

MAY AGNES FLEMING

SIR NOEL'S HEIR: A NOVEL

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CHAPTER I.

SIR NOEL'S DEATH-BED

The December night had closed in wet and wild around Thetford Towers. It stood down in the low ground, smothered in trees, a tall, gaunt, hoary pile of gray stone, all peaks, and gables and stacks of chimneys, and rook-infested turrets. A queer, massive, old house, built in the days of James the First, by Sir Hugo Thetford, the first baronet of the name, and as staunch and strong now as then.

The December day had been overcast and gloomy, but the December night was stormy and wild. The wind worried and wailed through the tossing trees with whistling moans and shrieks that were desolately human, and made me think of the sobbing banshee of Irish legends. Far away the mighty voice of the stormy sea mingled its hoarse-bass, and the rain lashed the windows in long, slanting lines. A desolate night and a desolate scene without; more desolate still within, for on his bed, this tempestuous winter night, the last of the Thetford baronets lay dying.

Through the driving wind and lashing rain a groom galloped along the high road to the village at break-neck speed. His errand was to Dr. Gale, the village surgeon, which gentleman he found just preparing to go to bed.

"For God's sake, doctor!" cried the man, white as a sheet, "come with me at once! Sir Noel's killed!"

Dr. Gale, albeit phlegmatic, staggered back, and stared at the speaker aghast.

"What? Sir Noel killed?"

"We're afraid so, doctor; none of us knows for certain sure, but he lies there like a dead man. Come quick, for the love of goodness, if you want to do any service!"

"I'll be with you in five minutes," said the doctor, leaving the room to order his horse and don his hat and great coat.

Dr. Gale was as good as his word. In less than ten minutes he and the groom were flying recklessly along to Thetford Tower.

"How did it happen?" asked the doctor, hardly able to speak for the furious pace at which they were going. "I thought he was at Lady Stokestone's ball."

"He did go," replied the groom; "leastways he took my lady there; but he said he had a friend to meet from London at the Royal George to-night, and he rode back. We don't, none of us, know how it happened; for a better or surer rider than Sir Noel there ain't in Devonshire; but Diana must have slipped and threw him. She came galloping in by herself about half an hour ago all blown; and me and three more set off to look for Sir Noel. We found him about twenty yards from the gates, lying on his face in the mud, and as stiff and cold as if he was dead."

"And you brought him home and came for me?"

"Directly, sir. Some wanted to send word to my lady; but Mrs. Hilliard, she thought how you had best see him first, sir, so's we'd know what danger he was really in before alarming her ladyship."

"Quite right, William. Let us trust it may not be serious. Had Sir Noel been – I mean, I suppose he had been dining?"

"Well, doctor," said William, "Arneaud, that's his *valet de chambre*, you know, said he thought he had taken more wine than was prudent going to Lady Stokestone's ball, which her ladyship is very particular about such, you know, sir."

"Ah! that accounts," said the doctor, thoughtfully; "and now William, my man, don't let's talk any more, for I feel completely blown already."

Ten minutes' sharp riding brought them to the great entrance gates of Thetford Towers. An old woman came out of a little lodge, built in the huge masonry, to admit them, and they dashed up the long winding avenue under the surging oaks and chestnuts. Five minutes more and Dr. Gale was running up a polished staircase of black, slippery oak, down an equally wide and black and slippery passage, and into the chamber where Sir Noel lay.

A grand and stately chamber, lofty, dark and wainscoted, where the wax candles made luminous clouds in the darkness, and the wood-fire on the marble hearth failed to give heat. The oak floor was overlaid with Persian rugs; the windows were draped in green velvet and the chairs were upholstered in the same. Near the center of the apartment stood the bed, tall, broad, quaintly carved, curtained in green velvet, and on it, cold and lifeless, lay the wounded man. Mrs. Hilliard, the housekeeper, sat beside him, and Arneaud, the Swiss valet, with a frightened face, stood near the fire.

"Very shocking business this, Mrs. Hilliard," said the doctor, removing his hat and gloves – "very shocking. How is he? Any signs of consciousness yet?"

"None whatever, sir," replied the housekeeper, rising. "I am so thankful you have come. We, none of us, know what to do for him, and it is dreadful to see him lying there like that."

She moved away, leaving the doctor to his examination. Ten minutes, fifteen, twenty passed, then Dr. Gale turned to her with a very pale, grave face.

"It is too late, Mrs. Hilliard. Sir Noel is a dead man!"

"Dead?" repeated Mrs. Hilliard, trembling and holding by a chair. "Oh, my lady! my lady!"

"I am going to bleed him," said the doctor, "to restore consciousness. He may last until morning. Send for Lady Thetford at once."

Arneaud started up. Mrs. Hilliard looked at him, wringing her hands.

"Break it gently, Arneaud. Oh, my lady! my dear lady! So young and so pretty – and only married five months!"

The Swiss valet left the room. Dr. Gale got out his lancet, and desired Mrs. Hilliard to hold the basin. At first the blood refused to flow – but presently it came in a little, feeble stream. The closed eyelids fluttered; there was a restless movement and Sir Noel Thetford opened his eyes in this mortal life once more. He looked first at the doctor, grave and pale, then at the housekeeper, sobbing on her knees by the bed. He was a young man of seven-and-twenty, fair and handsome, as it was in the nature of the Thetfords to be.

