

Fenn George Manville

Cursed by a Fortune



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Chapter One

“Yes, James; this is my last dying speech and confession.”

“Oh, papa!” with a burst of sobbing.

“Be quiet, Kitty, and don’t make me so miserable. Dying is only going to sleep when a man’s tired out, as I am, with the worries of the world, money-making, fighting for one’s own, and disappointment. I know as well as old Jerminham that it’s pretty nearly all over. I’m sorry to leave you, darling, but I’m worn out, and your dear mother has been waiting for nearly a year.”

“Father, dearest father!” and two white arms clung round the neck of the dying man, as their owner sank upon her knees by the bedside.

“I’d stay for your sake, Kitty, but fate says no, and I’m so tired, darling, it will be like going into rest and peace. She always was an angel, Kitty, and she must be now; I feel as if I must see her afterwards. For I don’t think I’ve been such a very bad man, Will.”

“The best of fellows, Bob, always,” said the stout, florid, country-looking gentleman seated near the great heavily-curtained four-post bed.

“Thanks, James. I don’t want to play the Pharisee, but I have tried to be an honest man and a good father.”

“Your name stands highest in the city, and your charities – ”

“Bother! I made plenty of money by the bank, and I gave some away, and I wish it had done more good. Well, my shares in the bank represent a hundred and fifty thousand; those are Kitty’s. There’s about ten thousand pounds in India stock and consols.”

“Pray, pray don’t talk any more, papa, dear.”

“Must, Kitty, while I can. That money, Will, is yours for life, and after death it is for that boy of yours, Claud. He doesn’t deserve it, but perhaps he’ll be a better boy some day. Then there’s the lease of this house, my furniture, books, plate, pictures, and money in the private account. You will sell and realise everything; Kitty does not want a great gloomy house in Bedford Square – out of proceeds you will pay the servants’ legacies, and the expenses, there will be ample; and the residue is to be given to your wife for her use. That’s all. I have made you my sole executor, and I thought it better to send for you to tell you than for you to wait till the will was read. Give me a little of that stuff in some water, Kitty.”

His head was tenderly raised, and he drank and sank back with a sigh.

“Thank you, my darling. Now, Will, I might have joined John Garstang with you as executor, but I thought it better to give you full control, you being a quiet country squire, leading your simple, honest, gentleman-farmer’s life, while he is a keen speculative man.”

James Wilton, the banker’s brother, uttered something like a sigh, muttered a few words about trying to do his duty, and listened, as the dying man went on —

“I should not have felt satisfied. You two might have disagreed over some marriage business, for there is no other that you will have to control. And I said to myself that Will would not try to play the wicked uncle over my babe. So you are sole executor, with very little to do, for I have provided for everything, I think. Her money stays in the old bank I helped to build up, and the dividends will make her a handsome income. What you have to see to is that she is not snapped up by some plausible scoundrel for the sake of her money. When she does marry – ”

“Oh, papa, dear, don’t, don’t! You are breaking my heart. I shall never marry,” sobbed the girl, as she laid her sweet young face by the thin, withered countenance on the pillow.

“Yes, you will, my pet. I wish it, when the right man comes, who loves you for yourself. Girls like you are too scarce to be wasted. But your uncle will watch over you, and see to that. You hear, Will?”

“Yes, I will do my duty by her.”

“I believe you.”

“But, papa dear, don’t talk more. The doctor said you must be kept so quiet.”

“I must wind up my affairs, my darling, and think of your future. I’ve had quite enough of the men hanging about after the rich banker’s daughter. When my will is proved, the drones and wasps will come swarming round you for the money. There is no one at all, yet, is there?” he said, with a searching look.

“Oh, no, papa, I never even thought of such a thing.”

“I know it, my darling. I’ve always been your sweetheart, and we’ve lived for one another, and I’m loth to leave you, dear.”

“Oh, father, dearest father, don’t talk of leaving me,” she sobbed.

He smiled sadly, and his feeble hand played with her curls.

“God disposes, my own,” he said. “But there, I must talk while I can. Now, listen. These are nearly my last words, Will.”

