have liked to remonstrate ; but he knew that no remonstrance would be of any avail ; for there was a look on Lashmore's face which reminded Forbes of the young man's father when in his stubbornest mood.

Lashmore ate very little dinner that evening, and slept as little that night ; for remorse is not a good appetiser, and is a still worse bed-fellow. He rose in the early morning, and, lighting a pipe, went out into the Park to try and get rid of the headache and heart-ache which oppressed him almost as badly as he deserved.

There were not many persons out walking in the Park ; but there were several riding ; and Lashmore

leant against the rail, and watched the horses with the keen eye of one who loves them. At another time he might have looked on enviously, and thought regretfully of the days, not so very long ago, when he had horses of his own; but this morning he had still more poignant matter for regret; so he looked at the bankers and stockbrokers as they jogged by on their solid hacks, at the young girl on her pony, followed by the trim groom, at the stout Bishop, ambling placidly on a cob as stout as, and even more placid, than himself.

But presently Lashmore's attention was aroused by the appearance of a very beautiful horse, a thoroughbred or nearly so, which was picking its way fretfully over the tan. It was a beautiful creature, and evidently as nervous as a cat; and the man who was riding her—Lashmore put him down as a stable-help—had evidently quite enough to do to manage her. As the horse came nearly abreast of Lashmore, it was startled by a child running by with a hoop; it gave a tremendous shy; the man, nearly unseated, pulled hard at it, and the horse rose almost straight. The man swore and struck the horse over the head with a far too heavy crop, and the animal got down on its front legs, and bolted, scattering the bankers and stock-brokers and bishops like a flock of sheep.

Much interested, Lashmore walked quickly across the circle, and was in time to see the man pull the horse up; he was as white as death, and evidently in a terrible funk. Lashmore got under the railing, and went up to them.

'Little bit fresh, isn't he?' he observed.

'Yes, he is,' said the man sullenly, with an oath. 'But I'll take it out of him before I've done with him.'

'I shouldn't thrash him, much less worry him,' said Lashmore. 'He is only nervous and shy; he's a thoroughbred, isn't he? And you've got too tight a curb on him; he'd go better on a snaffle.'

'And break my adjective neck,' said the man, as he started off again.

Lashmore crossed back to his original place; for he was curious to see which would come out on top, horse or man; and in due course the horse approached, plunging and pulling and trying its best to get away, to do anything to relieve the cruel pressure of the bit. As they came up to Lashmore, the horse rose again, and the man was thrown. Lashmore sprang forward, and got hold of the bridle, and the man rose, a little shaken, but not hurt, and came forward with upraised crop. Lashmore caught his arm, and, one is bound to confess, used some strong expressions.

'You ass!' he said; 'strike him, and the next time you get on his back he'll throw you on something harder than tan, and break your silly neck. Whose horse is it?'

The man uttered something about not wanting anybody to interfere with him; but Lashmore cut him short with—

'You don't know how to manage this horse; that's as plain as a pikestaff; and I'm going to show you how. Let the stirrup leathers down a couple of holes, and I'll take him round a turn or two; you'll have pulled yourself together by that time. I shan't run away with him, and he won't run away with me. You can tell your master, if you think it necessary to tell him, that a man who has—had—horses of his own gave you a little assistance. Stand out of the way,' he added warningly, and he got lightly into the saddle, and as lightly felt the bit, the curb of which he had loosened.

The horse plunged and reared slightly, but not feeling the horrible pressure which it expected, but, instead, a soothing hand on his neck, he got down and started, still nervously and feverishly, of course, but with comparative calmness. After a minute or two, Lashmore gave him a little more head, still petting and

talking to it, and the beautiful creature fully comprehending that he had a different kind of rider, became quieter and quieter, and presently Lashmore was riding him with an almost loose rein, 'on a piece of cotton,' and wishing to heaven that the horse were his. He pulled him up after a while in the gentle confiding way which a horse loves, and was patting him and telling him what a really good-tempered animal he was, when a man, who was standing by the rail, smoking a very long and a very black cigar, touched his hat, and said—

'That's a fine animal you're on, sir.'

'He is, indeed,' said Lashmore, with a sharp little sigh.

'Had him long?' inquired the man, who was short and thin, and had that indescribable appearance which one attempts to describe by the word 'horsey.' His clean-shaven face was shrewd and good-natured, and his question was put respectfully, and in a tone of good-natured bonhomie. 'I ask, because you seem to be trying him.'

'I didn't make him in this muck,' said Lashmore. 'It was a fool of a man who had been riding him before I got on: got him on a hard curb, and was frightened of him. He isn't mine, I'm sorry to say. I wish I knew his owner.'

'Then you can have your wish mighty soon, young gentleman,' said the man dryly, and with a twinkle in his keen eyes. 'He belongs to me.'

Lashmore stared at him; then laughed more brightly than he had ever expected to laugh again: he had had a turn on a good horse.

'Then I should recommend you to ride him yourself or get a man who understands how to manage a nervous, high-bred thing like this.'

'I know,' said the man as dryly as before. 'I saw the whole business. He can't ride, and you can.'

'Well, I hope you'll excuse the liberty I've taken;'

said Lashmore; 'and now I'll take him back to the man.'

'I think not, sir,' said the owner. 'I'll lead him to the stables—but perhaps you'd be so very kind as to ride him there? It's a mews not far off.'

'Right!' assented Lashmore. 'I shall be sorry to part company with him.'

He left the ride at the next opening, and walked the horse beside its owner to the mews, dismounted, and gave the animal a good friendly smack by way of farewell. The owner stood eyeing the well-built, lissome figure with obvious approval; then he said—

'Half a moment, sir. My name's Coke—think of coal, then you won't forget it. I'm over here in London on business: staying at a quiet hotel close by. Will you come and have breakfast with me, or a glass of something, if you've breakfasted?'

'I haven't,' replied Lashmore; 'and I'm as hungry as a hunter. I shall be delighted.'

They walked to a quiet hotel in as quiet a street, and Mr. Coke became communicative, if not expansive. It appeared that he had come from South America, where he owned a great deal of land, and that he had run over to England to pick up pedigree cattle and a horse or two. While they were making their way through a good but stolid breakfast, Mr. Coke grew more expansive, and went into details. He was a single man, and ran the show himself; he had started in the world with less than the proverbial half-crown, but was now prosperous; and he spoke with quiet but convincing enthusiasm of the place—it was called Quirapata—where he had made his home and his money.

As they lit their pipes and leant back in the genial glow of an admirable meal, Mr. Coke, who had evidently taken a great liking to his new acquaintance, not a little startled Lashmore by asking him, with a kind of respectful bluntness, who he was and what he was doing, and winding up with—

'If you've nothing particular on hand, I'd like you to come back with me.'

Lashmore coloured. 'My name's Lashmore,' he said. 'I would have told you before, but I haven't had an opportunity.'

Mr. Coke's eyes twinkled. 'I don't always talk so much,' he remarked.

'No, no, I didn't mean that!' said Lashmore, with a laugh. 'I should like to accept your kind invitation; but the fact of it is I can't, just because I am looking for something to do, some work; and, honestly, I can't waste the time.'

'I shouldn't think of asking you to do so,' said Coke. 'I'm not fond of wasting time myself; and between you and me, I don't think I've been wasting it this morning. If you're looking for work, and care for the kind I can offer you, we shan't be long coming to terms. You're a gentleman, I can see; you may be down on your luck——'

'I am,' said Lashmore laconically.

'Quite so. I've been there myself. I'm not a curious man, and I've learnt that it doesn't pay to poke your nose into another person's business. I'll lay odds that your trouble is none of your own making; or I'm no judge of a man. But let that pass; we've got on to the solid bed-rock of business now, and I'll make you a proposal. You come over with me to Quirapata; be my manager, overseer, right hand, whatever you like to call yourself, sign on for three years, and I'll give you'—he considered for a moment, blowing dense clouds of smoke—'two hundred a year. Hold on; you'll want references, of course. How will the London and Westminster Bank suit you? They'll tell you all that's worth knowing about me.'

'It will suit me very well,' said Lashmore gravely; 'but I fear my references will not suit you: I have none.'

Coke was silent for a minute; then to Lashmore's surprise and delight, he said quietly—

'We start on the 14th. You come round to dinner to-morrow night, Mr. Lashmore, and we'll draw up the agreement, and I'll give you some tips as to your outfit. Perhaps it would be convenient if I were to give you an advance——' He took some bank-notes from a pocket-book which was bulky enough to serve for the one which is produced by the typical benevolent personage in a typical melodrama; but Lashmore shook his head, and tried ineffectually to look unmoved by the man's trust in him.

'You're very good,' he said; 'but it isn't necessary. I have some money.'

Mr. Coke returned the note to his pocket-book, and the two men talked hard, or rather, Coke talked and Lashmore listened, for an hour; then parted with a hearty shake of the hand.

The agreement was signed the following evening, and Lashmore informed Forbes of this sudden good fortune—which the old man received almost tearfully, and with the prayer that his young master would remember that if anything went wrong in those 'foreign parts' there was always a home for him in England—and Lashmore, busy with his outfit, would have been almost a happy man, but for the thought of Eva. That he should leave England, perhaps for ever, without trying to convince her that he was not an utter scoundrel, and obtaining her forgiveness, filled him with the bitterness of gall.

Sitting up very late one night and smoking fiercely, he was beset by the almost irresistible desire to write to her; but he was bad at writing a letter of even the simplest kind; and what a complex one this would necessarily be! No; he couldn't write. If he could only see her, for just five minutes! If he could only win her forgiveness; then, indeed, he might start on this new career with something less of the remorse which tortured him.

Not for the last time in his life, Lashmore yielded



to impulse. He would go down to Okefield, and try to get an interview with her. Fate had driven them together, and helped him to his undoing; perhaps it would help him now to her forgiveness; at any rate, he could only seek the opportunity.

It was an exceedingly beautiful moonlight night as he walked along the Okefield road towards the Court. The night was so warm as well as beautiful that Kittie had sauntered out of the cottage, and through the wood. There was no necessity for outdoor things, but, fearing that Mrs. Bickers would scold her if she went out without some extra garment, Kittie had thrown on a long golf cloak, and pulled the hood over her head; so capacious was the hood that it almost concealed her face.

She wandered to the edge of the wood, and, seating herself on a felled tree, looked across the meadow to the river by which she had seen Lashmore and Lady Eva. She was so absorbed in thinking of them, and the hood so closely covered her ears, that she did not hear footsteps amongst the bracken; and she sprang to her feet with an exclamation almost of alarm, as a tall figure came out from amidst the trees, and stood beside her. The moon was behind her, and shone full on the face of the man who had come upon her; and she saw that it was Lashmore.

She stood motionless, staring at him, and he, as motionless, gazed at her. Then, as if he had found his voice with difficulty, he exclaimed, scarcely above a whisper--

'Miss Lyndhurst!'

## CHAPTER IX

### IN THE PLACE OF ANOTHER

‘MISS LYNTHURST!’

Kittie started, her eyes opened on him with a shock of surprise which he must have seen, if the moon had been shining on her face, and the hood had not almost concealed it. For a moment she stood quite still, overwhelmed by the fact that he had actually mistaken her for her double. The words, ‘I am not Miss Lyndhurst,’ rose to her lips, but she checked the denial. The humour of the situation was keenly felt by Kittie; and the Hibernian love of a joke and the desire to carry it on took possession of her to the exclusion of any other feeling. Surely there would be no harm in letting him continue in his mistake for—well, just a minute or two. She wanted to hear what he would say, wanted to see how long she could keep up the delusion.

Her eyes danced under her long lashes, and she had much ado to keep her lips from smiling. Still keeping with her back to the moon, she resumed her seat on the fallen fir, and, turning her head so that her face was now completely concealed from him, she clasped her hands loosely in her lap, and waited in silence; but she knew, though she did not look at him, that Lashmore’s agitation was increasing. He came and stood beside her, his hands gripping each other tightly behind his back, and, with his brows knit and his lips tightly compressed, looked down at her, all his heart in his eyes.

‘I know that I ought not to be here,’ he said at last, as if he did not know how to choose his words, how to begin. ‘I’m almost sure that I am only adding to my

offence in daring to speak to you. I ought to have stayed away, never to have come near you again ; but—but a man can't always behave as he ought to do. I did try to keep away ; but—well, I couldn't. I felt as if I must see you again, and—try and explain, try to get your forgiveness. You see, a man doesn't like to be thought a scoundrel by the girl he—loves. Forgive me for saying that. But you must know it : I shouldn't have spoken the other day as I did if I hadn't loved you.'

Kittie listened with a strained attention. Her eyes had ceased to dance, there was no longer any temptation to smile ; the little farce was approaching dangerously near to a tragedy. The man beside her was certainly in deadly earnest ; his voice was deep and strained, and indicative of strong emotion. Her heart began to beat faster, she trembled a little, and began to feel rather frightened ; but it was too late to stop him, to undeceive him ; indeed, she had now become incapable of speech or movement.

'I wanted to see you once more,' continued Lashmore. 'I know right enough that it's for the last time ; but I couldn't go away for ever without making an attempt to put myself right—no ; I couldn't do that, of course. But to make some excuse, if there is any excuse for behaving like a cad and a scoundrel.'

He sat down on the tree beside her, his head bent, his whole attitude one of dejection and remorse. Kittie knew that he was struggling for words which should express what he felt, and yet not add to his offence. She was consumed by a burning curiosity, and her hands closed on each other a little more tightly.

'I don't know how to begin,' said Lashmore. 'First of all I ought not to have come down here at all. I don't know why I did ; and I haven't any excuse for coming. I was loafing about, sick of myself and all the world ; for I was—am—in trouble : in a very big trouble ; and I jumped at anything that would take me out of myself

and let me forget a little while. Then I wanted to see you again. I'm not going to refer to our first meeting. I promised not to do so ; and I haven't done so, though you'll admit that once or twice you've tempted, tried me very hard. And I found, too, that you, your family, were not unknown to me ; that is to say, that years ago your people knew mine. So I felt drawn to come down on the chance of seeing you. From a distance, mind ! I had no intention of speaking to you.'

He drew a long breath, and made a gesture of helplessness, of a man who had been driven by circumstances he was powerless to control.

'And on the very first day I met you ! I should have turned back at sight of you, kept out of your way ; but there was the affair of the dogs, and I couldn't help myself. I'd have backed out then ; but Sir Talbot came up ; and there I was, helpless ! I give you my word that every day afterwards I made a resolution to go away ; but, of course, I broke it. I was in love from the very first, I suppose, though I tried to tell myself that I wasn't. Why, what man could be with you, day after day, as I was, without falling in love with you !'

He said it so simply, with such earnestness and evident truth, that, though it was not meant for her, Kittie thrilled.

'But though I loved you, I didn't mean to let you know it. I want you to believe that, Eva—Miss Lyndhurst. I knew that it wouldn't be any use. I'm not such a fool as not to know the difference between a man in my position, I mean, between a poor man with no future, and Sir Talbot's daughter. And I am in a worse plight than the kind of man I'm thinking of. I want you to believe that I kept that in my mind all along, and that I never had any hope, any thought, of aspiring to you. I just meant to go on loving you all my life, to keep the memory of you in my heart as a kind of—of goddess.'

Kittie was pale now and trembling. She had never

before heard words of love spoken, excepting on the stage; but they had never sounded so wonderful, so moving, as they did now and here in the shadow of the trees beneath the moon. The glamour of the situation was gradually enfolding her; little wonder that she forgot that the passionate words were not addressed to her, but to another.

'I lost my head,' continued Lashmore, 'at it completely when I saw you lying there, when I held you in my arms, fainting. I didn't know that I was speaking, that I was letting you know that I loved you. I was just out of my senses, mad. I'd like to put that forward as an excuse; but I feel that it isn't one. I ought not to have lost my head, I ought to have remembered that there was a barrier between us—the kind of thing no man can get over.'

His voice was very low, and came with difficulty. Kittie involuntarily made a slight movement, for the tension was almost unendurable.

What was the barrier: what was it that separated him from Miss Lyndhurst—from herself, she almost felt? For the other girl had very nearly faded from her consciousness; and it almost seemed as if Lashmore were pleading to her, Kittie.

'I've got to tell you,' he said, as if in response to her slight movement, 'but I don't know how to do so; for at every word I say, you'll think worse of me, you'll find it harder to forgive me. The fact is, his voice broke, and he paused. 'I told you my name was Lashmore, Harry Lashmore. It isn't.' Kittie started slightly, and turned her face towards him; but he was looking straight before him, and seemed ashamed to meet her eyes; and Kittie, with a quiver of fear at the risk of discovery which she had run, turned her head away again. 'I have no right to that name—or any other,' he said almost inaudibly. 'Do you—understand?'

Kittie shook her head. He wiped the perspiration from his brow, and drew a long breath.

'My father and mother were not married,' he said hoarsely. 'I'm just an outcast, a man without a name, without any standing in the world. It's an insult for me to thrust myself into any decent society, to know decent people; it's worse than an insult for me to tell any woman, the commonest, the humblest in the world, that I love her. And that's what I told you.'

There was silence. Kittie was not so ignorant of the world, as she had known it by books that described it, not to realize the position in which he stood. The farce had indeed turned to tragedy. Curiosity had given place in her bosom to a nobler emotion, perhaps the noblest which woman can feel—pity. Her heart was wrung with pity for this man, so richly endowed with youth and strength, and health, with a goodly presence, a form and face which few of her sex could regard with coldness, and yet cursed by a ban which nothing could remove.

The pity welled up in her heart, and filled her eyes with tears. Now she thought of Eva Lyndhurst, and confusedly wondered what that other girl would do if she were sitting here in Kittie's place and listening to the broken words, the hoarse, strained voice, in every note of which spoke a strong man's agony. Would she turn away from him scornfully, with bitter words of reproach and contempt? What would she, Kittie, do in Eva Lyndhurst's place? The question made her heart leap. For the answer came swift as lightning. She knew that she would turn to him with both her hands extended, and her heart in them. Pity is akin to love: 'tis an old saying, but, like many other old and hackneyed ones, absolutely true; for the maternal instinct is always alive and throbbing in every woman's bosom; she has a craving to comfort, to soothe and succour all who are weary and heavy laden.

Kittie's heart ached for the aching heart beside her, and, probably without knowing, she longed to have him nearer to her, to draw his head to her bosom, to murmur

soft words of pity, of consolation. And Love was not very far off, if it were not actually within her. The silent wood, the odour of the firs, the mystic light from the moon, the whole atmosphere breathed deeply of romance, of the nameless sentiment which passes like an electric current from one sex to the other. If she were only Eva Lyndhurst—! Yes, she would know what to do.

But she was Kittie Norton, an impostor, the mere shadow and likeness of the girl he loved. At that moment there shot into Kittie's bosom a feeling of hatred for the other girl, and she was actually jealous of her. Lashmore spoke again.

'Now I have told you,' he said. 'Now you understand why the other day I didn't stand to my colours, and tell you, when you came to, that I hadn't been raving like a madman, that I loved you and wanted you for my wife. For I tell you frankly that if I hadn't been the outcast I am, I'd have told you, and asked you sharp enough. I wouldn't have let my poverty stand in my way. Other men can make money, and I dare say I could do so; at any rate, I would have had a good try. I'd have asked you to wait, to try and love me, to look forward to the future. But as it was, with this—what do you call it?—stain on my birth—I believe that's the way of putting it,' bitterly, and with a laugh that was almost a groan, 'how could I do so? No man was ever in such a fix. I had to go without a word, leaving you to think that I was the meanest kind of hound, and a scoundrel to boot.

Kittie sighed.

'I felt that I couldn't live,' he went on, 'actually live without telling you the whole truth, and without getting your forgiveness. I felt that that look in your face, in your eyes, would haunt me till I die. I felt that if I didn't get your forgiveness, I shouldn't be able to carry on, that life wouldn't be worth living.'

He paused a moment. 'I'm glad I've told you all



this. I couldn't tell it to any other living being. I mean, the story of my birth. In coming here, in telling you, I hadn't any intention of getting your pity. I don't want that. I just want your forgiveness; I want you to think a little better of me than you must have done; I want you to think of me as not quite a scoundrel. To put it shortly, I want you to forgive me, Miss Lyndhurst.'

Kittie wanted, longed, to say, 'I forgive you;' but she was afraid to speak, lest her voice should betray her.

Lashmore drew a long breath. 'I suppose you're afraid to say so, lest I should continue to worry you,' he said bitterly. 'You needn't have any such fear. I am going away; I am going to leave England—for ever, I hope. I shall never see you again; you will never be distressed by the sight of me.'

Kittie moistened her lips, and endeavoured to still the throbbing of her heart. She got possession of her voice at last.

'Where—where are you going?' she asked, wondering whether he would detect her by her voice. She held her breath in the pause before he answered. To her surprise and immense relief, he did not start to his feet with an exclamation. Her voice must resemble Miss Eva Lyndhurst's as closely as did her face and form.

'I am going to South America,' he said. 'I met a man, by a kind of miracle, who has offered me employment. The name of the place is Quirapata.'

'Quira—?' she murmured.

'Quirapata,' he repeated. 'I'll write it down for you. I haven't any hope that you'll write to me, that you will want to have anything to do with me from now on; but that's the place.'

He tore a page from his pocket-book, wrote on it, and held it out to her. Kittie's small, shapely hand, very white from her illness, stole slowly out from her cape, and took the paper.



'It's a long way off,' he said. 'I am not likely to trouble you again; it is scarcely probable that we shall ever meet; because, you see, I shall stay there. No one will know me, be likely to guess my secret over there. I shall vanish. That's all right, and as it should be. I shall welcome the chance of losing myself, of cutting adrift from England, and any one who might recognize and know me; but I can't do so unless I feel that I have put myself straight with you. Miss Lyndhurst, will you forgive me? That is just what I want to know, I want to take your forgiveness with me, to comfort me, to make me feel less of a cad and a hound than I feel now.'

He leant forward; he was so near to Kittie that she could feel his breath on that part of her face which the hood did not conceal. She knew that he was waiting anxiously for her response; that its import meant, more than a transient ease of mind, a life-long solace. If Eva Lyndhurst sat where she sat, felt as she felt, what would she say? Kittie thrust the question away from her with a mental impatience. Her hand stole from under the cloak, and was extended to him; and in liquid tones, liquid, but deep and penetrating, full of pity and something more than pity, she breathed, almost inaudibly—

'I forgive you.'

Lashmore caught her hand, and sprang to his feet. He held her hand in both of his, and bent over her downcast head.

'You forgive me!' he exclaimed, in so low a voice that she could scarcely hear it. 'I don't deserve it! I don't deserve it! What can I say—how can I thank you! You have lifted a load from my heart, have sent me on again. What an angel of goodness you are! You have forgiven me! It scarcely seems true.—Ah, you don't understand how much it means to me. You know I love you. I would give the world, if I had it, to have the right to woo you, to try and make

you love me in return. But that's impossible, I know,' he added despairfully.

Scarcely knowing what she was saying, obeying the impulse of her heart, moved beyond herself, Kittie turned her pale face to him, and whispered—

'Why?'

## CHAPTER X

### ENTER, DEATH.

**H**E gazed at her with amazement. 'Why!' he cried. 'Because I am—what I am! Do you mean to say——! Heaven and earth, I can't believe it!—Do you mean to say that if I were not what I am, you would—you would listen to me, give me some hope!'

Kittie forgot all about Eva Lyndhurst. She was herself now, Kittie Norton, and the man before her was making love, appealing to her, herself.

She shrank from him a little, for at that moment, as her eyes were fixed on his, as if he would read in them the confirmation of his wild hope, she thought he would recognize her; for the space in which one draws a breath he faltered, and her heart seemed to contract; she turned away again, gasping for breath. But he did not recoil from her, uttered no exclamation, showed no sign of discovering the fraud she was perpetrating, as he gazed down at her.

'You mean—what is it you mean?' he asked, as if he dared not accept the wild hope her single word had given him. 'For Heaven's sake, don't play with me—but you wouldn't do that; you are too good, too gentle, too true!'

His hand sought hers, found it, and held it tightly; his voice trembled, and came painfully.

'Eva, do you know that your question puts hope into me, that—that I am daring to think you might—care for me? Do you, do you? I—I don't want to take advantage of your pity, to trade on it. No, no; I love you too much, too dearly for that! Do you

understand, realize the meaning of what I've told you ?'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'That—that is, if you could bring yourself to care for me—you would be giving yourself to a man who is—what? I have told you I am? Nameless, of no account. Do you really understand this?'

'Yes,' she said again.

His other hand went towards her, but he checked himself. He had played the cur and the scoundrel once; he would not be tempted to do so again; she should have time to think, to realize. He drew his hand from hers quickly, and springing to his feet paced up and down, his brows knit, his lips tightly compressed.

Kittie watched him from under her lowered lids. Now was the time for her to declare herself, to implore his pardon, and fly from him. She did open her lips, but he spoke at the instant, and she remained silent.

'Your father!' he said hoarsely. 'He would never consent. He could not! Think! No, no! I can't do it! I—I can't! And yet——! Eva!' he was beside her again, had got her hand between both of his; 'if you—you loved me—if you believed in me——! Oh what can I say!'

The grip of his hands robbed her of all her strength; her good resolution melted into thin air, was swept away by his passion—and her own. She turned her face to him slowly; he read the admission in it—it was all too plain—and he caught her to him with an exclamation, a cry of joy, of wonder, of surrender.

She hid her face on his breast; and felt his lips touch her hair; and at the touch, the last remnants of her scruples, of her resolution, were scattered. She was caught up in a cloud of sensations in which an ecstatic pleasure, delight, mingled with a nameless pain that was dread: but the delight, the joy, predominated. Love held poor Kittie in thrall;

she was bound body and soul, and powerless. The moments seemed to glide into minutes, days ; all her previous existence appeared to her like a shadowy, intangible thing, and this, this was the first moment of her real life.

'Dearest !' he whispered, his voice still full of wonder, of bewilderment, as if he did not yet realize what had happened. 'What shall I say to you ! You love me ! I—I can scarcely believe it, though I hold you in my arms— !'

He drew her to the tree, and, seating himself beside her, held her closely to him.

'You have given me hope, life, the desire to live, and something to live for, Eva !' he said. 'I am going away now——'

She clung to him more closely, and he felt her quiver.

'Yes ! I must go, dearest. Dear love, it will be like death to part from you ; but I must go. That is my only chance of winning you ! There's work there for me, and—who knows ?—perhaps a future ! That's what I shall strive for, and watch for. For it will mean you, *you* ! And—and, Eva'—he paused, and his voice grew grave with the import of what he was going to propose, to ask of her—'if I should succeed, if the luck—I'm the luckiest, the most fortunate man in the world to-night !—if the luck stands by me, and I should be able to send for you, would you—would you come ? Think, dearest ; don't answer without realizing—— !'

She lifted her face, and looked up at him, forgetting all fear of discovery now.

'Yes,' she breathed. 'I—would—come !'

He kissed her with a passion of love and gratitude.

'Leave everything—your father,—Eva ?'

'Yes,' she whispered. 'I—I should have to come. I could not stay away from you,—if you sent for me.'

'Never to come back ?' he said. 'There should be no deceit, no concealment of the gravity of the case, of the

sacrifice she would make, if she gave up all and came to him. 'It would be for ever, for I shall not be able to come back to England. My life must be spent out there, somewhere where no one knows me, no one knows my story.'

She made a gesture of assent, not a weak or timid one, but one as complete as any words could be; and he pressed her to him, and kissed her again.

'I know now that you love me, Eva,' he said brokenly. 'To give up all for me,—so—so unworthy! Oh, would to God that I were a better man, more worthy of your sacrifice. Dearest, I may write to you? Ah, no, how can I! The letter might be seen——! How can I let you know? How——'

He looked from side to side with a frown. At the question, Kittie came back to her own personality. She grew white to the lips; for she was now face to face with facts, with tangible things. But she was acute; the quick brain came to her aid in a moment. There was a little post office, the usual stationer's, news-vendor's shop, in a street near her own.—She gave him the address, and he repeated it twice and slowly, to impress it on his mind.

'Dearest! How clever you are! Yes; yes! I see! And Eva——' he paused a moment. 'I can't bear to think that I'm leaving you, that I shan't know what is happening to you—— You'll write to me?'

'No, no!' she said, with a little gasp.

He looked at her with a faint questioning, but accepted her refusal.

'You know best, dear love', he said. 'You shall not write unless you want me, unless you are in trouble—though I cannot see what trouble can come to you. But'—he paused, and looked down at her—'if you should want me, or——' he paused again, the contingency was so remote, so unlikely, that it seemed scarcely worth providing against; and yet he would do so. 'If—you could come out to me—no one knows what

may happen in this world—why, hasn't the most wonderful thing happened: you love me! You are here in my arms!—If you can come to me, you will do so; will wait for nothing; let no—no scruples, shyness, keep you back?'

'No,' she whispered. 'I will come.'

They sat, hand in hand, for some minutes; but the moment of parting was creeping down upon them, and they felt its chill approach. She slowly disengaged herself from him; and he understood that the moment had come.

'I'm going,' he said huskily. 'When—when shall I see you again! When I've gone, I shall think I've been dreaming, just dreaming. Give me something belonging to you, something you have worn——.'

She shared his craving, and her heart went out to satisfy him. In the bosom of her dress was a small cluster of roses, so exquisitely counterfeited that they looked like real flowers: they had been fastened to Eva Lyndhurst's pink dress. Kittie took the cluster out, put it to her lips, then offered it to him. He kissed it passionately, and put it away against his heart. Then he drew a ring from his finger, and slipped it on one of hers.

'I remember those roses,' he said almost inaudibly. 'And now it's good-bye, Eva! It's good-bye!'

He took her white face in his hands, and gazed down at it as if he were impressing it on his mind, his very soul. Their lips met, and clung together; then at last, with a groan, his grasp of her relaxed, and he turned away. Twice he came back, to renew the bitterness of the parting; but at last he left her; and Kittie, shaking in every limb, no longer a girl, but a woman storm-tossed on the tempest of love, racked by the sorrow of parting, hid her face in her hands to shut out the sight of his slowly retreating form.

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She fought hard for composure as she slowly went

back to the cottage ; she feared that Mrs. Bickers, near-sighted as she was, might notice her agitation, the white face, the eyelids swollen with tears ; but luck—or her evil genius—continued to stand by her : she found the old lady sleeping peacefully in her armchair beside the open window ; and Kittie stood and looked at her, and then round the room, with a sensation of being enclosed in a cage and stifling. Mrs. Bickers woke under her gaze, and exclaimed, with a start—

‘Why, how late you are, my dear ! I had nearly fallen into a doze. I’ll get the lamp.’

‘No, no !’ said Kittie. ‘I—I have had a long walk, and am rather tired. I will go to bed at once.’

As she kissed the placid face, a pang of remorse smote Kittie, and a dry little sob escaped her. Mrs. Bickers’s arm was round her directly.

‘What is it, dear ?’ she asked anxiously.

‘Nothing, nothing,’ replied Kittie, forcing a laugh. ‘I am only tired. Good-night.’

She lay awake all that night, going over every incident of the scene, dwelling on his words, his looks, his caresses, with a face that was white one moment and burning with shame the next. Now she told herself she was a wicked girl ; then she would plead excuses for herself. It was not her fault ; she had been driven, swept away by the force of his love. And she loved him. If any punishment were lacking, that fact supplied it ; and it was this sudden overwhelming that was the source of her weakness ; for though at intervals she resolved to write to him, and make full confession, she felt that her resolution would not hold, that she would not be able to do it. And through all the gamut of emotions ran the one predominant chord, ‘It is *me* he loves ; it is me, myself.’

She went next morning to the spot where the farce which had turned to tragedy had been enacted, and, closing her eyes, called up his face and listened to his words ; impressing the reality of it all upon her ; and



holding tightly in her palm the ring he had given her, the ring which she had slipped on to her finger again, when she had locked the door of her room.

As the days passed, the whole place became unendurable to her ; there was nothing in its quietude, in its solitude, to divert her mind ; she grew restless under the strain of always thinking, thinking of her great secret and its import.

She bore the torture of the place another week ; then she told Mrs. Bickers that she must go. The old lady's heart was very sorry to part with her, and she begged for another day. Kittie yielded, and remained two ; but on the third, the farewell was spoken with tears on both sides ; and Mrs. Bickers, mopping her eyes, watched the train as it carried Kittie back to London.

Bickers met her at the station, and explained Mr. Norton's absence.

'The fact is, he's not very well to-day,' he said airily. 'Been rather seedy lately : working too hard, I expect. Or a touch of gout perhaps. I persuaded him to stay at home, and let me come. How well you're looking, Miss Kittie !' The journey, the excitement of returning home, had brought the colour back to her face. 'The boys will be delighted to see you ! I've got all kinds of messages. We must have a beno to celebrate the return of the goddess.—No, no ! It's nothing,' he said airily, in response to an anxious question about her father ; 'just a little seedy, nothing more ; he'll be all right now he's got you back. Who wouldn't miss you ? I expect mother's crying her eyes out.'

Kittie tried to tell him how good the old lady had been to her, and how grateful she was. Bickers got the cab and the luggage, and they drove to Denbeigh Street. Kittie tore up the stairs ; her father, calling on her name, came to meet her, and she hugged him, and scanned his face anxiously.

'I'm all right,' he declared. 'I can see Bickers has been gassing about me ; he's a regular old woman.'

Come and tell me all about what you've been doing.'

Her heart smote her at the question. She winced guiltily, and hid her face against him, as she sat, in her old familiar attitude, on the arm of the shabby old chair. She told him about the cottage, about Mrs. Bickers, her goodness, kindness, loveliness, and all the care she had taken of her.

'We must have her up to London to stay with us, D. J., and take her about to see the sights. She would enjoy it so!'

He seized on the idea eagerly. 'Yes, yes!' he said. 'You must take her about, to the kind of places she would like; Earl's Court, and so on. Of course!'

Kittie unwound her arms, and rose from the chair.

'I must go and unpack, dear,' she said. 'Oh, how good it is to be home again!'

'I say!' he called after her. She stopped at the door, but did not turn her face. 'We must have a bit of a flare up to-night. I've asked the boys, all of them to come in to supper. They're all mad to see you.'

They came in rich attire—at any rate, the richest they possessed—and bearing presents; a little band of royal courtiers, eager to welcome their queen home again. Kittie and Hagnes Hevangeline had got together a splendid meal, in which the individual tastes of the guests had been carefully considered; and, yielding to the blandishments of Mr. Norton, Bloggs had sent in a plentiful supply of claret and whisky. Seated at the head of the table, Kittie, all smiles, queened it indeed. They all wanted to talk at once, to tell her what had happened during her long absence; and they all obviously envied Bickers the possession of a mother who had been blessed by the ability to succour their young goddess.

'I assure you he has been most insufferable while you've been away Miss Kittie,' said Vilorne. 'To hear him talk, any one would think that there was only

one mother in the world, and that Bickers, by some special virtue, had got her. And he gasses about that 'cottage by the wood' until, to get rid of it, we have to go and stare at Buckingham Palace. If you hadn't come home, we should have killed Bickers.'

'That's so,' said Teddy Wilson. 'I tell you, Miss Kittie, that I've had the greatest difficulty in keeping the words 'mother' and 'cottage by the wood' out of my articles for the *Daily Telephone*.'

'You're just in time for the first night of the new play at the Comus, Miss Kittie,' said Mandeville. 'I should have refused to play—I would have made 'em put it off—if you hadn't come back. I've got a fine part; and I want to go over it with you, as we did last time.'

'And I've got a set of verses I want you to hear,' broke in Percy Vilorne eagerly. 'Best thing I've ever done. I've called it "The Wood Nymph." It's about a girl, a beautiful girl, who goes into the country——'

Kittie responded to one and all of them, her face flushed, her eyes sparkling with happiness. Her father, sitting opposite her, his face more than flushed, his eyes beaming with fond pride, presided at the feast with a geniality and aplomb, which were worthy of ever De Courcy Norton. They were all hungry; the wine passed freely, and freely ran the laughter, the jest, the bit of literary gossip, the note of good-natured criticism. They were at the height of their enjoyment, when there came a knock at the door.

'Come in!' cried Norton. Hagnes Hevangeline opened the door, and discovered the tall, spare form and wrinkled face of Mr. Levison. 'Hullo, Levison!' said Norton. 'Come in! You're just in time.—Hagnes Hevangeline, a chair for Mr. Levison.'

Levison bent over Kittie with a murmured apology; but she had the chair squeezed in next her own, and made him sit down. The feast took on a new lease; what remained of the eatables was presently removed

by the perspiring Hagnes; the big, cracked punch bowl was placed in front of Mr. Norton, cigars and tobacco were distributed; and the room soon grew hazy. Percy Vilorne, very red in the face and with a sudden and astonishing air of bashfulness, knocked on the table with his pipe, and cried—

‘Silence, gentlemen, for a toast!’

The demand was met by a fearful noise of banging tumblers and shouts of ‘Bravo, Percy!’ Norton leant back in his chair with an anticipatory smile, and Percy began with much stammering and nervousness.

‘I feel that on this occasion—that on this occasion I feel—I say that on this occasion I cannot but feel—’

‘You ought to feel like an ass, for that’s what you look like, dear boy,’ said Wilson quite good-temperedly.

‘If you think you can do it better yourself—’ retorted Percy indignantly, but with equal good temper.

‘Shut up, Wilson! Go on, Percy; don’t mind him. It’s only envy. We can’t all be orators.’

‘Well, look here,’ said Percy, abandoning the idea of a speech. ‘You know my toast well enough. It’s Miss Kittie! Miss Kittie, and God bless her!’

They filled their glasses with anything that happened to be nearest, sprang to their feet, and raised their glasses on high, calling, ‘Miss Kittie, God bless her!’

Kittie still smiled, but her eyes were full of tears. She looked round at them all with a little piteous entreaty, and her lips opened, but they quivered so much that she could not speak.

‘Oh, I can’t say anything!’ she murmured to Levison, who was looking round with his dry smile. ‘Father, you—you tell them!’

De Courcy, every inch the Dook, rose with his hand thrust in his bosom, looking down on them with a genial, bland, paternal smile of pride and benediction.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, clearing his throat, ‘my daughter is so overcome by the great honour you have done her that she has deputed to me the pleasant and

welcome task of thanking you for the great kindness, the affection—the affection—the affection——’

He paused, the colour began to fade slowly from his face, a look of wonderment, of something like terror, shone in his eyes, the hand in his bosom clutched at his heart; he swayed to and fro, then gasping, as if for breath, fell back in his chair, with his head dropped on his breast.

There was a moment of terrible silence, then they sprang to their feet, overturning some of the chairs, and hurried to him. But Kittie was already at his side. With a cry of alarm she threw her arms round him and drew his head to her bosom.

‘Oh, what is it, father, what is it!’ she cried. ‘He has fainted! He is ill!’

Levison stepped between her and the crowd around them, bent over the stricken man, then laid his thin hand on Kittie’s shoulder. Something in his touch, in the expression of his keen dark eyes, softened now, conveyed the truth to her.

Her father was dead.

## CHAPTER XI

### LORD HERNDALE

EVA was not seriously hurt by her fall from the bridge; indeed, she was not so much affected by it as by the strange behaviour and words of Harry Lashmore. Few women are surprised when a man declares his love for them; for the youngest and most inexperienced girl is quick to see the premonitory symptoms; and Lashmore's eyes had often been eloquent. But she was amazed and wounded by his manner when she had fully recovered consciousness, by the sudden cessation of his avowal.

She tingled with shame as she recalled the expression of his face, his attitude, as he had stood tongue-tied, awkward and embarrassed, before her. To have said so much and yet to have refrained from saying more was almost an insult to her; and the shame which she felt was caused by the conviction that if he had continued to make love to her instead of stopping suddenly and drawing back, she might have yielded.

She did not love Lashmore—yet; but she felt that it would not be difficult to do so. His conduct was inexplicable; for he had always seemed so frank and honest. And he was a gentleman.

She remained in her room for some time trying to solve the problem, trying to salve her wounded pride; then she went downstairs, dressed for dinner.

'You look pale; are you tired?' said Sir Talbot, as he took his seat.

'No, I am all right,' she replied. 'Did you get a good basket?'

'Fairly good; they weren't rising very well. Oh, by the way, Mr. Lashmore has left us. He was called to town suddenly. I am sorry. I shall miss him very much; for he is a very nice and pleasant young fellow.'

Eva was not surprised, and she did not blush.

'I'm afraid it was bad news,' said Sir Talbot, 'for he looked rather upset. He did not say what it was, and, of course, I did not ask him; though, I must confess, I should like to have done so, for he interests me very much.'

Eva felt that she must say something. 'I am afraid you will miss him, dear. You must take me fishing with you.'

'Yes,' he said, absently, then he looked up. 'You will have another companion. Isn't it the day after to-morrow that Lord Herndale comes?'

'Yes,' said Eva.

She had forgotten him.

But she was almost glad that he was coming; for the preparations for his visit provided her with an occupation which distracted her thoughts. One of the best rooms was allotted to him, and she saw that it was in proper order, and with her own hands filled a huge bowl with roses and supplied the writing bureau with notepaper and the rest of it. The big barouche was sent to meet him, and she heard it return, and felt slightly curious about its occupant as she dressed for dinner.

When she went down to the drawing-room she saw Lord Herndale standing by the window. The door had been open; he had not heard her enter, and she had a moment or two in which to observe him before he was aware of her presence. She saw that he was tall and thin, with a presence that might fairly be described as distinguished. He was very fair, and his hands, clasped loosely behind his back, were almost as small and white as a woman's; he was standing looking out across the park with his head slightly



bent, and she could just catch his profile, and could see that he was good-looking.

It was a clever face, so she thought, one appropriate to the 'struggling barrister' he had been until quite recently. The eyes were grey and somewhat cold; the lips also had a touch of coldness, of the firmness and power of resolution which come to most men who have struggled with anything; and this firmness and determination were also indicated by the rather square jaw.

She moved slightly; he heard the frou-frou of her dress, but he did not turn quickly, though Eva knew that he had become aware of her presence. He waited until she had taken a step or two towards him, then he turned and came to meet her; but without the conventional smile, and with a certain gravity, almost as if he were on guard, as if he did not choose to commit himself to even the usual smile until he was quite sure that it was appropriate. His eyes met hers openly enough, but with a kind of veiled scrutiny, so veiled that Eva was not sure that it was there.

'How do you do, Lord Herndale?' she said. 'I hope you have had a pleasant journey.'

He took her hand and bent over it slightly with something more than self-possession, and made a suitable response.

'It has been a very pleasant and a very interesting journey,' he said; 'the scenery is very fine all along the line. You live in a beautiful place, Miss Lyndhurst.'

Eva listened to his voice rather than to his words, as a woman will when meeting a man for the first time; and half-unconsciously she decided that it was a good voice, well modulated and pleasant, but, like his eyes and expression, rather cold and a trifle hard and keen.

'Of course, you've seen my father?' she said.

'Yes, I have had an opportunity of thanking Sir



Talbot for having me down here. It was very kind of him to ask me, and I was very glad to come. I have been working very hard lately; for, of course, there was a great deal to do; I mean in connection with the estate; and it was work with which I am necessarily quite unacquainted.'

Eva thought that it was rather nice of him to refer so modestly to his sudden and unexpected accession to the title. Sir Talbot came into the room at the moment, and dinner was announced. The two men talked together during the earlier portion of the dinner and Eva listened. It was only natural that she should mentally compare Lord Herndale and Mr. Lashmore. They were very different. There was a certain frankness both in manner and speech, a sort of boyishness in Lashmore, which were markedly absent in Lord Herndale, though they must have been about the same age. Lashmore expressed himself promptly and freely on any and every subject, all his attitudes and movements were free, as those of a man born in the purple and who had spent his life in amusing himself.