"What is it?" he faintly asked. "What is the matter?"

"You are hurt, Sir Noel," the doctor answered, sadly; "you have been thrown from your horse. Don't attempt to move – you are not able."

"I remember – I remember," said the young man, a gleam of recollection lighting up his ghastly face. "Diana slipped, and I was thrown. How long ago is that?"

"About an hour."

"And I am hurt? Badly."

He fixed his eyes with a powerful look on the doctor's face, and that good man shrunk away from the news he must tell.

"Badly?" reiterated the young baronet, in a peremptory tone, that told all of his nature. "Ah! you won't speak, I see! I am, and I feel – I feel. Doctor, am I going to die?"

He asked the question with a sudden wildness – a sudden horror of death, half starting up in bed. Still the doctor did not speak; still Mrs. Hilliard's suppressed sobs echoed in the stillness of the vast room.

Sir Noel Thetford fell back on his pillow, a shadow as ghastly and awful as death itself lying on his face. But he was a brave man and the descendant of a fearless race; and except for one convulsive throe that shook him from head to foot, nothing told his horror of his sudden fate. There was a weird

pause. Sir Noel lay staring straight at the oaken wall, his bloodless face awful in its intensity of hidden feeling. Rain and wind outside rose higher and higher, and beat clamorously at the windows; and still above them, mighty and terrible, rose the far-off voice of the ceaseless sea.

The doctor was the first to speak, in hushed and awe-struck tones.

"My dear Sir Noel, the time is short, and I can do little or nothing. Shall I send for the Rev. Mr. Knight?"

The dying eyes turned upon him with a steady gaze.

"How long have I to live? I want the truth."

"Sir Noel, it is very hard, yet it must be Heaven's will. But a few hours, I fear."

"So soon?" said the dying man. "I did not think – Send for Lady Thetford," he cried, wildly, half raising himself again – "send for Lady Thetford at once!"

"We have sent for her," said the doctor; "she will be here very soon. But the clergyman, Sir Noel – the clergyman. Shall we not send for him?"

"No!" said Sir Noel, sharply. "What do I want of a clergyman? Leave me, both of you. Stay, you can give me something, Gale, to keep up my strength to the last? I shall need it. Now go. I want to see no one but Lady Thetford."

"My lady has come!" cried Mrs. Hilliard, starting to her feet; and at the same moment the door was opened by Arneaud, and a lady in a sparkling ball-dress swept in. She stood for a moment on the threshold, looking from face to face with a bewildered air.

She was very young – scarcely twenty, and unmistakably beautiful. Taller than common, willowy and slight, with great, dark eyes, flowing dark curls, and a colorless olive skin. The darkly handsome face, with pride in every feature, was blanched now almost to the hue of the dying man's; but that glittering, bride-like figure, with its misty point-lace and blazing diamonds, seemed in strange contradiction to the idea of death.

"My lady! my lady!" cried Mrs. Hilliard, with a suppressed sob, moving near her.

The deep, dark eyes turned upon her for an instant, then wandered back to the bed; but she never moved.

"Ada," said Sir Noel, faintly, "come here. The rest of you go. I want no one but my wife."

The graceful figure in its shining robes and jewels, flitted over and dropped on its knees by his side. The other three quitted the room and closed the door. Husband and wife were alone with only death to overhear.

"Ada, my poor girl, only five months a wife – it is very hard on you; but it seems I must go. I have a great deal to say to you, Ada – that I can't die without saying. I have been a villain, Ada – the greatest villain on earth to you."

She had not spoken. She did not speak. She knelt beside him, white and still, looking and listening with strange calm. There was a sort of white horror in her face, but very little of the despairing grief one would naturally look for in the dying man's wife.

"I don't ask you to forgive me, Ada – I have wronged you too deeply for that; but I loved you so dearly – so dearly! Oh, my God! what a lost and cruel wretch I have been."

He lay panting and gasping for breath. There was a draught which Dr. Gale had left standing near, and he made a motion for it. She held it to his lips, and he drank; her hand was unsteady and spilled it, but still she never spoke.

"I cannot speak loudly, Ada," he said, in a husky whisper, "my strength seems to grow less every moment; but I want you to promise me before I begin my story that you will do what I ask. Promise! promise!"

He grasped her wrist and glared at her almost fiercely.

"Promise!" he reiterated. "Promise! promise!"

"I promise," she said, with white lips.

"May Heaven deal with you, Ada Thetford, as you keep that promise. Listen now."

The wild night wore on. The cries of the wind in the trees grew louder and wilder and more desolate. The rain beat and beat against the curtained glass; the candles guttered and flared; and the wood-fire flickered and died out.

And still, long after the midnight hour had tolled, Ada, Lady Thetford, in her lace and silk and jewels, knelt beside her young husband, and listened to the dark and shameful story he had to tell. She never once faltered, she never spoke or stirred; but her face was whiter than her dress, and her great dark eyes dilated with a horror too intense for words.

The voice of the dying man sank lower and lower – it fell to a dull, choking whisper at last.

"You have heard all," he said huskily.