His brother started and bent forward to hear his half-whispered words, and he wiped the dew from his sun-browned forehead, and shivered a little, for the chilly near approach of death troubled the hale, hearty-looking man, and gave a troubled look to his florid face.

“When all is over, Will, as soon as you can, take her down to Northwood, and be a father to her. Her aunt always loved her, and she’ll be happy there. Shake hands upon it, Will.”

The thin, white, trembling hand was placed in the fat, heavy palm extended, and rested there for some minutes before Robert Wilton spoke again.

“Everything is set down clearly, Will. The money invested in the bank is hers – one hundred and fifty thousand pounds, strictly tied up. I have seen to that. There, you will do your duty by her, and see that all goes well.”

“Yes.”

“I am satisfied, brother; I exact no oaths. Kate, my child, your uncle will take my place. I leave you in his hands.” Then in a low voice, heard only by her who clung to him, weeping silently, he whispered softly, “And in Thine, O God.”

The next morning the blinds were all down in front of Number 204, Bedford Square, which looked at its gloomiest in the wet fog, with the withered leaves falling fast from the great plane trees; and the iron shutters were half drawn up at the bank in Lothbury, for the old leather-covered chair in the director’s rom was vacant, waiting for a new occupant – the chairman of the Great British and Bengalie Joint Stock Bank was dead.

“As good and true a man as ever breathed,” said the head clerk, shaking his grey head; “and we’ve all lost a friend. I wonder who will marry Miss Kate!”

Chapter Two

“Morning, Doctor. Hardly expected to find you at home. Thought you’d be on your rounds.”

The speaker was mounted on a rather restive cob, which he now checked by the gate of the pretty cottage in one of the Northwood lanes; and as he spoke he sprang down and placed his rein through the ring on the post close by the brass plate which bore the words – “Pierce Leigh, M.D., Surgeon, etc.,” but he did not look at the ring, for his eyes gave a furtive glance at the windows from one to the other quickly.

He was not a groom, for his horse-shoe pin was set with diamonds, and a large bunch of golden charms hung at his watch chain, but his coat, hat, drab breeches, and leggings were of the most horsey cut, and on a near approach anyone might have expected to smell stables. As it was, the odour he exhaled was Jockey Club, emanating from a white pocket handkerchief dotted with foxes’ heads, hunting crops and horns, and saturated with scent.

“My rounds are not very regular, Mr Wilton,” said the gentleman addressed, and he looked keenly at the commonplace speaker, whose ears stood out widely from his closely-cropped hair. “You people are dreadfully healthy down here,” and he held open the garden gate and drew himself up, a fairly handsome, dark, keen-eyed, gentlemanly-looking man of thirty, slightly pale as if from study, but looking wiry and strong as an athlete. “You wished to see me?”

“Yes. Bit off my corn. Headache, black spots before my eyes, and that sort of thing. Thought I’d consult the Vet.”

“Will you step in?”

“Eh? Yes. Thankye.”

The Doctor led the way into his flower-decked half-study, half-consulting room, where several other little adornments suggested the near presence of a woman; and the would-be patient coughed unnecessarily, and kept on tapping his leg with the hunting crop he carried, as he followed, and the door was closed, and a chair was placed for him.

“Eh? Chair? Thanks,” said the visitor, taking it by the back, swinging it round, and throwing one leg across as if it were a saddle, crossing his arms and resting his chin there – the while he stared rather enviously at the man before him. “Not much the matter, and you mustn’t make me so that I can’t get on. Got a chap staying with me, and we’re going after the pheasants. I say, let me send you a brace.”

“You are very good,” said the Doctor, smiling rather contemptuously, “but as I understand it they are not yet shot?”

“Eh? Oh, no; but no fear of that. I can lick our keeper; pretty sure with a gun. Want to see my tongue and feel my pulse?”

“Well, no,” said the Doctor, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. “I can pretty well tell.”

“How?”

“By your looks.”

“Eh? Don’t look bad, do I?”

“Rather.”

“Something nasty coming on?” said the young man nervously.

“Yes; bad bilious attack, if you are not careful. You have been drinking too much beer and smoking too many strong cigars.”