On the other hand, Lord Herndale spoke with deliberation, and just a trifle stiffly, almost as if he were keeping a watch on his words and his slightest movements; but he was absolutely self-possessed, and seemed fully aware of his position, though he made no snobbish display of the fact that by a fortunate fluke he had slid into an earldom. At the same time he spoke quite candidly of the great change in his life, and Eva listened as he replied deliberately, but without hesitation, to her father's questions.

'The estate is by no means in good order,' he said. 'My uncle was, I should think, an easy-going man—I say I think, because I knew very little of him. I had not seen him since I was a boy. And you may be aware, Sir Talbot, there was an estrangement between my father and him.'

Sir Talbot nodded rather sadly. 'The late Lord Herndale was rather—eccentric,' he said. 'I fear that he quarrelled with most of his friends and relations.' He glanced at Eva and changed the subject of the late Lord Herndale's idiosyncrasies. 'You have a good steward, I hope?'

'Yes, I think so,' replied the new Lord Herndale; 'but I intend looking after things myself. It will give me something to do. I have been accustomed to hard work, and I should not—in fact, I could not—be satisfied with an idle life. I was just making my way at the Bar when I fell into this thing'—he paused a moment and smiled rather coldly and grimly—'and at first I was not too elated that I should no longer have to fight for bread and cheese, but that something better than bread and cheese were awaiting me without any effort on my part. Oh, yes; I shall find plenty to do. It will take some time, probably years, before I get the estate in order. The preserves have been very well kept up; my uncle and—his son were keen sportsmen, I believe.'

Sir Talbot coloured slightly at the scarcely perceptible pause, and glanced apprehensively at Eva. He did not want her to know anything of the tragic story of the unfortunate young man's illegitimacy; at any rate, he did not want it discussed before her. Lord Herndale seemed to understand, and he glided on with cool self-possession.

'But everything else has been very much neglected. I wonder whether you will be so very kind as to give me the benefit of your valuable advice and experience, Sir Talbot?'

Of course, Sir Talbot looked pleased. 'Certainly, certainly!' he said promptly. 'I shall be glad to do so. We must have some talks together.'

Lord Herndale bowed slightly in acknowledgment, and at once turned to Eva. As he talked, Eva remembered the lavish entertainments which Aunt Lucy had

written on him ; and before she rose from the table she was forced to admit that Lord Herndale merited some of the encomiums, and that he was both clever and brilliant. She was half inclined to think that it was almost a pity he should have been taken from the profession in which he would evidently have shone.

When she was alone in the drawing-room, she asked herself if she liked him ; and strangely enough she found the answer somewhat difficult ; strangely, because it is a question which women usually settle very quickly.

Sir Talbot pushed the claret jug towards his guest, and offered him a cigarette.

'I don't like to allude to the subject, Herndale,' he said ; 'but have you seen, heard anything of the late Lord Herndale's son ? By the way, my daughter does not know anything of the story : and I don't intend to tell her anything about it. Of course, she may hear of it elsewhere ; but——'

'I quite understand, Sir Talbot,' said Herndale. 'I referred to him just now by a slip of the tongue. I will be more careful in future. No ; I have not seen or heard anything of him, I am sorry to say. When I learnt how it was that I had come into the title, I at once wrote to him expressing my sympathy, and offering him, as delicately as I could, a suitable allowance. I think I may say to you that it was not an illiberal one.'

'I am sure it would not be,' murmured Sir Talbot approvingly.

'He did not write to me—poor fellow, I can quite understand that !—but I got a letter from Wensley, the family lawyer, declining my offer. I wished to see him ; but he disappeared immediately after the funeral, at which I was unfortunately not able to be present, for I was spending my vacation in Italy. I have made several attempts to find him, to get tidings of him, but quite unsuccessfully. His conduct is very natural, of course.'

Sir Talbot nodded. 'Yes; it's what most of us would do—disappear. It is a sad story—even you must feel that, Herndale.' Lord Herndale inclined his head. 'And I must confess that I cannot understand it. I knew your uncle years ago; we were at school together, and until we quarrelled I saw a great deal of him. I should have thought that he would have been the last man to—to contract an alliance with a girl, and so beautiful and so suitable a girl, without going through the marriage ceremony. They were abroad when he ran away with her; and I suppose there were some difficulties in the way of the marriage. We shall never know the truth; for I understand that the statement he made on his deathbed was almost incoherent.'

Lord Herndale looked up quickly; there was a slight glint, like the flash of steel, in his cold eyes.

'Quite coherent enough,' he said. 'He declared his son to be illegitimate; no marriage certificate could be found; and, of course, every possible search, every possible inquiry, was made.'

'Quite so, quite so!' assented Sir Talbot promptly. 'Of course, you, and the lawyers, would want to be fully convinced of the fact.—Do you fish? I'm afraid it's the only sport I can offer you at this season.'

'I am very fond of it,' said Lord Herndale; 'indeed, it is about the only sport I have been able to indulge in; for though I ride and shoot a little, I have not been able, of course, to afford horses or shooting.'

'Ah, all that is altered now; you will be able to indulge all your tastes. The estate is a very large one——'

'Yes,' put in Lord Herndale; 'but there is very little money in hand at present. My uncle lived up his income; a little beyond it, indeed. But there will be plenty of money presently. Yes'—he leant back in his chair, and spoke in a low voice and slowly, with a kind of repressed satisfaction—'there will be

plenty of money. I shall hunt—there are some good horses in the stable.'

For some reason or other, the remark, which Lord Herndale had let slip, as if he had been for the moment off his guard, jarred on Sir Talbot.

'Will you have some more wine?' he said. 'No? Shall we go into the drawing-room?'

Eva was at the piano; but she rose as the gentlemen entered; and Lord Herndale went up to her at once, stood beside the tea table, and took up the conversation at the point at which it had remained when she had left the dining-room. He made no slips now; and he was not only clever and brilliant, but in a way charming; for he talked well, with a deferential manner, a desire to please and to be pleased which always tell with women, especially young ones.

Presently her father requested her to sing. As Lord Herndale followed her to the piano, she asked him if he sang or played.

'No,' he replied quietly. 'I have no parlour tricks; I have never had any time to acquire them. Of course, I am fond of music: who isn't!'

He stood, with one hand resting on the piano, regarding her while she sang; and there gradually stole into his eyes the keen, considering expression with which he ran over a brief; as if he were calculating chances. Few men could be insensible to Eva's beauty, and certainly Lord Herndale was not. She had a sweet voice—it was not so powerful or so good as Kittie's—and, as he listened to her, something stirred in his heart that had never fluttered there before; and he was so absorbed by it, so surprised by it, that it was with something like a start that he thanked her, and begged her to sing again. She complied at once; and he moved away from the piano, so that he might regard her less conspicuously.

Though he had seen and known many beautiful and charming girls, he had never been in love in his

life ; and as his eyes rested, with that veiled look of calm consideration, on Eva's face, he wondered whether he was going to fall in love now. The three of them talked for a little while ; then Eva, who was an open-air girl, and liked going to bed and getting up early, retired, and the men went into the billiard-room for their smoke and soda and whisky. Sir Talbot was rather favourably impressed by the young peer, and over a cigar became somewhat communicative.

Without saying anything definite, he conveyed the fact that he was a comparatively poor man, and that he was struggling to provide for Eva.

'It is so difficult to invest the little money one is able to save,' he complained with a sigh.

Lord Herndale nodded. 'One wants to be in the swim, as they call it,' he said thoughtfully. 'Some men make large sums of money on the Stock Exchange. I used to see a great deal of stock-brokers and financiers when I was practising ; and occasionally I got some useful tips from grateful clients. It helped me a great deal.'

'You were very fortunate,' remarked Sir Talbot, with a suppressed eagerness.

When Lord Herndale went up to his room and had dismissed his valet, he stood before the glass, as if he were surveying himself ; but it was only a trick of his, and was not prompted by vanity ; for he did not see his own reflection, but the beautiful face of Eva Lyndhurst ; and the acute brain was at work. He was asking himself if he should fall in love with her ; and it was characteristic of the man that he did not ask whether she might come to love him, as most men would have done under the circumstances. If he meant falling in love with her, he would not allow his success to depend upon such a mere chance. It was too risky to be relied on. No ; there were other ways of getting her, if he wanted her.

'She is very beautiful,' he said to himself. 'She

would fill the position admirably. Sir Talbot is poor, in difficulties——”

As he turned away from the glass, the steel-like glint came into his eyes, his lips closed and grew straight, as if the acute brain had caught an idea, seized on an advantage. Once or twice, as he undressed slowly, he stopped and looked before him with narrowed eyes, as if he were working out an intricate problem.



## CHAPTER XII

### KITTIE'S TEMPTATION

**K**ITTIE sat in the little workroom making a dress. She looked very slight and thin and fragile in her black, and her face was like ivory, excepting for the shadows under the eyes, which had worn themselves out with weeping. Poor De Courcy Norton had been lying in Kensal Green Cemetery for nearly a month, and Kittie was still here in Denbeigh Street, for the simple and all-sufficient reason that there was nowhere else for her to go ; and, if there had been, she would not have had sufficient heart and energy to move ; for it is mercifully ordained that a terrible shock of grief like hers shall be followed by a stupor which enfolds body and mind alike.

But she knew this afternoon that she would not be able to remain in her present lodgings much longer. Modest and shabby as they were, she would not be able to afford them ; for it is scarcely necessary to say that her Bohemian father had died as poor as he had lived. There was only a little money in hand, and a few outstanding payments to come in from publishers and managers ; and these small sums Kittie knew, by sad experience, would soon be exhausted.

Of course, the future which lay so black before her had been keenly and sympathetically discussed by the friends who had stood by her so staunchly through her great trouble. All sorts of projects had been started ; but there was a difficulty in all of them. If the good-natured Bohemians could have had their way they would have liked to levy a tax on their collective earnings, and place the result at Kittie's disposal ;



they cared not how heavy the tax might be, if they could keep her in their midst, to protect, to worship her, as they had done of old. But the main, if not the only difficulty, lay in the fact that Kittie was proud, as, they acknowledged, a goddess should be. They met in frequent conference, each making suggestions which were pooh-poohed by the others.

Percy Vilorne, the most unpractical of the band, hinted that Kittie might be led to believe her father had left a considerable sum behind him ; but the idea was scouted with scorn.

'Fancy trying to take our Miss Kittie in with such a feeble plant as that !' said Bickers, with something like indignation. 'She'd spot it in a moment ; and then where should we be ?'

'Why not let her go down to your mother's "cottage by the wood ?"' said Teddy Wilson.

Bickers shook his head. 'I've tried that ; of course, I've tried it. D'you think I haven't any brains ? Thought of it the first thing. My mother would be delighted ; she wrote to Kittie ; and I tried all I knew to persuade her ; but she won't go. Looks too much like—like charity ; and, of course, Miss Kittie shies at that.'

'If we could only get her something to do,' said Mandeville, gazing round thoughtfully at the shabby walls of the cheap Soho restaurant, where they were holding the conference.

Teddy Wilson shook his head. 'Yes ; but what can she do ? She can't teach——'

'I should like to see Miss Kittie wearing herself out over a lot of snivelling brats !' remarked Vilorne, with a snort.

'There's typewriting—but that's worse, if anything,' said Bickers.

'Not to be thought of,' declared Mandeville. 'I know a girl who does that ; and she says that she's always got a headache, and that she hears the click of the keys

all the while she's asleep. Miss Kittie's awfully clever with her needle; makes her own dresses——'

'That's very different to making other people's,' said Bickers. 'Of course, there are ever so many things she could do; but there is no money in them, worse luck.'

It was significant that no one of them suggested, or even thought of, the stage; they would have considered the idea a profanation.

'Aren't there any relations, old friends?' asked Mandeville.

'Not that I know of,' said Wilson; 'not that any of us know of. And if there were, Miss Kittie would be too proud to hang on to them. I know that game: dependent in the house of an uncle or cousin, with all the family looking down on her; or living with a maiden aunt, who would treat her like an upper servant, except that she wouldn't pay her any wages. Miss Kittie would stand that for a long while, wouldn't she!'

'Something must be done,' said Teddy Wilson moodily. 'There can't be much money left; though we've tried to fake it in the matter of expenses.'

They had succeeded in deceiving poor Kittie over the undertaker's bill and some of the outstanding accounts. Bloggs, for one, had been squared, to the extent of at least two-thirds of his bill.

'Pears to me, we'd better hear Miss Kittie's views—if she has any yet, poor child! I vote that Bickers go round to her this evening, and see if she is able to talk about matters. It would all be easy enough, if she would only let us look after her.'

'Which she won't,' said Teddy Wilson; and the rest shook their heads in regretful assent.

Bickers went round to Denbeigh Street soon afterwards, and found Kittie at work at the plain and cheap black dress. She gave him her thin hand, and smiled wanly at him; she did not weep, though the sight of

him recalled the dead father ; for her tears were exhausted for the time. With a poor assumption of cheerfulness, even of nonchalance, Bickers approached the all-important subject, and he was both grieved and relieved to find that she was equal to discussing it.

'Of course, there's no hurry,' he said, with an air ; 'you know we've got plenty of money in hand, Miss Kittie.'

She looked at him with a little smile, which made Bickers grow red and fidget.

'I know exactly, or pretty nearly, how much,' she said. 'I think I know, can guess, how much you have already done for me ;' her voice quavered, but she mastered it. 'Of course, I have got to get my own living——'

'There's plenty of time. If you'd only go down to mother's for a while——!' urged Bickers.

She winced and shook her head. 'I shall find something to do,' she said. 'I was thinking of it just before you came in. I haven't been able to do so before. There must be something.'

At that moment the door opened, and Agnes appeared.

'Mr. Levison, miss,' she said.

Kittie braced herself and nodded, and Mr. Levison came in. As he entered, Bickers rose to go ; but Kittie, with a slight motion of her hand, signed to him to remain. Mr. Levison's face looked more impassive and expressionless than usual ; and after he had greeted Kittie in his low measured voice, he sat looking at his boots for a minute or two, then, raising his eyes slowly, he said—

'I suppose Mr. Bickers is here on the same errand as mine, Miss Kittie ?'

'Yes,' said Kittie. 'We were talking about my "future": sounds a very large word, doesn't it, for so insignificant a person ? We can't decide whether I shall save an old lady from being run over and inherit

all her money ; discover that I have a millionaire uncle, who adopts me ; or whether I'm to earn my living by nursing—I'm afraid all my patients would die ; type-writing—I never could spell words of more than two syllables—or going out as a companion to some snuffy old lady with whom I should quarrel on the first day. Have you any advice to give, Mr. Levison ?

'Yes,' said Levison, in his slow way, 'or I shouldn't have come. All the things you have been talking about are impossible—as you know. There is one thing you can do, and do well. And there's a fortune in it ; all the other things mean starvation.'

Kittie looked up quickly, then down again at her needlework.

'Of course I mean the stage,' he said. 'I've seen a manager ; he is quite willing to engage you, on my word, my recommendation. He offered good terms, very liberal ones. I have a letter from him in my pocket ; it only wants a sixpenny stamp to be an agreement.' He took it from his pocket-book, and held it out to her. 'Read it, at any rate,' he said, as she shook her head.

She read the letter, and her face flushed, but it quickly grew pale again, and her brows came together with a look of determination. Bickers, who had also grown red, drew a breath of relief.

'I couldn't do it,' she said, returning the letter to Levison. 'No, no ; I could not ! I—I am very grateful to you ; but—it's impossible.' Her eyes grew moist, but no tears fell. 'I promised him that I would not, and I will keep my promise. It is a liberal offer, a good chance, but—no, no, I cannot ! I—I'd rather starve.'

Mr. Levison's face expressed no disappointment or chagrin as he returned the letter to its place.

'I am happy to think there is no question of starving, Miss Kittie,' he said, almost cheerfully. 'No doubt we shall find something in another direction. It's a pity, of course. The profession has its advan-

tages ; there are great prizes. And there can be no question of your success.'

Kittie rose suddenly, her lips quivering, her hand pressed against her bosom.

'No, no,' she breathed.

'Better chuck it, Mr. Levison,' warned Bickers, in a low voice.

'Certainly, certainly,' said Levison. 'I am very sorry to have distressed you, Miss Kittie. I had better go now. I hope you will forgive me. If you should change your mind——'

'I never shall, I never shall!' she said, as she gave him her hand. 'I am grateful to you—but—no, no!—I can't do it.'

The two men went down the stairs in silence ; it was not until they reached the street that Bickers said—

'She'll keep her promise, Levison. And I'd be sorry if she didn't. Miss Kittie's too good for the stage.'

Mr. Levison shrugged his shoulders slightly. 'There are plenty of good women on the boards,' he said. 'It was a foolish promise. If Miss Kittie can find something else—But can she? That's the question.'

Kittie soon found that it was indeed a very grim question ; she discovered, what most of us suspect, that though there is a great deal of work to be done in the vast City of London, there are more than enough people to do it. She discussed the matter almost hourly with the faithful Hagnes Hevangeline ; she answered advertisements with an expenditure of stationery and notepaper which brought no results ; and to the advertisements which she herself inserted no replies came excepting from registration offices and employment agencies. The time passed with gruesome rapidity : she saw her little stock of money diminish as rapidly. She would have to leave Denbeigh Street for a single room, an attic, in a still cheaper neighbour-

hood ; and she must make the move without letting the boys know ; for she knew that they would oppose it strenuously, and insist upon giving her money.

She found a room, a miserable room, at the top of a miserable house, in an equally miserable street in Westminster ; and choosing Hagnes Hevangeline's afternoon out, she moved thither, leaving a letter of good-bye—a letter that was written, and also read, with tears—for the tender-hearted slavey.

Kittie had, of course, written also to the boys through Bickers. In neither letter did she give her new address. What it cost Kittie to leave the shabby home in which she had been so happy, to write those two letters, no pen can describe. She felt as if she were parting from her old life for ever, as if she had not only lost her father, but every friend also, and were drifting out to an unknown sea.

And now began in more terrible earnest a fiercer struggle to keep the wolf from the door ; and the effort so absorbed all her physical and mental powers that she had scarcely time or desire to think of anything else. At times the episode at Deerbrook came back to her, and she recalled the amazing scene in the moonlight when she had lain in Lashmore's arms, listened to his passionate avowal, and made the still more amazing compact with him. But the whole incident seemed so vague and nebulous as to be more of a dream than a reality ; and, but for the presence of the pink dress and the ring—which she had kept, though all her other little trinkets had gone to the pawnbrokers—she could easily have been persuaded that she was the victim of a delusion.

Now and again she was fortunate enough to get work. She found a place in a collar factory ; but the heat of the room, the noise of the machines, the long hours, soon told upon her ; and the forewoman saw that she was not fitted for such work, and, kindly and regretfully enough, discharged her. For a week or two after

this Kittie was in sore straits, and it was inevitable that she should think of Mr. Levison's offer, of the salary and perhaps fortune which awaited her if she should yield; but, great as the temptation was, she resisted it. She could starve, die perhaps, but she would not break her promise to her father, who had never shown his love more plainly than when he had exacted it from her.

One day she was on her way to pay a visit to a registry office in Chelsea on the chance of something turning up, and she passed the little news-vendor's shop to which she had told Lashmore that he might address any letters, if he wrote. She paused and looked before her hesitatingly. It was just possible he had written; but even if he had, what could it matter to her? It would be better to let the letter lie there; it would be better that she should forget him, that she should let him think that she—that is, Eva Lyndhurst—had broken the compact.

But, of course, she went into the shop, and as casually as she could, fighting hard to keep the colour from her face, she asked if there were a letter for her. Her heart leapt and then seemed to stand still as the woman handed her a letter.

'Twopence, please,' she said.

Scarcely knowing what she did, Kittie parted with the two precious pennies, and, with the envelope hidden in her hand, went into the grounds of Chelsea Hospital, and, sinking on to one of the seats, sat gazing before her, and breathing hard. It was some time before she could open the envelope.

It was a short letter, but every line of it breathed the passionate love which had overwhelmed her on that moonlit night.

He had reached the place, Quirapata. It was a wild, beautiful country; he had to work hard, but it was work he delighted in. 'The man he was with was one of the very best,' and he (Lashmore) would be



perfectly happy if—— There followed words, words of love and longing, which made her burn as she read them, made her thrill from head to foot, and filled her heart with a longing which she felt must be even keener than his. At the end came a pregnant sentence—

‘Dearest, you remember our last words? If I should send for you; if, for any reason you wish to come to me without waiting for me to send for you, you would come! Sometimes I lie awake and wish you were poor and friendless—a cruel wish, but I can’t help it, that you had no one to turn to but me, and that you were obliged to come to the poor wretch who loves you better than his own life.’

She gasped with a choking sob. His wish had been granted. She was poor and friendless; if she were really Eva Lyndhurst she could go to him. She closed her eyes and saw a beautiful sunlit country, far away from this present misery; she saw him standing—no, hastening,—to meet her, with outstretched hands and love in his eyes; she saw herself falling on his breast, felt his arms enfolding her, succouring her—

She rose from the seat, weak and trembling, and thrust the vision from her. For a time she walked on mechanically; then she remembered the registry office and slowly made her way there. There were several persons waiting in the stuffy room, women old and young, but all careworn and shabbily dressed. The person at the desk had nodded to her and pointed to a chair, and Kittie sat down and waited with the others. Her turn came at last, and the person in charge beckoned to her.

‘I suppose there is nothing for me?’ said poor Kittie, trying to smile.

The official turned over the pages of her ledger. ‘Let me see, Miss Bowman,’—that was the name Kittie had given—‘Well, I may have something here; but I don’t know whether it would suit you. A lady



wants a companion. Have you any objection to travel, Miss Bowman ?'

Kittie could have laughed at the question.

'Not any,' she replied. Her heart would have beat fast with hope, but the visions she had thrust from her had left her numbed with despair, 'I should like to travel. What is it ?'

'It's a lady who is going abroad. She is somewhat of an invalid, and wants some one, a lady, as a companion. She will take her own maid ; but the maid may be ill on the voyage or she may not, of course.'

'I understand,' said Kittie. 'Perhaps she would engage me. I am not likely to be ill.'

'Well, at any rate, you might go and see her ; there's no harm in trying. I'll give you her address. It's quite close here.'

She wrote 'Mrs. Vanstone, 176 Hans Crescent,' on a slip of paper, and Kittie went off with it, thinking, it must be confessed, very much more of the letter in her pocket than the slip in her hand.

Mrs. Vanstone was at home, and Kittie was taken upstairs to a daintily furnished room in which as dainty a lady reclined languidly on a couch. She was a woman still in her youth, rather pretty, and evidently amiable, for she received Kittie in kindly fashion, told her to bring a chair near her, and explained what she wanted ; and it was obvious that she was much prepossessed by Kittie's appearance and manner.

'By the way, I hope you are not delicate,' she said, after a pause. 'You look rather——'

Kittie's lips trembled a little. 'I am very strong,' she said. 'I have only had one illness in my life that I remember, influenza ; but I have had a great deal of trouble recently.' Mrs. Vanstone glanced at the plain black dress and the white face, and nodded sympathetically. 'And I am very poor. It is difficult to find work. I hope you may engage me.'

'Really, I think I will,' said Mrs. Vanstone, 'for I am sure we should get on very well together. I want a lady.—Oh, I've seen so many! Such a quantity of old frumps, and young women who are worse than old! Y's, I think I will. Go to the table there and write down your references.'

Kittie went to the table and wrote the name of the clergyman of the church in the grimy square near her attic. He had been to see her several times and had shown a desire to help her.

'Thanks,' said Mrs. Vanstone. 'I'm sure it will be quite satisfactory. And now about the arrangements. We shall start on the 24th. Will that be too soon for you, Miss Bowman? Oh, please tell me your Christian name!'

The human mind is a complex machine. Kittie could not give her own name, and, absently, mechanically, the other name that was always in her mind slipped glibly from her lips.

'Eva,' she said, and the moment she had said it she would have recalled it, with a throb of terror. But it was too late.

'What a pretty name!' said Mrs. Vanstone. 'I am stupidly fanciful about names, but I like Eva. I will write to your reference and then to you, and then you must come to me and help me make the preparations for the voyage. They told you at the registry office what I was prepared to give? No?' She mentioned a sum which seemed more than liberal to Kittie. 'Well, then, I think that's all. Oh, you'll want an outfit for the voyage. It need not be a big or expensive one. Perhaps I can help you—we shall see.'

They talked together for a little while longer, then Kittie rose. Mrs. Vanstone shook hands in a friendly way, and Kittie was leaving the room when her possible employer said, with a laugh—

'You haven't asked where we are going!'

Kittie smiled. 'No,' she said. 'I don't think I

care very much. I have been looking for work for so long, and it doesn't matter where I go.'

'You poor girl!' murmured the languid lady, pityingly. 'Well, we are going to Buenos Ayres. Good-bye, till I write.'

Kittie went home to her attic, her mind flashing like a swallow from Lashmore's letter to this prospect of an engagement. She sat on the edge of the bed and read his letter again and again until every word of it was engraven on her heart. He wanted her, was longing for her. If she could only go! Then she thought of Mrs. Vanstone, Buenos Ayres: where was it? Kittie had not the least idea. Among the few belongings she had brought with her from Denbeigh Street were some schoolbooks. She turned them over until she came to an atlas, and, referring to the index, discovered that Buenos Ayres was in South America. She had turned to the map and found the place, and she was mechanically reading the names round about it when suddenly she came upon the word, printed in very small letters, 'Quirapata.'

She neither started nor cried out, but the blood ebbed from her face and left it deathly white, and she started at the map with a commingling of wonder, terror, and awe in her eyes.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE SNARE

**H**ERNDALE fell in love with Eva before the end of the first week ; so much in love that he would have proposed to her, if she had permitted him to do so ; but she would not ; and every one knows how easily a woman can keep even the most ardent of men at arm's length. Herndale, however ardent he might be, would never act on impulse or without making sure of his ground. He was not impulsive as Lashmore was ; passion would never carry him away, would rather make him more calculating and astute. But he courted her, after the manner of his kind, and contrived without any difficulty to spend most of his time at her side.

He had sent for a couple of horses, and he rode, walked, and fished with her and Sir Talbot ; and he was always entertaining, full of information and unobtrusively attentive. Eva had not forgotten Lashmore, be sure ; but she was forced to admit to herself that Lord Herndale had justified Aunt Emily's praises ; but she was certainly not in love with him—not yet, at any rate—and whenever she was away from him she was conscious of a certain misgiving about him.

Charmingly as he talked and behaved, she felt that she did not know him any better than she had done on the first night he arrived ; there was a suggestion of secrecy, of concealment in his manner ; it was difficult to analyze the grounds for her doubt ; but it was there all the same.

One day they were out riding together, and were alone ; for Sir Talbot's horse had cast a shoe soon after

they had started ; and he had begged them to go on, saying that he would go back and get another horse, and meet them as they returned. It was a lovely morning, and Herndale's heart beat more quickly than usual as he glanced at the beautiful girl beside him. Nearly every young woman looks at her best in a riding habit, and Eva, in her youthful grace and beauty, was enough to set any man's heart a-beating, even the coldest. Herndale was unusually silent. He, who was generally so fluent though deliberate, found speech difficult ; he drew nearer to Eva, and was about to speak, to say something that would lead up to a proposal, when Tim, no doubt also carried away by the beauty of the morning, rushed from the other dogs, and, barking joyously, jumped up at Eva's mare.

The horse was startled—they were cantering—and shied violently, so violently that Eva swayed in the saddle, and looked as if she were about to fall. The blood rushed to Herndale's face and a cruel look came into his cold eyes ; he carried a crop with a long thong, and he pulled up and lashed at Tim, and, not content with one stroke, thrashed him with a kind of fury, until the wretched dog fell to the ground. Herndale continued to thrash him, the horrible swish of the thong mingling with the agonized yells of the dog.

Eva had been carried on a little way ; but she succeeded in turning the mare, and, for a second, sat stricken speechless by the scene, and the cruel and ruthless expression of Herndale's face. It was as if a mask had dropped from it and revealed the man's true nature. She rode in between him and the dog, narrowly escaping a cut from the whip, and with a cry of indignation and anger, slipped from her horse to pick up Tim ; but Tim was too frightened to permit even his beloved mistress to approach him, and, still howling, fled homewards. Herndale saw his mistake, his face grew pale, and he bit his lip, as he dismounted and stood beside her.

'He is not hurt, not really hurt,' he said pleadingly ; 'and he deserved all he got. He might have thrown you ; indeed, he very nearly did so. Pray, do not be anxious about him ; he is all right.'

Eva turned from him, and, refusing with a gesture his offer to assist her, got into her saddle. They rode on in silence for some time, Eva, her face pale and set, looking over her shoulder now and again to see if Tim were coming back.

'I am afraid you are angry with me,' Herndale said in a low and still pleading voice. 'I will confess that I lost my temper, not a usual thing with me—but you will admit that I had some excuse ? I thought you were going to fall—you might have been seriously hurt,—and I—I—the dread made me lose my head. If you had met with an accident while you were under my care, I should never have forgiven myself ; no, never !'

'You were cruel,' she said, her eyes downcast, the tears gathering under them ; 'very, very cruel !'

'Perhaps I was,' he admitted, coming closer to her and looking at her steadily with his lips tightly drawn. 'But I could be cruel to anything, any one, that endangered you. Do you not understand ? Yes ; I think you must. Any man who is worth being called a man will be cruel, merciless, when he is protecting, guarding a woman ; especially when it is the woman—'

The colour mounted to her face, and she shrank with a sudden fear from the pleading voice and the imploring eyes ; she still saw the latter as they had gleamed a few minutes before with almost fiendish cruelty.

'There is my father !' she said, and she touched the mare with her whip, and rode swiftly towards him.

Herndale felt the shrinking, repelling response, his face grew hard, his eyes narrowed to slits, and he gnawed at his moustache as he followed her. Eva avoided him for the rest of that day ; she had promised to go fishing with him ; but she excused herself on the

plea of a headache, and he did not see her until dinner-time.

During that evening he bore himself with the humility which indicates remorse and penitence ; his manner, his voice were those of a man who has sinned deeply against the woman he loves, and is pleading for her forgiveness. But Eva treated him very coldly : she had been down to the stable to see Tim, and had found his smooth body covered with weals ; in one or two places the cruel whip had cut the skin : the dog was before her eyes the whole of that evening, and rendered Lord Herndale's penitence of no avail.

Up to the moment of saying good-night—she retired early—Herndale maintained his show of humility, regret, and desire for her forgiveness ; but it disappeared as she left the room, and he followed Sir Talbot into the smoking-room. He and Sir Talbot were now on very friendly terms ; for though something in Herndale now and again jarred on Sir Talbot, he saw that Herndale was falling in love with Eva, and, naturally enough, the anxious father was ready to welcome so eligible a son-in-law.

They sat down to their cigars and soda and whisky, and gradually Herndale led the conversation to the subject of Stock Exchange operations. It was a subject they had discussed on most evenings, and Sir Talbot was intensely interested in it. He knew little or nothing about stocks and shares ; and he was therefore all the more ready to place implicit reliance on Herndale, who evidently knew a great deal, and inspired confidence by the calmness, the shrewdness, which he displayed.

'I had a letter this morning from a man who was once a client of mine,' said Herndale, in a casual way. 'He is rather heavily interested in those Montala shares we were speaking about the other night. He was good enough to give me a tip about them. I think it is quite reliable, because he is "in the know," as they call it.'



Sir Talbot looked up with a repressed eagerness, and nodded thoughtfully.

'He advises me to buy as heavily as I can,' Herndale went on, but without any eagerness on his part.

'Are you going to do so?' asked Sir Talbot, quickly.

'Yes; I think so,' replied Herndale, with a slight yawn.

'I—I think I should like to buy some,' said Sir Talbot, with a nervous little laugh. 'I've never done anything of the kind before; I've always had a kind of dread of speculation.'

'This is certainly a speculation,' said Herndale candidly. 'You can't make a large sum of money, in this way, at any rate, without speculating; though I rather fancy that this is as near a certainty as a speculation can be.'

'How much shall you buy,' said Sir Talbot, 'if I may ask?'

The fish was nibbling at the bait; but Herndale displayed no satisfaction; he knocked the ash off his cigar and stretched himself before replying indifferently.

'Oh, a thousand pounds is as much as I shall risk.'

Sir Talbot caught his breath and was silent a moment; then, very much as a swimmer prepares for a long dive, he said—

'I, too, will risk a thousand, if—if you will be so good as to manage the affair for me?'

Herndale nodded. 'I thought of running up to London on some other business to-morrow'—he knew that it would be well for him to absent himself from Eva's presence for a day or two—'and I will go, if you will permit me. I will see my friend, and learn as much as I can about the company; and I will buy to the extent of a couple of thousand, between us, if I think they look promising; and if you care to leave me a free hand in the matter?'

'Certainly, certainly!' responded Sir Talbot, with nervous gratitude. 'I shall be very much obliged to



you. But I am sorry you are going to leave us even for a short time. We shall miss you very much.'

Herndale breakfasted early, and left the Court before Eva was down. He kept a dainty little suite of furnished rooms in a quiet little street—Verron Street—in St. James's, of which he said nothing to his friends. There was no particular reason for any secrecy in the matter ; but Herndale was one of those men who like to have a *pied à terre* to which they can go if there should be any reasons for concealing themselves ; and Herndale could rely upon his valet, Siddons, who was a discreet and extremely reticent man. The rooms were in perfect order ; Herndale lunched there ; then he took a taxi to Myrtle Court, Bishopsgate Street.

Myrtle Court, about which there was nothing floral save the name, was a grimy cul de sac, composed of offices. Amongst the names on the doorway of one of the houses was that of Colin MacDonald, stockbroker ; his offices were on the ground floor ; and Mr. Colin MacDonald himself, seated on a high stool at his desk, answered 'Come in !' to Lord Herndale's knock. His accent was certainly not Scottish, but thick and nasal ; and his countenance gave the lie to his assumed name and proclaimed the Jew. He almost tumbled off his stool as he saw who the visitor was ; for Herndale had once fought a difficult and shady case for him ; and Mr. MacDonald, alias Moses, was, of course, aware of his late counsel's succession to the peerage ; he stood bending low, smiling unctuously and rubbing his big fat hands, on the rather dirty fingers of which shone diamonds, rubies, and other precious stones. Imagine a Scottish stockbroker with jewelled rings on his fingers !

Herndale responded to the man's servile and obsequious greeting with a nod, and seating himself astride the dusty chair and lighting a cigarette, proceeded at once to business.

'I want you to do something for me, Mr. MacDonald,' he began, in his cool, self-possessed way.

'Delighted, delighted, my lord, I'm thure!' murmured Mr. MacDonald.

'I have a little money I want to speculate with,' said Herndale ignoring the man's politeness. 'Can you tell me anything about Montalas?'

The stockbroker lowered his eyes, as he considered whether he should 'act on the square' with his titled client. A glance at the hard face and the steel-cold eyes convinced Mr. MacDonald that it would be unwise to act in any other way.

'Well, they are rather risky,' he said. 'They're in the hands of a little group of gentlemen who keep the show pretty much to themselves.'

'They run up and down a great deal, don't they?'

Mr. MacDonald nodded and smiled. 'Yes; they're rather bucketty. If a man was in the know he could make a lot of money with them; but they're rather uncertain; they may go up and they may go down; p'raps the mine's a very good thing; and then again, p'raps it isn't. That's the worst of mines; you can't tell, unless you're working at the bottom of 'em or happen to be a director, how they're going to pan out. And not always then,' he added, with a chuckle.

Herndale did not look discouraged or alarmed by this vague account of the great Montala mine; he was silent for quite a minute, slowly smoking his cigarette; Mr. MacDonald, under his thick lips, watching him curiously.

'They are very low, are they not?' asked Herndale.

The man referred to the share list. 'Yes; very low, my lord. I should say they'd go up. The last report and dividend were good; on the other hand——'

'They may go down.' Herndale finished for him with a twist of the lip.

'That's so,' assented Mr. MacDonald, shrugging his

shoulders slightly. 'They're as risky as—as a woman. If your lordship's looking for an investment——'

'I am not,' said Herndale. 'I told you I was looking for a speculation. Be good enough to buy me a thousand pounds' worth; and sell a thousand a fortnight from date.'

Mr. MacDonald looked slightly surprised; for, of course, the order he had received meant that his client could neither lose nor make much; in fact, that Lord Herndale had hedged on the deal. However, the broker was accustomed to all kinds of transactions in stocks and shares; and he expressed no surprise. Lord Herndale filled in a cheque and laid it on the desk.

'Thank you, my lord,' said Mr. MacDonald. 'I will send you the contract note.'

Herndale nodded. 'Make them out separately, please,' he said; 'and leave out the name. I will fill it in. I mean the name of the buyer and seller. Do you understand?'

'Quite so, quite so, my lord!' replied MacDonald. 'You can fill in any name you like—Smith, Jones, Robinson.'

'Exactly,' assented Herndale. 'If you hear anything about the mine which you think I ought to know, write to me.'

'I will, my lord, I will,' the man assured him. 'Your lordship did me a very good turn when you were at the Bar; and I shan't forget it. Wonderful, how you fought that case! Never thought you'd win it, didn't indeed! But you stuck to it like a—like a weasel. Never see such a thing. I owe you something, my lord, and, sw'lp my truth'—in the ardour of his gratitude the gentleman with the Scottish name became absolutely Jewish—'I shan't forget it!'

On his legal prowess Herndale was susceptible to flattery. He smiled and stroked his moustache.

Y—es, it was a ticklish case, a touch and go;

you'd have dropped a lot of money, Moses—I beg your pardon, Mr. MacDonald—if you had lost it. I had to fight for all I was worth.'

'And you fought well, you fought well, my lord!' declared the man. 'Never seen anything like it! Yes; you saved me a lot of money; and I'll do the same by you, some day, if I have a chance.'

'I think you will,' said Herndale, quietly. 'By the way, in any business I may do with you—and I may have a great deal—I don't wish my name to appear. You understand?'

'That's all right, my lord,' assented Mr. MacDonald, rubbing his hands unctuously. 'You may rely on my discretion.'

Herndale nodded to him, and went out to the taxi which was waiting. Two or three minutes after he had gone, Mr. Levison entered the same office without knocking; he was Mr. MacDonald's sleeping partner; in fact, he found the capital and most of the brains of the firm; not all, because the Israelitish gentleman with a noble Scottish name was by no means a fool.

Without even a nod, Mr. Levison went to the books and examined them with his usual impassive countenance, and for some time appeared to be absorbed in his examination; then he said, in his low, expressionless voice—

'Anything important this morning?'

'Yes,' said his partner, with oily satisfaction. 'A very nice bit of business. A two thousand pounds deal in Montalas. And cheque and commission on the spot. A new client and a good one, Mr. Levison.'

'Lord Herndale,' said Levison quietly, and in a matter of fact tone. 'I saw him leave the office. He buys and sells, does he?' he added, as Mr. MacDonald showed him the note of the transaction. 'Hem! And the name on the contracts to be left vacant. He's making this little flutter for some one else?'

'How quick you are, Mr. Levison!' Mr. MacDonald

exclaimed admiringly. 'But that's not our business, is it? He's a good client, eh?'

Mr. Levison nodded. 'Yes,' he said, thoughtfully. 'Let me know if he does anything else with us, will you, MacDonald? Send a messenger boy up to my place whenever his lordship writes or calls on you.'

'Certainly, certainly, Mr. Levison!' said his partner, obsequiously. 'You know his lordship?'

Mr. Levison shrugged his shoulders, but passed the question by.

'Give me the daybook, will you?' he said.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE MEETING

**W**ITH every mile of the voyage, Kittie felt that she was not only leaving England behind her, but her past life. She had written a loving letter of farewell to the 'boys,' a letter as full of gratitude as of love, and blotted here and there with tears; she told them that she was going abroad, that she might not come back; and—notable omission!—she did not say that she would write again to them. Even as she penned it, the letter seemed an act of separation. As yet there was no definite purpose in her mind, but ever since she had learnt that she was going to the country where Lashmore was, she had felt that she was being driven by an overmastering fate; and that she was powerless to resist.

The voyage did wonders for her; she gradually lost the wan and haggard appearance caused by the terrible months of poverty and privation; the figure which had grown so pitifully thin became supple and round again, and recovered its wonted grace; her eyes grew brighter, and the clear ivory of her face was tinted with the warmth of health; but there was still in the beautiful eyes a touch of melancholy, and sometimes something verging on a nameless dread.

Mrs. Vanstone, a typical woman of the world, was slightly alarmed at finding that she had engaged so beautiful a girl as a companion, that, so to speak, the chrysalis had developed into a butterfly; but she was reassured when she saw that Kittie remained as quiet, as reserved, and as reticent as at their first interview. Many of their fellow-passengers, especially the men,

made overtures of friendship to Kittie; but with the ease and self-possession which were born with her and had been developed by her life in London, she declined all advances; and when she was not with Mrs. Vanstone, spent her time either in her own cabin or walking or reading on the least frequented part of the deck.

Sometimes she sat without turning a page of her book, her mind dwelling on the past with the clearness of regained physical and mental strength; and it was on that part of her life in which Lashmore had figured that she dwelt most constantly. She carried his letter in the bosom of her dress, as if it were something sacred, a talisman which not only had the power to protect her from evil but to influence her future. Of that future she did not dare to think, much less to form any plan in which Lashmore should have a place. She was simply drifting.

Mrs. Vanstone was too languid a personage to feel anything like intense curiosity about her companion: but every now and then she showed an inclination to learn something more respecting her; but Kittie easily parried these attempts, and Mrs. Vanstone at last desisted from her delicate inquiries. As a matter of fact, she was too well satisfied with her bargain to worry about her companion's antecedents or her future plans; so the relations of employer and employed were pleasant enough.

As they approached the end of the voyage Mrs. Vanstone spoke definitely of her own movements. She was going to stay with a married brother who had a ranche on the Amico river; she was uncertain how long she should stay there; but she hoped that Miss Bowman would remain with her until she returned to England. However, Miss Bowman would see how she liked the country, and, of course, would be perfectly free to stay or go. In her lymphatic way, the woman of the world had become rather fond of the



pretty girl who, though so evidently full of life and spirits, had refrained from making the acquaintance of the other passengers and flirting with the men, which Mrs. Vanstone, when she realized how beautiful Kittie was, had certainly expected her to do.

They reached Buenos Ayres, and Kittie was conscious of the stir in her blood caused by the excitement of landing at the big port and the change from the monotony of the sea voyage to the quick life and bustle of a town. They remained one night, and Mrs. Vanstone and Kittie did some shopping. Kittie looked a little surprised when she saw that Mrs. Vanstone was buying some evening gloves; and Mrs. Vanstone with a laugh explained that they were not going to plunge into absolute barbarism.

'My brother's place is by no means out of the way, as such places go,' she said; 'they have quite a number of neighbours and friends—of course, at what we English should call a long distance—and they live quite civilized lives; dress for dinner and all that kind of thing. And both my brother and his wife are young and bright, and are fond of seeing people about them. You need not be afraid that you'll be dull. If you've forgotten your gloves, as I foolishly did, you'd better buy a pair or two, and any other little thing you may want.'

Kittie looked surprised, and shrugged her shoulders slightly.

'I do not suppose I shall want anything for evening dress, Mrs. Vanstone,' she said.

'Oh, you never can tell,' said Mrs. Vanstone languidly; and she settled the question by buying some gloves and shoes for Kittie, remarking as she did so, 'You've got good hands and feet, my dear.'