"All?"

The word dropped from her lips like ice – the frozen look of blank horror never left her face.

"And you will keep your promise?"

"Yes."

"God bless you! I can die now! Oh, Ada! I cannot ask you to forgive me; but I love you so much – so much! Kiss me once, Ada, before I go."

His voice failed even with the words. Lady Thetford bent down and kissed him, but her lips were as cold and white as his own.

They were the last words Sir Noel Thetford ever spoke. The restless sea was sullenly ebbing, and the soul of the man was floating away with it. The gray, chill light of a new day was dawning over the Devonshire fields, rainy and raw, and with its first pale ray the soul of Noel Thetford, baronet, left the earth forever.

An hour later, Mrs. Hilliard and Dr. Gale ventured to enter. They had rapped again and again; but there had been no response, and alarmed they had come in. Stark and rigid already lay what was mortal of the Lord of Thetford Towers; and still on her knees, with that frozen look on her face, knelt his living wife.

"My lady! my lady!" cried Mrs. Hilliard, her tears falling like rain. "Oh! my dear lady, come away!"

She looked up; then again at the marble form on the bed, and without a word or cry, slipped back in the old housekeeper's arms in a dead faint.

CHAPTER II. CAPT. EVERARD

It was a very grand and stately ceremonial, that funeral procession from Thetford Towers. A week after that stormy December night they laid Sir Noel Thetford in the family vault, where generation after generation of his race slept their last long sleep. The gentry for miles and miles around were there, and among them came the heir-at-law, the Rev. Horace Thetford, only an obscure country curate now, but failing male heirs to Sir Noel, successor to the Thetford estate and fifteen thousand a year.

In a bedchamber, luxurious as wealth can make a room, lay Lady Thetford, dangerously ill. It was not a brain fever exactly, but something very like it into which she had fallen, coming out of the death-like swoon. It was all very sad and shocking – the sudden death of the gay and handsome young baronet, and the serious illness of his poor wife. The funeral oration of the Rev. Mr. Knight, rector of St. Gosport, from the text, "In the midst of life we are in death," was most eloquent and impressive, and women with tender hearts shed tears, and men listened with grave, sad faces. It was such a little while – only five short months – since the wedding-bells had rung, and there had been bonfires and feasting throughout the village; and Sir Noel, looking so proud and so happy, had driven up to the illuminated hall with his handsome bride. Only five months; and now – and now.

The funeral was over and everybody had gone back home – everybody but the Rev. Horace Thetford, who lingered to see the result of my lady's illness, and if she died, to take possession of his estate. It was unutterably dismal in the dark, hushed old house, with Sir Noel's ghost seeming to haunt every room – very dismal and ghastly this waiting to step into dead people's shoes. But then there was fifteen thousand a year, and the finest place in Devonshire; and the Rev. Horace would have faced a whole regiment of ghosts and lived in a vault for that.

But Lady Thetford did not die. Slowly but surely, the fever that had worn her to a shadow left her; and by-and-bye, when the early primroses peeped through the first blackened earth, she was able to come down-stairs – to come down feeble and frail and weak, colorless as death and as silent and cold.

The Rev. Horace went back to Yorkshire, yet not entirely in despair. Female heirs could not inherit Thetford – he stood a chance yet; and the widow, not yet twenty, was left alone in the dreary old mansion. People were very sorry for her, and came to see her, and begged her to be resigned to her great loss; and Mr. Knight preached endless homilies on patience, and hope, and submission, and Lady Thetford listened to them just as if they had been talking Greek. She never spoke of her dead husband – she shivered at the mention of his name; but that night at his dying bed had changed her as never woman changed before. From a bright, ambitious, pleasure-loving girl, she had grown into a silent, haggard, hopeless woman. All the sunny spring days she sat by the window of her boudoir, gazing at the misty, boundless sea, pale and mute – dead in life.

The friends who came to see her, and Mr. Knight, the rector, were a little puzzled by this abnormal case, but very sorry for the pale young widow, and disposed to think better of her than ever before. It must surely have been the vilest slander that she had not cared for her husband, that she had married him only for his wealth and title; and that young soldier – that captain of dragoons – must have been a myth. She might have been engaged to him, of course, before Sir Noel came, that seemed to be an undisputed fact; and she might have jilted him for a wealthier lover, that was all a common case. But she must have loved her husband very dearly, or she never would have been broken-hearted like this at his loss.

Spring deepened into summer. The June roses in the flower-gardens of the Thetford were in rosy bloom, and my lady was ill again – very, very ill. There was an eminent physician down from

London, and there was a frail little mite of babyhood lying among lace and flannel; and the eminent physician shook his head, and looked portentously grave as he glanced from the crib to the bed. Whiter than the pillows, whiter than snow, Ada, Lady Thetford, lay, hovering in the Valley of the Shadow of Death; that other feeble little life seemed flickering, too – it was so even a toss up between the great rival powers, Life and Death, that a straw might have turned the scale either way. So slight being that baby-hold of gasping breath, that Mr. Knight, in the absence of any higher authority, and in the unconsciousness of the mother, took it upon himself to baptize it. So a china bowl was brought, and Mrs. Hilliard held the bundle of flannel and long white robes, and the child was named – the name which the mother had said weeks ago it was to be called, if a boy – Rupert Noel Vandeleur Thetford; for it was a male heir, and the Rev. Horace's cake was dough.

