

**GARVICE
CHARLES**

ONLY A GIRL'S
LOVE

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CHAPTER I

It is a warm evening in early Summer; the sun is setting behind a long range of fir and yew-clad hills, at the feet of which twists in and out, as it follows their curves, a placid, peaceful river. Opposite these hills, and running beside the river, are long-stretching meadows, brilliantly green with fresh-springing grass, and gorgeously yellow with newly-opened buttercups. Above, the sunset sky gleams and glows with fiery red and rich deep chromes. And London is almost within sight.

It is a beautiful scene, such as one sees only in this England of ours – a scene that defies poet and painter. At this very moment it is defying one of the latter genus; for in a room of a low-browed, thatched-roofed cottage which stood on the margin of the meadow, James Etheridge sat beside his easel, his eyes fixed on the picture framed in the open window, his brush and mahlstick drooping in his idle hand.

Unconsciously he, the painter, made a picture worthy of study. Tall, thin, delicately made, with pale face crowned and set in softly-flowing white hair, with gentle, dreamy eyes ever seeking the infinite and unknown, he looked like one of those

figures which the old Florentine artists used to love to put upon their canvases, and which when one sees even now makes one strangely sad and thoughtful.

The room was a fitting frame for the human subject; it was a true painter's studio – untidy, disordered, and picturesque. Finished and unfinished pictures hung or leant against the walls, suits of armor, antique weapons, strange costumes littered the floor or hung limply over mediæval chairs; books, some in bindings which would have made the mouth of a connoisseur water, lay open upon the table or were piled in a distant corner. And over all silence – unbroken save by the sound of the water rushing over the weir, or the birds which flitted by the open window – reigned supreme.

The old man sat for some time listening to Nature's music, and lost in dreamy admiration of her loveliness, until the striking of the church clock floated from the village behind the house; then, with a start, he rose, took up his brushes, and turned again to the easel. An hour passed, and still he worked, the picture growing beneath the thin, skillful hand; the birds sank into silence, the red faded slowly from the sky, and night unfolded its dark mantle ready to let it fall upon the workaday world.

Silence so profound took to itself the likeness of loneliness; perhaps the old man felt it so, for as he glanced at the waning light and lay his brush down, he put his hand to his brow and sighed. Then he turned the picture on the easel, made his way with some little difficulty, owing to the litter, across the room,

found and lit an old briar-wood pipe, and dropping into the chair again, fixed his eyes upon the scene, and fell into the dreamy state which was habitual with him.

So lost in purposeless memory was he, that the opening of the door failed to rouse him.

It was opened very gently and slowly, and as slowly and noiselessly a young girl, after pausing a moment at the threshold, stepped into the room, and stood looking round her and at the motionless figure in the chair by the window.

She stood for full a minute, her hand still holding the handle of the door, as if she were not certain of her welcome – as if the room were strange to her, then, with a little hurried pressure of her hand to her bosom, she moved toward the window.

As she did so her foot struck against a piece of armor, and the noise aroused the old man and caused him to look round.

With a start he gazed at the girl as if impressed with the idea that she must be something unsubstantial and visionary – some embodiment of his evening dreams, and so he sat looking at her, his artist eye taking in the lithe, graceful figure, the beautiful face, with its dark eyes and long, sweeping lashes, its clearly penciled brows, and soft, mobile lips, in rapt absorption.

It is possible that if she had turned and left him, never to have crossed into his life again, he would have sunk back into dreamland, and to the end of his days have regarded her as unreal and visionary; but, with a subtle, graceful movement, the girl threaded the maze of litter and disorder and stood beside him.

He, still looking up, saw that the beautiful eyes were dim, that the exquisitely curved lips were quivering with some intense emotion, and suddenly there broke upon the silence a low, sweet voice:

"Are you James Etheridge?"

The artist started. It was not the words, but the tone – the voice that startled him, and for a brief second he was still dumb, then he rose, and looking at her with faint, trembling questioning, he answered:

"Yes, that is my name. I am James Etheridge."

Her lips quivered again, but still, quietly and simply, she said:

"You do not know me? I am Stella – your niece, Stella."

The old man threw up his head and stared at her, and she saw that he trembled.

"Stella – my niece – Harold's child!"

"Yes," she said, in a low voice, "I am Stella."

"But, merciful Heaven!" he exclaimed, with agitation, "how did you come here? Why – I thought you were at the school there in Florence – why – have you come here alone?"

Her eyes wandered from his face to the exquisite scene beyond, and at that moment her look was strangely like his own.

"Yes, I came alone, uncle," she said.

"Merciful Heaven!" he murmured again, sinking into his chair. "But why – why?"

The question is not unkindly put, full, rather, of a troubled perplexity and bewilderment.

Stella's eyes returned to his face.

"I was unhappy, uncle," she said, simply.

"Unhappy!" he echoed, gently – "unhappy! My child, you are too young to know what the word means. Tell me" – and he put his long white hand on her arm.

The touch was the one thing needed to draw them together. With a sudden, yet not abrupt movement, she slid down at his side and leant her head on his arm.

"Yes, I was very unhappy, uncle. They were hard and unkind. They meant well perhaps, but it was not to be borne. And then – then, after papa died, it was so lonely, so lonely. There was no one – no one to care for me – to care whether one lived or died. Uncle, I bore it as long as I could, and then I – came."

The old man's eyes grew dim, and his hand rose gently to her head, and smoothed the rich, silky hair.

"Poor child! poor child!" he murmured, dreamily, looking not at her, but at the gloaming outside.

"As long as I could, uncle, until I felt that I must run away, or go mad, or die. Then I remembered you, I had never seen you, but I remembered that you were papa's brother, and that, being of the same blood, you must be good, and kind, and true; and so I resolved to come to you."

His hand trembled on her head, but he was silent for a moment; then he said, in a low voice:

"Why did you not write?"

A smile crossed the girl's face.

"Because they would not permit us to write, excepting under their dictation."

He started, and a fiery light flashed from the gentle, dreamy eyes.

"No letters were allowed to leave the school unless the principals had read them. We were never out alone, or I would have posted a letter unknown to them. No, I could not write, or I would have done so, and – and – waited."

"You would not have waited long, my child," he murmured.

She threw back her head and kissed his hand. It was a strange gesture, more foreign than English, full of the impulsive gracefulness of the passionate South in which she had been born and bred; it moved the old man strangely, and he drew her still closer to him as he whispered —

"Go on! – go on!"

"Well I made up my mind to run away," she continued. "It was a dreadful thing to do, because if I had been caught and brought back, they would have – "

"Stop, stop!" he broke in with passionate dread. "Why did I not know of this? How did Harold come to send you there? Great Heaven! a young tender girl! Can Heaven permit it?"

"Heaven permits strange things, uncle," said the girl, gravely. "Papa did not know, just as you did not know. It was an English school, and all was fair and pleasant outside – outside! Well the night just after I had received the money you used to send me each quarter, I bribed one of the servants to leave the door open

and ran away. I knew the road to the coast and knew what day and time the boat started. I caught it and reached London. There was just enough money to pay the fare down here, and I – I – that is all, uncle."

"All?" he murmured. "A young, tender child!"

"And are you not angry?" she asked, looking up into his face. "You will not send me back?"

"Angry! Send you back! My child, do you think if I had known, if I could have imagined that you were not well treated, that you were not happy, that I would have permitted you to remain a day, an hour longer than I could have helped? Your letters always spoke of your contentment and happiness."

She smiled.

"Remember, they were written with someone looking over my shoulder."

Something like an imprecation, surely the first that he had uttered for many a long year, was smothered on the gentle lips.

"I could not know that – I could not know that, Stella! Your father thought it best – I have his last letter. My child, do not cry – "

She raised her face.

"I am not crying; I never cry when I think of papa, uncle, Why should I? I loved him too well to wish him back from Heaven."

The old man looked down at her with a touch of awe in his eyes.

"Yes, yes," he murmured; "it was his wish that you should

remain there at school. He knew what I was, an aimless dreamer, a man living out of the world, and no fit guardian for a young girl. Oh, yes, Harold knew. He acted for the best, and I was content. My life was too lonely, and quiet, and lifeless for a young girl, and I thought that all was right, while those fiends – "

She put her hand on his arm.

"Do not let us speak of them, or think of them any more, uncle. You will let me stay with you, will you not? I shall not think your life lonely; it will be a Paradise after that which I have left – Paradise. And, see, I will strive to make it less lonely; but" – and she turned suddenly with a look of troubled fear – "but perhaps I shall be in your way?" and she looked round.

"No, no," he said, and he put his hand to his brow. "It is strange! I never felt my loneliness till now! and I would not have you go for all the world!"

She wound her arms round him, and nestled closer, and there was silence for a space; then he said:

"How old are you, Stella?"

She thought a moment.

"Nineteen, uncle."

"Nineteen – a child!" he murmured; then he looked at her, and his lips moved inaudibly as he thought, "Beautiful as an angel," but she heard him, and her face flushed, but the next moment she looked up frankly and simply.

"You would not say that much if you had seen my mamma. *She* was beautiful as an angel. Papa used to say that he wished

you could have seen her; that you would have liked to paint her. Yes, she was beautiful."

The artist nodded.

"Poor, motherless child!" he murmured.

"Yes, she was beautiful," continued the girl, softly. "I can just remember her, uncle. Papa never recovered from her death. He always said that he counted the days till he should meet her again. He loved her so, you see."

There was silence again; then the artist spoke:

"You speak English with scarcely an accent, Stella."

The girl laughed; it was the first time she had laughed, and it caused the uncle to start. It was not only because it was unexpected, but because of its exquisite music. It was like the trill of a bird. In an instant he felt that her childish sorrow had not embittered her life or broken her spirit. He found himself almost unconsciously laughing in harmony.

"What a strange observation, uncle!" she said, when the laugh had died away. "Why I am English! right to the backbone, as papa used to say. Often and often he used to look at me and say: 'Italy has no part and parcel in you beyond your birth, Stella; you belong to that little island which floats on the Atlantic and rules the world.' Oh, yes, I am English. I should be sorry to be anything else, notwithstanding mamma was an Italian."

He nodded.

"Yes, I remember Harold – your father – always said you were an English girl. I am glad of that."

"So am I," said the girl, naively.

Then he relapsed into one of his dreamy silences, and she waited silent and motionless. Suddenly he felt her quiver under his arm, and heave a long, deep sigh.

With a start he looked down; her face had gone wofully pale to the very lips.

"Stella!" he cried, "what is it? Are you ill? Great Heaven!"

She smiled up at him.

"No, no, only a little tired; and," with naive simplicity, "I think I am a little hungry. You see, I only had enough for the fare."

"Heaven forgive me!" he cried, starting up so suddenly as almost to upset her. "Here have I been dreaming and mooning while the child was starving. What a brainless idiot I am!"

And in his excitement he hurried up and down the room, knocking over a painting here and a lay figure there, and looking aimlessly about as if he expected to see something in the shape of food floating in the air.

At last with his hand to his brow he bethought him of the bell, and rang it until the little cottage resounded as if it were a fire-engine station. There was a hurried patter of footsteps outside, the door was suddenly opened, and a middle-aged woman ran in, with a cap very much awry and a face startled and flushed.

"Gracious me, sir, what's the matter?" she exclaimed.

Mr. Etheridge dropped the bell, and without a word of explanation, exclaimed – "Bring something to eat at once, Mrs. Penfold, and some wine, at once, please. The poor child is

starving."

The woman looked at him with amazement, that increased as glancing round the room she failed to see any poor child, Stella being hidden behind the antique high-backed chair.

"Poor child, what poor child! You've been dreaming, Mr. Etheridge!"

"No, no!" he said, meekly; "it's all true, Mrs. Penfold. She has come all the way from Florence without a morsel to eat."

Stella rose from her ambush.

"Not all the way from Florence, uncle," she said.

Mrs. Penfold started and stared at the visitor.

"Good gracious me!" she exclaimed; "who is it?"

Mr. Etheridge rubbed his brow.

"Did I not tell you? It is my niece – my niece Stella. She has come from Italy, and – I wish you'd bring some food. Bring a bottle of the old wine. Sit down and rest, Stella. This is Mrs. Penfold – she is my housekeeper, and a good woman, but," – he added, without lowering his tone in the slightest, though he was evidently under the idea that he was inaudible – "but rather slow in comprehension."

Mrs. Penfold came forward, still flushed and excited, and with a smile.

"Your niece, sir! Not Mr. Harold's daughter that you so often have spoken of! Why, how did you come in, miss?"

"I found the door open," said Stella.

"Good gracious me! And dropped from the clouds! And that

must have been an hour ago! And you, sir," looking at the bewildered artist reproachfully, "you let the dear young thing sit here with her hat and jacket on all that time, after coming all that way, without sending for me."

"We didn't want you," said the old man, calmly.

"Want me! No! But the dear child wanted something to eat, and to rest, and to take her things off. Oh, come with me, miss! All the way from Florence, and Mr. Harold's daughter!"

"Go with her, Stella," said the old man, "and – and," he added, gently, "don't let her keep you long."

The infinite tenderness of the last words caused Stella to stop on her way to the door; she came back, and, putting her arms around his neck, kissed him.

Then she followed Mrs. Penfold up-stairs to her room, the good woman talking the whole while in exclamatory sentences of astonishment.

"And you are Mr. Harold's daughter. Did you see his portrait over the mantel-shelf, miss? I should have known you by that, now I come to look at you," and she looked with affectionate interest into the beautiful face, as she helped Stella to take off her hat. "Yes, I should have known you, miss, in a moment? And you have come all the way from Italy? Dear me, it is wonderful. And I'm very glad you have, it won't be so lonely for Mr. Etheridge. And is there anything else you want, miss? You must excuse me for bringing you into my own room; I'll have a room ready for you to-night, your own room, and the luggage, miss – "

Stella smiled and blushed faintly.

"I have none, Mrs. Penfold. I ran – I left quite suddenly."

"Dearie me!" murmured Mrs. Penfold, puzzled and sympathetic. "Well, now, it doesn't matter so long as you are here, safe, and sound. And now I'll go and get you something to eat! You can find your way down?"

"Yes," Stella said. She could find her way down. She stood for a moment looking through the window, her long hair falling in a silky stream down her white shoulders, and the soft, dreamy look came into her eyes.

"Is it true?" she murmured. "Am I really here at home with someone to love me – someone whom I can love? Or is it only a dream, and shall I wake in the cold bare room and find that I have still to endure the old life? No! It is no dream, it is true!"

She wound up the long hair and went down to find that Mrs. Penfold had already prepared the table, her uncle standing beside and waiting with gentle impatience for her appearance.

He started as she entered, with a distinct feeling of renewed surprise; the relief from uncertainty as to her welcome, the kindness of her reception had already refreshed her, and her beauty shone out unclouded by doubt or nervousness.

The old man's eyes wandered with artistic approval over the graceful form and lovely face, and he was almost in the land of dreams again when Mrs. Penfold roused him by setting a chair at the table, and handing him a cobwebbed bottle and a corkscrew.

"Miss Stella must be starving, sir!" she said, suggestively.

"Yes, yes," he assented, and both of them set to work exhorting and encouraging her to eat, as if they feared she might drop under the table with exhaustion unless she could be persuaded to eat of everything on the table.

Mr. Etheridge seemed to place great faith in the old port as a restorative, and had some difficulty in concealing his disappointment when Stella, after sipping the first glass, declined any more on the score that it was strong.

At last, but with visible reluctance, he accepted her assertion that she was rescued from any chance of starvation, and Mrs. Penfold cleared the table and left them alone.

A lamp stood on the table, but the moonbeams poured in through the window, and instinctively Stella drew near the window.

"What a lovely place it is, uncle!" she said.

He did not answer, he was watching her musingly, as she leant against the edge of the wall.

"You must be very happy here."

"Yes," he murmured, dreamily. "Yes, and you think you will be, Stella."

"Ah, yes," she answered, in a low voice, and with a low sigh. "Happier than I can say."

"You will not feel it lonely, shut up with an old man, a dreamer, who has parted with the world and almost forgotten it?"

"No, no! a thousand times no!" was the reply.

He wandered to the fireplace and took up his pipe, but with a

sudden glance at her laid it down again. Slight as was the action she saw it, and with the graceful, lithe movement which he had noticed, she glided across the room and took up the pipe.

"You were going to smoke, uncle."

"No, no," he said, eagerly. "No, a mere habit – "

She interrupted him with a smile, and filled the pipe for him with her taper little fingers, and gave it to him.

"You do not want me to wish that I had not come to you uncle?"

"Heaven forbid!" he said, simply.

"Then you must not alter anything in your life; you must go on as if I had never dropped from the clouds to be a burden upon you."

"My child!" he murmured, reproachfully.

"Or to make you uncomfortable. I could not bear that, uncle."

"No, no!" he said, "I will alter nothing, Stella; we will be happy, you and I."

"Very happy," she murmured, softly.

He wandered to the window, and stood looking out; and, unseen by him, she drew a chair up and cleared it of the litter, and unconsciously he sat down.

Then she glided to and fro, wandering round the room noiselessly, looking at the curious lumber, and instinctively picking up the books and putting them in something like order on the almost empty shelves.

Every now and then she took up one of the pictures which

stood with their faces to the wall, and her gaze would wander from it to the painter sitting in the moonlight, his white hair falling on his shoulders, his thin, nervous hands clasped on his knee.

She, who had spent her life in the most artistic city of the world, knew that he was a great painter, and, child-woman as she was, wondered why the world permitted him to remain unknown and unnoticed. She had yet to learn that he cared as little for fame as he did for wealth, and to be allowed to live for his art and dream in peace was all he asked from the world in which he lived but in which he took no part. Presently she came back to the window, and stood beside him; he started slightly and put out his hand, and she put her thin white one into it. The moon rose higher in the heavens, and the old man raised his other hand and pointed to it in silence.

As he did so, Stella saw glide into the scene – as it was touched by the moonbeams – a large white building rearing above the trees on the hill-top, and she uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What house is that, uncle? I had no idea one was there until this moment!"

"That is Wyndward Hall, Stella," he replied, dreamily; "it was hidden by the shadow and the clouds."

"What a grand place!" she murmured. "Who lives there uncle?"

"The Wyndwards," he answered, in the same musing tone, "the Wyndwards. They have lived there for hundreds of years,

Stella. Yes, it is a grand place."

"We should call it a palace in Italy, uncle."

"It is a palace in England, but we are more modest. They are contented to call it the Hall. An old place and an old race."

"Tell me about them," she said, quietly. "Do you know them – are they friends of yours?"

"I know them. Yes, they are friends, as far as there be any friendship between a poor painter and the Lord of Wyndward. Yes, we are friends; they call them proud, but they are not too proud to ask James Etheridge to dinner occasionally; and they accuse him of pride because he declines to break the stillness of his life by accepting their hospitality. Look to the left there, Stella. As far as you can see stretch the lands of Wyndward – they run for miles between the hills there."

"They have some reason to be proud," she murmured, with a smile. "But I like them because they are kind to you."

He nodded.

"Yes, the earl would be more than kind, I think –"

"The earl?"

"Yes, Lord Wyndward, the head of the family; the Lord of Wyndward they call him. They have all been called Lords of Wyndward by the people here, who look up to them as if they were something more than human."

"And does he live there alone?" she asked, gazing at the gray stone mansion glistening in the moonlight.

