

GARVICE CHARLES

WILD

MARGARET

Charles Garvice

Wild Margaret

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Geraldine Fleming, Charles Garvice

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CHAPTER I

When the train drew up at the small station of Leyton Ferrers, which it did in the slowest and most lazy of fashions, two persons got out. One was a young girl, who alighted from a third-class carriage, and who dragged out from under the seat a leather bag and a square parcel instead of waiting for the porter, who was too much engaged in light and pleasant conversation with the guard, to pay any attention to such small cattle as passengers.

The other person was a young man, who sauntered out of a first-class carriage, with a cigar in his lips, and his soft traveling cap a little on one side, and with that air which individuals who have been lucky enough to be born with silver spoons in their mouths naturally acquire, or are endowed with. Standing on the platform, as if it and the whole Great South-Northern Railway system belonged to him, this young gentleman at last caught sight of the porter.

"Hi, porter!" he called, and when the man came up, quickening his pace as he took in the tall, well-dressed figure of his summoner, the young man continued with a smile, "Sorry to tear you away from your bosom friend, my man, but there's a portmanteau of mine in the van, or should be."

The porter touched his hat, and was going toward the van, when the young man called after him:

"See to that young lady first," he said, indicating with a slight nod the young girl, who was struggling with the bag and the parcel.

Somewhat surprised at this display of unselfishness, the porter turned like a machine, and addressed the girl; the young man sauntered down the platform and, leaning over the fence, surveyed the June roses in the station-master's garden with an indolent and good-tempered patience.

"Any luggage, miss?" asked the porter.

"No; nothing but these," said the girl. "Here is the ticket;" then she looked round. "Can you tell me how far Leyton Court is from the station?"

"Little better than two miles and a half," replied the porter.

"Two miles and a half – that means three miles," said the girl, and she looked inquiringly at the road and across the fields, over which the dying sun was sending a warm, rich crimson.

"Yes, miss. Will you have a fly? There is one outside," he added, with a touch of impatience, for it seemed highly improbable that more than twopence – at the most – could proceed from his present job, while sixpence or a shilling, no doubt, awaited him from the aristocratic young gentleman still lounging over the garden fence. The girl thought a moment; then, with the faintest flush, said:

"No, thank you. I will leave my luggage; there will be something, some cart –"

"Carrier's cart goes to the Court every evening!" broke in the porter, and, seizing the bag and the parcel, and dropping them in a corner with that sublime indifference to the safety of other people's goods which only a railway porter can adequately display, hurried off to the other passenger.

The young girl went with a light step down the station stairs, and having reached the road, stopped.

"How stupid of me!" she said. "I ought to have asked the way."

She was turning back to worry the porter once more when she saw a finger-post, upon which was written, "To Leyton Court," and, with a little sigh of relief, she went down the road indicated.

Meanwhile the porter had got the portmanteau, and stood awaiting the passenger's pleasure.

After a minute or two, and in the most leisurely fashion possible, the young man turned to him.

"Got the bag? All right. I'm going to Leyton Court." The porter touched his cap. "Is there anything here that can take me?"

"There's a fly, sir," said the porter, nodding toward the road, where a shambling kind of vehicle on its last wheels, attached to a horse on its last legs, stood expectantly.

The young man surveyed the turn-out, and laughed.

"All right; take the bag down to it. Wait! here's a drink for you. By the way, where can I get one for myself? No inn or anything here?"

"No, sir, nothing," said the porter, with almost pathetic sadness. "Nearest is at Parrock's Cross, a mile and a half on the road."

"Then I shall have to remain thirsty till I get to Parrock's Cross," said the young man, with an easy smile. "Do you think your horse can get as far as that, my friend?" he added to the driver.

The man grunted, mounted the box, and the Noah's ark rattled slowly away.

The young man lit another cigar, put up his feet on the opposite cushions, and surveyed the scenery, through eyes half closed, in perfect contentment, good humor, and indolent laziness. Presently they came abreast of the young girl, who was stepping along with the graceful gait which belongs to youth, and health, and good breeding.

"Now, I wonder where she is going?" he said to himself as he looked at her. "If she were a man now, I would give her a lift; as it is – By George! she's pretty though. Pretty? She's lovely! I wonder whether she'd take the fly from me, and let me tramp it instead of her? Don't dare ask her! I know what she'd do – give me a look that would make me wish I were fifty miles under the sea, and not say a word. What a devil of a stupid world it is!" And with this reflection as a kind of consolation, he made himself a little more comfortable, and closed his eyes completely.

It was a lovely evening. Some days in June, as we miserable Englishmen know only too well, are delusions and snares, cold as December or wet as October, but it was late in the month and really summer weather; and as the girl walked along the smooth path, which a shower had made pleasant, the trees shone in all their midsummer beauty; the birds sang their evening hymns; the flowers loaded the air with perfume.

It is good to be a girl, it is good to be young, it is good to be beautiful, but it is best of all to be innocent and happy, and she was all these. To save her life she could not help singing softly as she walked through all the splendor of this summer evening, and so she joined the birds in their evening hymn to the tune of "Oh, Mistress Mine!" stopping now and again to gather a spray of honeysuckle or a particularly fine dog-rose, of which the hedges were full.

The fly rattled on its way and came in due course to Parrock's Cross; and the horse, no doubt with a sigh of relief, pulled up of its own accord at the door of the village inn.

The young man woke up – if he had really been asleep – jumped out without opening the door and sauntered into the inn.

"Give the man what he likes, and me a bottle of Bass," he said to the landlord, and he threw himself down on the rustic seat outside the door.

The landlord brought the ale, touching his forehead obsequiously, for like most country people he knew a gentleman when he saw him, and the young man took a huge draught.

"That's very good beer," he said, nodding. "Get another bottle for yourself. How many miles is it to Leyton Court?"

"Not more than a mile, sir," said the landlord, touching his forehead again, for a man who was not only a gentleman but who was going to Leyton Court was worthy of all the respect that could be paid him.

"Is that all? Look here, then; I shall walk it. That contrivance reminds me too forcibly of a hearse; besides, I want to stretch my legs." He stretched them as he spoke; they were long legs and admirably shaped. "Tell the man to take the bag on. Here's five shillings for him."

"The fare's half-a-crown from the station, sir," said the landlord.

The gentleman laughed lazily.

"All right. Tell him to put the other two-and-six in the poor-box."

The landlord laughed respectfully, and the young man, left alone, leaned back on the seat and drank his beer in indolent content. Presently the girl passed on the other side of the road.

"Hullo! – there she is again!" he said. "I wonder where she is going? I dare say she's thirsty. It's a pity she isn't a man, for I could ask her to have a drink. Do you know that young lady, landlord?" he asked.

The man shaded his eyes and looked after the girl.

"No, sir," he said. "No. The lady's a stranger to me, sir; a perfect stranger."

The young man smoked his cigar and watched the graceful figure going down the road in the twilight with a touch of interest on his handsome face. He seemed in no hurry to pursue his journey by any means; and when he rose, at length, he yawned and stretched himself.

"Could you give me a bed here to-night, landlord?" he asked.

The man eyed the ground doubtfully.

"We're plain people, sir – " he commenced.

"I like plain people," broke in the young man with a laugh, the music of which never failed to call up an answering smile on the faces of those who heard it. "I don't mind roughing it; I'm used to it. I'm not sure that I shall want one; but if I should – "

"We'll do our best to make you comfortable, sir," said the landlord, touching his forehead again.

"Right!" exclaimed the young man, carelessly. "Well, don't be surprised if you see me back in – say a couple of hours. Straight on to the Court, I suppose?"

"Straight on, sir," said the landlord, and swinging his stick with a careless, happy-go-lucky air, the young man started off.

Slowly as he walked, his long legs soon overtook the young girl, and he passed her again, as she was standing on tiptoe to get a flower from the hedge. He half stopped with the evident intention of reaching the blossom, which reared itself tantalizingly just beyond her reach, but he thought – "she won't like it perhaps; think I want to intrude myself upon her," and walked on. She had not turned her head.

Probably the loveliness of the evening had the same effect upon him as it had upon her, for when he had got out of her hearing he began to sing, for, you see, he was young and handsome, in good health, and – I was going to say innocent, but pulled up in time.

In a quarter of an hour the road grew wider, and opened out on to a village green. Two or three houses were dotted about it, and an inn with the sign of the Ferrers Arms swinging on a post. A little further stood a pair of huge iron gates, with a lodge at the side of them.

"That's the Court, I suppose?" he said to himself. "Now for the tug of war! Lord, how I wish myself back in London!" and he flicked his cap onto the back of his head, and laughed ruefully.

Some children were playing on the green, and two or three men lounged on the settle outside the inn. Suddenly one of them rose, just as the young man came abreast of the door, and as he made way for the man to pass, a dog ran out from the inn and caused the man to stumble. The fellow uttered an oath and raised his heavily-booted foot. The kick struck the dog in the side, and with a howl of pain he fled behind the young man.

Now a moment before his handsome face had been a picture of indolent good temper, but at the kick and the howl his face changed. The lips grew set, the eyes stern and fierce. He was not a good young man – alas, alas! it will be seen that he was a thousand miles removed from that – but his heart was as tender as a woman's, and he loved dumb animals – dogs and horses in especial – with that love of which only a strong, healthy, young Englishman is capable.

"You brute!" he said, not loudly, but with an intense emphasis, which caused the man to pull up and stare at him with an astonished scowl.

"Did you speak to me, guv'nor?" he growled.

He was a tall, wiry-looking ruffian, and his voice seemed to proceed from the bottom of his chest, and the glance he shot at the speaker came from a pair of evil-looking eyes, deeply sunk beneath thick and black brows.

"I did!" said the young man curtly; "I called you a brute!" and he stooped and comforted the dog.

The man eyed him up and down with a vindictive glare.

"Can't I kick my own dawg?" he demanded, with a most atrocious attempt at a sneer.

"Not when I am near," said the young man, quite calmly, but meeting the glare of the evil eyes with a steady firmness.

"Oh, I can't, can't I?" retorted the man. "You get out of the way and I'll show you, curse you!"

The young man stepped aside, apparently to leave the dog exposed to the threatened assault, but as the man lifted his foot the young fellow thrust his own forward, and launching out with his left hand, dealt the man a blow which sent him a mass of arms and legs against the doorway.

The dog fled, the group of idlers who had remained seated, listening to the colloquy, sprung up and drew near, exchanging glances and staring at the pair.

The young fellow stood in the easiest of attitudes, with something like a smile on his lips, for the man's attitude of complete astonishment as he leant against the doorway was rather comical.

"That was a good 'un," cautiously whispered one of the men, looking at the young fellow admiringly. "'Tain't often Jem Pyke gets it like that, are it?"

The man called Pyke pulled himself together, and stretching himself glared round him; then his eyes rested on the young fellow, and he seemed to remember.

With an oath he made ready for a spring, but the young fellow raised his hand.

"Wait a minute, my friend," he said, almost pleasantly. "If you are anxious for a fight, say so, and let us have it comfortably. I haven't the slightest objection myself."

"Curse you, I'll – I'll kill you!" gasped the man.

The young fellow laughed.

"I don't think you will, my friend. I'm afraid you'll be disappointed, I really am; but if you'd like to try –"

He threw his cigar away, and, taking off his light shooting jacket, tossed it on to the settle.

As he did so his back was turned to the road along which he had come, and he didn't see the young girl, who had been near enough to witness the scene from its commencement, and was now kneeling down by the dog and murmuring womanly words of pity and sympathy.

"Let the gentleman alone, Jem," said one of the men. "'Twas all your fault. What did you want to go and kick the dawg for? Beg the gentleman's pardon, and go and get your beer."

For all response Jem commenced to turn up his sleeves. Two or three of the men got between them, but the young fellow waved them aside.

"Don't interfere, my men," he said pleasantly. "Your friend is dying for a fight, I can see, and a little exercise will give me an appetite. Just stand back, will you?"

The next instant Pyke rushed at him, and the first blows were delivered.

The girl heard the sound of them, and, with a cry of fear and horror, started as if to run across to them, but her heart failed her, and she shrank back against the hedge, looking on with hands clasped, and her face white and terrified.

The man Pyke was a giant in length and strength, but he was in a rage, and no man who is in a rage can fight well. The young fellow on the other hand was, now, in the best of humor, and thoroughly enjoying himself, and he parried the furious onslaught of his opponent as easily as if he were having a set-to at a gymnasium. The blows grew quicker and smarter, one from the young man had reached Mr. Pyke's face, and had cooled him a little. He saw that if he meant to win he must play more cautiously, and drawing back a little, he began again, with something like calculation. Like the blows of a sledge hammer his fists fell upon the chest of the young fellow, one struck him upon the lip and the blood started.

With a smile the young man seemed to think that it was time to end the little drama, and planting his left foot firmly forward, he delivered one blow straight from the shoulder. It fell upon the bully's forehead with a fearful crash, and the same instant, as it seemed, he staggered and fell full length to the ground. A murmur of consternation and admiration – for the blow had really been a skillful one – arose from the group of onlookers, and they crowded round the prostrate man.

"Dang me if I don't think he's killed 'im!" exclaimed the ostler, lifting Jem Pyke's head on his knee.

"What do you say?" said the young fellow, and, pushing them aside, he bent down and examined his late foe. "No, he's not dead. See, he's coming to already. Get some water, some of you – better still, some brandy. That's it. There you are!" he added, cheerfully, as Pyke opened his eyes and struggled to his feet. "How are you? You ought to have countered that last shot of mine, don't you know. You don't box badly, a little wild, perhaps, but then you were wild, weren't you? and that's always a mistake. Well one of us was bound to win, and there's no harm done, though you've got a bump or two, and" – putting his hand to his own face – "my figurehead isn't improved. There," and under the pretense of shaking the man's hand, he slipped half a sovereign into the wiry palm. "Get yourself a drink – and good-morning," and with a laugh and a nod he was striding across the road, when, seeing the pump at the head of the horse trough, he called to a boy to work the handle, and with his pocket-handkerchief washed his face and head, coming out of the impromptu bath with his short chestnut hair all shining like a Greek god's.

Then he strolled across the road, and – for the first time became aware that the young girl from the station had been a spectator of the scene.

He pulled up short within a few paces of her, and the two stood and looked at each other. She had the dog in her arms, and on her face and in her eyes was an expression which baffles my powers of description. It was not fright nor disgust, nor admiration, nor scorn, but a little of each skillfully and most perplexedly mingled. Women hate fighting, when it is inconveniently near to them; on the other hand they love courage, because they have so little of it themselves, and they adore a man who will stand up in defense of one of themselves or a dumb animal.

The girl had longed to turn and fly at the first sight and sound of the awful blows, but she could not: a horrible fascination kept her chained to the spot, and even when the fray was over she still stood, trembling and palpitating, her color coming and going in turn, her arms quite squeezing the dog in her excitement and emotion.

The young man looked at her, took in the oval face, with its dark, eloquent eyes and sweet, tremulous lips, the tall, graceful figure, even the plain blue serge, which seemed so part and parcel of that figure; then his glance dropped awkwardly, and he said, shamefacedly:

"I beg your pardon; I didn't know you were looking on."

The girl drew a long breath.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said, sternly, with a little catch in her voice.

He raised his eyes a moment – they were handsome, and, if the truth must be told, dare-devil eyes – then dropped them again.

"It – it is shameful," she went on, her lovely face growing carmine, her eyes flashing rebukingly, "for two men to fight like – like dogs; and one a gentleman!"

He looked rather bewildered, as if this view of the proceedings was something entirely novel.

"Oh, come, you know," he said, deprecatingly, "there isn't much harm done."

"Not much! I saw you knock him down as if – as if he were dead!" she said, indignantly. "And you – oh, look at your face!" and she turned her eyes away.

As this was an impossibility, he did the next best thing to it, and put his hand to his cheek and lips.

"I don't think he's hurt much," he said, excusingly, "and I'm not a bit. I think we rather enjoyed it; I know I did," he added, half inaudibly, and with the beginning of a laugh which was smitten dead as she said, with the air of a judge:

"You must be a savage!"

"I – I think I am," he assented, with a rueful air of conviction. "But, all the same, I'm sorry you were here! If I'd known there was a lady looking on I'd have put it off! I'm afraid you've been upset; but don't worry yourself about either of us! Our long-legged friend will be all the better for a little shaking up, and as for me – The dog isn't hurt, is he?"

"I – I don't know," she said.

He came a little nearer, and took the dog from her, noticing that in extending it to him she shrank back, as if his touch would pollute her.

"No; he's all right!" he said, after turning the animal over, and setting him on his legs. "He ought to have some of his ribs broken, but he hasn't! I'm glad of that, poor little beggar," and for the first time his voice softened.