Days went by, weeks, months, and to the surprise of the eminent physician neither mother nor child died. Summer waned, winter returned; and the anniversary of Sir Noel's death came round, and my lady was able to walk down-stairs, shivering in the warm air under all her wraps. She had expressed no pleasure or thankfulness in her own safety, or that of her child. She had asked eagerly if it were a boy or a girl; and hearing its sex, had turned her face to the wall, and lay for hours and hours speechless and motionless. Yet it was very dear to her, too, by fits and starts as it were. She would hold it in her arms half a day, sometimes covering it with kisses, with jealous, passionate love, crying over it, and half smothering it with caresses; and then, again, in a fit of sullen apathy, would resign it to its nurse, and not ask to see it for hours. It was very strange and inexplicable, her conduct, altogether; more especially, as with her return to health came no return of cheerfulness and hope. The dark gloom that overshadowed her life seemed to settle into a chronic disease, rooted and incurable. She never went out; she returned no visits; she gave no invitations to those who came to repeat theirs. Gradually people fell off; they grew tired of that sullen coldness in which Lady Thetford wrapped herself as in a mantle, until Mr. Knight and Dr. Gale grew to be almost her only visitors. "Mariana, in the Moated Grange," never led a more solitary and dreary existence than the handsome young widow, who dwelt a recluse at Thetford Towers; for she was very handsome still, of a pale moonlit sort of beauty, the great, dark eyes, and abundant dark hair, making her fixed and changeless pallor all the more remarkable.

Months and seasons went by. Summers followed winters, and Lady Thetford still buried herself alive in the gray old manor – and the little heir was six years old. A delicate child still, puny and sickly, and petted and spoiled, and indulged in every childish whim and caprice. His mother's image and idol – no look of the fair-haired, sanguine, blue-eyed Thetford sturdiness in his little, pinched, pale face, large, dark eyes, and crisp, black ringlets. The years had gone by like a slow dream; life was stagnant enough in St. Gosport, doubly stagnant at Thetford Towers, whose mistress rarely went abroad beyond her own gates, save when she took her little son out for an airing in the pony phaeton.

She had taken him out for one of those airings on a July afternoon, when he had nearly accomplished his seventh year. They had driven seaward some miles from the manor-house, and Lady Thetford and her little boy had got out, and were strolling leisurely up and down the hot, white sands, while the groom waited with the pony-phaeton just within sight.

The long July afternoon wore on. The sun that had blazed all day like a wheel of fire, dropped lower and lower into the crimson west. The wide sea shone red with the reflections of the lurid glory in the heavens, and the numberless waves glittered and flashed as if sown with stars. A faint, far-off breeze swept over the sea, salt and cold; and the fishermen's boats danced along with the red sunset glinting on their sails.

Up and down, slowly and thoughtfully, the lady walked, her eyes fixed on the wide sea. As the rising breeze met her, she drew the scarlet shawl she wore over her black silk dress closer around her, and glanced at her boy. The little fellow was running over the sands, tossing pebbles into the surf, and hunting for shells; and her eyes left him and wandered once more to the lurid splendor of that sunset on the sea. It was very quiet here, with no living thing in sight but themselves; so the lady's

start of astonishment was natural when, turning an abrupt angle in the path leading to the shore, she saw a man coming toward her over the sands. A tall, powerful-looking man of thirty, bronzed and handsome, and with an unmistakably military air, although in plain black clothes. The lady took a second look, then stood stock still, and gazed like one in a dream. The man approached, lifted his hat, and stood silent and grave before her.

"Captain Everard!"

"Yes, Lady Thetford – after eight years – Captain Everard again."

The deep, strong voice suited the bronzed, grave face, and both had a peculiar power of their own. Lady Thetford, very, very pale, held out one fair jeweled hand.

"Captain Everard, I am very glad to see you again."

He bent over the little hand a moment, then dropped it, and stood looking at her silent.

"I thought you were in India," she said, trying to be at ease. "When did you return?"

"A month ago. My wife is dead. I, too, am widowed, Lady Thetford."

"I am very sorry to hear it," she said, gravely. "Did she die in India?"

"Yes; and I have come home with my little daughter."

"Your daughter! Then she left a child?"

"One. It is on her account I have come. The climate killed her mother. I had mercy on her daughter, and have brought her home."

"I am sorry for your wife. Why did she remain in India?"

"Because she preferred death to leaving me. She loved me, Lady Thetford!"

His powerful eyes were on her face – that pale, beautiful face, into which the blood came for an instant at his words. She looked at him, then away over the darkening sea.

"And you, my lady – you gained the desire to your heart, wealth, and a title? Let me hope they have made you a happy woman."

"I am not happy!"

"No? But you have been – you were while Sir Noel lived?"

"My husband was very good to me, Captain Everard. His death was the greatest misfortune that could have befallen me."

"But you are young, you are free, you are rich, you are beautiful. You may wear a coronet next time."

His face and glance were so darkly grave, that the covert sneer was almost hidden. But she felt it.

"I shall never marry again, Captain Everard."