"No, there is a Lady Wyndward, and a daughter – poor girl."

"Why do you say poor girl?" asked Stella.

"Because all the wealth of the race would not make her otherwise than an object of tender pity. She is an invalid; you see that window – the one with the light in it?"

"Yes," Stella said.

"That is the window of her room; she lies there on a sofa, looking down the valley all the day!"

CHAPTER II

"Poor girl!" murmured Stella. There was silence for a moment. "And those three live there all alone?" she said.

"Not always," he replied, musingly. "Sometimes, not often, the son Leycester comes down. He is Viscount Trevor."

"The son," said Stella. "And what is he like?"

The question seemed to set some train of thought in action; the old man relapsed into silence for a few minutes. Then suddenly but gently he rose, and going to the other end of the room, fetched a picture from amongst several standing against the wall, and held it toward her.

"That is Lord Leycester," he said.

Stella took the canvas in her hand, and held it to the light, and an exclamation broke involuntarily from her lips.

"How beautiful he is!"

The old man took the picture from her, and resting it on his knees, gazed at it musingly.

"Yes," he said, "it is a grand face; one does not see such a face often."

Stella leant over the chair and looked at it with a strange feeling of interest and curiosity, such as no simply beautiful picture would have aroused.

It was not the regularity of the face, with its clear-cut features and its rippling chestnut hair, that, had it been worn by a

Wyndward of a hundred years ago, would have fallen in rich curls upon the square, well-formed shoulders. It was not the beauty of the face, but a something indefinable in the carriage of the head and the expression of the full, dark eyes that attracted, almost fascinated, her.

It was in a voice almost hushed by the indescribable effect produced by the face, that she said:

"And he is like that?"

"It is lifelike," he answered. "I, who painted it, should not say it, but it is like him nevertheless – that is Leycester Wyndward. Why did you ask?"

Stella hesitated.

"Because – I scarcely know. It is such a strange face, uncle. The eyes – what is it in the eyes that makes me almost unable to look away from them?"

"The reflection of a man's soul, Stella," he said.

It was a strange answer, and the girl looked down at the strange face interrogatively.

"The reflection of a man's soul, Stella. The Wyndwards have always been a wild, reckless, passionate race; here, in this village, they have innumerable legends of the daring deeds of the lords of Wyndward. Murder, rapine, and high-handed tyranny in the olden times, wild license and desperate profligacy in these modern ones; but of all the race this Leycester Wyndward is the wildest and most heedless. Look at him, Stella, you see him here in his loose shooting-jacket, built by Poole; with the diamond

pin in his irreproachable scarf, with his hair cut to the regulation length: I see him in armor with his sword upraised to watch the passionate fire of his eyes. There is a picture in the great gallery up yonder of one of the Wyndwards clad just so, in armor of glittering steel, with one foot on the body of a prostrate foe, one hand upraised to strike the death-dealing blow of his battle-ax. Yes, Leycester Wyndward should have lived four centuries back."

Stella smiled.

"Has he committed many murders, uncle, burnt down many villages?"

The old man started and looked up at the exquisite face, with its arch smile beaming in the dark eyes and curving the red, ripe lips, and smiled in response.

"I was dreaming, Stella; an odd trick of mine. No, men of his stamp are sadly circumscribed nowadays. We have left them no vent for their natures now, excepting the gambling-table, the turf, and – " he roused suddenly. "Yes, it's a beautiful face, Stella, but it belongs to a man who has done more harm in his day than all his forefathers did before him. It is rather a good thing that Wyndward Hall stands so firmly, or else Leycester would have melted it at ecarte and baccarat long ago."

"Is he so bad then?" murmured Stella.

Her uncle smiled.

"Bad is a mild word, Stella; and yet – look at the face again. I have seen it softened by a smile such as might have been worn

by an innocent child; I have heard those lips laugh as – as women are supposed to laugh before this world has driven all laughter out of them; and when those eyes smile there is no resisting them for man or woman."

He stopped suddenly and looked up.

"I am wandering on like an old mill. Put the picture away, Stella."

She took it from him and carried it across the room, but stood for a moment silently regarding it by the lamp light. As she did so, a strange fancy made her start and set the picture on the table suddenly. It seemed to her as if the dark eyes had suddenly softened in their intense fixed gaze and smiled at her.

It was the trick of a warm, imaginative temperament, and it took possession of her so completely that with a swift gesture she laid her hand over the dark eyes and so hid them.

Then, with a laugh at her own folly, she put the picture against the wall and went back to the window and sat beside the old man.

"Tell me about your past life, Stella," he said, in a low voice.

"It seems to me as if you had always been here. You have a quiet way of speaking and moving about, child."

"I learnt that while papa was ill," she said, simply. "Sometimes he would sit for hours playing softly, and I did not wish to disturb him."

"I remember, I remember," he murmured. "Stella, the world should have known something of him; he was a born musician."

"He used to say the same of you, uncle; you should have been

a famous artist."

The old man looked up with a smile.

"My child, there are many men whom the world knows nothing of – luckily for them. Your father and I were dreamers, both; the world likes men of action. Can you play?"

She rose and stood for a moment hesitating. In the corner of the room there was a small chamber organ – one of those wonderful instruments which in a small space combine the grand tones of a cathedral organ with the melodious softness of a flute. It was one of the few luxuries which the artist had permitted himself, and he was in the habit of playing snatches of Verdi and Rossini, of Schubert and Mozart, when the fading light compelled him to lay the brush aside.

Stella went up to it softly and seated herself, and presently began to play. She attempted no difficult fugue or brilliant march, but played a simple Florentine vesper hymn, which she had heard floating from the devout lips of the women kneeling before the altar of the great church in Florence, and presently began to sing it.

The old man started as the first clear bird-like notes rose softly upon the evening air, and then covering his face with his hands went straight to dreamland.

The vesper hymn died softly, slowly out, and she rose, but with a gesture of his hand he motioned her to remain at the organ.

"You have your father's voice, Stella; sing again."

She sang a pleasant ditty this time, with a touch of pathos

in the refrain, and hearing a slight noise as she finished, looked round, and saw the old man rise, and with quivering lips turn toward the door.

The young girl's sweet voice had brought back the past and its dead too plainly, and he had gone out lest she should see his emotion.

Stella rose and went to the window, and stood looking into the night. The moonlight was glinting the river in the distance, and falling in great masses upon the lawn at her feet. Half unconsciously she opened the window, and stepping out, found herself in a small garden, beautifully kept and fragrant with violets; her love for flowers was a passion, and she stepped on to the path in search of them. The path led in zigzag fashion to a little wooden gate, by which the garden was entered from the lane. Stella found some violets, and looking about in search of further treasure store, saw a bunch of lilac blossom growing in the lane side.

To open the gate and run lightly up the side of the bank was the impulse of the moment, and she obeyed it; there were still deeper masses of flowers a little further down, and she was walking toward them when she heard the sound of a horse galloping toward her.

For a moment she was so startled by the unexpected sound that she stood looking toward the direction whence it came, and in that moment a horse and rider turned the corner and made full pelt for the spot where she was standing. Stella glanced back

toward the little white gate to discover that it was not in sight, and that she had gone further than she intended. It was of no use to attempt to get back before the horseman reached her, there was only time to get out of the way. Lightly springing up the bank, she stood under the lilac tree and waited.

As she did so, the horse and man came out of the shadow into the moonlight. To Stella, both looked tremendously big and tall in the deceptive light, but it was not the size, but the attitude of the rider which struck her and chained her attention.

She could not see his face, but the figure was that of a young man, tall and stalwart, and full of a strange, masterful grace which displayed itself in the easy, reckless way in which he sat the great animal, and in the poise of the head which, slightly thrown back, seemed in its very attitude eloquent of pride and defiance. There was something strange and unusual about the whole bearing that struck Stella, unused as she was to meeting horsemen in an English country lane.

As he came a little nearer she noticed that he was dressed in evening dress, excepting his coat, which was of velvet, and sat loosely, yet gracefully, upon the stalwart frame. In simple truth the rider had thrown off his dress coat for a smoking jacket, and still wore his dress boots. Stella saw the moonlight shining upon them and upon a ruby, which blazed sullenly upon the white hand which held the whip.

As if rider and horse were one, they came up the lane, and were abreast of her, the man all unconscious of her presence.

But not so the horse; his quick, restless eye had caught sight of the shimmer of Stella's dress, and with a toss of the head he swerved aside and stood still. The rider brought his eyes from the sky, and raising his whip, cut the horse across the flank, with a gesture of impatient anger; but the horse – a splendid, huge-boned Irish mare, as fiery and obstinate as a lion – rose on its hind legs instantly, and the whip came down again.

"Confound you! what is the matter?" exclaimed its master. "Go on, you idiot!"

The horse pricked its ears at the sound of the familiar voice, but stood stock still, quivering in every limb.

Stella saw the whip raised again, and instinctively, before she was aware of it, her womanly protest sprang from her lips.

"No! no!"

At the sound of the eager, imploring voice, the rider kept his whip poised in the air, then let his arm fall, and dragging rather than guiding the horse, forced it near the hedge.

"Who is it? Who are you?" he demanded, angrily. "What the –"

Then he stopped suddenly, and stared speechlessly, motionless, and transfixed – horse and rider, as it were, turned to stone.

Tall and graceful, with that grace which belongs to the girlhood which stands on the threshold of womanhood, with her exquisite face fixed in an expression of mingled fear and pity, and a shyness struggling with maidenly pride, she made a picture

which was lovely enough to satisfy the requirements of the most critical and artistic mind – a picture which he who looked upon it carried with him till the day he died.

For a moment he sat motionless, and as he sat the moon fell full upon his face, and Stella saw the face of the portrait whose eyes she had but a few minutes since hidden from her sight.

A lifetime of emotion may pass in a minute; a life's fate hangs upon the balance of a stroke of time. It was only for a moment that they looked into each other's eyes in silence, but that moment meant so much to each of them! It was the horse that broke the spell by attempting to rise again. With a slight movement of the hand Leicester Wyndward forced him down, and then slid from the saddle and stood at Stella's feet, hat in hand.

Even then he paused as if afraid, lest a word should cause the vision to vanish into thin air; but at last he opened his lips.

"I beg your pardon."

That was all. Four words only, and words that one hears daily; words that have almost lost their import from too familiar commonplace, and yet, as he said them, they sounded so entirely, so earnestly, so intensely significant and full of meaning that all the commonplace drifted from them, and they conveyed to the listener's ear a real and eager prayer for forgiveness; so real and earnest that to have passed them by with the conventional smile and bow would have been an insult, and impossible.

But it was not only the words and the tone, but the voice that thrilled through Stella's soul, and seemed to wake an echoing

chord. The picture which had so awed her had been dumb and voiceless; but now it seemed as if it had spoken even as it had smiled, and for a moment she felt a woman's desire to shut out the sound, as she had shut out the smiling eyes.

It was the maidenly impulse of self-protection, against what evil she did not know or dream.

"I beg your pardon," he said again, his voice deep and musical, his eyes raised to hers. "I am afraid I frightened you. I thought I was alone here. Will you forgive me?"

Stella looked down at him, and a faint color stole into her cheeks.

"It is I who should beg pardon; I am not frightened, but your horse was – and by me?"

He half glanced at the horse standing quiet enough now, with its bridle over his arm.

"He is an idiot!" he said, quickly; "an obstinate idiot, and incapable of fear. It was mere pretense."

"For which you punished him," said Stella, with a quick smile.

He looked up at her, and slowly there came into his eyes and his lips that smile of which Mr. Etheridge had spoken, and which Stella had foreseen.

"You are afraid I am going to whip him again?"

"Yes," she said, with simple directness.

He looked at her with a curious smile.

"You are right," he said; "I was. There are times when he requires a little correction; to-night is one of them. We have not

seen each other for some little time, and he has forgotten who is master. But I shall not forget your 'No,' and will spare the whip; are you satisfied?"

It was a strange speech, closing with a strangely abrupt question. It was characteristic of the speaker, who never in all his life probably had known for a moment what nervousness or embarrassment meant. Judging by his tone, the easy flow of the musical voice, the frank, open manner, one would have imagined that this meeting with a strange and beautiful girl was the most matter-of-fact affair.

"Are you satisfied?" he repeated, as Stella remained silent, trying to fight against the charm of his simple and direct manner. "If not, perhaps that will do it?" and taking the whip, a strong hunter's crop, in both his white hands, he broke it in two as easily as if it were a reed, and flung it over his shoulder.

Stella flushed, but she laughed, and her dark eyes beamed down upon him with serious archness.

"Does not that look as if you were afraid you should not keep your promise?"

He smiled up at her.

"It does," he said – "you are right; I may have been tempted beyond my strength. He is a bad-tempered beast, and I am another. Why do you laugh – ?"

He broke off, his voice changing as subtly as some musical instrument.

Stella hesitated a moment.

"I beg you will tell me – I shall not be offended."

She laughed, and clung with one hand to the lilac, looking down on him.

"I was thinking how fortunate it was that he could not whip you. It is not fair, as you are both so bad-tempered, that one only should get punished."

He did not laugh, as another man would have done; but there came into the dark eyes a flash of surprised amusement, such as might have shone in those of the giant Gulliver when some Liliputian struck him with a pin-sized stick; and his lips parted with a smile.

"It was a natural reflection," he said, after a pause. "Will you let me help you down?"

Stella shook her head. Somehow she felt safe up there above him, where but the dark eyes could reach her.

"Thank you, no; I am gathering some lilac. Do not trouble."

And she turned slightly from him, and stretched up her hand for a branch above her head. The next moment he sprang up the bank lightly, and stood beside her.

"Permit me," he said. And with one sweep he drew the fragrant branch within her reach.

"And now will you come down?" he asked, as if she were some wilful child. Stella smiled, and he held out his hand. She put hers into it, and his fingers closed over it with a grasp firm as steel, but as smooth as a woman's. As the warm fingers closed over hers, which were cold with her long grasp of the branch above her

head, a thrill ran through her and caused her to shudder slightly.

"You are cold," he said, instantly. "The Spring evenings are treacherous. Have you far to go?"

"I am not cold, thanks," she said, with quick alarm, for there was a look in his eyes and a movement of his hand which seemed to give warning that he was about to take his coat off.

"I am not at all cold!"

"Have you far to go?" he repeated, with the air, gentle as it was, of a man who was accustomed to have his questions answered.

"Not far; to the little white gate there," she answered.

"The little white gate – to Etheridge's, the artist's?" he said gently, with a tone of surprise.

Stella bent her head; his eyes scanned her face.

"You live there – are staying there?"

"Yes."

"I never saw you in Wyndward before."

"No, I was never here till to-night."

"Till to-night?" he echoed. "I knew that I had not seen you before."

There was something in the tone, wholly unlike commonplace flattery, that brought the color to Stella's face.

They had reached the gate by this time, he walking by her side, the bridle thrown over his arm, the great horse pacing quiet and lamb-like, and Stella stopped.

"Good-night," she said.

He stopped short and looked at her, his head thrown back, as she had seen it as he rode toward her, his eyes fixed intently on her face, and seeming to sink through her downcast eyes into her soul.

"Good-night," he replied. "Wait."

It was a word of command, for all its musical gentleness, and Stella, woman-like, stopped.

"I am going away," he said, not abruptly, but with calm directness. "If you have only come to-night I shall not be able to learn your name; before I go, will you tell it me?"

Stella smiled.

"Why not?" he said, as she hesitated.

"My name is Stella Etheridge, I am Mr. Etheridge's niece."

"Stella!" he repeated. "Stella! Thank you. I shall not forget. My name," and he raised his hat with a simple gesture of proud humility, "is Wyndward – Leycester Wyndward."

"I know it," said Stella, and the next moment she could have called the impulsive words back again.

"You know it!" he said; "and came here only to-night! How is that?"

Stella's brows contracted, dark and full they met across her brow in true southern fashion, and lent a significant eloquence to her face; she would have given much to avoid answering.

"How is that?" he asked, his eyes fixed on hers.

"It is very simple," she said, as if vexed at her hesitation. "I saw your portrait and – knew you."

He smiled a curious smile.

"Knew me before we met! I wonder – " he paused and his eyes seemed to read her thoughts. "I wonder whether you were prejudiced by what you saw by that forshadowing of me? Is that a fair question?"

"It is a strange one," said Stella.

"Is it? I will not press it. Good-night!" and he raised his hat.

"Good-night, and good-bye," she said, and impulsively again she held out her hand.

His eyes showed no surprise, whatever he may have felt, as he took her hand and held it.

"No," he said, as he let her draw it away. "Not good-bye. I have changed my mind. I shall not go. It is only good-night," and with a smile flashing out of his eyes, he leapt upon his horse and was gone.

CHAPTER III

Stella stood watching until the big chestnut had borne its master out of sight, and down the lane, across the meadow; she caught one more glimpse of them as he rode through the ford, the water dashing up a silver shower of spray as high as the horse's head; then they vanished in the shadow of the woods which engirdled Wyndward Hall.

But she still stood, lost in a dreamy reverie that was not thought, until her uncle's voice came floating down the garden, and with a start she ran up the path and stood breathless before him.

The old man's placid face wore a slight look of anxiety, which faded instantly as he said:

"Where have you been, Stella? I thought you had changed your mind, and flown back to Italy again. Mrs. Penfold is searching the meadows wildly."

Stella laughed, as she put her arm round his neck.

"You will not get rid of me so easily, uncle. No, I have only been down the pretty lane at the end of the garden. See, here are some flowers; are they not sweet? You shall have them for your table, and they shall stand within sight while you are at work." And she filled a vase with water, and arranged them. "But the flowers are not all the fruits of my wandering, uncle," she went on; "I have had an adventure."

He was strolling up and down with his pipe in his mouth, his hands folded behind him.

"An adventure!"

"Yes," she nodded. "I have met – can you guess whom?"

He smiled.

"Mr. Fielding, the clergyman? It is his usual evening stroll."

"No."

"Perhaps an old lady in a lace shawl, with a fat pug by her side. If so, you have made an acquaintance with the great Mrs. Hamilton, the doctor's wife."

"No, it was not anybody's wife, uncle – it was a man. You shan't guess any more; but what do you say to Lord Leycester?"

"Lord Leycester!" said Mr. Etheridge. "I did not even know he was at home. Lord Leycester! And does my picture do him justice?" he asked, turning to her with a smile.

She bent over the flowers, ashamed of the meaningless blush which rose to her face.

"Yes, uncle, it is like him; but I could not see very distinctly you know. It was moonlight. He was riding a great, huge chestnut horse."

"I know," he murmured, "and tearing along like a lost spirit. He flashed past like a meteor, I expect. No, you could not see him, and cannot judge of my portrait."

"But he didn't flash past. He would have done, no doubt, but the chestnut declined. I think it was frightened by me, for I was standing on the bank."

"And he stopped?" asked Mr. Etheridge. "It was a wonder; such a little thing even as the shying of his horse was sufficient to rouse the devil in him! He stopped!"

"Because he was obliged," said Stella, in a low voice, a deep blush of maidenly shame rising to her face, as she remembers that it was she who had really stopped him.

"And was he very furious?"

"No; the proverbial lamb could not have been more quiet," said Stella, with a musical laugh.

Mr. Etheridge laughed.

"He must have been in a good humor. It was strange his being out to-night. The Hall is full of people from town; but it would not matter to him if he wanted to ride, though the prince himself were there; he would go. And my picture?"