“Not a bad guess,” said the young man with a grin. “Last boxes are enough to take the top of your head off. Try one.”

“Thank you,” was the reply, and a black-looking cigar was taken from the proffered case.

“Mind, I’ve told you they are roofers.”

“I can smoke a strong cigar,” said the Doctor, quietly.

“You can? Well, I can’t. Now then, mix up something; I want to be off.”

“There is no need to give you any medicine. Leave off beer and tobacco for a few days, and you will be all right.”

“But aren’t you going to give me any physic?”

“Not a drop.”

“Glad of it. But I say, the yokels down here won’t care for it if you don’t give them something.”

“I have found out that already. There, sir, I have given you the best advice I can.”

“Thankye. When am I to come again?”

“Not until you are really ill. Not then,” said the Doctor, smiling slightly as he rose, “for I suppose I should be sent for to you.”

“That’s all then?”

“Yes, that is all.”

“Well, send in your bill to the guv’nor,” said the young man, renewing his grin; “he pays all mine. Nice morning, ain’t it, for December? Soon have Christmas.”

“Yes, we shall soon have Christmas now,” said the Doctor, backing his visitor toward the door.

“But looks more like October, don’t it?”

“Yes, much more like October.”

“Steady, Beauty! Ah, quiet, will you!” cried the young man, as he mounted the restive cob. “She’s a bit fresh. Wants some of the dance taken out of her. Morning. – Sour beggar, no wonder he don’t get on,” muttered the patient. “Take that and that. Coming those games when I’m mounting! How do you like that? Wanted to have me off.”

There was a fresh application of the spurs, brutally given, and after plunging heavily the little mare tore off as hard as she could go, while the Doctor watched till his patient turned a corner, and then resumed his walk up and down the garden – a walk interrupted by the visit.

“Insolent puppy!” he muttered, frowning. “A miserable excuse.”

“Pierce, dear, where are you?” cried a pleasant voice, and a piquant little figure appeared at the door. “Oh, there you are. Shall I want a hat? Oh, no, it’s quite mild.” The owner of the voice hurried out like a beam of sunshine on the dull grey morning, and taking the Doctor’s arm tried to keep step with him, after glancing up in his stern face, her own looking merry and arch with its dimples.

“What is it, Jenny?” he said.

“What is it, sir? Why, I want fresh air as well as you; but don’t stride along like that. How can I keep step? You have such long legs.”

“That’s better,” he said, trying to accommodate himself to the little body at his side.

“Rather. So you have had a patient,” she said.

“Yes, I’ve had a patient, Sis,” he replied, looking down at her; and a faint colour dawned in her creamy cheeks.

“And you always grumbling, sir! There, I do believe that is the beginning of a change. Who was the patient?”

The Doctor’s hand twitched, and he frowned, but he said, calmly enough, “That young cub from the Manor.”

“Mr Claud Wilton?” said the girl innocently; “Oh, I am glad. Beginning with the rich people at the Manor. Now everyone will come.”

“No, my dear; everyone will not come, and the sooner we pack up and go back to town the better.”

“What, sell the practice?”

“Sell the practice,” he cried contemptuously. “Sell the furniture, Sis. One man – fool, I mean – was enough to be swindled over this affair. Practice! The miserable scoundrel! Much good may the money he defrauded me of do him. No, but we shall have to go.”

“Don’t, Pierce,” said the girl, looking up at him wistfully.

“Why?” he said angrily.

“Because it did do me good being down here, and I like the place so much.”

“Any place would be better than that miserable hole at Westminster, where you were getting paler every day, but I ought to have been more businesslike. It has not done you good though; and if you like the place the more reason why we should go,” he cried angrily.

“Oh, Pierce, dear, what a bear you are this morning. Do be patient, and I know the patients will come.”

“Bah! Not a soul called upon us since we’ve been here, except the tradespeople, so that they might get our custom.”

“But we’ve only been here six months, dear.”

“It will be the same when we’ve been here six years, and I’m wasting time. I shall get away as soon as I can. Start the New Year afresh in town.”