"Never? You surprise me! Six years – nay, seven, a widow, and with innumerable attractions. Oh, you cannot mean it!"

She made a sudden, passionate gesture – looked at him, then away.

"It is useless – worse than useless, folly, madness, to lift the veil from the irrevocable past. But don't you think, don't you, Lady Thetford, that you might have been equally happy if you had married *me*?"

She made no reply. She stood gazing seaward, cold and still.

"I was madly, insanely, absurdly in love with pretty Ada Vandeleur in those days, and I think I would have made her a good husband; better, however – forgive me – than I ever made my poor dead wife. But you were wise and ambitious, my pretty Ada, and bartered your black eyes and raven ringlets to a higher bidder. You jilted me in cold blood, poor love-sick devil that I was, and reigned resplendent as my Lady Thetford. Ah! you knew how to choose the better part, my pretty Ada!"

"Captain Everard, I am sorry for the past – I have atoned, if suffering can atone. Have a little pity, and let me alone!"

He stood and looked at her silently, gravely. Then said, in a voice deep and calm:

"We are both free! Will you marry me now, Ada!"

"I cannot!"

"But I love you – I have always loved you. And you – I used to think you loved me!"

He was strangely calm and passionless, voice and glance and face. But Lady Thetford had covered *her* face, and was sobbing.

"I did – I do – I always have! But I cannot marry you. I will love you all my life; but don't, *don't* ask me to be your wife!"

"As you please!" he said, in the same passionless voice. "I think it is best myself; for the George Everard of to-day is not the George Everard who loved you eight years ago. We would not be happy – I know that. Ada, is that your son?"

"Yes."

"I should like to look at him. Here, my little baronet! I want to see you."

The boy, who had been looking curiously at the stranger, ran up at a sign from his mother. The tall captain lifted him in his arms and gazed in his small, thin face, with which his bright tartan plaid contrasted harshly.

"He hasn't a look of the Thetfords. He is your own son, Ada. My little baronet, what is your name?"

"Sir Rupert Thetford," answered the child, struggling to get free. "Let me go – I don't know you!"

The captain set him down with a grim smile; and the boy clung to his mother's skirts, and eyed the tall stranger askance.

"I want to go home, mamma! I'm tired and hungry."

"Presently, dearest. Run to William, he has cake for you. Captain Everard, I shall be happy to have you at dinner."

"Thanks; but I must decline. I go back to London to-night. I sail for India again in a week."

"So soon! I thought you meant to remain."

"Nothing is further from my intentions. I merely brought my little girl over to provide her a home; that is why I have troubled *you*. Will you do me this kindness, Lady Thetford?"

"Take your little girl? Oh, most gladly – most willingly!"

"Thanks! Her mother's people are French, and I know little about them; and, save yourself, I can claim friendship with few in England. She will be poor; I have settled on her all I am worth – some three hundred a year; and you, Lady Thetford, you can teach her, when she grows up, to catch a rich husband."

She took no notice of the taunt; she looked only too happy to render him this service.

"I am so pleased! She will be such a nice companion for Rupert. How old is she?"

"Nearly four."

"Is she here?"

"No; she is in London. I will fetch her down in a day or two."

"What do you call her?"

"Mabel – after her mother. Then it is settled, Lady Thetford, I am to fetch her?"

"I shall be delighted! But won't you dine with me?"

"No. I must catch the evening train. Farewell, Lady Thetford, and many thanks! In three days I will be here again."

He lifted his hat and walked away. Lady Thetford watched him out of sight, and then turned slowly, as she heard her little boy calling her with shrill impatience. The red sunset had faded out; the sea lay gray and cold under the twilight sky, and the evening breeze was chill. Changes in sky and sea and land told of coming night; and Lady Thetford, shivering slightly in the rising wind, hurried away to be driven home.

CHAPTER III. "LITTLE MAY."

On the evening of the third day after this interview, a fly from the railway drove up the long, winding avenue leading to the great front entrance of the Thetford mansion. A bronzed military gentleman, a nurse and a little girl, occupied the fly, and the gentleman's keen, dark eyes wandered searchingly around. Swelling meadows, velvety lawns, sloping terraces, waving trees, bright flower-gardens, quaint old fish-ponds, sparkling fountains, and a wooded park, with sprightly deer – that was what he saw, all bathed in the golden halo of the summer sunset. Massive and grand, the old house reared its gray head, half overgrown with ivy and climbing roses. Gaudy peacocks strutted on the terraces; a graceful gazelle flitted out for an instant amongst the trees to look at them and then fled in afright; and the barking of half a dozen mastiffs greeted their approach noisily.

"A fine old place," thought Captain Everard. "My pretty Ada might have done worse. A grand old place for that puny child to inherit. The staunch old warrior-blood of the Thetfords is sadly adulterated in his pale veins, I fancy. Well, my little May, and how are you going to like all this?"

The child, a bright-faced little creature, with great sparkling eyes and rose-bloom cheeks, was looking in delight at a distant terrace.

"See, papa! See all the pretty peacocks! Look, Ellen," to the nurse, "three, four, five! Oh, how pretty!"

"Then little May will like to live here, where she can see the pretty peacocks every day?"