"Did him justice, uncle. Yes, he is very handsome; he wore a loose velvet coat to-night of a dark purple; I did not know gentlemen wore such colors now."

"A smoking coat," he explained. "I think I can see him. No doubt he had obeyed the impulse of the moment – had jumped up and left them there at the Hall – saddled his own horse and tore away across the river. Well, you have probably seen the last of him for some time, Stella. He rarely stays at the Hall more than a day or two. Town has too great a charm for him."

Stella's lips opened, and she was about to reply that he had suddenly resolved to stay, but something stopped the words on her lips.

Presently there was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Penfold came in with the candles.

"You have given me quite a turn, Miss Stella," she said, with a smile of reproach; "I thought you were lost. Your room is quite ready now, miss."

Stella went up to the old man and kissed him.

"Good-night, uncle," she murmured.

"Good-night, my child," he said, his eyes dwelling on her tenderly, but with something of the bewildered look clouding them; "Good-night, and happy dreams for this, your first night at home."

"At home!" murmured Stella; "at home! You are very good to me, uncle," and she kissed him again.

Mrs. Penfold had done wonders in so short a time permitted her, and Stella found herself standing alone in a tiny room, modestly but comfortably – oh, so comfortably! – furnished, with its white bed and its old-fashioned dimity curtains framing the lattice window. As her gaze wandered round the room, her glorious eyes grew moist. It was all so sudden, so sweet a contrast to the gaunt, bare room, which, for a weary year she had shared with a score of girls as miserable as herself; so sudden that she could scarcely believe it was real.

But youth is ever ready to accept the surprises of life, and she fell asleep – fell asleep to dream that she was back in the wretched school in Italy, and chained to a stone wall from which all her efforts to free herself were unavailing, but presently she thought

that a tall, stalwart figure came riding down on a big chestnut horse, and that with one sweep of his strong hand he broke her chains asunder, and, lifting her into his saddle, bore her away. Then the scene changed; she seemed to be following her rescuer who, with his handsome face turned over his shoulder, drew her on continually with a strange fascinating smile. All through her dreams the smiling eyes haunted her, and once she stretched out her hands to keep it from her, but even in the action the gesture of repulse turned in a strange, subtle manner to one of entreaty and welcome, and she drew the smile, as it were, to her bosom, and folded her hands over it. A girlish fancy, perhaps, but such fancies influence a life for good or ill, for joy or misery.

Lord Leycester Wyndward, of whose smile Stella was dreaming, had ridden up the hills, the great chestnut scarcely breaking his pace, but breathing hard and defiantly from its wide, red nostrils – had ridden up the hills and through the woods, and reached the open plateau lying round the Hall.

A noble park occupied the plateau – a park of chestnuts and oaks, which were the pride of the county. Through the park wound the road, gleaming white in the moonlight, to the front gates of Wyndward. The lodge-keeper heard the beat of the chestnut's feet, for which he had been listening intently, and threw open the gates, and Lord Leycester entered the grounds. They were vast in extent and exquisitely laid out, the road winding between a noble avenue of trees that arched overhead. The present earl's grandfather had gone in for arboriculture,

and the way was lined for fifty feet back with rare shrubs and conifers.

So serpentine was the road that the great gray mansion broke upon the gaze suddenly, mentally startling him who approached it for the first time.

To Lord Leycester it was a familiar sight, but familiar as it was he glanced up at it with what was almost a nod of approval. Like most men of his nature, he possessed a passionate love and appreciation for the beautiful, and there was to-night a strange, indefinable fire in his hot blood which made him more than usually susceptible to the influence of the scene. A sweeping curve of the road led to the terrace which stretched along the whole front of the house, and by which the principal entrance was gained.

Lord Leycester struck off to the right, and entered a modern courtyard, three sides of which were occupied by the admirable stables. A couple of grooms had been listening as intently as the lodge-keeper, and as he entered the yard they hurried forward silently and took the chestnut. Lord Leycester dropped to the ground, patted the horse, which made a playfully-affectionate snap at his arm, and, ascending a flight of steps, entered the lower end of the long hall, which stretched through the building.

The hall was softly but sufficiently lighted by shaded lamps, supported by huge figures in bronze, which diffused a charming glow upon the innumerable pictures upon the panels of dark oak. From the vaulted roof hung tattered flags, most of them borne by

the earlier Wyndwards, some of them bestowed by the graceful hands of dead and gone princes; the somewhat gloomy aspect of the place was lightened by the gleaming armor of the knightly effigies which stood at regular intervals upon the tessellated floor, and by the deep crimson of the curtains which screened the heavy doors and tall windows. The whole scene, the very atmosphere, as it seemed, was characteristic of an ancient and powerful race. Notwithstanding that the house was full of guests, and that a brilliant party was at that moment in the drawing-room, not a sound penetrated the vast hall. The two or three servants who were standing by the doors or sitting on the benches, talking in hushed voices, were silent the moment he entered, and one came forward to receive any commands.

Notwithstanding the brusqueness which is the salient characteristic of our present life, the old world state and formality still existed at Wyndward. Be as exacting and capricious as you might, you had no fear of meeting with inattention or disrespect from the army of servants, whose one aim and purpose in life seemed to be to minister to the wants and moods of their superiors.

It was a princely house, conducted in stately fashion, without regard to cost or trouble, and the servants, from the pages to the countess's own maid, were as proud of their position, in its degree, as the Lord of Wyndward of his.

"Send Oliver to me," said Lord Wyndward, as he passed the man. "I am going to my room."

He went up the stairs, and passing along the principal corridor, entered a room fronting the park. It was one of a suite which consisted of a sort of sitting-room, a dressing-room, and beyond a bedroom.

The sitting-room gave pretty plain indications of the owner's tastes and dispositions.

It was a medley of objects connected with sport and art. Here a set of boxing-gloves and foils; a gun-rack, well stocked; fishing-rods and whips hung over the antique fireplace with the wide open hearth and dog-irons. On one side of the room hung a collection of etchings, unique and priceless; on another half a dozen gems in oil, while against the third stood a piano, and an easel upon which rested a canvas displaying a half-finished Venus rising from her cradle of sea foam; for upon this, the only son of the house, the partial gods had bestowed many gifts; any one of which, had he been a poor man, would have made the world regard him as one of its masters. But as it was, he painted and played for amusement only, and there were only a few of his friends, and only those who were most intimate, who suspected that the wild, reckless Leicester could do more than ride like a centaur and shoot like a North American Indian. How were they to know, seeing that he rarely spoke of art, and never of his own passionate love of it? Had they known, it would have given them a key to much in his character which puzzled and bewildered them; they would have been nearer understanding how it was that in one man could be combined the soft tenderness of a southern

nature with the resolute, defiant recklessness of the northern.

He entered the room and went to the fireplace in which a log was burning brightly, to guard against the too frequent treachery of an early summer evening, and flinging his hat on to a chair, passed his hand through his hair with a thoughtful yet restless smile.

"Stella!" he murmured. "Stella! That was wrong. A star should be fair and golden, all light and sunshine, while she – great Heaven! what eyes! It was surely the sweetest, loveliest face that a man ever looked upon. No wonder that coming upon it so suddenly – with my thoughts a hundred miles away, coming upon it suddenly as it shone up above me – that I should think it only a vision! If that face as I saw it could smile out from the Academy next Spring, what crowds of fools would gather round to gape and stare at it? If – yes, but who could do it? No one! No one! As well try and catch the sunlight on a brush and paint it on the canvas – as well try – " he broke off suddenly, his eye caught by the Venus Aphrodite smiling from the easel, and going across to it, stood and contemplated it.

"Venus with a pale pink face and meaningless blue eyes, with insipid yellow hair and simpering smile! Never more will Venus take that semblance for me. No, she will be as I saw her tonight, with dark silken hair, and sweeping lashes shading the dark brown eyes, in which one sees the soul peering from their depths. That is Venus, not this," and with a smile of derision he took up a brush and drew a dark, broad effacing line across the fair face.

"So departs forever all my former dreams of womanly loveliness. Loveliness! I have never seen it until to-night. Stella! A star! Yes, she is rightly named, after all. She shone down on me like a star, and I – great Heaven! – was like one bewitched! While she – she made a laughing-stock of me. Compared me with the nag, and treated me like a school-boy too big to be whipped but not too large to be laughed at.

"By Jove it is not a thing to be proud of; called to task by a girl – a little slip of a girl not yet a woman! and yet I would not have missed that laugh and the light scorn of those dark eyes, though they lighted up at my expense. Stella – "

There was a knock at the door, and his valet, Oliver, entered.

Lord Leycester stared at him a moment abstractedly, then roused himself from his reverie.

"What is it, Oliver?"

"You sent for me, my lord."

"Oh, yes! I had forgotten. I will wash and get into my other coat."

Oliver passed noiselessly into the other room and assisted his master to change the velvet smoking-jacket for the dress coat, brushed the thick, short-cut chestnut hair into order, and opened the door.

"Where are they all?" he asked. "Are any of them in the smoking-room?"

"Yes, my lord, Lord Barton and Captain Halliday; the Marquis of Sandford and Sir William are in the billiard-room."

Lord Leicester nodded, and went down the stairs across the hall; a servant drew a curtain aside and opened a door, and Lord Leicester entered a small ante-room, one side of which opened into a long-stretching fernery, from which came the soft trip trip of fountains, and the breath which filled the whole atmosphere with a tropical perfume.

A couple of footmen in gorgeous livery were standing beside a double curtain, and at a sign from Lord Leicester they drew it apart. Lord Leicester passed through and down a small corridor lined with statuary, at the end of which was another curtain. No passage, or door, or ante-room but was thus masked, to shut out the two things which the earl held as abominations – draught and noise.

With the opening of these curtains the large saloon was revealed like the scene on the stage of a theater. It was a magnificent room in keeping with the rest of the place, richly but not gorgeously decorated, and lighted by wax candles shining through faintly hued globes. At one end stood a grand piano in white and ormolu, and a lady was playing and singing, while others were standing round with tea-cups in their hands. Near the fireplace was a table, upon which stood a silver tea equipage, with which the countess was busied.

Lady Wyndward was still in her prime, notwithstanding that Lord Leicester was twenty-three; she had been married at eighteen, and was now in the perfection of matronly beauty; one had only to glance at her to learn from whence Leicester had

got his strange beauty. Near her stood a tall, thin gentleman with proud, haughty, clean-cut face, and iron gray hair, worn rather long and brushed back from a white, lofty brow. It was the earl. His dark piercing eyes were bent upon the ground as he stood listening to the music, but he saw Leycester enter, and raised his head as a slight frown crossed his face. Lady Wyndward saw the frown and sought the cause, but her face showed no signs of surprise or displeasure. It was calm and impassive at all times, as if its owner disdained the weakness of ordinary mortals. Leycester paused a moment, taking in the scene; then he crossed the room, and went up to the table.

Lady Wyndward looked up with her serene, imperial smile.

"Will you have some tea, Leycester?"

"Thanks," he said.

She gave him his cup, and as he took it a young man left the group at the piano, and came up to him laughing.

"Where have you been, Leycester?" he asked, putting his hand on the broad shoulder. It was Lord Charles Guildford, Leycester's most intimate friend.

Between these two existed an affection which was almost, say rather more than fraternal. They had been together at Eton, where Leycester, the great, stalwart lad, had fought the slight frail boy's battles; they had lived in the same rooms at Oxford, had been comrades in all the wild escapades which made their term at college a notorious one, and they were inseparable. Leycester had grown from a tall lad into a stalwart man; Lord Charles – or

Charlie, as he was called – had fulfilled the promise of his frail boyhood, and developed into a slight, thin, fair-haired youth, with the indolent grace which sometimes accompanies weakness, and the gentle nature of a woman.

Leycester turned to him with a smile, and the earl looked up to hear the answer; the countess busied herself with the teapot, as if she were not listening as intently.

"I went for a galop, Charlie," said Leycester. "You fellows were half asleep in the smoking-room, and I had listened to Barton's Indian story for the hundredth time, and it got rather slow; then I remembered that the chestnut had been eating his head off for the last five weeks, and thought I would give him a turn."

The earl frowned and turned away; Lord Charles laughed.

"Pretty behavior!" he exclaimed; "and here were we hunting all over the place for you."

"Why didn't you come into the drawing-room to us, Lord Leycester?" said a beautiful girl who was sitting near; "we should not have bored you with any Indian stories."

"But, you see, I should have bored you, Lady Constance," he said.

The girl smiled up into his face.

"Perhaps you would," she said. "You are more considerate than I thought."

"I never venture into the ladies' sanctum after dinner till the tea is announced," he retorted. "I have an idea, shared by my sex

generally, that it is not safe – that, in short, you are too ferocious."

"And you prefer riding about the country till we quiet down. Are we quiet now, or do we look ferocious?"

And she smiled up at him from behind her fan with a plain invitation.

He sat down beside her and began to talk the infinite nothings which came to his lips so easily, the trivial small change which his musical voice and rare smile seemed to transform to true coin; but while he talked his thoughts were wandering to the dark-haired girl who had shone down upon him from her green and fragrant bower in the lane, and he found himself picturing her in the little room at the cottage in the meadows, amongst the curious litter of the old artist's studio; and gradually his answers grew disjointed and inconsequential.

He got up presently, got up abruptly, and wandered across the room stopping to exchange a word or two with one and the other, his tall, graceful figure towering above those of the other men, his handsome head thrown back musingly. Many an admiring and wistful glance followed him from among the women, and not a few would have exerted all their fascinations to keep him by their side, had they not known by experience, that when he was in his present mood he was deaf to the voice and smile of the charmer, charmed she never so wisely.

CHAPTER IV

The countess watched him from her table, and, looking up at the earl, murmured:

"Leycester is in one of his restless moods to-night."

"Yes," he said, with a sigh. "What is it? – do you know?"

"No," she said, calmly. "He was all right at dinner."

"Why can he not behave like other people?" said the earl, sadly. "Can you fancy any other man leaving his father's guests and riding about the country?"

"Leycester never was like any other," she said, not without a touch of pride. "He is as he is, and nothing can alter him."

The earl was silent for a moment, his long white hands folded behind his back, his dark eyes fixed on the floor.

"Has he told you of his last escapade – his last mad freak?" he said, in a low voice.

"Yes," she answered, calmly. "He has never concealed anything from me."

"It is nearly twenty thousand pounds. Even Wyndward must feel such strains as this."

The countess raised her head.

"I know," she said; "he has told me everything. It was a point of honor. I did not quite understand; horse-racing is a pastime with which I have little sympathy, though we have always owned race-horses. It was a point of honor. Some one had been taking

advantage of his name to act dishonestly, and he withdrew the horse. He could take no other course," he says.

The earl sighed.

"No doubt. But it is mad folly, and there is no end to it – if he could see some limit! Why does he not marry?"

The countess glanced at the handsome face.

"He will not marry until he meets with some one he can love."

The earl looked round the room at the many beautiful graceful women who adorned it, and sighed impatiently.

"He is hard to please."

"He is," assented the countess, with the same touch of pride.

"It is time he married and settled," continued the earl. "For most men a year or two would not matter, but with him – I do not like to think that the title rests only on our two lives, as mine must be near its close."

"Algernon!"

"And on his, which is risked daily."

He stooped, silenced by the sudden look of pain in the beautiful eyes.

"Why do you not speak to him? He will do anything for you."

The countess smiled.

"Everything but that. No, I cannot speak to him; it would be useless. I do not wish to weaken my influence."

"Get Lilian to speak to him," he said.

The countess sighed.

"Lilian!" she murmured; "she would not do it. She thinks him

something more than human, and that no woman in the world can be good enough to – to hold his stirrup or fill his wineglass."

The earl frowned.

"Between you," he said, "you have spoiled him."

The countess shook her head gently.

"No, we have not. He is now as a man what he was as a boy. Do you remember what Nelson said, when Hardy asked him why he did nothing while one of their ships was fighting two of the enemy's? 'I am doing all I can – watching.'"

Before the earl could reply, a cabinet minister came up and engaged him in conversation, and the countess rose and crossed the room to where an elderly lady sat with a portfolio of engravings before her. It was the Dowager Countess of Longford, a tiny little woman with a thin wrinkled face, and keen but kindly gray eyes that lit up her white face and made it remarkable.

She was dressed as simply as a quakeress, excepting for some old and priceless lace which softened the rigor of her plainly made gray satin dress. She looked up as the younger countess approached, and made room for her on the sofa.

Lady Wyndward sat down in silence, which was unbroken for a minute. Then the old countess said without looking at her —

"The boy grows handsomer every day, Ethel!"

Lady Wyndward sighed.

"What is the matter?" asked the other, with a keen smile. "What has he been doing now, burning a church or running off with a Lord Mayor's daughter?"

"He has not been doing anything very much," answered Lady Wyndward. "Except losing some money."

The old countess raised her eyebrows lightly.

"That does not matter."

"Not much. No, he has not been doing anything; I wish he would. That's what is the matter."

"I understand," retorted the other. "He is most dangerous when quiet; you are always afraid he is preparing for some piece of madness beyond the ordinary. Well, my dear, if you will give the world such a creature you must put up with the consequences – be prepared to pay the penalty. I should be quite content to do so."

"Ah, you don't know," said the countess, with a smile that had something pathetic in it.

"Yes, I do," retorted the old lady, curtly. "And I envy you still. I love the boy, Ethel. There is not a woman of us in the room, from the youngest to the oldest, who does not love him. You cannot expect one whom the gods have so favored to behave like an ordinary mortal."

"Why not? It is just what Algernon has said to me."

"I thought as much. I was watching you two. Of all things, beware of this: don't let Algernon interfere with him. It is a strange thing to say, but his father is the worst man in all the world to attempt to put the bridle on Leicester. It is we women who alone have the power to guide him."

"That is where my fear lies," said the countess. "It is the

thought of what may happen in that quarter which fills me with daily dread."

"There is only one safeguard – marry him," remarked the old countess, but with a comical smile.

The countess sighed.

"Again, that is what Algernon says. You both say it as calmly as if you told me to give him a cup of tea."

The old countess was silent for a moment, then she said —

"Where is Lenore Beauchamp?"

Lady Wyndward was almost guilty of a start.

"You read my thoughts," she said.

The old lady nodded.

"She is the only woman who can really touch him. Ask her here; let them be together. She will be glad to come."

"I am not sure, Lenore is proud; she might guess why we wanted her."

The old lady drew up her head as haughtily as if she was Leicester's mother.

"And then? Is there any girl among them who would not jump at the chance? I don't mean because he is the heir to Wyndward; he is enough in himself without that."

"It is well you are not his mother; you would have made him what he is not now – vain."

The old lady sighed.

"I know it. But you are wrong about Lenore. If she ever cared for anyone, it is Leicester. She is proud, but love levels pride, and

she may put forth her power. If she should, not even Leycester can withstand her. Ask her down, and leave the rest to her – and Providence."

The countess sat for a moment in silence, then she put her hand upon the thin, wrinkled hand, unadorned by a single gem.

"I have always you to come to. I think you understand him better than his own mother."

"No," said the old lady, "but I love him nearly as well."

"I will write at once," said the countess. And she rose and crossed to the ante-room.

There was a writing-table amongst the furniture; the servants saw her go to it, and noiselessly left the room.