Mrs. Vanstone's people were named Murray, and their place Connita; and Kittie was amazed, when they arrived there, by its beauty and its extent. Looking round her, she almost felt that she was in one of the most picturesque of the counties round London. Bar-



barism had disappeared, and civilization had taken its place ; instead of the wilderness she had imagined, there were trimly kept gardens, smooth lawns, park-like woods. She had pictured the house as a kind of rough shanty, like those she had read of in novels ; but here was a substantial stone building as well kept as any villa in London's Suburbia.

Mr. Murray, still young and in boisterous health, was amused by her astonishment.

' You evidently thought you were coming into the wilds, Miss Bowman,' he said, with a hearty laugh. ' Oh, I assure you, we are quite up-to-date at Connita ; in fact, we rather pride ourselves on being a day or two in advance.'

Kittie was conducted to a pretty little room with a magnificent view, and she unpacked her things and waited for a summons from Mrs. Vanstone ; but, not unreasonably, that lady appeared to have forgotten her ; and it was only just before the dressing-bell had rung that Mrs. Vanstone sent for her.

' Why, aren't you dressed ? ' she said, with surprise ; ' everybody begins here before the dressing-bell : half an hour isn't long enough.'

' Do you wish me to come down to dinner to-night ? ' asked Kittie.

' Why, certainly ! ' said Mrs. Vanstone, raising her eyebrows. ' Look sharp ; my brother hates waiting.'

' I think I would rather not come down this evening,' said Kittie.

Mrs. Vanstone shrugged her shoulders with a languid consent ; and Kittie ate her dinner in her own room. Mrs. Vanstone did not seem to have any need of her the next morning, and Kittie wandered about the grounds and tried to realize that she was there and that England was some thousands of miles away. Later in the day there was a bustle and stir among the innumerable servants, which indicated that something was going on ; and as she was sitting in her room, altering a dress,

Mrs. Vanstone knocked at the door and put in her head.

'There's going to be a dance to-night,' she said. 'You'd better dress and come down to dinner, so as to be ready.'

Kittie looked up with a heightened colour. 'I'd rather not, if you don't mind, Mrs. Vanstone,' she said.

'Oh, all right,' assented Mrs. Vanstone, indulgently. 'You can have something sent up to you.'

Kittie ate her dinner in solitude. Presently she heard a violin tuning up, then the strumming of a piano. She lay back in her chair and listened to it, her mind wandering back to the moonlit night at Deerbrook, to Lashmore's letter in her pocket; and she started as Mrs. Vanstone entered.

'Oh, I am sorry to disturb you, dear,' she said. 'How comfortable you look! But we want you. There are not ladies enough. The place seems crowded with men! What a change after London, where the men are so precious! Slip on your things and come down, will you? You have an evening dress? If not, one of mine——'

The blood rose to Kittie's face. She remembered that she had an evening dress, that one of Evelyn Lyndhurst's which Mrs. Bickers had given her.

'Thanks,' she said, reluctantly, with a kind of resignation; 'I have a dress.'

'That's right,' said Mrs. Vanstone. 'Be as quick as you can. We want to make up a second set of the lancers.'

After Mrs. Vanstone had gone Kittie sat for some minutes without moving. She had said that she had a suitable frock, but she shrank from wearing it; but she knew that if she gave some reason for not going down, that something had gone wrong with her dress, Mrs. Vanstone would insist upon Kittie wearing one of hers; therefore, after a time, she rose and took the dress from the wardrobe in which she had hung it. The sight, the touch of it, recalled the past so distinctly that she

trembled and turned pale. The bunch of roses which was missing from it she had given to Lashmore as a pledge of love.

Half an hour before she had been reluctant to go down to the dance ; now she was almost eager to do so ; for perhaps the movement, the music, the contact with strange people, would dispel the thoughts which were always concentrated on one subject. When she had got on her war paint, she stepped back from the pier glass and looked at herself critically, and the colour rose to her face at the reflection in the glass. The least vain of girls knows when she is looking well, and Kittie, as she turned away, drew a long breath of feminine satisfaction.

When she entered the long, well-lit room, a waltz was in full swing, and she made her way by the wall to a settee by the window, the curtains of which almost screened her from view ; but Mrs. Vanstone, passing on the arm of a partner, saw her, and stopped, and introduced the man. He asked for the next dance, and while Kittie was giving it him—it was an informal dance, there were no programmes, and he wrote her name on his shirt cuff—Mr. Murray caught sight of her and came up with two other gentlemen, who at once asked for dances, and with the eagerness that proclaims the fact that women are scarce.

Her first partner was a young fellow from a neighbouring ranche ; he danced well and Kittie, who had learnt to waltz in one of the schools at which she had given a spasmodic attendance, soon found her feet. To Kittie, with her keen ear for music and love of rhythmical movement, dancing came as naturally as swimming to a duck. Her partner was delighted and enthusiastic, and begged for another waltz later on. Kittie sank back in her seat, while the last strains of the waltz died away, and drew a long breath of pleasure that was almost pain.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE TEMPTATION

MRS. VANSTONE, as she was passing, stopped, and looked at Kittie with a curious but approving smile.

'How beautifully you dance, my dear,' she said, in her languid way. 'And that dress of yours is quite fetching. Paris, isn't it? Strange how one can tell! There's an—atmosphere about a Paris dress which the London people strive after in vain. It's your colour, too!'

Kittie felt her face flame, then grow pale, and she murmured 'something inaudibly. Her next partner came up; it was the lancers, and they had time to talk. He expatiated on the beauties and advantages of the country.

'Room to move here,' he said. 'A man can feel his feet. And he's got twice the energy he has in England. Some of the people here have come twenty miles or more for this dance. Do you notice the difference between this and a London ball-room?'

Kittie was of the point of replying that she knew nothing of London ball-rooms; but she checked the admission, and her partner went on.

'Strange as it may seem, we are all enjoying ourselves!—It's our turn now: I always forget the figures—We're none of us blasé. We're quite ready to work all day, and dance all night. And work all the next day too, by George; I say, how well you dance! I wish you'd give me a waltz. A cousin, or something of the kind, of Mrs. Vanstone's, aren't you?'

'I am Mrs. Vanstone's companion,' said Kittie.

He stared at her. 'Jolly lucky woman, Mrs. Vanstone!' he said.

After the lancers he took Kittie into an adjoining room where refreshments were served with a profuseness and liberality which would not have discredited a London hostess. The tall French windows were thrown open, the big moon shone on the lawns, the scent of the flowers made the atmosphere heavy. Kittie's heart was beating fast, but regularly; she was feeling the satisfaction which comes to every woman when she knows that she is well dressed and admired. She was only Mrs. Vanstone's companion; but she was enjoying herself; for she was being treated as an equal. For the moment she forgot the past, her own individuality; she was not the girl who had worked in a collar factory, who had been on the point of starvation in a miserable attic, but a lady like—she glanced down at her dress—like Eva Lyndhurst!

The thought dominated her as she danced the next waltz. By this time she had attracted a great deal of attention; for, as a matter of fact, she was the most beautiful girl in the room, and one of the best, if not the very best, of the dancers. When the waltz had ended, she was surrounded by men who were eager to engage her, and the women were looking at her with that cold smile which recognizes the advent of a new beauty. But Kittie was all unconscious of their criticism, and, in some cases, envy; she was just a young girl, girlishly happy and oblivious of anything but the pleasure of the moment.

'Your companion seems to be enjoying herself,' said one of the dowagers to Mrs. Vanstone. 'She is a pretty girl, more than pretty. Where did you pick her up?'

Mrs. Vanstone shrugged her narrow shoulders.

'In the usual way,' she said languidly. 'Yes, she is pretty, isn't she? Does me credit?'

'Oh, quite,' assented the dowager. 'She looks like a lady. What is her history?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' said Mrs. Vanstone with a laugh. 'I suppose she has one; most women in her position have; but if she has, she knows how to keep it to herself. And I don't worry.'

A plentiful supper had been provided, and Kittie's last partner took her in for it. The music had ceased, and in the comparative quietude Kittie could hear the twitter of the birds kept from their sleep in the big trees outside, by the lights and the music. She was listening to them, and thinking of the London sparrows that used to chirp outside her window in Denbeigh Street, when suddenly she heard another sound, that of horses and wheels. Her companion saw that she was listening, and he explained.

'Some one just arrived,' he said. 'No, not a guest; too late for that, but some one on a journey. He will put up here for the night.' He smiled at her surprise. 'Oh, it's the usual thing. We're more hospitable than the Arabs. It's not so much a virtue as an obligation. We all keep open house to every traveller, because we are so often travellers ourselves. That sounds like a waggon; they are driving round to the stables. Perhaps we shall see who it is. Murray is going out to him, I see. He will very likely bring him in.'

Kittie looked round at the men in their conventional dress-clothes; and her companion, divining her thought, laughed.

'Oh, that won't matter,' he said. 'He won't mind how he's dressed; unless he happens to be a big swell or a bit of a dandy. We're not in London, you know; though we look as if we were, and try to think we are.'

The musicians returned to their places, the dance went on; and, as is always the case, it was freer and more joyous after the supper and the champagne, which appeared to be unlimited. Kittie had, all unconsciously, slipped into the position of the belle of the

room. Men gathered round her just as the boys had done in the dear old times which seemed so far away ; the remaining dances were soon filled up, her partners came to her with the promptitude which men display when they are engaged to a girl who is much sought after.

Inspired by a liberal supper, the musicians played with inspiriting vigour, the dancing got faster, there was much laughter in the air, the room grew hot, the men became red of countenance, the bosoms of the women were heaving. Kittie had danced every dance since supper, and she was hot and breathless ; her partner went off to get her a cooling drink ; but she felt as if she could not await his return, and she passed through the ante-room, and though the open French windows to the verandah. Beyond it stretched the flower-laden garden, and beyond that the big hills, above which the moon shone resplendently. Something seemed to draw her into the coolness and comparative darkness of the night. She caught up her thin shawl, and, flinging it round her neck, stepped off the verandah, and went slowly down one of the garden paths.

She drew a long breath, and inhaled the perfume of the flowers, and looked up at the big moon sailing in a cloudless sky ; and as she did so, the ball, her present surroundings, faded from her ; she was back again at Deerbrook. She was sitting on the fallen fir, listening to Lashmore. The memory thrilled her ; she was like a harp swept by a mastering hand ; it all came back upon her at that moment ; the love, the mystery, the deceit, the commingling of pleasure and pain ; pleasure so predominating that she was unconscious of deceit. At such times, in such a moonlight, in such a perfumed air, a woman's heart has room to move, to feel. Under the spell of her surroundings, with the memory of their last meeting and parting vibrating in her heart and mind, Kittie's



soul floated out to the past, and longed for the man she loved.

Here she was arrayed in a beautiful garment; a lady in all but name; the belle of this ball——. If he could but see her now!

She wandered on, lost in the labyrinth of the perfumed shrubbery, her mind dwelling on the past, the present lost to view. After a while she sank on to a seat, and, with a long-drawn sigh looked up at the moon, across which the fleecy clouds were drifting. Suddenly, as she sat lost in thought, she heard faint sounds of footsteps; she did not heed them until they were close upon her; then she turned her head slowly, and saw a man approaching her.

She smelled the smell of a pipe—it recalled to her the gala nights of her father and the boys—and the scent of the tobacco came nearer, the man moved into the beam of moonlight which swept across the seat on which she was sitting. He raised his cap and was passing; then suddenly, as she gasped for breath, he stopped, turned, and looked at her. She rose, all unsteadily, and clutched the arm of the seat; for the figure seemed familiar to her, with a familiarity which struck her to stone and made her heart stand still. The man stood still and she saw that he was dressed in everyday clothes, a rough riding suit. He looked tall, gigantic, in the moonlight; and she regarded him expectantly, with a wild throbbing of her heart.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said. ‘I hope I have not frightened you.’

She knew the voice. It was Lashmore’s. The throbbing of her heart seemed to choke her, and her hand went to her throat. Unconsciously she turned her face towards him; the moonlight shone on it, and he saw her distinctly. He had been going to pass on, but he stopped again suddenly, and stood as if he also had been turned to stone; then he threw up one hand with a gesture of amazement, of incredulity, and gasped—



‘Eva!’

It needed the sound of his voice to convince her that he was really standing before her, that she was not dreaming. When she had seen the name of Quirapata on the map, she knew that she was going to the country in which he had settled; but since she had arrived she had realized its vastness, and had thought that she was almost as far away from him as she had been in England. And he was here, standing before her! She could not speak, her face was white, her breath coming painfully. She was face to face with a terrible crisis; she would have to confess that she had been guilty of a cruel deceit, that she had tricked him, that she was not Eva Lyndhurst, but Kittie Norton, a ‘hand’ at a collar factory, the companion, the servant, of Mrs. Vanstone.

Her heart recoiled from the task; and yet it must be done, and at once. But he gave her no time. He caught her hand and gripped it so tightly—he was trying to realize by actual touch that it was she—that he hurt her.

‘Eva! It is you, really you! Heaven and earth! I thought I was dreaming: not for the first time. I am always seeing you, hearing you! And you are here! Speak to me! Are you frightened, dearest? Why did you come—how?’

He sank on to the seat and drew her down beside him.

‘My beautiful angel! To think that you are here—I don’t realize it yet; I can’t. It is by the merest chance than I am here. I meant pushing on in the moonlight to Patana, but somehow I felt as if I must stop here. And something drew me to the garden—— I am so full of amazement, so confused—— Quick! Tell me, Eva, tell me all about it! You are staying here with these people, the Murrays? But *how* did you come?’

She was fighting for time: she would break it to him gradually. Her hand was still in his grasp; she had not courage to withdraw it—yet.

'I—I—came out with a lady, Mrs. Vanstone, as her companion,' she said, her voice scarcely audible, her bosom still heaving with mingled rapture and agony; for now that he was near her again, she knew how passionately she loved him, why she had dwelt upon the memory of every look and word of his. Oh, it was hard, hard to resign him! In imagination, she could already see the ardent love in his face turn to indignation and bitter scorn.

'As—as her companion?' he said, as if he were puzzled. 'Then—then—you have parted, quarrelled with your father? You have told him, and he—of course he was angry. And you stood by me, stood by your pledge? I see it all! And I see what a coward I was, dearest, not to have told him myself. To leave you to bear the brunt of it! Yes; I was a coward.' He drew a long breath. 'And you would not give me up? God, how faithful a woman can be! And you left him and came to me—all this way—the long journey! Eva, what can I say to you, how can I try and tell you how my heart throbs with gratitude and love. I'm not worthy to touch the hem of your dress—and you have left father, home, everything, for me! God bless you, my love!'

Kittie sat transfixed, overwhelmed, by the fashion in which her crooked way was made straight, the continuance of her deceit made not only possible but easy. She was trembling, panting, and was forcing the words of her confession to her lips, when a man came to the window and called,

'Miss Bowman! Are you there?'

Kittie shrank back into the shadow, and the man, after peering about him, returned to the room.

'Miss Bowman? Does he mean you?' said Lashmore.

He drew her from the seat to another, in the dusk of the shrubbery, and, putting his arm around her, held her to him. There was silence for a minute as his lips sought hers in a passionate kiss.

'Miss Bowman?' he said. 'You have taken that name? I see! Tell me everything, dearest.' But it seemed as if he could not wait for a precise statement; and he hurried on with question after question, still unconsciously shaping Kittie's way for her. 'You left home at once, suddenly? You found some one who was coming out here. You brave girl! And all for love of me! Is it any wonder that I feel half-dazed, as if I couldn't believe my senses? Let me look at you.' He held her a little away from him, and his eyes flashed over her with worship, admiration, in them. 'How beautiful you look! And in that dress.—Of course, I remember it. Why, I've lain awake at night and thought of the evening you wore it——'

'And spilt the wine over it,' murmured Kittie, almost unconsciously. She started when she had said it; but it had been said, and could not be recalled; she had welded another link in the chain.

'I remember, of course!' he said with a laugh. 'I was filled with remorse. And I remember the night when we parted, there in England, and you gave me the little bunch of roses. See, dearest!'

He took the crushed bunch of artificial flowers from his breast-pocket, showed them to her, and kissed them as he put them back.

'And to think that this beautiful girl is my own, is my very own. Have you kept my ring, dearest?'

Scarcely knowing what she was doing, she fumbled in her bosom and took out the ring suspended on a narrow ribbon.

'Happy ring!' he murmured. 'I am half beside myself with joy, with pride! I want to take you on my arm into the house, there, where they are dancing, and say, shout, 'Ladies and gentlemen, this is my future wife!'''

She shrank from him slightly. 'No, no!' she breathed.

'No?' he said. 'You don't want them to know?'

I understand. I don't want to make it awkward for you, to place you in an embarrassing position, darling. You don't want these people to know ?'

Surely now was the time to make her confession. But how could she, with his arm around her, his eyes devouring her, the love-laden tones of his voice hypnotising her, deadening her conscience, making only one thing worth having—his love ?

'I understand, dearest,' he said. 'I will do whatever you wish. You have only to command me. Yes ; that's it. And it is your due. You have made this tremendous sacrifice for me, and I will do anything, everything, you wish.'

She found her voice. 'Tell me—tell me about yourself,' she said.

He threw back his head and laughed. 'Soon told, dearest,' he said lightly. 'I am the luckiest man in the world ;' he pressed her to him ; 'I've fallen on my feet here. The man I told you about—he's a brick ! We get on splendidly together. I'm his right hand man, almost like a son. He's somewhat of a rough diamond, but he's one of the first water. It's a huge farm ; a ranche, they call it ; there's plenty of work, but I like it. I may be a partner some day. Anyway, we can be married.'

## CHAPTER XVI

### TO BE MARRIED ?

**M**ARRIED ! Every nerve in her body thrilled. To be his wife ! His wife ! To be with him every day, as long as life lasted ! The temptation was irresistible, though she tried for a moment or two to resist it, to draw away from him. But he thought it was only her maiden modesty shrinking sweetly from the word.

'Yes ; that's it !' he said, drawing her more closely to him. 'We must be married right away. I must make arrangements.'

'No, no !' she forced herself to breathe.

'You want it to be quiet, on the secret, dearest ?' he said. 'I understand. I can manage it——'

Again a voice came through the still night air 'Miss Bowman ! Are you there ? This is our dance !'

Lashmore laughed at the frenzied accents of the caller.

'They want you, dearest. And no wonder ! But I've got you, here in my arms. You belong to me !'

'I—I must go,' she said reluctantly.

'Must you, darling,' he said, with a sigh. 'It's rather hard, but I suppose you must. How soon shall I see you again ? To-night ?'

She shook her head. 'No, no ! I could not come out ; they would miss me——'

'Why shouldn't they ?' he said. 'Ah, yes ; I forgot. You don't want them to know that we are engaged ? But, dearest, I am staying in the house ; I shall meet you at breakfast.'

He saw that she was alarmed, anxious ; and he pondered for a moment or two.

'It wouldn't be the slightest use my pretending we are strangers,' he said ; 'I should give myself away in the first five minutes—I have it ! I can have met you in England ; old acquaintances ; of course, they will see that I am in love with you ; 'they would be truly blind if they didn't. I shall not be able to stay long ; I am going after stores, and must start soon after breakfast. How long are you going to remain here ?'

'I don't know,' she faltered. 'A fortnight, a month——'

'A fortnight will be long enough,' he said resolutely. 'I can make the arrangements in that time ; I don't quite know what they are out here ; but there's a parson staying at a place not far from ours ; he will tell me. Why do you tremble so, dearest ? But I'm shaking myself ! It seems too good to be true : my wife in a fortnight !'

Footsteps were heard on the verandah. Kittie drew away from him affrightedly.

'Meet me in the morning, a little farther from the house,' he said quickly. 'Will six o'clock be too early ? Must you go ? Give me one kiss of your own accord, Eva,' he pleaded.

She hesitated for a moment. Oh, if her heart would only let her speak ; if she could only crush down the love in it, and find courage to tell him the truth !—But she could not. She put her arms round his neck and kissed him—and she felt like Judas. She almost tore herself away from him, and went unsteadily towards the house. She knew that she was white and shaking, and she fought for self-control. The dance was drawing to a close, for they necessarily kept early hours ; with a sudden rush of excitement, as if she must thrust away from her, and forget, if only for a short time, this crisis in her life, she danced all the remaining dances,

was so gay, so charming, that some of the men grew absolutely wild about her. She kept telling herself that she would have time to think when she was alone in her room ; but when she got there, she could not think ; her mind was in a chaos ; all she could realize was the fact that he was here under the same roof with him, that in a few short hours she would see him again—that she was going to marry him.

She did not sleep that night, and she was pale when she met him in the morning, with all its marvellous freshness and fragrance. As he held her in his arms, he told her that he had been awake all night, and that he had realized how great a sacrifice she was making for him. She was dropping her high rank, had given up her people, her friends, was descending to his lowly estate. And she listened with a sense of guilt that made her want to scream aloud ; and yet with a joy that was well nigh delirious.

He had already made his plans. He would see the clergyman on his way back to Quirapata ; he would write to her, would come to see her again, if it were possible : if not, he would come at the end of a fortnight to—take her away. He was like a very boy in his ardour and his joy. They parted—but to meet again at breakfast. Kittie hung back in her room till the last moment, trying to nerve herself for the meeting in public ; but she had to go down. The long table was almost unoccupied ; most of the guests had breakfasted in their rooms, and had already started ; Mrs. Vanstone was there, and next her Harry Lashmore. He had been schooling himself, and on Kittie's entrance, he rose with a natural air of surprise.

'Oh, how do you do, Miss Bowman ?' he said. 'I heard last night you were here.'

He was a poor actor, and broke down, his face red, his manner embarrassed. Mrs. Vanstone looked from him to Kittie, who was crimson and pale by turns ; but the woman of the world said nothing—for the



moment. Lashmore tried to talk to Miss Bowman as if they had not met for some time, and Mrs. Vanstone joined in the conversation, and asked no questions; which was ominous. Lashmore finished his breakfast and rose quickly.

'I must start,' he said. 'Would you like to see my team, Miss Bowman?'

Kittie murmured something, and followed him out. There was no opportunity for a single embrace, scarcely for a word; she looked on as they put to the team, was able to give her hand into his grip for a moment; then stood and watched him drive away, feeling as if he had taken her heart, the whole of her, with him. When she returned to the dining-room, Mrs. Vanstone, reclining in an easy-chair, languid with the exertions of the preceding evening, looked up at her with a smile.

'Your friend gone?' she said. 'What an exceedingly good-looking man: distinguished too. Is he an old friend of yours? My dear girl, don't look as if you were being brought up before a magistrate, and were afraid of getting six months for larceny! A blind man could see that there have been tender passages between you and the young gentleman who has just driven away. Forgive my seeming rudeness, but I stand in the place of a kind of guardian to you. Are you engaged to this gentleman—I don't know his name?'

There was a moment's silence; then—

'Yes,' said Kittie, desperately. 'I—I met him—knew him in England. He is out here——'

'That is obvious,' smiled Mrs. Vanstone.

'We are to be married soon—in a fortnight.'

Mrs. Vanstone raised her eyebrows. 'I congratulate you, my dear,' she said languidly. 'At any rate, you will have an exceedingly nice and handsome husband. I had had some talk with him before you came down. He is evidently a gentleman. Who is he? But perhaps I am indiscreet——'



'No, no ; you are very kind,' said Kittie gratefully ;  
'but our marriage is to be quiet—secret.'

Mrs. Vanstone laughed. 'Quite a romance,' she said with a little yawn. 'Of course, I shall respect your confidence. I shall be awfully sorry to lose you. I have never had any one to suit me half so well. If there is anything I can do——'

'There is nothing, nothing,' said Kittie painfully. 'But do not speak to any one of it. It is to be quite quiet—I do not wish any one to know.'

Mrs. Vanstone nodded and yawned again. 'I quite understand, my dear,' she said. 'I wish you luck. There are some letters I want you to answer, unless you feel tired this morning ?'

A week later a letter came from Lashmore. It was written by a man who was evidently half-beside himself with anticipatory joy. He had seen the parson ; there were no difficulties in the way. He had told Mr. Coke, the man with whom he was working, that he, Lashmore, had met the girl he was in love with, and wanted to marry her. Mr. Coke had behaved like a brick ; had quite welcomed the news. He was really a good sort ; for he had placed a cottage on the ranche at their disposal, and would be delighted to see Lashmore happy. The work on the ranche was very pressing at the moment, and he would not be able to come to Eva until he came to take her away as his bride. It was not a long letter—Harry Lashmore was a bad hand at the pen—but it made up for its brevity by a few lines at the end which breathed his passionate love for the recipient. Kittie learnt that letter by heart. She had plenty of time to think of it, to consider the course she was pursuing.

Why did she not sit down and write and tell him the truth ? Why does a starving man refuse an invitation to a glorious feast ? Her guilt pressed upon her every hour of the day ; but so also did the ecstatic prospect of a life spent with the man she loved. Let her

consider : after all, he loved her. He thought she was Eva ; but it was Kittie Norton he really loved. There was no prospect of his marrying Eva Lyndhurst ; why should he not marry Kittie, who loved him and could make him happy ? Yes ; she knew that she could make him happy. They were far away from England : he had said that he would never go back there ; why should she not live here with him, away from the hideous world she had left ?

This was mere sophistry : and she knew it, as she tossed through the sleepless night, and resolved that she would draw back while there was time, tell him the truth, and endure as best she might the martyrdom of his scorn and contempt. But in the morning her qualms of conscience disappeared, and she yielded to the promptings of her heart.

The days sped swiftly, the fortnight of probation, of mental and spiritual strife, came to an end, and one morning she heard, amidst the barking of dogs, the clatter of horses' hoofs and the roll of heavy wheels. He had come.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE DIE IS CAST

**T**HE Murrays had gone off to pay a visit ; Mrs. Vanstone and Kittie were alone, and the elder lady, reclining on a couch, regarded the flushed and excited girl with a smile of languid interest.

I suppose the important moment has arrived,' she said. 'Well, I am very sorry you are going ; but you have my heartiest congratulations. Here he comes—dear me, what a handsome man he is !' she added, as Lashmore strode into the room and, for a moment forgetful of every one in the universe but Kittie, seized her hands and gazed at her.

'Are you ready, dearest ?—How do you do, Mrs. Vanstone ? I didn't see you for the moment. Pardon !'

Mrs. Vanstone laughed. 'Oh yes,' she said ; 'she has been ready for days past. How absurdly happy you both look. And how I envy you. Though really I bear you a grudge, Mr. Lashmore, for robbing me of my charming companion ; and I certainly think you owe me something for letting her go so uncereemoniously.'

'I'm grateful at any rate,' said Lashmore with an unsteady laugh. 'Lunch ? No ; thanks very much ; I've brought a kind of picnic hamper with me ; we shall eat it on the way.'

When Kittie had run upstairs to put on her outdoor things, Mrs. Vanstone regarded the bridegroom through half-closed lids.

'Lashmore ?' she said. 'Do I remember the name, or don't I ?'

'I don't think you do,' said Lashmore. "I haven't any relations—of that name. I wish I could tell you how grateful I am to you for letting Eva—I mean Miss Bowman—leave you at such short notice. She has told me how kind you have been to her. Oh, here she is. Are you ready?'

Yes; Kittie was ready. She stood pale and down cast waiting on her lord and master. The waggon with its team of high-spirited, restless horses, was ready also.

'Good-bye,' faltered Kittie.

Mrs. Vanstone kissed her and laughed, as if with amusement at the palpable romance of the affair. She slipped something, a dainty little jewel case, into the trembling hand.

'A little wedding present, my dear,' she said. 'With my best wishes. Good-bye! Good-bye, Mr. Lashmore. Every happiness!'

Was it a dream? Kittie asked herself as she drove away beside her bridegroom. Indeed, it was far more of a dream than a reality; the splendour of the day, the brilliant sunshine, the great, tearing plunging horses, held in check by the strong hand of the man beside her; his murmured words, thrilling with a passion as tender as it was fierce. Surely they came to her through the mist of sleep? And as surely she must be dreaming still as they drove mile after mile at a hard pace, stopping only for half an hour while the horses rested, and these two figures in dreamland ate their picnic luncheon.

But it was very little she could eat; for joy and doubt, happiness and guilt, had robbed her of an appetite.

They reached the log-built parsonage, where the clergyman awaited them. As Lashmore took her in his arms to lift her from the waggon she shrank back for the last time that journey. She was trembling so much that he put his arm round her and led her into the house. The clergyman was a very old man, who

had been sent out by his friends to save him from the death that was crawling on him in London. He was almost blind as well as feeble, and received them with senile nods and chuckles. The man and woman of the house, a stolid couple, were there as witnesses. It was wonderful how Lashmore had arranged matters.

Still in a dream, helpless and in thrall to her love and the fate which was driving her onward, Kittie heard the mumbled words which made her and Lashmore man and wife. A mist was before her eyes, and all that was tangible was the grip of her lover's hand.

'Yes, yes!' she heard the clergyman chuckle; 'a little form to go through and then it's all over. I will get you to sign this book, both of you, please; and I will give you your certificate, madam—he! he! Mrs. Lashmore now!'

Kittie signed the book; they all signed; the old parson filled in the certificate and handed it to her. She took it mechanically and slowly slipped it into her pocket. It appeared that some refreshment had been provided for them; but Lashmore could not wait—he wanted to reach Quirapata before nightfall. The good-natured old man insisted upon their drinking a glass of wine, and Kittie put her lips to hers.

As Lashmore lifted her into the waggon he pressed her to him, and murmured rather hoarsely, 'My wife!' Just the two words. Then on again; she nestling within his arm, over vast plains, through thick woods, then out in the plains again, and, in time, to a fertile valley lying basking in the sunlight below them to a substantial house, with smoke wreathing from the chimneys, and behind and beyond vast hills crowned by gigantic firs.

'Quirapata, dearest!' he said, with a whisper breaking the silence which had reigned like a magic spell. 'But we do not stop here; the cottage—our cottage—lies in the dip beyond the trees there.'

But they had to stop, for the thin but comfortable

figure of a man with a shrewd, good-natured face was standing at the gate leading to the farm.

'Mr. Coke,' whispered Harry. 'That's kind of him! He's one of the best!'

Mr. Coke raised his hat, and with a smile came to the waggon.

'I couldn't let you come to Quirapata without saying a word of welcome, Miss—I mean Mrs. Lashmore,' he said, as he shook hands with her.

Then he exchanged a hearty grip with Lashmore, and nodded and smiled approvingly.

'You'll find it all right down there, I think,' he said. 'Polly—that's your maid, Mrs. Lashmore—has got everything ready for you. You'll come up to the house when you feel inclined, and as often as you feel inclined, I hope.'

Lashmore drew him aside and whispered huskily.

'Thank you, thank you! Isn't she—isn't she beautiful?'

'She is!' assented Mr. Coke. 'And she looks as good as they make 'em. You're a lucky chap, Lashmore. Be good to her! Off with you, my lad. And God bless you!'

Lashmore went back to Kittie laughing rather shakily.

'He told me to be good to you!' he said as he pressed her to him. 'Do you think I shall be, dearest?'

They came in sight of the cottage, and Kittie drew a long breath. 'Oh, how beautiful!' she murmured.

She was at the gates of her earthly paradise; they were swinging wide open for her; she had only to enter. A man was waiting to take away the horses; a rosy-cheeked, buxom girl was standing at the door to receive them.

'Well, Polly!' said Lashmore, beaming at her; 'This is Mrs. Lashmore, your new mistress.' His voice rang with pride. The girl gazed at Kittie with an admiring awe. She had never seen any one like

her, and thought of the portrait of the Queen on the almanack nailed on the kitchen wall.

'Supper's ready, Miss—ma'am, when you're ready,' she faltered.

Kittie went up to her room—a dainty room, with new furniture, snow-white chintz; with flowers on the dressing table, the window sill, everywhere. She took off her things slowly, and heard Lashmore's voice as he talked to the girl below. Still in a dream! She went downstairs again; the supper was laid, as Polly had said. Lashmore had changed his riding suit for one of blue serge. He looked, as Mrs. Vanstone had said, amazingly handsome, distinguished; a man whom any woman might love and be proud of.

He drew her to the head of the table and kissed her.

'Welcome home, dearest!' he said.

He held a folded paper in his hand, and he shook it at her, laughingly, his eyes brilliant, his face flushed with happiness.

'What do you think it is, Eva?' he said. 'You'll never guess! It's the draft of a deed of partnership. I'm "man" no longer, but "part-master." Didn't I say he was one of the best? You'll like him, darling; no one could help it. He's as sharp as a needle, but as soft-hearted as—as a woman. He's been like a father to me; and I feel like—like a son to him. You must eat something, dearest!'

He put something on her plate, poured her out a glass of wine, brought them round to her, and, of course, availed himself of the opportunity to take her in his arms.

'Do you think you will like the place?' he asked. 'Do you think you will be happy here, away from the old country and—all your friends?' He looked at her anxiously, gratefully, as he put the question. 'Don't think I don't know all that you have given up for me, and that my only way of making it up to you is to make you happy.'

She raised her eyes to his with something like entreaty in them.

'I—I have given up nothing,' she said; 'I have made no sacrifice. 'I am—ah, yes, I am happy—happier than I deserve to be.' The last words were spoken more to herself than to him.

He laughed, but his eye glowed. 'That's your way of putting it,' he said. 'You speak like an angel. You are an angel! But I was wondering whether you'd feel lonely; there is no other woman here but Polly——'

She caught her breath. 'I shall not feel lonely. I do not want any one else. I only want—you.'

She breathed the word with such an intensity of passion that he sat and looked at her for a moment in silence.

'My wife!' he said in a whisper.

There was such an accent of devotion, of pride, of perfect trust in his voice that it broke Kittie down. She struggled for a moment; then her head fell in her hands, and she burst into a storm of tears. He sprang to her and put his arms round her.

'My dearest, my dearest!' he murmured consolingly, and in a terrible fright and anxiety. 'What is it? What is the matter? Tell me, Eva. Oh, my love, why do you cry? Is the sacrifice too great; are you—repenting?'

His face went white; his voice shook. She hid her face against his breast, pressed it there as if to force back her tears; her small hands gripped his coat, and clung there as a drowning man's cling to a rock; her voice found its way through her sobs.

'There is no sacrifice,' she said, almost inaudibly. 'I am not giving up anything. I am wicked, wicked, wicked!—Oh, I can't tell you; but I ought to do so, I ought! But I love you; it's my love that makes me wicked—and selfish. If you knew—if you only knew!—but I can't tell you! I feel as if it would kill



me. I couldn't bear to see you change to me ; I should die. Yes ; I should die !'

Manlike, he thought it was only hysteria. He had come upon her suddenly at Connita ; she had had a long journey, the excitement of the wedding, the solitude of this lonely spot—perhaps all newly-married girls broke down in this way ? He soothed her, kissed her brow and lips, gently stroked the hair from her forehead, drew her on to his knee, and murmured phrases of tender endearment and encouragement.

'Of course you realize all that you have lost, my poor darling,' he said. 'That's only natural. I expected that. Leaving England, your father, wealth, rank—entrusting yourself to a man you scarcely know—why, yes ; it's only natural. But, dearest, you know that I love you ; that I would give my life to make you happy ? And you love me—just a little, don't you ?'

## CHAPTER XVIII

### TOO LATE

**H**ER arms strained round his neck, and she hid her face still more closely against him.

‘Yes, yes, I love you, I love you! That is it; that is why! Oh, I am weak and wicked—I can’t speak I can’t tell you——’ She raised her face suddenly and looked at his anxious, but still love-laden, eyes. ‘Harry——’

‘Do you know that is the first time you have called me that,’ he said with a forced laugh—he really must try and get her to laugh; coax her into a lighter mood. ‘“Harry!” I didn’t know the name sounded so good. I like to hear you say it. Call me by it again, dearest.—But what were you going to say?’

She looked beyond him for a moment; then her eyes returned to his, seeming to search them, to plead for mercy, to seek assurance there of his love, of his pardon.

‘If’—she said, as if speech cost her pain—‘if some day you found that I was—was not so good as you think me; that I had not—not given up all that you thought I had——’

‘Would I love you still?’ he laughed. ‘Why, yes!’

Her hands writhed together behind his neck; she drew a long breath, and her eyes closed; but, as if she were forcing herself to speak, she went on again, her eyes seeking his with a feverish, agonized eagerness.

‘But if—I want to know how much you love me. They say that when a man loves with all his heart, he can forgive everything.’

‘I am prepared to forgive everything, Eva, dearest,’

he said with a laugh, as he tried to imagine something he would have to forgive—some little, trivial, foolish, girlish fault. 'Try me!'

'I am—I am!' she panted. 'I am trying to tell you, but—oh, I can't, I can't! If you found that I had deceived you, that I was—was—not what I seem—would you love me still? Oh, don't laugh. If you knew! If you knew!'

His face suddenly grew grave; a look of anxiety, of something between disappointment and doubt, came into his eyes.

'You were going to tell me that you once—once cared for some other man,' he said huskily. 'Hold on, dearest! Don't be frightened. Was it long ago; before I met you that night—you remember, at the Exhibition at Earl's Court? Was that one of the reasons why, when I saw you again at Ripley Court, you kept me to my promise, our agreement; pretended that we had never met before? Was he—did he exist then?'

She shivered and shuddered in his arms as he referred to Ripley Court, for his words called up Eva Lyndhurst, and a torturing vision of all that may have passed between them; and her heart grew hot with jealousy.

'No, no!' she said. 'I have never loved any one but you. Never, never!'

His face cleared, he uttered a cry, and his arms closed round her so that she felt as if she were in a vice.

'Thank God!' he said hoarsely. 'Of course, I could have borne it. I know that you love me and me only now, but I should have hated, yes, hated, to have thought that you had ever cared for any other man; that he had—you had—ever let him kiss you like this, and this, and this!—And so it's all ended in smoke, and there is no fire behind it. Dry your tears dearest. Are you afraid that I shall not make you happy, that you'll not be able to bear this new, strange

life here alone with me ? Well, that's not surprising. But, dearest, this is all that I have to offer you. We shall have to stay here. I—I can't go back to England for—for the reasons I told you of at Deerbrook.'

She nestled closer to him. The desire for confession was broken down by his complete trust, his perfect love.

'We shall have to stay here and be all in all to each other. Will you be content, Eva ?'

She drew a long breath, and the whole of her seemed to resign itself to him.

'Yes, yes !' she whispered, 'I shall be more than content. I want to stay here with you alone, quite alone. I shall never want to go away. Oh, don't take me away ; I shall be happy here while I am here with you. Don't, don't heed my foolish words, Harry. They mean nothing. If you love me, let us forget the past. Never, never speak of it again. Let us begin our lives from to-day !'

Her lips sought his. She had succumbed to the great temptation ; the moment of confession had passed.

She went up to her room, resolved to struggle no longer with the fate that drove her. Once, and only once, as she buried her face in the pillow and checked a sob, her guardian angel strove with her. But she thrust it away. She heard her husband's footstep on the stairs.

It was too late for repentance, too late for confession.

## CHAPTER XIX

### ENTER OWEN OSBORNE

**E**ARLY in the London season Sir Talbot and Eva came up to the house in Gorden Gardens. Eva had not been very well, and needed a change, and it was Lord Herndale who had suggested that they should come to town. His visit to Ripley Court had been a rather extended one ; and he was now in London, staying at the quiet little rooms in Verron Street, though he gave one of his clubs as his address.

Sir Talbot had very much changed of late. He had never been a particularly light-hearted man, but he had now become anxious, moody, and impatient in manner and speech. As a rule your born gambler takes his luck with a certain amount of equanimity ; it is the amateur gamester and speculator—the terms are synonymous, of course—who loses his head and his nerve, and allows his ill-luck to prey upon him. Sir Talbot's first operation on the Stock Exchange had proved successful, because Herndale had filled in the winning contract with Sir Talbot's name.

Unfortunately for the novice at most games of chance, he generally wins the first stake—unfortunately, because he is elated by his good luck, and is lured on by the hope of perpetuating it. That thousand pounds woke the gambler in Sir Talbot, and made him as eager as a tiger ; and when Herndale, with true cunning, counselled prudence, Sir Talbot called him faint-hearted, and grew impatient for the game.

Herndale, by the plans he adopted in the first instance, allowed his dupe to win various sums, with an occasional loss, to give an air of genuineness to the

business ; and Sir Talbot, restless with excitement, tried his own hand. As he knew nothing whatever of Stock Exchange manipulation, it is scarcely necessary to say that he lost, and that he at once fell back into Herndale's hands, and relied entirely upon his more experienced mentor.

Then ensued a series of transactions which Sir Talbot could make neither head nor tail of ; and, though every now and then he received fairly large sums from Herndale, he had not the least idea how he actually stood, and for how large an amount he was responsible ; but he consoled and encouraged himself with the reflection that Herndale was in the same boat, and that they were both sure to come out winners in the end. But the strain told on him ; and, of course, Eva noticed it. Now, Herndale had expressly stipulated that Miss Lyndhurst should be kept in ignorance of the fact that her father had gone in for speculating ; and therefore Sir Talbot could not ease the load on his mind by telling her.

Lord Herndale was at Gordon Gardens nearly every day ; and he paid his court to Eva as astutely and cunningly as he manipulated her father's speculating accounts. He took care not to frighten her by too conspicuous attentions ; he seemed always to be at hand when there was anything going on, and was always ready to accompany her and Sir Talbot when they were going anywhere ; he contrived to have her fan, her theatre wrap, her opera glasses, when she needed them ; he selected books for her from the library ; got the best seats for her at the opera, the theatres, the swagger concerts ; he was present at most of the receptions and balls to which she went, and he succeeded in getting more than his proper share of dances. He had said that he had no parlour tricks ; but he was an admirable dancer, and, when she was waltzing with him, Eva almost forgot that she had once distrusted and disliked him.

An innocent, country-bred girl is always distrustful of the opinion she may have formed of that complex creature, man ; and Herndale had played his cards so well, and kept so close a guard on himself, had wooed her good opinion so assiduously of late, that Eva actually began to think that she had done him an injustice ; and when she recalled his thrashing of Tim, found some excuse for him in the fact that he had lost his temper on her behalf, so to speak. In short, she was growing accustomed to him, as he intended her to do ; and he took care not to alarm her by any show of the passion, which burnt more fiercely within him as the time went on.

Eva went out a great deal, for Aunt Lucy was in town, and was delighted to take her niece into society. Lady Lorchester, though perhaps not the wisest woman in London, was one of the sweetest and best-natured, and was extremely popular ; for there is a plentiful supply of wisdom in this world of ours, and a corresponding shortage of sweetness and good nature. She had an income sufficiently large for her purpose ; but unfortunately it went from her, when she died, to another branch of the family, otherwise Sir Talbot would have had less reason to be anxious about Eva's future.

Lady Lorchester had a nice house in Eaton Square, which she rarely left even in the hot weather, when London is supposed to be a wilderness, and here she gave charming little parties, to which the best people were always ready to come, because they were sure of being well entertained, and of meeting interesting people ; indeed Lady Lorchester had quite a genius for discovering interesting people, the latest traveller, the new poet, the famous actor, the last 'great' novelist ; in fact, one was sure of finding in Lady Lorchester's drawing-room one or more of the stars that scintillated in the social hemisphere.

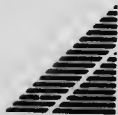
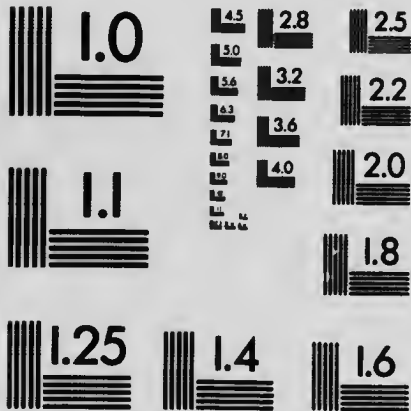
Eva used to laugh at Aunt Lucy's love for celebrities,





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and her never-wearying enthusiasm on their account ; but Aunt Lucy did not mind ; she was very fond of the girl, and was as proud of her as she was fond. She loved to have Eva with her, to sit amongst the dowagers, and look on smilingly at the girl's triumph ; and she was delighted to find that Lord Herndale had become so constant a friend of the family. It would be a splendid marriage for Eva. Of course Aunt Lucy was a matchmaker ; all sweet-tempered, good-natured women are.