The girl looked at him with grave displeasure.

"I am afraid he is the best Christian of the three," she said, severely.

"By George, I shouldn't wonder!" he muttered, with the ghost of a smile.

She gave him another glance, then, without a word, raised her head loftily and passed on.

He lifted his hat and looked after her, then tugged at his mustache thoughtfully.

"So I'm a savage, am I?" he said. "Well, I expect she's about right! What a beautiful girl! I'm a savage! By George, the old man will say the same if I present myself with this highly-colored physiognomy. I'd better go back to the inn, and turn up later on."

As he stood hesitating, the fly crawled up with the bag; the man had pulled up within view of the fight, and had enjoyed it thoroughly.

"Here, wait! I'll go back with you! I've decided to stay at your place for the night," said the young fellow; and he jumped in.

"Not hurt, I hope, sir?" said the man, as he turned the horse. "It was a right down good fight, sir; it was, indeed!"

"Not a bit! There, hurry up that four-legged skeleton of yours! I'm as hungry as a – a – savage," he concluded, as if by a happy inspiration, and throwing himself along the cushions, he laughed, but rather uneasily.

CHAPTER II

The girl, without looking behind her or vouchsafing even a glance of farewell, walked on until she reached the great iron gates. There she rang the bell which hung like a huge iron tear, within reach of her hand, and on the lodge-keeper coming out, inquired if Mrs. Hale were in.

"Mrs. Hale? Yes, miss; she is up at the house," said the woman. "You are Miss Margaret, I expect?"

"Yes," said the girl; "my name is Margaret. I am Mrs. Hale's granddaughter."

"She has been expecting you, miss. Keep along the avenue and you'll come to the small gates and see the Court. There are sure to be some of the servants about, and they'll tell you whereabouts Mrs. Hale's rooms are."

The great gate swung heavily back, and Margaret passed through. The avenue wound in and about for nearly half a mile, and she was thinking that she should never get to the end of it, when at a sudden turn a sight broke upon her which caused her to stop with astonishment.

As if it had sprung from the ground, raised by a magician's wand, rose Leyton Court. You can buy any number of photographs of it, and are no doubt quite familiar with its long stretching pile of red bricks and white facings; but Margaret had seen neither the place nor any views of it, and the vision of grandeur and beauty took her breath away.

Far down the line of sight the facade stretched, wing upon wing, all glowing a dusky red veiled by ivy and Virginian creeper, and sparkling here and there as the sunset rays shone on the diamond-latticed windows. The most intense silence reigned over the whole; not a human being was in sight, and the girl was quite startled when a peacock, which had been strutting across a lawn that looked like velvet, spread its tail and uttered a shrill shriek.

The size and grandeur of the place awed her, and she stood uncertain which direction to take, when a maid-servant, with a pleasant face and a shy smile, came hurriedly through a wicket set in the closely-cut box hedge, and said:

"Are you Miss Margaret, please?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Mrs. Hale sent me to meet you, miss. This way please." And with a smile of welcome, the girl led her through a narrow alley of greenery into a near courtyard which seemed to belong to a wing of the great house. An old fountain plashed in the center of the court and all around were beds of bright flowers, which filled the air with color and perfume. Up the old red walls also climbed blue starred clematis and honeysuckle, through which the windows glistened like diamonds.

Margaret looked round and drew her breath with that excess of pleasure which is almost pain.

"Oh what a lovely place!" she murmured involuntarily.

The servant looked pleased.

"It is pretty, isn't it, miss?" she assented. "Of course it isn't the grand part of the Court, but I think that it's as beautiful as any part of the terrace or the Italian gardens."

"Nothing could be more lovely than this!" said Margaret.

Then she uttered a low cry of loving greeting, and, running forward, threw her arms round an old lady, who, hearing her voice, had come to the open doorway.

"Why Margaret – Madge!" said the old lady tremulously, as she pressed the girl to her bosom, and then held her at arm's length that she might look into her face. "Why my dear – my dear! Why, how you've grown! Is this my little Margaret? – my little pale-faced Madge, who was no taller than the table, and all legs and wings?" and leading the girl into a bright little parlor, she sank into a chair, and holding her by the hands, looked her over with that loving admiration of which only a mother or a grandmother can be capable; and the old lady was justified, for the girl, as she stood, slightly

leaning forward with a flush on her face and her eyes glowing with affection and emotion, presented a picture beautiful enough to melt the heart of an anchorite.

"Yes, it's I, grandma," she said, half laughing, half crying. "And you think I've grown?"

"Grown! My dear, when I saw you last you were a child; you are a woman now, and a very" – "beautiful" she was going to say, but stopped short – "a very passable young woman, too! I can scarcely believe my eyes! My little madcap Madge!"

"Oh, not madcap any longer, grandma dear," said the girl, sinking on her knees and taking off her hat, that she might lean her head comfortably on the old lady's bosom, "not wild madcap now, you know. I am Miss Margaret Hale, of the School of Art, and a silver medalist," and she laughed with sparkling eyes, which rather indicated that there was something of the wildness left notwithstanding her dignity.

"Dear, dear me!" murmured the old lady. "Such a grand young lady! You must tell me all about it. But there, what am I thinking of? You must be tired – how did you come from the station, dear?"

"I walked," said the girl.

"Walked! Why didn't you take a fly, child?"

The girl colored slightly.

"Oh, it was a lovely evening and I was tired of sitting so long, and – and – flies are for rich people, you know grandmamma," laughingly, "and although I am a silver medalist, I am not a millionaire yet! But indeed – " she added quickly – "I enjoyed the walk amazingly, it is such a lovely country, and my things are coming on by the carrier. And now I'll go and wash some of the dust and smuts away, and come back and tell you – oh, everything."

The old lady called the maid, and the girl, still shyly, led Margaret to a dainty little room which overlooked the flowered court, which filled it with the odors of the clematis and honeysuckle and sweetbrier.

Margaret went to the window, and leaning over, drew in a long breath of the perfumed air.

"Oh, beautiful! beautiful!" she murmured. "Ah! you should have lived in London for five years to appreciate this lovely place. Mary – is your name Mary?"

The maid blushed.

"Why, yes, miss! Did you guess it?" she replied, almost awed by the cleverness of this tall, lovely young creature from London.

Margaret laughed.

"Most nice girls are called Mary," she said; "and I am sure you are nice."

The girl blushed again, but, rendered speechless with pleasure, could only stare at her shyly, and run from the room.

When Margaret came down it seemed to the old lady that she was more beautiful than before, with her bright soft hair brushed down from her oval face, and her slim, undulating figure revealed by the absence of the traveling jacket. Tea was on the table and a huge bowl of Gloire roses, and the whole room looked the picture of comfort and elegance.

"Now tell me all about it," said Mrs. Hale, when the girl had got seated in a low chair beside the window, with her teacup and bread and butter. "And you are quite a famous personage, Margaret, are you?"

The girl laughed, a soft, low laugh of innocent happiness.

"Not famous, dear," she said, "a very long way from the top of the tree; but I've been lucky in getting one of my pictures into the Academy and gaining the silver medal, and what is better than all, my picture is sold."

This seemed to surprise the unsophisticated old lady more than all the rest.

"Dear, dear me!" she mused. "Who ever would have thought that little wild Madge would become an artist and paint pictures – "

"And sell them, too," laughed the girl.

"How proud your poor father would have been if he had lived," added Mrs. Hale, with a sigh. A swift shadow crossed the girl's lovely face, and there was silence for a moment.

"And you are quite happy, Madge? The life suits you?"

"Yes, quite, dear; oh, quite. Of course it is hard work. I paint all day while there is light enough, and I read books on art – I was going to say all night," and she smiled. "Then there are the schools and lectures – oh! it is a very pleasant life when one is so fond of art as I am."

"And you don't feel lonely with no kith nor kin near you?"

"No," she said. "Three of us girls lodge together a little way from the schools, and so it is not lonely, and the lady who looks after the house – and us, of course – is pleasant and lady-like. Oh, no, it is not lonely, but – " her eyes softened – "but I am glad to come down and see you, grandma – I can't tell you how glad!" and she stretched out her long, white, shapely hand – the artist's hand – so that the old lady could take it and fondle it.

"Yes, my dear," she said. "And I can't tell you how glad I am to have you. It seems ages instead of five years since we parted in London and I came down here as housekeeper to the earl – ages! And the change will do you good; I think you want a little country air; you're looking a trifle pale, now that you have settled down a bit."

"It's only the London color," said the girl, smiling. "Nobody carries many roses on his cheeks in London. What lovely ones those are on the table, grandma, and what cream! How the girls would stare if they saw and tasted it. You know we drink chalk and water in London, grandma!"

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the old lady.

"They carry it round in cans and call it milk, but it is chalk and water all the same," she said, laughingly. "And now, dear, you must tell me all about yourself – why, we have done nothing but talk about foolish me since I came! Are *you* quite happy, grandma, and do you like being housekeeper to a grand earl?"

"Very much, my dear," said the old lady, with a touch of dignity. "It is a most important and responsible post," and she stroked the smooth white hand she still held.

"I should think so," said Margaret, with quick sympathy. "Keeping any kind of house must be a tremendous affair, but keeping such an enormous place as this – why, grandma, it is like a town, there seems no end to it!"

The old lady nodded proudly.

"Yes. Leyton Court is a very grand place, my dear," she assented. "I suppose it's one of the grandest, if not *the* grandest, in the country. You shall go over it some day when the earl is away."

"The earl, yes," said Margaret. "It was very kind of him to let me come."

Mrs. Hale tossed her head.

"Oh, my dear, he knows nothing about it!" she said. "Bless me, the earl is too great a person to know anything about the goings on of such humble individuals as you and me. I am my own mistress in my own apartments, my dear, and am quite at liberty to have my own granddaughter stay with me."

"Of course," said the girl quickly. "And is he nice? – the earl, I mean."

"Nice!" repeated the old lady, as if there were something disrespectful in the word. "Well, 'nice' is scarcely the word – I've only seen him half a dozen times since I came, so I can't say what he's like; but he was very pleasant then – in his way, my dear."

Margaret opened her eyes.

"Not half-a-dozen times in five years? Then he doesn't live here always?"

"Not always. He is in Spain or Ireland some parts of the year, but he lives at the Court during most of the summer. You see, my dear, great folks like the Earl of Ferrers keep to themselves more than humble people. The earl has his own apartments – you can see them from the drive; they run along the terrace – and his own particular servants. Excepting Mr. Stibbings, the butler, and Mr. Larkhall, his valet, and the footmen, none of us see anything of his lordship."

"He is quite like a king, then?" said the girl musingly.

"Quite," assented the old lady approvingly; "quite like a king, as you say; and everybody in Leyton Ferrers regards him as one. Why, the queen herself couldn't be more looked up to or feared!"

The girl pondered over this. You don't meet many earls and dukes in the National Art Schools, and this one possessed an atmosphere of novelty for Margaret.

"And does he live here all alone?" she asked.

"All alone; yes."

"In this great place? How lonely he must be!"

"No, my dear," said the old lady. "Great people are never lonely; they are quite – quite different to us humble folks."

Margaret smiled to herself at the naive assertion.

"I thought he would have had some relations to live with him. Hasn't he any sons – children?"

Mrs. Hale shook her head.

"No, no children! There was a son, but he died. There is a nephew, Lord Blair Leyton, but he and the earl don't agree, and he has never been here, though, of course, he will come into the property when the earl dies, which won't be for many a long year, I hope."

"Blair Leyton! and he's a lord too –"

"A viscount," said the old lady. "I don't like to speak ill of a gentleman, especially one I don't know, but I am afraid his young lordship is – is" – she looked round for a word – "is a very wicked young man, my dear."

"How do you know?" asked Margaret, nestling into the comfortable chair to listen at her ease.

"Well, Mr. Stibbings has spoken of him. Mr. Stibbings – a perfect gentleman, my dear – is good enough to drop in and take a cup of tea sometimes, and he has told me about young Lord Blair! You see, he has been in the family a great many years, and knows all its history. He says that the earl and the young nephew never did get on together, and that the young man is, oh, very wild indeed, my dear! The earl and he have only met two or three times, and then they quarreled – quarreled dreadfully. I daresay the earl feels the loss of his son, and that makes it hard for him to get on with Lord Blair. But he is really a very wicked young man, I am sorry to say."

"What does he do?" asked Margaret.

The old lady looked rather puzzled how to describe a young man's wickedness to an innocent girl.

"Well, my dear, it would be easier, perhaps, to say what he *doesn't* do!" she said at last.

Margaret laughed softly.

"Poor young man," she said gently. "It must be bad to be so wicked!"

The old lady shook her head severely.

"I don't know why you pity him, my dear," she said.

"Oh, I don't know," said the girl, slowly. "Perhaps some people can't help being bad, you know, grandma! Oh, here are my things coming! now I can show you one of my pictures!" and she jumped up gleefully, and commenced unfastening the brown-paper parcel. "I did think of carrying it, but I am glad I didn't, for it was warm, and I met with an unpleasant adventure on the road, when the parcel might have been in the way. Oh, I didn't tell you, grandma! I saw such a terrible fight – a *fight*! think of it – as I came here."

"A fight, my dear?" exclaimed the old lady.

"Yes," nodded Margaret; "between two men; and what made it worse, one was a gentleman."

"A gentleman, Margaret! Gentlemen don't fight, my dear."

"So I thought," she said, naively; "but this one does anyway, and fights very well," she added.

"At least, he knocked the other one down – a great tall fellow – as if he had been shot."

"Bless my heart! where was this?"

"Oh, just in the village here. The man – he was an ill-tempered fellow, I'm sure, with such a dreadful face – kicked a poor dog, and the gentleman, who was near, fought him for it."

"Good gracious me! And, of course, you ran away?"

The girl laughed rather strangely.

"No, I didn't, grandma. I ought to have done so, I meant to do so, but – well, I didn't. I wish I had, for the creature had the impudence to speak to me!"

"What – the man?" aghast.

"The gentleman. He came across the road and begged my pardon. I'd got the poor dog in my arms, you see, and I suppose – well I don't know why he spoke, but perhaps it was because, being a gentleman, he felt ashamed of himself. If he didn't at first, I think he did when he went away," she added, with a laugh and a blush, as she remembered the words that had flown like darts of fire from her lips. "Oh, it was shameful! His face was cut, and there was blood" – she shuddered – "on his collar! He was a very handsome young man, too. I wonder who he was. Did I tell you he came down by the same train as I did?"

Mrs. Hale shook her head.

"No one I know, my dear," she said. "None of the gentry hereabouts would fight with any one, least of all a common man. A tall man, with an ugly face – "

"Oh, very ugly and evil-looking – I think they called him Pyke."

"Pyke – Jem Pyke!" said Mrs. Hale. "Oh, I know him; a dreadful bad character, my dear. I'm not surprised at his kicking a dog, or fighting either. He's one of our worst men – a poacher and a thief, so they say. I wonder he didn't get the best of it!"

"He got the very possible worst of it," said Margaret, with an unconscious tone of satisfaction. "There's the picture, grandma! And where will you hang it?"

It was a clever little picture; a bit of a London street, faithfully and carefully painted, and instinct with grace and feeling.

The old lady of course did not see all the good points, but she was none the less proud and delighted, and stood regarding it with admiring awe that rendered her speechless.

"You dear, clever girl," she said, kissing her, "and it is for me, really for me? Oh, Margaret, if your poor father – "

Margaret sighed.

"Get me a hammer and a nail, grandma," she said, after a moment, "and I'll put it in a good light; the light is everything, you know."

A hammer and nail were brought, and the picture hung, and the two went out into the garden, and presently the girl was singing like a nightingale from her over-brimming heart. But suddenly she stopped and looked in at the window of the room where the old lady had returned to see the unpacking and uncreasing of the clothes which had traveled in the unpretending Gladstone bag.

"Oh, grandma, I beg your pardon! I forgot! Perhaps the earl won't like my singing?"

Mrs. Hale laughed.

"The earl! My dear, he is right at the other end of the building and could scarcely hear a brass band from here! But come in now, Margaret, and have some supper. You must go to bed early after your long journey, or you won't sow the seed for those roses I want to see in your cheeks!"

When she woke in the morning with the scent of the honeysuckle wafting across her face, Margaret could almost have persuaded herself that Leyton Court was a vision of a dream, and that she should find herself presently on her way to the art school at Kensington amidst all the London noise and smoke. To most Londoners the country in June is a dream of Paradise; what must it have been to this young girl, with the soul of an artist, with every nerve throbbing in sympathy with the sky, the flowers, the songs of the birds?