She took up the pen and thought a moment, then wrote:

"My Dear Lenore, – Will you come down and spend a week with us? We have a few friends with us, but we are not complete without you. Do not say 'No,' but come. I do not name any day, so that you may be free to fix your own."

"Yours affectionately,

"Ethel Wyndward."

"P.S. – Leycester is with us."

As she wrote the signature she heard a step behind her, which she knew was Leycester's.

He stopped short as he saw her, and coming up to her, put his hand on her white shoulder.

"Writing, mother?" he said.

The countess folded her letter.

"Yes. Where are you going?"

He pointed to the Louis Quatorze clock that ticked solemnly on a bracket.

"Ten o'clock, mother," he said, with a smile.

"Oh, yes; I see," she assented.

He stood for a moment looking down at her with all a young man's filial pride in a mother's beauty, and, bending down, touched her cheek with his lips, then passed out.

The countess looked after him with softened eyes.

"Who could help loving him?" she murmured.

Humming an air from the last opera bouffe, he ran lightly up the staircase and passed along the corridor, but as he reached the further end and knocked at a door, the light air died upon his lips.

A low voice murmured, "Come in;" and opening the door gently, he entered.

The room was a small one, and luxuriously furnished in a rather strange style. On the first entrance, a stranger would have been struck by the soft and delicate tints which pervaded throughout. There was not a brilliant color in the apartment; the carpet and hangings, the furniture, the pictures themselves were all of a reposeful tint, which could not tire the eye or weary the sense. The carpet was a thick Persian rug, which deadened the sound of footsteps, costly hangings of a cool and restful gray covered the walls, save at intervals; the fire itself was screened by a semi-transparent screen, and the only light in the room came from a lamp which was suspended by a silver chain from the

ceiling, and was covered by a thick shade.

On a couch placed by the window reclined a young girl. As Leycester entered, she half rose and turned a pale, but beautiful face toward him with an expectant smile.

Beautiful is a word that is easily written, and written so often that its significance has got dulled: it fails to convey any idea of the ethereal loveliness of Lilian Wyndward. Had Mr. Etheridge painted a face with Leycester's eyes, and given it the delicately-cut lips and spiritual expression of one of Raphael's angels, it would have been a fair representation of Lilian Wyndward.

"It is you Leycester," she said. "I knew you would come," and she pointed to a small traveling clock that stood on a table near her.

He went up to her and kissed her, and she put her arms round his neck and laid her face against his, her eyes looking into his with rapt devotion.

"How hot you are, dear. Is it hot down there?"

"Awfully," he said, seating himself beside her, and thrusting his hands into his pockets. "There is not a breath of air moving, and if there were the governor would take care to shut it out. This room is deliriously cool, Lil; it is a treat to come into it."

"Is it?" she said, with a glad eagerness. "You really think it is. I like to hear you say that."

"Yes, it's the prettiest room in the house. What is it smells so sweet?"

"Lilac," she said, and she pointed to a bunch on the table.

He started slightly, and, stretching out his hand, took a spray out of the epergne.

"I thought it was lilac," he said, quietly. "I noticed it when I came in."

She took the spray from him and fastened it in his coat, against which her hands looked white as the driven snow.

"You shall take it to your own room, Ley," she said. "You shall take them all."

"Not for worlds, Lil," he said. "This will do."

"And what are they doing?" she asked.

"The usual thing," he replied; "playing, singing, rubber at whist, and boring each other to death generally."

She smiled.

"And what have you been doing?"

"Assisting in the latter amusement," he answered, lightly.

"They told me you had gone out," she said.

He nodded.

"Yes, I took the chestnut for a spin."

She laughed, a soft, hushed laugh.

"And left them the first night! That was like you, Ley!"

"What was the use of staying? It was wrong, I suppose. I am unfortunate! Yes, I went for a ride."

"It was a lovely evening. I watched the sunset," and she looked at the window. "If I had known you were going, I would have looked for you. I like to see you riding that big chestnut. You went across the meadows?"

"Yes," he said, "across the meadows."

He was silent for a minute, then he said, suddenly, "Lil, I have seen a vision to-night."

"A vision, Ley!" she repeated, looking up at him eagerly.

He nodded.

"A vision. The most beautiful girl I have ever seen, excepting you, Lil!"

She made no protest, but smiled.

"Ley! A girl! What was she like?"

"I can't tell you," he said. "I came upon her in a moment. The chestnut saw her first, and was human enough to be struck motionless. I was struck too!"

"And you can't tell me what she was like?"

"No; if I were to describe her with usual phrases you would smile. You women always do. You can't help being a woman, Lil!"

"Was she dark or fair?"

"Dark," he replied. "I did not know it at the time; it was impossible to think whether she was dark or fair while one looked at her, but I remembered afterward. Lil, you remember that picture I sent you from Paris – the picture of the girl with the dark eyes and long, silky hair – not black, but brown in the sunlight, with long lashes shading the eyes, and the lips curved in a half-serious smile as she looks down at the dog fawning at her feet?"

"I remember, Ley. Was she like that?"

"Yes; only alive. Fancy the girl in the picture alive. Fancy

yourself the dog she was smiling at! I was the dog!"

"Ley!"

"And she spoke as well as smiled. You can imagine the voice that girl in the picture would have. Soft and musical, but clear as a bell and full of a subtle kind of witchery, half serious, half mockery. It was the voice of the girl I met in the lane this evening."

"Ley! Ley, you have come to make poetry to me to-night. I am very grateful."

"Poetry! It is truth. But you are right; such a face, such a voice would make a poet of the hardest man that lives."

"And you are not hard, Ley! But the girl! Who is she? What is her name?"

"Her name" – he hesitated a moment, and his voice unconsciously grew wonderfully musical – "is Stella – Stella."

"Stella!" she repeated. "It is a beautiful name."

"Is it not? Stella!"

"And she is – who?"

"The niece of old Etheridge, the artist, at the cottage."

Lilian's eyes opened wide.

"Really, Ley, I must see her!"

His face flushed, and he looked at her.

She caught the eager look, and her own paled suddenly.

"No," she said, gravely. "I will not see her. Ley – you will forget her by to-morrow."

He smiled.

"You will forget her by to-morrow. Ley, let me look at you!"

He turned his face to her, and she looked straight into his eyes, then she put her arm round his neck.

"Oh, Ley! has it come at last?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, not angrily, but with a touch of grimness, as if he were afraid of the answer.

"Ley," she said, "you must not see her again. Ley, you will go to-morrow, will you not?"

"Why?" he asked. "It is not like you to send me away, Lil."

"No, but I do. I who look forward to seeing you as the sweetest thing in my life – I who would rather have you near me than be – other than I am – I who lie and wait and listen for your footsteps – I send you, Ley. Think! You must go, Ley. Go at once, for your own sake and for hers."

He rose, and smiled down at her.

"For my sake, perhaps, but not for hers. You foolish girl, do you think all your sex is as partial as you are? You did not see her as I saw her to-night – did not hear her ready wit at my expense. For her sake! You make me smile, Lil."

"I cannot smile, Ley. You will not stay! What good can come of it? I know you so well. You will not be content until you have seen your Venus again, and then – ah, Ley, what can she do but love you, and love you but to lose you? Ley, all that has gone before has made me smile, because with them I knew you were heart-whole; I could look into your eyes and see the light of laughter in their depths; but not this time, Ley – not this time.

You must go. Promise me!"

His face went pale under her gaze, and the defiant look, which so rarely shone out in her presence, came into his eyes, and about his lips.

"I cannot promise, Lil," he said.

CHAPTER V

*For love lay lurking in the clouds and mist,
I heard him singing sweetly on the mountain side:
"Tis all in vain you fly, for everywhere am I —
In every quiet valley, on every mountain side!"*

In the clear, bird-like tones of Stella's voice the musical words floated from the open window of her room above and through the open French windows of the old man's studio.

With a little start he turned his head away from the easel and looked toward the door.

Stella had only been in the house three days, but he had already learned something of her habits, and knew that when he heard the beautiful voice singing at the window in the early morning, he might expect to see the owner of the voice enter shortly.

His expectation was not doomed to disappointment. The voice sounded on the stairs, in the hall, and a moment afterward the door opened and Stella stood looking smilingly into the room.

If he had thought her beautiful and winsome on that first evening of her coming, when she was weary with anxiety and traveling, and dressed in dust-stained clothes, be sure he thought her more beautiful still, now that the light heart felt free to reveal itself, and the shabby dress had given place to the white and

simple but still graceful morning gown.

Mrs. Penfold had worked hard during those three days, and with the aid of the Dulverfield milliner had succeeded in filling a small wardrobe for "her young lady," as she had learned to call her. The old artist, ignorant of the power of women in such direction, had watched the transformation with inward amazement and delight, and was never tired of hearing about dresses, and hats, jackets, and capes, and was rather disappointed than otherwise when he found that the grand transformation had been effected at a very small cost.

Bright and beautiful she stood, like a vision of youth and health in the doorway, her dark eyes laughingly contemplating the old man's gentle stare of wonder, – the look which always came into his eyes when she appeared.

"Did I disturb you by my piping, uncle?" she asked as she kissed him.

"Oh no, my dear," he answered, "I like to hear you, – I like to hear you."

She leant against his shoulder, and looked at his work.

"How beautiful it is!" she murmured. "How quickly it grows. I heard you come down this morning, and I meant to get up, but I was so tired – lazy, wasn't I?"

"No, no!" he said, eagerly. "I am sorry I disturbed you. I came down as quietly as I could. I knew you would be tired after your dissipation. You must tell me all about it."

"Yes, come to breakfast and I will tell you."

"Must I?" he said, glancing at his picture reluctantly.

He had been in the habit of eating his breakfast by installments, painting while he ate a mouthful and drank his cup of coffee, but Stella insisted upon his changing what she called a very wicked habit.

"Yes, of course! See how nice it looks," and she drew him gently to the table and forced him into a chair.

The old man submitted with a sigh that was not altogether one of regret, and still humming she sat opposite the urn and began to fill the cups.

"And did you enjoy yourself?" he asked, gazing at her dreamily.

"Oh, very much; they were so kind. Mrs. Hamilton is the dearest old lady; and the doctor – what makes him smile so much, uncle?"

"I don't know. I think doctors generally do."

"Oh, very well. Well, he was very kind too, and so were the Miss Hamiltons. It was very nice indeed, and they took so much notice of me – asked me all sorts of questions. Sometimes I scarcely knew what to answer. I think they thought because I had been brought up in Italy, I ought to have spoken with a strong accent, and looked utterly different to themselves. I think they were a little disappointed, uncle."

"Oh," he said, "and who else was there?"

"Oh, the clergyman, Mr. Fielding – a very solemn gentleman indeed. He said he didn't see much of you, and hoped he should

see me in church."

Mr. Etheridge rubbed his head and looked rather guilty.

"I expect that was a back-handed knock for me, Stella," he said rather ruefully. "You see I don't go to church often. I always mean to go, but I generally forget the time, or I wander into the fields, or up into the woods, and forget all about the church till it's too late."

"But that's very wicked, abominably so," said Stella, gravely, but with a twinkle in her dark eyes. "I must look after your morals as well as your meals, I see, uncle."

"Yes," he assented, meekly – "do, do."

"Well, then there was a Mr. Adelstone, a young gentleman from London. He was quite the lion of the evening. I think he was a nephew of Mr. Fielding's."

The old man nodded.

"Yes; and did you like him?"

Stella thought a moment, holding the cream-jug critically over the coffee-cup.

"Not much, uncle. It was very wrong, and very bad taste, I am afraid, for they all seemed to admire him immensely, and so did he himself."

Mr. Etheridge looked at her rather alarmed.

"I must say, Stella, you get too critical. I don't think we are quite used to it."

She laughed.

"I don't fancy Mr. Adelstone was at all conscious of adverse

criticism; he seemed quite satisfied with everybody, himself in particular. He certainly was beautifully dressed, and he had the dearest little hands and feet in the world; and his hair was parted to a hair, and as smooth as a black-and-tan terrier's; so that he had some grounds for satisfaction."

"What did he do to offend you, Stella?" asked the old man, rather shrewdly.

She laughed again, and a little touch of color came into her face, but she answered quite frankly:

"He paid me compliments, uncle."

"That doesn't offend your sex generally, Stella."

"It offends me," said Stella, quickly. "I – I detest them! especially when the man who pays them does it with a self-satisfied smile which shows that he is thinking more of his own eloquence and gallantry than of the person he is flattering."

The old man looked at her.

"Will you oblige me by telling me your age again?" he said.

She laughed.

"Am I too wise, uncle? Well, never mind – I'll promise to be good and stupid, if you like. But you are not eating any breakfast; and you must not keep looking at that odious easel all the time, as if you were longing to get back to it. Did you ever see a jealous woman?"

"No, never."

"Well, if you don't want to, you must not confine all your attention to your work."

"I don't think there is much fear of that when you are near," he said, meekly.

She laughed, and jumped up to kiss him with delight.

"Now that was a splendid compliment, sir! You are improving rapidly – Mr. Adelstone himself couldn't have done it more neatly."

Scarcely had the words left her lips than the door opened.

"Mr. Adelstone," said Mrs. Penfold.

A young man, tall and dark, and faultlessly dressed, stood in the doorway, his hat in one hand, a bouquet of flowers in the other. He was undeniably good-looking, and as he stood with a smile upon his face, looked at his best. A severe critic might have found fault with his eyes, and said that they were a little too small and a little too near together, might also have added that they were rather shifty, and that there was something approaching the sinister in the curves of the thin lips; but he was undeniably good-looking, and notwithstanding his well cut clothes and spotless boots with their gray gaiters, his white hands with the choice selection of rings, there was an indication of power about him; no one could have suspected him of being a fool, or lacking the power of observation; for instance, as he stood now, smiling and waiting for a welcome, his dark eyes took in every detail of the room without appearing to leave Stella's face.

Mr. Etheridge looked up with the usual confused air with which he always received his rare visitors, but Stella held out her hand with a smile calm and self-possessed. There is a great deal

of the woman even about a girl of nineteen.

"Good-morning, Mr. Adelstone," she said. "You have come just in time for a cup of coffee."

"I ought to apologize for intruding at such an unseasonable hour," he said, as he bent over her hand, "but your good housekeeper would not hear of my going without paying my respects. I am afraid I'm intruding."

"Not at all, not at all," murmured the artist. "Here's a chair," and he rose and cleared a chair of its litter by the simple process of sweeping it on to the floor.

Mr. Adelstone sat down.

"I hope you are not tired after your mild dissipation last night?" he asked of Stella.

She laughed.

"Not at all. I was telling uncle how nice it was. It was my first party in England, you know."

"Oh, you musn't call it a party," he said. "But I am very glad you enjoyed it."

"What beautiful flowers," said Stella, glancing at the bouquet. He handed them to her.

"Will you be so kind as to accept them?" he said. "I heard you admire them in the conservatory last night and I brought them for you from the rectory green-house."

"For me?" exclaimed Stella, open-eyed. "Oh, I didn't know! I am so sorry you should have troubled. It was very kind. You must have robbed the poor plants terribly."

"They would be quite consoled if they could know for whom their blossoms were intended," he said, with a low bow.

Stella looked at him with a smile, and glanced half archly at her uncle.

"That was very nice," she said. "Poor flowers! it is a pity they can't know! Can't you tell them? There is a language of flowers, you know!"

Mr. Adelstone smiled. He was not accustomed to have his compliments met with such ready wit, and was nonplussed for a moment, while his eyes dropped from her face with a little shifty look.

Mr. Etheridge broke the rather embarrassing pause.

"Put them in the vase for her, Mr. Adelstone, will you, please, and come and have some breakfast. You can't have had any."

He waited until Stella echoed the invitation, then drew up to the table.

Stella rang for cup and saucer and plates, and poured him out some coffee; and he plunged into small talk with the greatest ease, his keen eyes watching every graceful turn of Stella's arm, and glancing now and again at the beautiful face.

It was very good small talk, and amusing. Mr. Adelstone was one of those men who had seen everything. He talked of the London season that was just coming on, to Stella, who sat and listened, half amused, half puzzled, for London was an unknown land to her, and the string of names, noble and fashionable, which fell from his ready tongue, was entirely strange to her.

Then he talked of the coming Academy to Mr. Etheridge, and seemed to know all about the pictures that were going to be exhibited, and which ones would make a stir, and which would fail. Then he addressed himself to Stella again.

"You must pay London a visit, Miss Etheridge; there is no place like it the whole world through – not even Paris or Rome."

Stella smiled.

"It is not very likely that I shall see London for a long time. My uncle does not often go, although it is so near, do you?"

"No, no," he assented, "not often."

"Perhaps you are to be congratulated," said Mr. Adelstone. "With all its charms, I am glad to get away from it."

"You live there?" said Stella.

"Yes," he said, quietly, welcoming the faint look of interest in her eyes. "Yes; I live in chambers, as it is called, in one of the old law inns. I am a lawyer!"

Stella nodded.

"I know. You wear a long black gown and a wig."

He smiled.

"And address a jury; and do you say 'm'lud' instead of 'my lord,' as people in novels always make barristers say?"

"I don't know; perhaps I do," he answered, with a smile; "but I don't address a jury, or have an opportunity of calling a judge 'my lud,' or 'my lord,' often. Most of my work is done at my chambers. I am very glad to get down into the country for a holiday."

"Are you going to stay long?" asked Mr. Etheridge, with polite interest.

Mr. Adelstone paused a moment, and glanced at Stella before answering.

"I don't know," he said. "I meant going back to-day, but – I think I have changed my mind."

Stella was only half listening, but the words caused her to start. They were the same as those which Lord Leycester had uttered three nights ago.

Mr. Adelstone's keen eyes saw the start, and he made a mental note of it.

"Ah! it is beautiful weather," said Mr. Etheridge. "It would be a pity to leave Wyndward for London now."

"Yes: I shall be more than ever sorry to go now," said Mr. Adelstone, and his glance rested for a moment on Stella's face, but it was quite lost, for Stella's eyes were fixed on the scene beyond the window dreamily.

With almost a start she turned to him.

"Let me give you some more coffee!"

"No, thanks," he said; then, as Stella rose and rang the bell, he walked to the easel. "That will be a beautiful picture, Mr. Etheridge," he said, viewing it with a critical air.

"I don't know," said the artist, simply.

"You will exhibit it?"

"I never exhibit anything," was the quiet reply.

"No! I am surprised!" exclaimed the young man, but there was

something in the quiet manner of the old man that stopped any further questions.

"No," said Mr. Etheridge; "why should I? I have" – and he smiled – "no ambition. Besides I am an old man, I have had my chance; let the young ones take theirs, I leave them room. You are fond of art?"

"Very," said Mr. Adelstone. "May I look round?"

The old man waved his hand, and took up his brush.

Jasper Adelstone wandered round the room, taking up the canvases and examining them; Stella stood at the window humming softly.

Suddenly she heard him utter an involuntary exclamation, and turning round saw that he had the portrait of Lord Leycester in his hand.

His face was turned toward her, and as she turned quickly, he was in time to catch a sinister frown of dislike, which rested for a moment on his face, but vanished as he raised his eyes and met hers.

"Lord Leycester," he said, with a smile and an uprising of the eyebrows. "A remarkable instance of an artist's power."

"What do you mean?" asked Stella, quietly, but with lowered eyes.

"I mean that it is a fair example of ideality. Mr. Etheridge has painted a likeness of Lord Leycester, and added an ideal poetry of his own."