"And all the pretty flowers, and the water, and the little boy – where's the little boy, papa?"

"In the house – you'll see him presently; but you must be very good, little May, and not pull his hair, and scratch his face, and poke your fingers in his eyes, like you used to do with Willie Brandon. Little May must learn to be good."

Little May put one rosy finger in her mouth, and set her head on one side like a defiant canary. She was one of the prettiest little fairies imaginable, with her pale, flaxen curls, and sparkling light-gray eyes, and apple-blossom complexion; but she was evidently as much spoiled as little Sir Rupert Thetford himself.

Lady Thetford sat in the long drawing-room, after her solitary dinner, and little Sir Rupert played with his rocking-horse and a pile of picture-books in a remote corner. The young widow lay back in the violet-velvet depths of a carved and gilded *fauteuil*, very simply dressed in black and crimson, but looking very fair and stately withal. She was watching her boy with a half smile on her face, when a footman entered with Captain Everard's card. Lady Thetford looked up eagerly.

"Show Captain Everard up at once."

The footman bowed and disappeared. Five minutes later, and the tall captain and his little daughter stood before her.

"At last!" said Lady Thetford, rising and holding out her hand to her old lover, with a smile that reminded him of other days – "at last, when I was growing tired waiting. And this is your little girl – my little girl from henceforth? Come here, my pet, and kiss your new mamma."

She bent over the little one, kissing the pink cheeks and rosy lips.

"She is fair and tiny – a very fairy; but she resembles you, nevertheless, Capt. Everard."

"In temper – yes," said the captain. "You will find her spoiled, and willful, and cross, and capricious and no end of trouble. Won't she, May?"

"She will be the better match for Rupert on that account," Lady Thetford said, smiling, and unfastening little Miss Everard's wraps with her own fair fingers. "Come here, Rupert, and welcome your new sister."

The young baronet approached, and dutifully kissed little May, who put up her rose-bud mouth right willingly. Sir Rupert Thetford wasn't tall, rather undersized, and delicate for his seven years; but he was head and shoulders over the flaxen-haired fairy, with the bright gray eyes.

"I want a ride on your rocking-horse," cried little May, fraternizing with him at once; "and oh! what nice picture books and what a lot!"

The children ran off together to their distant corner, and Captain Everard sat down for the first time.

"You have not dined?" said Lady Thetford. "Allow me to – " her hand was on the bell, but the captain interposed.

"Many thanks – nothing. We dined at the village; and I leave again by the seven-fifty train. It is past seven now, so I have but little time to spare. I fear I am putting you to a great deal of trouble; but May's nurse insists on being taken back to London to-night."

"It will be of no consequence," replied Lady Thetford, "Rupert's nurse will take charge of her. I intend to advertise for a nursery governess in a few days. Rupert's health has always been so extremely delicate, that he has not even began a pretext of learning yet, and it is quite time. He grows stronger, I fancy; but Dr. Gale tells me frankly his constitution is dangerously weak."

She sighed as she spoke, and looked over to where he stood beside little May, who had mounted the rocking-horse boy-fashion. Sir Rupert was expostulating.

"You oughtn't to sit that way – ask mamma. You ought to sit side-saddle. Only boys sit like that."

"I don't care!" retorted Miss Everard, rocking more violently than ever. "I'll sit whatever way I like! Let me alone!"

Lady Thetford looked at the captain with a smile.

"Her father's daughter, surely! bent on having her own way. What a fairy it is! and yet such a perfect picture of health."

"Mabel was never ill an hour in her life, I believe," said her father; "she is not at all too good for this world. I only hope she may not grow up the torment of your life – she is thoroughly spoiled."

"And I fear if she were not, I should do it. Ah! I expect she will be a great comfort to me, and a world of good to Rupert. He has never had a playmate of his own years, and children need children as much as they need sunshine."

They sat for ten minutes conversing gravely, chiefly on business matters connected with little May's annuity – not at all as they had conversed three days before by the seaside. Then, as half-past seven drew near, the captain arose.

"I must go; I will hardly be in time as it is. Come here, little May, and bid papa good-bye."

"Let papa come to May," responded his daughter, still rocking. "I can't get off."

Captain Everard laughed, went over, bent down and kissed her.

"Good-bye, May; don't forget papa, and learn to be a good girl. Good bye, baronet; try and grow strong and tall. Farewell, Lady Thetford, with my best thanks."

She held his hand, looking up in his sun-burned face with tears in her dark eyes.

"We may never meet again, Captain Everard," she said hurriedly. "Tell me before we part that you forgive me the past."

"Truly, Ada, and for the first time. The service you have rendered me fully atones. You should have been my child's mother – be a mother to her now. Good-bye, and God bless you and your boy!"

He stooped over, touched her cheek with his lips reverentially, and then was gone. Gone forever – never to meet those he left behind this side of eternity.