One evening Eva arrived at the house in Eaton Square for one of her aunt's parties. She was alone, for Sir Talbot had a headache ; which meant that he was worrying over a loss on the Stock Exchange. Her aunt took her in her arms and kissed her, admired her dress, and made much of her generally.

'I am so glad you have come to-night, dear,' she said, beaming at her ; 'for he is coming.'

Eva laughed. 'Who is "he"?' she asked.

'Why, Owen Osborne, of course, my dear,' replied Aunt Lucy as if she were surprised that Eva should need to ask. 'I have had such trouble to get him ! He is one of the most reserved of men, and goes nowhere ; has refused the very best people, I assure you. I met him at the Geographical Society the other night, and I told him about your poor uncle's collection of spear-heads. He is coming to see them this evening. Of course, I asked a few friends—everybody is dying to see him.'

'Who is he, and what has he done?' asked Eva.

'My dear child !' exclaimed Aunt Lucy, as if Eva's ignorance were absolutely criminal. 'He is the greatest traveller we have. He has been farther North—or is it South?—than any one else ; has penetrated into the most savage lands where no other man has ever been, carrying his life in his hands. They say he is the bravest man that ever lived—'

'That's rather a large order, isn't it, Aunt Lucy?' suggested Eva.

'At any rate, that's what they say, my dear,' rejoined the dear old lady complacently. 'He has all sorts of medals, and amongst them two for saving life under the most extraordinary and audacious circumstances. I assure you it is a great thing to have him here; for he never goes anywhere; and he's—well, so—so reserved and brusque.—Oh, how do you do, dear Lady Mountjoy! Did I tell you that Mr. Owen Osborne is coming to-night?'

Eva went to some friends at the other end of the room, and was chatting with them, when she was aware of the sudden cessation of talk, which, by experience, she knew proclaimed the advent of the celebrity of the evening. She glanced towards the door, and saw a tall, a very tall man, standing there talking to her aunt, who was receiving him with empressement. He was a good-looking, strongly built man, with a tanned face and eyes which looked startlingly blue in their tanned surroundings. He wore a very short beard cut to a point; and something about his strongly marked face, the directness of his look, the self-possessed attitude of his figure, as if it were knit up for any emergency, differentiated him from the other men in the room, who seemed ordinary by comparison with him. Eva thought he looked rather bored already, and he glanced at the door, through which he had only just entered as if he were meditating escape.

Eva heard her aunt say, 'The collection is in the other room, Mr. Osborne,' and as Lady Lorchester took him there, she introduced him to any one who happened to be near. The great celebrity looked still more bored as he passed into the other room. Aunt Lucy fluttered over to Eva.

'My dear,' she said excitedly, 'come with me, and show him the arrow heads! I'm afraid he'll run off. He is so difficult, so—so anxious to get away!'

Much amused, Eva accompanied her aunt to the room where the collection was displayed. The captured lion turned as she entered, muttered something, and seemed about to pass them, probably meditating flight; then he looked at Eva again, and hesitated.

'I have come to show you the arrow heads or whatever they are,' said Eva. 'I am Lady Lorchester's niece,' she added, for in her perturbation Lady Lorchester had retreated to the drawing-room without introducing Eva.

The great traveller frowned at her. 'What do you know about them?' he inquired rather brusquely.

'Nothing whatever,' said Eva.

He looked at her steadily, and his frown melted into a smile of amusement.

'There is nothing much to know about them,' he said. 'They are by no means extraordinary; you could buy most of 'em in Museum Street. So you are Lady Lorchester's niece? What is your name—why didn't she introduce us?'

Repressing her desire to laugh, Eva told him her name; and he regarded her steadily, as if she were a specimen rather more interesting than those by which he had been beguiled by Lady Lorchester.

'Let's sit down,' he said suddenly. 'It's quieter here away from that mob in the other room. How I hate mobs of that kind! What on earth can you find amusing in it?'

'"The proper study of Mankind is Man,"' Eva reminded him.

'Not that kind of man; it's not worth studying,' he retorted. 'They are always alike as peas.'

'There are some small peas in a pod,' said Eva.

'These are all small,' he said. 'Do you mean to tell me you like coming to parties of this kind?'

'Yes,' said Eva gravely. 'Some of these people are my friends. Don't abuse them, please.'

'Sorry!' he said, but not very penitently 'I should have thought you were above this kind of thing.'

'I suppose you intend to be complimentary,' said Eva with a smile. 'But why should I be above it?'

He passed his hand over his beard, and almost scowled at her.

'I was judging by your face,' he said. 'Oh, I don't mean to be offensive.' Eva had coloured slightly. 'I have had to judge by faces for many a year; and you get pretty smart at it after a time; especially when, in many cases, your life depends upon your making up your mind whether the man you're talking to is going to hold out his hand empty or with a weapon in it.'

'I am not the least bit offended,' said Eva; 'and I suppose you know by this time that I am not going to stab or shoo you.'

'No; I don't suppose you'd do that unless you were driven to it,' he said.

'Thank you,' said Eva. 'And now, won't you tell me something about your travels?'

He recoiled with something like an expression of horror.

'Good lord, no!' he exclaimed. 'What have you ever done to me that I should afflict you so badly?'

'But I should be very much interested,' pleaded Eva. 'You have been to some extraordinary places and done some wonderful things—'

'Oh, don't!' he said with something like a groan. 'Don't disappoint me. I expected something very different from you. Everybody asks me that question. It's a kind of duty; and if I don't bore them to death, they look and speak as if I'd defrauded them of their just due. Hold on!'—for Eva had opened her lips to assure him that she was just as curious as the rest of the world, and that she wouldn't be bored; 'if you want to know anything about what I've done—and I give you my word of honour that it's nothing wonder-

ful—come and hear me read a paper next Thursday at the British Institution.'

'Thank you. I will come,' said Eva.

'I will send you a ticket,' he said, and he wrote down her address on his shirt-cuff, 'I hate reading papers, lecturing; I hate talking to any kind of public. I can't see what there is to make a fuss about in anything I've done. I did it to amuse myself, and I shouldn't have done it if I hadn't liked it. Just at present I'm a great deal more interested in London; the sights and shows and all that kind of thing. I'm like a boy let loose from school, for a holiday, a spree.'

'I love London,' said Eva.

They began to talk about Her, the great city, which is as fascinating as a beautiful, mysterious, Sphinx-like woman; they compared notes; they talked of Dickens' London, of Thackeray's; they gloried in the parks, the old, historic houses. Insensibly, Eva spoke of her life in the country; gradually he was drawn, notwithstanding his real reluctance, into speaking of the unknown lands into which he had penetrated. They sat side by side on a comfortable ottoman, and they looked at each other, eye to eye. Eva began to feel as if they were old friends; and it was not difficult, because, notwithstanding his vast experience of many lands and many peoples, the great traveller was as simple-hearted and as transparent as a child: perhaps that was the reason of his success. They forgot all about the 'mob' in the other room; but Aunt Lucy had not forgotten her latest lion, and presently she came in with an inundation of persons who were dying to be introduced to the famous Owen Osborne.

His manner changed instantly; he became almost sullen, looked at his watch, muttered something, and was striding to the door; then he seemed to remember Eva, and he came back to her.

'I'd like to know what you think of that paper, when you've heard it,' he said. 'Shall I call on you, or have you seen enough of me?'

'Oh, call,' said Eva, laughing.

He nodded, and was making his way unceremoniously through the group surrounding them when the footman announced Lord Herndale. Owen Osborne stopped and knit his brows.

'Herndale?' he said, as if he were trying to remember something. 'Herndale? I seem to remember the name. I think I've met him somewhere, but I can't recollect when or where.'

He was looking at Eva absently, and she glanced in the direction of Lord Herndale, who was shaking hands with Lady Lorchester at the entrance to the other room. Owen Osborne peered over the heads of the people, then shrugged his shoulders.

'That isn't the man I knew,' he said. 'I must be mistaken. Good-night. Don't forget—Thursday.'

Eva condoled with her aunt on the lion's absolute refusal to be lionized, then drove home; and thought a good deal about him on the way. She liked him. She had not met any one whom she liked so much since—since Mr. Lashmore. For some time Harry Lashmore had naturally occupied a prominent place in her mind; but Eva was a high-minded girl, and she had succeeded in thrusting Lashmore into the background. She might have loved him, but his conduct had been inexplicable; he had gone off without making any sign, any attempt to explain his conduct, to retain her goodwill.

There may be some women who would not only condone such conduct, but be attracted to the man by his ill-treatment; but Eva was not one of them. Yes—certainly she liked Mr. Owen Osborne, and she intended going to hear his lecture.

Her father was sitting up for her in what was called the library. She came in softly, and found him sitting at the table in a dejected attitude, his head resting on his hand. He looked up with a start as she entered, and hastily thrust aside a sheet of paper over which

he had been bending. She was shocked by his attitude and the weariness and dejection of his face, and she went to him and put her arm round his shoulder.

'What is the matter, father?' she asked anxiously. 'You look so worried and tired.'

'Nothing, nothing, my dear,' he said hurriedly. 'I have just been going through some accounts. Have you had a pleasant evening?'

'Oh, yes,' she said with a laugh. 'But I am afraid Aunt Lucy hasn't; and I am sorry for her, because I love her. She is the dearest, sweetest aunt in all the world. It was about a lion who turned restive.'

She told him about the great traveller and latest hero, but Sir Talbot listened rather inattentively.

'Was Lord Herndale there?' he asked.

'Oh, yes,' said Eva. 'I only saw him for a minute or two, for I was talking so much with Mr. Owen Osborne. Lord Herndale came out to the carriage with me, as usual; and, by the way, he asked me to tell you that he would be round to-morrow morning.'

Sir Talbot nodded and checked a sigh.

Eva went to the lecture, and enjoyed it. The great man stood up square and straight, and got through his task with scarcely any notes. By the aid of a paper, which he had drawn, and by the very simplest means, he made the story of his extraordinary travels so fully fascinating. Eva and the rest of the audience hung on his words; and, though he made light of them, she saw and appreciated clearly the terrible perils on the way.

As she was coming out, she felt a touch on her arm. Owen Osborne had left the congratulatory throng to make his way to her.

'I hope you haven't been bored to extinction, Miss Lyndhurst,' he said.

'On the contrary, I have been very much interested; and I am sure every one else has been,' she said.

His heavily marked face lightened, and became a



very pleasant one to look at: strong, generous, and at that moment almost boyish.

'That's the nicest compliment I've had,' he said.

He went out, bare-headed, with her, and put her into the carriage.

'Good-bye,' he said. 'And thank you.'

## CHAPTER XX

### MR. LEVISON AGAIN

OSBORNE called at Gordon Gardens the following afternoon. Sir Talbot was out; but Eva was glad that she was at home; and she gave him a frank and cordial welcome. Tea was brought in, and they sat over it, and chatted for quite a long time. He talked much more freely than he had done at Lady Lorchester's; and, to Eva's gratification, he spoke of himself and his work as if he thought she would understand him. It was clear that he had not a very high opinion of the typical Society woman; and his evident candour and communicativeness were therefore highly complimentary.

Eva enjoyed his visit very much; he was so very different from most of the men she met, who seemed to have very few ideas beyond those concerning clothes, bridge, polo, and motor cars. She gathered, from some few words he had said, that he had very little regard for money, and that he was, if not actually poor, by no means rich. She liked him none the less for this; and his individuality, his obvious physical and mental strength, acted on her as a tonic, a stimulant.

Her father and Lord Herndale came in a few minutes after Osborne had left; and Eva, half-unconsciously, drew a comparison between him and the young peer; and Herndale came out second best; for by contrast with Owen Osborne's sturdy, genuine manliness, the former seemed—well, just veneer. And yet Herndale was more than usually attentive that afternoon, and

hung about her with a kind of subdued tenderness, which made Eva uneasy and irritable.

A night or two afterwards Aunt Lucy took her to an extremely brilliant reception. As is usual with such functions, the rooms were horribly hot and crowded; and Eva was surprised to see Owen Osborne's tall and closely cropped head towering above the mob; she did not remember telling him casually that she was going to be there. Presently he made his way to her—by no means a gentle way, for he almost shouldered the men aside—and bent over her hand.

'Good heavens! Whatever made you come here?' he asked, working his tanned brow, and looking round with a mixture of disgust and amazement which made Eva laugh.

'Good heavens! Whatever made you come here?' she echoed.

He looked at her with his direct gaze, then glanced aside. He was silent a moment; then he said, by no means lowering his tone—

'I suppose I ought to say I don't know; but it wouldn't be true. I came because you said you were coming.'

Eva fought down the blush that threatened to rise. 'That's a very great compliment,' she said as lightly as she could. 'But you will not have very much of me, for I see that my aunt is going.'

'Oh, wait a few minutes!' he begged, as one boy might appeal to another. 'I deserve some reward for coming into this horrible crush. I give you my word, it's almost as bad as a palaver in a savage village; in fact, it's worse; for they're held in the open air. This air is like poison. Can't we go out on the balcony?'

'Well, could,' said Eva with a smile; 'but my aunt—'

'You wave your aunt at me like a mumbo-jumbo. I don't believe she's going yet. Look, she's sat down

beside that old witch with the feathers in her hair. Come on !'

'That old dame is the Duchess of Moorland,' said Eva laughingly ; but evidently she did not resent the brusqueness of his invitation, for she rose and went with him to the balcony.

'This is better,' he said, expanding his broad chest and drawing a long breath. 'But you'd better draw that shawl around you.' His hand went out to do it for her, but he checked himself. 'London's not a bad place,' he said thoughtfully, looking down at the park, which is, so far as I know, more beautiful than any other in the wide world. At least it wouldn't be if it weren't for shows like this,' he jerked his head towards the hot and crowded rooms behind him. 'I shall think of this night when I am far away up in Africa.'

Eva felt a strange little sensation in her bosom : was it one of pain ? But she said lightly enough—

'Are you thinking of going soon ?'

'Well, the Foreign Office.—By the way, this is a secret——.'

'Perhaps you ought not to tell me ?' she said, and her tone had grown graver and lower.

'Oh, I'd tell you any secrets,' he said ; 'for I know they'd be safe with you.'

She tried to laugh ; but somehow she couldn't manage it.

'The F. O. has asked me to accompany an important expedition they are sending out there on the quiet. It's a good offer, and I want to see the place, a new one to me. They have offered me a large sum of money. That would not have influenced me a— a little while ago ; but one's views are altered by circumstances.' He was looking down at the lamplit road, the vague masses of the trees ; his face had grown thoughtful and rather wistful.

'So you will decide to go ?' she said in a still lower voice.

He started slightly and turned to her.

'I—I don't know. I haven't made up my mind. And I shall have to do so very quickly. I wonder whether if I told you all that's in my mind, what it is that makes me undecided, you would——'

Before he could finish the sentence, Lady Lorchester appeared at the window.

'My dear Eva, I have been looking for you everywhere!—Oh, Mr. Osborne, how do you do? What a delightful evening it has been, hasn't it?'

'Delightful!' he said quietly, with a glance at Eva, who had risen. 'Do you want your carriage? I'll get it for you.'

'Dear me, how gracious he is!' laughed Aunt Lucy. 'He is really learning some manners. We ought to be very proud, my dear!'

'I think Mr. Osborne has plenty of manners, aunt,' said Eva gently.

'Then he mostly keeps them for his savages,' retorted Lady Lorchester good humouredly.

Owen Osborne stalked beside them without a word, and in a like silence put them into the carriage; but he held Eva's hand tightly for a moment, and his eyes met hers with an expression in his which brought the colour to Eva's face, and caused her to draw back quickly into the shadow.

Eva may or may not have been spending a pleasant evening; Sir Talbot certainly had not. Herndale had come in after dinner, and had brought bad news. The two men went into the library, and discussed it; or rather, it should be said that Herndale informed Sir Talbot of it, and Sir Talbot unsuccessfully endeavoured to realize it, and to understand how the catastrophe had been brought about. He sat at the table, with bent back and white face, vainly endeavouring to make sense of the mass of figures which lay before him.

'Bad business, isn't it?' said Herndale gravely. 'Most extraordinary run of ill luck.'

'I—I don't understand it,' said poor Sir Talbot, drawing his trembling hand across his furrowed brow. 'I—I had no idea that I had risked so much money, that I was liable for such an enormous sum; for it is enormous to me, a poor man.'

'Say "we,"' said Herndale with a shrug. 'I'm in the same boat. I've been with you in every transaction we've made.'

'Quite so, quite so!' assented Sir Talbot miserably. 'But this loss can—I am glad to say—be of very little consequence to you. You are well off, you will be in command of plenty of money presently.'

'I don't like losing, all the same,' said Herndale. 'Of course, we ought not to be surprised. We've been dealing in shares with great possibilities in them. We've made a lot of money, from time to time, as you know; and if we had pulled off this coup we should have made a very large sum. You can't do that kind of thing without taking the chances; and the chances happened to be against us. That is the whole of it.'

Sir Talbot drew a long breath that seemed to come from his heart.

'Quite so, quite so!' he said again. 'Please believe that I do not hold you in any way to blame. You have been very kind; you have taken a great deal of trouble.—It is my fault. I ought to take the loss with equanimity. But I am thinking of Eva. It will make a terrible difference to her, to my girl's future. I was trying to provide for it; that is why—'

Herndale glanced at him keenly; then, in his cool, calculating way, took a drink of his soda and whisky before he said—

'You need not be anxious about Miss Eva's future, if you will permit me to influence it. I do not know whether you will be surprised or not when I tell you, Sir Talbot, that the great desire of my life is to win Eva for my wife. I love her with all my heart and

soul, and I trust that she does not altogether dislike me. With your permission, I will ask her to make my hope a reality. If she says "Yes," as I sincerely trust she may, her future, about which you are so naturally anxious, is assured.'

Sir Talbot lifted his haggard face; his lips were tremulous, a faint hope dawned in his weary eyes.

'I—I can't answer for her, Herndale,' he said. 'But I may say for myself that I should be glad—that I should welcome you—as a son-in-law. But I can't answer—I can't speak for Eva. The decision must rest with her—I could not undertake to influence her——'

'Certainly not, certainly not!' said Herndale with the suspicion of a sneer curling his thin lips. 'I should like to have the matter settled. Will you speak to her to-night? I don't think there is any use in postponing the matter.'

'Would you not rather speak to her first?' pleaded poor Sir Talbot.

But after smoking in silence for a moment, Herndale shook his head.

'I think I would rather you spoke to her,' he said. 'I am naturally aware of my shortcomings; I am rather a modest man. You will plead my cause better than I can. And I hope you will succeed. I think I'll go now. Oh, by the way,' he added, as he rose and lit a fresh cigar, 'don't worry about this liability of yours. Of course, if Eva says "Yes," I'll take the matter over from you. I can manage quite easily.'

When he had gone. Sir Talbot sank into his easy chair—which he found anything but easy that night, and buried his face in his hands. Eva found him there, white, wan, and weary, and consumed by a terrible anxiety. She sprang to him, and knelt beside him.

'Father, there is something the matter!' she whispered. 'I am sure of it! You are ill——!'

'No, no!' he said, almost hoarsely. 'I want to speak

to you, Eva. Lord Herndale has—Eva, have you ever thought of him as—as a husband? Wait! Don't speak until I have told you. I can't tell you all; I scarcely understand it myself; but I am in difficulties—money difficulties. Lord Herndale has been a true friend to me, very kind, very considerate. He can help me, he will do so—he has proposed for you, he wants you to be his wife. If you can say "Yes," for God's sake do so! I don't want to press you, to influence you—— But he is a good fellow. It is a marriage that will commend itself to every one, to your Aunt Lucy.—It is a good marriage, as good as I could expect for you. Your future will be assured— And I—I——' he drew a long breath; 'I shall be saved from ruin—— No, no! I didn't mean to say that—to tell you——'

But he had said it, he had told her. White to the lips she rose and stood a little way behind him so that he could not see her face. Her hands were clasped tightly, her heart was beating fast, yet heavily. Ruin! She did not know how it had been brought about; but she could see by the terror, the anguish in the pale, working face, that it was true. And she could save him by a word, save the father she loved, far better than she loved herself. One trembling hand was stretched out, and fell lightly on his shoulder.

'Yes, father,' she said in a voice which sounded in her ears as if it belonged to some one else. 'I will marry Lord Herndale.'

Herndale came the next morning for his answer; and Eva went down from her own room to him at once. She was very calm, but very pale. Herndale himself was pale, and his lips were tightly set.

'Your father has told you——?' he said in a low voice, his eyes fixed on hers with the expression of a fowler who has the bird within his reach.

'Yes,' she said in as low a voice, 'my father has told me. And I—yes; I will marry you, Lord Herndale.'



The man's passion burst into a flame, and he caught her to him. She yielded to his embrace, suffered his kisses; but she gave none in return, and said no word.

The following night, before the public announcement of their engagement had been made, she met Owen Osborne at a small party at Aunt Lucy's. Eva was looking pale and tired, and Owen Osborne, as he bent over her, grew suddenly grave and troubled looking.

'You are not well?' he said; 'you look worried. Is—anything the matter? But I've no right to ask—yet. I'm glad I've met you here to-night. I wanted to ask you to decide for me about this African expedition. I want you to tell me whether I shall go or not. Miss Lyndhurst—Eva—I want the decision to rest in your hands. I want you to decide my whole future for me——.'

They were alone together in a little recess; no one was within hearing. She looked up at him, her face very white now, her lips tremulous.

'I ought to tell you——' she faltered almost inaudibly. 'I—I am engaged to marry Lord Herndale.'

He did not start; but he drew himself erect; his hands clenched at his sides, he looked down at her, his thick brows heavily knit, his teeth set hard.

'Thank you,' he said hoarsely. 'You have answered, decided for me. I go to Africa. Good-bye.'

He left her, and, without the formal 'good-night' to Lady Lorchester, got his coat and hat and made his way into the street. He strode on for some minutes, his face white and set, as it had been upstairs in the recess. He was so engrossed by his own misery that he did not notice a man who had passed him, but who, after passing him, had stopped suddenly and then turned back. Owen Osborne felt a touch on his arm. He turned almost ferociously and confronted a wrinkled face, which looked as impassive as a mask.

'How do you do, Mr. Osborne?' asked the owner

of the mask-like face. 'You don't, remember me? My name's Levison. We met, if you recollect, at Algiers.'

Owen Osborne drew his hand across his brow and tilted his opera hat back. Mr. Levison, as absolutely impassive as ever, glanced up at him.

'You don't remember? Well, it's some years ago. If you recollect, Lord Herndale—the late Lord Herndale, not the present one, of course—was of the party. It's a long time ago, now; you were young, very young. Time passes quickly. One forgets.'

'I remember now,' said Owen Osborne wearily. The two men walked on together.

## CHAPTER XXI

### A FRAGILE HAPPINESS

**K**ITTIE had entered into her earthly paradise. There are probably on this fair earth of ours many more beautiful places than Quirapata ; but to Kitty, only recently escaped from the London slums, it appeared in all the roseate hues of fairyland, and was a fitting setting for her happiness. And that happiness was, at any rate at present, amazingly complete and perfect. Every hour of the day was a joy to her ; she found herself now and again stopping suddenly, in whatever she was doing, and gazing before her, as if she were trying to realize this great happiness. But her joy would have been as complete and perfect if Quirapata had been one of the ugliest instead of one of the most beautiful places ; for she was passionately in love, and knew that she was as passionately loved.

It was her honeymoon, and love's luminary shone without one of the clouds which too often dim the brightness of the early nuptial days, which frequently represent a month of boredom. This happy pair did not have time to bore each other, for they had to work, and work hard. After the early and plentiful breakfast—it was a land flowing with milk and honey—Lashmore went off to his daily toil ; Kittie would stand at the gate, and, shading her eyes from the sun, watch him with pride and the woman's joy of possession as he rode or drove away ; watch with admiration his mastery of the half-broken horse, his perfect seat in the saddle, or the skilful way in which he man-

aged the team which a minute or two before had been plunging and rearing all over the place.

Then she would go back to the cottage and set about her own work ; her joy finding expression in singing some of the songs she had sung to the 'boys ;' and Polly would listen, entranced, to the music of her young mistress's voice, and gasp out, as if she could not restrain herself—

'Lor' ma'am, how beautiful you do sing !'

The cottage was the first real home that Kittie had possessed ; for the furnished lodging, from which her father and she might have to fly any moment, or the attic in the slums, could scarcely be counted as home ; and Kittie resolved that it should be a little House Beautiful. She did wonders with it, and Lashmore's quick eyes, noticing all her improvements, was enthusiastic in his appreciation and praise. She wanted a flower garden, and when he had railed off a space for her, she set to work with all a Londoner's joy in the open air ; and her song floated now across the billowy plain and up to the Great House, as they called the farm.

Lashmore took her up there in the first week of their honeymoon, and she was surprised to find the place so comfortable, not to say luxurious. Mr. Coke made much of her, and treated her with a mixture of paternal kindness and chivalrous deference which won Kittie's heart ; but she would have liked him in any case, because of his evident affection for Lashmore, whom he now treated as a partner as well as a son. In the dining-room there was a goodly quantity of books, for Mr. Coke was a great reader ; and, as he saw her eyes wander wistfully towards them during supper, he said—

'Fond of books, Mrs. Lashmore ? I hope you'll find something there that you haven't read ; if so, you come and get 'em whenever you've a mind. They've passed many a lonely hour away for me,

especially before Harry came out to keep me company. It's a regular mixture ; there are all sorts there ; and I dare say you'll find something to amuse you. Harry's not much given to reading.'

Lashmore laughed, the laugh of the man who is thoroughly happy. 'No time,' he said. 'And I never was much of a hand at books. But Eva will be delighted to avail herself of your offer ; she goes in for everything. You ought to hear her play, Mr. Coke,' he added, his eyes dwelling with fond pride upon his beautiful bride.

Mr. Coke said nothing, but nodded thoughtfully ; and some little time afterwards she and Lashmore, returning from a long day's outing, found a piano in the corner of their sitting-room. Kittie exclaimed ; then her eyes filled with tears, and she hid them on Lashmore's breast.

'Oh, Harry, how good of him ! How good everybody is to me. I—I don't deserve it.'

He laughed as he pressed her to him and shared in her delight.

'I told you he was one of the best, dearest,' he said.

'So unselfish !' sobbed Kittie. 'He might have had it up at the Great House, and I could have played when I was there.'

'That isn't his way,' said Lashmore. 'He wanted you to have it for your very own. Go and play something, darling.'

She went to the piano, but stopped as suddenly, and the colour rushed to her face. She had had lessons during some of her spasmodic schooling, and was born with the gift of music, but she had remembered that Eva Lyndhurst was certain to be a skilled pianiste. Harry would discover the difference. She shook her head and turned it away from him.

'No, not now,' she said. 'It is so long since I played. I should like to practise a little first—by myself.'

He ascribed her refusal and agitation to the sudden shock of a memory of the past, and he said no more,

but took her in his arms and kissed her. When he had gone next morning he sat down to the piano and played, with only brief intervals, all day. Mr. Coke had thoughtfully ordered a pile of music to accompany the piano, and Kittie, who was a quick reader, practised some of the pieces. They invited Mr. Coke down that night, and she played to them after supper.

She was nervous at first—for she was conscious of her peril—but she was soon lost in the music. The two men were enthusiastic in their praise; Lashmore was more proud of her than ever, and she breathed a long sigh of relief, for she saw that she had passed through the ordeal successfully.

Another one soon cropped up. One evening Lashmore brought a handsome horse to the door.

'Yours, dearest!' he said, with boyish pleasure. 'I've had my eye on her for some weeks past, but the fellow wouldn't sell. I've got her at last, though!'

Kittie's face went pale. She was not afraid of the horse, but she had never been on one in her life, and she knew that he would discover her ignorance in a moment.

'I haven't a habit,' she said in a low voice.

'That doesn't matter, dearest,' he said; 'you can ride in a skirt. But I haven't a saddle and bridle for her yet; it will be here in a day or two. Meanwhile I am going to try her with a sack; to see if she's quite quiet and will carry a lady. I won't have you get on her until I'm quite sure she's safe.'

'She looks quiet enough, the beauty,' said Kittie, as she leant against Harry and stroked the horse.

'Quiet as a lamb, I believe,' he said; 'and she seems to have taken a fancy to you. We'll take her into the stable. You get a feed of corn for her, get her used to you.'

Kittie went for the corn and stood at the bin for a moment, her hand pressed tightly to her heart. She would have been spared her anguish and anxiety

and dread, if she had known that Lashmore had never seen Eva Lyndhurst on horseback ; but she did not know this. She rose to grapple with this ordeal as she had done that of the piano. The mare proved quite quiet, and Kittie fed it with her own hands ; and of course they grew fond of each other ; so fond that Kittie carried out a resolution she had made. One day, after Lashmore had gone to his work, she sent Polly up to the Great House on an errand ; then she slipped an old bridle on the mare, led it out, mounted from a chair and rode the horse, barebacked, on the grass beside the house.

It was a daring deed and characteristic of Kittie's pluck. She expected to come off, and after a while she did ; but she was not hurt, and she mounted again. The mare was as careful of her as if it understood the whole business ; and soon, to her intense delight, she found that she was able to retain her seat on the broad back, even when the horse was going at a trot or a soft canter. She practised every day, and was filled with delight by the joy of the novel exercise. Without saying a word to Lashmore she lengthened and altered a dark blue serge walking-skirt into something like that of a habit ; so that when Lashmore arrived one day with the saddle and bridle, she was ready for him.

There was reason for the pride that shone in his eyes when she came out to the horses ; for the effect of the lithe, graceful figure was accentuated by the riding dress she had concocted ; and, though she was a trifle pale, she seemed to radiate health and happiness. Lashmore looked at her, his lips half apart, in speechless admiration. Amongst the books she had got from the Great House was a cheap little handbook on riding ; she had studied it carefully and she was therefore not awkward and embarrassed when he lifted her to the saddle ; and she knew how to hold her reins. There was something almost awe-inspiring



and certainly dangerous in Kittie's quickness to acquire anything she wanted to know.

As they rode off side by side, Lashmore watched her, then laughed with satisfaction.

'You're enjoying it, aren't you, dearest?' he said.

'Yes!' she breathed, then she added falteringly, 'I—I haven't ridden much lately.'

'You'll be all right presently,' he said easily; 'you'll get into the old way of it. It's just as it was with the piano. You look well on horseback, Mrs. Lashmore.'

He nodded at her with a look in his eyes which a woman loves to see, which sets her heart beating, and draws her towards the man she loves by invisible threads. She wanted to say out loud, 'Harry, I love you!' but, though she did not say the words, her eyes spoke quite plainly enough.



## CHAPTER XXII

### RUNNING THE RISKS

HE would not let her go far that day, in case she should be tired: but it was a heavenly ride. Love cast its glamour round them, the hoofs of the horses beat out soft music on the grassy way, the birds sang to them, the sun shone in benediction. After that day she frequently accompanied him when he went on horseback; they saw the country as they could not have seen it any other way; she learnt the details of his daily work, and took the deepest interest in them; the herds of cattle did not frighten her; no journey seemed too long or too rough. Very soon it would have been difficult for any one to have recognized in Harry Lashmore's wife the pinched and pale-faced girl who worked in the collar factory, and spent weary hours in registry offices seeking employment.

Notwithstanding their hard work and, so far as Lashmore was concerned, its roughness, their lives did not lack the element of refinement; for instance, though they did not put on evening dress, they changed their workaday clothes for supper. There were delightful times after that meal. Harry smoked his pipe while she played and sang or read to him. Sometimes they went up to the Great House or Mr. Coke came down to them; and it is scarcely necessary to say that he grew fond of Harry's beautiful and accomplished young wife.

No visitors had come to them or were likely to come, unless some wayfarer chanced their way, and these three persons led self-contained lives and were bound up in

each other. Lashmore never alluded to the past ; it seemed as if the agreement they had come to on their wedding night was regarded by both of them as sacred ; and Kittie, absorbed in her happiness, almost forgot the past. Remorse was dead in her ; indeed, if it had risen like a grim spectre, she would have been able to lay it to rest with the reflection that her deceit had brought happiness to the man she loved as well as to herself. And her love for him grew day by day. He never left her but her heart sank, he never returned but it leapt in her bosom ; they were lovers as well as husband and wife.

The weeks slid into months, and their happiness was still without alloy. When the winter came it was but to intensify the comfort of their little home. She read a great deal, books of all kinds ; and, with her retentive memory and acute intelligence, she sucked the pith out of all she read. Strangely enough, in Mr. Coke's odd collection there happened to be a book on etiquette. It was not so absurd as most of them, and Kittie grasped the salient points and stored them away in a pigeon-hole of that wonderful brain of hers.

Presently trouble came, as it always comes sooner or later. The mare, startled by a bird which rose suddenly from under her feet, shied with a terrific bound, and threw Kittie. She was unconscious for a minute or two ; but fortunately they were near home, and Lashmore carried her to the cottage. He was half beside himself with anxiety ; Mr. Coke, almost as anxious and cut up, rode for the nearest doctor. He came and sentenced Kittie to bed for a fortnight. She was very ill during part of that time ; and not only Lashmore but Mr. Coke and Polly went about as if they were sentenced to death but might just hope for a reprieve.

In ordinary circumstances the trouble might have been a serious one ; but Kittie had not been living a life in the open, had not been feeding on joy and

happiness for nothing. She passed the crisis and began to get well, and very soon Lashmore carried her downstairs and laid her on the sofa beside the fire. The accident had robbed them of a great hope; but they were young, and Lashmore counted the disappointment as nothing compared with the welfare of his beloved wife. He and Polly and Coke waited on her hand and foot as if she were a goddess; and Kittie repaid them with a love and gratitude which beamed from her eyes, though her lips said very little.

One afternoon, when Lashmore was out stock-riding, she felt rather listless and bored, and she got up from the sofa and wandered about as convalescents will. She thought she would tidy the bureau; and she unlocked it and looked at the confusion with a little dismay; for Harry was the most untidy of mortals; and the bureau, which he used exclusively, was crowded up with all sorts of articles—cartridges, account-books, horse medicines, seeds, tobacco, fishing tackle. She set to work to arrange them, and felt somewhat amused by the task. Presently she came upon a gold matchbox.

She did not know that it was gold until she saw the hall marks; then she wondered why Harry had never worn it, for there was a convenient ring by which he might have attached it to his watch chain. Impressed by its value, she carried it to the firelight and examined it, and she saw that a crest was engraved on it. There was a heron with a coronet above it, and below it a motto in Latin, which, of course, she did not understand. As she looked at it, she remembered the scene in the moonlight on the edge of the wood and his hurried, agitated words. The coronet puzzled her. She pondered over the thing, then slipped it into her pocket.

Lashmore came home, riding quickly—for was he not coming back to his love?—and as he came in and took her in his arms, she experienced that thrill of safety, of absolute safety, of passionate abandon

which always came to her when she was enfolded in his embrace.

'Better to-night, dearest?' he said. 'That's right! I won't be ten minutes.'

They had their supper together; and presently, as she was drawing her handkerchief from her pocket, she felt the gold matchbox.

'Oh, look, Harry, what I have found!' she said, and she took it out and pushed it across to him. 'In the bureau there. Is it yours?'

He took it up and looked at it, and was silent so long that her eyes opened on him with surprise and questioning.

'Yes; it's mine,' he said at last, and in a low, strained voice.

He put the matchbox in his pocket and stared straight before him, as if he saw nothing that was present; then he said, 'You'll be able to go out to-morrow, dearest? Mr. Coke wants to take you for a little drive.'

'Yes,' she responded. 'It is very kind of him—But that matchbox, Harry; it is gold, isn't it? Why don't you wear it?'

His face grew pale, his lips set tightly.

'Oh, I don't know,' he said carelessly. 'What time will you be able to go to-morrow?'

Mr. Coke came down for her early in the afternoon. He had a bundle of newspapers in his hand and he gave them to her, with his kindly smile.

'English newspapers, Mrs. Lashmore! I thought you'd like to see them. We won't get them often. We live so out of the world here that nothing except what happens at Quirapata seems to matter; but, still, perhaps you would like to look at them. Do you feel strong enough for a drive? It's quite warm outside; our early summers are like that. But you must wrap up. I'm answerable to Harry, you know.'

She took the bundle of papers upstairs with her and sang softly to herself as she put on her outdoor

things. Yes ; summer was coming. How beautiful life was ; how good it was to be just alive ; how happy she was in the love of the best man that was ever created, the handsomest, the noblest, the most unselfish ! Her heart was overbrimming with joy and gratitude.

During their drive, Mr. Coke, who took as much care of her as if she had been his daughter, talked most of the way of Harry.

'Fine fellow, my dear !' he said. 'Though perhaps I ought not to say it to his wife. But there ! you know. I don't know what I should have done without him. He's doubled the value of Quirapata. Nothing comes amiss to him, nothing escapes him. But that's the way with your real gentleman. He's the best worker in the world. He can do more with the men with half a word than I can do by jawing for an hour. But I'm not a gentleman ; that is, born and bred ; and any one can see that Harry is. And you're a lady, my dear. Forgive an old man's bluntness. And I tell you I'm as pleased as Punch at having the nous to hit upon him that day in Hyde Park when he was down on his luck ; and more than pleased to see him as happy as he is. He was terribly restless before you came. But you set all that straight. Keep that shawl over your chest, my dear. Lord, you do look like your old self this afternoon ; and it does one good to see you ! You're happy, my dear, you never feel dull !'

Kittie turned her eyes on him and smiled. The smile was answer enough, but she said,

'Happy ? I am so happy that I—try to realize it and can't. And I am never dull. Haven't I Harry and you and Polly and the mare and—Oh, ever so many things ? Dull !'

'God bless you, my dear !' he said. 'Harry's a lucky man. And so am I to have you near me. And he's happy too ; I never saw a man so much in love in my life. That's your fault, my dear.'

Kittie laughed, a laugh of content, of immeasurable joy.

Lashmore had not returned when they had got home, and she went up to her room. The bundle of papers was lying on the bed where she had thrown it; she took it up absently and with not an iota of interest and opened it. Among the others was a copy of the *Morning Post*; and she unfolded it absently and glanced at it.

Suddenly the expression of her face changed, she grew crimson and then pale; for her eye had caught a paragraph amongst the *Fashionable Intelligence*. She read:

'A marriage has been arranged between the Earl of Herndale and Miss Eva Lyndhurst, the daughter of Sir Talbot Lyndhurst of Ripley Court.'

The paper fell from her grasp and she gazed into vacancy, her hands gripped tightly, her heart scarcely beating. Like a spectre the shadow of the past had risen before her. She had forgotten so completely, had thrust the past from her with so firm a hand, that she had almost come to believe she was absolutely safe. This paragraph might have been seen by her husband; her imposture, deceit, would have been made known—she shivered on the brink of discovery, of absolute ruin. A few lines of print in a newspaper were sufficient to overthrow her wonderful, marvellous happiness. The blood seemed to ebb from her heart. She had felt so secure, she had felt so happy; here, in this wild, almost unknown place, she had been living as if the past had ceased to exist, as if it had never been. And now, this paragraph!—What should she do? To give up everything, to accept ruin for herself, misery for the man she loved—Oh, impossible!

With something like a ferocious gesture she tore from the newspaper the fatal lines. Then she dressed herself and went down to supper.

'Here are some newspapers Mr. Coke brought,'

she said, moistening her lips and speaking in a voice that sounded hollow in her own ears.

Lashmore took them, without any show of interest, and as he tossed them aside, she thought 'Yes; it is all right. I have done her no wrong. She never cared for him. She's going to marry another man. It is all right. I am justified.'

She rose from her own chair and crouching on the hearthrug nestled up to the man she loved, and laid her cheek against his hand. And he drew her closer to him and kissed her with a loving kiss.

Yes; it was all right: she was justified.



## CHAPTER XXIII

### MR. LEVISON'S QUESTIONS

OWEN OSBORNE and Mr. Levison walked on side by side in silence for a minute or so. Osborne was scarcely thinking of the man who had accosted him, and was certainly too absorbed in his own misery to ask himself why Levison had thrust their very slight acquaintance upon him. Owen Osborne was not the man to love in a lukewarm fashion; and the discovery that Eva was engaged to Lord Hern-dale had been a cruel and terrible blow; he walked on, scarcely noticing where he was going, and half-unconscious of the man by his side; so that he almost started when Levison spoke again.

'If I remember rightly, Mr. Osborne, you were paying a visit to an uncle of yours who was living or staying in Algiers? Pray forgive me for asking the question and for bothering you, especially at such a late hour and in the street; but some business with which I am connected——'

Osborne looked up. They were within a few yards of his Club, a small and select one, the qualification of membership of which was extensive travel.

'Come inside,' he said. 'I shall be very pleased to answer any questions, to give you any information.'

He led the way into the smoking-room, and called for drinks and cigars. He looked very pale and haggard, and Mr. Levison watched him without appearing to do so. Mr. Levison was on a very delicate quest, and it behoved him to go slowly and cautiously. He knew Owen Osborne by repute; and now, as he scrutinized the drawn, pale, deeply-lined face, he



knew that he had to deal with a strong man. He could see that Osborne was in trouble of some sort, and he guessed, with swift intuition, that it was trouble connected with a love affair. Mr. Levison had had his eye upon Osborne for some days past, had seen him in the company of Miss Lyndhurst, and was not slow to draw conclusions.

'Tell me what I can do for you, Mr. Levison,' said Osborne, rousing himself with an effort. 'By the way, it was rather strange your happening upon me to-night, if you wanted to see me.'

'It was scarcely an accident, Mr. Osborne,' said Levison with a candour which he felt was necessary in dealing with the man before him. 'I have been trying to meet you for some days past. Of course, I should have written to your address, if I had known it, or your Club. As it was, I happened to see you going to Eaton Square, Lady Lorchester's, and I waited on the chance of seeing you again as you came out.'

'Are you a detective?' asked Osborne.

Levison neither smiled nor looked offended. 'No,' he said quietly. 'I am just an ordinary business man; but my business is a peculiar one and has a good many ramifications. On the present occasion I am desirous of obtaining some data in connexion with the affairs of a client of mine; and I think you can help me.'

Osborne nodded absently; it was difficult for him to drag his mind away from his great trouble, to concentrate it on his rather strange visitor.

'Your uncle, Mr. Osborne—by the way I don't remember his name,' said Levison.

'George Owen,' said Osborne.

'Ah, yes; of course,' assented Mr. Levison, as if he now remembered it. He made no note of the name, for Mr. Levison was one of those men who rarely need to make notes. 'He has spent some years in Algiers, has he not?'

'A great many,' replied Osborne.

'The occasion on which I happened to see you in Algiers with him was your first visit, was it not?'

'The first and only one,' said Osborne.

'You remember Lord Herndale—the late Lord Herndale, of course—being there while you were in Algiers?'

'Oh, yes,' said Osborne. 'I remember him. A tall, handsome man, who seemed old to me—of course, I was only a boy then, and to a boy middle-age looks like antiquity—Your business has to do with him, I see,' he added, looking at Levison with, for the first time, some interest.