"You mean that it is not like him?" she said.

Mr. Etheridge painted on, deaf to both of them.

"No," he said, looking at the picture with a cold smile. "It is like him, but it – honors him. It endows him with a poetry which he does not possess."

"You know him?" said Stella.

"Who does not?" he answered, and his thin lips curled with a smiling sneer.

A faint color came into Stella's face, and she raised her eyes for a moment.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Lord Leycester has made himself too famous – I was going to say infamous – "

A vivid crimson rushed to her face, and left it pale again the next instant.

"Do not," she said, then added quickly, "I mean do not forget that he is not here to defend himself."

He looked at her with a sinister scrutiny.

"I beg your pardon. I did not know he was a friend of yours," he said.

She raised her eyes and looked at him steadily.

"Lord Leycester is no friend of mine," she said, quietly.

"I am glad of it," he responded.

Stella's eyes darkened and deepened in a way peculiar to her, and her color came. It was true that Lord Leycester was no friend of hers, she had but seen and spoken with him by chance, and for a few moments; but who was this Mr. Adelstone that he should

presume to be glad or sorry on her account?

He was quick to see that he had made a slip, and quick to recover himself.

"Pray forgive me if I have presumed too far upon our slight acquaintance, but I was only thinking at that moment that you had been so short a time in England as to be ignorant of people who are well known to us with whom they have lived, and that you would not know Lord Leycester's real character."

Stella inclined her head gravely. Something within her stirred her to take up arms in the absent man's defense; the one word "infamous," stuck and rankled in her mind.

"You said that Lord Leycester was 'infamous,'" she said, with a grave smile. "Surely that is too strong a word."

He thought a moment, his eyes resting on her face keenly.

"Perhaps, but I am not sure. I certainly used it as a play upon the word 'famous,' but I don't think even then that I did him an injustice. A man whose name is known all over the country – whose name is familiar as a household word – must be notorious either for good or evil, for wisdom or folly. Lord Leycester is not famous for virtue or wisdom. I cannot say any more."

Stella turned aside, a faint crimson dyeing her face, a strange thrill of pity, ay, and of impatience, at her heart. Why should he be so wicked, so mad and reckless – so notorious that even this self-satisfied young gentleman could safely moralize about him and warn her against making his acquaintance! "Oh, the pity of it – the pity of it!" as Shakespeare has it – that one with such a

beautiful, god-look face, should be so bad.

There was a few moments' silence. Jasper Adelstone still stood with the picture in his hand, but glancing at Stella's face with covert watchfulness. For all his outward calmness, his heart was beating quickly. Stella's was the sort of beauty to make a man's heart beat quickly, or not at all; those who came to offer at her shrine would offer no half-measured oblations. As he watched her his heart beat wildly, and his small, bright eyes glittered. He had thought her beautiful at the party last night, where she had outshone all the other girls of the village as a star outshines a rushlight; but this morning her loveliness revealed itself in all its fresh purity, and he – Jasper Adelstone, the critical man of the world, the man whose opinion about women was looked upon by his companions in Lincoln's-inn and the bachelors' haunts at the West-end as worth having – felt his heart slipping from him. He put the picture down and approached her.

"You have no idea how beautiful and fresh the meadows are. Will you stroll down to the river with me?" he said, resolving to take her by surprise and capture her.

But he did not know Stella. She was only a school-girl – innocent and ignorant of the ways of men and the world; but, perhaps, because of that – because she had not learnt the usual hackneyed words of evasion – the ordinary elementary tactics of flirtation, she was not to be taken by surprise.

With a smile she turned her eyes upon him and shook her head.

"Thank you; no, that is impossible. I have all my household duties to perform, and that" – pointing to the sun with her white slim hand – "reminds me that it is time I set about them."

He took up his hat instantly, turning to hide the frown that knitted his brow and spoiled his face, and went up to the painter to say "good-morning."

Mr. Etheridge started and stared at him; he had quite forgotten his presence.

"Good-morning, good-morning – going? I beg your pardon. Won't you stop and take some tea with us?"

"Mr. Adelstone would like some dinner first, uncle," said Stella.

Then she gave him her hand.

"Good-morning," she said, "and thank you very much for the flowers."

He held her hand as long as he dared, then passed out.

Stella, perhaps unconsciously, gave a sigh of relief.

"Very nice young fellow, my dear," said Mr. Etheridge, without taking his eyes from the canvas. "Very clever, too. I remember him quite a little boy, and always said he would make his way. They say that he has done so. I am not surprised. Jasper –"

"Jasper!" said Stella. "What a horrible name."

"Eh? Horrible? I don't know – I don't know."

"But I do," said Stella, laughing. "Well, what were you going to say?"

"That Jasper Adelstone is the sort of man to insist upon having anything he sets his heart upon."

"I am glad to hear it," said Stella, as she opened the door, "for his sake; and I hope, also for his sake, that he won't set his mind upon the sun or the moon!" and with a laugh she ran away.

In the kitchen Mrs. Penfold was awaiting her with unconcealed impatience. Upon the white scrubbed table stood the preparations for the making of pastry, an art which Stella, who had insisted upon making herself useful, had coaxed Mrs. Penfold into teaching her. At first that good woman had insisted that Stella should do nothing in the little household. She had announced with terrible gravity that such things weren't becoming to a young lady like Miss Stella, and that she had always done for Mr. Etheridge, and she always would; but before the second day had passed Stella had won the battle. As Mrs. Penfold said, there was no resisting the girl, who mingled willfulness with bewitching firmness and persuasion, and Mrs. Penfold had given in. "You'll cover yourself with flour, Miss Stella, and give your uncle the indigestion, miss, that you will," she remonstrated.

"But the flour will brush off, and uncle needn't eat pies and puddings for a little while; I'll eat them, I don't mind indigestion," Stella declared, and she made a delightfully piquant little apron, which completed Mrs. Penfold's conquest.

With a song upon her lips she burst into the kitchen and caught up the rolling pin.

"Am I not awfully late?" she exclaimed. "I was afraid you would have done it all before I came, but you wouldn't be so mean as to take an advantage, would you?"

Mrs. Penfold grunted.

"It's all nonsense, Miss Stella, there's no occasion for it."

Stella, with her hand in the flour, elevated the rolling-pin in heroic style.

"Mrs. Penfold!" she exclaimed, with the air of a princess, "the woman, be her station what it may, who cannot make a jam roleypoley or an apple tart is unworthy the name of an Englishwoman. Give me the jam; stop though, don't you think rhubarb would be very nice for a change?"

"I wish you'd go and play the organ, Miss Stella, and leave the rhubarb alone."

"Man cannot live on music," retorted Stella; "his soul craves for puddings. I wonder whether uncle's soul craves for jam or rhubarb. I think I'll go and ask him," and dropping the rolling-pin – which Mrs. Penfold succeeded in catching before it fell on the floor – she wiped her hand of a fifteenth part of the floor and ran into the studio.

"Uncle! I have come to lay before you the rival claims of rhubarb and strawberry jam. The one is sweet and luscious to the taste, but somewhat cloying; the other is fresh and young, but somewhat sour – "

"Good Heavens! What are you talking about?" exclaimed the bewildered painter, staring at her.

"Rhubarb or jam. Now, noble Roman, speak or die!" she exclaimed with upraised arm, her eyes dancing, her lips apart with rippling laughter.

Mr. Etheridge stared at her with all an artist's admiration in his eyes.

"Oh! the pudding," he said, then he suddenly stopped, and stared beyond her.

CHAPTER VI

Stella heard a step on the threshold of the window, and turning to follow the direction of his eyes, saw the stalwart form of Lord Leycester standing in the window.

He was dressed in a suit of brown velveteen, with tight-fitting breeches and stockings, and carried a whip in his hand with which he barred the entrance against a couple of colleys, a huge mastiff, and a Skye terrier, the last barking with furious indignation at being kept outside.

Even at the moment of surprise, Stella was conscious of a sudden reluctant thrill of admiration for the graceful figure in the close-fitting velvet, and the handsome face with its dark eyes regarding her with a grave, respectful intensesness.

"Back dogs!" he said. "Go back, Vix!" then as they drew back, the big ones throwing themselves down on the path with patient obedience, he came into the room.

"I beg your pardon," he said, standing before Stella, his head bent. "I thought Mr. Etheridge was alone, or I should not have entered in this rough fashion."

As he spoke in the lane, so now it was no meaningless excuse, but with a tone of most reverential respect and proud humility, Stella, girl-like, noticed that he did not even venture to hold out his hand, and certainly Mr. Adelstone's self-satisfied smile and assured manner rose in her mind to contrast with this stately,

high-bred humility.

"Do not apologize; it does not matter," she said, conscious that her face had grown crimson and that her eyes were downcast.

"Does it not? I am forgiven," and he held out his hand.

Stella had crossed her hands behind her as he entered with an instinctive desire to hide her bare arms and the flour, now she put out her hand a few inches and held it up with a smile.

"I can't," she said.

He looked at the white hand – at the white arm so beautifully molded that a sculptor would have sighed over it in despair at his inability to imitate it, and he still held out his hand.

"I do not mind the flour," he said, not as Mr. Adelstone would have said it, but simply, naturally.

Stella gave him one small taper finger and he took it and held it for a moment, his eyes smiling into hers; then he relinquished it, with not a word of commonplace compliment, but in silence, and turned to Mr. Etheridge.

"It is quite hopeless to ask you to forgive me for interrupting you I know, so I won't ask," he said, and there was in his voice, Stella noticed, a frank candor that was almost boyish but full of respect. At once it seemed to intimate that he had known and honored the old man since he, Leicester, was a boy.

"How are you, my lord?" said Mr. Etheridge, giving him his long, thin hand, but still keeping a hold, as it were, on his beloved easel. "Taking the dogs for a walk? Are they safe? Take care, Stella!"

For Stella was kneeling down in the midst of them, making friends with the huge mastiff, much to the jealous disgust of the others, who were literally crowding and pushing round her.

Lord Leycester looked round and was silent for a moment; his eyes fixed on the kneeling girl rather than on the dogs. Then he said, suddenly:

"They are quite safe," and then he added, for Stella's behalf, "they are quite safe, Miss Etheridge."

Stella turned her face toward him.

"I am not afraid. I should as soon think of biting them as they would dream of biting me, wouldn't you?" and she drew the mastiff's great head on to her lap, where it lay with his big eyes looking up at her piteously, as he licked her hand.

"Great Heavens, what a herd of them!" said Mr. Etheridge, who loved dogs – on canvas.

"I ought not to have brought them," said Lord Leycester, "but they will be quite quiet, and will do no harm, I assure you."

"I don't care if they don't bite my niece," said Mr. Etheridge.

"There is no fear of that," he said, quietly, "or I should not allow her to go near them. Please go on with your work, or I shall think I am a nuisance."

Mr. Etheridge waved him to a chair.

"Won't you sit down?" he said.

Lord Leycester shook his head.

"I have come to ask you a favor," he said.

Mr. Etheridge nodded.

"What is it?"

Lord Leycester laughed his rare laugh.

"I am trembling in my shoes," he said. "My tongue cleaves to my mouth with nervousness – "

The old painter glanced round at him, and his face relaxed into a smile as his eyes rested on the bold, handsome face and easy grace of the speaker.

"Yes, you look excessively frightened," he said. "What is it?"

It was noticeable that, excepting in his first greeting, the old man had not given him the benefit of his title; he had known him when Leycester had been a boy, running in and out of the cottage, always followed by a pack of dogs, and generally doing some mischief.

"I want you to do a little scene for me."

The old man groaned and looked at his picture firmly.

"You know the glade in the woods opening out opposite the small island. I want you to paint it."

"I am sorry," began the old man.

Lord Leycester went on, interrupting him gently:

"Have you seen it lately?" he said, and as he spoke Stella came into the room enticing the mastiff after her, with a handful of biscuits she had taken from the cheffonier. "It is very beautiful. It is the loveliest bit on the whole river. Right up from the stream it stretches green, with the young Spring leaves, to the sky above the hill. In the open space between the trees the primroses have made a golden carpet. I saw two kingfishers sailing up it as I

stood and looked this morning, and as I looked I thought how well, how delightfully you would put it on canvas. Think! The bright green, the golden foreground, the early Summer sky to crown the whole, and reflected in the river running below."

Mr. Etheridge paused in his work and listened, and Stella, kneeling over the dog, listened too, with down-bent face, and wondered how the painter could stand so firm and obstinate.

To her the voice sounded like the sweetest music set to some poem. She saw the picture as he drew it, and in her heart the music of the words and voice found an echoing harmony.

Forgotten was the other man's warning; vain it would have been if he had repeated it at that moment. As well associate the darkness of a Winter's night with the bright gladness of a Summer's morning, as think of evil in connection with that noble face and musical voice.

Mr. Etheridge paused, but he shook his head.

"Very fine, very temptingly put; you are a master of words, Leycester; but I am immovable as a rock. Indeed your eloquence is wasted; it is not an impressionable man whom you address. I, James Etheridge, am on this picture. I am lost in my work, Lord Leycester."

"You will not do it?"

The old man smiled.

"I will not. To another man I should present an excuse, and mask my refusal. With you anything but a simple 'no' is of no avail."

Lord Leycester smiled and turned away.

"I am sorry," he said. "I meant it for a present to my sister Lilian."

Again Stella's eyes turned toward him. This man – infamous! The old man put down his brush and turned upon him.

"Why didn't you say so at first?" he said.

Lord Leycester smiled.

"I wanted to see if you would do something for me – for myself," he said, with infinite *naivete*.

"You want it for Lady Lilian," said Mr. Etheridge. "I will do it, of course."

"I shan't say thank you," said Lord Leycester. "I have nothing to thank you for. She shall do that. When will you come – "

"Next week – next month – "

"Now at once," said Lord Leycester, stretching out his hand with a peculiar gesture which struck Stella by its infinite grace.

The old man groaned.

"I thought so! I thought so! It would always be now at once with you."

"The Spring won't wait for you! The green of those leaves is changing now, very slowly, but surely, as we speak; in a week it will be gone, and with it half – all the beauty will go too. You will come now, will you not?"

Mr. Etheridge looked round with comical dismay, then he laughed.

Lord Leycester's laugh chimed in, and he turned to Stella with

the air of a man who has conquered and needs no more words.

"You see," said Mr. Etheridge, "that is the way I am led, like a pig to market, will I or will I not! And the sketch will take me, how long?"

"A few hours!"

"And there will be all the things to drag down – "

Lord Leicester strode to an old-fashioned cabinet.

"I will carry them, and yourself into the bargain if you like."

Then, with his hand upon the cabinet, he stopped short and turned to Stella.

"I beg your pardon! – I am always sinning. I forgot that there was now a presiding spirit. I am so used to taking liberties with your uncle's belongings; I know where all his paraphernalia is so well, that – "

Stella rose and smiled at them.

"Your knowledge is deeper than my uncle's, then," she said.

"Do not beg pardon of me."

"May I?" he said, and he opened the cabinet and took out the sketching-pad and color-box; then, with some difficulty, he disentangled a folding camp-stool from a mass of artistic litter in a corner, and then prepared to depart.

Mr. Etheridge watched these proceedings with a rueful countenance, but seeing that resistance had long passed out of his power, he said:

"Where is my hat, Stella? I must go, I suppose."

Lord Leicester opened the door for her, and she went out,

followed by all the dogs, and fetched the soft felt hat, holding it by the very tips of her fingers.

With a sigh, Mr. Etheridge dropped it on his head.

"Give me some of the things," he said; but Lord Leycester declined.

"Not one," he said, laughing. And Mr. Etheridge, without another word, walked out.

Lord Leycester stood looking at Stella, a wistful eagerness in his eyes.

"I have gone so far," he said, "that I am emboldened to venture still further. Will you come too?"

Stella started, and an eager light flashed for a moment in her eyes; then she held out her hands and laughed.

"I have to make a pudding," she said.

He looked at the white arms, and then at her, with an intensified eagerness.

"If you knew how beautiful the morning is – how grand the river looks – you would let the pudding go."

Stella shook her head.

He inclined his head, too highly bred to persist.

"I am so sorry," he said, simply. "I am sorry now that I have gained my way. I thought that you would have come."

Stella stood silent, and, with something like a sigh, put down the things and held out her hand; but as he took the finger which she gave him, his face brightened, and a light came into his eyes.

"Are you still firm?"

"I would not desert the pudding for anything, my lord," said Stella, naively.

At the "my lord," a slight shade covered his face, but it went again instantly, as he said:

"Well, then, will you come when the inevitable pudding is made? There," he said, eagerly, and still holding her hand he drew her to the window and pointed with his whip, "there's the place! It is not far – just across the meadows, and through the first gate. Do you see it?"

"Yes," said Stella, gently withdrawing her hand.

"And you will come?" he asked, his eyes fixed on hers with their intent earnestness.

At that instant the word – the odious word – "infamous" rang in her ears, and her face paled. He noticed the sudden pallor, and his eyes grew dark with earnest questioning.

"I see," he said, quietly, "you will not come!"

What was it that moved her? With a sudden impulse she raised her eyes and looked at him steadily.

"Yes, I will come!" she said.

He inclined his head without a word, called to the dogs, and passed out.

Stella stood for a moment looking after them; then she went into the kitchen – not laughing nor singing, but with a strange gravity; a strange feeling had got possession of her.

She felt as if she was laboring under some spell. "Charmed" is an often misused word, but it is the right word to describe the

sensation. Was it his face or his voice that haunted her? As she stood absently looking down at the table, simple words, short and commonplace, which he had used rang in her ears with a new meaning.

Mrs. Penfold stood and regarded her in curious astonishment. She was getting used to Stella's quickly changing moods, but the sudden change bewildered her.

"Let me do it, Miss Stella," she pleaded, but Stella shook her head firmly; not by one inch would she swerve from her cause for all the beautiful voice and noble face.

In rapt silence she finished her work, then she went up-stairs and put on her hat and came down. As she passed out of the house and down the path, the mastiff leaped the gate and bounded toward her, and the next moment she saw Lord Leycester seated on a stile.

He dropped down and came toward her.

"How quick you have been," he said, "I thought a pudding was a mystery which demanded an immensity of time."

Stella looked up at him, her dark brows drawn to a straight line.

"You waited for me?" she said.

"No," he said, simply, "I came back. I did not like to think that you should come alone."

Stella was silent.

"Are you angry?" he asked, in a low voice.

Stella was silent for a moment, then she looked at him frankly.

"No," she said.

If she had but said "yes," and turned back! But the path, all beautiful with the bright coloring of Spring stretched before her, and she had no thought of turning back, no thought or suspicion of the dark and perilous land toward which she was traveling by his side.

Already the glamour of love was falling upon her like the soft mist of a Summer evening; blindly, passively she was moving toward the fate which the gods had prepared for her.

CHAPTER VII

Side by side they walked across the meadows; the larks rising before them and soaring up to the heavens with a burst of song; the river running in silvery silence to the sea; the green trees waving gently in the Summer breeze; and above them the long stretching gray masonry of Wyndward Hall.

Lord Leycester was strangely silent for some minutes since that "Are you angry?" and Stella, as she walked by his side, stooping now and again to gather a cowslip, glanced up at his face and wondered whether her uncle could be mistaken, whether they were not all deceived in thinking the quiet, graceful creature with the beautiful face and dreamy, almost womanly, soft eyes, wild and reckless, and desperate and altogether bad. She almost forgot how she had seen him on that first night of their meeting, with his whip upraised and the sudden fire of anger in his eyes.