Little May bore the loss of papa and nurse with philosophical indifference – her new playmate sufficed for both. The children took to one another with the readiness of childhood – Rupert all the more readily that he had never before had a playmate of his own years. He was naturally a quiet child, caring more for his picture-books and his nurse's stories than for tops, or balls, or marbles. But little May Everard seemed from the first to inspire him with some of her own superabundant vitality and

life. The child was never, for a single instant, quiet; she was the most restless, the most impetuous, the most vigorous little creature that can be conceived. Feet and tongue and hands never were still from morning till night; and the life of Sir Rupert's nurse, hitherto one of idle ease, became all at once a misery to her. The little girl was everywhere – everywhere; especially where she had no business to be; and nurse never knew an easy moment for trotting after her, and rescuing her from all sorts of perils. She could climb like a cat, or a goat, and risked her neck about twenty times per diem; she sailed her shoes in the soup when let in as a treat to dinner, and washed her hands in her milk-and-water. She became the intimate friend of the pretty peacocks and the big, good-tempered dogs, with whom, in utter fearlessness, she rolled about in the grass half the day. She broke young Rupert's toys, and tore his picture-books and slapped his face, and pulled his hair, and made herself master of the situation before she had been twenty-four hours in the house. She was thoroughly and completely spoiled. What India nurses had left undone, injudicious petting and flattery on the homeward passage had completed – and her temper was something appalling. Her shrieks of passion at the slightest contradiction of her imperial will rang through the house, and rent the tortured tympanums of all who heard. The little Xantippe would fling herself flat on the carpet, and literally scream herself black in the face, until, in dread of apoplexy and sudden death, her frightened hearers hastened to yield. Of course, one such victory insured all the rest. As for Sir Rupert, before she had been a week at Thetford Towers, he dared not call his soul his own. She had partly scalped him on several occasions, and left the mark of her cat-like nails in his tender visage: but her venomous power of screeching for hours at will had more to do with the little baronet's dread of her than anything else. He fled ingloriously in every battle – running in tears to mamma, and leaving the field and the trophies of victory triumphantly to Miss Everard. With all this, when not thwarted – when allowed to smash toys, and dirty her clothes, and smear her infantile face, and tear pictures, and torment inoffensive lapdogs; when allowed, in short, to follow "her own sweet will," little May was as charming a fairy as ever the sun shone on. Her gleeful laugh made music in the dreary old rooms, such as had never been heard there for many a day, and her mischievous antics were the delight of all who did not suffer thereby. The servants petted and indulged her, and fed her on unwholesome cakes and sweetmeats, and made her worse and worse every day of her life.

Lady Thetford saw all this with inward apprehension. If her ward was completely beyond her power of control at four, what would she be a dozen years hence?

"Her father was right," thought the lady. "I am afraid she *will* give me a great deal of trouble. I never saw so headstrong, so utterly unmanageable a child."

But Lady Thetford was very fond of the fairy despot withal. When her son came running to her for succor, drowned in tears, his mother took him in her arms and kissed him and soothed him – but she never punished the offender. As for Sir Rupert, he might fly ignominiously, but he never fought back. Little May had all the hair-pulling and face-scratching to herself.

"I must get a governess," mused Lady Thetford. "I may find one who can control this little vixen; and it is really time Rupert began his studies. I shall speak to Mr. Knight about it."

Lady Thetford sent that very day to the rectory her ladyship's compliments, the servant said, and would Mr. Knight call at his earliest convenience. Mr. Knight sent in answer to expect him that same evening; and on his way he fell in with Dr. Gale, going to the manor-house on a professional visit.

"Little Sir Rupert keeps weakly," he said; "no constitution to speak of. Not at all like the Thetfords – splendid old stock, the Thetfords, but run out – run out. Sir Rupert is a Vandeleur, inherits his mother's constitution – delicate child, very."

"Have you seen Lady Thetford's ward!" inquired the clergyman, smiling; "no hereditary weakness there, I fancy. I'll answer for the strength of her lungs, at any rate. The other day she wanted Lady Thetford's watch for a plaything; she couldn't have it, and down she fell flat on the floor in what her nurse calls 'one of her tantrums.' You should have heard her, her shrieks were appalling."

"I have," said the doctor, with emphasis; "she has the temper of the old demon. If I had anything to do with that child, I should whip her within an inch of her life – that's all she wants, lots of whipping! The Lord only knows the future, but I pity her prospective husband!"

"The taming of the shrew," laughed Mr. Knight. "Katherine and Petruchio over again. For my part, I think Lady Thetford was unwise to undertake such a charge. With her delicate health it is altogether too much for her."

The two gentlemen were shown into the library, whilst the servant went to inform his lady of their arrival. The library had a French window opening on a sloping lawn, and here chasing butterflies in high glee, were the two children – the pale, dark-eyed baronet, and the flaxen-tressed little East Indian.

"Look," said Dr. Gale. "Is Sir Rupert going to be your Petruchio? Who knows what the future may bring forth – who knows that we do not behold a future Lady Thetford?"

"She is very pretty," said the rector thoughtfully, "and she may change with years. Your prophecy may be fulfilled."

The present Lady Thetford entered as he spoke. She had heard the remarks of both, and there was an unusual pallor and gravity in her face as she advanced to receive them.

Little Sir Rupert was called in, and May followed, with a butterfly crushed to death in each fat little hand.

"She kills them as fast as she catches them," said Sir Rupert, ruefully. "It's cruel, isn't it, mamma?"

Little May, quite unabashed, displayed her dead prizes, and cut short the doctor's conference by impatiently pulling her play-fellow away.