Like a vision herself, her plainly made morning dress of a soft, dove color and fitting her slim young shape with the grace of a well-made garment that can afford to be plain, she ran down the oak stairs into the parlor. But Mrs. Hale was not there, and Mary, who glanced with shy admiration at the lovely face and pretty dress, said that she had gone to see the butler.

"You will find her in the pantry, miss, if you like. It is at the end of this passage, to the right. You can't miss it, miss."

But Margaret did miss it, for her idea of a pantry was a small place in the nature of a cupboard, whereas the pantry at the Court was a large and spacious room, and Margaret, seeing nothing to answer to her idea, opened a door, entered, found herself before another door, opened that, discovered that she was in a round kind of a lobby surrounded, like Blue Beard's chamber, with other doors, and all at once learned that she had lost herself.

It was a ridiculous position to be placed in, and an annoying one, for she felt that her grandmother would be vexed by Margaret's venturing out of their own apartments.

But she did not know what to do; it was impossible, having turned round in the circular lobby and lost count of the door, to regain it again, and in a semi-comic despair, she opened the door opposite her, intending to walk on until she met a servant of whom she could ask her way back to Mrs. Hale's wing.

She found herself presently and quite suddenly in a short corridor, at the end of which a stream of varicolored light poured from a stained window; there was the reflection also of gilt carving and velvet hangings, and rather awed, Margaret was for turning back, when she saw a footman pass with noiseless footsteps across the thick Oriental carpet at the end of the corridor.

She called to him, and hurried after him, but before she could reach him he had disappeared as if by magic, evidently without hearing her suppressed voice, and she found herself standing at the entrance to a magnificent picture gallery, which seemed to run an interminable length and lose itself in a distant vista of ferns and statuary.

Margaret literally held her breath as she peered in through the velvet curtains.

There, line upon line, hung what was no doubt one of the collections of the kingdom – and she within the threshold of it.

Her mouth, metaphorically, began to water; her large dark eyes grew humid with wistfulness.

What cream is to a cat, water to a duck, *pate de foie gras* to a gourmet, an Elziver to a bookworm, that is a picture gallery to an artist.

She could resist the temptation no longer. The place was crowned, as it were, with silence and solitude: no one would see her or know that she had been there, and she would only stay five – ten minutes.

Eve could not resist temptation – being doubtless fond of apples; Margaret could not resist, being fond of pictures. And yet, if she had known what was to follow upon this visit to Leyton Court, if there had only been some kind guardian angel to whisper:

"Fly, Margaret, my child! Fly this spot, where peril and destruction await thee!"

But, alas! our guardian angels always seem to be taking bank holiday just on the days when we most need them, and Margaret's angel was silent as the tomb.

Pushing the heavily-bullioned curtain aside she entered the gallery, and an exclamation of surprise and delight broke from her lips.

It was a priceless collection: Rubens, Vandyke, Titians, Raphael, Michael Angelo, Cuyp, Jan Steen; all the masters were here, and at their best.

The soul of the girl went into her eyes, her face grew pale, and her breath came in long-drawn sighs, as she moved noiselessly on the thick Turkey carpet, which stretched itself like a glittering snake over the marble floor before the pictures.

What jewels were to some women, and dress to others, pictures were to Margaret.

She was standing rapt in an ecstasy before a head by Guido, her hands clasped and hanging loosely in front of her, her lovely face upturned, a picture as beautiful as the one upon which she gazed, when she suddenly became aware, without either seeing or hearing, but with that sense, which is indescribable and nameless, that she was not alone, but that some one else had entered the gallery.

The consciousness affected her strangely, and for a moment she did not move eye or limb; then, with an effort, she turned her head and saw a tall figure standing a few paces from the doorway.

It was that of an old man, with white hair and dark – piercing dark – eyes. He was clad in a velvet dressing-gown, whose folds fell round the thin form and gave it an antique expression, which harmonized with the magnificence and silence of the gallery.

The eyes were bent on her, not sternly, not curiously, but with a calm, steadfast regard, which affected her more than any expression of anger could have done.

She stood quite still, her heart beating wildly, for she knew, though she had never seen him, that it must be the earl himself.

CHAPTER III

Margaret stood perfectly still, her eyes downcast, yet seeing quite plainly the tall patrician figure enveloped in the folds of violet velvet.

What should she do? Pass by him without a word, or murmur some kind of apology? How upset and annoyed her grandmother would be when she heard of her trespass, and its discovery by the earl, of all people. And the earl himself, what was he thinking of her? He was, no doubt, setting her down, in his mind, as an ill-bred, forward girl, who had intruded out of sheer impudence! The idea was almost unendurable, and smarting under it, the color came slowly into her face and her lips quivered.

Meanwhile, the earl, who had been indifferently wondering who she was, moved slowly, his hands behind him, along the gallery and toward her. His movements nerved her, and bending her head she made for the door, but slowly. The earl may have thought that she was one of the higher servants, but as she came nearer – for she had to pass him to leave the gallery – he must have seen that she was not one of the establishment, which was far too numerous for him to be familiar with.

"Do not let me drive you away," he said, in a low-toned, but exquisitely clear and musical voice, which had so often moved his fellow peers in the Upper House.

"I am going," said Margaret, flushing. "I – I ought not to have come."

She had never spoken to a nobleman in her life before, and did not know whether to say "my lord" or "your lordship," at the end of her sentence.

"Ought you not?" he said, with a faint smile crossing his clear-cut features.

"No – my lord," she faltered, venturing on that form; "I – I came here by accident. I lost my way. I am very sorry."

"Do not apologize," he said, bending his piercing eyes on her face, and smiling again as he noticed her abashed expression; "it is not a deadly sin. Are you – " he hesitated. It was evident that he did not want to add to her distress and confusion, and was choosing his words – "Are you staying here?"

"Yes," said Margaret; "I am staying with Mrs. Hale, my grandmother, my lord."

"Ah, yes!" he murmured. "Yes. Mrs. Hale. Yes, yes. You are her granddaughter. What is your name?"

"Margaret – Margaret Hale," she said.

"And how long have you been here?" he asked.

"I came last night, my lord," said Margaret.

"Last night? Yes. And you were on a voyage of discovery – "

"Oh, no, no!" she broke in, quickly. "I was looking for Mrs. Hale, and – opened the wrong door; when I came into the corridor outside I saw the pictures, and" – her color rose – "I was tempted to come in," and, with an inclination of the head, she was moving away.

His voice stopped her.

"Are you fond of pictures?" he asked, as one of his age and attainments would ask a child.

"Yes," said Margaret, simply, refraining even from adding, "very."

His glance grew absent.

"Most of your sex are," he said, musingly. "All life is but a picture to most of them. The surface, the surface only" – he sighed very faintly and wearily, and was pacing on, to Margaret's immense relief, as if he had forgotten her, when he stopped, as if moved by a kindly impulse, and said: "Pray come here when you please. The pictures will be glad of your company; they spend a solitary life too often. Yes, come when you please."

"Thank you, my lord," said Margaret, quietly, and without any fuss.

Perhaps the reserved and quiet response attracted his attention.

"Which was the picture I saw you admiring when I came in?" he asked. "You were admiring it, I think?"

"It was the head by Guido, my lord," she answered.

He looked at her quickly.

"How did you know it was Guido's?" he asked, and he went and stood before the picture, looking from it to her.

Margaret stared. How could it be possible for any intelligent person not to know!

"It is easy to tell a Guido, my lord," she said, with a slight smile. "One has only to see one of them once, and I have seen them in the National Gallery fifty – a hundred times."

He looked at her, not curiously – the Earl of Ferrers, famed for his exquisite courtesy, could not have done that – but with a newly-born interest.

"Yes? Do you recognize other masters here? This, for instance," and he raised his hand; it stood out like snow in front of the violet velvet, and a large amethyst on the forefinger gleamed redly in the downward light.

"That is a Carlo Dolci, my lord; but not a very good one."

"Right in both assertions," he said, with a smile. "And this?"

"A Rubens, and a very fine one," she said, forgetting his presence and grandeur, and approaching the picture. "I have never seen more beautiful coloring in a Rubens – but I have not seen the Continental galleries. It would look better still if it were not hung so near that De la Roche; the two clash. Now, if the other Rubens on the opposite side were placed – " but she remembered herself, and stopped suddenly, confused and shamefaced.

"Pray go on," he said gently. "You would hang them side by side. Yes. You are right! Tell me who painted this!" and he inclined his head toward a heavy battle piece.

"I do not know, my lord," said Margaret.

He smiled.

"It is a pleasant discovery to find that your knowledge is not illimitable," he said. "It is a Wouvermans."

Margaret looked at it, and her brows came together, after a fashion peculiar to her when she was thinking deeply, displeased, or silent under pressure.

"Well?" he said, as if he had read her thoughts; "what would you say?"

"It is not a Wouvermans, my lord," she said.

The earl smiled, and stood with folded hands regarding her.

"No, my lord. That is, I think not. It is not even a copy, but an imitation – oh, forgive me!" she broke off, blushing.

"No, no!" he said, gently; "there is nothing to forgive. Tell me why you think so? But I warn you – " and he smiled with mock gravity – "this picture cost several thousand pounds!"

"I can't help it," said Margaret, desperate on behalf of truth. "It is not a Wouvermans! He never painted a horse like that – never! I have copied dozens of his pictures. I should know a horse of his if I met it in the streets, my lord," and her eyebrows came together again in almost piteous assertion.

He looked at the picture keenly; then, with a slight air of surprise, he said:

"I think you are right! But it is a clever forgery – "

"Oh, clever!" said Margaret, with light scorn.

"Are you an artist?" he asked, after a second's pause.

"Yes, my lord," she said, modestly.

"Yes! Ah, I understand your inability to keep outside the gallery. An artist" – his piercing eyes rested on her downcast face – "my pictures are honored by your attention, Miss Hale. Permit me to repeat my invitation. I hope you will pay the gallery many visits. If you should care to copy any of the pictures, pray do so!"

"Oh, my lord!" said Margaret, and her face lit up as if a ray of sunlight had passed across it.

There was no ill-bred admiration in his gray eyes, only a deep and steady regard.

"Copy any you choose," he said. "As to the De la Roche – "

He paused, for a hurried footstep was heard behind them, and Mrs. Hale's voice anxiously calling "Margaret."

At sight of the earl she stopped short, turned pale, and dropped a profound curtsy.

"Oh, my lord! I – we – beg your pardon! My granddaughter lost her way – " then she seemed unable to go any further.

The earl turned to her with the calm, impassive manner he had worn when Margaret had seen him first.

"Do not apologize, Mrs. Hale," he said. "Your granddaughter is perfectly welcome. She is an artist, I hear?"

"Yes, my lord," faltered the old lady, as if she were confessing some great sin of Margaret's.

"Yes, and a capable one I am sure. She will probably like to copy some of the pictures. Please see that she is not disturbed."

Then, leaving the old lady overwhelmed and bewildered, he inclined his head to Margaret and moved away. But as he raised the heavy curtain at the end of the gallery, he turned and looked aside at her with a grave smile.

"The De la Roche shall be re-hung, and the false Wouvermans removed." Then murmuring "would that it were as easy to depose every other false pretender!" he let the curtain fall and disappeared.

Margaret stood looking after him, her brows drawn together dreamily, and seemed to awake with a start when, with a gasp, the old lady turned to her, exclaiming:

"Well, Margaret! To think that the earl – that his lordship – that – that – When I came in and saw him with you here I felt fit to sink into the ground! Oh, my dear, how ever did you come here?"

"My wayward feet were wont to stray," quoted Margaret, with a laugh.

"What do you say?"

"Oh, it was only a line from a poem, grandmamma. I lost my way, and the earl came in and found me – "

"And – and spoke? And he wasn't angry? My dear, if I had been in your place, I should have longed for the earth to open and swallow me up!"

Margaret laughed softly.

"Of course you mustn't pay any attention to what he said: you mustn't take advantage of his offer about the copying of the pictures. Copy the pictures! Good gracious! as if you'd take such a liberty!"

Margaret opened her eyes.

"I certainly did think of taking it," she said.

"Oh, dear, no; it would never do!" exclaimed the old lady. "It was only politeness on his part to make you feel at your ease, and to show that he wasn't angry. As to his meaning it, why of course he didn't!"

"I had an impression that great noblemen like the earl always meant what they said; but that's only my ignorance, grandma, and, of course, I'll do as you wish. But," with a wistful glance down the gallery, "I had looked forward to painting some of them."

"Well, never mind, my dear," said the old lady soothingly; "you can come and look at them – sometimes, when the earl's out or away from the Court. It would never do for him to find you here again."

"No. I suppose next time he wouldn't find it incumbent upon him to be polite. Well, let's go now, grandma," and she turned with a sigh.

"Not that way!" exclaimed Mrs. Hale, in a horrified whisper, as Margaret went toward a door; "that leads direct to his lordship's private apartments."

Margaret laughed.

"It is quite evident that I mustn't venture out of your rooms alone again, grandma, or I shall get into serious trouble!"

"That you certainly will. But it's excusable, my dear; there aren't many places so big, and such a maze like. It took even me a long time to find my way about."

She opened the proper door as she spoke, and nearly ran against a portly gentleman, who was dignified looking enough to be the earl's brother.

"Bless my heart, Mr. Stibbings!" exclaimed Mrs. Hale. The butler puffed out a response in a hushed voice – everybody's voice was hushed at Leyton Court – then looked at Margaret and made a respectful bow.

"My granddaughter, Margaret, Mr. Stibbings," said the old lady, proudly.

The butler appeared surprised. He had taken Margaret for a visitor, and had been wondering how on earth she had got into the place without his knowing it?

"In – deed, Mrs. Hale! Glad to see you, miss."

"Yes, Mr. Stibbings; and, would you believe it, she's been in our picture-gallery, and – "

But Mr. Stibbings seemed too hurried and full of suppressed excitement to attend.

"Mrs. Hale, ma'am, you'll scarcely credit it, but – " he drew nearer and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Bless my heart!" exclaimed the old lady. "Dear, dear me! What is to be done? Will he stay, do you think? You'll let me know at once, there will be a great deal to see to – "

"Yes, yes," said the butler. "I'm going to find out. He has only just been announced. I don't know yet whether the earl will see him. Extraordinary, isn't it?" and he hurried on his way.

"Ex – tra – ordinary!" responded the old lady, staring at Margaret.

"What has happened, grandma?" asked Margaret, with a laugh.

"It's no laughing matter, my dear!" said the old lady, gravely. "Lord Blair Leyton has come."

"Has he?" said Margaret, with less interest than the matter deserved.

"Yes, and who knows what will happen? Perhaps the earl won't see him; perhaps they won't meet after all."

"I suppose they won't kill each other if they do, will they?" said Margaret.

The old lady looked at her aghast; such levity was terrible.

"My dear," she said, "you don't know what you are talking about. Kill each other – the earl and his nephew! Why, how ever could you say such a thing? Great people never fight, let alone kill each other."

CHAPTER IV

Meanwhile, Mr. Larkhall, the valet, had gone to the earl's sitting-room and made the announcement:

"Lord Leyton, my lord!"

The earl raised his steel-gray eyes, and, frowning slightly, said, "Lord Leyton?" without any expression of surprise.

"Yes, my lord," said the valet, with the proper impassiveness of a high-class servant.

The earl kept his eyes on the floor for a moment, then nodded as an indication that Lord Blair was to be shown in, and Mr. Larkhall went out to the drawing-room, where Lord Blair was waiting.

He was looking remarkably well this morning, and there were no traces of his encounter with Mr. Pyke on his handsome face, which with its prevailing suggestion of brightness and good humor, seemed to light up the grand and rather too stately room. He was dressed in that very comfortable and somewhat picturesque fashion, which is the mode nowadays, and his shapely limbs displayed themselves, not without grace, in knickerbockers and a shooting jacket of a wide check, which made his broad shoulders look even more vast than they were. Take him altogether he presented a very fine specimen of the genus man, at its best period, when youth sits at the prow, and pleasure sings joyously at the helm.

"This way, my lord," said Mr. Larkhall, and the young man followed the valet into the earl's room.

As he entered, the earl rose and looked at him, and notwithstanding the sternness of his face, a gleam of reluctant admiration shone in his eyes. He held out the thin, white hand.

"How do you do, Blair?" he said.

Lord Blair shook his hand.

"I hope you're well, sir?" he said, and the light, musical voice seemed to ring through the room, in its contrast to the elder man's subdued tones.

The earl waved his hand to a chair, and sank back into his own.

Then a silence ensued. It was evident that the earl expected the young viscount to account for his presence, and that Lord Blair found it rather hard to begin.