Presently he spoke, so suddenly that Stella, who had been lost in her speculations respecting him, started guiltily:

"I have been wondering," he said, "how Mr. Etheridge takes the change which your presence must make in the cottage."

Stella looked up with surprise, then she smiled.

"He bears it with admirable resignation," she said, with that air of meek archness which her uncle found so amusing.

Lord Leycester looked down at her.

"That is a rebuke for the presumption of my remark?" he said.

"No," said Stella.

"I did not mean to be presumptuous. Think. Your uncle has lived the whole of his life alone, the life of a solitary, a hermit; suddenly there enters into that life a young and beau – a young girl, full of the spirit of youth and its aspirations. It must make a great change."

"As I said," says Stella, "he bears it with pious fortitude." Then she added, in a lower voice, "He is very good to me."

"He could not be otherwise," was the quiet response. "I mean that he could not be anything but good, gentle, and loving with any living thing. I have known him since I was a boy," he added. "He was always the same, always living a life of dreams. I wonder whether he takes you as a dream?"

"A very substantial and responsible one, then," said Stella, with her little laugh. "One that lasts through the daytime."

He looked at her with that strange intent look which she had learned that she could not meet.

"And you?" he said.

"I?" said Stella, though she knew what he meant.

He nodded.

"How do you like the change? – this still, quiet life in the Thames valley. Are you tired of it already? Will you pine for all the gayeties you have left?"

Stella looked up at him – his eyes were still fixed on hers.

"I have left no gayeties," she said. "I left a bare and horrid school that was as unlike home as the desert of Sahara is like

this lovely meadow. How do I feel? As if I had been translated to Paradise – as if I, who was beginning to think that I was alone in the world I had no business to be in, had found some one friend to love – "

She paused, and he, glancing at the black waistband to her white dress, said, with the tenderest, most humble voice:

"I beg your pardon. Will you forgive me? – I did not know – "

And his voice broke.

Stella looked up at him with a smile shining through the unshed tears.

"How – why should you know? Yes, I was quite alone in the world. My father died a year ago."

"Forgive me," he murmured; and he laid his hand with a feather's weight on her arm. "I implore you to forgive me. It was cruel and thoughtless."

"No," said Stella. "How should you know?"

"If I had been anything better than an unthinking brute, I might have guessed."

There was a moment's pause, then Stella spoke.

"Yes, it is Paradise. I had no idea England was like this, they called it the land of fogs."

"You have not seen London on a November evening," he said, with a laugh. "Most foreigners come over to England and put up at some hotel at the west-end, and judge the whole land by the London sample – very few come even so far as this. You have not been to London?"

"I passed through it," said Stella, "that is all. But I heard a great deal about it last night," she added, with a smile.

"Yes!" he said, with great interest – "last night?"

"Yes, at Mrs. Hamilton's. She was kind enough to ask me to an evening party, and one of the guests took great pains to impress me with the importance and magnificence of London."

He looked at her.

"May I ask who she was?" he said.

"It was not a she, but a gentleman. It was Mr. Adelstone."

Lord Leycester thought a moment.

"Adelstone. Adelstone. I don't know him."

Before she was quite aware of it the retort slipped from her lips.

"He knows you."

He looked at her with a thoughtful smile.

"Does he? I don't remember him. Stay, yes, isn't he a relation of Mr. Fielding's?"

"His nephew," said Stella, and feeling the dark, penetrating eyes on her she blushed faintly. It annoyed her, and she struggled to suppress it, but the blush came and he saw it.

"I remember him now," he said; "a tall, thin dark man. A lawyer, I believe. Yes, I remember him. And he told you about London?"

"Yes," said Stella, and as she remembered the conversation of a few hours ago, her color deepened. "He is very amusing and well-informed, and he took pity on my ignorance in the kindest

way. I was very grateful."

There was something in her tone that made him look at her questioningly.

"I think," he said, "your gratitude is easily earned."

"Oh, no," she retorted; "I am the most ungrateful of beings. Isn't that uncle sitting there?" she added, quickly, to change the subject.

He looked up.

"Yes, he is hard at work. I did not think I should have won him. It was my sister's name that worked the magic charm."

"He is fond of your sister," said Stella, thoughtfully.

His eyes were on her in an instant.

"He has spoken of her?" he said.

Stella could have bitten her tongue out for the slip.

"Yes," she said. "He – he told me about her – I asked him whose house it was upon the hills."

"Meaning the Hall?" he said, pointing with his whip.

"Yes, and he told me. I knew by the way he spoke of your sister that he was fond of her. Her name is Lilian, is it not?"

"Yes," he said, "Lilian," and the name left his lips with soft tenderness. "I think every one who knows her loves her. This picture is for her."

Stella glanced up at his face; anything less imperious at that moment it would be impossible to imagine.

"Lady Lilian is fond of pictures?" she said.

"Yes," he said; "she is devoted to art in all its forms. Yes, that

little sketch will give her more pleasure than – than – I scarcely know what to say. What are women most fond of?"

Stella laughed.

"Diamonds, are they not?"

"Are you fond of them?" he said. "I think not."

"Why not?" she retorted. "Why should I not have the attributes of my sex? Yes, I am fond of diamonds. I am fond of everything that is beautiful and costly and rare. I remember once going to a ball at Florence."

He looked at her.

"Only to see it!" she exclaimed. "I was too young to be seen, and they took me in a gallery overlooking the great salon; and I watched the great ladies in their beautiful dresses and shining gems, and I thought that I would give all the world to be like one of them; and the thought spoiled my enjoyment. I remember coming away crying; you see it was so dark and solitary in the great gallery, and I felt so mean and insignificant." And she laughed.

He was listening with earnest interest. Every word she said had a charm for him; he had never met any girl – any woman – like her, so frank and open-minded. Listening to her was like looking into a crystal lake, in which everything is revealed and all is bright and pure.

"And are you wiser now?" he asked.

"Not one whit!" she replied. "I should like now, less than then, to be shut up in a dark gallery and look on at others enjoying

themselves. Isn't that a confession of an envious and altogether wicked disposition?"

"Yes," he assented, with a strange smile barely escaping from under his tawny mustache. "I should be right in prophesying all sorts of bad endings to you."

As he spoke he opened the gate for her, driving the dogs back with a crack of his whip so that she might pass first – a small thing, but characteristic of him.

The painter looked up.

"Keep those dogs off my back, Leycester," he said. "Well, Stella, have you concocted your poison?"

Stella went and looked over his shoulder.

"Yes, uncle," she said.

"You have been long enough to make twenty indigestible compounds," he said, gazing at the view he was sketching.

Stella bent her head, to hide the blush which rose as she remembered how slowly they had walked across the meadows.

"How are you getting on?" said Lord Leycester.

The old man grunted.

"Pretty well; better than I shall now you have come to fidget about."

Lord Leycester laughed.

"A pretty plain hint that our room is desired more than our company, Miss Etheridge. Can we not vanish into space?"

Stella laughed and sank down on the grass.

"It is uncle's way of begging us to stay," she said.

Lord Leycester laughed, and sending the dogs off, flung himself down almost at her feet.

"Did I exaggerate?" he said, pointing his whip at the view.

"Not an atom," replied Stella. "It is beautiful – beautiful, and that is all that one can find to say."

"I wish you would be content to say it and not insist upon my painting it," replied Mr. Etheridge.

Lord Leycester sprang to his feet.

"That is the last straw. We will not remain to be abused, Miss Etheridge," he said.

Stella remained immovable. He came and stood over her, looking down at her with wistful eagerness in silence.

"What lovely woods," she said. "You were right; they are carpeted with primroses. We have none in our meadow."

"Would you like to go and get some?" he asked.

Stella turned her face up to him.

"Yes, but I don't care to swim across."

He smiled, and went down to the bank, unfastened a boat, and leaping into it, called to her.

Stella sprang to her feet with the impulsive delight of a girl at the sight of a boat, when she had expected nothing better than rushes.

"Is it a boat – really?" she exclaimed.

"Come and see," he said.

She went down to the water's edge and looked at it.

"How did it come there?" she asked.

"I pay a fairy to drop a boat from the skies whenever I want it."

"I see," said Stella, gravely.

He laughed.

"How did you think I came across? Did you think I swam?"
and he arranged a cushion.

She laughed.

"I forgot that; how stupid of me."

"Will you step in?" he said.

Stella looked back at her uncle, and hesitated a moment.

"He will assure you that I shall not drown you," he said.

"I am not afraid – do you think I am afraid?" she said,
scornfully.

"Yes, I think that at this moment you are trembling with
nervousness and dread."

She put her foot – he could not help seeing how small and
shapely it was – on the gunwale, and he held out his hand and
took hers; it was well he did so, for the boat was only a small,
lightly built gig, and her sudden movement had made it rock.

As it was, she staggered slightly, and he had to take her by the
arm. So, with one hand grasping her hand and the other her arm,
he held her for a moment – for longer than a moment. Then he
placed her on the cushion, and seating himself, took up the sculls
and pushed off.

Stella leant back, and of course dropped one hand in the water.
Not one woman out of twenty who ever sat in a boat can resist
that impulse to have closer communion with the water; and he

pulled slowly across the stream.

The sun shone full upon them, making their way a path of rippling gold, and turning Stella's hair into a rich brown.

Little wonder that, as he sat opposite her, his eyes should rest on her face, and less that, thus resting, its exquisite beauty and freshness and purity should sink into the soul of him to whom beauty was the one thing worth living for.

Unconscious of his rapt gaze, Stella leant back, her eyes fixed on the water, her whole attention absorbed by its musical ripple as it ran through her fingers.

In silence he pulled the sculls, slowly and noiselessly; he would not have spoken and broken the spell for worlds. Before him, as he looked upon her, rose the picture of which he had spoken to his sister last night.

"But more beautiful," he mused – "more beautiful! How lost she is! She has forgotten me – forgotten everything. Oh, Heaven! if one were to waken her into love!"

For an instant, at the thought, the color came into his face and the fire to his eyes; then a half guilty, half repentful feeling struck through him.

"No, it would be cruel – cruel: and yet to see the azure light shining in those eyes – to see those lips half parted with the breath of a great passion, would be worth – what? It would make amends for all that a man might suffer, though he died the next moment, if those eyes smiled, if those lips were upturned, for love of him!"

So lost were they that the touching of the boat and the bank made them start.

"So soon," murmured Stella. "How beautiful it is! I think I was dreaming."

"And I know that I was," he said, with a subtle significance, as he rose and held out his hand. But Stella sprang lightly on shore without accepting it. He tied up the boat and followed her; she was already on her knee, picking the yellow primroses.

Without a word, he followed her example. Sometimes they were so near together that she could feel his breath stirring her hair – so near that their hands almost met.

At last she sank on to the mossy ground with a laugh, and, pointing to her hat, which was full of the spring earth-stars, said laughingly:

"What ruthless pillage! Do not pick any more; it is wanton waste!"

"Are you sure you have plenty?" he said. "Why hesitate when there are such millions?"

"No, no more!" she said. "I feel guilty already!"

He glanced at the handful he had gathered, and she saw the glance and laughed.

"You do not know what to do with those you have, and still want more. See, you must tie them in bundles.

"Show me," he said, and he threw himself down beside her.

She gathered them up into bundles, and tied them with a long stem of fern, and he tried to do the same, but his hands, white

and slender as they were, were not so deft as hers, and he held the huge bundle to her.

"You must tie it," he said.

She laughed and put the fern round, but it broke, and the primroses fell in a golden shower over their hands. They both made a grasp at them, and their hands met.

For a moment Stella laughed, then the laugh died away, for he still held her hand, and the warmth of his grasp seemed stealing upward to her heart. With something like an effort she drew her hand away, and sprang to her feet.

"I – I must go," she said. "Uncle will wonder where I have gone," and she looked down at the water with almost frightened eagerness.

"He will know you are here, quite safe," he said. "Wait, do not go this moment. Up there, above our heads, we can see the river stretching away for miles. It is not a step; will you come?"

She hesitated a moment, then she turned and walked beside him between the trees.

A step or two, as he said, and they reached a sort of plateau, crowned by a moss-grown rock, in which some rough steps were hewn. He sprang up the steps and reached the top, then bent down and held out his hand.

Stella hesitated a moment.

"It will repay your trouble; come," he said, and she put her hand in his and her foot on the first step, and he drew her up beside him.

"Look!" he said.

An exclamation of delight broke from Stella's lips.

"You are not sorry you came?"

"I did not think it would be so lovely," she said.

He stood beside her, not looking at the view, but at her dark eyes dilating with dreamy rapture – at her half-parted lips, and the sweet, clear-cut profile presented to him.

She turned suddenly, and to hide the look of admiration he raised his hand and pointed out the objects in the view.

"And what is that little house there?" asked Stella.

"That is one of the lodges," he said.

"One of the lodges – one of your own lodges, you mean?" she asked.

He nodded lightly, "Yes."

"And all this between here and that lodge belongs to you?"

"No, not an inch," he said, laughing. "To my father."

"It is a great deal," she said.

"Too much for one man, you think?" he said, with a smile.

"A great many other people think so too. I don't know what you would think if you knew how much we Wyndwards have managed at one time or the other to lay our acquiring grasp on. This is one of our smallest estates," he said, simply.

Stella looked at the view dreamily.

"One of the smallest? Yes, I have heard that you are very rich. It must be very nice."

"I don't know," he said. "You see one cannot tell until one has

been poor. I don't think there is anything in it. I don't think one is any the happier. There is always something left to long for."

She turned her dark eyes on him with a smile of incredulity.

"What can you possibly have to long for?" she said.

He looked at her with a strange smile; then suddenly his face grew grave and wistful – almost sad, as it seemed to her.

"You cannot guess, and I cannot tell you; but believe me that, as I stand here, there is an aching void in my heart, and I do long for something very earnestly."

The voice was like music, deep and thrilling; she listened and wondered.

"And you should be so happy," she said, almost unconsciously.

"Happy!" he echoed, and his dark eyes rested on hers with a strange expression that was half-mocking, half-sad. "Do you know what the poets say?"

"'Count no man happy till he dies,' do you mean?" said Stella.

"Yes," he said. "I do not think I know what happiness means. I have been pursuing it all my life; sometimes have been within reach of it but it has always evaded me – always slipped from my grasp. Sometimes I have resolved to let it go – to pursue it no longer; but fate has decreed that man shall always be seeking for the unattainable – that he who once looks upon happiness with the eyes of desire, who stretches out his hands toward her, shall pursue her to the end."

"And – but surely some get their desire."

"Some," he said, "to find that the prize is not worth the race

they have run for it; to find that they have wearied of it when it is gained; to find that it is no prize at all, but a delusive blank; all dead sea fruit that turns to dust upon the lips."

"Not all; surely not all!" she murmured, strangely moved by his words.

"No; not all," he said, with a hidden light in his eyes that she did not see. "To some there comes a moment when they know that happiness – real true happiness – lies just beyond their grasp. And the case of rich men is more to be pitied than all others. What would you say if I told you that it was mine?"

She looked up at him with a gentle smile, not on her lips but in her eyes.

"I should say that I was very sorry," she murmured. "I should say that you deserved – " she stopped short, smitten by sudden remembrance of all she had heard of him.

He filled up the pause with a laugh: a laugh such as she had not heard upon his lips till now.

"You were right to stop," he said. "If I get all the happiness I deserve – well, no man will envy me."

"Let us go down now," said Stella, gently; "my uncle – "

He leapt down, and held up his hand.

CHAPTER VIII

Stella put hers into it, but reluctantly, and tried to spring, but her dress caught and she slipped forward.

She would have fallen but that he was on the alert to save her. Quite simply and naturally he put his arms round her and lifted her down.

Only for a moment he held her in his embrace, her panting form close to his, her face almost resting on his shoulders, but that moment roused the blood in his fiery heart, and her face went pale.

"Are you hurt?" he murmured.

"No, no!" she said, and she slipped out of his arms and stood a little away from him, the color coming and going in her face; it was the first time that any man's arms, save her father's, had ever encircled her.

"Are you quite sure?" he repeated.

"Quite," she said, then she laughed. "What would have happened if I had slipped?"

"You would have sprained your ankle," he said.

"Sprained my ankle, really?" she repeated, with open eyes.

"Yes, and I should have had to carry you down to the boat," he said, slowly.

She looked away from him.

"I am glad I did not slip."

"And I," he said, "am – glad also."

She stooped and picked up the primroses and ran down the slope, her cheeks aflame, a feeling that was something like shame, and yet too full of a strange, indefinable joy to be sullen shame, took possession of her.

With light feet, her hat swinging in her hand, she threaded her way between the trees and sprang on to the grassy road beside the river bank.

He did not follow so quickly, but stood for a moment looking at her, his face pale, his eyes full of a strange, wistful restlessness.

Then Stella heard his step, firm and masterful, behind her. A sudden impulse tempted her sorely to jump into the boat and push off – she could pull a pair of sculls – and her hand was on the edge of the boat, when she heard the sound of bells, and paused with astonishment. Looking up she saw a tiny phaeton drawn by a pair of cream-white ponies coming along the road; it was the bells on their harness that she had heard.

They came along at a fair pace, and Stella saw that the phaeton was being driven by a coachman in dark-brown livery, but the next moment all her attention was absorbed by the young girl who sat beside him.

She was so fair, so lovely, so ethereal looking, that Stella was spellbound.

A book was in her hand – ungloved and small and white as a child's – but she was not reading. She held it so loosely that as the phaeton came along the top of the bank which hid Stella, the

book dropped from the lax grasp of the white fingers.

The girl uttered an exclamation, and Stella, obeying one of her sudden impulses, sprang lightly up the bank, and picking up the book, held it toward her.

Her appearance was so sudden that Lady Lilian was startled and for a moment the pale face was dyed with a faint color; even after the moment had passed she sat speechless, and the surprise in her eyes gave place to a frank, generous admiration.

"Oh, thank you – thank you!" she said. "How kind of you. It was so stupid of me to drop it. But where did you come from – the clouds?" And there was a delicious hint of flattery in the look that accompanied the words.

"Quite the reverse," said Stella, with her open smile. "I was standing below there, by the boat."

And she pointed.

"Oh?" said Lady Lilian. "I did not see you."

"You were looking the other way," said Stella, drawing back to allow the carriage to proceed; but Lady Lilian seemed reluctant to go, and made no sign to the coachman, who sat holding the reins like an image of stone, apparently deaf and dumb.

For a few strokes of Time's scythe the two girls looked at each other – the one with the pale face and the blue eyes regarding the fresh, healthful beauty of the other with sad, wistful gaze. Then Lady Lilian spoke.

"What beautiful primroses! You have been gathering them on the slopes?" with a suggestion of a sigh.

"Yes," said Stella. "Will you take them?"

"Oh, no, no; I could not think of robbing you."

Stella smiled with her characteristic archness.

"It is I who have been the thief. I have been taking what did not belong to me. You will take these?"

Lady Lilian was too well bred to refuse; besides, she thirsted for them.

"If you will give them to me, and will not mind picking some more," she said.

Stella laid the bunch on the costly sables which wrapped the frail figure.

Lady Lilian put them to her face with a caressing gesture.