"Come, Rupert, come," she cried. "I want to catch the black one with the yellow wings. Stick your tongue out and come."

Sir Rupert displayed his tongue, and submitted his pulse to the doctor, and let himself be pulled away by May.

"The gray mare in that span is decidedly the better horse," laughed the doctor. "What a little despot in pinafores it is."

When her visitors had left, Lady Thetford walked to the window and stood watching the two children racing in the sunshine. It was a pretty sight, but the lady's face was contracted with pain.

"No, no," she thought. "I hope not – I pray not. Strange! but I never thought of the possibility before. She will be poor, and Rupert must marry a rich wife, so that if – "

She paused, with a sort of shudder, then added:

"What will he think, my darling boy, of his father and mother if that day ever comes?"

CHAPTER IV. MRS. WEYMORE

Lady Thetford had settled her business satisfactorily with the rector of St Gosport.

"Nothing could be more opportune," he said. "I am going to London next week on business which will detain me upward of a fortnight. I will immediately advertise for such a person as you want."

"You must understand," said her ladyship, "I do not require a young girl. I wish a middle-aged person – a widow, for instance, who has had children of her own. Both Rupert and May are spoiled – May particularly is perfectly unmanageable. A young girl as governess for her would never do."

Mr. Knight departed with these instructions and the following week started for the great metropolis. An advertisement was at once inserted in the *Times* newspaper, stating all Lady Thetford's requirements, and desiring immediate application. Another week later, and Lady Thetford received the following communication:

"Dear Lady Thetford – I have been fairly besieged with applications for the past week – all widows, and all professing to be thoroughly competent. Clergyman's widows, doctors' widows, officers' widows – all sorts of widows. I never before thought so many could apply for one situation. I have chosen one in sheer desperation – the widow of a country gentleman in distressed circumstances, who, I think, will suit. She is eminently respectable in appearance, quiet and lady-like in manner, with five years' experience in the nursery-governess line, and the highest recommendation from her late employers. She has lost a child, she tells me, and from her looks and manner altogether, I should judge she was a person conversant with misfortune. She will return with me early next week – her name is Mrs. Weymore."

Lady Thetford read this letter with a little sigh of relief – some one else would have the temper and outbreaks of little May to contend with now. She wrote to Captain Everard that same day, to announce his daughter's well-being, and inform him that she had found a suitable governess to take charge of her.

The second day of the ensuing week the rector and the new governess arrived. A fly from the railway brought her and her luggage to Thetford Towers late in the afternoon, and she was taken at once to the room that had been prepared for her, whilst the servant went to inform Lady Thetford of her arrival.

"Fetch her here at once," said her ladyship, who was alone, as usual, in the long drawing-room with the children, "I wish to see her."

Ten minutes after the drawing-room door was flung open, and "Mrs. Weymore, my lady," announced the footman.

Lady Thetford arose to receive her new dependent, who bowed and stood before her with a somewhat fluttered and embarrassed air. She was quite young, not older than my lady herself, and eminently good-looking. The tall, slender figure, clad in widow's weeds, was as symmetrical as Lady Thetford's own, and the full black dress set off the pearly fairness of the blonde skin, and the rich abundance of fair hair. Lady Thetford's brows contracted a little; her fair, subdued, gentle-looking, girlish young woman, was hardly the strong-minded, middle-aged matron she had expected to take the nonsense out of obstreperous May Everard.

"Mrs. Weymore, I believe," said Lady Thetford, resuming her *fauteuil*, "pray be seated. I wished to see you at once, because I am going out this evening. You have had five years' experience as a nursery-governess, Mr. Knight tells me."

"Yes, my lady."

There was a little tremor in Mrs. Weymore's low voice, and her blue eyes shifted and fell under Lady Thetford's steady and somewhat haughty gaze.

"Yet you look young – much younger than I imagined, or wished."

"I am twenty-seven years old, my lady."

That was my lady's own age precisely, but she looked half a dozen years the elder of the two.

"Are you a native of London?"

"No, my lady, of Berkshire."

"And you have been a widow, how long?"

What ailed Mrs. Weymore? She was all white and trembling – even her hands, folded and pressed together in her lap, shook in spite of her.

"Eight years and more."

She said it with a sort of sob, hysterically choked. Lady Thetford looked on surprised, and a trifle displeased. She was a very proud woman, and certainly wished for no scene with her hired dependents.

"Eight years is a tolerable time," she said, coolly. "You have lost children?"

"One, my lady."

Again that choked, hysterical sob. My lady vent on pitilessly.

"Is it long ago?"

"When – when I lost its father?"

"Ah! both together? That was rather hard. Well, I hope you understand the management of children – spoiled ones particularly. Here are the two you are to take charge of. Rupert – May come here."

The children came over from their corner. Mrs. Weymore drew May toward her, but Sir Rupert held aloof.

"This is my ward – this is my son. I presume Mr. Knight has told you. If you can subdue the temper of that child, you will prove yourself, indeed, a treasure. The east parlor has been fitted up for your use; the children will take their meals there with you; the room adjoining is to be the school-room. I have appointed one of the maids to wait on you. I trust you will find your chamber comfortable."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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