'Yes,' said Levison. He regarded his cigar closely for a moment or two; then he said, 'Mr. Osborne, I am in a rather delicate position. I am engaged on an inquiry which may or may not have serious results. If I were certain that these results would ensue, I should frankly lay my cards on the table before you; but I am not certain; and therefore I do not want to show my hand. In a word, I have certain suspicions which I consider to be well grounded; but they are suspicions only, and I do not want to confide them to any one, even to you, Mr. Osborne, whom I very much respect, and in whom, I tell you candidly, I should like to confide; for I think that you are directly or indirectly concerned in the matter.'

Osborne was not the man to exclaim or start at anything at any time, and to-night he was so benumbed by the shock he had already received in the loss of Eva as to be impervious to any other.

'I am concerned?' he said.

'Yes,' said Mr. Levison; he hesitated a moment, 'through another person. Pardon me, please,' he added quickly as Osborne opened his lips to ask whom the other person was. 'I can go no farther than that at present; but I ask you to believe me when I say that if you refuse to assist me, you will very greatly regret it.'

'That sounds like a threat,' .. Levison,' said Osborne with a smile.

'No; I'm not such a fool as to threaten, Mr. Owen Osborne,' said Levison very quietly. 'I am only venturing to warn, to advise, you. Now, may I ask my questions?'

Osborne was silent for a moment or two, his strongly-marked brows drawn, his eyes fixed keenly on the impassive face opposite. Then he nodded.

'Go ahead!' he said. 'I think I see your difficulty. I don't like moving in the dark; but this is not the first time I've had to do so.'

'Thank you,' said Levison. 'You will find that your trust has not been misplaced, Mr. Osborne. Now, can you tell me whether Lord Herndale had visited Mr. George Osborne at Algiers before the occasion on which you saw him?'

Osborne thought for a moment, his chin in his hand, his eyes fixed on Levison.

'Yes; I can remember,' he said. 'I happen to have a good memory: it has been of some service to me in my wanderings. Lord Herndale had certainly been to Algiers before that. I was present during several conversations between my uncle and him; and I remember now that Lord Herndale referred to a former visit or visits.'

'He was alone when you and I saw him at Algiers?' said Mr. Levison. 'I may as well say that I happened to be there on ordinary business, quite unconnected with this one.'

'Yes; he was alone. But I think, if I remember rightly, that on one of his previous visits, he had been accompanied by his wife, Lady Herndale.'

Mr. Levison's eyelids dropped over his eyes, and he took some of his soda and whisky before putting his next question.

'That visit, when Lady Herndale was with him, was made many years before you and I met him?'

'Yes,' replied Osborne reflectingly. 'I fancy from the few words I remember that it was soon after they were married.'

Mr. Levison looked up at the ceiling as if he found its ornate carving and gilding extremely interesting ; then he said,

'It struck me, Mr. Osborne, that Lord Herndale, when I chanced to meet him at your uncle's, looked like a man in trouble.'

Osborne raised his eyes quickly and met Mr. Levison's. An incident had flashed across Osborne's mind, words which had sounded strangely to his boyish ears, and which, as they returned to him now, sounded still more pregnant, dramatic, in connexion with the mysterious business in which he and this strange-looking man were dealing.

'Yes,' he said in a lowered voice, 'your question has awakened the memory of some singular words my uncle addressed to himself rather than to me. Lord Herndale must have been, as you suggest, in some trouble or scrape ; for I remember meeting him as he came out of my uncle's room on the day of his departure from Algiers. I was going into the room, as I say, and Lord Herndale was coming out. I stood aside to let him pass : but I don't think he saw me. His head was bent, his face white and drawn, he looked as if he had just sustained a blow, a shock.' Osborne gazed straight before him. 'Yes ; I can see him now, quite distinctly. You are right, he was in trouble. I remember I went into the room. My uncle was sitting at his desk, with his hand before his eyes.'

Mr. Levison leant forward, his piercing black eyes fixed on Osborne's reflecting face ; he looked like a man who is holding himself in leash, ready to spring at the psychological moment ; but the tense attitude was only retained for a second or two, and as Osborne lowered his eyes and looked at him, the attitude re-

laxed and Mr. Levison was as impassive, as calm and as inscrutable as usual.

'My uncle turned as I entered,' resumed Osborne, 'and said——' He stopped and knocked the ash off his cigar. 'I have my doubts, Mr. Levison, whether I ought to tell you.'

Mr. Levison was too wise, too astute, to press the point. He sat quite still and silent. He knew that if Owen Osborne decided not to tell him, not to repeat the words, nothing he, Mr. Levison, could say, would induce him to do so. He waited while the clock behind them ticked half a dozen times; then his astuteness had its reward. Osborne looked up with a jerk of the head, as if he had made up his mind.

'I have come to the conclusion, Mr. Levison, that, as I have answered your questions thus far, it would be inconsistent to stop short. I do not know why you want this information I am giving you; I have no particular reason for believing your assertion that the matter concerns me directly or indirectly; I do not know what purpose you are pursuing; but I may say that I am not in the habit of being made a dupe of, and that I should not take kindly to the rôle.'

Mr. Levison did not quail or display any embarrassment. 'The man who would attempt to make a dupe of you, Mr. Osborne, would be in need of my sympathy; he would certainly get my contempt,' he said, as if he were stating an indisputable and commonplace fact.

'I'll tell you,' said Osborne. 'The words my uncle let drop were, as near as I can remember, "There goes the most unhappy man in the world. A man with a broken heart. And I'm afraid I've helped to break it!"'

Mr. Levison's lips moved slightly, as if he were repeating the words. There was silence for a moment or two; then he said—

'Can you give me your uncle's address, Mr. Osborne?'

'Certainly,' said Osborne. 'He is living in a little place just outside St. Heliers in Jersey. He is a very old man now, and lives in complete retirement. I have not seen him for years, though we write to each other occasionally. He has quite withdrawn from the world, and takes no interest in anything but his vineries and tomato houses.'

'Very interesting, grape-growing,' remarked Mr. Levison. 'I have long wanted to see something of it. It is a pleasant trip to Jersey, especially at this time of the year, very.'

He rose, buttoned his light overcoat and reached for his hat. Osborne also rose. He was tired, worn out, and was not sorry his visitor was going.

'You intend crossing to Jersey, to see my uncle?' he said. 'In that case I do not think it is likely we shall meet again, Mr. Levison. I am starting for Africa immediately.'

Levison raised his eyelids and looked at Osborne sharply. 'I wouldn't do that if I were you, Mr. Osborne,' he said,

'Why not?' demanded Osborne grimly.

Levison was silent for a moment, then he looked steadily at Osborne and said,

'I thought that I had asked my last question; but I will ask one other, if I may venture to do so? Are you interested in the welfare of Miss Lyndhurst?'

The blood rose quickly to Osborne's face, then left it pale and drawn; and he looked at Levison sternly.

'Why do you ask?'

Mr. Levison nodded, as if Osborne had replied to the question.

'Because that lady is very greatly concerned in this matter,' he said. 'Good-night.'

Osborne was too astonished, too staggered to attempt to stay him, and Levison passed out.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### IN DREAD OF DISCOVERY

HAVING thrust remorse away from her, her conscience lulled by the anodyne of the joy of her waking and sleeping hours, Kittie surrendered herself to happiness. The days still glided into weeks, the weeks into months, and no shadow came to dim the felicity of the husband and wife.

She had recovered her strength very quickly, and, as heretofore, she went about her work singing blithely, and accompanied Lashmore in his rides and drives. As he often told her, she was the most perfect companion a man could have ; never listless, never bored, scarcely ever tired. Their life was Arcadian ; the daily round, the common task, varied by little holidays and always the delightful evenings with their music and their books, made up their happiness.

Kittie almost told herself that she had forgotten England ; but one day it was suddenly recalled to her memory. Quirapata was flourishing, and Mr. Coke, desirous of launching out, proposed buying some pedigree stock which was coming on for sale in the old country ; and it was arranged that he should go over to England to pick up what he could of the famous breed and transact other business in connexion with the ranche. He had made all his plans and appointments, and had fully equipped himself for the journey when the goddess of Mischance stepped in. Four days before that fixed for his departure, he was thrown from a young horse, with fortunately no more serious result than a sprained ankle.



But a sprained ankle takes much longer than four days to recover, and poor Mr. Coke, lying on his back and grumbling after the fashion of men, said to Lashmore, who had hurried up to the Great House and was sitting beside him.

'I'm afraid this stupid thing will keep me here for weeks, Harry. Anyhow, I couldn't catch this boat; and I don't know what the deuce is to be done, unless—. I have made all the arrangements and have booked myself right and left. I don't see any way out of it, unless—'

'I'll go,' said Lashmore at once.

Mr. Coke drew a breath of relief. 'I'm afraid you must, my boy,' he said. 'But after all, there's no reason to cry about it. Of course, I don't like the idea of your going away, while I'm laid up here by the leg, like a sick fowl; but it will be a bit of a change for you and the missis. You'll take her, of course; and you'll give her a good time, Harry. She deserves it, bless her heart! I wish I were going with her to help you to take her around and share in the pleasure the sight of her enjoyment will give. And, look here, Harry, give her a real good time. What I mean is, don't spare the money. We've been doing awfully well, mostly owing to you, dear lad; and we can afford a tip-top outing for her. And if we couldn't, she should have it all the same. I never met any one like her, etc., etc.'

Lashmore listened with a warm heart to Mr. Coke's generous proposal, and yet more generous praise of Kittie; then he went home to the cottage to break it to her. She had been up at the Great House bandaging the invalid's ankle, and she was now busily engaged in helping Polly to get the dinner. Lashmore called her into the sitting-room, and she came in with her big apron on, her face prettily flushed, her beautiful hair as prettily disordered. She saw by his face that he had something important to tell her, and, with the



quick fear that was always lying in ambush for her, the flush began to fade before he had said a word.

'What is it, Harry?' she asked, her eyes fixed on him.

'Nothing to worry you,' he said quickly, and he put his arm round her waist. 'We are going to England; that's all.'

He felt her droop in his arms, almost collapse, her face went deathly white, and her eyes closed.

'My dear love!' he murmured. 'What a fool I am! And I meant to break it to you! Mr. Coke can't go, and I must. He wants me to take you with me.' He told her of Coke's generosity. 'He has planned a regular treat for us—for you, rather; for you know how much he thinks of you. What is the matter, Eva? Don't you want to go?'

She had recovered somewhat, and was trying to still the trembling that vibrated through every limb. She knew that she dared not go. She might meet one of the boys, Mr. Levison, some one who would know, recognize her and know—who she was! She was consumed by terror and was incapable of speech for a moment or two; then, hiding her face against his breast, she said in a low, pleading tone,

'No, Harry, I don't want to go. I—I am afraid—I mean—No, I can't go. Don't ask me, Harry!'

'You're afraid of meeting—whom? But, dearest, we're not likely to meet—any one you know. We should put up at a quiet little house in Chelsea which belongs to an old serv—friend of mine; and we should not be likely to come across any of the people, the grand people, who knew Eva Lyndhurst.'

She shuddered as she thought how likely they were to meet some of the people who knew Kittie Norton.

'No, no, Harry!' she said. 'I can't go! Don't ask me—I—I—can't give you all my reasons. But you won't ask me—And yet to let you go alone, to lose you!—Oh, for how long is it, Harry?'

'Not for very long, darling,' he said soothingly. 'If I go alone, if you are not with me, every day will seem an eternity; and you may depend upon it that I shall not stay an hour longer than is necessary. Do you think I don't understand, Eva? Of course, I do. And of course I won't ask you to go, if you don't want to. God knows how I hate leaving you, how much I shall suffer in doing so! But I must go; there is no help for it. Mr. Coke has committed himself to several appointments and engagements; and this sale, we can't miss that. Yes; I'm afraid I must go; but you shall stay here and take care of him. I like the thought of that; it will console me for your absence; it will console you, dearest. And I will get back as soon as possible. Don't cry, darling!'

She was not crying; it would have been a relief if tears would come; for the thought of losing him for even a day was almost intolerable. She drew herself from the loving arms and compelled herself into something like composure.

'I must see about your dinner, Harry,' she said quaveringly. 'You're—not angry with me, for not wanting to go? You understand?'

'Of course I understand!' he responded lovingly. 'I see now that there would be a risk of unpleasantness, of pain for you. You're quite right, as you always are. You shall stay here and look after Mr. Coke, and I'll cut over to England and do the business, and come back again so quickly that you will scarcely know I've gone, before I've got you in my arms again.'

The hour of parting came swiftly, as all such hours do. The light cart that was to drive Lashmore to the nearest station was at the door, and he held Kittie in a close embrace, both of them dreading the mournful words 'Good-bye.' At almost the last moment, as she clung to him, she murmured brokenly through the sobs she tried to suppress,

'Harry, dearest, listen to me. I—I don't want

you to tell any one that we—we—we are married. Will you—will you promise me? I want to forget, to pass quite out of the old life, to have no one know——' Her voice broke.

'Yes, yes!' he said, soothing her. 'Of course I won't tell any one, if you don't wish it. But I shan't meet any one to whom it would be necessary to tell anything. For God's sake, don't cry! I don't want to carry away the memory of you—so broken-hearted, so cut up. And we were so happy!—I'm almost inclined to chuck this journey, even now, at the last moment.'

'No, no!' she gasped, forcing back her sobs and her tears. 'I won't cry. The moment you have gone, I shall look forward to the hour of your return to me. Happy! Ah, how happy I have been! And you, too, Harry?' she demanded almost fiercely, raising her tear-dimmed eyes to his, as if she would read his soul. 'You have been happy?'

'God knows I have!' he said devoutly. 'No man in this world more happy than I.'

'Then—then you will always remember that—I ask you to remember that,' she panted, 'if anything should happen, if in the future——'

'I'm not likely to forget it!' he said huskily. 'But nothing is likely to happen—to me, at any rate.' He tried to laugh. 'I'm as strong as a horse, and accidents don't fall my way—There's the cart, dearest. Be a man—for my sake!'

She would not—she could not—go to the door; and when he had been carried away, she flung herself on her knees beside a chair and hid her face in her hands, praying for his safety, for his ignorance of what she was and what she had done, for his safe return.

Lashmore had a bad time of it for some days; indeed, he was by no means companionable during the voyage; for his girl-wife's tear-stained face and anguished accents were with him night and day; but he

had to play a man's part ; and he played it. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it is easier than the woman's ; for she has to stay at home and count the weary hours of absence, while he must necessarily forget some of them in the bustle of action.

Lashmore reached London in due course, and went straight to the quiet little house in Chelsea. He had not been able to write, but he had wired immediately he had reached England, and Forbes received him in a flutter of affectionate excitement. Lashmore held both the old man's hands, patted him on the back, and for a minute or two was almost as incapable of speech as the old man himself. He had arrived just in time for dinner ; and Forbes had got some of his beloved young master's favourite dishes, and opened a bottle of the Chateau Margaux.

Lashmore did not insist upon the old man sitting down with him, because it would have made Forbes uncomfortable, but he kept him in the room and talked with him and told him of the wonderful luck that he, Lashmore, had met with in the country across the sea : and Forbes listened eagerly, nodding his old head at intervals ; but not at all surprised that his young master should have been successful.

'It's a lovely country, Forbes,' said Lashmore. 'A land of plenty, a kind of earthly paradise. I'm half-inclined to pack you up and take you back with me.'

Forbes shook his head and smiled with pride and gratitude as he removed the dishes.

'Too old, Master Harry, too old !' he said, in his quavering voice. 'Besides, my lord—sir—you'll be coming back some day. You'll be rich and want a wife.'

Lashmore reddened, and hastily drank a draught of wine. It went against him to conceal anything from the old man.

'But there is plenty of time for that, Master Harry. No; I'd better stop here and keep a home for you, as I have done, in case you should want it.'

'You're a silly old noodle,' said Lashmore, laughing to hide his emotion. 'Is there any news?'

'No, my lord—sir,' replied Forbes. 'Ah, yes, there is!—your sudden coming, Master Harry, has quite scattered my poor wits. There was a gentleman called here a few days ago inquiring after you.'

'Oh?' said Lashmore. His face grew grave, for it suddenly struck him that Sir Talbot might have traced him and come to make inquiries. 'What name did he ask for?'

'Strangely enough, sir, he asked for Lord Herndale.'

Lashmore looked graver. 'What was his business, Forbes?'

'He didn't say, sir, he wouldn't say. I was all in a flutter, as you may suppose, my lord, but I asked him his business; and he wouldn't say. He wanted your address—'

'Which you didn't give him,' interjected Harry.

'Certainly not, my lord. He tried me all he knew; but I stood firm.'

'What was his name?' asked Lashmore.

'Levison, sir.'

Lashmore repeated the name several times; then shrugged his shoulders. He was too relieved to find that it was not Sir Talbot to feel much interest or curiosity in the unknown visitor.

'If he comes again, keep your mouth shut, Forbes,' he said; and he threw himself back in the comfortable chair and lit his pipe and thought of his wife. He was going to write to her before he went to bed.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE BIRD IN THE NET

**Y**OU may lead or drive a horse to the water, but it is quite another thing to make it drink. You may, by cunning and duplicity, snare a young girl into promising to be your wife, and may, indeed, succeed so far as to actually marry her; but winning her love is quite another thing. Herndale soon discovered the truth of this proposition, and was of course not only unreasonably disappointed, but full of resentment, at the fact that though Eva had, so to speak, fallen into his net, she refused to nestle up to the bosom of her captor, but, like a young eagle, held herself aloof, and would not be coaxed even into the show of affection.

This disappointment of Herndale's, though unreasonable enough, seeing that he had only schemed for the possession of her body and not her heart, increased day by day; and as it is with most men who have obtained the desire of their hearts by unlawful means, his resentment increased with his disappointment; and, of course, he considered himself to be a hardly used man.

In the eyes of the world Eva appeared to be all that a newly engaged man could desire in his fiancée; she was seen with him in public, at receptions, concerts, dances; she drove and walked in the Park with him; and never by the quiver of an eyelash did she reveal the fact that she was an unwilling captive of Lord Herndale's bow and spear. She was pale; but she had never been wont to go about with flushed cheeks; and there was an absent, pre-occupied look in her eyes, and a certain gravity about her lips; but Eva had never

been one of the grinning girls ; and the majority of her friends applauded her for not gushing or crowing over her good fortune ; for the young Earl of Herndale was indisputably a good parti, and innumerable unmarried girls unashamedly envied her.

Of all her intimates, perhaps Aunt Lucy was the only one who had a suspicion that all was not well with the girl, and that she was not as happy as she should have been ; but it was only a vague suspicion, and Lady Lorchester did not feel warranted in voicing it to any one, especially to Eva herself, of whom she had become of late just a little afraid.

Eva went out a great deal, more frequently, indeed, than before her engagement ; the truth was, she was trying to get away from herself, to forget the past, to forget—no ; she would not admit even to herself that she wanted to forget Owen Osborne ; which was just as well perhaps ; because she would not have been able to efface him from her memory even if she had tried : it was just another case of leading the horse to the water.

She did not expect to see him again, for she had read a paragraph in the paper stating that he intended returning to Africa, and she thought he had probably already started. It was therefore with a sudden shock that seemed to send the blood back to her heart that she caught sight of his tall figure amongst the crowd at a reception of Lady Merryvale's. The blood rushed back again, and her face was suffused with a burning blush, which left it as suddenly as it had come. Herndale happened to be standing beside her, and saw the signs of the violent emotion which thrilled her. He said nothing, but his keen, cold eyes scanned the crowd and, with the instinct of jealousy, he instantly divined that the sight of Owen Osborne had been the cause of Eva's agitation.

When the fire of passion, either of love, hate, or jealousy seizes upon a cold nature, it often burns more fiercely and consumes more utterly than in a warmer



one ; and at that moment the fire of jealousy flamed malignantly in what Herndale called his heart. But the smile did not leave his face ; he was careful to look away from both Eva and Owen Osborne ; and presently he left her side and went to another part of the room. And, of course, watched them.

Now, it is needless to say, Owen Osborne had been much impressed by Mr. Levison's parting words and injunction. Impressed is scarcely an adequate word by which to describe the effect which Mr. Levison had produced. A man in love will catch at straws, and something like a vague hope, too vague to be called hope, had sprung up in Osborne's bosom. There had been something about Mr. Levison even more impressive than his words ; he seemed to be what is called a reliable man, a man who chose both steps and words with caution ; and he had as good as intimated to Owen Osborne that, though Eva Lyndhurst was engaged to another man, he, Owen, might still hope. Vague as the whole thing was, Owen felt that he could not leave England until something more tangible had discovered itself. He had intended never seeing Eva again ; but now he abandoned that intention and felt drawn towards her, as if she needed his protection.

He had decided upon the manner to adopt when he first met her, and had so schooled himself that he now made his way through the crowd towards her with apparent calmness, though, be sure, his heart was beating with a variety of emotions in which love predominated.

Eva saw him approaching and was now apparently as calm as himself, though she was very pale.

'How do you do, Miss Lyndhurst ?' he said, bending over her hand, as he never bent over any other woman's. 'What a horrific crush ! I think it gets worse and worse ; the late comers will surely have to cut their way in with a hatchet. Some one is going to sing : shall we go into the lobby ?'



'Do you dislike music so much that you want to avoid it?' she asked, with an attempt at casualness which was belied by her serious, downcast eyes.

'I love music,' he said, 'and that's why I want to get out of earshot of that poor woman, whose voice, one of the best in Europe—I suppose Lady Merryvale must have given her at least a hundred guineas to come here—will be almost drowned by the senseless chatter of this empty-headed mob. Don't you feel like that? Well, let us go then!'

Eva wanted to refuse; but over her came that powerlessness which assails all women when they are requested to do something by the man they love; for then the request is a command, and women's natural attitude towards the loved one is that of instant obedience; so she rested the tips of her fingers on his arm and went with him into the comparatively empty lobby. Osborne had come prepared to say something if he chanced to meet her, and he said it at once, said it quietly and calmly; even with a smile, friendly and somewhat protective.

'I am glad I have met you to-night, Miss Lyndhurst. It's useless, for me at any rate, to try and ignore what—what passed between us the other night at Lady Lorchester's. I suppose it's the usual thing for a man who has been rejected, especially when he finds that the woman he loves—I beg your pardon,' he broke off, as he saw the colour rise to her face, and felt rather than saw that she winced, 'I won't use the words again. I won't refer to my unhappiness. Don't be afraid. What I was going to say was, that a man in my case usually flies off, or, at any rate, avoids the lady who has had the good taste and sense to refuse him. But, somehow I don't feel like doing that. I think the fellow who said that if you can't have a rose to wear in your bosom, it is rather a good thing to be near it, was pretty sensible. If I had been lucky enough to win you, I should have counted myself the happiest mortal on

earth ; but next to your love, I value your friendship. To tell the whole truth, your companionship, your society, is very precious to me. It sounds absurd, of course ; but I am trying to console myself for my great loss with the reflection that some day or other I may be of service to you.'

He paused, for he felt that to Eva who had not been present at his interview with Mr. Levison and heard that gentleman's vague warning, his offer of service, must sound inexplicable, if not ridiculous. She had listened with throbbing heart and downcast eyes. His words may have sounded inexplicable, but to her they did not appear ridiculous ; for nothing he could have said or done would have seemed so to her.

'Those are my sentiments, as the orator said,' he went on, forcing a lighter tone ; 'and I hope you won't punish me, as probably I deserve, by cutting or avoiding me when we chance to meet.'

'I did not intend to cut or avoid you,' said Eva in a low voice.

'Thank you very much,' he said fervently. 'Perhaps I flatter myself, but I think you and I have a great deal in common, Miss Lyndhurst ; any way, there is no woman in London to whom I like to talk as I do to you. Having now made our little bargain, much to my relief and joy, will you be so kind as to ratify it by joining a little party I am making for a picnic on the river ? I must confess that I do not as a rule regard picnics with much favour—you see, I've had so many of a rough kind, that I now not unnaturally prefer to eat off an ordinary dining-table—but what is a poor bachelor to do who, having no house to which he can invite his friends, is desirous of returning in some small measure the boundless hospitality he has received ? Will you—and of course Lord Hern-dale—be so kind as to come, and so crown my little entertainment with success ? It's on Tuesday week. I'll send you the bill of fare—I mean, the place and the way to get at it.'

"Yes ; I shall be very pleased to come," said Eva ; and instantly the vision of a day spent beside him rose before her with a torturing joy.

'That's all right,' he said in his laconic fashion. 'I humbly trust that we shall not be blessed with the proverbial picnic weather ; my experience is that it usually rains—when it doesn't snow.'

At that moment Herndale came up. There was an ugly glint in his eyes, and his lips were drawn tightly ; but he controlled his voice as he greeted Owen Osborne with a 'How do you do ?' and a curt nod. Eva was pale and her eyes downcast ; but Osborne returned Herndale's greeting with perfect self-possession ; and he was about to repeat his invitation, when Herndale said abruptly.

'It is getting late, Eva. Lady Lorchester is going. Good-night, Mr. Osborne.'

Nowadays a man does not address his male friends with the prefix of 'Mr.' ; but Herndale had so addressed Osborne and with a marked emphasis. And, of course, Osborne had to return the lead with,

'Good-night, Lord Herndale.'

## CHAPTER XXVI

### LORD HERNDALE LOSES HIS HEAD

**B**OTH Eva and Herndale were almost silent on the way home ; and, when they were standing in the drawing-room, Herndale, who had been brooding over the fact that Eva and Owen Osborne had been talking, apparently confidentially, in the lobby, said, with apparent casualness,

‘I thought that man Osborne had gone back to Africa, or wherever it was he was going.’

There was something in his tone, a hint of master-ship, of proprietorship which nettled Eva.

‘He evidently has not gone,’ she said coldly, as she pulled off her long gloves.

‘I wonder why he is hanging about here ?’ said Herndale. ‘I dislike that kind of man, the man who poses as a celebrity.’

‘Mr. Osborne is I, suppose, a celebrity,’ said Eva, ‘but he certainly does not pose.’ Herndale opened his lips to retort ; but before he could speak, Eva went on, as coldly as before, ‘I am sorry you dislike him, because I have accepted an invitation for us to go to a picnic he is giving on Tuesday week.’

Herndale reddened, and his eyes glinted angrily ; but he still controlled his voice as he said,

‘I am sorry you have done that, Eva. I shall not go ; and I do not wish you to go.’

She had turned away from him, so that he did not see the indignant flush, the flash of her eyes, which his words had evoked.

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'Why?' she asked quietly.

'Well,—Oh, for several reasons. One is, that, as I say, I do not like the man. And a picnic is a nuisance and a bore. But my reasons don't matter. The mere fact that I do not wish you to go should surely be sufficient.'

She seemed to consider for a moment; then she said,

'I agree with you. I will send an excuse to Mr. Osborne.'

Herndale's face, which had been very dark, cleared, and he took a step towards her.

'I knew you would, dearest!' he said. 'Forgive me if I seem harsh—and abrupt.' He took her hand, and Eva suffered him to do so; but as he would have drawn her towards him, she drew back, as if she were not aware of his intention.

'It is very late,' she said. 'I will go to bed.'

But she still remained in the room after he had gone. She sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands. Had she been wise in accepting Owen Osborne's offer of friendship? Would it not have been better for her peace of mind if he had gone to Africa, or if she confined her acquaintance with him within the narrow limits of a bow or a few conventional words of greeting when they met? She was so absorbed in her mental and spiritual examination that she did not hear her father enter the room by the open door.

He stopped as he saw her attitude, and his lips twitched nervously, apprehensively; then he went up to her and laid his hand on her shoulder. She started to her feet, and he saw that her eyes were full of tears.

'Eva—my child! Are you crying? Are you unhappy about anything?'

'No, no!' she replied, hastily wiping away the tears. 'I am only tired. It was very hot and crowded

at Lady Merryvale's. It is nothing; really, it is nothing.'

She put her arm round his neck and kissed him soothingly.

'All is right between you and Herndale, Eva?' he asked anxiously, almost guiltily. 'Sometimes of late I have thought that you and he——' He stopped and bit his lip.

'It is all right, dear,' she said, forcing a laugh. 'It is true that we have just had what is called a lovers' tiff.' She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice. 'But it was over a little matter which is not of the least importance; and it has quite passed away.'

He drew a breath of relief and stroked her hair.

'I am glad of that, dear,' he said. 'Herndale is a good fellow; he has been very kind and considerate——' he stopped and bit his lip again, 'but won't you go to bed now, Eva?'

'Directly, dear,' she said. 'I have a letter to write first. Go back and smoke your cigar. I am all right now; indeed, I am.'

When he had gone, she wrote to Owen Osborne telling him that she had discovered Lord Herndale had an engagement for the day of the picnic.

But though she did not go to the picnic—which, by the way, was very much enjoyed by every one but the giver—she and Osborne met continually; and his manner towards her was indicative of that friendship which she had accepted. He talked to her almost as freely as of old; and, as a matter of fact, Eva learned to know more of him, his past life, his future plans—though they were somewhat vague—than she had known before his proposal. And Herndale watched them as they talked earnestly together, and apparently forgetful of every one else, with a fury that smouldered in his heart, and only wanted a chance wind to burst into flame. He could not order Eva to drop Owen Osborne's acquaintance, simply because he was

afraid to do so ; but he determined to speak to Osborne himself, to pick a quarrel with him, if it were necessary ; and he was only waiting for an opportunity, which did not readily present itself.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of Sir Talbot's folly and weakness, he was drawing the net more tightly round the unhappy baronet, who was now very heavily in debt to his future son-in-law.

One evening the opportunity which Herndale was seeking offered itself. He was walking across the green park to his quiet and secret rooms when he saw Osborne pacing the path beside the lake. It was just before the dinner hour, and the Park was almost empty ; Osborne presently turned off into one of the smaller paths, and Herndale followed him, unconsciously gripping tightly his walking-stick, which happened to have a heavy silver handle.

Strangely enough at that same moment, Lashmore was coming along the broader path, and just as Herndale turned off on the narrow one, Lashmore, scarcely glancing at him, stopped, and, leaning on the rail, absently watched the gulls sailing over the lake. Somehow or other the sight of them, the free sweep of their wings as they circled round or swooped down on the water, recalled Quirapata, the free life there, and the young wife, who was waiting for him. His heart yearned for her. He had had a very busy day, had been interviewing all sorts of men, buying cattle and transacting the business on which he had come to England ; and he was asking himself wistfully, how soon he could return.

He took his beloved briar out of his pocket, and, lighting up, smoked reflectively. Meanwhile, Herndale had caught Osborne up.

'Good-evening, Mr. Osborne,' he said in a voice which he tried to make conventional, but which sounded harsh and strained.

Osborne turned quickly, with the alertness of a man



to whom rapidity of motion has become habitual, because of the frequent necessity for it. He had been thinking of Eva, and the harsh voice of her future husband cut with sudden unpleasantness across his thoughts.

'Oh, good evening, Lord Herndale,' he said quite civilly. 'Beautiful evening, isn't it? Like myself, I suppose you are taking advantage of it for a stroll.'

'Yes,' said Herndale. 'I want a word or two with you, Mr. Osborne,' he added, his lids lowered, his lips drawn straight.

'Well, here I am,' said Osborne with a smile.

The smile seemed to incense Herndale; his lips twitched and he was silent for a moment; then he said, his voice more harsh than before,

'It is rather a delicate matter; but I am sure you will understand. We are both men of the world, Mr. Osborne; and when I tell you that I—strongly object to your acquaintance with Miss Lyndhurst, my future wife, you will see the propriety of discontinuing it.'

Now this was not badly put, so far as the phrasing went; but there was something in Herndale's tone which roused the spirit of Osborne, who was before everything else a fighting man; and a man, be it understood, who had been accustomed to command other men, and was little able to brook anything savouring of insolence. He was silent for a moment; then he said calmly, though his nostrils were expanded and there was an ominous light in his eyes,—

'You speak plainly, Lord Herndale; and my first impulse is to grant your request, curtly though it has been made. But permit me to ask if Miss Lyndhurst shares your sentiments, if she is aware that you intended making this request, which you must admit is as strange as it is offensive.'

Herndale breathed hard and stared angrily at Osborne.

'You've no right to ask such a question,' he said.



'Miss Lyndhurst is my future wife. I have a right to——'

'Pardon me,' said Osborne, with dangerous suavity; 'but isn't that open to argument? I might ask you the reason for this peremptory command of yours; for it is nothing short of a command. Miss Lyndhurst may not have the same reason, may not even have the desire to lose an acquaintance, let me say—friend.'

Herndale's face grew darker, and he breathed shortly.

'I don't intend to argue with you,' he said. 'I want simply to know whether you will cease to pester Miss Lyndhurst with your attentions, whether, in short, you will treat her as a lady whose acquaintance you have forfeited.'

Osborne was silent for a moment. His conscience told him that the angry man had some right on his side.

'See here, Lord Herndale,' he said gravely; 'I fancy you think you have the right to make this request. I'm not sure that you haven't. Anyhow, I will comply with it. But, in justice to myself and to Miss Lyndhurst, I must inform her of what has passed between you and me and must explain to her why for the future I must treat her as if we were strangers.'

Unwittingly he had said that which was most likely to fan the flame of fury and jealousy in Herndale's breast.

'You are a specious scoundrel!' he said huskily. 'I forbid you to address Miss Lyndhurst!'

Osborne's brows came together. 'You are going beyond your prerogative, Lord Herndale,' he said. 'I'm not a scoundrel, as you know, and I will not consent to behave towards a lady as if I had forfeited her respect. I shall certainly tell Miss Lyndhurst of this interview and your strange request.'

He raised his hat and turned away.

Herndale stood panting with rage, his stick clutched by the ferule end. Carried beyond himself by an un-

governable passion, he stole behind Osborne, raised the stick and aimed a blow at his head. To his amazement and discomfiture, the blow fell not on Osborne but on a man who had sprung between Osborne and his assailant. The heavy silver handle of the stick had fallen on the side of the face of the interposer and had instantly drawn blood. Osborne swung round with an exclamation; and there the three men stood, looking at each other in profound silence.

Before Osborne could speak, Herndale had recovered from his passion sufficiently to realize the situation. With a muttered oath, he swung on his heel and strode off; and the preserved and preserver were left confronting each other.

'Good God!' said Osborne aghast, as he saw the blood streaming down the other man's face. 'He struck you! It was meant for me. I'm—I'm awfully sorry! I'm afraid you're very much hurt. Here! I'll go after the hound—for that's what he must be, to aim a blow at a man behind his back!'

'No, no!' said the preserver. 'Better let him go—for the present. What can you do? The fight is over. If he had stayed, as a decent chap would have done, I could have taken him on. I shall later, I hope. And I'm jolly glad the blow fell on me and where it did, instead of on you. The beggar aimed for the back of your head; and you'd have gone down, if he had struck you.'

Osborne caught hold of his arm. 'Look here!' he said with pardonable agitation. 'You saved me a nasty knock and got badly hurt. Come to my rooms, will you, and we'll see to that face of yours. I'll try and tell you presently how much obliged to you I am. My name's Osborne—what's yours? Here! Come along, at once.'

'Oh, it's all right,' said the other. 'I've had nastier knocks than this; it has only grazed the skin. My name's Lashmore.'

## CHAPTER XXVII

### LEVISON'S VISIT

OSBORNE took Lashmore to the former's modest rooms in Vincent Street. They had to go in a cab, because Lashmore's blood-stained face and handkerchief would have attracted too much attention. As Lashmore entered the sitting-room, which was littered with trophies of the chase—savage weapons and utensils, skin and stuffed birds, roughly-drawn maps and plans—he swung round on Osborne, and said eagerly—

'You're not Owen Osborne, the traveller, explorer?'

Osborne nodded, as he got a bowl of water and a sponge.

'By George! I'm delighted to meet you,' said Lashmore with irrepressible admiration; 'and I'm jolly glad I took that blow instead of you. Fancy such a man as you, such a valuable life, being at the mercy of a chance blow from a fool and a coward!'

'Yes,' said Osborne; 'I'm afraid our friend is both—hold your head a little lower. I'm relieved to find that, as you said, it's not much more than skin-deep. I'm going to put something on it that will heal it up in no time, a lotion some quaint people up Uganda-way use. It's a secret—until I tell it; a patent medicine man could make a million out of it.'

'Make it yourself,' said Lashmore.

Osborne shrugged his shoulders. 'No use for money,' he said. 'I might have wanted some a little while ago, but I'm not sure that I do now. You're all right now, or will be soon. I should like to thank

you for what you've done for me, but I can see that you are the sort of chap who wouldn't like it.'

'I shouldn't,' assented Lashmore.

Osborne nodded. 'Look here, have you had anything to eat. No? Let us go and get something. I know a nice little restaurant round here, cheap and good.'

They went round to the nice little restaurant, and had a pleasant little dinner. Both men felt drawn to each other; they were men, in the fullest sense of the word; Lashmore had done Osborne a great service, and Osborne was extremely grateful. They talked about the wilds, sport, exploration; Lashmore told Osborne what he was doing in Quirapata; Osborne spoke briefly of his recent feat in Africa. They were both so absorbed, so interested, and so pleased at their strange meeting, and the sudden, but real, friendship which had sprung from it, that for a time they actually forgot the occurrence in the Park; but presently, after they had lit up, and were smoking in placid enjoyment of their companionship, Lashmore said—

'Oh, about that fellow. I'm not curious, and, of course, I don't want you to tell me anything you don't want to tell me; but I feel as if I ought to get even with that gentleman with the stick. I don't think he ought to get off scot free, do you?'

'I don't think he will,' said Osborne. 'To a man of his nature the fact that he has been guilty of a common assault that would disgrace a Whitechapel rough will be punishment enough. No man likes to show himself a coward and a fool, as you very properly called him. We could lug him before a beak—and serve [him] jolly well right; but—there are all sorts of things—and people—to be considered. I'd rather not take such a step—I shouldn't have done so if he had hit me instead of you.—But, of course, if you would like——'

'Oh, no,' said Lashmore promptly. 'I may meet

him some day, and level matters in my own way.'

Osborne nodded and smiled. 'I can picture him now,' he said, 'waiting for a policeman and a summons. I'm much obliged to you for taking my view of it. The fact is,' he hesitated a moment, but a glance at Lashmore's handsome and, still better, frank and open, countenance led him on, 'the fact is, we have quarrelled about a lady. It is the lady who is engaged to marry him; but I happen to want her to marry me. Hence these tears. Of course, if I thought she was happy I should clear out; but I don't. It's rather a strange and mysterious business. I can't tell you all of it; I wish I could, because somehow I feel as if I should like to. I have had my doubts about the gentleman's—what shall I call it?—uprightness. And these doubts have been strengthened by a singular communication, too vague to be called a communication, from an extraordinary kind of person. I've got the notion that it would be a bad thing for this lady to marry Lord Herndale—'

Lashmore was filling their glasses from the bottle of modest claret, and he started so suddenly and so violently that he upset the wine.

'What name did you say?' he asked swiftly, his face flushed, his eyes fixed on Osborne's with a stare of amazement.

Osborne looked rather annoyed by his slip.

'I didn't mean to mention any names,' he said, 'but it slipped out. The man who struck you, instead of me, is the Earl of Herndale. He came into the title a short time back. But we won't talk any more about him. I see you've heard of him—and of nothing much to his advantage, judging by your face. But let it go. He has unwittingly done me a great service in bringing about our acquaintance. Let's have another bottle. I like your account of that place of yours, and I should think you've got a fortune there.'

They sat and talked for some time ; and at parting arranged another and speedy meeting ; they shook hands with a warm grip, and looked into each other's eyes with the expression which Englishmen wear when they have taken to each other.

Lashmore went home pondering on the strange coincidence : the man who had struck him was his cousin, the man who now bore the title and owned the estates, which Lashmore, until recently, had regarded as his own !

At sight of his master's bruised face, Forbes uttered an exclamation of alarm and dismay : and it took Lashmore some time to reassure the old man and convince him that the injury was a mere nothing, the result of a little accident which, Lashmore said airily, might happen to any one.

'Yes, I'll have a soda and whisky presently and a pipe,' he said. 'No news, I suppose ? Any letters ?'

'No letters, my lord—sir,' said Forbes, still all in a flutter ; 'but that gentleman has called again. He asked for you straight out ; and when I began to refuse him, he smiled and shook his head in a curious way, and said it wasn't any use, because he had seen you go out of the house. He seems a very persistent gentleman, Master Harry——' There was a ring at the bell as he spoke, and Forbes almost jumped. 'I shouldn't wonder if that is him again,' he said.

'Oh, well, let him in,' said Lashmore, with a shrug of his shoulders. 'It's a tax collector or something of the kind, I expect.'

After a minute or two—devoted by Forbes to collecting himself—the door opened, and he ushered in Mr. Levison. Lashmore got up from his easy chair and nodded, and was rather impressed by the much wrinkled face, and the thin, carefully-dressed figure of his visitor.

'You want to see me——,' began Lashmore.

Levison did not glance at Forbes, but he waited

until the old man had left the room; then he said in his impassive voice.

'Yes, Lord Herndale; I want to see you very badly.'

Lashmore grew red, and his eyes flashed angrily.

'You're making a mistake, sir,' he said. 'I am not Lord Herndale. My name is Lashmore—but pray sit down, if your business is with me.'

'My business is with you, my lord,' said Levison, seating himself on the edge of the chair, and looking at Lashmore with a calm so profound that it was almost statuesque.

'I don't think it can be,' said Lashmore; 'if you address me as "my lord." I tell you my name is Lashmore.'

'I will accept that for the present, sir,' said Levison. 'I am extremely obliged to you for consenting to see me, and I will state my business as briefly as possible; and I am sure you will give me a patient hearing. My name is Levison.' He produced a card, and slid it on the table with an automatic gesture. 'I am a financial agent, as you will see by my card. I am in a position to give you unexceptionable references as to my position and integrity. This is of importance, because the business I have to lay before you is a very great one. A client of mine, quite a poor man, is a mineralogist; he has discovered coal on a portion of the Herndale estate. There can be no question about my client's reliability; he is a man who never makes mistakes. He came to me with his information, and I am prepared to find him the capital—a very large amount—if I can come to some arrangement with you, either by way of a concession or as partner in the exploitation—'

Lashmore had been listening with bent brows and hardly repressed impatience; and he broke in now somewhat angrily.

'Look here, Mr. Levison, you're making a great mistake. The Herndale estates have nothing whatever



to do with me. They belong to Lord Herndale——'

'To whom I have the honour of speaking,' said Mr. Levison, as calmly as before.

Lashmore grew pale,, and turned aside to the mantelshelf. It was rather hard that he should have to speak of his shame, of his lost birthright, to this stranger; but there seemed no help for it. The man had evidently got a bee in his bonnet, and the quickest way of getting rid of him would be to tell him the truth.

'You're wrong,' he said a little huskily. 'I am not Lord Herndale. Wait, please! You do not seem to be aware that though I am the late Lord Herndale's son—I—I have no right to the name—the title, the property. I—I am illegitimate. Neither you nor I will want to prolong this interview, now you have heard this. You will, of course, go to Lord Herndale.'



## CHAPTER XXVIII

### STARTLING NEWS

IT was a dismissal ; but Levison did not move, but sat with his eyes fixed on Lashmore's face.

'I have come to Lord Herndale,' said Levison. 'I am, I hope, too good a business man to come to the wrong person, to make a mistake in a matter of such vast importance. I am quite sensible of your candour, my lord, and I thank you for it ; but I am aware of the circumstances which, for a time, have ousted you from your title and estate ; and you will readily believe that I should not come to you unless I had good proof that you have been labouring under a misapprehension.'

'Misapprehension !' Lashmore echoed the word mechanically.

'I think that is the right term to use, Lord Herndale,' said Levison ; 'and it is my duty and pleasure, before proceeding further with my business, to lay before you the evidence of which I spoke. First, will you allow me to ask you why you accepted your illegitimacy ?'