"You are, like me, fond of flowers?" she said.

Stella nodded. "Yes."

Then there was a pause. Above them, unseen by Lilian, forgotten by Stella, stood Lord Leycester.

He was watching and waiting with a strange smile. He could read the meaning in his sister's eyes; she was longing to know more of the beautiful girl who had sprang like a fairy to her side.

With a faint flush, Lady Lilian said:

"You – you are a stranger, are you not? I mean you do not live here?"

"Yes," said Stella; "I live" – and she smiled and pointed to the cottage across the meadow – "there."

Lady Lilian started, and Lord Leycester seized the moment, and coming down, quietly stood by Stella's side.

"Leycester!" exclaimed Lilian, with a start of surprise.

He smiled into her eyes, his strange, masterful, irresistible smile. It was as if he had said, "Did I not tell you? Can you withstand her?"

But aloud he said:

"Let me make the introduction in due form. This is Miss Etheridge, Lilian. Miss Etheridge, this is my sister. As the French philosopher said, 'Know each other.'"

Lady Lilian held out her hand.

"I am very glad," she said.

Stella took the thin, white hand, and held it for a moment; then Lady Lilian looked from one to the other.

Lord Leycester interpreted the glance at once.

"Miss Etheridge has intrusted herself on the watery deep with me," he said. "We came across to gather flowers, leaving Mr. Etheridge to paint there."

And he waved his hand across the river.

Lady Lilian looked.

"I see," she said – "I see. And he is painting. Is he not clever? How proud you must be of him!"

Stella's eyes grew dark. It was the one word wanting to draw them together. She said not a word.

"Your uncle and I are old friends," Lady Lilian continued. "Sometime when – when I am stronger, I am coming to see him – when the weather gets warmer – " Stella glanced at the frail form clad in sables, with a moistened eye – "I am going to spend

a long afternoon among the pictures. He is always so kind and patient, and explains them all to me. But, as I am not able to come to you, you will come and see me, will you not?"

There was a moment's silence. Lord Leycester stood looking over the river as if waiting for Stella's reply.

Stella looked up.

"I shall be very glad," she said, and Lord Leycester drew a breath, almost of relief.

"You will, will you not?" said Lady Lilian, with a sweet smile.

"Yes, I will come," said Stella, almost solemnly.

"You will find me poor company," said the daughter of the great earl, with meek humility. "I see so little of the world that I grow dull and ignorant; but I shall be so glad to see you," and she held out her hand.

Stella took it in her warm, soft fingers.

"I will come," she said.

Lady Lilian looked at the coachman, who, though his eyes were fixed in quite another direction, seemed to see the glance, for he touched the horses with the whip.

"Good-bye," she said, "good-bye."

Then, as the phaeton moved on, she called out, in her low, musical voice, that was a low echo of her brother's:

"Oh, Leycester, Lenore has come!"

Leycester raised his hat.

"Very well," he said. "Good-bye."

Stella stood a moment looking after her. Strangely enough the

last words rang in her ears with a senseless kind of insistence and emphasis. "Lenore has come!" She found herself repeating them mentally.

Recalling herself she turned swiftly to Lord Leycester.

"How beautiful she is!" she said, almost in a whisper.

He looked at her with gratitude in his eloquent eyes.

"Yes."

"So beautiful and so kind!" Stella murmured, and the tears sprang to her eyes. "I can see her face now. I can hear her voice. I do not wonder that you love her as you do."

"How do you know that I love her?" he said. "Brothers, generally – "

Stella stopped him with a gesture.

"No man with a heart warmer than a stone could help loving her."

"And so you agree that my heart is warmer than a stone. Thank you for that, at least," he said, with a smile that was not at all unselfish.

Stella looked at him.

"Let us go now," she said. "See, uncle is getting his things together."

"Not without the primroses," he said; "Lilian will break her heart if you go without any. Let me get some," and he went up the slope.

Stella stood in thought. The sudden meeting with the fairy-like creatures, had filled her with strange thoughts. She understood

now that rank and money are not all that is wanted for earthly happiness.

So lost in thought was she that she did not hear the sound of a horse coming along the mossy road, though the animal was coming at a great pace.

Lord Leycester's ears were freer or quicker however, for he caught the sound and turned round.

Turned round in time to see a huge bay horse ridden by a tall, thin, dark young man, almost upon the slim form, standing with its back to it.

With something like an oath on his lips, he dropped the flowers and with one spring stood between her and the horse, and seizing the bridle with both hands threw the beast, with sheer force, on to its haunches.

The rider had been staring at the river, and was taken by surprise so complete, that, as the horse rose on its legs, he was thrown from the saddle.

Stella, alarmed by the noise, turned and swerved out of the path. And so they were grouped. Lord Leycester, pale with furious passion, still holding the reins and forcing the horse in an iron grip, and the erstwhile rider lying huddled up on the mossy road.

He lay still, only for a moment, however; the next he was on his feet and advancing toward Lord Leycester. It was Jasper Adelstone.

His face was deadly pale, making, by contrast, his small eyes

black as coals.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, furiously, and half-unconsciously he raised his whip.

It was an unlucky gesture, for it was all that was needed to rouse the devil in Lord Leycester's breast.

With one little irresistible gesture he seized the whip arm and the whip, and flinging the owner to the ground again with one movement, broke the whip, and flung it on the top of him with the other.

It was all done in a second. With all the will in the world, Stella had no time to interpose before the rash act was accomplished; but now she sprang between them.

"Lord Leycester," she cried, pale and horror-stricken, as she gazed into his face, white and working with passion; all its beauty gone, and with the mask of a fury in its place. "Lord Leycester!"

At the sound of her voice – pleading, expostulating, rebuking – a shiver ran through him, his hand fell to his side, and still holding the now plunging and furious horse with a grip of steel, he stood humbly before her.

Not so Jasper Adelstone. With a slow, sinuous movement he rose and shook himself, and glared at him. Speechless from the sheer breathlessness of furious hate he stood and looked at the tall, velvet-clad figure.

Stella was the first to break the silence.

"Oh, my lord!" she said.

At the sound of her reproachful voice, Lord Leycester's face

paled.

"Forgive me," he said, humbly. "I beg – I crave your forgiveness; but I thought you were in danger, you were – you were!" Then, at the thought, his fiery passion broke out again, and he turned to the silent, white-faced Jasper. "What the devil do you mean by riding in that fashion?"

Jasper Adelstone's lips moved, and at last speech came.

"You shall answer for this, Lord Leycester."

It was the worst word he could have said.

In an instant all Lord Leycester's repentances fled.

With a smothered oath on his lips, he advanced toward him.

"What! Is that all you have to say? Do you know, you miserable wretch, that you nearly rode over this lady – yes, rode over her? Answer for it! Confound you –" and he raised his arm.

But Stella, all her wits on the *qui vive*, was in time, and her own arms were wound about his, on which the muscles stood thick and prominent – like iron bands.

With a gesture he became calm again, and there was a mute prayer for pardon in his eyes as he looked at her.

"Do not be afraid," he murmured, between his lips; "I will not hurt him. No, no."

Then he pointed to the horse.

"Mount, sir, and get out of my sight. Stop!" and the fiery passion broke out again. "No, by Heaven, you shall not, until you have begged the lady's pardon."

"No, no!" said Stella.

"But I say 'Yes!'" said Lord Leycester, his eyes blazing. "Is every tailor to ride through the Chase and knock down whom he will? Ask for pardon, sir, or – "

Jasper stood looking from one to the other.

"No, no!" said Stella. "It was all an accident. Please, pray do not say another word. Mr. Adelstone, I beg you will go without another word."

Jasper Adelstone hesitated for a moment.

"Miss Stella," he said, hoarsely.

Alas! it was oil on the smoldering fire.

"Miss Stella!" exclaimed Lord Leycester. "Who gave you the right to address this lady by her Christian name, sir?"

Jasper bit his lip.

"Miss Etheridge, you cannot doubt that I am heartily sorry that this unpleasant contretemps should have been caused by my carelessness. I was riding carelessly – "

"Like an idiot!" broke in Lord Leycester.

"And did not see you. No harm would have resulted, however, if this man – if Lord Leycester Wyndward had not, with brutal force, thrown me from the saddle. I should have seen you in time, and, as I say, no harm would have been done. All that has occurred is this man – Lord Leycester Wyndward's – fault. Again I beg your pardon."

And he bent his head before her. But as he did so a malignant gleam shot out of his eyes in the direction of the tall, stalwart figure and white, passionate face.

"No, no, there is no occasion!" said Stella, trembling. "I do not want you to beg my pardon. It was only an accident. You did not expect to see anyone here – I – I – oh, I wish I had not come."

Lord Leycester started.

"Do not say that," he murmured.

Then aloud:

"Here is your horse, sir; mount him and go home, and thank your stars the lady has escaped without a broken limb."

Jasper stood a moment looking at him, then, with another inclination of the head, he slowly mounted the horse.

Lord Leycester, his passion gone, stood calm and motionless for a moment, then raised his hat with an old-world gesture.

"Good-day to you, and remember to ride more carefully in future."

Jasper Adelstone looked down at him with a malignant smile on his thin lips.

"Good-day, my lord. I shall remember. I am not one to forget. No, I am not one to forget," and striking spurs into the horse, he rode off.

CHAPTER IX

"Who is 'Lenore,' uncle?"

It was the evening of the same day – a day never to be forgotten by Stella, a day marked with a white stone in her mental calendar. Never would she be able to look upon a field of primroses, never hear the music of the river running over the weir, without remembering this morning the first she had spent with Lord Leycester.

It was evening now, and the two – the painter and the girl – were sitting by the open window, looking out into the gloaming, he lost in memory, she going over and over again the incidents of the morning, from the visit of Mr. Jasper Adelstone to his encounter with Lord Leycester.

It was strange, it was almost phenomenal – for Stella was frankness and candor itself – that she had said nothing of the encounter to her uncle; once or twice she had opened her lips – once at dinner, and once again as she sat beside him, leaning her arm on his chair while he smoked his pipe – she had opened her lips to tell him of that sudden outburst of fury on the part of Lord Leycester – that passionate rage which proved all that the painter had said of his hot temper to be true, but she had found some difficulty in the recital which had kept her silent.

She had told him of her walk in the woods, had told him of her meeting with Lady Lilian, but of that passionate encounter

between the two men she said nothing.

When Jasper had ridden on, pale and livid with suppressed passion, Lord Leycester had stood looking at her in silence. Now, as she sat looking into the gloaming, she saw him in her mind's eye still, his beautiful eyes eloquent with remorse and humility, his clear-cut lip quivering with the sense of his weakness.

"Will you forgive me?" he said, at last, and that was all. Without another word, he had offered to help her into the boat, help which Stella had disregarded, and had rowed her across to her uncle. Without a word, but with the same penitent, imploring look in his eyes, he raised his hat and left her – had gone home to the Hall, to his sister Lady Lilian, and to Lenore.

Ever since she had heard the name drop softly from Lady Lilian's lips it had rung in her ears. There was a subtle kind of charm about it that half fascinated, half annoyed her.

And now, leaning her head on her arm, and with her dark eyes fixed on the stars which glittered merrily in the sky, she put the question:

"Who is Lenore, uncle?"

He stirred in his chair and looked at her absently.

"Lenore, Lenore? I don't know, Stella, and yet the name sounds familiar. Where did you hear it? It's scarcely fair to spring a question like that on me; you might ask me who is Julia, Louisa, Anna Maria – "

Stella laughed softly.

"I heard it this morning, uncle. Lady Lilian told her brother

as she left us that 'Lenore had come.'"

"Ah, yes," he said. "Now I know. So she has come, has she? Who is Lenore?" and he smiled. "There is scarcely another woman in England who would need to ask that question, Stella."

"No?" she said, turning her eyes upon him with surprise. "Why? Is she so famous?"

"Exactly, yes; that is just the word. She is famous."

"For what, uncle? Is she a great actress, painter, musician – what?"

"She is something that the world, nowadays, reckons far above any of the classes you have named, Stella – she is a great beauty."

"Oh, is that all!" said Stella, curtly.

"All!" he echoed, amused.

"Yes," and she nodded. "It seems so easy."

"So easy!" and he laughed.

"Yes," she continued; "so very easy, if you happen to be born so. There is no merit in it. And is that all she is?"

He was staggered by her *sang froid* for a moment.

"Well, I was scarcely fair, perhaps. As you say, it is very easy to be a great beauty – if you are one – but it is rather difficult if you are not; but Lenore is something more than that – she is an enchantress."

"That's better," remarked Stella. "I like that. And how does she enchant? Does she keep tame snakes, and play music to them, or mesmerize people, or what?"

The painter laughed again with great enjoyment at her *naivete*.

"You are quite a cynic, Stella. Where did you learn the trick; from your father, or is it a natural gift? No, she does not keep tame snakes, and I don't know that she has acquired the art of mesmerism; but she can charm for all that. First, she is, really and truly, very beautiful – "

"Tell me what she is like?" interrupted Stella, softly.

The old man paused a moment to light his pipe.

"She is very fair," he said.

"I know," said Stella, dreamily, and with a little smile; "with yellow hair and blue eyes, and a pink and white complexion, and blue veins and a tiny mouth."

"All wrong," he said, with, a laugh. "You have, woman-like, pictured a china doll. Lenore is as unlike a china doll as it is possible to imagine. She has golden hair it is true – but golden hair, not yellow; there is a difference. Then her eyes are not blue; they are violet."

"Violet!"

"Violet!" he repeated, gravely. "I have seen them as violet as the flowers that grow on the bank over there. Her mouth is not small; there was never yet a woman worth a fig who had a small mouth. It is rather large than otherwise, but then it is – a mouth."

"Expressive?" said Stella, quietly.

"Eloquent," he corrected. "The sort of mouth that can speak volumes with a curve of the lip. You think I exaggerate? Wait until you see her."

"I don't think," said Stella, slowly, "that I am particularly

desirous of seeing her, uncle. It reminds me of what they say of Naples – see Naples and die! See Lenore and die!"

He laughed.

"Well, it is not altogether false; many have seen her – many men, and been ready to die for love of her."

Stella laughed, softly.

"She must be very beautiful for you to talk like this, uncle. She is charming too?"

"Yes, she is charming," he said, low; "with a charm that one is bound to admit at once and unreservedly."

"But what does she do?" asked Stella, with a touch of feminine impatience.

"What does she not?" he answered. "There is scarcely an accomplishment under the sun or moon that she has not at her command. In a word, Stella, Lenore is the outcome of the higher civilization; she is the type of our latest requirement, which demands more than mere beauty, and will not be satisfied with mere cleverness; she rides beautifully and fearlessly; she plays and sings better than one-half the women one hears at concerts; they tell me that no woman in London can dance with greater grace, and I have seen her land a salmon of twenty pounds with all the skill of a Scotch gillie."

Stella was silent a moment.

"You have described a paragon, uncle. How all her women friends must detest her."

He laughed.

"I think you are wrong. I never knew a woman more popular with her sex."

"How proud her husband must be of her," murmured Stella.

"Her husband! What husband? She is not married."

Stella laughed.

"Not married! Such a perfection unmarried! Is it possible that mankind can permit such a paragon to remain single. Uncle, they must be afraid of her!"

"Well, perhaps they are – some of them," he assented, smiling.

"No," he continued, musingly; "she is not married. Lenore might have been married long before this: she has had many chances, and some of them great ones. She might have been a duchess by this time if she had chosen."

"And why did she not?" said Stella. "Such a woman should be nothing less than a duchess. It is a duchess whom you have described, uncle."

"I don't know," he said, simply. "I don't think anyone knows; perhaps she does not know herself."

Stella was silent for a moment; her imagination was hard at work.

"Is she rich, poor – what, uncle?"

"I don't know. Rich, I should think," he answered.

"And what is her other name, or has she only one name, like a princess or a church dignitary?"

"Her name is Beauchamp – Lady Lenore Beauchamp."

"Lady!" repeated Stella, surprised. "She has a title, then; it was

all that was wanted."

"Yes, she is the daughter of a peer."

"What a happy woman she must be; – is she a woman or a girl, though. I have imagined her a woman of thirty."

He laughed.

"Lady Lenore is – is" – he thought a moment – "just twenty-three."

"That's a woman," said Stella, decidedly. "And this wonderful creature is at the Hall, within sight of us. Tell me, uncle, do they keep her in a glass case, and only permit her to be seen as a curiosity at so much a head? They ought to do so, you know."

He laughed, and his hand stroked her hair.

"What is it Voltaire says, Stella," he remarked. "If you want a woman to hate another, praise her to the first one."

Stella's face flushed hotly, and she laughed with just a touch of scorn.

"Hate! I don't hate her, uncle – I admire her; I should like to see her, to touch her – to feel for myself the wonderful charm of which you speak. I should like to see how she bears it; it must be strange, you know, to be superior to all one's kind."

"If she feels strange," he said, thoughtfully, "she does not show it. I never saw more perfect grace and ease than hers. I do not think anything in the world would ruffle her. I think if she were on board a ship that was going down inch by inch, and she knew that she was within, say, five minutes of death, she would not flinch, or drop for a moment the smile which usually rests upon

her lips. That is her charm, Stella – the perfect ease and perfect grace which spring from a consciousness of her power."

There was silence for a moment. The painter had spoken in his usual dreamy fashion, more like communion with his own thoughts than a direct address to his hearer, and Stella, listening, allowed every word to sink into her mind.

His description impressed her strongly, more than she cared to admit. Already, so it seemed to her, she felt fascinated by this beautiful creature, who appeared as perfect and faultless as one of the heathen goddesses – say Diana.

"Where does she live?" she asked, dreamily.

He smoked in silence for a moment.

"Live? I scarcely know; she is everywhere. In London in the season, visiting in country houses at other times. There is not a house in England where she would not be received with a welcome accorded to princes. It is rather strange that she should be down here just now; the season has commenced, most of the visitors have left the Hall, some of them to be in their places in Parliament. It is rather strange that she should have come down at this time."

Stella colored, and a feeling of vague irritation took possession of her – why, she scarcely knew.

"I should think that everyone would be glad to come to Wyndward Hall at any time – even Lady Lenore Beauchamp," she said, in a low voice.

He nodded.

"Wyndward Hall is a fine place," he said, slowly, "but Lady Lenore is accustomed to – well, to palaces. There is not a ball-room in London where her absence will not be noticed. It is strange. Perhaps" – and he smiled – "Lady Wyndward has some motive."

"Some motive?" repeated Stella, turning her eyes toward him. "What motive can she have?"

"There is Leycester," he said, musingly.

"Leycester?"

The word was out of her lips before she was aware of it, and a vivid crimson dyed her face.

"Lord Leycester, I mean."

"Yes," he answered. "Nothing would please his mother more than to see him marry, and he could not marry a more suitable person than Lenore. Yes, that must be it, of course. Well, he could not do better, and as for her, though she has refused greater chances, there is a charm in being the future Countess of Wyndward, which is not to be despised. I wonder whether he will fall into the trap – if trap it is intended to be."

Stella sat silent, her head thrown back, her eyes fixed on the stars. He saw she was very pale, and there was a strange, intent look in her eyes. There was also a dull aching in her heart which was scarcely distinct enough for pain, but which annoyed and shamed her. What could it matter to her – to her, Stella Etheridge, the niece of a poor painter – whom Lord Leycester, future Earl of Wyndward, married? Nothing, less than nothing. But still the

dull aching throbbled in her heart, and his face floated between her and the stars, his voice rang in her ears.