"Not had the gout lately, I hope, sir?" he said.

"Thanks, no; not very lately," replied the earl.

"I'm glad of that," said Lord Blair. "I shouldn't have liked to worry you while you were ill – and – and I ought to apologize for coming uninvited – "

It was palpable that he was not used to apologizing, and he did it awkwardly and bluntly.

The earl waved his hand.

"You are always free to come to the Court, Blair; you know that, I trust?"

He did not say that he was welcome, or that he, the earl was glad to see him.

"Thanks," said Lord Blair. "I shouldn't have come if I hadn't been obliged – I mean," with a smile at his clumsiness, "I mean I wanted to see you particularly on business – "

"Business?" said the earl, raising his eyebrows slightly. "Would not Messrs. Tyler & Driver – " Tyler & Driver were the family solicitors.

"No," said Lord Blair; "I didn't think so. The fact is, sir, that I'm in a scrape." He said it with an air of surprise that made the earl smile dryly. "Yes; I suppose you'll say I always am. Well, I dare say I am. By George, I don't know how it is, either, for I'm always trying hard to keep out of 'em."

"Is it money – this time?" inquired the earl, with an impassiveness that was worse than any exhibition of ill-humor.

"Yes; it's money this time," assented Lord Blair laughing slightly, but coloring. "The fact is – " he paused. "I don't know whether you saw that my horse, Daylight, lost the Chinhester stakes?"

"I don't read the racing news," said his lordship gravely.

"Ah, I forgot. Well, it did. The fool of a jockey pulled at him too long, and – but I'm afraid you would not understand, sir."

"Most probably not," was the dry response.

"Anyway, he lost, and as I'd backed him very heavily – too heavily as it turned out – I lost a hatful of money. I've had a run of ill-luck all the season, too," he continued, as cheerfully as if he were recounting luck of quite another kind. "So I find myself completely up a tree. I don't like asking you for any more money, I seem to have had such a tremendous lot, don't you know, and it occurred to me that there was that Ketton property, and I could raise the money on that."

The earl's face darkened.

"Of course I know I needn't have troubled you about it," went on Lord Blair, "but I promised you I wouldn't raise any money without letting you know, and so – well, here I am," he wound up cheerfully.

The earl sat perfectly still and looked at the carpet.

"Blair," he said, at last, "you are on the road to ruin!"

"It's not so bad as that, sir, I hope," said the young man, after a rather startled stare and pause.

"You are a spendthrift and a gambler," continued the earl, his face hardening at each word.

Lord Blair's face flushed.

"That's rather strong, isn't it, sir?" he said, quietly.

"It is the truth – the plain truth," retorted the earl, quickly. "You are twenty-five, and you have run through – flung to the winds, destroyed – nearly all your own property. Only Ketton remains, and that is, you tell me, to go. What do you expect me to say? Have you no conscience, no sense of decency? But, indeed, the question is unnecessary, you have none."

The young man rose, and on his handsome face came a look that bore a faint resemblance to that on the old man's.

"What do you mean?" he asked, shortly.

The earl raised his eyes.

"With this ruin impending over you, you come to me to ask my sanction of the last step, and on the way here you amuse yourself by indulging in a vulgar ale-house brawl with one of my people, outside my gates – within sight of the house!"

Lord Blair sank into the chair, and smiled.

"Oh, that," he said, easily – "oh, that was nothing, sir. The fellow deserved all he got and more. 'Pon my word I couldn't help it. It was – but you've heard all about it, I daresay?"

"I have heard that you had a vulgar quarrel with one of the worst characters in the place, and indulged in a fight with him, sir," said the earl, his eyes flashing for a moment, then growing hard and cold. "But I forget. You say it was nothing. That which I deem a degradation, the future Earl of Ferrers may regard differently. But this I may be permitted to ask: that you will choose some other locality than Leyton for the exhibition of your brutality."

A hot response sprung to the lips of Lord Blair, but with an effort he choked it back.

"We won't say any more about the affair, sir," he said, "except that if it were to be done again, I'd do it!"

"I don't doubt you, sir," said the earl, coldly.

There was a pause, then the young man rose.

"I take it I can raise the money on Ketton, then?" he said.

The earl stared at the floor moodily.

"Hartwell gone, Parkfield mortgaged to the hilt, and now Ketton. What next, sir? Thank Heaven, you cannot play ducks and drakes with this place, or you would do it, I suppose! But I could forgive you all you have done if you had spared Violet."

The color mounted to the young man's face, and he bit his lip.

"In her, and her alone, lay your chance of salvation. You flung it away as ruthlessly as you have flung away your property. You have ruined yourself and broken her heart, and you sit there smiling – "

As if he could endure it no longer, Lord Blair rose.

"Broken her heart! Broken Violet's heart!" he repeated, with mingled amazement and incredulity. "Good Heavens, who told you that? I don't believe she has a heart to break! We – we broke off the match by mutual agreement. She was quite jolly about it! She – oh, come, sir, you don't know Violet as well as I do. I'll answer for it she thinks herself well out of it; as she is, by George! Any woman would get a bad bargain in me, I'm afraid."

"I wish that I could contradict you," said the earl grimly. "I pity any woman who trusts herself to your tender mercies. As for Violet Graham, I am glad that she has escaped; but your conduct was dishonorable – "

The young man's face paled, and his hands clinched with a passion of which he had shown no trace during the fight of yesterday.

"That will do, sir," he said, in a low voice. "No man, not even you, has the right to use such a word to me! I tell you it would have been dishonorable to have married Violet for her money; it was more honorable to keep from it. I'm going. As to Ketton, it's my own – "

"For the present," put in the earl, with fearful sarcasm.

– "And I can do what I like with it. I'd rather sell it twenty times over than marry Violet Graham, and get her money to save it! Good-bye, sir!" He was going out of the room with this brief farewell, but at the door he paused, and striding back held out his hand. "Look here, sir," he said, his voice softening, a gentler light coming into his eyes. "Don't let us part like this! Heaven knows when we shall meet again, if ever we do! I may have to clear out of England! I've some thoughts of going in for sheep farming out West, or I may break my neck at the next steeplechase. Anyhow, let us part friends."

The earl waved him to the chair.

If he had grasped the extended hand the warm heart of the young man would have forgiven all the hard words that had been spoken – forgiven and forgotten them.

"Sit down, please. You are right. Words are of no avail between us. In regard to your proposition, I am averse to it. I will give you the money. What is the amount?"

Lord Blair looked surprised, then grave.

"Thanks, sir," he said. "But I would rather you didn't. I have had too much from you already. I'm ashamed to think how much. I'm a spendthrift and a fool, as you say, but for the future I will spend only my own. I'm not ungrateful for all you have given me! No, but – I can't take any more from you."

The earl's lips came together tightly. He bowed.

"I have no right to combat your resolution," he said, "or to prevent you ruining yourself in your own fashion. After all, it matters very little whether the Jews have Ketton now or later; they will get it one time or the other, doubtless."

"I'm afraid they will," said Lord Blair, with a short sigh; then he rose. "Well, I'm off, sir."

"Stay!" said the earl; "our quarrel – if it can be called one – is over. You will oblige me by remaining for one night at least. I do not wish it to be said all over the country that we could not exist for twenty-four hours under one roof, as it will be said if you go at once. Stay, if you please."

"If you wish it, sir, certainly," said Lord Blair, not very joyously. "But I'm afraid I shall bore you dreadfully, you know."

"The boring will be mutual, I have no doubt," said the earl grimly. "I may remind you that we need meet only at dinner."

"That's true," said Lord Blair frankly. "Well, until then, I'll walk round the place."

Then earl inclined his head, and rang the bell which stood at his elbow.

"Lord Leyton will remain here to-night," he said to Larkhall, and that exemplary servant, holding the door open for Lord Blair to pass out, hurried off to tell Mr. Stibbings and Mrs. Hale the extraordinary news that the future earl was to sleep at the house which would some day be his own.

Lord Blair had spent a remarkably bad quarter of an hour; but before he had got half way down the broad staircase, with its carved balustrades and magnificent cross panelling, he began to shake off the effects with that wonderful good-humored carelessness which had lost him nearly all his lands, and won him so many hearts.

He went down the stairs into the hall and looked round him with a smile, as if his interview had been of the pleasantest description; then he lit a cigar and, with his hat on the back of his head, went out into the warm sunshine.

He walked along the terrace and across the lawns, and then as if by instinct found his way to the stables. And be it remarked, and it is worth noting, that he had not – as many a man in his position would have done – given one glance at the magnificent place with the thought that it would some day all be his.

Strange to say, for an heir, he didn't wish the earl dead. Blair Leyton hankered after no man's property, not even his uncle's; whatever sins may have been laid to his charge, he was innocent of that love of money which is the root of all evil.

So without a spark of envy or covetousness or ill-will, he went to the stables and, nodding pleasantly to the head groom, went into the stalls.

Of course the man knew who he was – the news had spread all over the Court in five minutes! – and was respectful, and in a second or two more than that; for Blair's manner was as pleasant with high, low, Jack, and the game all round.

"Some good horses," he said.

The man shook his head doubtfully.

"Some, my lord," he assented. "But not what they ought to be for so big a place – begging your lordship's pardon. You see his lordship the earl only has the carriage horses – and them only once now and again – and there's nobody to ride. I try to keep 'em up, but a man loses heart like, my lord."

"I understand," said Lord Blair, sympathetically. "It's a pity. Such a fine hunting country."

"Ah, isn't it, my lord!" said the man with a sigh. "If the earl 'ud only take the hounds – but there" – and he sighed again.

Lord Blair went up to a big black horse and smacked him, a little attention which the animal responded to by launching out viciously.

"Nice nag!" said Lord Blair, approvingly.

"All but his temper, my lord," said the man. "He's as crooked-minded a hoss as ever I see."

Lord Blair laughed.

"He's straight enough in other ways," he said. "Put a saddle on him and I'll take a turn."

The man hesitated a second.

"He's an awkward one to ride, my lord," he ventured.

"So I should think," said the young man, cheerfully; "but I like them awkward."

The horse was saddled and brought out, and immediately commenced to verify the character bestowed upon him.

"Ill-tempered dev – beast, I'll take him back, my lord," said the groom; but, with a laugh, Lord Blair got into the saddle, and as the horse reared brought him down in so neat a style that the groom's misgivings fled.

"All right, my lord," he said, with an approving nod.

"Yes, it's all right," said the young man, with another laugh. "He's rather hot just at present, but he'll come back like a lamb, and I shall be hot, I expect," and off he rode.

"There," said the groom to a circle of his helpers, "that's my idea of a young nobleman! There'd be some pleasure and credit in keeping a stable for him."

"What a pity he's such a bad young man," murmured a maid-servant, who had crept out to look on.

"He may be a bad young man," retorted the groom sententiously, "but he's a darned good rider."

"He's dreadfully handsome," said the girl, with a little sigh, as she ran in again, and they unconsciously expressed the general opinion of the two sexes of Blair, Viscount Leyton.

The announcement that the young lord was to remain the night at the Court threw Mrs. Hale into a state of excitement.

"I must see Mr. Stibbings about the lunch and dinner at once, and there's the room to prepare. I shall have to leave you to yourself to-day, my dear," she said to Margaret. "Bless me, if I'd only had an hour or two's notice I could have got something nice for dinner. The earl doesn't care what it is, and often sends the things away untouched; but a young man from London, and used to the dinners they get there at the London clubs, is very different."

"Don't mind me, grandma," said Margaret. "I suppose I can't help you at all?"

"You? – Good gracious me, no!" said the old lady quite pityingly.

"Then I'll get my hat and go into the garden," said Margaret.

"Do, my dear; but keep this side of the house, mind, and do not go in front of the earl's windows."

"Very well; I'll take care," laughed Margaret. "I suppose if the earl should happen to catch sight of me twice in one day it would be fatal! – or would he only have a fit?" But Mrs. Hale, fortunately for her, did not hear this.

Margaret went out into the garden, and carefully kept out of sight of the great windows. She was very happy, and now and again she would break into song. The garden attached to this wing was a large one, and filled with flowers, and when she came in to lunch she had a large bunch of roses and heliotrope and pinks in her hand.

"There was no notice – 'Do not pick the flowers!' grandma. I hope I haven't been very wicked?"

"No, no, my dear," said Mrs. Hale, who was in a fine state of flurry. "What a beautiful bouquet you have got!"

"Isn't it?" said Margaret, pinning a red rose in the bosom of her dress. "Where shall I put these?" and she looked round for a vase.

"Anywhere you like, my dear. Oh, Margaret, how nice they would be in Lord Leyton's room! It would make it seem more homely like; do what you will, a room that hasn't been used for months does look cold and formal."

"Doesn't it?" agreed Margaret. "And there is nothing like flowers to take off that effect. His lordship is welcome to them; so there they are, grandma."

"Yes, thank you," said Mrs. Hale, hurriedly. "I'll ring for Mary, unless you wouldn't mind running up with them; you'll arrange them decently, while she'll just throw them into a vase."

"Very well. Show me the way, Mary, to Lord Leyton's room," said Margaret as Mary entered.

Mrs. Hale had given him one of the best rooms in the house, and Margaret, who had never seen such an apartment, was lost in admiration of the silken hangings which stood in place of paper on the walls, and the old and priceless furniture.

She arranged the flowers in a deep, glass dish, and placed it on the spacious dressing table.

"His lordship ought to be pleased, miss," said Mary, shyly, as they were leaving the room.

Margaret laughed.

"I daresay he will think them very much in the way and throw them out of the window. I hope he won't throw dish and all," she said.

As she entered Mrs. Hale's sitting-room, she saw Mr. Stibbings approaching.

"I have been looking for you, miss," he said. "I have had a table put in the gallery, as his lordship directed, and his compliments, would you like any blinds put to the windows to shade the light?"

"Grandma, he did mean it after all," said Margaret, delightedly. "How kind? Oh, thank him, Mr. Stibbings! No, nothing more. I've got a portable easel and everything, and the light will do very well. Grandma, I may go now?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said the old lady, absently; "but mind, dear, if you hear the earl coming, you must get up and go away at once."

"Very well," said Margaret, with a smile, and she ran up and got her folding easel and painting materials. Mr. Stibbings wanted to place a footman at her disposal, but she laughingly declined, and with her impedimenta under her arm, and her paintbox in her hand, she made her way after lunch to the gallery.

"In the future, when I hear any one remark – 'as proud as a lord,' I shall correct them and say – 'kind as a lord,'" she said to herself. With all the eagerness of an artiste she set up her easel before the picture and commenced at once; and in a few minutes she had become absorbed in her work, and was lost to everything save the burning desire to catch something of the spirit of the great original she was copying.

"It is almost wicked to be so great!" she murmured. "How can I do more than libel you, you beautiful face?"

The afternoon glided on unnoticed by her. She heard a great bell booming overhead in a solemn fashion, but she gave it no attention beyond the thought, "the dinner or dressing bell," and went on with her copy.

She was so absorbed that she did not hear some one who had entered the gallery, and it was not until the some one stood close beside her that she knew of his presence.

With a start she looked up, and for a moment saw nothing but a handsome young man in evening dress.

His beauty – of the manliest type – gave her a pleasant sensation – she was an artist, remember – but the next moment she recognized him.

It was the young man whom she had called a savage; the gentleman who had fought Jem Pyke. Her eyes grew wide and her lips opened, and she sat and stared at him.

As for him, his astonishment equalled and surpassed hers. He had seen her back as he was passing the door of the gallery, and being unable to resist the temptation to ascertain what the face belonging to so graceful a figure was like, he had entered and softly approached her.

Margaret was a beautiful girl, but she was never lovelier than when under the spell which falls upon an artist absorbed in her work.

The clear, oval face grew dreamy, the large eyes softer and mystical, the red lips sweeter with a suggestful tenderness.

It was the loveliness of the face as well as the recognition of it which struck him – Blair Leyton, of all men – dumb and motionless.

They looked into each other's eyes while one could count fifty, then, with an embarrassment quite novel, he spoke.

"I've disturbed you?"

"No," said Margaret, and the word sounded blunt and cold in his ears. Who could he be, and how did he come here? Yesterday, fighting on the village green, this evening at Leyton Court. Then it flashed upon her: it was Lord Leyton! "No, I didn't hear you," she added.

"I came in quietly so as not to disturb you," he said, regaining some of his usual composure, but not all of it, for her loveliness dazzled, and her identity with the girl who had so sternly rebuked him yesterday, bewildered him.

"You – you are an artist?" he said.

"I have that honor," she said.

He looked at the copy.

"And a very good one! Your picture is better than the old one."