Lashmore, pale now, and struggling with his agitation, was silent for a moment ; then he forced himself to answer the painful question.

'I had it from my father's own lips,' he said, 'on his deathbed. He was near the end, and could only ——' He broke off and turned away to hide his emotion. 'My father and I were good friends—fond of each other—he was not likely to have made a mistake, to have said what he did—to disinherit me—unless he

had been sure——. Man, man ! why have you come to rake up the past !’

‘I have come to right a wrong, my lord,’ said Levison, as impassive as ever. ‘Your father was convinced that there was no marriage. But he was wrong. He had been misled by a gentleman, a friend, on whose opinion he relied. Had he been able to tell you the whole story, you would have seen that there was a doubt, a chance——’

Lashmore turned swiftly, gripping the mantel-shelf.

‘A doubt, a hope !’ he breathed, hoarsely.

‘Yes,’ said Levison, slowly, impressively. ‘A ceremony took place between your mother, Lady Herndale, and your father. It was at Algiers, soon after they had run away together. Your father had no doubts of the validity of the marriage at the time ; and it was not for some time after your birth that doubts arose in his mind. He went over to Algiers to consult this gentleman, this friend of his. His name was George Osborne. He held a high position in Algiers ; your father placed the case before him, and Mr. George Osborne decided that the marriage was not valid——’

Lashmore was trembling. ‘But——’ he managed to get out.

‘You are going to ask me why your father was satisfied with Mr. Osborne’s opinion ? The answer is obvious. As you are aware, your father had a great affection for his wife. He was an easy-going man, a man who loathed anything approaching publicity or scandal. To have raised the question openly in a Court of Law, for instance, would have proclaimed you, if the marriage proved invalid, what you have considered yourself to be. You can understand, my lord, that his great desire would be to spare your mother pain. In a word, fully convinced of Mr. Osborne’s capacity to give an opinion, Lord Herndale accepted it, rather than expose Lady Herndale to the terrible ordeal which she

would have had to have gone through if he had stirred up the matter.'

'But—but—this man's opinion——?' said Lashmore.

'Was wrong,' said Levison, quite quietly. 'I have seen Mr. Osborne—and I have been over to Algiers. I have all the documents, extracts from the register, copies of certificates, counsel's opinion.' He laid a packet of papers on the table. 'And I am so convinced, so sure that I am in the presence of the Earl of Herndale, that I am ready to accept the concession from you, to complete arrangements for the working of these coal fields, with you, Lord Herndale, as if there had never been any question of your right to the title. Seeing that I should be risking—but there is no risk—a very large sum of money, I think you will admit that I am giving you the strongest evidence of my own convictions. Examine the papers, the counsel's opinion, Mr. George Osborne's admission that he was wrong—he is a very old man, lost to the world, with a mind that is well nigh a blank; and he had forgotten the case or he would have come forward years ago and taken the initiative in clearing your mother's good name and keeping you in your proper place.'

While Levison had been speaking, Lashmore had, with a shaking hand, taken up the papers and examined them. Presently he dropped them on the table, sank into a chair, and, covering his face with his hands, burst into sobs that shook him from head to foot. Mr. Levison rose noiselessly, and, going to the window, stared intently at the opposite houses. Lashmore recovered after a while, and raised his head.

'I—I beg your pardon,' he said, brokenly. 'But—but you can understand what this—this means to me. My mother! My poor father! If he were only alive!—Married! I am his son—hers—in the sight of the law: I am Lord Herndale. Oh, I can't believe it! You are sure, quite sure? Forgive me, I am grateful,

God knows, but—but it is so sudden.' He tried to laugh, but the sound broke in his throat. 'You are a good man, sir,' he said, fervently, and he shot out his hand.

Mr. Levison took it in his skinny one and shook it with a quaint mixture of friendliness and respect.

'Yes, you are a good man and a straight! You might,' he scarcely knew what he was saying, 'you might have gone to Lord Herndale and made terms with him.'

'Yes; I might have done so,' assented Mr. Levison, not at all offended by the suggestion; 'but, as you were good enough to say, I happen to be an honest man. I am not sure that it is always an advantage. But you must permit me to remind you that if I had got a concession from the gentleman you call Lord Herndale, it would not have been worth the paper it was written on, because he happens not to be Lord Herndale. So I came to you who are Lord Herndale. Besides, I have no particular fancy for the present holder of the title. He is neither honest nor straight, as I chance to know. He has been spinning a web round a gentleman and his daughter—but that is another business; and, as we have plenty on our hands already, we need not go into it, my lord.'

Lashmore was pacing up and down the room in a fever.

'No, no!' he said. 'I am Herndale—my father's lawful son!'

'Of course your cousin will fight, my lord,' said Mr. Levison. 'It will be a hard and a long fight, without a doubt. You will want money—at least, I venture to presume so—I should like to say that it will be forthcoming.'

'You're a good fellow!' cried poor Lashmore. 'Fight! Oh, we'll fight him! Here! I must tell old Forbes.'

He was making for the door, but Levison caught

his arm. 'One moment, my lord! We must keep quiet for a while. So much depends upon the first move.'

'I must tell Forbes! At any cost,' said Lashmore. 'I couldn't keep it from him—you don't know what he has been to me.'

He found Forbes and dragged him into the room, and poured out the story. Forbes was moved to tears, tears of pity for his old master, and joy over his young one; but he was not so surprised as Lashmore had expected him to be. In their excitement and emotion, they temporarily forgot Mr. Levison, who was again looking out of the window; but suddenly, with something like shame, Harry remembered him.

'I beg your pardon!' he said. 'You mustn't think us ungrateful. Come and sit down—Forbes, a glass for Mr. Levison!'

Forbes, all of a shake, got the glass, and, when it was filled, Levison raised it, and, bowing solemnly to Lashmore, said—

'I drink to your good health and future happiness, Lord Herndale.'

"Lord Herndale, Lord Herndale." Oh, Master Harry—I mean, my lord, isn't it good to hear him say it!' sobbed Forbes.

Presently Mr. Levison, after making an appointment for the morrow and earnestly begging Lashmore and Forbes to keep their mouths shut, discreetly withdrew, and Lashmore was left alone.

He stood, looking straight before him. He had been thinking of his young wife all through the wonderful interview, though he had not mentioned her name; he was thinking of her now. He saw her standing at the gate, running forward to meet him; saw himself gather her in his arms, heard himself cry, 'Eva, I am no longer nameless! I can go to your father, can face him without shame, can tell him that I have a name and a place in the world, that I am no longer a pariah and an outcast, but my father's lawful son;

that you have not lost caste by marrying me, that you are not Harry Lashmore's, the adventurer's wife, but the Countess of Herndale !'

Lashmore woke from a dream the next morning—that he had proved his legitimacy and was Lord Herndale ; woke to find that it promised to be reality and not a dream. Of course he wanted to fly over to his bride there and then, without a moment's delay ; but a letter arrived that morning from Mr. Coke, asking him to undertake some additional business, which would turn out to be of advantage to them. Lashmore sighed and groaned ; and he sighed and groaned again when Mr. Levison arrived and told him that it was imperatively necessary that he should remain in England for the present. The chain of evidence was complete enough for any ordinary person ; but a Judge on the Bench and twelve jurymen in the box are not ordinary persons ; and Levison very naturally wanted Lashmore close at hand, so that he might consult with him from time to time.

It was impossible for Lashmore to keep from the woman he loved the great secret for an indefinite time ; so he sat down and, with infinite pains in breaking it to her, told her of the good news. He pictured her joy, her delight, in his, their, good fortune, and knew how much the prospect of a reconciliation with her father would mean to her. Then he tried to throw himself into the business that had brought him to England, and succeeded ; for he felt that he owed a deep debt of gratitude to Mr. Coke, a debt that he could never pay ; and he was more anxious than ever to do his duty by Quirapata.

The days passed in a kind of dream ; he seemed to be walking about with two personalities ; and every now and then, when he was alone, he said to himself out loud—' Yes ; it's true : I am Lord Herndale, my wife is the Countess of Herndale !'

He and Osborne met pretty frequently ; but neither

of them referred to the man who bore the title of Lord Herndale, and Lashmore, being under a pledge of secrecy to Levison, could not tell Osborne of the good news, though Lashmore had a great hankering to do so.

The letter sped on its way and reached Kittie in due course. She was waiting at the gate for the rider who brought it, and he smiled and nodded comprehendingly as she tried not to snatch it from him, and thanked him with a burning blush. She took the letter up to her own room, gazed at it, and kissed it before opening it, and opened it slowly, so that she might prolong the pleasure.

Lashmore's epistolary gifts were not great ; but he had managed to break the news to her ; and she read for quite half a page with eager eyes and a loving smile. Then suddenly she came upon it. The colour slowly faded from her face and left it deathly pale, the room spun round with her, and she clutched at the end of the bed to support herself. For in an instant she saw what this thing meant. They would have to return to England, to live there, to take up their proper position ; her fraud might be discovered within an hour, a day, of their landing.



## CHAPTER XXIX

### BACK TO LONDON

**K**ITTIE knew that on returning to this country she would be brought face to face with the true Eva Lyndhurst ; for, of course, Lashmore had dwelt upon the fact that she would now be reconciled to her father, that, as the Countess of Herndale, she would take her proper place in the world, a place worthy of Sir Talbot Lyndhurst's daughter. Indeed, he dwelt upon this fact more than on anything else ; though he spoke, with a feeling which brought tears to her eyes, of his own great joy in finding that he was no longer nameless.

The discovery, the shame, opened out before her like a panorama. Harry would surely cast her from him ; for though he was one of those men who never prate of conscience, principle, and the rest of it, he was also one of those men who hate a lie and abhor deceit. She knew that he thought her as upright as, more so than, himself, and she was assured that his heart would recoil from her, and that he would put her from him. She deserved it, she could bring herself to bear her great punishment, though it would break her heart ; but she could not look on his face and see it slowly change from a loving, trustful one, to——

Ah, no ; that she could not bear ! Even in the midst of the horrible bewilderment, confusion, and stupor that fell upon her like a crushing cloud, she knew that she must never see him again. For hours she lay on the bed, face downwards, the letter clutched in her hand ; tears would not come to her relief, though her



heart seemed bursting ; she could scarcely think ; and yet she knew that every moment was of importance. She would have to go, to hide herself from his accusing, condemning eyes. But where ? She could not hope to hide herself in that country, for it would be childishly easy to trace her. Besides, though she shrank, with the feeling of a leper, from his seeing, touching, her ; she felt that she would go mad if she could not know what had become of him, what was happening to him.

By a kind of instinct, she thought of London. She had heard one of the boys say that it was the easiest place in the world to hide in, that if a man played his cards well and behaved like an ordinary individual, he could conceal himself in the great City and be as difficult to find as the proverbial needle in the rick of hay. Yes, she would go to London, would take up her life there where she had left it ; she would be able to learn what Harry was doing—the newspapers would be full of the case ; she might, too, be able to see him from a distance ; a melancholy comfort, and yet, in its ghastly way, some consolation, some ease to her agonized heart.

At first she thought that she would fly from Quirapata secretly, but she saw that that would not do. Mr. Coke would cable to Harry, and Harry would rush over and injure his prospects. No ; she would go openly, and would thus gain time. She went down at last ; but, though she had bathed her eyes and forced a smile, Polly noticed her pallor, and anxiously inquired if she were ill.

Kittie had intended going to Mr. Coke that afternoon, but Polly's inquiry warned her. She went up to the Great House the next morning, and found Mr. Coke hobbling about the front.

'I've had a letter from Harry,' she said, with a smile of assumed cheerfulness. 'He tells me that he will not be able to get back for some time.'

'Oh, does he ?' said Mr. Coke. 'I thought he

might decide to remain in London for a little while but I gave him the option, because I know how anxious he is to get back.' He smiled and nodded at her, and poor Kittie twisted her lips into a smile of response.

'You are much better this morning?' she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

'Oh, ever so much!' he replied. 'I shall be all right in a day or two.' He scanned her face keenly. 'Look here,' he said, 'why shouldn't you run over to Harry? You'd still have a nice little time in England with him, and you'd have the pleasure of the voyage back together. Why, of course! It's the very thing!'

She faltered, and sank into a chair, and the kindly old man patted her encouragingly on the shoulder.

'You'll just have time to catch the ship. I saw the sailing dates in the paper this morning. Think of it! Just run over and take him by surprise. He'll jump out of his skin with joy.'

The thing was made so easy for her that she was almost frightened.

'I—I don't like to leave you,' she faltered; but he laughed at her, and at once began to talk of the arrangements for her departure, as if the matter were settled.

There was just time, as he had said, and Kittie passed the few days before her flight in feverish preparation, which fortunately left her no time to sit about and brood—fortunately, for there were moments when she felt that it would be a relief to lose her reason. Three days later she was driven away from the cottage in which she had found happiness and joy unspeakable. She dared not look back, lest she should break down, and she fought hard with her tears as she kissed Polly and clung to Mr. Coke's hand. She knew how keenly they would both suffer when they discovered that she had left them for ever, and in shame and disgrace. But she had wept bitterly enough, and her scalding tears had run down the glossy neck of her

mare as she had flung her arms round it and bidden it farewell.

The ship she caught did not carry the mail, and the letter which she had written—a few lines telling Harry that she had gone out of his life for ever, and praying him to let her go without question or search for her—would be carried by the next mail, and reach him when she was safe in London. The writing of those few lines had cost her an agony keener than any she had hitherto endured, for they were her farewell to him, the last words she should ever address to him; and she could see his face as he read them—the consternation, the pain, the anguish of dread which would cloud the face she had loved to kiss.

It was a pale and wan and broken-hearted woman that crept to her berth on board the good ship *Fortuna*. There were many aching hearts on board, but none so racked by hopeless despair as that of the wife of the Right Honourable the Earl of Herndale.

\* \* \* \*

Lashmore counted the days before it would be possible for him to get a letter in answer to the one he had written telling his wife of the change that had come over their lives, but he tried to possess his soul in patience. Naturally enough, now that it belonged to him, he was consumed by a desire to look upon the old place where he had been born, and which, until his father's death, he had regarded as his heritage. He fought with the desire, but it was irresistible, and one day he jumped into the train, after hesitating on the platform till the last moment, and was carried down to Herondyke. He approached it cautiously, and tried to brace his nerves, but his first glimpse of his old home nearly unmanned him.

The vast, stately building, surrounded by its glorious park, the great winding avenue of beeches, all the familiar sights and sounds made him shake and thrill. He sat on a stile and gazed through misty eyes at the

place, his ancestral home, which was now his again—not only his, but his dear wife's. He sat and glowed with anticipatory delight and joy as he pictured the day he would bring her there—would wander with her hand in hand over the huge, beautiful place, and would say, as he held her in his arms, 'This is your home, dearest!'

He waited until dusk, and then ventured to go still nearer to the house. And it was not with unalloyed pleasure that he saw certain changes in it. It was now well kept up, the grounds in perfect order, the façade repaired, the gardens resplendent. He could almost have wished to find the old place as he had left it, ill-kept, if not neglected. A man passed him as Lashmore was turning away—one of the new gardeners—and he looked at Lashmore curiously, and as if he wondered who the strange visitor might be. Lashmore was conscious of a little pang of bitterness. By rights this man should be his servant, should touch his hat, stand aside respectfully to let him pass. It was a small thought, and Lashmore was rather ashamed of it. But no matter: in a short time he would be in possession of his own again. He thought of his beautiful wife all the way back to London.

He told Forbes where he had been, and the old man chuckled and rubbed his hands.

'We shall soon be back there, please God, my lord!' he said.

The following evening Lashmore and Osborne dined together at the same little restaurant. They had a very pleasant dinner; but Osborne saw that Lashmore was restless and preoccupied. Osborne had, of course, noticed the change in his friend for some days past, but had not remarked on it. To-night Lashmore seemed unable to keep still, and at last Osborne said—

'Let us take a stroll. I've rather a fancy for the Strand at this time of night.'

'Pretty crowded,' said Lashmore absently.

'Yes; that's why I like it. It soothes me to push my way through a mob. I have a sneaking fondness for a London crush, the rattle of the cabs, the glare of the electric lights, the movement and excitement of life at its full tide. And it is at its full tide at eleven o'clock in the Strand, believe me! I get a kind of feeling when I'm surging along with a mob coming from the theatres that I used to get when we were in a tight corner in the wilderness—just a handful of us against a swarm of savages thirsting for our blood.'

Lashmore laughed. 'Come on, then!' he said.

They lit their cigars and went into the Strand. The theatres were just disgorging, and there was certainly mob enough to please even Osborne. They went with the crowd for a time, sometimes pulling up on the oasis of a friendly doorway to look on at the stream which surged by them.

'Funny to think that every man and woman, yes, and child too, of this crowd is a little cosmos, a little world, in himself and herself! They all look alike, and it would be difficult to pick out the sheep from the goats, and yet some of them are, no doubt, great villains and some are saints.'

'They all seem happy enough,' said Lashmore, as a group, talking eagerly and laughing, jostled past them.

'Oh, yes,' assented Osborne. 'Nowhere in the world can you find a happier, better-humoured crowd than in England. Down South they are more light-hearted; but I doubt whether it goes far below the surface. There seems to me to be always the echo of a sob in their laughter and a glimmer of a tear behind the flash of their eyes. George! that sounds like poetry, doesn't it? Yes; these people on the pavement are happy enough, and, judging by appearances, much more happy than some of the carriage folks.'

Naturally enough, Lashmore's eyes wandered from the people on the pavement to some of the carriages as they slowly made their way along the road.

'Yes; you're right,'—he began. Then suddenly he uttered an exclamation, and made as if to start forward, but he checked himself and unconsciously gripped Osborne's arm.

Osborne looked down at Lashmore's hand, then up at his face with speechless amazement; for Lashmore's face was white, there was a startled expression in his eyes, and his lips were apart as if he were breathing painfully.

'What on earth's the matter, Lashmore?' demanded Osborne. 'Are you ill? What is it?'

Lashmore was still staring at the roadway, his eyes apparently following one of the carriages. He did not appear to have heard Osborne, seemed to have been suddenly stricken deaf and dumb, turned to stone.

'Here! what is it, Lashmore?' said Osborne anxiously.

Lashmore heard him now, and, slowly dragging his eyes away from the object on which they had been fixed, he drew a long breath and passed his hand across his forehead, as if trying to recover from some shock.

'It's nothing,' he said with a forced laugh, his voice husky and unsteady. 'I thought I saw——' He pulled up short. He had not told Osborne that he was married.

Osborne was a man of the world and discreet. He asked no further questions, and at once ignored Lashmore's strange behaviour.

'Let us go over to Romano's and get a drink. This mob always makes me thirsty.'

They went across, and as soon as Lashmore had got his drink he drank it at a draught. The colour crept back to his face, but there was still a haunted look in his eyes.

And little wonder. For if he had not known that his dearly loved wife was thousands of miles away there at Quirapata, he could have sworn that he had seen her seated in one of the carriages which had passed them as Osborne and he stood in the doorway.



## CHAPTER XXX

### EXPIATING

**K**ITTIE sat in her attic at work. The London sun flickered through the narrow window, the London sparrows chirped about the chimney pots over which she looked, the hum and buzz of London rose faintly to her ears. It was difficult to believe that she had ever left it, that such a place as Quirapata existed. Immediately on her arrival she had sought for work, knowing full well that the money which Mr. Coke had given her, and which she had taken not only from sheer necessity, but from a fear lest her refusal should rouse his suspicions, would soon be exhausted.

She had been fortunate enough to obtain some fine needlework from one of the high-class shops, so that her few wants were provided for, at any rate for the present. It is said that the period of solitary confinement which the convict has to undergo is the worst part of his sentence; Kittie was finding her solitary life, contrasting so vividly with the happy one which she had left, a terrible ordeal; for she could think as well as work, and it is not difficult to imagine the nature of her thoughts. In a word, she was suffering her punishment in all its bitter fulness, and her punishment was intensified by the knowledge that when Harry received her letter his period of suffering would commence. It was not only her own life that she had wrecked and ruined, but that of the man she loved.

She was tortured by the desire to hear of him, to know what he was doing; but though she scanned the papers with fearful eagerness every morning she



found no reference in them to his claim. Amongst the fashionable intelligence she once saw the names of Lord Herndale and Miss Eva Lyndhurst in the list of persons at a reception, and the sight of Eva Lyndhurst's name affected her so much that for hours she was unable to work. She rarely left her attic until dusk, and then wore a veil, for she was afraid of meeting one of the boys or—there was terror in the thought—Harry himself. But when she went out her eyes were everywhere, especially when she was passing through some of the streets and squares of the West End.

One evening her fears were justified. She was leaving the shop to which she had taken her work, and had forgotten to lower her veil. A man was passing quickly, and he glanced at her and hesitated. She lowered her veil quickly and turned aside, but she could hear that he had followed her, and presently a voice—Bickers's—said close to her, 'I beg your pardon.'

She turned, for she knew it would be impossible to avoid him, and Bickers, with a gasp of astonishment and joy, exclaimed—

'It is Miss Kittie! Why—why—! I'm so knocked over that I can scarcely speak!' He had got hold of both her hands, and was holding them tightly, as if he feared that she might rise from the pavement and float away from him. 'It really is you! Where have you been? Why did you go away so suddenly? We were all so cut up; we've been so anxious. Has anything happened? You look—different somehow. As beautiful as ever, though.—I beg your pardon, Miss Kittie, but I am in such a state of confusion at seeing you! Come into the Square and tell me—oh, tell me everything!'

With her heart beating with a mixture of anxiety and affectionate gladness at the meeting, Kittie turned with him into the Square. He listened intently as she told him guardedly that she had been abroad with a

lady, but that she was now back in London trying to earn her living. Of course, Bickers saw that she was keeping something from him; but he was too tactful, too faithful, to harass her with questions. Indeed, it was enough for him that she was back.

'I can't tell you how glad I am to see you; of course you know that. And the rest of the boys, they'll be half crazy with delight! Where are you living? You must let us see you; you must come back to us—really come back to us, and let us look after you and take care of you. Look here, Miss Kittie, we're all going to dine at the *Potted Shrimp* to-night—you remember the dear old place, back of the Empire, you know? You'll come and meet them there? Ah, don't say "no!" I needn't tell you how we've missed you. There isn't a day that we don't speak of you; we've been no end anxious. And my mother, she's always writing to ask whether we've heard of you. You'll have to go down and see her, Miss Kittie, unless you want to break her heart.'

They talked for some time, and at last Kittie promised she would come; it was impossible to refuse. Bickers wrung both her hands at parting, and went off humming like a man who has come into a fortune.

The boys had a little room to themselves at the *Potted Shrimp*. Bickers was the first to arrive, and ordered an extra place to be laid. They all turned up—Teddy Wilson, Percy Vilorne, Herbert Mandeville, all of them. Fritz began to bring in the soup. Bickers looked at the clock anxiously; Kittie had not arrived. Was she going to disappoint them? Surely not! That would be unlike Miss Kittie.

'Hullo, there's a plate too many!' said Mandeville.

'It's—It's for a friend of mine I'm expecting,' said Bickers, reddening. 'We won't wait; she—he—mayn't turn up.'

At that moment the door opened gently and Kittie entered, and stood looking at them with a faint smile

on her pale face. For a moment there was the silence of amazement, then the boys sprang to their feet, and, with a wild 'Whoop!' rushed at her, overturning Fritz and his pile of plates, knocking aside the chairs, and dragging the cloth half off the table. Calling on her beloved name, they almost fought for her hands, Bickers chuckling and crowing triumphantly as he helped her take off her jacket.

'Why, where have you been?' some one exclaimed, but Bickers broke in before she could answer.

'She's been abroad, paying visits to some of the other crowned heads of Europe. Don't badger her with questions. We've got her back again, and that's enough.'

'So it is!' they chorused happily.

They escorted her to the head of the table, as if they were indeed escorting a queen to her throne.

'Fritz, a magnum of our own particular champagne to-night!' cried Mandeville. 'Miss Kittie, I give you my word this is the happiest night of my life—the happiest in all our lives, eh, boys?'

'It is, it is!' they responded, knocking the table with the ends of their knives; and the music was sweet in Kittie's ears. For the moment she almost forgot her great trouble: there is only one salve for sorrow, and the name of this wonderful medicine is Love.

The dinner proceeded in a kind of whirlwind of talk and laughter, in an atmosphere of rejoicing. Their goddess had come back to them, their hearts were warm again with the sunshine of her presence. They all talked at once; they all wanted to get her to listen at the same time; they told her of their troubles and trials, their successes and failures. The champagne went round briskly; Fritz, pouring out libations with a smile which stretched his mouth from ear to ear. Kittie was made to drink a glass; the dishes of the simple but admirably cooked menu were delicately pressed upon her, her plate was piled with fruit; they hung on every

word, fed on every smile of hers. It was indeed an evening like those of old times.

More than half their noise was prompted by loving cunning, for they saw that Kittie had changed, and that she had passed through some trouble. Perhaps she would tell them some day; but meanwhile the thing to do was to lure her on to forgetting the trouble, to realizing that she was safe back amongst them, and that they were all her sworn friends and protectors. The party broke up at last; they all wanted to see her home, but Bickers claimed the privilege.

'You see,' he said apologetically, 'Miss Kittie's a kind of ward of my mother's, and I feel that I am responsible for her.'

Teddy Wilson groaned. 'We've had a rest from his mother while you've been away, Miss Kittie,' he said, 'but now'—with exaggerated apprehension—'I'm afraid he's going to trot her out and crow over us as he used to do. Some of us will have to go down and painlessly kill that old lady, or there will be no living with Bickers.'

Bickers walked with her to the little narrow street in which her attic lay, and lingered with her at the door, just as he had done in the Square; as if he were afraid of losing her; and even when she said good-bye, and had promised for the twentieth time to meet them all again, he came running back.

'Oh, Miss Kittie, I had nearly forgotten! It's been such a night that really there is some excuse for me. You remember that old bureau writing-stand of—of your father's? Well, you know, I bought that, and the other day—only a few days ago—I was lugging out a drawer to get at something—you remember how those blessed old drawers always used to stick?—and I came upon a kind of secret place at the back—one of those places they used to put in old-fashioned bureaus. I thought, at first, it was empty, but I found a packet of papers lying at the bottom. I don't suppose they

are of any account,, any value, I mean ; but I put 'em in an envelope and sealed them up. They look like old bills and things of that sort, and p'raps they're nothing whatever to do with your father. I'll send them to you. Good-night once more ! You'll meet me on Tuesday at Hyde Park corner ? Right ! Good-night, and God bless you, Miss Kittie !'

This meeting with the boys lightened the darkness of Kittie's sorrow, if only for a few hours. Alas ! it bore down upon her again before dawn had come. She met Bickers on Tuesday, and they walked into the Park, Bickers with his head erect and proud of his beautiful companion.

'Here is the packet,' he said almost immediately. 'I wish it were full of bank notes, Miss Kittie ; but there are nothing but old bills and letters, so far as I could see.'

She took the envelope and managed to get it into her pocket, and they talked of old times and old friends.

'Hagnes Hevangeline is married,' he said. 'Married the baker ; red-headed man with a face like a quartern loaf ; you remember ?'

'Of course I do ! I must go and see her,' said Kittie.

Let me see, who else is there ? Oh, Mr. Levison ?'

'Haven't seen him since you dis—went away,' replied Bickers. 'He has quite vanished, and none of us know what has become of the old gentleman, You see, Miss Kittie, he was never really one of us ; I mean, one of the boys. It was you and your father that he was friendly with. Took a tremendous amount of interest in the Dook—I beg your pardon, Miss Kittie, I really do beg your pardon ! Forgive me !'

Kittie smiled at him through her tears. 'I like you to call him that,' she said.

'There was no disrespect in our doing so, I assure you, Miss Kittie. We all knew that he was better class than ourselves. And he looked a gentleman, an aristocrat, always. You've the same look, too, Miss

Kittie. It's hard to define, but you've got it; and we boys are proud of it.'

Kittie smiled at his enthusiasm. 'I am afraid my aristocratic appearance exists only in the imagination of the boys,' she said. 'Any way, the people I work for would not be likely to pay me a higher price on account of it.'

As they were leaving the Park by the Albert gate Kittie stopped and seemed to shrink back. Sir Talbot Lyndhurst was coming towards them. She recognized him in an instant, though he was greatly changed since she had seen him by the stream at Ripley Court. He was bent, and thin, and his face was haggard and wan. He looked ten years older, and like a man carrying more than the burden of his years. His eyes were bent on the ground, but he raised them as he drew near. Kittie, however, had turned and put Bickers between her and Sir Talbot, who passed without noticing her. She lowered her veil with a trembling hand and told Bickers that she must go home. At parting with her he tried to get her to promise to go down to his mother; but she would not give him the promise, and begged him not to write to the old lady about her until she, Kittie gave him permission.

The sight of Sir Talbot had awakened the memory of that moonlight night at Deerbrook; and for some time she sat with her hands clasped tightly, going back along the road of the bitter-sweet past. Presently she remembered the papers Bickers had given her, and she took the envelope from her pocket; but she did not open it that night. Her heart was so sore that the touch of anything connected with her dead father was like the contact of fire with a wound. She put the envelope aside, and it was not until some days had passed that she opened it with reluctance, with pain, which were inevitable.

As Bickers had said, the contents appeared to be old bills, plans of literary work, agreements, written on a



sheet of notepaper, with publishers and theatre managers. The sight of her father's handwriting brought the tears to her eyes, and she was putting the remainder of the papers unread into the envelope when she caught a name on what looked like a certificate, which startled her and caused her to continue her examination with a sudden eagerness and interest. She read almost breathlessly, her bosom heaving, her eyes dilating, and at last, when she had got through every paper, she rose with her arms extended, her face flushed, her lips quivering ; indeed, she was shaking in every limb.

For before her lay disclosed the secret of her father's life.



## CHAPTER XXXI

### MY WIFE !

**L**OOK here, Lashmore,' said Osborne one evening. 'I can see that you are hipped and out of sorts—Of course, I can guess that you've got something on your mind, some worry or other; but I don't want you to tell me; in fact, I'd rather you didn't, unless I can help you. If I can help you—well, I needn't say how glad I shall be to do so.'

'No; you can't help me,' said Lashmore. 'I wish you could. I'd tell you sharp enough. And, to speak the truth, there really is no cause for me to worry; on the contrary, I have had a wonderful stroke of luck; but it hasn't quite come off yet; and it's the suspense that is getting on my nerves. I feel like the man who cried out in the middle of his long trial, "Oh, hang me first, and try me afterwards!"'

Osborne laughed. 'I know,' he said. 'Got the same feeling myself. But you mustn't give way to it. I've an idea you're leading a lonely kind of life, and don't see many friends.'

'Absolutely no one excepting you and old Forbes, and'—he checked himself at the name of Levison—'a man who is carrying through some important business for me, the business that is worrying me.'

'Exactly. And so you sit about and walk about alone, and brood. That's deuced bad for anybody, especially so for a man like you, all restlessness and energy. I prescribe a little society. Hold on,' as Lashmore laughed and shook his head, 'just you try my prescription. I'm going to-night to see a dear old lady friend of mine; one of the sweetest, best-natured

women in London. I'm a pet tiger of hers ; and I give her a lot of trouble, because I don't pet easy. You come with me. She'll be delighted to see you. It's quite a small affair to-night. Now don't refuse ; but say "Yes" to oblige me. I've got a worry of my own, and a big one ; and I've tried the prescription I am offering you. I've done a bit of brooding myself ; and that way madness lies. I'll call for you at nine sharp.'

Reluctantly, grudgingly, Lashmore got into evening dress—Forbes insisting on valeting him—and Osborne turned up to the moment : like Royalty and most other great persons, he was punctuality itself. They got into a taxi and were driven to Eaton Square. Lashmore took so little interest in their destination that he did not even ask the name of their hostess. They entered the house and went up to the drawing-room and Lady Lorchester came forward with evident pleasure to receive them.

'You said you would never come here again,' she said chidingly but smilingly to Osborne.

'I break down in all my good resolutions, my dear lady. But perhaps you will forgive me, seeing that I have brought a friend with me who is a much more amiable, and in every way a nicer, person than myself. Mr. Lashmore, Lady Lorchester.'

Aunt Lucy smiled still more sweetly as she gave Lashmore her hand ; then her placid brows knit with a puzzled frown.

'Surely I've met Mr. Lashmore before ?' she said.

'I am sure we have not, or I should not have forgotten it,' said Lashmore.

She was evidently pleased with the conventional but ready response, and she beamed from one to the other.

'I'm afraid there won't be many people here to-night.'

'Thank Heaven for all its mercies !' interjected Osborne quite audibly.

'Oh, you are hopeless,' she retorted. 'But I am sure Mr. Lashmore likes to meet interesting people.'

'I am quite satisfied already, Lady Lorchester,' said Lashmore.

'Now, why can't you talk as prettily as he does,' she cried to Osborne reproachfully. 'And why don't you try to teach him some of your good manners, Mr. Lashmore?'

Osborne laughed, and they passed on. As they did so, Lady Lorchester said to them, over her shoulder, 'My niece is coming to-night. You must introduce Mr. Lashmore to her.'

A gentleman with a tremendous head of hair was performing wonderful feats on the piano, and the two men made their way to a corner and sat down; but scarcely to listen, for everybody else in the room, and there was quite a number of persons, was talking as if the long-haired gentleman did not exist.

'This is what Lady Lorchester calls having a few people,' said Osborne; 'and there are more of them coming. I can see 'em! But she's a dear good soul, and you'll like her.'

Lashmore said nothing to this. In the hazy state of his mind there was stirring a vague recollection of the name; but he could not fix it. One or two persons who knew Osborne came up to him; he introduced Lashmore, and they talked for a little while; then Osborne remarked that there was a weird kind of collection, weapons and trophies, in the next room, and he took Lashmore to see it. Lashmore noticed while they were looking at the things that Osborne had grown absent-minded and preoccupied, and presently Osborne said.

'I've got a bad quarter of an hour coming on, Lashmore. You heard Lady Lorchester tell us that her niece was coming? Well, that's the woman I love. And she'll be here presently—with the man she's engaged to marry. The gentleman with the stick.'

Lashmore looked up suddenly and his face darkened.

'Let us go,' he said.

'No,' responded Osborne. 'It's too late now; the dear old lady would make a fuss. Besides, it's a case of the moth and candle with me; I must be near the light sometimes, though I scorch my wings and it hurts. And come to that, why should we shrink from seeing Lord Herndale; let him do the shrinking. Come back to the other room and get it over.'

They looked round as they entered the drawing-room, both men very grave and rather pale.

'They are not here yet,' said Osborne in a low voice. 'After all, perhaps we'd better go. We don't want to make a scene for the dear lady; and I've got an idea you might lose your head. Come on.'

They were making their way across the room when some new-comers entered. There was a group round Lady Lorchester, and the last arrivals were not visible to the two men; but presently, as they neared the door, the group broke up and Lord Herndale and Eva stood out plainly. Lashmore was looking aside for the moment; but presently he turned, then stood stock still, breathless, his eyes fixed with a wild stare on Eva's beautiful face.

'Here we are!' whispered Osborne. Then aloud to Eva, 'How do you do, Miss Lyndhurst?'

Herndale saw Lashmore, started and went ghastly white, but before he could speak, a cry arose from Lashmore, and he sprang forward with outstretched hands, with one word piercing the hum of conversation, cleaving the music—

'Eva!'

The movement, the cry, were so sudden, that Eva shrank back and gazed at him with nothing but alarm at first; then, as she recognized him, she blushed deeply and held out her hand.

The silence was intense, the musician, startled by it, ceased playing and swung round on his seat. All eyes

were fixed on the three men and the girl, with startled wonder and that peculiar effect which we call 'sensation.'

Lashmore's hands dropped to his sides; he, too, recoiled with amazement; he was panting for breath, fighting against the wonder of her presence, the manner in which she received him. He had left her at Quirapata—she was here in evening dress, leaning on the arm of the man who had supplanted him! Merciful Heaven, what did it mean!

'Eva!' he cried again. 'You are here—you have not written—I did not know you were coming!—Why do you look at me like that? Why don't you speak!'

The startled, and now somewhat frightened, crowd had drawn closely round them; but no one spoke. Trembling with agitation and alarm, Eva found her voice.

'I—I don't understand——' she said faintly.

'Good God!' exclaimed Lashmore. 'Am I mad—or are you? Is this a jest, some joke—if so, end it, end it, Eva! I left you at Quirapata——'

Osborne, very pale and upset, laid his hand on Lashmore's arm; but Lashmore threw the restraining hand off.

'Don't let any one interfere, don't let any one speak to me!' he exclaimed fiercely. 'I don't understand this.' He stared at Eva, and was obviously trying to gain command of himself. 'Why don't you speak, Eva? Why don't you tell them who you are? Is there some reason——? Ah, that's it! It is something to do with the case—I don't understand, I can't imagine. But come away out of this! Come home with me and tell me—everything.'

He drew nearer to her as if to take hold of her. Herndale, who had been standing, gazing from one to the other, his cold eyes flashing furiously, interposed between them. Lashmore raised his hand to strike him; but Osborne caught it just in time.

'Go easy, Lashmore!' he implored in a low tone. 'You are frightening the lady. There is some mistake——'

'There is no mistake,' said Lashmore, still struggling for calm. 'Do you know who that lady is?'

'Yes,' responded Osborne. 'It is Miss Lyndhurst!'

'She *was* Miss Lyndhurst,' said Lashmore; 'but she is now my wife—has been my wife for some time.'

A murmur rose from the people round them, and they looked at each other with amazed questioning. Eva, after gazing at Lashmore with a kind of frightened surprise, turned to Lady Lorchester, as if for rescue, and Aunt Lucy put her arm round her, though the elder lady was almost in as much need of support as Eva herself.

'Your wife!' ejaculated Osborne, his face suddenly white, his lips drawn tightly. 'You—you must be mad, Lashmore! That lady is Miss Eva Lyndhurst, Sir Talbot Lyndhurst's daughter. Yes; you must be mad, must be the victim of some hallucination!'

Herndale drew himself up and smiled contemptuously.

'It is evident that Mr. Osborne has solved the problem,' he said with a sneer. 'This person is evidently out of his mind.'

Lashmore looked from one to the other, as if he thought they were all joined in a conspiracy against him.

'I am not mad,' he said, and, strangely enough, he spoke almost calmly. 'I repeat, that lady is my wife—Eva,' he extended his arms to her—'why do you not speak, why do you disown me? Why are you so changed—what has wrought this change in you—what has happened since we parted? Are you disowning me of your own free will—are you ashamed of me? There is no need to be now. Have you not had my letter—did you leave before you knew the truth, the change that had come over my fortunes?'



By this time Eva had also become almost calm. She too had at first thought that Lashmore was mad; but gradually she had perceived that he was sane, that he had some reason for thinking that she was his wife. There was evidently some extraordinary mystery; he was obviously the victim of as extraordinary a delusion. Pity for him stirred in her bosom. Lady Lorchester had, in a trembling whisper, implored her to come away; but Eva would not do so.

'Let me speak to him,' she said. 'There is some terrible mistake.' Her hand went to her throat, as if she found it difficult to speak; then she drew herself from her aunt's support, and, looking steadily at Lashmore, said, in a low but clear voice.

'I am Eva Lyndhurst. You know that, Mr. Lashmore. I am not married. Why do you think that I am your wife?'

Lashmore's passion rose again. 'Eva! Can it really be you speaking to me, asking me such a question! Do you think I don't recognize your voice, that if I were blind I should not know you by it? Have you forgotten the day we were married—everything? Come to me! Come away at once. I will be patient. See, I am not angry. No doubt you have some explanation: you shall explain everything when we are alone——.'

Again he made as if to take her in his arms. Eva shrank back with a faint cry of alarm. Herndale stepped in between them, and once more Lashmore raised his hand to strike him; but Osborne who was watching Lashmore closely, seized him in a grip of steel, saying quickly, as he did so,

'Take Miss Lyndhurst away!'



## CHAPTER XXXII

' I AM GOING TO MY WIFE '

**L**ADY LORCHESTER led Eva from the room. Lashmore struggled for a moment or two to follow her ; but Osborne held him tightly and implored him to restrain himself. The spectators were now chattering loudly with excitement ; one or two ladies threatened hysterics. Herndale stood, with his arms folded, looking at Lashmore with an affectation of tolerant contempt.

' Who is this person ? ' he demanded of the company in general. ' I do not know him.'

Lashmore put Osborne aside and regarded the other man steadily.

' I am Lord Herndale,' he said very quietly, but so distinctly that every one heard the words.

Herndale's pale face was distorted by an insolent sneer.

' I think that settles the matter ! ' he said. ' The man is mad.' With a shrug of his shoulders, he turned and went out of the room.

' Come out of this, Lashmore,' said Osborne ; and to Osborne's surprise, Lashmore nodded and allowed Osborne to take him outside. Without a word Osborne called a cab, almost pushed Lashmore into it, and told the cabman to drive to Vincent Square. On the way he thrust a cigar into Lashmore's hand, and Lashmore lit up and smoked furiously. Neither man said a word until they reached Osborne's rooms ; then Lashmore sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. Osborne paced up and down for a minute or two, glanc-

ing every now and then at the bent figure of the man who crouched in the chair as if overwhelmed and utterly broken up; at last he said very gravely,

'I am waiting for your explanation, Lashmore. Here, drink this, and for God's sake pull yourself together!'

Lashmore rose and took the glass with an unsteady hand; his throat was parched, every vein in his body seemed filled with fire.

'She is my wife,' he said hoarsely. 'I left her at Quirapata—we were married near there—God, how can I keep calm! I am cruelly wronged; no man has been more cruelly wronged in this world. I tell you she is my wife! I met her in London—I have spent weeks at her father's place, Ripley Court—I told her there that I loved her. I was obliged to go abroad. There was a stain on my birth, I was regarded as illegitimate. I went abroad—I could not ask her to marry me—I went to make my fortune. It was agreed between us that she should come to me when I sent for her, or before, if she wished to do so. She came—we were married—were'—his voice choked and broke for a moment—'were happy together. She was broken-hearted when we parted: I mean, when I came to England.'

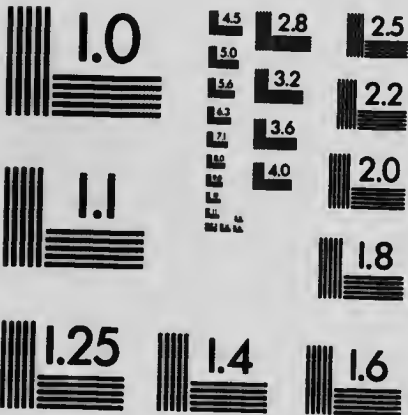
Osborne stared at him with wonder and bewilderment.

'When I got to England I found that I was not illegitimate, that I was my father's lawful son, that I was his heir, the owner of the title. Yes, I am Lord Herndale. I have been preparing my case; the man who called himself Lord Herndale was to have been served with the writ in a few days.—But that is a secondary matter, and sinks to nothing beside the other.' He drew a long breath. '*I want my wife.*'

The words, quietly spoken as they were, rang through the room. Osborne went to him and laid a restraining



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hand on his shoulder, and, looking steadily into his bloodshot eyes, said,

'Then you must go back to Quirapata for her. Miss Eva Lyndhurst is certainly not your wife.—Wait! Don't speak! Listen to me for two minutes. I say that she is not your wife. And who should know it better than I? Lashmore, don't you see, don't you realize, that Eva Lyndhurst is the woman I love?'

Lashmore started and glowered at him fiercely.

'She is the woman I love,' said Osborne. 'I have seen her for months, have been constantly in her company. How can it be possible that she should be here in England and out there in South America at the same time?'