How fortunate, how blessed, some women were! Here, for instance, was this girl of twenty-three, beautiful, famously beautiful, noble, and reigning like a queen in the great world, and yet the gods were not satisfied, but they must give her Leycester Wyndward! For of course it was impossible that he should resist her if she chose to put forth her charm. Had not her uncle just said that she could fascinate? – had she not even evidently fascinated him, the dreamer, the artist, the man who had seen and who knew the world so well?

For a moment she gave herself up to this reflection and to the dull aching, then with a gesture of impatience she rose, so suddenly as to startle the old man.

"What is the matter, Stella?" he asked.

"Nothing, nothing," she said. "Shall we have lights? The room is so dark and still, and – " her voice broke for a moment.

She went to the mantel-shelf and lit a candle, and as she did so she looked up and saw her face reflected in the antique mirror and started.

Was that her face? – that pale, half-startled visage looking at her so sadly. With a laugh she put the dark hair from her brow, and gliding to the organ began to play; feverishly, restlessly at first, but presently the music worked its charm and soothed her savage breast.

Yes, she was savage, she knew it, she felt it! This woman had

everything, while she —

The door opened and a stream of light broke in from the lamp carried by Mrs. Penfold.

"Are you there, Miss Stella? Oh, yes, there you are! I thought it was Mr. Etheridge playing; you don't often play like that. There's a note for you."

"A note! For me!" exclaimed Stella, turning on her stool with amazement.

Mrs. Penfold smiled and nodded.

"Yes, miss; and there's an answer, please."

Stella took the note hesitatingly, as if she half expected it to contain a charge of explosive dynamite; the envelope was addressed in a thin, beautiful hand to Miss Stella Etheridge. Stella turned the envelope over and started as she saw the arms stamped upon it. She knew it, it was the Wyndward crest.

For a moment she sat looking down at it without offering to open it, then with an effort she tore it open, slowly, and read the note enclosed.

"Dear Miss Etheridge: — Will you redeem the promise you made me this afternoon and come and see me? Will you ask Mr. Etheridge to bring you to dine with them to-morrow at eight o'clock? I say 'them' because I dine always alone; but perhaps you will not mind coming to me after dinner for a little while. Do not let Mr. Etheridge refuse as he generally does, but tell him to bring you for my sake."

"Yours very truly,

"Lilian Wyndward."

Stella read it and re-read it as if she could not believe her senses. Lady Lilian's invitation had sounded so vague that she had scarcely remembered it, and now here was a direct invitation to Wyndham Hall, and to dinner.

"Well, miss?" said Mrs. Penfold.

Stella started.

"I will give you the answer directly," she said.

Then she went across to her uncle and stood beside him, the letter in her hand. He was lost in thought, and quite unsuspecting of the thunder-clap preparing for him.

"Uncle, I have just got a letter."

"Eh? Where from, Stella?"

"From Lady Lilian."

He looked up quickly.

"She has asked me to dinner to-morrow."

"No!" he said. She put the letter in his hand. "Read it, will you, my dear?" he said.

And she read it, conscious that her voice trembled.

"Well?" he said.

"Well?" she repeated, with a smile.

He put his hand to his brow.

"To dinner – to-morrow? Oh, dear me! Well, well! You would like to go?" and he looked up at her. "Of course you would like to go."

She looked down, her face was delicately flushed – her eyes

shone.

"Of course," he said. "Well, say 'Yes.' It is very kind. You see, Stella, your wish is gratified almost as soon as you utter it. You will see your paragon – Lady Lenore."

She started, and her face went pale.

"I have changed my mind," she said, in a low voice. "I find I don't want to see her so badly as I thought. I think I don't care to go, uncle."

He stared at her. She was still an enigma to him.

"Nonsense, child! Not care to see Wyndward Hall! Nonsense! Besides, it's Lady Lilian; we must go, Stella."

She still stood with the letter in her hand.

"But – but, uncle – I have nothing to wear."

"Nothing to wear!" And he looked at her up and down.

"Nothing fit for Wyndward Hall," she said. "Uncle, I don't think I care to go."

He laughed gently.

"You will find something to wear between now and half-past seven to-morrow," he said, "or my faith in Mrs. Penfold's resources will be shaken. Accept, my dear."

She went slowly to the table and wrote two lines – two lines only.

"Dear Lady Lilian. – We shall be very glad indeed to come and see you to-morrow. Yours very truly,"

"Stella Etheridge."

Then she rang the bell and gave the note to Mrs. Penfold.

"I am going to Wyndward Hall to-morrow," she said, with a smile, "and I have got nothing to wear, Mrs. Penfold!" and she laughed.

Mrs. Penfold threw up her hands after the manner of her kind.

"To the Hall, Miss Stella, to-morrow! Oh, dear, what shall we do?" Then she glanced at the arm-chair, and beckoned Stella out of the room.

"Come up-stairs, then, and let us see what we can manage. To the Hall! Think of that!" and she threw up her head proudly.

Stella sat on a chair, looking on with a smile, while the scanty wardrobe was overhauled.

Scanty as it was it contained everything that was needful for such use as Stella might ordinarily require, but a dinner at the Hall was quite out of the ordinary. At last, after holding up dress after dress, and dropping it with a shake of the head, Mrs. Penfold took up a cream sateen.

"That's very pretty," said Stella.

"But it's only sateen!" exclaimed Mrs. Penfold.

"It looks like satin – a little," said Stella "by candlelight, at least."

"And they have real satin, and silks, and velvets," deplored Mrs. Penfold, eagerly.

"Nobody will notice me," said Stella, consolingly. "It doesn't matter."

Mrs. Penfold glanced at her with a curious smile.

"Will they not, Miss Stella? I don't know, I think they will; but

it must be this dress or nothing; you can't go in a cotton, or the black merino, and the muslin you wore the other night – "

"Wouldn't do at all," said Stella. "We'll make this sateen do, Mrs. Penfold. I think it looks very nice; the lace is good, isn't it?"

"The lace?" said Mrs. Penfold, thoughtfully, then her face brightened. "Wait a moment," she said, and she dropped the dress and hurried from the room, returning in a few moments with a small box. "Speaking of lace just reminded me, Miss Stella, that I had some by me. It was made by my mother – I don't know whether it's good," and as she spoke she opened the box and lifted some lace from the interior.

"Why it's point!"

"Point, is it, miss? I didn't know. Then it is good."

"Good!" exclaimed Stella – "it's beautiful, delicious, heavenly. And will you lend it to me?"

"No, I'll give it to you if you will take it, Miss Stella," said the good woman, with a proud smile.

"No, no, not for worlds, but I will wear it if you'll let me?" said Stella, and she took a long strip and put it round her throat. "Oh, it is beautiful, beautiful! It would make the poorest dress look handsome! I will take great care of it, indeed I will."

"What nonsense, dear Miss Stella! How glad I am I thought of it. And it does look pretty now you wear it," and she looked at the beautiful face admiringly. "And you'll want gloves – let me see – yes, you have got some cream gloves; they'll go with the dress, won't they? Now, you go down-stairs, and I'll look the things out

and tack the lace on. Going to the Hall? I'm so glad, Miss Stella."

"Are you?" said Stella, softly, as she went down-stairs, "I don't know whether I'm glad or sorry!"

CHAPTER X

The great clock in the Hall stables chimed the half-hour – half-past seven, and the sound came floating down the valley.

Mr. Etheridge stood at the door clad in evening dress, which, old-fashioned and well-worn as it was, sat upon him with a gracious air, and made him look more distinguished than ever. The fly was waiting at the door, and he glanced at his watch and took a step toward the stairs, when a light appeared above, and a light step sounded over his head. The next moment a vision, as it seemed to him, floated into sight, and came down upon him.

Stella was in the cream sateen dress – the exquisite lace was clinging round her slender, graceful throat – there was a red rose in her hair; but it was not the dress, nor the lace, nor the rose even, which chained the painter's eye – it was the lovely girlish face. The excitement had brought a dash of warm color in the clear olive cheeks and a bright light into the dark eyes; the lips were half-apart with a smile, and the whole face was eloquent of youth's fresh tide of life and spirits. If they had had all Howell and James' stock to choose from, they could not have chosen a more suitable dress – a more becoming color; the whole made a fitting frame for the girlish beauty.

"Well, uncle!" she said, with a little blush.

"What have you done to yourself, my child?" he said, with simple open-eyed wonder.

"Isn't she – isn't it beautiful?" murmured Mrs. Penfold, in an ecstasy. "But then, if it had been a morning cotton, it would have been all the same." And she proceeded to wrap a woolen shawl round her so carefully as if she was something that might be destroyed at too hard a touch. "Mind she has this wound round her like this when she comes out, sir, and be sure and keep the window up."

"And don't let the air breathe on me, or I shall melt, uncle," laughed Stella.

"Upon my word, I'm half disposed to think so," he muttered.

Then they entered the fly – Mrs. Penfold disposing the short train of the despised sateen with gingerly care – and started.

"How have you managed it all?" asked the old man, quite bewildered. "I feel quite strange conveying a brilliant young lady."

"And I feel – frightened out of my life," said Stella, with a little breath and a laugh.

"Then you conceal your alarm with infinite art," he retorted.

"That's just it," she assented. "My heart is beating like a steam hammer, but, like an Indian at the stake, I am determined to smile to the end. They will be very terrible, uncle, will they not?"

"Who?" he asked.

"The countess and the paragon – I mean Lady Lenore Beauchamp. I shall have to be careful, or I shall be calling her the paragon to her face. What would she do, uncle?"

"Smile and pass it by with a gracious air," he said, laughing.

"You are a clever and a bold girl, Stella, but even you could not take 'a rise,' as we used to say in my school-days, out of Lady Lenore."

"I am not clever, and I am trembling like a mouse," said Stella, with a piteous little pout. "You'll stand by me, uncle, won't you?"

He laughed.

"I think you are quite able to defend yourself, my dear," he said. "Never knew one of your sex who was not."

The fly rumbled over the bridge and entered the long avenue, and Stella, looking out, saw the lights of the house shining at the end of the vista.

"What a grand place it is," she murmured, almost to herself. "Uncle, I feel as if I were about to enter another world; and I am, I think. I have never seen a countess in my life before; have been shut up within the four walls of a school. If she says one word to me I shall expire."

He laughed, and began to feel for the sketch which he had brought with him.

"You will not find her so very terrible," he said.

The fly got to the end of the avenue at last, and wound round the broad drive to the front entrance.

It loomed so large and awe-inspiring above them, that Stella's heart seemed to sink; but her color came again as two tall footmen, in grand, but not gorgeous, livery, came down the broad steps and opened the fly door. She would not let them see that she was – afraid. Afraid; yes that was the word which described her

feelings as she was ushered into the hall, and she looked round at its vastness.

There were several other footmen standing about with solemn faces, and a maid dressed in black, with a spotless muslin cap, came forward with what seemed to Stella solemn and stately steps, and asked her, in almost a reverential whisper, whether she would come up-stairs; but Stella shook her head, and was about to unwind the shawl, when the maid, with a quick but respectful movement, undertook the task, going through it with the greatest care and attention.

Then her uncle held his arm and she put her hand upon it, and in the instant, as if they had been waiting and watching, though their eyes had been fixed on the ground, two footmen drew aside the curtains shutting off the corridor to the drawing-room, and another footman paced slowly and with head erect before them.

It was all so solemn, the dim yet sufficient light, the towering hall, with its flags and armor, the endless curtains, with their gold fringe, that Stella was reminded of some gothic cathedral. The white gleaming statues seemed to look down at her, as she passed between them, with a frown of astonishment at her audacity in entering their solemn presence, the very silence seemed to reproach her light footsteps on the thickly-carpeted mosaic floor.

She began to be overpowered, but suddenly she remembered that she too was of ancient birth, that she was an Etheridge, and that the man whose arm she was leaning upon was an artist, and a great one, and she held her head erect and called the color to

her face.

It was not a moment too soon, for another pair of curtains were drawn aside, and the next instant she stood on the threshold of the drawing-room, and she heard a low but distinct voice say —
"Mr. and Miss Etheridge."

She had not time to look round; she saw, as in a flash, the exquisite room, with its shaded candles and softly-gleaming mirrors, saw several tall, black-coated, white-chested forms of gentlemen, and richly-dressed ladies; then she was conscious that a tall, beautiful, and stately lady was gliding across the room toward them, and knew it was the countess.

Lady Wyndward had heard the announcement and had risen from where she was sitting with the Countess of Longford to welcome the guests. The painter was a favorite of hers, and if she could have had her will he would have been a frequent visitor at the hall.

When Lilian had told her of her meeting with Mr. Etheridge's niece and asked permission to invite her, she had assented at once, expecting to see some well-subdued middle-aged woman. Why she should have thus pictured her she could not have told; perhaps because Mr. Etheridge was old and so subdued himself. She had scarcely listened to Lilian's description, and Leycester had said no word.

But now as she came forward and saw a young and beautiful girl, graceful and self-possessed, dressed with perfect taste, and looking as distinguished as if she had gone through a couple

of London seasons, when the vision of Stella, in all her fresh young loveliness, broke upon her suddenly and unexpectedly, an infinite surprise took possession of her, and for a moment she half paused, but it was only for a moment, and by no change in her face, however slight, was her surprise revealed.

"How do you do, Mr. Etheridge? It was so kind of you to come. I know how great an honor this is, and I am grateful."

This is what Stella heard in the softest, most dulcet of voices – "Kind, grateful!" This was how a countess welcomed a poor painter. A glow of light seemed to illumine Stella's mind. She had expected to see a tall stately woman dressed in satin and diamonds, and with a courtly severe manner, and instead here was a lady with a small gentle voice and a face all softness and kindness. In an instant she had learned her first lesson – that a mark of high rank and breeding is pure gentleness and humility. The queen sits beside the bed of a sick peasant; the peer thanks the waiter who hands him his umbrella.

"Yes, it was very good of you to come. And this is your niece? How do you do, Miss Etheridge? I am very glad to see you."

Stella took her gloved hand, her courage came instantly, and she raised her eyes to the beautiful, serene face, little guessing that as she did so, the countess was filled with surprise and admiration as the dark orbs raised.

"We are quite a small party," said the countess. "Nearly all our friends have left us. We should have been in town before this, but Lord Wyndward is detained by business."

As she spoke the earl approached them, and Stella saw a tall, thin, noble-looking man bending before her as if he were expecting a touch of her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Etheridge? We have managed to entice you from your hermitage at last, eh? How do you do, Miss Etheridge? I hope you didn't feel the cold driving."

Stella smiled, and she knew why every approach was screened by curtains.

The earl drew the painter aside, and the countess, just laying her fingers on Stella's arm, guided her to the old countess of Longford.

"Mr. Etheridge's niece," she said; then, to Stella, "This is Lady Longford."

Stella was conscious of a pair of keen gray eyes fixed on her face.

"Glad to know you, my dear," said the old lady. "Come and sit beside me, and tell me about your uncle; he is a wonderful man, but a very wicked one."

"Wicked!" said Stella.

"Yes, wicked," repeated the old lady, with a smile on her wrinkled face. "All obstinate people are wicked; and he is obstinate because he persists in hiding himself away instead of coming into the world and consenting to be famous, as he should be."

Stella's heart warmed directly.

"But perhaps now that you have come, you will persuade him

to leave his shell."

"Do you mean the cottage? I don't think anything would persuade him to leave that. Why should he? He is quite happy."

The countess looked at her.

"That's a sensible retort," she said. "Why should he? I don't know – I don't know what to answer. But I owe him a grudge. Do you know that he has persistently refused to come and see me, though I have almost gone on my knees to him?"

Stella smiled.

"He does not care to go anywhere," she said. "If he went anywhere, I am sure he would come to you."

The old countess glanced at her approvingly.

"That was nicely said," she murmured. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen," said Stella, simply.

"Then you have inherited your uncle's brains," the old lady replied, curtly. "It is not given to every girl to say the right thing at nineteen."

Stella blushed, and looked round the room.

There were ten or twelve persons standing and sitting about, some of them beautiful women, exquisitely dressed, talking to some gentlemen; but Lord Leicester was not amongst the latter. She was conscious of that, although she scarcely knew that she was looking for him. She wondered which was Lady Lenore. There was a tall, fair girl leaning against the piano, but somehow Stella did not think it was the famous beauty.

The clock on the bracket struck eight, and she saw the earl

take out his watch and glance at it mechanically; and as he did so, a voice behind her said:

"Dinner is served, my lady."

Nobody took any notice however, and the countess did not show by sign or look that she heard. Suddenly the curtains at the other end of the room were swung apart, and a tall form entered.

Though her eyes were fixed on another part of the room, she knew who it was, and for a moment she would not look that way, then she directed her eyes slowly, and saw that her instinct had not misled her.

It was Leycester!

For a moment she was conscious of a feeling of surprise. She thought she knew him well, but in that instant he looked so different that he seemed almost a stranger.

She had not seen him before in evening dress, and the change from the velvet coat and knickerbockers to the severe, but aristocratic, black suit struck her.

Like all well-made, high-bred men he looked at his best in the dress which fashion has decreed shall be the evening costume of gentlemen. She had thought him handsome, noble, in the easy, careless suit of velvet, she knew that he was distinguished looking in his suit of evening sables.

With his hand upon the curtain he stood, his head erect, his eyes not eagerly, but commandingly, scanning the room.

She could not tell why or how she knew, but she knew that he was looking for her.

Presently he sees her, and a subtle change came over his face, it was not a smile so much as a look of satisfaction, and she knew again that a frown would have settled on his white brow if she whom he sought had not been there.

With a high but firm step he came across the room and stood before her, holding out his hand.

"You have come," he said; "I thought you would not come. It is very kind of Mr. Etheridge."

She gave him her hand without a word. She knew that the keen gray eyes of the old lady beside her were fixed on her face. He seemed to remember too, for in a quieter, more commonplace, tone, he added:

"I am late; it is an habitual fault of mine."

"It is," said the old countess.

He turned his smile upon her.

"Are you going to scold me?"

"I am not fond of wasting my time," she said. "Come and sit down for a minute if you can."

He glanced at the clock.

"Am I not keeping you all waiting?" he said.

Lady Longford shook her head.

"No; we are waiting for Lenore."

"Then she is not here!" thought Stella.

"Oh, Lenore!" he said, with a smile. "Well, no one will dare to scold her."

As he spoke the curtain parted, and someone entered.

Framed by the curtain that fell behind her in crimson folds stood a girl – not yet a woman, for all her twenty-three years – of wonderful beauty, with deep golden hair and violet eyes.

Stella knew her at once from her uncle's description, but it was not the beauty that surprised her and made her start; it was something more than that. It was the nameless, indescribable charm which surrounded her; it was the grace which distinguished her figure, her very attitude.

She stood a moment, with a faint half-smile upon her lips, looking round; then she glided with a peculiar movement, that struck Stella as grace itself, to Lady Wyndward, and bent her head down to the countess.

Stella could not hear what she said, but she knew that she was apologizing for her tardiness by the way the earl, who was standing by, smiled at her. Yes, evidently Lady Lenore would not be scolded for keeping dinner waiting.

Stella sat watching her; she felt her eyes riveted to her in fact, and suddenly she was aware that the violet eyes were fixed on hers.

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