“Pierce, oh don’t walk so fast. How can I keep up with you?”

“I beg your pardon.”

“That’s better. But, Pierce, dear,” she said, with an arch look; “don’t talk like that. You wouldn’t have the heart to go.”

“Indeed! But I will.”

“I know better, dear.”

“What do you mean?”

“You couldn’t go away now. Oh, Pierce, dear, she is sweet! I could love her so. There is something so beautiful and pathetic in her face as she sits there in church. Many a time I’ve felt the tears come into my eyes, and as if I could go across the little aisle and kiss her and call her sister.”

He turned round sharply and caught her by the arm, his eyes flashing with indignation.

“Jenny,” he cried, “are you mad?”

“No, only in pain,” she said, with her lip quivering. “You hurt me. You are so strong.”

“I – I did not mean it,” he said, releasing her.

“But you hurt me still, dear, to see you like this. Oh, Pierce, darling,” she whispered, as she clung to his arm and nestled to him; “don’t try and hide it from me. A woman always knows. I saw it from the first when she came down, and we first noticed her, and she came to church looking like some dear, suffering saint. My heart went out to her at once, and the more so that I saw the effect it had on you. Pierce, dear, you do love me?”

“You know,” he said hoarsely.

“Then be open with me. What could be better?”

He was silent for a few moments, and then he answered the pretty, wistful eyes, gazing so inquiringly in his.

“Yes,” he said. “I will be open with you, Sis, for you mean well; but you speak like the pretty child you have always been to me. Has it ever crossed your mind that I have never spoken to this lady, and that she is a rich heiress, and that I am a poor doctor who is making a failure of his life?”

“What!” cried the girl proudly. “Why, if she were a princess she would not be too grand for my brave noble brother.”

“Hah!” he cried, with a scornful laugh; “your brave noble brother! Well, go on and still think so of me, little one. It’s very pleasant, and does not hurt anyone. I hope I’m too sensible to be spoiled by my little flatterer. Only keep your love for me yet awhile,” he said meaningly. “Let’s leave love out of the question till we can pay our way and have something to spare, instead of having no income at all but what comes from consols.”

“But Pierce – ”

“That will do. You’re a dear little goose. We must want the Queen’s Crown from the Tower because it’s pretty.”

“Now you’re talking nonsense, Pierce,” she said, firmly, and she held his arm tightly between her little hands. “You can’t deny it, sir. You fell in love with her from the first.”

“Jenny, my child,” he said quietly. “I promised our father I would be an honorable man and a gentleman.”

“And so you would have been, without promising.”

“I hope so. Then now listen to me; never speak to me in this way again.”

“I will,” she cried flushing. “Answer me this; would it be acting like an honorable man to let that sweet angel of a girl marry Claud Wilton?”

“What!” he cried, starting, and gazing at his sister intently. “Her own cousin? Absurd.”

“I’ve heard that it is to be so.”

“Nonsense!”

“People say so, and where there’s smoke there’s fire. Cousins marry, and I don’t believe they’ll let a fortune like that go out of the family.”

“They’re rich enough to laugh at it.”

“They’re not rich; they’re poor, for the Squire’s in difficulties.”

“Petty village tattle. Rubbish, girl. Once more, no more of this. You’re wrong, my dear. You mean well, but there’s an ugly saying about good intentions which I will not repeat. Now listen to me. The coming down to Northwood has been a grave mistake, and when people blunder the sooner they get back to the right path the better. I have made up my mind to go back to London, and your words this morning have hastened it on. The sooner we are off the better.”

“No, Pierce,” said the girl firmly. “Not to make you unhappy. You shall not take a step that you will repent to the last day of your life, dear. We must stay.”

“We must go. I have nothing to stay for here. Neither have you,” he added, meaningly.

“Pierce!” she cried, flushing.

“Beg pardon, sir; Mr Leigh, sir.”

They had been too much intent upon their conversation to notice the approach of a dog-cart, or that the groom who drove it had pulled up on seeing them, and was now talking to them over the hedge.

“Yes, what is it?” said Leigh, sharply.