Lashmore frowned at him sullenly. 'There is some hideous mistake,' he said. 'But it's yours, not mine. Do you think a man doesn't know his own wife?'

'I should say he would, that he must,' assented Osborne; 'but—hold on, hear me out!—take the circumstances into consideration. You have been brooding, longing for her; you have been obsessed, as many a man is, when he is madly in love with a woman and has been parted from her for some time—do hold on!—you meet a lady in a crowded room, in a half light—Lady Lorchester's lights are always shaded with those stupid red silk arrangements—and misled by no doubt a strong resemblance in face—and voice too, if you like—you jump to the conclusion that she is your wife. You get excited, and lose your head—'

Lashmore stared at him, then burst into a laugh of mockery.

'Nicely argued!' he said. 'But you forget one thing—the name, the name, the name! It is the same. I married Eva Lyndhurst, Sir Talbot Lyndhurst's daughter. My wife did not to-night deny her name, though she denied me!'

Osborne looked aghast. 'The same name!' he said. 'By Heaven, it's a mystery! I tell—you—'

Lashmore, the lady you mistook to-night has not been out of England. I have spent hours in her society—why, I have seen her nearly every day !'

' And I say that she is my wife, that I left her at Quirapata !'

Osborne uttered an exclamation. ' I have it !' he cried. ' We can soon settle the matter !'

' How ?' demanded Lashmore sternly.

' Cable to your wife, asking if she is there, at home, at Quirapata. Of course, you will find that she is. What fools we were not to have thought of it before ! Come on ! We'll go down to the all-night telegraph office !'

They went in a cab to the office, and Lashmore, with an unsteady hand filled in the telegram form :—

' Are you well ?—Harry,' and gave Osborne's address.

They left the office, and Osborne linked his arm in Lashmore's and led him to Trafalgar Square.

' Let's keep in the cool a little while,' he said. ' I feel as if I were walking on my head. We won't say another word about your delusion—I beg your pardon !—no ; we won't say a word about it till the answer to your cable comes. What would be the use ? You'd persist in declaring that Eva Lyndhurst is your wife ; I should as strongly persist in denying it. Tell me about your claim : that's straightforward, at any rate ; and you've got all the sympathy I'm capable of. Naturally, I hate that man, Herndale, and it would be a happy hour for me which saw him in the dust.'

Lashmore, trying to concentrate his mind on the subject, told him of Mr. Levison's discovery.

' Levison ! Of course !' said Osborne. ' He came to me ; it was through me that he found my uncle, George. Why, Lashmore, I'm delighted to find that I've got a hand in this, that I have been of some slight service to you. I hope to Heaven I can be of more !

What a small world it is ! No wonder you and I were drawn towards each other. And the case is clear, clear enough to go into Court with ?

'Levison thinks so,' replied Lashmore. 'There is no doubt in my mind or his. But it will be a hard fight.'

Osborne was silent for a moment or two ; then he said thoughtfully.

'I am not so sure. I have heard that there was something shady about our friend Herndale—I say, that is the name I ought to call you !'

'Not yet,' said Lashmore impatiently. 'I have not established my right to it yet.'

'If there is anything shady in the past career of Herndale, he will probably be glad enough to compromise, especially if he sees that you have an irrefragable case. He is a lawyer, you know, and an astute man. How I hate that calculating, cold-blooded look of his ! How he came to get that beautiful creature to——. But we must not speak of her.'

'I will go home now,' said Lashmore.

Osborne pressed his arm tightly.

'Not yet,' he said. 'Come back to my rooms, and we'll sit up and smoke the time away till the cable comes. Frankly, my dear Lashmore, I don't care to lose sight of you. I can put myself in your place ; and I know exactly how I should feel if I were in your shoes : mad enough to do any insane trick ; in fact, I don't think I should have behaved half as well as you have. We should neither of us sleep if we went to bed ; and we shall be the better for each other's company.'

Lashmore was too exhausted to argue ; so they went back to Osborne's rooms. Not a word was said about the fatal question ; but they talked about Lashmore's case. It was a bad time ; the hours seemed to drag ; there were long stretches of silence. The dawn was followed by the bright light of a glorious morning ;



Osborne pulled up the blinds and revealed their pale and haggard countenances. His man came in with breakfast, and stared at them, although he was too discreet to express his astonishment in words.

They made a pretence of eating breakfast; then, as men will, took to their pipes again. Osborne went outside the door and sent a scribbled note to Forbes for Lashmore's morning suit; and when they came the men had a bath and changed. They went out into the street and walked and drove. Lashmore made no effort to get away. Indeed, he could not have gone, because he had given Osborne's address on the cable. They returned to Osborne's rooms at intervals during the day, to find that no cable had arrived. A kind of dogged sullenness had settled on Lashmore, and he could no longer speak; both men felt as if they were being tried for their lives and were waiting for the verdict.

Osborne had told his man to get dinner for them, and they sat down to it, but very soon rose from the table and got their pipes again; Lashmore half crouching in a chair, Osborne leaning against the mantelshelf and staring at the carpet. Suddenly there came a knock at the door, they both started as if the verdict were being pronounced, and Osborne, opening the door, took the yellow envelope from the telegraph boy. Lashmore snatched it from Osborne's hand and tore it open. He uttered a cry, a terrible cry, and hoarsely read the cable aloud—

'Mrs. Lashmore sailed for England. Have you not seen her? Cable reply.—Coke.'

'She is here! She is my wife!' Lashmore exclaimed fiercely.

He caught up his hat and made for the door. Osborne seized him by the arm.

'Where are you going?' he asked, with an agitation as great as Lashmore's.

Lashmore glared at him. 'Where am I going? Where do you think? I am going to my wife!'

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### IS SHE HIS WIFE ?

LADY LORCHESTER kept Eva at Eaton Square until the guests had gone—and they went quickly to spread the news all over London—then she accompanied Eva and Lord Herndale to Gordon Gardens.

Eva was the calmest person of the three ; she knew that Lashmore was not mad ; she felt convinced that there was some mystery that must be soon cleared up. She had not heard Lashmore declare himself to be Lord Herndale ; and Herndale did not mention this part of the incident. They found Sir Talbot waiting for them in the library. He had been poring over a mass of papers, which he thrust aside as they entered.

He looked weary and careworn, and he saw by their faces and manner that something had happened, and his look of anxiety deepened. Eva went to him and put her arm round him, while Lady Lorchester and Herndale between them told them the strange story ; the former all in a flutter and much agitated, the latter angry and contemptuous.

Sir Talbot listened, his head bowed on his breast, his hand wandering across his forehead now and again.

‘It is most remarkable,’ he said, ‘most extraordinary ! There is some terrible mistake somewhere ; and, of course, Mr. Lashmore’s delusion is one of identity.’

‘He is mad !’ said Herndale.

Sir Talbot looked doubtful. ‘I can scarcely think that is the explanation,’ he said. ‘He spent some time with us at the Court, and he was certainly one of the sanest and most intelligent young men I ever met. It

is a case of mistaken identity. And yet, I understand that he says his wife bore the name of Eva Lyndhurst.' He looked at Eva. 'Were there any love passages between you and Mr. Lashmore when he was at the Court ?'

The colour rose to Eva's face. She was silent for a moment, then she said,

'I—I think Mr. Lashmore thought that he was—Yes, father, one day when we were fishing together, he spoke, acted, as if he cared for me; but it was vague and indefinite, and he went away that day and I never saw him again until to-night.'

Herndale scowled. 'You have told me nothing of this,' he said.

'There was no ~~lead~~, she said with quiet dignity. 'Nothing definite ~~passed~~ between us.'

Sir Talbot sighed heavily. 'I cannot solve the mystery,' he said. 'We can only hope that Mr. Lashmore has discovered his unfortunate error by this time, or that he will do so shortly. Of course, we can convince him of it. I should like to see him. I liked him very much; and I am quite sure that he is not actuated by any base motives, that he is the victim of a delusion.'

'On more points than one,' said Herndale with a sneer; he saw that they had better hear from him. 'After I had claimed the title. 'After I had left the room, the man claimed to be Lord Herndale.'

Sir Talbot stared at him, then exclaimed, 'Claimed to be Lord Herndale! Why, how can he do that?' He pondered for a moment; then, as if a light had broken in upon him, he said gravely, 'This young man, Lashmore, must be Herndale's son. Yes, yes! I thought when I first saw him that there was something about his face and figure which awoke a vague recollection in my mind. Yes, he must be Herndale's son.'

'His illegitimate son,' said Herndale haughtily. 'It is probable. He looked like an adventurer playing a desperate game. Eva, you must be worn out.'

'Yes, yes!' said Sir Talbot. 'Go up to bed, Eva. Go with her, Lucy.'

When the two men were left alone, Herndale's manner became still more contemptuous and overbearing.

'This will be all over London in a few hours,' he said. '"A Fracas in a Drawing-Room," a pretty scandal!'

'For which neither Eva nor I can be held accountable,' said Sir Talbot with dignity.

'Of course not,' assented Herndale. 'But I think the sooner our marriage takes place the better. It will give the lie to this man's assertion and stop the scandal quicker than anything else can.'

Sir Talbot bowed his head. For some time past he had had opportunities of becoming acquainted with Herndale's character, and, though his eyes were not fully opened, he had a growing dread of committing Eva to his care.

'You must speak to Eva,' he said in a low voice. 'It rests with her.' He paused a moment, 'I have been trying to examine our accounts; but they seem a hopeless muddle to me, though I understand them sufficiently to be aware that I am heavily in your debt, Herndale. I am sorry, bitterly sorry.'

Herndale shrugged his shoulders. 'We can settle that after the marriage,' he said in an off-hand way which made Sir Talbot wince; 'in fact, I should be quite willing to give you a clear quittance—let's say a memento of the wedding. I'll go now. Good-night.'

As Herndale had said, the news was in the evening papers, which, suppressing names, gave a lurid account of what they called 'A Sensational Scene in a London Drawing-Room;' but Eva did not see the paper, for she was confined to her room by a violent headache. Of course, she was harassed by the mystery; but it was not so much of Herndale or of Lashmore she thought, as of Owen Osborne.

She had seen the wonder, the anguish in his face as Lashmore had claimed her as his wife, and Osborne's expression haunted her. She had known that he loved her still, though he had striven unsuccessfully to suppress the fact while he was in her presence ; but that look on his face had gone straight to her heart, the heart which she knew was his, though she was Herndale's promised wife.

She came down in the evening ; and she and Sir Talbot had just finished dinner, when a footman came in and said,

'A gentleman to see you sir ; Mr. Lashmore. He is in the library.'

Eva grew pale but remained calm. 'I knew he would come,' she said. 'You must see him, father.'

Sir Talbot went to the library. Lashmore was standing, his hands gripped tightly behind him, his haggard face set with the look of a man who has resolved to restrain himself. Sir Talbot went to him with outstretched hand.

'How do you do, Mr. Lashmore ?' he said. 'I expected you. You have come——'

'—For my wife, Sir Talbot,' said Lashmore in a low

Talbot flushed and motioned him to a chair.

'Let us talk this matter over,' he said. 'Distressing as your errand is, I am glad to see you, Mr. Lashmore. We were very good friends, and I may say that I have a strong regard for you. But that is explicable. I am sure I am right in saying that you are the son of my old friend, Lord Herndale ?'

Lashmore inclined his head. 'I am—his *lawful* son,' he said gravely. 'But—forgive me, Sir Talbot—at this moment the fact is not of so much importance to me as that my wife is under this roof.'

Sir Talbot shook his head. 'I assure you on the honour of a gentleman that you are labouring under a delusion. My daughter is not your wife. She has been

under my charge, under my eye, ever since you left us at the Court. She has not been out of England. You say that you married the lady for whom you have mistaken her abroad ; in South America, I understand ? I repeat, my daughter has not been out of England. This at once settles the question.'

Lashmore regarded him with bent brows. 'Forgive me ; I cannot accept the statement. I must believe my own eyes, my own feelings. You do not know all. You do not know that I fell in love with Eva when I was at the Court, that I met her and proposed to her, that she promised to be my wife. More—that she agreed to come out to me. And she came out. We were married. Will you let me see her ? I ask your permission ; but remember that I have the right to ask for her.

Sir Talbot bit his lip. 'My dear sir,' he said pleadingly, 'why inflict the unnecessary pain of an interview upon my daughter ? She has been confined to her room all day ; a meeting with you, after the terrible scene of last night, would naturally cause her poignant distress. I am convinced of the sincerity of your belief, but——.'

Lashmore laughed shortly and bitterly. 'And what am I to think ?' he demanded. 'That there is a conspiracy to rob me of my wife. For some reason or other she has deserted me, returned to you, disowned me. For some reason she left Quirapata—I have a cable here saying that she had gone—I want to know that reason, and from her own lips.'

'Very well,' said Sir Talbot coldly. 'You shall see her.'

He went out of the room, and Lashmore paced up and down, his hands working, his lips tightly set. The door opened, and Sir Talbot came in with Eva. Lashmore drew a long breath and took a step towards her, then stopped, his eyes fixed on her face with a mixture of reproach and appeal.

'Eva ! Eva ! I have come. Will you not end this ? A word, one word will be sufficient. Will you not speak it ? Why did you leave Quirapata ? What have I done that you should desert me, disown me ?'

Sir Talbot would have led Eva to a chair, but she shook her head and stood with her hands clasped, her eyes meeting Lashmore's sadly and steadily.

'I am not your wife, Mr. Lashmore,' she said. 'Oh, why do you not believe it ? Look at me ! You must believe.'

Lashmore trembled, and the sweat stood thickly on his forehead.

'Do you think I am mad ?' he said. 'Do you think I have lost my memory ? Do you think I have forgotten you, the night we met on the edge of the wood, that night when I told you that I loved you, when you promised to be my wife, to come to me if I sent for you ?'

'The edge of the wood—moonlight !' said Eva, almost breathless with amazement.

'Do you deny it ?' he said sternly. 'I remember every word you spoke, every expression of your face. How can I bring it home to you ! Ah !' He tore his pocket-book from his pocket and flung on the table an artificial flower, faded and flattened out of shape. 'You gave me that—took it from your bosom, as a pledge of love and faith. Have you forgotten it ? Look at it. It came from the dress, a pink dress, that you had worn. You have worn it since at Quirapata !'

Eva took up the flower and looked at it with bent brows. 'I remember,' she said, bewildered, confused, 'I remember the pink dress ; you spilt some claret over it when you were staying at the Court. But I never wore it again. What became of it ? I can't remember ! I may have given it to my maid, the maid I had then. She has left me.'

Lashmore held out his hand. 'Give it to me, please,' he said. 'It is mine. *As you are.* Now, now that I



have proved you are my wife, will you tell me why you have left me, why you have treated me thus ? '

Eva regarded him in speechless wonder and trouble. She did not know what to do, what to say. She was not angry with him ; through all her bewilderment pity struggled to the front and predominated. Suddenly her woman's wit, her woman's instinct, came to her aid. She turned to Sir Talbot and said in a low voice—

'Leave us alone together, father.'

Sir Talbot started, and, naturally enough, looked doubtful and anxious.

'Leave you ? My dear Eva ! '

'I am not afraid,' she said. 'There is no cause for fear. Leave us, father.'

Still hesitating and looking from one to the other apprehensively, Sir Talbot left the room. At the door he paused and said,

'I shall be outside, Eva—if you call——'

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### THE GREAT TEST

**W**HEN the door had closed, Eva began to tremble. She was like a gamester staking all on the hazard of a die. She was going to appeal to Nature, to the High Court of Love—going to subject the problem to the ordeal of proximity, of actual contact. She needed all her nerve, but the latent spirit in her rose at her call and inspired her. She raised her eyes to Lashmore, who stood on the other side of the table with his folded arms pressed hard against his breast, as if to hold in check his throbbing heart.

‘You loved your wife, Mr. Lashmore?’ she said in a low voice.

The emotion which tore him did not permit of surprise; and he answered at once.

‘I love her, yes,’ he said. ‘Say rather, that I loved her. She can lay no claim to my love now.’

‘You love her still,’ said Eva. ‘Every word, every look, your voice, your agitation, prove it. You think that I am your wife.—Ah, don’t speak! It is difficult for me to say, to do, what I am going to say and do. Don’t make it harder or—or I shall break down. You think that I am your wife?’

‘Before God, I do!’ he said hoarsely.

‘Well, then,’ she said, very sweetly, very solemnly, her face white, so spiritual an expression in her eyes that they might have shone in the face of an angel. ‘Well, then——!’ She moved slowly round the table, and advancing to him, held out her hand.

With a cry Lashmore seized it, his other arm went round her and, breathing her name in accents of relief

and joy, he drew her to him. Then suddenly a chill, like that of a cloud, seemed to fall upon him, envelop him. He held her at arm's length, his burning eyes scanning her face, feature by feature, line by line. His eyes sought hers, which were patient, mild, pitying. He began to shake in every limb; doubt crept over him, followed by certainty. With a cry, almost of horror, he released her and fell back, supporting himself by the mantelpiece.

Eva swayed as if she were about to faint, and called out,

‘Father!’

Sir Talbot rushed in, in time to catch her.

‘Father, he knows—he knows the truth. He knows now that I am not his wife!’

Lashmore had covered his face with his hands; suddenly he threw them up and cried like a man distraught.

‘God help me! Whom have I married—where is she!’ he cried.

Lashmore went out of the house like a drunken man. The shock almost stunned him; and he was like a man suddenly plunged into Cimmerian darkness, uncertain where he stood, where next to place his feet. If the girl he had married was not Eva Lyndhurst—and he knew now that she was not—who was she?

That the beautiful, pure-hearted girl he had made his wife out there in South America, every day of whose life had impressed him with her innocence and her goodness, should be an impostor, personating another woman, seemed to him beyond the range of possibility. Until a few minutes ago he would have answered for her truth, her honesty, her incapability of wrong-doing, with his life.

He would also have been as ready to answer for her love for him. His wife, the girl who had lain in his arms, who had proved her love for him, an impostor! And yet, how could he avoid not only the evidence which

had been given by Sir Talbot, Eva Lyndhurst, Owen Osborne, the persons who vouched for the fact that Eva Lyndhurst had not left England, but the still stronger, irrefutable evidence of his own senses and instincts? He had known the moment Eva Lyndhurst had surrendered herself to his arms that she was not his wife; and that he was the victim of an extraordinary resemblance.

Who, then, was the girl he had married, and why had she deceived him? These questions surged through his mind; but above them all arose one which was even more important than all the others: Where was she? For he loved her still, his heart ached for her. He wanted to hold her tightly, to wring the truth from her—Yes; and to forgive her. He loved her, notwithstanding all she had done; and he wanted her badly.

Instinctively he went back to Osborne. Osborne was shocked at his appearance; but he saw that Lashmore had been undeceived.

‘You know the truth?’ Osborne said gravely.

‘No; half the truth,’ said Lashmore. ‘I know that Eva Lyndhurst is not my wife; she has proved it to me; but I do not know who my wife is. I do not know where to find her. I must search, search! And I do not know where to turn, where to begin!’

‘You must let me help you, Lashmore,’ said Osborne. ‘You are broken up just at present; and no wonder! The first thing to do is to cable to Quirapata and ask when she sailed. We will go down to the shipping office at once. You want action; you shall have it.’

They drove to the shipping office, and at once learned that ‘Mrs. Lashmore’ had sailed by the *Fortuna*, and that she had disembarked in England with the other passengers. Then came a block; for of course the shipping people could give them no further information. From the Docks they went round to the newspaper offices and inserted an appeal to ‘Mrs. L. of Q.’

Osborne would have gone to Scotland Yard and set the detectives to work ; but Lashmore would not hear of it. At the back of his mind was a dread that his wife had done something which rendered her amenable to the law : no ; there must be no police.

From the newspaper offices, they went in a cab through some of the bye streets on the chance of seeing her ; it was a ridiculously remote one, but Osborne knew that it would afford Lashmore some relief ; anything, however ridiculous, was better than inaction and brooding. Lashmore returned in the evening to Chelsea pretty nearly exhausted by the stress and strain. He found Levison there ; and for a moment he felt inclined to tell that astute person of the new trouble and ask his assistance ; but unfortunately he suppressed the desire : his wife was still so sacred to him that he could not speak of her, and her story, without anguish.

Levison had come to tell him that the first step in the claim had been made, and that writs had been served on Lord Herndale and other persons. Lashmore received the news almost indifferently ; to him, at that moment, it mattered little whether he got the title and estate or not.

Evading Forbes's anxious inquiries and distress at his appearance, Lashmore forced himself to take some food ; then went out again to pace the streets in his feverish search.

Meanwhile Herndale had gone to his Club and found a letter, brought by hand, from Mr. Wensley, the family solicitor, requesting him to call at the office without a moment's delay. Herndale sat with the note in his hand, biting at an unlit cigar for some minutes ; then he went down to the lawyer's office. Mr. Wensley was an old man, and an honourable and upright one. He received Herndale very gravely.

' I do not know whether what I have to tell you will be a surprise to you, Lord Herndale,' he said. ' We

have this morning received a writ in connexion with a claim to the title and estates, made by the late Lord Herndale's son. I have been through the statement of claim, and I am bound to admit that it has startled me and caused me much anxiety. It appears—of course, from their statement—that there was a marriage between Lord and Lady Herndale, and that this gentleman, your cousin, is legitimate. It is a most extraordinary story; and we shall have to examine it most closely. In any case, you will, of course, contest the claim. The onus of proof lies with the other side; you are in possession, and it is only right to assume that you are in lawful possession.'

Herndale was very pale, his eyes were almost hidden by their lids; not only did he look like a man who has received a bad shock, but like one who was calculating, turning something over in his mind.

'It is not altogether a surprise,' he said in his dry voice. 'I met the man the night before last under peculiar circumstances. Probably you have heard something of them?' Mr. Wensley nodded. 'You said just now that we must fight. I should like to ask you a question. Are you sure that there is no ground for the claim? Are you convinced that it is a false one?'

Mr. Wensley fixed his eyes on the blotting-pad. 'That is scarcely a fair question, Lord Herndale,' he said. 'As a lawyer, and a somewhat experienced one, you must know that it is my duty to assume, as I am acting for the person in possession, that the claim is a false one.'

'To assume?' said Herndale. 'Quite so. But I am asking you as man to man.'

Mr. Wensley coloured and frowned. 'As man to man,' he said reluctantly and very gravely, 'I think the claimant has a good case. I will go no further than that. You will fight it, I presume?'

Herndale was silent for a moment or two, then he said—

‘I will give you my decision within twenty-four hours. If this person—my cousin—is entitled to the estates—— But, as I say, I will give you my decision to-morrow.’

Mr. Wensley looked at him curiously as they shook hands, and, returning to his desk, sat staring and frowning at the blotting-paper for some time. It had long been on his conscience that he had never liked Lord Herndale, had always entertained a vague suspicion of him. He felt ashamed of himself as he thought of it; for it looked as if Lord Herndale were going to act up to a standard of honour as high as any man could attain to. He felt ashamed of himself; and yet he was puzzled and uneasy.



## CHAPTER XXXV

### HERNDALE BEHAVES LIKE AN ANGEL

**H**ERNDALE drove to his rooms, locked the door, mixed himself a stiff glass of brandy and soda, and, taking from a safe a despatch box with a Bramah lock, opened it and took out a slip of paper. It was a copy of the late Lord Herndale's marriage certificate. Herndale had found it among some papers of Herondyke; and had therefore known that his uncle had been married, at any rate, in some more or less valid form, and that he, Herndale, was probably a usurper.

He sat, with the certificate in his hand, pondering deeply. As a lawyer, he knew that Lashmore might establish his claim; that if they fought, the world would side with Lashmore; the world including Sir Talbot and Eva. He might not only lose the title and estates, but Eva as well. An ordinary man would have fought; but Herndale was much more astute and cunning than the ordinary man.

The cost of a fight would be tremendous; half the estate might be swallowed up; and, if he lost, he might be responsible for the mesne profits; that is to say, for the money he had received while he had been in possession.

His face reddened with a fierce rage as he thought of surrendering the title and the estates, of sinking back into the condition of a mere commoner; and if a wish could have slain Lashmore, he would have been lying dead at that moment.

Herndale tried to console himself with the reflection that he would be able to force a compromise, that he would be able to extort a large sum of money. He would

not be a poor man, he would be the husband of a baronet's daughter, he could manage Sir Talbot's affairs and make a tolerably good thing of them. Then, again, another reflection flashed across his mind : this man, this cursed cousin of his, was married, it was true ; but there might be no children ; if so, only his life intervened between Herndale and the title. Some accident, illness, might carry him off—

He smoked furiously, gnawing at the cigar. Yes ; he would surrender everything, for a price—excepting Eva. The marriage must be hastened. If she were reluctant, the old fool, her father, must bring pressure to bear upon her.

An hour later he went round to Eaton Square. He had been so absorbed in the matter of the claim, that he had scarcely given a thought to Lashmore's assertion that he was married to Eva ; and he was therefore scarcely surprised when Sir Talbot came to the library to him and said at once,

'You will be glad to hear, Herndale, that Mr. Lashmore has admitted his delusion. He has been here, has seen me and Eva, and she has convinced him of his mistake. How she managed it, I cannot guess ; for, a few minutes before, when I left them together, at her request, he was firmly convinced that she was his wife. You must be immensely relieved ; as, of course, she is.'

'Yes,' said Herndale gravely. 'To tell you the truth, I did not attach much importance to his absurd claim. But I find that the other claim he made, to the title and estates, is not so absurd as it sounded when he made it at Lady Lorchester's. I have come to tell you about it. Will you let Eva know that I am here ; and that I should like to talk to you and her about it ?'

Sir Talbot sent for Eva, and she came into the room, her face wearing the expression which it always wore when she was in Herndale's presence ; a look of re-

serve, self-contained, almost defensive. Herndale did not offer to kiss her, and he plunged at once into the momentous subject. He told them of the statement of claim which Mr. Wensley had received; he laid stress upon the fact that he could contest it, carry it from court to court, keep the case hanging on for probably years.

'But ought I to do this?' he said, with a perfect assumption of honesty. 'If my cousin is the right man, I'm not the man to rob him, to keep him out of his own. I am sure that Mr. Wensley considers that Mr. Lashmore, as he calls himself, has a good case. If it is an absolutely clear one, I shall not fight it. I shall surrender the title and estates at once. It is my cousin's due.'

Sir Talbot regarded him—as he stood with downcast eyes and sad countenance—with surprise and admiration; it was the last course he would have thought Herndale would take. As for Eva, her eyes were moist, her face flushed, her heart beating with self-reproach. This man, whom she had almost disliked and dreaded, whom she was going to marry against her will, was proving himself a man of honour, a man of generous instinct, and worthy of any woman.

She went to him and held out her hand. 'It is good and generous of you,' she said. 'It is noble

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'It—it is almost Quixotic,' murmured Sir Talbot.

'No, father,' she said gravely. 'It is only just.—I suppose most men would do all they could to keep the title and the rest; but you are acting nobly!'

She pressed Herndale's hand, and his closed over hers tightly, as his face flushed and his eyes glittered.

'It—it will make no difference to you?' he said. 'Consider! you will be marrying a commoner, a comparatively poor man, a hard-working barrister. Can you make the sacrifice, Eva? I know that I have no right to ask you.'

He played his part so well, that Eva's bosom heaved, and the tears welled to her eyes. He little guessed how much greater a sacrifice she was making.

'That will be no sacrifice,' she said.

Herndale drew a long breath. 'Will you marry me at once, Eva?' he said. 'As soon as I have made the surrender?'

There was a moment of silence; then she raised her eyes to his, and said almost inaudibly.

'Yes.'

Three days later Lashmore received a letter from Mr. Wensley asking him to call at a certain hour. 'I think I ought to say,' added Mr. Wensley, 'that Lord Herndale, who desires to meet you, will be present.'

At another time and in other circumstances Lashmore would have been surprised by this letter; but he was too absorbed in his search for his wife to be capable of any emotion unconnected with it. He took the letter to Mr. Levison, who raised his brows and smiled shrewdly.

'They don't mean to fight, my lord,' he said. 'They would not ask you to meet the other man, if they had intended contesting your claim. It means a compromise. Lord Herndale—to give him the title he still holds—is as clever as I thought him. It will be question of "how much." They will ask a large sum.'

'I am prepared to give it,' said Lashmore wearily. 'Will you come with me?'

'I think not, my lord,' said Mr. Levison, after a moment's consideration, 'I happen to know more of Lord Herndale than he is aware; and I'm not anxious to meet him. Of course you will not commit yourself to anything definite.'

Mr. Wensley received Lashmore with some emotion. He had known him as a lad, and in his heart of hearts he was rejoiced at Lashmore's good fortune; but he was surprised and grieved to see him looking so care-

worn and anxious. They had some little talk about the claim, guarded talk ; then a clerk announced Lord Herndale.

The two men regarded each other in silence for a while. Within Lashmore's bosom there dwelt a dislike and distrust of his cousin, natural enough, in the circumstances, but intensified by the cowardly blow which Herndale had aimed at Osborne and Lashmore had received. Herndale was the first to speak. He held out his hand.

'How do you do?' he said, his voice cold and slightly harsh. 'I can't say I'm glad to meet you; you wouldn't believe me if I did; but it's better that we should meet in this way than glaring at each other across a Law Court. Perhaps Mr. Wensley has already told you of the decision at which I have arrived. No? Then I can tell you in a few words. I have spent the last three days considering, with Mr. Wensley's assistance, your statement of claim and the evidence you produce, and—I am not going to fight you.'

Lashmore coloured and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

'I think you have proved your case,' continued Herndale. 'At any rate, I am satisfied; "convinced" is a better word perhaps. However, I am willing to accept a compromise. Mr. Wensley will tell you the sum we—I—think adequate.'

Mr. Wensley mentioned a sum. It is scarcely necessary to say that it was a very large one.'

'Very well,' said Lashmore wearily, almost indifferently. 'I am agreed.'

Herndale almost caught his breath. 'That's all right,' he said. 'For my part I'm glad we've settled it; and I trust, Lord Herndale'—Lashmore started at the title—'you will not forget that we are relations, and that we should be friends. I very much regret the way in which I received your somewhat startling announcement the other night——'

Lashmore coloured. 'I was to blame,' he said in a low voice.

Herndale smiled a wintry smile. 'We will let that pass,' he said. 'Now, may I ask your plans? Would you like to go down to Herondyke and take possession at once? If so, I should like to accompany you, if you've no objection. Any time will suit me.'

Both Lashmore and the lawyer stared at the man; he was behaving like a hero, like an angel.

'I—I don't know,' stammered Lashmore. 'I—I'm rather taken by surprise—I will let you know.'

'You will want to consult your lawyer, of course,' said Herndale pleasantly. 'Suppose we go and get some lunch together?'

Too amazed to refuse, Lashmore, with a helpless look at the lawyer, which would have been ludicrously pathetic in other circumstances went off to lunch at the club of the cousin he had supplanted. Mr. Wensley gazed at the door which had closed on them, then rubbed his chin with an air of profound perplexity.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE LIKENESS AGAIN

**B**Y this time rumours of what was occurring, hints of 'a romance in High Life, not unconnected with a certain dramatic scene which had taken place in a fashionable drawing-room,' had begun to crop up in the newspapers; and Society was on the alert for sensational disclosures. Of course Sir Talbot and Eva discussed the matter continually; it was always in their thoughts. Sir Talbot's sympathies, notwithstanding that the man who had lost his title was his future son-in-law, were with Lashmore. He proposed that they should ask him to return with them to the Court. But Eva shook her head. She knew that Lashmore would not leave London until he had found his wife.

One evening, while they were at dinner, Sir Talbot said, casually,

'You didn't see me this afternoon, Eva?'

'This afternoon! No, dear; where were you?'

'In Knightsbridge,' said Sir Talbot. 'I had been to my tailor's, and was crossing the road by the barracks, I caught sight of you walking along by the shops; and I signed to you with my umbrella. You didn't see me, it appears; though I fancied that you looked in my direction. You got into an omnibus before I could cross, and I lost you. Do you often ride in omnibuses?'

'Never; scarcely ever,' said Eva slowly, with a startled expression on her face. 'Father, I was not there. I was not in Knightsbridge this afternoon.'



He looked up, saw that she was agitated, and he changed colour.

'Not—not—not there!' he said. 'But I saw you! I saw you distinctly. Your face was turned fully towards me.'

She shook her head. 'I was not there,' she repeated in a low voice. 'It was not I.'

'Not you! Then—then—who was it?'

She was silent a moment, though her eyes spoke. 'Don't you see, father!' she said; 'Oh, can't you guess? So like me that even you were mistaken! It—it must have been Mr. Lashmore's wife.'

Sir Talbot uttered a faint cry and sank back in his chair. He gazed before him, like a man upon whom a streak of light is beginning to fall from out the darkness. His brows were knit, his lips twitching. At last he muttered with a long breath,

'Merciful Heaven! Can it be possible!'

\* \* \* \* \*

When Lashmore—it will be better to still call him by that name—returned home after lunching with Herndale, he found both Levison and Osborne waiting for him, eager for the news. With a nod to each of them, he walked straight to the mantelshelf and hurriedly turned over the letters; then he dropped them and sighed: there was no answer to his advertisement for his wife.

'Well, what news?' asked Osborne.

'None, none!' said Lashmore dejectedly. 'She has not seen the advertisement, or she will not reply—Oh, you mean about Herndale?'

He told them of the extraordinary interview at the lawyer's and the result; told them listlessly, as if the matter were of little consequence, as, indeed, it was to him, in comparison with the fact that his wife was still lost to him. Osborne raised his brows and whistled as he heard the sum which Lashmore had agreed to pay

Herndale, but Levison's face remained as impassive as usual, as he said,

'He's a clever man; he has made a good bargain. But you can afford it, my lord. That little business you and I have in hand will more than pay off this compensation money. Yes; he's clever. I admire him. He ought to be in the City, he really ought; he's wasted outside of it. I suppose he was quite friendly and affable, my lord?'

'Oh, quite,' said Lashmore, with a weary and somewhat bitter little laugh. 'He asked me to lunch with him. And I went. Somehow I couldn't refuse. He was absolutely self-possessed, and bore himself as if he were a kind of good-tempered martyr. He told me what he had done for the estate, and was kind enough to give me his advice on certain points; said the poaching was rather bad because he had been away so much, and that I ought to get a couple or more keepers. I kept telling myself all the while I listened to him that he was behaving well, and that I ought to be grateful to him; but there's something about the man I don't like; something in the expression of his face, a trick he has of glancing sideways. And then again, of course, I couldn't forget that sneaking blow he timed at you in the park.'

Osborne nodded gravely. 'I know,' he said. 'And he is going to marry the woman I love!' he added under his breath.

They talked for some time—by chance, Lashmore did not inform them of Herndale's proposal that they should go down to Herondyke together—then Osborne and Levison went away in company.

'His lordship ought to be a happy man,' said Levison. 'The terms are stiff; but he has avoided a long and expensive fight and a fearful amount of trouble.'

'He will never be happy until he finds his wife,' said Osborne. 'The loss of her is eating into his heart; he looks fearfully wan and haggard, and this accession

to the title and the rest of it will bring him no happiness unless he finds her. It is one of the strangest mysteries I have ever heard of. I suppose you can't help us, Mr. Levison? You are the cleverest man I know.'

'I'm afraid not,' he said. 'It's a matter for the police.'

'To whom Lashmore will not go. And I can understand his feeling.'

They parted at the top of Sloane Street, and Levison turned towards Hyde Park corner. He was going to see a big financier about the coal concession. He was passing one of the large drapers', and stepped aside to allow a lady to cross the pavement and enter the shop. He was lost in thought, pondering his big scheme, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes bent on the ground; but as he made way for the lady he glanced up at her. A quick change of expression flashed across his face; he raised his hat, and in his slow voice said—

'How do you do, Miss Kittie?'

The lady stopped and regarded him with a startled expression; then she put out her hand and caught his arm as if she feared he was going to run away. Her face was pale and red by turns, and unconsciously they drew back against the window.

'You know me?' she said at last.

Levison raised his brows and smiled. 'Why shouldn't I?' he retorted, almost plaintively. 'You are not going to tell me that you have forgotten me?'

The lady looked at him steadily, and bit her lip softly. 'You called me "Miss Kittie,"' she said. 'What name ought I to call you?'

Levison smiled as if humouring her.

'I haven't changed my name, Miss Kittie,' he said. 'I am still known as Levison. I need not tell you how glad I am to see you. Can we have a little talk? Let us turn into the Park; I am very anxious to hear where

you have been, what you have been doing. All your friends have been anxious, and I hope I have the right to count myself amongst them.'

They turned into the Park, and Levison found a seat.

'Now, begin from the beginning,' he said, 'from the moment of your disappearance. Have you seen any of the boys yet? I suppose so. They ought to have let me know. You are looking well, and'—he glanced at her simple but costly dress—'I hope, are flourishing. Perhaps you have taken my advice, and gone on the stage?'

His companion shook her head. 'No,' she said in a low voice, her face averted from him. 'No, I have not been on the stage.'

'Married, perhaps?' he said.

She shook her head again.

'I am almost glad to hear that you are still Kittie Norton,' he said. 'And what are you doing?'

'I am sitting beside a gentleman named Levison, who evidently mistakes me for an old friend. My name is Eva Lyndhurst.'

She had turned to him with a suppressed eagerness. Mr. Levison did not start, at least not outwardly, but he looked at her with the eyes of a hawk; then he raised his hat.

'I beg your pardon,' he said quite calmly. 'I see now that you are not my friend—or rather, I take your word for it. May I add a little to your information? You are the lady who is engaged to marry Lord Herndale?'

Eva winced, and her face, which had been flushed with excitement, turned pale.

'To the gentleman who *was* Lord Herndale,' she said in a very low voice. 'But do not mind about me. I want to know who this lady is for whom you and Mr. Lashmore have mistaken me. It is of the greatest importance. Mr. Lashmore—he is a friend, a great friend of mine—is searching for her. No one knows

who she is but you. You are a friend of hers ; you can help us. Will you come home with me to see my father ? We are all so anxious to help Mr. Lashmore. Oh, please do !'

Mr. Levison shrugged his shoulders and shook his head regretfully.

'I have an important engagement, for which I am already late. And, my dear young lady, I fear I cannot help you. The other young lady is lost, here in London.' He was silent for a moment or two, his brows drawn together, his eyes shadowed by their thick lids. 'No, I can't help you,' he said, 'and I make it a rule never to interfere in any business unless I can do so successfully. Give me your address, and I will communicate with you if there is any cause for doing so. I have just left Mr. Lashmore'—he paused a moment—'and his friend Mr. Osborne.'

He did not look at her, but he saw the burning blush which suffused her face.

'Mr. Osborne,' he continued, 'is a great friend of Mr. Lashmore's, and has been a great help to him. He is a fine fellow—Mr. Osborne, I mean.' Again the blush rose. 'But you know him, I think ? It is a great mystery. I wish it could be solved for Mr. Lashmore's—I mean Lord Herndale's—sake. I'm afraid I must go now. Let me take you to a cab.'

Eva went for no more shopping that day, but drove straight home. Levison gazed after her, then went on to his appointment. His lips moved ; he was saying to himself 'A strange likeness : Kittie Norton herself ! No wonder Lashmore was deceived. A sweet-looking girl, too—far too good for that fellow Herndale. And she blushed when I spoke of Osborne. That's the man she cares for, though she's going to marry the other. And I can guess why. But where is Kittie Norton ?' He stopped and frowned thoughtfully, and a trifle impatiently. 'Why it—it looks like a case of personation. It's a mystery ; and I hate

mysteries, especially when I'm expected to clear them up. And my hands are too full already.'

He shook his head as if to shake the business off his mind; but it came back upon him immediately after his successful interview with the financier, and refused to be shaken off.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### SMOULDERING HATE

**T**HE secret which Kittie had found amongst her father's papers would have greatly affected her in other circumstances ; as it was, though she was moved by it, its effect was not perceptible in her mode of life or manner. She toiled at her monotonous work, met the boys occasionally, and, when she was alone, brooded and longed for a sight, only a sight, of Lashmore. Presently she came upon the report in a newspaper on 'The Strange Case of Mistaken Identity in High Life.' What she had feared had come to pass. Lashmore had met Eva Lyndhurst, had mistaken her for his wife, and had discovered his real wife's terrible deceit.

She trembled as she read, and buried her face in her hands. She dared not look back on the past, the future loomed before her dark and threatening, an infinity of hopelessness and despair. Of course she made herself ill, and for some days she was unable to leave her room ; a lassitude seized upon her which gave place to a desire for self-punishment. She wanted to expiate her sin, to find relief, peace ; her mental anguish, the acute pain of longing for the love of the man who was all the world to her—this was not punishment enough. She wanted to throw herself at his feet, to obtain his forgiveness, just his forgiveness, then crawl away somewhere and die. But, alas ! she knew that she was nowhere near dying ; notwithstanding her lassitude and her misery, the tide of life was moving strongly in her.

One evening she went out to take her work to the



shop; her veil was closely drawn and she walked slowly and with downcast head; she did not see a tall, carefully dressed, elderly man who stopped suddenly on the other side of the road and looked after her; and she started when he followed her as she left the shop, and coming up to her said, in a calm, impassive voice,

‘So, here you are, Miss Kittie!’

She started and gasped, as her hand went to her heart.

‘Mr. Levison!’

‘Yes; here I am, Miss Kittie,’ he said with commonplace cheerfulness. ‘No; it’s not an accident. I’ve been looking for you.’

She trembled so that she could scarcely stand; and he took her hand and drew it through his arm, in the most natural and fatherly way.

‘Yes; I’ve been looking for you. I want to have a talk with you.’ He looked round and saw a quiet little confectioner’s shop. ‘We will go in here and have a cup of tea. I’m like an old woman for my tea.’

He led her into a small tea-room at the back of the shop, and said nothing until the cups were on the table; then, closing the door, so that they could not be overheard—there was no one there but themselves—he leant forward, and, patting her trembling hand soothingly, said in a low voice,

‘Now, Mrs. Lashmore——’

Kittie started and her face went white.

‘You—know——?’ she gasped.

Mr. Levison nodded and smiled. ‘Yes, I know,’ he said. ‘I know that you are the wife of Harry Lashmore, as he has called himself. And I can guess, though it’s only a guess, why you have left him. I can’t guess the whole story; and I don’t want you to tell me. The reason I have been looking for you is because I have something to say to you. I can put it in one sentence You must go back to him.’

Kittie shuddered and clasped her hands.

'I can't, I can't!' she breathed. 'You don't know what I've done——? It's impossible, impossible! I shall never see him again. And oh, I do want to see him so!'

'Not more than he wants to see you,' said Mr. Levison. 'If ever a man wanted his wife, your husband wants you. I have seen him nearly every day—he is wearing himself out with longing for you. You know—or don't you know—that he is the Earl of Hern-dale? You are a Countess, Miss Kittie. It is scarcely the thing for a Countess to be living alone, to be earning her livelihood by—what is it, teaching?'

'Needlework,' said Kittie faintly. She was scarcely listening to him, she was thinking of her husband.

'Come now, be sensible! You always were one of the 'cutest, the cleverest of girls. Forgive me for speaking so plainly. I forget I am talking to a Countess; I remember only the Miss Kittie I knew. You must go back to him, or you will ruin his life.'

'I have ruined it,' said Kittie, with a dry sob. 'It is too late. I can never undo what I have done.' Terror came suddenly into her eyes. 'You won't tell him that you've seen me, Mr. Levison?'

'I ought not to give you the promise,' said Levison. 'I ought to go straight to him and tell him that I have found you.'

'Ah, you will not; you will not!' She clasped her hands and looked at him imploringly.