"You are *not* an artist, evidently," she said with a smile.

"No," he admitted; then a light shone in his eyes. "Oh, no, I am a savage!"

A burning blush covered her face, and she took up her brush.

Mr. Stibbings appeared between the velvet curtains.

"Dinner served, my lord."

Lord Blair Leyton nodded impatiently without turning.

"Are you staying here?" he said.

"Yes," said Margaret, going on with her painting.

He stood looking at her, at the beautiful, intelligent "artist" face, at the dove-colored dress, at the pink-white hand with its supple, capable fingers.

"Are you not going to dinner, my lord?" she said, unable to bear his silent presence any longer.

"I beg your pardon!" he said with a little start. "I was waiting for you."

"For me?" she said, turning her face to him with wide-eyed surprise.

"Yes," he said; "we will go together. You are coming, are you not?"

"I?" she said, then she laughed; "I am Mrs. Hale's – the housekeeper's granddaughter, Lord Leyton."

He reddened and bit his mustache.

"And you are not coming?" he said. "I am very sorry. I – "

"Dinner is served, my lord," said a footman in a low voice from the doorway.

Lord Blair uttered an impatient exclamation, which, as it was something remarkably like an oath, was fortunately unintelligible.

"Have you forgiven me yet?" he said, humbly.

"Forgiven?" said Margaret, as if she were trying to discover to what he referred. "Forgiven?"

"Yes! That affair of yesterday – the set-to, you know," he explained.

"Oh!" – the monosyllable dropped like a stone from her lips – "I had forgotten."

"That's right," he said, quickly; "if you've forgotten you have forgiven. I assure you – "

"Dinner is served, my lord," said a solemn voice.

He turned sharply.

"Confound it all – "

"Whether I have forgiven you is not of the least consequence, my lord," said Margaret, "but the earl will certainly not forgive you if you keep dinner waiting any longer," and she bent over her canvas with an air of absorption which shut him out of her cognizance completely.

He stood for a minute, then with an audible "Confound the dinner!" strode off.

CHAPTER V

Margaret did not raise her head from her work as Lord Blair Leyton moved reluctantly and impatiently down the gallery, but when the echo of his footsteps had died away she looked up with a slightly startled and altogether strange expression.

To her astonishment and disgust, the hand which held her brush was trembling. It was impossible to work any longer. Guido's head danced before her sight, and the other head – the handsome one of Blair Leyton – came between her and the painted one.

How very far from guessing she had been that this, the young man she had called a savage, was the earl's nephew, Lord Blair Leyton!

What must he think of her? And yet he had taken her for a guest of the house, had asked her if she were not going in to dinner with him!

She sat, paint brush in hand, and stared musingly at the curtained doorway through which he had gone, and thought of him.

It is a dangerous thing for a young, impressionable girl to think of a young man. But how could she help it? Her grandmother's words were ringing in her ears; according to Mrs. Hale, nothing was too bad to be said of poor Blair Leyton. He was the wickedest of the wicked, bad beyond all description. And yet – and yet! How bravely he had fought a stronger and bigger man than himself on behalf of a helpless dog!

She pondered over this question for half an hour, looking dreamily in the direction he had gone, then, without having arrived at any answer to it, she jumped up and, putting her painting materials together, left the gallery.

"Grandma," she said, as she entered the room in which the old lady was seated, placidly knitting, for the dinner was in full swing, and Mrs. Hale's anxiety was over, "grandma, I have seen Lord Leyton."

The old lady almost jumped.

"Seen Lord Leyton, Madge?"

Margaret nodded.

"Yes; he came into the gallery – "

The old lady broke in with a groan.

"Margaret, no good will come of your going to the picture gallery! Mark my words! It isn't – isn't proper and right like! And you've seen him. Did he speak to you?"

"Very much," said Margaret, smiling, but pensively. "He asked me if I weren't going in to dinner with him!"

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Mrs. Hale, lifting her hands. "Took you for a lady! Dear, now!"

"Yes; isn't it strange?" said Margaret, with great irony.

"Well – I don't know that," said the old lady, eying the graceful figure and lovely, refined face. "But, Margaret – "

"Well, grandma?" said Margaret, as the old lady hesitated.

"Well, I was going to say that – that – you must be careful!"

"Careful? What of?" said Margaret smiling. "Does Lord Blair bite, as well as the earl? What am I to be careful of, grandma?"

The old lady frowned.

"My dear, it isn't right and proper that you and Lord Blair should be on speaking terms," she said at last. "He's the earl's nephew, and – and you are only my granddaughter, you know."

"Which I am quite content to be," said Margaret, busily engaged with her paint box. "But I don't see that I have done anything very wicked, grandma. I couldn't very well refuse to answer him when he spoke."

"No, no, certainly not," said the old lady; "but if he speaks again – but there, it isn't likely you'll see him again. He is only going to stop the night, and you're not likely to meet him again, that's one comfort."

"It is indeed," said Margaret, with a laugh. "Especially as he is the gentleman whom I saw fighting in the village, and whom I called a savage."

"You – you called him a savage!" gasped Mrs. Hale. "My dear Margaret, is it possible?"

"It is only too possible and certain," said Margaret lightly, "and his lordship remembered it, too. However, as he asked me to forgive him, I suppose he has forgiven *me*; and if he has not I don't care. He was like a savage, and I spoke the truth." Then after a pause, during which the old lady stared in a rapt kind of fashion – "Grandma, what a pity it is that so wicked a man should be so good-looking."

"Yes, he is handsome enough," sighed the old lady, shaking her head.

"Oh, handsome, yes! I didn't mean that exactly. I meant really *good* looking. He looks so frank and – yes! – gentle, and his eyes seem to shine with kindness and – and – boyishness. Nobody would believe that he was a bad young man."

"They'd soon learn the truth when they knew him," said the old lady, rather shrewdly.

"I dare say. What a good thing it would be if all the good men were handsome, and all the bad ugly. You would tell at a glance, then, how the case lay. As it is, the man who looks like a villain may be as good as a saint, while the other who looks like a hero and an angel, is probably as bad as – as –"

"Lord Blair," broke in the old lady.

"Exactly – as Lord Blair," laughed Margaret. "And now I am going out to hear the nightingales, grandma. We haven't any nightingales in London – not of your sort, I mean. Ours haven't nice voices at all, and they mostly sing 'We won't go home till morning,' or 'He's a jolly good fellow,' and their voices sound rather unsteady as they go along the pavement. Those are the London kind of nightingale! Oh, what a lovely night –"

"Put a shawl on, Madge!" called the old lady. "Come back now; I can't have you catching cold the very first night!"

"Shawl? I haven't such a thing!" laughed Margaret. "This will do, won't it?" and catching up an antimacassar she threw it round her shoulders and ran out.

Dinner at Leyton Court was a stately function. Very often the earl, as Mrs. Hale had said, would make his meal of a morsel of fish or a tiny slice of mutton, but all the same an elaborate *menu* was prepared, and the courses were served with due state and ceremony by the butler and two footmen.

This night, in honor of Lord Blair, the dinner was more elaborate than usual; Mr. Stibbings had selected his choicest claret, and a bottle of '73 Pommery, and had himself superintended its icing. Already, although he had only been in the house a few hours, the young man had won the hearts of the servants!

But notwithstanding the choice character of the wines and the elaborate *menu*, Lord Blair seemed rather absent-minded and preoccupied. The earl was silent, almost grimly so, but the young man seemed not grim by any means, but dreamy. The fact was that the face of the young girl who had called him a savage yesterday, and whom he had seen again in the gallery this evening, was haunting him.

And – he wondered when and how he could see her again.

Of course he knew, as well as did Mrs. Hale, that there should be no acquaintanceship between Viscount Leyton and the granddaughter of his uncle's housekeeper, but he did not think of that, and, if he had, the reflection would not have stifled the desire to find her out and get a few more words from those sweet lips, one more smile or glance from the lovely eyes.

So that, what with Lord Blair being Margaret-haunted, and the earl being possessed by the fact of his nephew's wickedness, the grand dinner was anything but hilarious.

They talked now and again, but long before the dessert appeared they had dropped into a mutual silence. Then Mr. Stibbings carried in, daintily and carefully, a bottle of the famous Leyton port, and, with the air of one bestowing a farewell benediction, glided out and left the two gentlemen alone.

"Do you drink port, Blair?" said the earl, with his hand on the decanter.

"Yes, sir; I drink anything," replied the young man, awaking with a little start.

"You have a good digestion – good constitution?" said the earl.

"Oh, yes," assented Lord Blair, cheerfully; "I suppose so. Never had a day's illness in my life that I can remember, and can eat anything."

The earl looked at him musingly.

"And yet – " he paused, "your habits are not regular; you keep late hours?"

Lord Blair laughed.

"I'm seldom in bed before ten," he said. "Yes," he added, "I'm afraid I don't keep very good hours; it's generally daylight before I am in my little cot. What capital port, sir!"

"Yes? I do not drink it," said the earl.

There was silence for a moment, during which the elder man looked at the handsome face and graceful, stalwart figure of the younger one. Lord Blair was one of those men who look at their best in evening dress, and the earl could not help admiring him. Then he sighed.

"Have you thought over the words that passed between us this afternoon, Blair?" he asked.

"Well – I'm afraid I haven't," he admitted, frankly.

The earl frowned.

"And yet they were important ones – especially those which referred to your future, Blair. We have not seen much of each other – perhaps wisely – "

"I dare say," said Lord Blair, cheerfully. "People who can't agree are better apart, sir."

"But," continued the earl grimly, and not relishing the interruption, "but I would wish you to believe that I have your best interests at heart."

"Thank you, sir. I will take another glass of port."

"And in no surer way can these interests be promoted than by your marriage with Violet Graham."

Lord Blair frowned slightly, then he smiled.

"Pon my word, sir, I'm sorry to refuse you anything, especially after all your liberality; but it isn't to be done."

"Why not?" demanded the earl coldly.

Lord Blair hesitated, then he laughed grimly.

"Well, I suppose we can't hit it off; we don't care for each other."

The earl frowned.

"I have every reason to believe that Violet would be willing – "

"Oh, it's all a mistake, sir!" broke in Lord Blair quickly. "Nothing of the kind! Violet doesn't care a straw for me! And as to breaking her heart, as you said this afternoon, why" – he laughed – "she's the last girl in the world for that sort of thing! No, we thought we could manage it, but we found pretty soon that it wouldn't work, and so – and so – well, we just broke it off!"

"I can understand!" said the earl, grimly. "You wearied her with your dissipation, and stung her by your neglect."

Lord Blair flushed.

"Put it so, if you like, sir," he said, thinking what a good thing it was that they did *not* see much of each other.

"And so lost the chance of restoring your ruined fortunes," said the earl. "Violet's fortune is a large one. I am one of the trustees, and can speak with authority. It is large enough to repair all the mischief your wild, spendthrift course has produced. And you have lost, not only the means of your

salvation, but one of the best girls in England. Great Heaven" – he spoke quite quietly – "how can a man be so great a fool, and so blind!"

At another time the young man might have retorted, but he had had a good dinner and two glasses of the wonderful port, and so he only laughed.

"I suppose I am a fool, sir," he said good-temperedly. "Perhaps it's part of my constitution. But don't let us quarrel. It isn't worth while."

"You are right. It isn't worth while," said the earl, sinking back in his chair. "After all, I ought to be thankful that Violet has escaped; but blood is thicker than – water and I have thought of you more than of her. But let it pass. You are bent on following the road you have set out upon, and not even she nor I can stay you. As to Ketton, you refuse to accept my offer – "

"Yes, sir," said Lord Blair, gently but firmly. "I shall mortgage Ketton. I can't take any more money from you. If we were – well, better friends, it would be different, but – It's a pity you can't touch this port! The best wine I ever tasted!"

The earl sat in silence for a few minutes, then he rose.

"Coffee will be served in the drawing-room," he said. "You will excuse me?"

"Oh, certainly," said Lord Blair, jumping up. "I don't care about the coffee, I will go and get a cigar on the terrace. Perhaps I sha'n't see you again, sir, I start early in the morning. If I should not, I'll say good-bye," and he held out his hand.

The earl touched it with his thin white fingers.

"Good-bye," he said, and with a sigh he passed down the corridor to his own apartments.

Lord Blair took out his cigar-case and stepped through the open window on to the terrace.

"Yes, I'm on the road to ruin, as mine uncle says," he mused, "and going along at a rattling good pace, too! Sha'n't be long before I reach the terminus, I expect. Hartwell gone, Parkfield gone, and now Ketton. I'm sorry about Ketton! But I'd rather pawn everything that's left than take any more money from him! Heigho! I wonder whether any of the fellows who are so thick now will cut me when I can't come up on settling day and my name's on the black list! And I could put it all right by marrying Violet Graham. Just by marrying Violet. But I can't do that. I suppose I *am* a fool, as the old gentleman politely remarked. It's wonderful that I'm the only man he is ever rude to. They say he is the pink of courtesy and politeness to the rest of the world. 'Courtly Ferrers,' they used to call him. Ah, well, what does it matter? All the same in a hundred years. I've had my fling, or nearly had it, and after me – "

Before he could conclude with "the deluge," a girl's voice rose softly and sweetly in the distance, and seemed to float in and harmonize with the rather melancholy strain of his musings; and yet the voice was blithe and joyous enough, too.

Lord Blair leaned over the stone rail of the balustrade and listened.

A spell fell upon the wild young man, and for a few minutes a strange feeling – was it of remorse for his wasted life? – possessed him. Then there rose the desire to see the singer, and as such desires were far stronger in Lord Blair's breast than remorse, he moved quickly along the terrace in the direction of the voice.

It did not occur to him that it might be Margaret Hale, and he experienced a sudden thrill of gratification as he saw the dove-colored dress shining, a soft patch of light against the shrubbery of the small garden.

At the same moment Margaret saw his shadow cast upon the smooth lawn, and the song died on her lips.

He stopped short, and stood on top of the steps leading to the little garden, looking down at her.

"May I come?" he said quietly.

Margaret inclined her head gravely and rose. It was quite unnecessary to tell the Viscount Leyton that he was at liberty to step into a part of the garden that would belong to him some day.

"I'm awfully unlucky, Miss Hale," he said, flinging his cigar away and coming up to the seat where she had been sitting. "This is the second time to-day I have disturbed you; and yesterday – oh, yesterday won't bear thinking of! You were singing, weren't you?"

"Yes, my lord," said Margaret gravely, for her grandmother's words had suddenly occurred to her, and she moved away.

"Are you going?" he said. "Now, I have driven you away! Please, don't go. I'll take myself off at once."

"I was going, my lord," said Margaret.

"Oh, come," he retorted pleadingly; "it's almost as wicked to tell stories as it is to fight; and you know you were sitting here comfortably enough until I intruded upon you."

His voice, his manner were irresistible, and produced a smile on Margaret's face.

"It is getting late," she said, "and Mrs. Hale may want me."

"I don't think she will. It isn't late – " he looked at his watch – "I can't see. Your eyes are better than mine, I'll be bound. I've spoilt them sitting up studying at night. Will you look? But upon this condition," he added, covering the face of the watch with his hand, "that if it isn't ten o'clock, you will stay a little while longer; of course I'll go – if you want me to!"

His eagerness was so palpable, almost so boyish, that Margaret could not repress a soft laugh. Rather gingerly she came back a step, and he held out his watch.

"It is half-past nine," she said.

"There you are, you see; it isn't late at all! Now you stop out till ten, and I'll take myself off" – and with a nod he walked toward the steps, with Margaret's antimacassar shawl in his hand.

"My lord!" she said, in a tone of annoyance, for it seemed as if he had done it on purpose.

"Yes," he responded, turning back very promptly.

"Will you give me my anti – my shawl, please?"

"Eh? Oh, of course, I beg your pardon," he said, "I took it up intending to ask you to put it on – nights are chilly sometimes. Here you are. Let me put it on for you."

"No, no, thank you," said Margaret, taking it from him.

"Well, it is warm," he said, looking up at the sky, and then quickly returning his gaze to her face. "It's a pity you can't paint this; but you artists get rather handicapped on these night scenes, don't you? Want a big moon and a waterfall, and all that kind of thing?"

Margaret smiled. Certainly, in matters pertaining to art he was a perfect savage.

"To-night could be painted, my lord," she said, just stopping to say it, then moving away again.

"You think so?" he said, displaying, with boyish ingenuousness, his desire to engage her in conversation. "Well, I don't know much about it; rather out of my line, you know. But I like seeing pictures, and I think you must be awfully clever – "

"Thanks, my lord!" said Margaret, with admirable gravity. "But your avowed ignorance rather detracts on the value of your expressed approval, does it not?"