“Will you come over to the Manor directly, sir? Master’s out, and Missus is in a trubble way. Our young lady, sir, Miss Wilton, took bad – fainting and nervous. You’re to come at once.”

Jenny uttered a soft, low, long-drawn “Oh!” and, forgetful of everything he had said, Pierce Leigh rushed into the house, caught up his hat, and hurried out again, to mount into the dog-cart beside the driver.

“Poor, dear old brother!” said Jenny, softly, as with her eyes half-blinded by the tears which rose, she watched the dog-cart driven away. “I don’t believe he will go to town. Oh, how strangely things do come about. I wish I could have gone too.”

Chapter Three

John Garstang stood with his back to the fire in his well furnished office in Bedford Row, tall, upright as a Life Guardsman, but slightly more prominent about what the fashionable tailor called his client's chest. He was fifty, but looked by artificial aid, forty. Scrupulously well-dressed, good-looking, and with a smile which won the confidence of clients, though his regular white teeth were false, and the high foreheaded look which some people would have called baldness was so beautifully ivory white and shiny that it helped to make him look what he was – a carefully polished man of the world.

The clean japanned boxes about the room, all bearing clients' names, the many papers on the table, the waste-paper basket on the rich Turkey carpet, chock full of white fresh letters and envelopes, all told of business; and the handsome morocco-covered easy chairs suggested occupancy by moneyed clients who came there for long consultations, such as would tell up in a bill.

John Garstang was a family solicitor, and he looked it; but he would have made a large fortune as a physician, for his presence and urbane manner would have done anyone good.

The morning papers had been glanced at and tossed aside, and the gentleman in question, while bathing himself in the warm glow of the fire, was carefully scraping and polishing his well-kept nails, pausing from time to time to blow off tiny scraps of dust; and at last he took two steps sideways noiselessly and touched the stud of an electric bell.

A spare-looking, highly respectable man answered the summons and stood waiting till his principal spoke, which was not until the right hand little finger nail, which was rather awkward to get at, had been polished, when without raising his eyes, John Garstang spoke.

"Mr Harry arrived?"

"No, sir."

"What time did he leave yesterday?"

"Not here yesterday, sir."

"The day before?"

"Not here the day before yesterday, sir."

"What time did he leave on Monday?"

"About five minutes after you left for Brighton, sir."

"Thank you, Barlow; that will do. By the way –"

The clerk who had nearly reached the door, turned, and there was again silence, while a few specks were blown from where they had fallen inside one of the spotless cuffs.

"Send Mr Harry to me as soon as he arrives."

"Yes, sir," and the man left the room; while after standing for a few moments thinking, John Garstang walked to one of the tin boxes in the rack and drew down a lid marked, "Wilton, Number 1."

Taking from this a packet of papers carefully folded and tied up with green silk, he seated himself at his massive knee-hole table, and was in the act of untying the ribbon, when the door opened and a short, thick-set young man of five-and-twenty, with a good deal of French waiter in his aspect, saving his clothes, entered, passing one hand quickly over his closely-shaven face, and then taking the other to help to square the great, dark, purple-fringed, square, Joinville tie, fashionable in the early fifties.

"Want to see me, father?"

"Yes. Shut the baize door."

"Oh, you needn't be so particular. It won't be the first time Barlow has heard you bully me."

"Shut the baize door, if you please, sir," said Garstang, blandly.

"Oh, very well!" cried the young man, and he unhooked and set free a crimson baize door whose spring sent it to with a thud and a snap.

Then John Garstang's manner changed. An angry frown gathered on his forehead, and he placed his elbows on the table, joined the tips of his fingers to form an archway, and looked beneath it at the young man who had entered.

"You are two hours late this morning."

"Yes, father."

"You did not come here at all yesterday."

"No, father."

"Nor the day before."

"No, father."

"Then will you have the goodness to tell me, sir, how long you expect this sort of thing to go on? You are not of the slightest use to me in my professional business."

"No, and never shall be," said the young man coolly.

"That's frank. Then will you tell me why I should keep and supply with money such a useless drone?"

"Because you have plenty, and a lot of it ought to be mine by right."

"Why so, sir? You are not my son."