Mr. Levison was silent for a minute or two; then he said gravely,

'I can't refuse you anything, Miss Kittie. I won't tell him; but you must give me your address, where I can find you.'

She hesitated for a little; but at last she gave him the address.

'I can trust you?'

'Yes,' said Levison, 'you can trust me; that's my

strong point. Do you—forgive me—but do you want money ?’

She shook her head, the tears started to her eyes. ‘No ; I only want one thing in all the world. And that I have lost for ever : my husband’s love and trust in me. I must go. I rely on your promise.’

She gave him her shaking hand, and, with her veil lowered, passed out. Mr. Levison ordered another cup of tea, but did not drink it. He was regretting that promise ; but he had given it, and he was a man of his word.

He went round next morning to Forbes. The old man seemed surprised to see him.

‘Didn’t his lordship tell you, Mr. Levison ?’ he said. ‘His lordship has gone down to Herondyke—with his cousin.’

Mr. Levison’s lips twitched and his heavy brows went up ; then they drew together ; and Forbes instantly became anxious.

‘I didn’t like the idea myself, Mr. Levison,’ he said. ‘I tried to persuade his lordship not to go ; but he laughed in that sad way of his, and asked me “why not” ? of course I couldn’t say. It was only a kind of feeling on my part ; a fearsome kind of feeling, as if something—something might happen. I didn’t explain to his lordship ; for he would only have laughed at me.’

‘Naturally,’ said Mr. Levison, with a smile.

But the smile faded as he turned away ; and at the end of the street he called a cab and drove to the address Kittie had given him. He climbed up the stairs to her attic—‘Nice place for a Countess !’ he murmured to himself,—and she came to the door, pale and wan, and with a little start of apprehension.

‘Do you know Herondyke ?’ he asked quietly, as he still held her hand.

She shook her head.

‘I’ll tell you where it is and find the train for you,’ he said. ‘I want you to go there.’

She gazed at him with fear and doubt in her eyes. 'He is there!' she murmured breathlessly.

'He is,' said Mr. Levison as quietly as before. 'Wait! When a man is in danger, who is the proper person to be by his side, Miss Kittie?'

She leant against the table, her hands gripping its edge, her eyes fixed on him.

'Danger?' she breathed almost inaudibly.

'Yes,' said Mr. Levison. 'I think there is. He has gone down with a man I would not trust out of my sight. You see I speak openly. You used to have plenty of pluck in the old days, and I fancy you have it still. That's why I tell you what is in my thoughts. Put on your things; we'll go straight down to the station. Don't be alarmed. Nothing can have happened yet; nothing will happen if you are by his side.'

She was white, but she was not trembling. At that moment she forgot the past, forgot her sin; she was only conscious that the man she loved was in danger, and that she could help him. In less than five minutes she was ready. Mr. Levison took her arm and they went down to the cab which he had kept waiting. She was silent as they went to the station; but her lips moved and formed the word 'Danger!' They had to wait for over an hour for the train, and Levison led her to the refreshment room and, in his quiet way, persuaded her to take some food.

He held her hand and pressed it as he put her into the train, and she fixed her eyes on him in speechless gratitude and comprehension. He had given her no particulars, no directions; and she had asked for none. It seemed to her to be sufficient that the man she loved, her husband, was in some vague, nameless peril from which she could save him. And she was going to him.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### THE SLAYER

LASHMORE and Herndale sat at dinner. Lashmore had been silent for some time ; every now and then he had glanced round the softly-lit room, at the noiseless servants, at the massive plate, the richly-cut glass, and at the calm, self-possessed face of the man opposite him. He felt as if he were in a dream, as if the familiar room with its old-time splendour must presently fade away and give place to the sitting-room in the little cottage at Quirapata.

He had come down with Herndale on the previous evening ; and Herndale had played his part with graceful ease and consummate skill. As they went over the house and Herndale pointed out the improvements he had made, he adopted the manner of a man who had been in charge and is resigning his temporary guardianship to the owner of the property. He took a secondary place, as it were, and indicated the fact by gesture and voice ; and he was so successful in his assumption that Lashmore's dislike and mistrust of his cousin almost vanished. At another time, in other circumstances, with Kittie by his side, this return to his old home would have filled Lashmore with delight ; but it was now as Dead Sea Fruit, and left a bitterness in the mouth. Of what use were rank and wealth, this reinstatement in his old position, with his wife lost to him ?

He walked about the grounds with his cousin, abstracted, absorbed, with hanging head and lagging

step. He spoke but little; but Herndale kept up the flow of talk with a cold facility; but beneath his apparently pleasant and frank demeanour a fire smouldered within him, which threatened now and again to overmaster him. As he sat at dinner with the man to whom he had resigned everything—for a price—his hatred of Lashmore stung him like the lash of a whip. But the cold eyes revealed nothing of this, and the smooth, even voice never faltered. Even when the servants openly displayed their joy at Lashmore's return and his presence in the house as master—Herndale had insisted upon his taking the head of the table—Herndale revealed neither by word nor look his irritation and chagrin; and in the servants' hall they marvelled at the easy way in which his 'late' lordship was taking things.

Lashmore had been leaning back in his chair in silence, turning his empty wine glass in his fingers and presently, without looking up, he said,

'I must go back to London to-morrow.'

'Must you?' said Herndale. Can you not manage to stay a day or two longer? Strange as it may sound, I have enjoyed our visit.' He laughed with a sardonic note which Lashmore, absorbed in his thoughts, did not notice. 'I suppose I am feeling the glow of conscious virtue. Of course, I could have kept you out of this, he waved his cigar, 'for a deuce of a time. But it is better as it is. I have lost it,' he waved his cigar again, 'but I hope I shall retain your friendship. How warm it is!' He rose and opened the tall window. There was a full moon out, but heavy clouds now and again obscured it. As he looked across the Italian garden to the park beyond, Herndale's eyes gleamed and his teeth closed with a click. Did the fool, who sat moping there, realize all that he was depriving him of? 'We are going to have a storm, I think,' he said; 'it won't come yet; but it's threatening.'

As he turned from the window, a faint report, pro-

ceeding from the woods beyond, broke the silence. Lashmore, roused from his reverie by the sound, looked up sharply.

‘What was that?’

Herndale shrugged his shoulders and smiled contemptuously. ‘Poachers,’ he said. ‘They’re at work in the plantation. They will always dodge that fool of a keeper; he’s worse than useless. I’ll sack him to-morrow.’ He bit his lip at the slip, and the smouldering fire within him reddened his face. ‘Pardon!’ he said with a laugh. ‘I meant that you ought to sack him.’

‘I’ll see,’ said Lashmore, already fallen into abstraction again.

Herndale poured out another glass of wine for himself—he was usually a temperate man, but, unnoticed by Lashmore, he had drunk a great deal during the dinner—and he pushed the decanter towards his companion. Lashmore shook his head, rose and went to the window and looked out. Herndale drank the wine at a draught and refilled the glass; it was port, and the wine added fuel to the fire within him. The presence of the other man grew unendurable; for the spirit of Cain was stirring in Herndale, and the savage impulse which had caused him to aim a blow at Owen Osborne was beginning to assert itself and growing stronger every moment. He pushed his chair back, and rose a trifle unsteadily, not from the drink as much as from the impulse which tortured him.

‘I have a letter or two to write,’ he said. ‘You’ll excuse me?’

‘Yes; oh, yes,’ said Lashmore absently.

Herndale went into the library and paced up and down noiselessly in his court shoes. That sullen fool was all that stood between him and this that he was losing. The thought was a torment and an incentive. And yet he could do nothing; the man was there, young, strong, likely to live to ninety. Herndale



uttered no melodramatic curses, made no melodramatic gestures ; but he felt his brain grow hot and the room swim round him. He tried to console, to pacify himself, with the reflection that he had managed to grab a large sum of money, that he was going to marry Eva, that she admired him for his great renunciation, that all the world would applaud him for having behaved with Quixotic generosity ; but at this moment the reflection, the self-flattery, brought him no ease ; his hatred of the man in the other room, the owner of the title, the master of Herondyke, burnt fiercely, suffocatingly.

And yet he was apparently quite cool when he returned to the dining-room. A couple of footmen were clearing the table. Lashmore was not there.

'Where is—Lord Herndale ?' he asked, with an involuntary pause before the title.

The butler, coming from behind the screen, replied—

'His lordship has gone out for a stroll, sir.'

He emphasized the 'lordship' and the 'sir' unctuously. He was an old servant, and, like the others, adored Lashmore and disliked Herndale ; and yet Lashmore as a boy had been hot-tempered, impatient, and somewhat tyrannical ; and Herndale was never ill-tempered and always courteous ; but Lashmore had been attached to everybody about the place, and, even as a boy, had listened to their troubles and sympathized with them ; in a word, had won their hearts, which had remained sealed to Herndale, and would have so remained if he had retained possession of the title for fifty years.

'Please tell Lord Herndale when he comes in that I am in the billiard room,' said Herndale, as he left the room.

The footmen smirked at the butler.

'Pretty rough on him, ain't it, Mr. Yule,' remarked one of them. 'But he do stand up against it well, don't he. 'Asn't turned a hair.'

'No, he hasn't,' asserted Yule ; 'but it's in the

blood; and he's a Herndale after all. There's another gun! I do wonder what Barker can be about to let them poachers ravage the preserves in that open way!'

Herndale went to the billiard room and lit another cigar. In a corner was a cabinet containing some wine and spirits and the odds and ends which collect in a billiard room. He got himself some brandy; there was no water in the room, and he drank the spirit neat. The footmen's manner, Yule's emphasis on the respective titles, irritated Herndale to a point of madness, which concentrated in an ever opening hatred of Lashmore and a burning desire to be rid of him, to stand in his place again, to discharge every servant, to assert himself as master of Herondyke once more.

The brandy burnt like fire in his veins, the spacious room seemed hot and stifling; he went up to his dressing-room, put on his boots and a soft cap, and came down to the hall; an old covert coat hung on the rack, and he put it on, and went out by the back-hall door. The moon was covered with clouds, and he went along the terrace and across the lawn to the park unobserved; from the park he passed into the wood; and as he did so the moon emerged, and pierced between the trees. A shadowy form, half crouching, crossed a small clearing within twenty paces of him. Herndale stepped behind a tree and watched.

The man was a poacher, carried a gun and a bag over his shoulder. Presently there came a low, soft whistle, and a voice from amongst the trees said cautiously—

'Hi, Jim, bring the bag along!'

The man stood his gun down against a tree, and hurried, still crouching, in the direction of the voice. When he had gone Herndale came out stealthily, took up the gun, and was about to follow the man; but he hesitated: he was a coward, and was asking himself if the game was worth the risk. He decided that it was not; and, with the gun under his arm, and a muttered curse for the ineffective keeper, he turned in

the other direction. He had almost reached the edge of the wood, when he stopped abruptly ; for he saw another figure, not crouching or crawling, but walking upright with an alert and determined aspect in his attitude.

It was Lashmore. He had put on a light overcoat over his dress smoking-jacket, and carried a thick stick in his hand. He was no longer preoccupied, and it was evident to Herndale that he had come out in search of the poachers. Screened by a tree, Herndale watched him with a malignant gleam in the cold eyes ; his burning hand gripped the gun with a kind of feverish caress, as if it were some fierce living thing he could control or let loose at will. The Spirit of Cain surged through him and made him shake ; his teeth were clenched, his face livid.

He watched, motionless, until Lashmore had passed him ; then, as if indeed the gun were a living thing, it seemed to glide to his shoulder ; he took careful aim, every limb as if braced with ice, and fired. Lashmore toppled, threw up one arm, uttered a faint moan, and, swaying and staggering, fell on his back.

Herndale stood, as if turned to stone, his eyes fixed on the prone figure, with its arms outstretched, its face turned up to the placid moon. He remained thus for what seemed to him an eternity ; then, crouching, as the poacher had done, he went to his victim. He bent over the white face, stained now with blood, and putting his ear down to the parted lips listened intently. He raised himself, and drew a long shuddering breath through his clenched teeth. The stumbling-block was removed from his path, the man was dead ; he, Herndale, was master of Herondyke again and Earl of Herndale.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kittie reached Herondyke in exactly the same mental condition in which she had started. She could not

think clearly, could make no plan of what she should say or do when she reached the house. The past was still as if enveloped in a mist, the future was formless ; she could only grasp one fact—that Harry was in danger and in need of her. The stationmaster, with a rather curious glance at her, directed her to the great house, and she went on her way quickly, steadily, like a dreamer making for a visionary goal.

The woman at the lodge, as she opened the gates, regarded the slim, graceful figure with curiosity and a trace of suspicion.

‘ You go straight on, Miss, through the avenue,’ she said in answer to Kittie’s low-voiced inquiry.

Presently she came in sight of the vast place ; but its grandeur did not affect her, she scarcely raised her eyes ; and she went straight up the stone steps flanked by the huge heraldic monsters—the memory of the crest she had seen on the match-box at Quirapata, flashed across her mind—and entered the hall by the open door. Yule was crossing the hall, and stopped and stared at her with surprise ; but he saw that she was a lady, and he came forward respectfully.

Kittie sought for her voice, and found it at last ; it sounded hollow, expressionless ; but it was quite firm. The pluck with which Mr. Levison had credited her rose within her and sustained her.

‘ I wish to see Lord Herndale,’ she said.

‘ His lordship is out, ma’am—miss,’ said Yule. He did not know which designation was right ; there was the dignity and nobility of maturity in her white face and solemn eyes ; but the figure, the soft and tender lips, were those of a girl. ‘ His lordship has just strolled out. I don’t suppose he has gone far. Will you come in and wait for his lordship ? ’

Kittie hesitated for a moment only ; it would be better that she should meet Harry out in the open, that she should explain her presence, make her bitter confession with no one to hear her but him

'Can you tell me which way Lord Herndale has gone?' she asked.

Yule was touched by the sad, gentle voice.

'His lordship would doubtless go into the park, miss,' he said; 'in fact, he must have done, or I should have seen him about the terrace. Right across the lawn; that path will take you to it. What name shall I say, if his lordship should come in?'

'It will not matter,' said Kittie. 'I shall find him.'

She crossed the lawn and entered the park. As she did so, she glanced behind her to see if Lashmore were in sight, and the long stretching line of the great house, with its marble terraces and steps, smote her with a vague sense of its grandeur and magnificence. Amongst the trees, with no path opening to her, she did not know which way to take; and all ignorantly she took the direction of the preserves. The trees were closer, the undergrowth thicker here; she made her way with difficulty, and she was about to turn back, thinking that Lashmore would be more likely to be strolling in the open spaces of the park, when she heard the report of a gun.

She stopped dead short, and both hands flew to her heart. 'Danger!' And Harry was out here!

With almost superhuman strength she forced her way through the bracken and the bramble, which tore at her skirt as if to detain her with human hands, and she went in the direction of the fateful sound.

\* \* \* \* \*

Herndale stepped backwards, his eyes still fixed on the upturned face, to the shelter of a tree, and leant against it, shaking in every limb; but presently through the stupor of his terror there crept the coward's first instinct, that of self-preservation. In a moment or two his brain grew clear, had never been more acute. Poachers were in the wood; firing had been heard; what more likely than that Lashmore had been shot by one of the scoundrels? What more likely than,

having shot him, they should rob him? If he only had the courage, he could make the evidence against them complete. With a shudder of loathing and supernatural fear, he crawled slowly towards the motionless form, and, advancing his hand three or four times before he could dare the contact, he tore Lashmore's watch and chain from their place, and, with shaking hands, took some gold from the waistcoat pocket, in which he knew Lashmore carried it.

The sweat stood in icy drops upon his forehead, his livid lips were twitching, his heart seemed so swollen that he could scarcely breathe. 'Curse you!' he said between his teeth; 'you've made me do this!'

In an impotent, maddening rage, he actually raised his hand to strike the white face; but his arm was arrested above his head by a strange sound: the rustling of the undergrowth, the panting and gasping of a human breath. Still kneeling, he gazed, as if spellbound by terror, in the direction of the sound. Some one was coming; he would be caught here by the body, the gun in his hand. Would be caught! And yet he could not move. He was held, incapable of movement, like a man in a nightmare. The fumes of the spirit, of the wine, cleared away, and he realized the stupendous folly of which he had been guilty. Fool, fool, that he was to have let his passion carry him away! He had become a murderer, like any ruffian in the slums. And yet all would be well if he could only move, if he could only move! No one would know, no one would even suspect him—the poachers, they would get the credit of it. No one would know. He was a rich man, Eva would be his wife, he would be rich, would become distinguished. If he could only move.

The sound came nearer, nearer. Its proximity broke the horrible spell. He sprang upright, flinging the gun from him, as he did so. He could say that he had been alarmed by the sound of the gun, and Las-

tened to the spot. The bushes in front of him parted ; a girlish figure stood before him, as if rooted to the spot, transfixed by the horror of the scene. A mist was before his eyes ; he tried to shape his lips to speak ; the moon came from behind the bank of clouds and shone full upon the girl's face ; and at the same moment the mist cleared from his eyes, and he saw her plainly.

With a cry, an awful cry, he flung up his arms and staggered back.

'Eva ! Eva !' came hissing through his livid lips. He tottered back, his eyes still fixed on her, and, turning like a drunken man, he flung himself into the wood and disappeared.

Kittie had stood there for one moment only ; then she threw herself down beside Lashmore ; and the silence of the night was riven by her screams.



## CHAPTER XXXIX

### THE CONFESSION

**A**N intense stillness brooded over the great house ; for its master was fighting for life in the darkened room which overlooked the park and the headlands which he might never see again. Beside his bed, upon which he tossed with fever or lay like a man already dead from exhaustion, Kittie watched him with eyes which seemed scarcely ever to close ; the nurses hovered about ; the doctor was in close attendance, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by a famous physician from London.

All the countryside was in suspense, and London itself was watching the issue with an intense interest ; for this new turn, this climax to Lashmore's romantic story, had excited and touched all England and the England beyond the seas. Owen Osborne, who had arrived with Levison within an hour or two of the tragedy, remained at Herondyke, though he could do little but step into the room noiselessly, gaze at the unconscious man who had won his affection, and murmur words of encouragement and comfort to his anguished wife. Sometimes Kittie heard them and responded with a wan smile, at others she was deaf and did not remove her eyes from Lashmore's face.

The police had, of course, appeared on the scene, but they were baffled in their attempts to fix the guilt upon one of the poachers. The man who owned the gun had been able to prove conclusively that, after setting his gun down, he went to a different part of the wood when the shot was fired which had laid the stalwart form

low. And Kittie's lips had remained closed. Owen Osborne had a suspicion of the truth ; and the suspicion was grounded on the fact that Herndale had disappeared.

He had written to Lashmore saying that he had been called abroad suddenly, and everybody, save Osborne, had thought it only natural that the displaced man should want to get away. It should be said that Levison also shared his suspicion ; but though Levison came frequently to Herondyke he uttered no word. He was waiting to see if Lashmore would win through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. If he did not, then Herndale could be tracked down and brought home.

Forbes also was at Herondyke ; and his eyes found as little sleep as those of his mistress. He was always at hand, not nervous and trembling now, but calm with the devotion of a faithful servant whose master may need him at any moment. Strangely enough, though very few words had passed between them, there was already a tacit understanding and confidence between Kittie and the old man ; each recognized in the other the great love which they bore the injured man, and Kittie's tearless eyes were turned with a perfect comprehension to Forbes whenever he stole into the room.

To Kittie the past was still a blank ; all her mind and soul were concentrated on the helpless husband beside whom she watched and on whose fate seemed to hang her reason and her life itself. Not a movement, a sigh, a delirious word of his escaped her ; and it was she, who one evening saw the signs of a coming change in him, though neither the doctor nor the nurse, who had just left the room, had observed it. Her hand closed still more tightly over Lashmore's burning one, and she knelt so that her face touched his. She waited, almost breathless, while the clock ticked its lagging moments ; then her reward came. Lashmore, who had been lying quite still, drew a long and painful breath and opened his eyes with a glimmer of returning intelligence

in them; his brows knit, and he stared at her with a puzzled, questioning gaze, then his lips moved, and he whispered feebly—

‘Eva!’

She pressed her face to his, even as she winced as if a knife had struck her.

‘Yes, dearest, I am here!’ she murmured.

He gave the ghost of a laugh and closed his eyes for a moment.

‘I’ve had a bad dream,’ he managed to say. ‘I thought we were separated—that you had left me—been gone ever so long. Ridiculous things, dreams! Is it time to get up?—Why, you’re up already! And I’m lying here!’ He looked round the darkened room, back at her, then tried to sit up, but fell back again. ‘Why, what’s the matter with me?’

‘You have been ill, dearest,’ she murmured. ‘Lie still’—her arm went across his chest with a gentle, loving pressure. ‘You’ve been very ill, Harry.’

‘Ill?’ He frowned at her perplexedly, silently for a moment, then he gripped the slowly returning memory and uttered a faint cry which caused her arm to tighten round him. ‘I remember! I was shot!’ His eyes flashed, his hand closed on her arm. ‘Shot! In my own woods. I remember—poachers. Have they got the poor devil? I hope not. Let him go, Eva. He didn’t mean to kill me, and I’m not dead—yet.’

He was silent, as if he were fighting for a completer memory, searching amongst the shadows for something! and presently she saw by his face that he had found it.

‘Eva! You *have* been away from me—separated! It’s all coming back! The other woman—the other Eva—the woman I mistook for you! Is it all a dream—am I still off my head? Are you not really there, but only a shadow, a vision? Tell me. Quick! Don’t keep me in suspense—I can bear anything but that. I tell you I can’t bear—’

His voice had risen ; his hand was gripping her arm feverishly, fiercely. She knew the danger, the relapse that might follow, if she could not soothe him, quiet the whirling brain. She half-sat, half-knelt on the bed, and, drawing his head to her heaving bosom, whispered, as steadily as she could—

‘Harry, Harry, I am here! Your wife. Ah, you know it! See, dearest, my arms are round you, your head is on my bosom. I have been away, we—we have been parted. But I have come back, never to leave you again, never, never—unless you send me,’ she added almost inaudibly. ‘I will tell you everything, yes, everything. But not now. You could not bear it, you are not strong enough—nor I, nor I! You must sleep first. Ah, Harry, you *must* sleep. When you wake, I will tell you. I will confess—’

His eyes opened on her, and he echoed the word, ‘Confess!’

‘Yes,’ she said, controlling her voice by a super-human effort. ‘Sleep now, Harry, darling. I will hold you all the while, as I am holding you now.’

His spirit yielded to the wondrous power of wifely, maternal love, and he fell asleep. The nurse and the doctor came in and found him lying placidly in her arms, which never for an instant had relaxed their hold, though she was in cruel, and yet sweet pain, with stiffness and cramp. She motioned them, with her eyelids, to leave them ; and when Lashmore woke she and he were alone. There was no lack of intelligence in his eyes now, and she reached for a restorative on the table beside her, and held it to his lips while he drained it.

‘That’s better,’ he said faintly, but with a note of renewed strength in his voice. ‘I’m all right now. I’m not going to die ; anyhow, I couldn’t until you had spoken, explained.’ His eyes sought hers with sudden sternness. ‘You are here. I know that now. You are my wife—but *who are you, Eva?*’

She knelt beside the bed, not touching him now, but with her hands clasped like those of a suppliant, pleading for something more precious than life.

'I am not Eva,' she said, as if every word cost her an untold agony. 'My name is "Kittie"—I was Kittie Norton, a poor girl—the girl whom you saved from the crowd that night. Ah, you remember! Don't speak, Harry—let me go on to the end without a word, or—or I cannot do it!'

He listened to the end. At times he started up, to fall back again with a stifled cry of amazement, almost of unbelief; his head tossed to and fro as he tried to realize that it was not Eva Lyndhurst whom he had made love to, engaged himself to, in the moonlight on the edge of the Ripley Woods, that it was not Eva Lyndhurst whom he had married and lived with as a husband.

Acutely she was conscious of all the phases of his emotion, as if she were suffering them herself. Her voice, which was sometimes almost a moan, came to an end. Her confession was finished: what would be his verdict? Would she receive bare justice and be sent away to expiate her sin in life-long banishment from his presence? With bursting heart, her lips parched and dry, her eyes burning, she waited. He was silent for a moment or two, then he said in broken accents—

'And you did all this for love of me! My love, my wife.'

The relief, the gratitude, the unspeakable joy, almost overwhelmed her. The tears rose to her eyes; she had to clutch the coverlet to save herself from falling; but, half-blinded by her tears, she saw him stretch out his arms towards her, and the next moment, half-swooning, she lay on his breast, his lips on hers, his arms holding her, as if fearful that she might leave him again.

The rapidity with which Lashmore regained his

strength amazed the doctor and every one else, excepting Kittie and Lashmore himself ; for these two knew that it was not so much Herndale's shot that had laid Lashmore low, as the terrible strain and anxiety which he had undergone before Herndale's attempt at murder. Very soon he was out on the terrace ; of course, leaning on Kittie's arm, and friends surrounded them with unfeigned congratulations and satisfaction at his recovery ; for Lashmore had the knack of winning hearts—and keeping them, which is quite another thing. But he was happiest when Kittie and he were in a solitude of two. And how much she had to say, and how intently, with what emotion, he listened ! He wanted all the details of her early life, got to know all the boys by name, and, not a little of a Bohemian himself, revelled in the scenes in which they appeared.

'I must know them, all of them, Kittie,' he said. 'We must have a big dinner ; they must come down here and stay. Bickers must bring his mother—good chap, that Bickers ! And the dear old lady must be a brick. Oh, yes, we will have them all !'

They often spoke of Eva Lyndhurst, and several times Lashmore dwelt upon the extraordinary resemblance between the two girls, and expressed his amazement. But on this point Kittie was silent, and cast down her eyes or averted her face, every expression of which Lashmore's love made him quick to interpret. She could have thrown some light on this strange resemblance ; but she could not speak—she was leaving it to others.

One day Osborne came down, and was received with an eager welcome.

'Takes a lot of killing, Lady Herndale, doesn't he ?' he said as he gripped Lashmore's hand. 'But, you see, he has a great deal to live for.' He glanced at the house and round about him, but his eyes came back to Kittie's face, and rested there significantly.

'Have you—have you brought any news?' said Lashmore in a low voice.

Osborne's face became clouded. 'No,' he said. 'Nothing has been heard of Herndale. We have inquired at his Club, everywhere, but no one seems to have seen him or to have any idea where to look for him. It is a complete disappearance. May I speak openly? Of course, my dear Lashmore, I and Levison know why he has gone.'

Lashmore nodded and frowned. He knew now; for Kittie, when he had got strong enough to be told, had described how she had come upon him lying unconscious in the wood; the would-be murderer bending over him, and the villain's start of horror and cry of 'Eva!' as he saw her. Lashmore sent Kittie in, and told Osborne. Osborne nodded.

'He thought it was Miss Lyndhurst who had discovered him,' he said. 'He concluded that the game was up—that the marriage was impossible; he saw the gallows before him. He will not come back—unless you fetch him back at the end of a rope, Lashmore.'

Lashmore shuddered. 'Let him go,' he said grimly. 'I was partly to blame; I was a fool to trust him. There was murder that night in his eye, behind his smile, if I had been in a condition to read the signs. Yes, let him go. After all, I have won; I have got the title and estate, and, better than all else, my wife! I'll tell you her story some day, Osborne. It is the story of a girl, a mere girl, who risked all for love. And I reaped the reward. But Miss Lyndhurst?'

'She has been ill—is still ill,' said Osborne gravely. 'And Sir Talbot is like a man distraught. There is money trouble—with which I have a strong suspicion Herndale is concerned; indeed, he is, I think, the cause. I have not been able to see her, and I want to—badly. I think Levison knows something; but you know what he is—close as an oyster; and he won't speak or move until he chooses to do so.'



'If it's money——' said Lashmore shyly.

Osborne pressed his shoulder. 'Thanks, dear fellow! But that's not worrying me. I'm rather flush myself just now; a speculation "out there" has turned up trumps, and I'm perfectly oofish. But it's no use; Sir Talbot would not take it—would not accept any help from a mere acquaintance.'

'You won't be only that long,' said Lashmore.

Osborne shook his head gloomily. 'I don't know. You see, she still considers herself bound to that scoundrel. She doesn't know what we know. I'm just waiting on Providence—and waiting is a poor game, as you know. Who's this coming up the drive?'

Lashmore looked at the approaching fly, then sprang to his feet.

'It's Coke!—Kittie!' He was half-way down the steps as the fly drew up, and he almost dragged Coke out. 'Why, you dear old chap! Is it really you? To think of your coming over! But, of course, you would; it's just what you'd do. Kittie—my wife—Eva'—he coloured at the slip—'is just inside. She will be half crazy with joy to see you. Osborne, here is one of the best friends a man ever had. Coke, this is another; Owen Osborne, the great Owen Osborne.—Kittie! Kittie!'

She came running out, all anxiety at his excited tones, and her face went pale as she saw Coke; but Mr. Coke, who had been diligently reading the newspapers and had been preparing himself for the meeting, showed no embarrassment, but took both her hands, and, with a 'May I, Lashmore?' kissed her paternally on the forehead.

'Weren't you surprised when you heard of the change in my fortunes, Coke?' asked Lashmore after the two had had a long talk in the smoking-room that night.

'Well, a little; but not over much,' Coke replied with his shrewd smile. 'I always had a suspicion

that you were a genuine swell, and high up somewhere amongst the nobility. I've seen a good deal of the world, you know, Lashmore—I beg your pardon, Lord Herndale——'

'None of that!' said Lashmore threateningly. 'I'm Harry Lashmore to you always; and don't you forget it. And how are things going at Quirapata?'

'Very well,' said Mr. Coke. 'So well that I think now is just about the time to realize. You see, I'm going to lose my partner—he's jumped into a far better thing—and I shall miss him. I should feel a bit lonesome now out there by myself; so, as I've made a bit of money, I fancy I'll come back to the old country, buy a bit of land and do a little farming to pass away the time.'

'Bravo!' cried Lashmore, smiting him on the back. 'That's good news! We'll find that bit of land, and I'll take precious good care it's near your old partner. Why, the thought of losing you was just a fly in the amber for me. And to think that we shall have you as a neighbour—it knocks me over! Here, have some more whisky! We'll go round and look for a place to-morrow. And, mind! it's not to be more than two miles off.'

## CHAPTER XL

### FORGIVEN

OSBORNE had gone back to town. He seemed as if he could not rest, as if he must be near Eva, though he should not be allowed to see her. He wandered about Gordon Gardens, until the policeman on his beat grew suspicious ; so Osborne went home. But he was there again next morning, and, somewhat to his surprise, met Mr. Levison, accompanied by a gentleman, evidently of his own nationality. Mr. Levison greeted Osborne as impassively as usual, and introduced his friend, Mr. MacDonald.

'We are going to call on Sir Talbot on a little matter of business,' said Mr. Levison. 'Perhaps, as I have been so fortunate as to meet you, you will accompany us, Mr. Osborne ? We are going to give Sir Talbot a little information.'

'Yes,' observed Mr. Macdonald ; 'we are going to open his eyes.'

'And we shall be glad if you will be present at the operation,' said Mr. Levison.

Osborne, after a moment of hesitation, consented. They were shown into the library, and presently Sir Talbot came to them. He was looking very old and careworn, and was evidently nervous and alarmed at the sight of his visitors, especially when he heard the name of Mr. MacDonald.

'You have doubtless come to see me about my account, Mr. MacDonald,' he said, as he begged them to be seated.

'That is so, sir,' said the stockbroker ; 'but not to press you——'

'Mr. MacDonald has come to make a little explanation, Sir Talbot,' said Levison; 'and, being rather a shy man, has asked me to accompany him, as I know something of the business. I am his partner, though it's not generally known. We had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Osborne outside, and I requested him to be good enough to come with us, because he knows something of the gentleman we shall have to speak about. You are rather heavily indebted to Mr. MacDonald, Sir Talbot; but I do not think you are fully aware how you came to be so.'

Poor Sir Talbot shook his head and sighed. 'I fear it is only too plain,' he said sadly. 'I have been engaged in operations on the Stock Exchange, in matters of which I was quite ignorant, and with which I was quite incapable of dealing. I have acted on the advice of my future son-in-law, Lord Herndale—you are doubtless aware of his changed position—and I am sorry to say that he is, like myself, a heavy loser.'

'Oh, no, he isn't, Sir Talbot,' said Mr. MacDonald. 'That's what we've come to tell you—what we've come to explain.'

At this moment the door opened, and Eva came in. She had thought that her father was alone, and she drew back at the sight of the visitors, a blush rising to her face as Osborne went to her and took her hand.

'I will go,' she murmured.

But Mr. Levison said, 'I think it would be better if Miss Lyndhurst remained, Sir Talbot. I think you will find that she ought to be informed of—the truth.'

Osborne placed a chair for her next his own, and his hand stole down till it touched her dress; so near her hand that he could hold it if the chance offered. He saw, with a pang, how pale and thin she was, and that the little hand was trembling.

'Oh, no; Lord Herndale hasn't lost anything, Sir Talbot,' said Mr. MacDonald. 'In all these operations

you've been carrying on with him he squared himself. When the deal went wrong he scored it against you ; when it went right he put it to his own credit. See ? ' As simply as he could, Mr. MacDonald explained the ingenious *modus operandi* by which Herndale had enmeshed the confiding Sir Talbot. ' I guessed there was something wrong when he always asked for blank contract notes. He could fill in the names as he liked. And he did.'

Sir Talbot's face flushed, and with an Irishman's hot indignation he sprang to his feet, but sank down with a heavy sigh.

' This is terrible news ! ' he said brokenly. ' A man who is capable of such perfidy must be a hardened villain. What motive—— ? ' He looked suddenly at Eva, and his face grew white as she evaded his eye. ' I have been trapped,' he said.

' Swindled ish the word I should use,' said Mr. MacDonald.

Sir Talbot waved his hand with a gesture of resignation and despair. ' I am ruined ! ' he said. ' But the knowledge of Lord Herndale's treachery is harder to bear than my heavy loss.' He looked at Eva again.

' Oh, as to that,' said Mr. MacDonald, with a cheerfulness that sounded rather heartless under the circumstances, ' things ain't as bad as they look. The fact is, my honoured partner, Mr. Levison, who ish one of the sharpest men in the City, and an honour to it, spotted his Lordship's little game at the beginning and checkmated him—at least, as far ash your risk was concerned, Sir Talbot. He and me put our 'eads together and took the liberty of opening a little account in your name. We've been pretty fortunate—Mr. Levison always ish !—and we've about wiped out your losses.'

Sir Talbot reddened, and looked from one to the other with a gratitude he was quite incapable of expressing.

'What can I say, gentlemen!'

'Oh, that's all right, Sir Talbot,' said Mr. MacDonald; 'it's a mere matter of business. Of course, you owe us our commission. We shouldn't presume to do anything in your name except on regular business terms.'

'Where is Lord Herndale?' asked Sir Talbot in a low voice.

Mr. MacDonald shrugged his shoulders and looked at Mr. Levison, who looked at Osborne.

'He has left the country, Sir Talbot,' said Osborne quietly. 'He, no doubt, knew that he had good reason for doing so. And I do not think he will return. I suppose Mr. Levison wished me to accompany him here because I could tell you this.' His hand stole down the fold of Eva's dress, and, seeking her hand, held it in a loving, encouraging pressure. 'Having performed my task I will leave you, Sir Talbot, to finish your business with these gentlemen.'

'Not before you have heard me thank them with all my heartfelt gratitude,' said Sir Talbot. 'They have saved me from ruin; by their disclosures they have unmasked a villain and saved my daughter—'

At the door, Osborne signed to Eva, and she rose and went out with him as if it were her duty to obey his beck and call. They went into the drawing-room, and he took her hands from before her face and held them.

'You have heard all that there is any need for you to hear, Eva,' he said. 'You are free! And you are free from my importunity—for the present. Ah, Eva, my dear love, do you think I don't know what you are suffering—that my heart doesn't ache with yours? But I've promised I will not speak of myself or my love now. But you must not expect me to wait too long. When you have got over the shock, the trouble, then I will speak—tell you what you know already. But you must let me see you very often. I will be

very careful ; I will set a guard on my lips—but I must see you. You will get better, grow stronger, for my sake ? You will go down to Ripley. But not just yet. There is still something to be done.



## CHAPTER XLI

### ALL IS WELL.

WHEN Lashmore grew strong enough, he and Kittie came up to London. She had written and invited the boys to a dinner at the *Potted Shrimp*, the little restaurant where they had given her her return feast; she asked permission to bring a friend, and she signed herself simply 'Kittie.' The boys were delighted; they had wondered what had become of her, and had feared that she had disappeared again. They all came; there was not one absent. Something extraordinary in the way of a menu had evidently been ordered; for the proprietor of the restaurant was all importance, and Fritz was one beaming smile.

The little room was full, they were all talking of Miss Kittie, of course, and wondering who her 'friend' might be; when Kittie entered, accompanied by a handsome, stalwart young man, who regarded them with a smile, as if he already knew them and was very, very glad to see them. The cheer which rose at her entrance died away, and they regarded him curiously.

'Boys,' said Kittie, red and pale by turns, and with a novel shyness mixed with a tender pride; 'this is my husband!'

They stared at her aghast, every man of them jealous; but Bickers broke the silence by a comment which was meant to be inaudible.

'Well, she couldn't marry all of us!' he said, with a kind of cheerful ruefulness; and at that, they re-

covered themselves and pressed round her with congratulations and offers of renewed devotion.

Before an hour had passed, Lashmore had won all of them over. He was a man's man, and his frank, light-hearted laugh, the absence of 'side,' and his desire to make friends with these old friends of his adored wife, were irresistible. They drank his health with acclamation, and, amongst themselves, agreed that he was—almost—worthy of Kittie. No one could quite be, of course.

When they got back to the hotel that night, Kittie, half crying, half laughing, in Irish fashion, drew Lashmore's head down to her and kissed him, murmuring between her happy sobs—

'Oh, Harry, there is no one like you, no one!'

Lashmore insisted upon making little pilgrimages to the places where Kittie had spent her early years. So they went to the house in Denbigh Street, to the old rooms, where Kittie shed a tear and Lashmore almost paralyzed the landlady by the magnitude of his tip. They went to the baker's and saw Hagnes Hevangeline, who screamed with delight at the sight of Miss Kittie, and screamed more loudly when, hugging her in her arms, she heard who she was.

They even went to the attics in the slums where Kittie had moistened her needlework with her tears and expiated some of her sin. She was happy at these moments, full of appreciation of his goodness to her; but there were other moments when she was keenly conscious that her expiation was not complete, that some of her punishment had still to be borne. There was the other woman, the girl whose name she had taken, whose place she had so wickedly filled. She had still to meet Eva Lyndhurst, to make confession, to humbly plead for forgiveness.

That meeting had not yet taken place; but Kittie knew that it must come some day, and her heart sank at the thought of it. Lashmore, of course, also knew

it must come ; but, for Kittie's sake, he avoided it.

One day Osborne, who met them frequently, came with an invitation. It was from Lady Lorchester. She begged that Lord and Lady Herndale, who had already left cards, would come to see her that same evening.

'Sir Talbot and Miss Lyndhurst will be there, Lashmore,' said Osborne quietly ; 'but perhaps it would be as well if you did not mention the fact to Lady Herndale.'

Lashmore understood, and nodded as he pressed Osborne's hand. Yes ; they would go ; and he would say nothing about Eva Lyndhurst to Kittie.

'I suppose I shall have to be very smart, to-night, Harry dear,' she said all unsuspectingly.

'Yes, you'd better put on all your war paint,' he replied.

Lady Lorchester was alone when they arrived. She started when she saw Kittie, for the resemblance not only amazed, but puzzled her ; but the dear good lady concealed her astonishment as well as she could, and greeted Kittie very warmly.

'Your husband is an old friend of mine, my dear,' she said ; 'and I am delighted to meet you. I never did like that other man ; there was always something about him—but I mustn't speak of him. It's very tactless of me ; but I'm a foolish old woman ; and I must say how delighted I am that your husband has proved to be the right man. Come and sit down, my dear, and let us have a talk before the others come.'

Kittie was grateful to the old lady for her kindness, and they were talking together quite confidentially when a footman threw open the door and announced—  
'Sir Talbot and Miss Lyndhurst and Mr. Osborne.'

Kittie's eyes turned slowly towards the door, the blood ebbed from her face, and, unconsciously, her face white as death, her eyes fixed themselves with a

piteous appeal on the face of her double. Eva turned her head, as if she felt that gaze, and, starting, stared with amazement at Kittie. Naturally enough, there was something more than amazement; there was a touch of anger and indignation in her face and attitude; for she could not forget that this other woman had stolen her name, had taken her place. The two women gazed at each other in profound silence; and at that moment Kittie's punishment was complete in all its bitterness.

His heart melting with love and pity, Lashmore went to her, and, taking her hand, led her up to Eva.

'My wife!' he said in a low voice.

Eva drew a long breath, and her eyes looked over Kittie's head. She bowed; she wanted to put out her hand, but she was too confused, too bewildered at the moment to do so. Before she could regain her composure and offer the hand, Sir Talbot with a cry, hurried to Kittie and seized, rather than took, her hand, gazing at her with an almost painful scrutiny.

'You are Mr. Lashmore's—Lord Herndale's wife? This extraordinary resemblance—forgive me! There is some mystery—but I think I can explain it. Will you tell me your name—I mean, your maiden name?'

Kittie knew what was coming. She could scarcely force her trembling lips to answer; but presently, in the intense silence, there fell from them the words—

'Norton—Kittie Norton.'

Sir Talbot uttered an ejaculation.

'I thought so. I suspected the truth!' He swung round to Lady Lorchester. 'You remember my younger brother, De Courcy? Poor De Courcy! He disappeared. He was wild and reckless—nothing worse—nothing worse. He cut himself off from us, disappeared. He made an unfortunate marriage.—I beg your pardon, my dear! I should have said that he married beneath his station. My father was angry—you know what he was, Lucy? De Courcy cut

himself off from us, and we saw no more of him. He was proud, like the rest of us—too proud to have anything to do with the family who would not acknowledge his wife. My dear, I assure you there was nothing but difference of station. You must be his daughter; that accounts for the extraordinary resemblance between Eva and you. I suspected that this was the solution of the mystery. I ought to have solved it before this; but I have been busy, worried—'

Kittie clung to her husband's arm, her breath was coming painfully, her eyes were downcast. Eva stood, breathing as painfully as Kittie, and looking at her with quite a different expression to that with which she had before regarded her. For blood is thicker than water, and Eva's heart was melting at the sight of Kittie's distress.

Sir Talbot swung round to Eva. 'You understand, Eva?' he said. 'This is your cousin, my niece. Her father called himself Norton, but his name, hers, was your own—Lyndhurst. You don't look surprised, my dear?' he said to Kittie.

'I—I knew,' faltered Kittie. 'I discovered it from—from some papers of my father's.'

She swayed a little, as if she were about to faint, and Lashmore drew her nearer to him; but Eva went to her and took her hand.

'Let her come with me,' she said in a low voice.

She drew Kittie into the ante-room; the curtains swung behind them, and Kittie would have fallen; but Eva took her in her arms and supported her. Both women were crying.

'Oh, forgive me, forgive me!' implored Kittie. 'If you knew all—I loved him, loved him so very much!'

'To know all is to pardon all,' said Eva very gravely, but very sweetly. 'I do forgive you. No, don't thank me. I am too happy to bear malice. You have the man you love; and I—I shall gain by what you have

done. Don't cry. We are cousins. I am glad! But,' she laughed, 'we shall have to wear a label when we go out together, or else we shall be taken for—the other woman!'

THE END.

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