He looked at her.

"That's rather hot and peppery, isn't it?" he said, ruefully. "Look here, you know, if I'm not up in painting, I know a little of other things. There are three things you might put me through a regular exam. in, and I shouldn't come out badly."

"For instance, my lord?" said Margaret, dangerously interested, and slowly stopping.

"For instance. Well, I know a horse when I see it."

"Very few people take it for a cow," retorted Margaret.

He laughed.

"Oh, *you* know what I mean. Many flats take a screw for a horse, though. Well, I know what a horse is worth pretty well, and I know a good dog when I see him, and I can tell you the proper kind of fly for most of the rivers in England and Scotland; and I know the quickest and surest way

of stalking a stag; and – I can play a decent hand at *ecarte* – that is, if it's not *too* late in the evening; and – and – " he paused and looked rather at a loss.

"Is that all, my lord?"

"That's – that's all. It seemed rather a long lot, too, while I was running it over," he responded.

"And what use is your knowledge to you, my lord, unless you intend turning horse-dealer or gamekeeper? – but perhaps you do."

He laughed.

"By George, you're hard upon me! Won't you sit down?" Insensibly, Margaret sank into the seat, and he dropped carelessly on to the arm. "Well, I might do worse!"

"Much worse!" assented Margaret, severely.

He looked at her rather curiously.

"How strangely you said that," he remarked. "Meant for me from the shoulder, I expect; now wasn't it?"

Margaret was silent. She *had* meant it as a rebuke, but she would not have admitted it for the world.

He regarded her silently for a second, then he said:

"Miss Hale, they have been telling you something about me. They have, haven't they?"

A faint flush rose to her face.

"Would that matter in the slightest, my lord?"

"By George, yes!" he said. "Look here! there is an old proverb that says: 'Don't believe more than half you see, and less than half you hear.' I should like to know what they have been telling you about me!"

"What should 'they' say, my lord?" said Margaret. "Except that you are a very high-principled and serious-minded gentleman, doing all the good you could find to do, and setting a high example to your friends and companions?"

He leaned forward so that he might see her face, then broke into the musical and contagious laugh.

"It's too bad!" he said. "Miss Hale, I give you my word that the dev – , that nobody is quite as bad as he is painted – "

"It is to be hoped not, or, judging from the portraits one sees at the Academy, there must be a great many ugly people in the world," she said, quietly.

Lord Blair stared at her with unconcealed delight.

Pretty women he had met by the hundred, but a girl who was lovely as a flower, and witty as well, was a rarity that set his heart throbbing.

"All right!" he said. "I see you have made up your mind about me, and that you won't let me say a word in my own defense. But every poor beggar of a convict is allowed to say something before they pass sentence, don't you know, and you'll let me say my word before you send me away, painted black right through. Miss Hale, I'm in one of my unlucky months! Everything I've touched this June has gone wrong! My horse – but I don't want to trouble you about that – and to put the finishing touch to the catalogue, I had the bad luck to have you looking on while I'm having a set-to with a country yokel. Of course, you think the worst of me, and yet – " He stopped. "Well, I'm bad enough, I dare say," he said, with a sort of groan; "but I haven't had much chance; I haven't, indeed. They don't make many saints out of the kind of life that has fallen to me. What can you expect of a fellow who is thrown upon the world at nineteen without a friend to keep him straight or say a word of warning? And that was just the way of it with me; my father died when I was nineteen and I was let loose with plenty of money, and not a soul to show me the right road."

"Your mother?" said Margaret, and the next instant regretted it, for across his handsome face came a spasm, as if she had touched a wound across his heart.

"My mother died two years before my father; her death killed him. I wish that it had killed me. Don't let's speak of her."

"I am very sorry, my lord," murmured Margaret.

"All right," he said cheerfully. "If she had been living – but then! Well, I had no one. My uncle – the earl, here – would have nothing to say to me; I reminded him too much that he had lost his own boy and that I must come into the property. As if I wouldn't rather have died instead of the lad! He was as nice a boy as ever you saw – poor little chap! Well, where was I? Oh, on the road to ruin as my uncle said this afternoon, and, by George, he was right!" and he laughed. "But there – once you make the first false step, the rest is easy; it's all down hill, you see, and nobody to put the skid on – nobody! But never mind any more about me; I can see you've passed sentence. Are you living here altogether, Miss Hale?"

"No," said Margaret with a little start, and very quietly. She was thinking of the wasted life, the friendless, guardless youth which his wild, incoherent statement revealed, and something like pity for him was creeping into her heart.

Pity! It is a dangerous sentiment for one like Margaret to harbor for one like Blair Leyton!

"No; I am here on a visit, my lord."

"How jolly!" he said. "I hope you are enjoying yourself. But, perhaps you always live in the country?"

"I am enjoying myself very much. No, I live in London, my lord."

"In London!" he said, quickly. "But I say – " he broke off appealingly, "I wish you wouldn't 'my lord' me, you know."

Margaret laughed.

"My circle of acquaintances does not include any noblemen, Lord Leyton, and I am not quite sure of the way to address one of your rank," she said, faltering a little.

"How well she said that!" he thought. "Most girls would have giggled and blushed, but she took it as quietly as a duchess would have done!"

Then aloud he said:

"Well, it's usual to address us by our surname; I wish you would call me Leyton."

Margaret was silent a moment, while he scanned her face with suppressed eagerness.

"If it is quite usual," she said in her blissful ignorance. "It sounds rather abrupt."

"Why, of course!" he said. "Abrupt, not a bit. And you live in London! Now, shall I guess what part? Let me see. You are an artist. Yes. Well, Chelsea – "

"Wrong; but Kensington is not so far away," she said, with a smile.

"Kensington," he said. "The Art School, of course. How jolly! I've got rooms not very far from there. Perhaps we shall – " he hesitated and watched her rather fearfully – "we might meet, you know."

"I should say that there was nothing more improbable, my – Lord Leyton. We don't know the same people, and never shall, and – " she stopped, her own words had recalled Mrs. Hale's warning. "I must go now," she said, rising suddenly.

"Oh, it's not ten," he pleaded. "You feel chilly? Let me put your shawl on. It has slipped down. Why, what a funny shawl it is!"

"It's an antimacassar," she said laughing.

"So it is!" he said. "And look here, it has got entangled in my watch-chain; but they are built to get entangled in things, aren't they?" he added, fumbling with all a man's awkwardness at the tangled threads.

"Oh, you'll never get it off like that," said Margaret impatiently, and innocently enough her small supple fingers flew at it.

His own hand and hers touched, and with a feeling of surprise he felt the blood tingling at her touch. He looked at the lovely face so close to his own, so gravely, unconsciously beautiful, and a wild desire to lift the hand to his lips seized him, but with a mighty effort he forced it down.

"There it is!" he said. "And now to reward me for – not getting it undone, will you let me give you this flower?" and he stooped and picked a red rose.

Margaret started slightly and looked at him; but the handsome face wore its frankest, "goodest" look, and with a laugh she held out her hand. He drew it back with an answering laugh.

"Before I give it to you, will you tell me one thing, Miss Hale?"

"That depends," she said, "upon what the thing is."

"It's not much," he said. "Only this: will you tell me that you don't think I am quite the savage you accused me of being yesterday?"

She looked up at him with a faint color in her face.

"Yes, I will do that," she said. "But I think you should keep the rose, Lord Leyton."

"No," he said, laughingly, but with an intent look in his eyes, fixed upon her. "No, I've got a fancy for leaving something behind me that you may remember me by. I'm going to-morrow, you know."

"I did not know," said Margaret.

"Yes," with a sigh. "My welcome to the Court is soon outworn, and I'm back to London and the old road," with a laugh.

Margaret stood with averted face.

"Is – is it so inevitable, that same road? Is there no other, my lord?" she said.

"No, I'm afraid not, my lady," he said, smiling, but rather gravely.

"I think there must be, that there might be if you cared to take it," she said, gravely.

"If you cared that I should take it – I mean" – he broke off quickly, for she had looked alarmed at his words and their tone – "I mean that it's very good of you to care what becomes of a useless fellow like me, and –"

"Margaret!" called Mrs. Hale's voice from the open window.

Margaret started.

"Good-night, my lord," she said, hurriedly, and yet with simple dignity.

"Stop," he said, in a low voice; "you have forgotten your rose," and, following her a step or two, he touched her arm. "It is not a very grand one; there was a bowl of beauties in my room: some good soul had pick –" he stopped, for the color rose to Margaret's face. "*You* put them there!" he exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. "*You*!"

"I – I did not know –" she said, faltering, and trying to speak proudly.

"Oh, don't destroy my pleasure by explaining that you did not mean them for me!" he pleaded. "You put them there at any rate. Will you let me, in return, fix this rose in your shawl? We shall be more than quits then on my side!"

Oh, Margaret, put back the proffered flower! Red stands in the language of magic for all that is evil, for a passion that will burn into ashes of pain; put back the hand that offers it to you!

But he was too quick. Gently, reverently he fixed the rose in the meshes of the antimacassar, and, as he put it straight with a caressing touch, he murmured:

"Good-night! Try and remember me, Miss – Margaret, at any rate as long as the rose lives!"

Red as the flower itself, trembling with a feeling that was painfully like the stab of conscience, Margaret glanced up at him, and without a word, sped from his side.

Lord Leyton stood looking after her, as strange an expression in his face as her own had worn.

Then with a long sigh he went back to the seat and threw himself down into it, in the place where she had sat.

Half an hour passed; the nightingale for which Margaret had been waiting came out and sang for him; but the song gave him no delight, for in his whirling brain its notes seemed to take the shape of words: words of such sad, strange import! "Spare her! – spare her!" the bird seemed to sing; and as if he could not endure the appeal any longer, he rose impatiently and walked toward the terrace.

As he did so, a tall, skulking figure moved snake-like after him.

Lord Blair stopped at the bottom of the steps, and the shadow pursuing him stopped also, and raised a heavy stick.

For a moment it hovered evilly over Lord Blair's head, then, as if smitten by a sudden remorse or a desire for a still deeper revenge, Pyke let the stick fall, and, slinking back, disappeared amongst the shrubs.

CHAPTER VI

Margaret ran into the house, her heart beating fast, the color coming and going in her cheeks. To her amazement and annoyance, she felt that she was actually trembling! Well, if not trembling, quivering, as a leaf quivers when the summer wind passes over its bosom.

What was this that she had done? Notwithstanding her grandmother's warning and her own good resolutions, she had spent – how long! – nearly an hour talking alone with Lord Blair Leyton. And he had given her a rose! Not only given it to her, but fastened it in the antimacassar.

She could feel his fingers touching her still, as it seemed to her! She looked down at the rose, gleaming like a spot of blood on the white cotton of the antimacassar, then, with a sudden gesture, she went to pull it out and fling it through the window; but she averted her hand even as it touched the velvet leaves. Yes, she had done wrong; she ought not to have spoken to him, ought not to have remained with him, and most certainly ought not to have taken the rose from him.

She saw now how wrong she had been. They used to call her "Wild Margaret," "Mad Madge," when she was a child, but she had been trying to become quiet, and dignified, and discreet, and, as it seemed to her, had succeeded, until this wicked young man had tempted her into flirting – was it flirting? – in the starlight.

"You look flushed, my dear," said Mrs. Hale. "Are you tired?"

"I think I am a little," said Margaret, longing to get to the solitude of her own room.

"It's the country air," said the old lady, nodding. "It always makes people from London sleepy. Was it pleasant in the garden?" she added, innocently.

Margaret's face flushed.

"Y – es, very," she replied; then she was going on to tell the old lady of her meeting with Lord Blair, but stopped short.

"I think I will go up to bed now," she said, and giving the old lady a kiss, she went up-stairs to her own room. There she thought over every word that the young lord said, and that she herself had spoken. There had been no harm in any of it, surely! He had spoken respectfully, almost reverentially, and even when he had given her the rose he had done it with as much diffidence and high bred courtesy as if she had been a countess. Surely there had been no harm in it.

It was a lovely morning when she woke, and dressing herself she went straight to the picture gallery. As she left the room Lord Blair's red rose seemed to smile at her from the dressing table, and she took it up and carried it in her hand. It was just possible that she might meet him; if so, it would be as well to have the rose with her, for give it back she meant to, if a chance afforded. The light in the gallery could not have been better, and she set to work at first languidly, but presently with more spirit, and was becoming perfectly absorbed, when she heard a voice singing the refrain of the last popular London song.

It was a man's voice, it could be no other than Lord Blair's, and in a minute or two afterward she heard him enter the gallery.

She heard him coming toward her with a quick step, and looking up with his eyes fixed upon her with eager pleasure. He was dressed in the suit of tweeds in which he had looked so picturesque on the morning of the fight, and in his buttonhole he wore a white rose. It drew her eyes toward it, and she knew it at once – it was the finest of the roses she had placed in his room.

"Miss Hale!" he exclaimed, holding out his hand, while his eyes beamed with the frank, glad light of youth when it is pleased. "This is luck! I only strolled in here by mere chance – and – and to think of my finding you here! How early you are! And what a lot you have done!" staring admiringly at the canvas. "I hope you didn't catch cold last night?"

"No, my lord," said Margaret, as coldly as if her voice were frozen.

He looked at her with a quick questioning.

"I'm off almost directly," he said, with something like a sigh. "It's a bore having to go back to London and leave this place a morning like this. I had no idea it was so – so jolly, until – " he stopped; he was going to add: "until last night."

Margaret remained silent, dabbing on little spots of color delicately.

"I quite envy you your stay here," he went on, looking in her grave face, which had become somewhat pale since his arrival. "That jolly little garden, and – and this grand gallery. I hope you will be happy, and – and enjoy yourself."

"Thank you my lord," coldly as before.

He looked at her with a slightly puzzled frown.

"Yes, I should like to stay; but I can't – for the best of all reasons, I haven't been invited, don't you know."

Margaret said nothing, but carefully mixed some colors on her palette.

"And so – and so I'm off," he said, with a sudden sigh. "Perhaps we shall meet in London, Miss Hale."

"It is not likely," said Margaret gravely.

"So you said last night," he responded; "but I shall live in hopes. Yes. London's only a little place, after all, you know, and – and we may meet. Well, I'll say good-bye!"

"Good-bye, my lord," she said, affecting not to see his outstretched hand.

"Won't you shake hands?" he said with a laugh, which died away as she took up the rose and placed it in his extended palm.

"Will you take back this flower, my lord?" she said quietly, but with a trembling quiver on her lips.

"Take back?" he stammered. "Take back the rose I gave you last night!" he went on with astonishment. "Why? what have I done to offend you?" and he stared from the rose to her face.

"You have done nothing to offend me, my lord," said Margaret quickly, and with a vivid blush, which angered her beyond expression. "Nothing whatever, but – "

"But – well?" he said as she paused.

"But," she went on, lifting her eyes to his bravely – "but I do not think I ought to take a flower from you, my lord."

"Good lord, why not?" he demanded, with not unreasonable astonishment.

Margaret looked down. But she was no coward.

"I will say more than that," she said in a low but steady voice. "I ought not to have remained in the garden with you last night, Lord Leyton. I thought so last night, I am sure of it now. And if I ought not to have stayed talking with you, I certainly ought not to have accepted a flower from you! I beg your pardon, and – there is your rose!"

A look of pain crossed his handsome face.

"You haven't told me why yet," he said, after a pause.

Margaret bit her lip, and was silent for a second or two, then she said:

"Lord Leyton, there should be, can be, no acquaintance between you and me – "

"Now stop!" he said. "I know what you are going to say; you are going to talk some nonsense about my being a viscount and you being something different, and all that! As if you were not a lady, and as if any one could be better than that! Yes, they can, by George! and you *are* better, for you are an artist! A difference between us – yes, yes, I should think there was, between a useless fellow like myself and a clever, beautiful – "

"My lord!" said Margaret, flushing, then looking at him with her brows drawn together.

"I beg your pardon, I beg your pardon; I do indeed! But, all the same," he said, defiantly, "it's true! You are beautiful, but I don't rely on that. I say an artist and a lady is the equal of any man or woman alive, and if that's the reason you fling my flower back to me – "

"I didn't fling it, my lord," said Margaret, gravely.

"I'm a brute!" he said, penitently. "The difference between a brute and – and an angel! That's it. No, you didn't fling it, but it's just as if you had, isn't it now?"

"You will take back the flower, Lord Leyton, please?" she almost pleaded. "I don't want to fling it, as you say, out of the window."

He stood looking at her.

"How – how you must hate and despise me, by Jove!" he said.

Margaret flushed.

"You have no right to say that, my lord, because I see that I acted unwisely last night. How can I hate or despise one who is a stranger to me?"

"Yes, that's it; I'm a stranger, and you mean to keep me one!" he said, half bitterly, half sorrowfully. "Well, I can't complain; I'm not fit for you to know. Why, even my own flesh and blood are anxious to see the back of me! Yes, you are right, Miss Margaret."

He dwelt on the name sadly, using it unconsciously.

"Oh, no, no!" she said, wrung to the heart at the thought of wounding him so mercilessly. "It's not that! It's not of you I thought, but of myself."

"Of yourself yes," he said. "Communication with me is a kind of pollution; you cannot touch tar, you know! Oh, I understand! Well" – he hung his head – "I'll do as you tell me; I can't do less. I'll take my poor rose – " He stopped short, and something seemed to strike him. "But if I do, I must return you this," and he gently unfastened the white one from his coat, and held it out to her.

Margaret put out her hand irresolutely.

"Oh, take it!" he said recklessly. "It is one out of the bowl you gave me."

"I gave you?" she said.

"Yes," he said; "you picked them yourself, the girl told me so. I asked her. And you put them in my room. If I take your rose back you must take mine."

"Well," she said, and she took it slowly, and laid it on the table beside her.

He drew a long breath, then the color came into his face and the wild, daring Ferrers' spirit shone in his eyes.

"That's an exchange," he said. "It's a challenge and an acceptance. Don't you see what you have done in cutting me off and flinging me aside, Miss Margaret?"

"What have I done?" said Margaret.

"Yes! You have given me back my rose, but you forget that you have worn it, that it has been in your dress, that you have touched it, that it's like a part of yourself. And you have taken *my* rose, which has been in my room all night, while I dreamt of you – "

"Lord Leyton!" she panted, half rising.

"Yes!" he said, confronting her with the sudden passion which lay dormant in him and always, like a tiger, ready to spring to the surface. "You can throw my offer of friendship in my face, you can put me coldly aside, and – and wipe out last night as if it had never been, as if you had done some great wrong in talking to such a man as I am; but you can't rob me of the rose you have touched, ah! and worn."

"Give – give it me back!" she exclaimed, with a trepidation which was not altogether anger or fear. "Give it me back, my lord. You have no right – "

"To keep it! Haven't I?" he retorted. "What! when you forced it back on me! No, I will not give it you back! You may do what you like with the white one. You will fling it on the fire, I've no doubt. I can't help it. But this one, *yours*, I keep! It is mine. I will never part with it. And whenever I look at it I will remember how – until you discovered that I was not fit to associate with you, such a bad lot that you couldn't even keep a flower I gave you! – I'll remember that you have worn it near your heart."

White as herself, with a passion which had carried him beyond all bounds, he raised the red rose to his lips and kissed it, not once only but thrice.

Then, as he saw her face change, her lips tremble, his passion melted away, and all penitent and remorseful, he bent toward her.

"Forgive me!" he said, as if half bewildered; "I – I didn't know what I was saying. I – I am a savage! Yes, that's the name for me! Forgive me, and – good-bye!"

He lingered on the words till they seemed to fill the room with their music, low as they had been spoken. Then he turned.

Margaret found her voice.

"My lord – Lord Leyton. Stop!"

He stopped and turned.

"Give me back the rose, please," she said, firmly.

"No!" he said, his eyes flashing again. "Nothing in this world would induce me to give it to you, or to any one else. I'll keep it till I die! I'll keep it to remind me of last night – and of you!"

He stood for a moment looking at her steadily – if the passionate glance could be called steady; then the thick folds of the velvet curtain fell and hid him from her sight.

Margaret stood for a moment motionless.

Lord Leyton strode through the corridor into the hall. He scarcely knew where he was going, or saw the objects before him.

"The dog-cart is ready, my lord," said a footman.

Mr. Stibbings stood with respectful attention beside the door.

"Good-morning, my lord; the portmanteau is in – " he glanced at the rose which Lord Blair still held in his hand. "If your lordship would like to take some flowers with you, I will get some: there is time – "

"Flowers? Flowers?" said Lord Blair, confusedly; then, with an exclamation, he hid the rose in his breast and sprung into the cart.

The horse bounded forward and dashed down the avenue, Lord Blair looking straight before him like a man only half awakened.

Suddenly, seeing and yet scarcely seeing, he noticed a tall, wiry figure lounging against the sign-post in the center of the village green.

"Stop!" he said to the groom.

He pulled up and Lord Blair beckoned to the man.

Pyke resisted the summons for a second or two, then he slouched up to the dog-cart with his hands in his pockets.

"Good-morning, my man," said Lord Blair. "I hope you're none the worse for our little set-to?"

"*I'm* not the worse, and I sha'n't be," retorted Pyke, lifting his evil eyes for a moment to the handsome face then fixing them on the last button of Lord Blair's waistcoat.

"That's all right," said Lord Blair. "I see you've got a bruise or two still left," and he laughed. "And I dare say I have. Well, here is some ointment for yours," and he held out some silver.

Pyke opened his hand, and his fingers closed over it.

"That's all right," said Blair again, cheerfully. "We part friends, I hope?"

"Yes, we part friends," said Pyke, but the expression of his face would have suited "We part enemies" equally well.

"Well, we shall meet again, I dare say," said Blair. "Good-morning."

"Yes, we shall meet again," said the man, and as he spoke he shot a vindictive glance at Blair's face. "Oh, yes, my lord, we shall meet again," he snarled as the dog-cart drove on. "And it will be my turn then. Ointment, eh! It will be a powerful ointment as 'ud do you any good when I've done with you!"

CHAPTER VII

About four o'clock the same evening a group of people was gathered round a young lady who sat on a magnificent and strong-looking horse, standing with well-bred patience near the rails of the Mile.

The park was crammed, carriages, riders, and pedestrians all massed and hot, in the lovely June air, which seemed laden with the scent of the flowers, and heavy with the sound of wheels and voices.

The lady was young, but certainly not beautiful. That you decided at once, immediately you saw her. After a time, when you got to know her, your decision became somewhat shaken, and you would very likely admit that if she were not beautiful, she was, well – taking. She was not tall – short indeed, one of those small women who make us inclined to believe that all women should be small; one of those little women who twist great men – and great in all senses of the word – round their very diminutive little fingers. She had a beautiful figure, *petite*, fairy-like, lithesome and graceful, and it looked at its very best in the brown habit of Redfern's make. Her hair was black, her eyes gray, and her mouth – well, it was not small, but it was wonderfully expressive.

She was the center of a group. There were other young ladies with her, but she was distinctly the center, and the men who crowded round bent their eyes upon her, addressed most of their remarks to her, and, in fact, paid her the most attention: the other ladies did not seem to complain even silently; they took it as a matter of course.

For this little lady, with the not small but expressive mouth, was Miss Violet Graham, and she was, perhaps, the richest heiress in London.

There were several well-known men in the circle round her. There was the young Marquis of Aldmere, with the pink eyes and the receding chin of his race, his pink eyes fixed admiringly upon the small, alert face as he fingered the beginning of a very pale mustache.

Next him, and leaning on the rails so that he nearly touched her skirt, was Captain Floyd, otherwise the Mad Dragoon, as handsome as Apollo, as reckless as only an Irish dragoon can be, and as cool as a cucumber till the red pepper is applied.

Near to him was young Lord Chichester, who had just married a very charming young woman, but who still found it impossible to pass any group of which Violet Graham was the center. There was several others – a Member of Parliament, a well-known barrister, and a curate who happened just then to be the fashion – and, although there were a great many of them "all at once," Violet Graham seemed quite able to keep the whole team in hand. And while she talked, the small, keen eyes were taking in the features of the procession which passed and repulsed her.

"There goes the duchess," said Captain Floyd, raising his hat, as a stout lady, in a handsome equipage, inclined her head toward them. "Looks very jolly, considering that she has lost so much money, and that the duke is supposed to have left her."

"She puts her gain against her loss, don't you see," said Violet Graham quickly.

There was an applausive laugh, of course.

"And here comes the new bishop. Why do bishops always have such awfully plain wives, Miss Graham?" murmured Lord Chichester.

"That they may not be too proud, like some of us," she said, promptly.

Charlie Chichester's wife was good looking. He blushed.

"You are harder than ever, this afternoon, Miss Graham," he said.

"Or is it that you are softer?" she retorted.

The ready laugh rang out.

"Tremendous lot of people," said the dragoon, languidly; "it makes one long for a desert island all to one's self."

"Any island would be a desert which contained Captain Floyd," she said.

"I don't see the point," he said, looking up at her languidly.

"Because you would soon quarrel with and kill anyone else who happened to be living there," she retorted.

"That's right, Miss Graham," exclaimed Lord Chichester, cheering up. "Give him one or two lunges; he's far too conceited, and wants taking down."

"I wonder where Blair is?" said the captain, and he looked at Miss Violet, but whether intentionally or not could not be said. If there was any significance in his glance she did not betray herself by the movement of an eyelash.

"Oh, Blair?" said the marquis; "he's off into the country somewhere. Come a dreadful cropper over Daylight, you know. Think he's gone to raise the tin; don't know, of course."

"Of course!" assented Miss Graham, smiling down upon him.

He was known as "Sublime Ignorance."

"One for you, Aldy," chorused Chichester. "But, seriously, where is Blair? He went off without a word, don't you know, let me see, two days ago. Perhaps he's bolted! Shouldn't wonder! He has been going it awfully rapidly lately, don't you know. Poor old Blair!"

For once Miss Graham seemed to have no repartee ready. She sat looking straight between her horse's ears, her eyes still and placid, her lips set.

Then she looked round them with a smile.

"Well, I can't stay chattering with you any longer."

"Oh, give us another minute," pleaded Lord Chichester. "It's too hot for riding."

"And far too hot for talking," she put in. "I must be off! Are you coming, girls?"

As she spoke the two girls who were with her, and who had been talking with some of the men, obediently – everybody obeyed Violet Graham – gathered up their reins, a horseman rode slowly up, and bringing his horse to a stand close beside Violet Graham's, raised his hat.

He was a tall, fine-looking man, thin and not badly made, but there was something in his face which did not prepossess one. Perhaps it was because the lips were too thin and under control, or the eyes too close together, or perhaps it was the expression of steadfast determination which lent a certain coldness and hardness to the clear-cut features.

"Ah, Austin, how do you do?" said Miss Graham, with the easy carelessness of an intimate friend, but as she spoke her eyes seemed to seek his face, and finding something there, dropped to her horse's ears.

He answered her salutation in a low, clear voice – almost too cold and grave for so young and handsome a man, and exchanged greetings with the rest. Then, without looking at her, he said:

"Are you riding on?"

"Yes," she said. "We were just starting. Good-bye!" and with a wave of her hand to her circle of courtiers, she rode on, Austin Ambrose close by her side.

"How I hate that fellow!" murmured the dragoon, languidly, looking after them.

"Hear, hear," said Lord Chichester.

"And yet he isn't a bad fellow – what's the matter with him?" stammered the marquis.

"Don't know," murmured Captain Floyd. "I do not like thee, Dr. Fell, the reason why I cannot tell –"

"Who's Dr. Fell?" asked the marquis, with a bewildered stare.

A shout of laughter greeted his question.

"Look here, Sublime Ignorance," said the dragoon, with a wearied smile, "you are too good for this world. Such a complete lack of brains and ordinary intelligence are utterly wasted on this sublunary sphere."

"Oh, bother!" grunted the peer. "I never heard of any Dr. Fell, how should I? But what's the matter with Ambrose?"

"I don't know," said Lord Chichester, thoughtfully. "I think it's that smile of his, that superior smile, that makes you long to kick him; or is it the way in which he looks just over the top of your head?"

"Or is it because Miss Graham is such a special friend of his that he can take her away from all the rest of us put together?" murmured the captain.

"Oh, there is nothing on there," said Lord Chichester. "My wife – and she ought to know, don't you know – stoutly denies it."

"I didn't say there was anything between them. If there was, that would be sufficient reason for all of us hating him – barring you, Charlie, who are out of the hunt now."

"You don't hate Blair?" said Chichester, thoughtfully.

"Well, there is nothing between him and her; now, at any rate; and if there were we shouldn't hate him."

"Fancy hating old Blair!" exclaimed the marquis.

There was a general smile of assent at the exclamation.

"Best fellow alive!" said Chichester. "Poor old chappie; he's dreadfully down on his luck just at present."

"Oh, he'll come up to time all right!" broke in the dragoon. "You never find Blair knocked under for long. He'll come up smiling presently. Always falls on his legs, thank goodness. By the way," he said, more thoughtfully than was his wont, "it's rather rum how he and that fellow Ambrose get on so well together."

"Oh, Blair could get on with any one – Old Nick himself!" exclaimed Chichester, and amidst the general laugh the group melted and passed on with the crowd.

Miss Violet Graham rode on in silence for a moment or two, then she said, in an undertone:

"Have you seen him? Where is he?"

Austin Ambrose cast a cold glance of warning toward the others, and with a little gesture of impatience Violet Graham answered it.

"You are right. Come in to tea, will you?"

"Thanks," he said aloud. "I will leave you now," he added, as they reached the gates; "I will be round as soon as I have put the horse in."

Violet Graham nodded, and immediately joined in conversation with the people near her, and with her usual vivacity exchanged greetings and rapid exclamations with the people who rode or drove by. It seemed as if she knew and was known of everybody!

But presently she pulled up.

"Well, girls, I'm tired out. It really is too hot for any more of it. Any of you come home to tea with me?"

They knew by the way the invitation was given that they were not wanted, and of course declined, and Miss Graham, turning her horse, rode pretty smartly, hot as it was, toward the gate.

In a few minutes she was in her house in Park Lane.

It was one of the largest houses in the lane, and the appointments were of a magnificence suitable to the richest lady in London.

The hall she entered, though not so large as those in country mansions, was superbly decorated and lined with choice exotics. Statuary, white as the driven snow, gleamed against the mosaic walls. Plush had given place to Indian muslin for the summer months, and the white place looked like an Oriental or a Grecian dream.

"I am out to everyone but Mr. Ambrose," she said to the footman who attended her, and passing by the drawing-room, she ascended the stairs and entered a really beautiful apartment, which, as she reserved it for herself, might be called her boudoir.

She shut the door and dropped on a couch, flinging her hat on a table and feverishly tugging at her gauntlets. Then she rose and began pacing the room. And all the time she looked as anxious as a woman could look.

Presently the door opened, and a servant announced Mr. Ambrose.

"Bring some tea," she said, "and show Mr. Ambrose in."

He came in, cool, self-possessed, bringing with him, as it seemed, a breath of cold air.

Just glancing at her, he put down his hat and whip, and seating himself in one of the delightfully easy chairs, leant back and looked at her from under his lids.

It was a peculiar look, critical, analytical; it was the look a surgeon bends on a patient who is a curious and, perhaps, difficult case.

"Well?" she said, sinking into a chair and fidgeting with the handle of her whip.

The footman entered with the tea-tray, and Austin Ambrose, instead of answering, said:

"No sugar in mine, please."

She poured him out a cup with not too carefully concealed impatience, and as he rose and fetched it, taking it leisurely back to his chair, she beat a tattoo on the ground with her small feet.

"How tiresomely slow you can be when you like," she said. "I believe you do it to – to exasperate me."

"Why should I exasperate you?" he responded calmly, coolly. "Are you angry with me because I would not speak before the women who were with us in the park, or before the servant here; it is a question which of them would chatter most."

"Oh, you are right, of course. You always are," she said. "That makes it so annoying. But there are no women or servants here now, and you can speak freely, and – and at once. Did you see Blair?"

"I had just left him when I met you," he answered.

"Well?" she said, and her eyes sought his face eagerly, impatiently. "Where has he been?"

"To Leyton Court," he replied.

"To the earl's," she said. "I thought so."

"Yes," he said slowly; "he has been to the earl."

"Well, has he done anything for him?"

"No; nothing."

A look of relief shone in her eyes.

"I am glad, glad!" she murmured.

"He offered to lend him – or give him – the money he wanted, but Blair refused."

"He refused? That was like him!" she said, with a touch of pride and satisfaction. "Yes, that was just like him. They quarreled, of course?"

"Oh, yes, they quarreled!" assented Austin Ambrose quietly. "There were the materials for a quarrel. It seems that, finding the journey tedious, Blair enlivened it by fighting with one of the rustics."

She smiled, and a strange look came into her eyes.

"Yes, that is Blair all over! And the earl heard of it?"

"Yes," he said, slowly, "he heard of it; and, as the combat took place just outside the Court gates, he was not altogether pleased. Blair's account is amusing."

"He shall tell me! He shall tell me!" she said, looking into vacancy, her cheeks mantling, her eyes glowing. "I – I have never seen him fight –"

"I dare say he would gratify any desire you may have in that direction. He is always ready to fight, and on the smallest provocation," remarked Austin Ambrose, with icy coldness.

"No," she said, "he is not! He is not easily provoked, but when he is – but what does it matter? We don't want to waste time quarreling about him. I want to hear all – all that occurred!"

"I came to tell you," he said, slowly. "The earl, notwithstanding his anger at the brawl outside the Court gates, offered to lend Blair the money to help him out of this difficulty, but Blair refused."

"And – and Ketton must go?" she said, in a tone of satisfaction.

"Ketton must go the way of the rest," he assented.

She nodded, her small eyes shining brightly – too brightly.

"Ketton gone; there is not much left to fall back upon, is there?"

"No, not much," he replied.

"And – and he will not pull up; will not retrench? You will prevent that?" and she looked at him anxiously.

He did not reply, but his silence was significant enough.

"And he thinks you his best friend, his Fides Achates. Poor Blair!" and she laughed. "All his money gone, and his estates; Ketton is the last! Yes, he cannot keep the pace much longer. He will be – what do you men call it? – 'stone broke,' and then – and then!" She drew a long breath, and her lips closed and opened. "And then he will come to me! He *must* come!" she exclaimed, her hand trembling. "He will come back to me, and – " She stopped suddenly, arrested by a look in his cold secretive eyes. "Is there anything else? Have you told me all?"

He was silent a moment, and she accosted him with an exclamation of impatient impetuosity.

"What else is there? Why do you sit there silent, if there is anything else to tell? Do you remember our bargain?"

"Yes, I remember it," he said, after a moment's pause, during which he looked, not at her, but just over her head, in the manner which Captain Floyd found so objectionable. "It is not so long ago that I should forget it. It was made in this room. I had the presumption to offer you – "

"Never mind that!" she broke in, but as if she had not spoken he went on in his cold, impassive manner.

"I had the presumption to offer you my hand, to beg yours! I was fool enough to imagine that your smiles and your sweet words were intended to signify that such an offer would not meet with a refusal. It was a mistake! I had forgotten that I was poor, and that you were rich. You recalled me to my senses by a laugh, which I hear still – "

"What is the use – " she tried to break in with, but he went on.

"Most men, I believe, placed in a like position, that of a rejected suitor, implore the lady who refuses them her love to grant them her friendship. I did so. But while most men mean nothing by it, I meant a great deal. If I could not have you for myself, I was ready to serve you as a grand vizier serves his sultan, or a slave its master. You accepted my offer. It was not I you wanted, but another man; that man was Blair Leyton."

"You – you put it plainly," she murmured, biting her lip.

He looked over her head.

"Yes. Truth is natural, always," he said. "I undertook to help you to gain him, asking for no definite reward, but trusting to your generosity."

"You shall ask for what you like. I will grant it," she said, "you know that."

"Yes," he said, "I know that," but his response was uttered with a significance which she did not appreciate. "You and he were engaged, the engagement is broken off; it is my task to see that it is renewed. I am engaged in that task now. Between us, it is understood there should be no concealment. Concealments would be fatal. You ask me to tell you all concerning this visit of Blair to the Court. I intend doing so. There is not much difficulty, for I have just left Blair, who has found out his heart after his fashion."

"His heart! About what?" she demanded, taking up her tea cup.

"About a girl he met there," he said, quietly and coldly.

The fragile and priceless piece of porcelain fell crushed by her fingers.

He rose courteously and picked up the fragments.

"It will spoil the set," he remarked, coolly.

"Girl – girl! What girl?" she demanded.

She was white to the lips, and her gray eyes seemed to have grown dark, almost black.

"A girl whom he found staying in the house," he rejoined, with a cool ease that maddened her. "I can describe her, for Blair was minute to weariness. She is tall, graceful, has auburn hair, large and expressive eyes, a small mouth, a clear, musical voice, an angelic smile – "

She put up her hand.

"Are – are you saying all this to – to play with me?" she said, and her voice was almost hoarse. He raised his brows and looked above her head with an air of surprise.

"No. They are his own words," he said.

"And – and you think he is in" – she paused; something seemed to stop her utterance for a moment – "he is in love with this girl?"

He sat silent for a moment.

"If he is to be believed, he is most certainly," he responded, coldly; "very much in love – head over heels! He raved about her for nearly an hour by the clock; I timed him."

She sprung to her feet and moved to and fro, her tiny hand clutching the riding-whip until the nails ran into her soft, pink palm. Then she stopped suddenly and looked at him.

"And this – this girl?" she said. "Who is she?"

"The daughter – no, to be exact, the granddaughter of the earl's housekeeper," he said slowly, as if he enjoyed it.

She panted and drew her breath heavily.

"A servant!" she exclaimed, and she laughed, a cruel unwomanly laugh.

"By no means," he said. "She is, according to Blair, and he is a fair judge, a lady. She is an artist, and is copying the pictures in the Court gallery."

Her face grew white and anxious again.

"What – what is her name?" she demanded, and her voice was hard and hoarse.

He took an ivory tablet from his pocket and consulted it.

"Her name is Margaret – a pretty name; reminds one of Faust, doesn't it? Margaret Hale."

"Margaret Hale," she repeated slowly; then she came and stood in front of him, her gray eyes as hard as steel, her lips drawn across her white, even teeth. "And he – you say – he is in love with her?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"He says so," he said coldly.

"And – and he speaks of marrying her?"

"Apparently it is the one and absorbing desire of his life," he responded in exactly the same manner.

She opened her lips as if about to speak again, then sank on to a couch in silence.

He rose.

"I'll go," he said.

"Wait!" she said, and she stretched out her hand with the whip in it. "Austin, this – this, must be stopped, prevented – " she spoke with a panting breathlessness. "You – you understand. It *must* be prevented, at *all* costs, at any risks! You will do it! Promise me! Remember our bargain! Ask what you please, I will grant it. Half – every penny I possess – anything! You will prevent it!"

He stood looking at her without an atom of expression on his clean-cut face, which might have been a marble mask.

"I understand," he said, after the pause. "At any cost? You will not upbraid, reproach me in the future, whatever may happen?"

"No. I shall not! At any cost!" she repeated, meeting his cold glance.

He stood regarding the wall above her head for a moment, then, without a word, went out and left her.

Slowly, impassively, he paced down the stairs, his eyes fixed on the open doorway and the street beyond, but reaching the hall, which happened to be empty, he paused, and with his foot on the doorstep, he turned round and smiled.

It was a peculiar smile and difficult to analyze, but supposing a man had caught a wild animal in a trap and had left it hard and fast, to be killed at his leisure, that man might smile as Austin Ambrose smiled as he looked round the hall of Violet Graham's house in Park Lane.

CHAPTER VIII

Margaret had never been in love. If any one had asked her why not, she would have said that she was too busy, and hadn't time. Young men had admired her, and some few, the artists whom she met now and again, had fallen in love with her, but no one had ever spoken of the great mystery to her, for there was something about Margaret, with all her wildness, an indescribable maiden dignity which kept men silent.

Lord Blair had been the first to speak to her in tones hinting at passion, and it is little wonder that his words clung to her, and utterly refused to be dismissed from her mind, though she tried hard and honestly to forget them; even endeavored to laugh at them, as the wild words of a wild young man, who would probably forget that he had ever spoken them, and forget her, too, an hour or two after he had got to London.

But she could not. She said not a word of what had occurred to old Mrs. Hale, for she felt that she could not have borne the flow of talk, and comment, and rebuke which the old lady would pour out. It would have been better if she had spoken and told her all; a thing divided becomes halved, a thing dwelt upon grows and gets magnified.

Margaret brooded over the wild words Lord Blair had said until every sentence was engraved on her mind; even the expression of his face as he stood before her, defiant as a Greek god, got impressed upon her memory so that she could call it up whenever she pleased, and, indeed, it rose before her when she did not even wish it.

"This is absurd and – and nonsensical!" she exclaimed on the second day after his departure, when she suddenly awoke to the fact that she had been sitting, brush in hand, staring before her and recalling Lord Blair's handsome, dare-devil eyes, as they had looked into hers. "I am behaving like a foolish, sentimental idiot!" she told herself, dabbing some color on her canvas with angry self-reproach. "What on earth can it matter to me what such a person as Viscount Leyton said to me? I shall never see him again, and he has probably forgotten, by this time, that such a person as myself exists! I am an idiot not to be able to forget him as easily. He behaved like a savage to the very last, and I would not speak to him again if – if we were cast alone on a desert island!"

She sprung to her feet with an exclamation of annoyance, and began bundling her painting materials together, and was in the midst of clearing up, when she heard a step behind her, and saw the earl.

It was near the dinner hour, and he was in evening dress, for, though he dined alone, he always assumed the regulation attire; and Margaret, as she looked at him, could not help noticing the vague likeness between him and Lord Blair.

"Do I disturb you?" he said, in his low, grave voice, and he paused with the knightly courtesy for which he was famous.

"No, my lord. I have just finished for to-day," said Margaret, rather shyly, for she felt his greatness, which spoke in the tone of his voice, and proclaimed itself even in his gait, and the way he held himself.

With a slight inclination of his head he came and stood before the canvas.

A slight expression of surprise came over his face.

"You have made an excellent copy," he said. "I think you are capable of higher work – original work."

Margaret's face flushed with pleasure, but she said nothing. It was not for so humble an individual as herself to bandy compliments with so great a personage as the Earl of Ferrers.

"You have worked hard," he said, looking at her; "not too hard, I hope."

Now Margaret had grown rather pale during these last two days. It had been one of the results of Lord Blair's passionate words. She did not sleep much at night, and what with this and dwelling

upon the scene that had passed between them, the roses which Mrs. Hale wished to see had vanished from her face.

"You are looking tired and pale," said the earl, in a gravely kind fashion.

"I am quite well, my lord," she said, standing with lowered lids under the piercing gaze of the dark-gray eyes.

"Yes, it is a very good copy," he said, returning to the picture. "I should have paid you a visit before; I have not lost my interest in art, but I have been engaged and indisposed. I have had my nephew with me," he continued, more to himself than to her – "Lord Leyton." He sighed. "You may not have seen him?"

"I have seen him, my lord," said Margaret, and for the life of her she could not help the tell-tale flush rising to her face.

His eyes rested on hers, and seemed to sink to the innermost depths of her soul.

"Have you spoken to him?" he asked, not angrily, but in the tones a judge might use.

Margaret's face grew pale again.

"I have spoken to him, my lord," she said.

The earl's face grew stern and he stood perfectly motionless, with his eyes fixed on her face.

"I am sorry for that."

"Sorry, my lord?" faltered Margaret.

"I am sorry," he repeated. "My nephew, Lord Leyton, is a wicked and unprincipled young man. He is not fit –"

"Oh, my lord!" said Margaret, all her womanly chivalry rising on behalf of the absent.

The earl looked at her, his eyes dark and severe.

"He is not fit to hold converse with such as you." Then the look of grief and surprise seemed to recall him to himself. "No matter. He has gone. It is not likely that you will see him again –"

"No, my lord," assented Margaret, with simple dignity.

"Let us say no more about him. He has nearly broken my heart; he is the one thorn in my side," he went on, notwithstanding that he had said no more should be spoken of the wicked young man. "He is a spendthrift and a gambler, and –" he stopped, suddenly. "If your work is done, permit me to walk with you on the terrace; the air is cool and inviting."

"I have finished for to-day, my lord," she said.

He went to the window and opened it wide for her, and held it open until she had passed out.

It was only to Lord Blair that he was rough and fierce.

"It is a lovely evening," he said, looking out upon the far-stretching lawns.

Margaret stood beside him in silence.

"What will you do with your Guido when you have finished it, Miss Hale?" he said, after a moment or two.

Margaret laughed softly.

"I don't know, my lord," she said at last.

"If you will sell it, I will buy it," he said.

Margaret flushed with gratification.

"I do not know its worth, but I will venture to offer you fifty pounds."

"That's a great deal too much, my lord," she said, decidedly.

"I think not," he responded, so quietly that she could say nothing else beyond "Thank you, my lord!"

"You shall paint another picture for me," he said; "not a copy this time." He paused a moment, then went on, "Choose some small piece of woodland scenery and paint it for me, if you will, Miss Hale."

"I will, my lord," said Margaret, gratefully.

Her simple response seemed to please him, and he looked at her thoughtfully, and with a sad regret. Why had not Heaven blessed him with a daughter like to this beautiful girl? was passing through his mind.

Then he said suddenly:

"You have no parents, Miss Hale?"

"No, my lord," said Margaret sadly.

"And you rely upon your own efforts?" he said gently.

"Yes," replied Margaret, "I depend entirely upon my painting, Lord Ferrers."

"It is not an ignoble dependence," said the stately old man. "You are happy in being able to rely upon yourself. And you delight in your work?"

"I am fonder of it than anything else, my lord," said Margaret, with a smile.

The earl paced toward the broad steps that lead from the terrace to the gardens, and Margaret, feeling that she must not go until she was dismissed, walked by his side.

At a turn in the path he stopped short.

"I must leave you now," he said. "Good-bye! Perhaps, some day, you will be kind enough to give me your company in another stroll. You will not forget the picture?"

"Oh, no, my lord," said Margaret, dropping a courtesy.

The earl paced slowly to his own apartments, and entering the library, sat down before the great carved writing-table.

For half an hour he sat musing.

"So young, so innocent, so much at the mercy of the cold, cruel world. Depends upon her art! Poor child, a frail dependence! Why should I not? I am rich beyond calculation, as they tell me. Why should I not do one act of common kindness, and make my money of some use to one deserving it? Hitherto it has passed, through Blair's hands to blacklegs and scoundrels."

He drew the paper toward him and took up the pen with an air of resolution and wrote a note to Messrs. Tyler & Driver, the family solicitors.

"Gentlemen," he wrote, "add a codicil to my will, bequeathing five thousand pounds to Margaret Hale, the granddaughter of Mrs. Hale, who acts as the Court housekeeper.

Very truly yours,
Ferrers."

It was an important letter for Margaret, but it bore upon her future to an extent far greater than would be inferred even by the gift of so large a sum of money.

CHAPTER IX

It was only when she had left the earl that Margaret noticed how kind and gracious he had been. He had not only bought the copy of the Guido, and commissioned another picture of her, but had walked by her side and smiled upon her, treating her almost as an equal, with a gentleness and deference indeed which seemed to indicate that he thought her a superior.

"I'll go into the woods and find a subject at once," she said to herself. "And it shall be my very best picture, or – I'll know the reason why. No wonder people are fond of lords and ladies, if they are all like the great Earl of Ferrers."

No doubt, if she had known the contents of the letter he had just written to Messrs. Tyler & Driver, she would have thought still more highly of him.

She had a sketch-block and pencil in her hand, and she went through to the woods that fringed the Court lawns on three sides.

They were lovely woods: there was no more beautiful place in England than Leyton Court, and Margaret almost forgot the purpose for which she had come, as she sat in a little bushy dell, through which ran a tiny stream, tumbling in silvery cascades over the bowlders rounded by the hand of Time.

But presently, when she had drank deep of its beauty, she began to make a sketch of the dell.

What a lucky girl she was! The possessor of the silver medal, an exhibitor in the Academy, and now commissioned by no less a personage than the Earl of Ferrers.

"I shall be really famous if I go on like this," she said to herself, with a soft laugh.

Then the laugh died out on her lips, for, with a sudden spring, a young man reached the rock she was at that moment sketching, and from it dropped to her side.

It was Lord Leyton.

Margaret was so startled that she let the sketch-block fall from her hand, and sat looking at him, with the color slowly fading from her face. She had succeeded in forgetting him for a short hour or two, and here he was at her side again.

And Lord Blair assuredly looked, if not startled, pale and haggard.

For the last two days, since he had left Margaret, overwhelmed by his passionate outburst, he had been living after his wildest and most reckless fashion, and two days of such dissipation and sleeplessness, added to passion, tell even upon such perfect physical specimens of humanity as Blair Leyton.

"Lord Leyton!" she said at last.

He picked up her sketch-block, but held it, still looking at her.

"I've frightened you," he said, remorsefully; "I – I am a brute. I did not know you were here until I jumped upon that stone, when I was close upon you."

Margaret tried to smile.

"It does not matter," she said. "Give me my block, please," and she held out her hand.

He drew a little nearer, and gave her the block.

"You are sketching?" he said, his eyes fixed on her face with a wistful eagerness.

She inclined her head.

"Yes; I am painting a picture for the earl."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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