"No, but I'm my mother's."

"Naturally," said Garstang, with a supercilious smile.

"You need not sneer, sir. If you hadn't deluded my poor mother into marrying you I should have been well off."

"Your mother had a right to do as she pleased, sir. Where have you been?"

"Away from the office."

"I know that. Where to?"

"Where I liked," said the young man sulkily, "I'm not a child."

"No, and this conduct has become unbearable. It is time you went away for good. What do you say to going to Australia with your passage paid and a hundred pounds to start you?"

"Isn't good enough."

"Then you had better execute your old threat and enlist in a cavalry regiment. I promise you that I will not buy you out."

"Thank you, but it isn't good enough."

"What are you going to do then?"

"Never mind."

Garstang looked up at him sharply, this time from outside the finger arch.

"Don't provoke me, Harry Dasent, for your own sake. What are you going to do?"

"Get married."

"Indeed? Well, that's sensible. But are there not enough pauper children for the parish to keep?"

"Yes, but I am not going to marry a pauper. You have my money and will not disgorge it, so I must have somebody's else."

"Indeed! Then you are going to look out for a lady with money?"

"No. I have already found one."

"Anyone I know?"

"Oh, yes."

"Who is it, pray?"

"Katherine Wilton."

Garstang's eyes contracted, and he gazed at his stepson for some moments in silence. Then a contemptuous smile dawned upon his lip.

"I was not aware that you were so ambitious, Harry. But the lady?"

"Oh, that will be all right."

"Indeed! May I ask when you saw her last?"

“Yesterday evening at dinner.”

“You have been down to Northwood?”

“Yes; I was there two days.”

“Did your Uncle Wilton invite you down?”

“No, but Claud did, for a bit of shooting.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Garstang thoughtfully, and the young man stood gazing at him intently. Then his manner changed, and he took one of the easy chairs, drew it forward, and seated himself, to sit leaning forward, and began speaking confidentially.

“Look here, step-father,” he half-whispered, “I’ve been down there twice. I suspected it the first time; yesterday I was certain. They’re playing a deep game there.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. I saw through it at once. They’re running Claud for the stakes.”

“Please explain yourself, my good fellow; I do not understand racing slang.”

“Well, then, they mean Claud to marry Kate, and I’m not going to stand by and see that done.”

“By the way, I thought Claud was your confidential friend.”

“So he is, up to a point; but it’s every man for himself in a case like this. I’m in the race myself, and I mean to marry Kate Wilton myself. It’s too good a prize to let slip.”

“And does the lady incline to my stepson’s addresses?”

“Well, hardly. I’ve had no chance. They watched me like cats do mice, and she has been so sickly that it would be nonsense to try and talk to her.”

“Then your prospects are very mild indeed.”

“Oh, no, they’re not. This is a case where a man must play trumps, high and at once. I may as well speak out, and you’ll help me. There’s no time shilly-shallying. If I hesitate my chance would be gone. I shall make my plans, and take her away.”

“With her consent, of course.”

“With or without,” said the young man, coolly.

“How?”

“Oh, I’ll find a means. Girls are only girls, and they’ll give way to a stronger will. Once I get hold of her she’ll obey me, and a marriage can soon be got through.”

“But suppose she refuses?”

“She’ll be made,” said the young man, sharply. “The stakes are worth some risk.”

“But are you aware that the law would call this abduction?”

“I don’t care what the law calls it if I get the girl.”

“And it would mean possibly penal servitude.”

“Well, I’m suffering that now, situated as I am. There, father, never mind the law. Don’t be squeamish; a great fortune is at stake, and it must come into our family, not into theirs.”

“You think they are trying that?”

“Think? I’m sure. Claud owned to as much, but he’s rather on somewhere else. Come, you’ll help me? It would be a grand coup.”

“Help you? Bah! you foolish young ass! It is impossible. It is madness. You don’t know what you are talking about. The girl could appeal to the first policeman, and you would be taken into custody. You and Claud Wilton must have been having a drinking bout, and the liquor is still in your head. There, go to your own room, and when you can talk sensibly come back to me.”

“I can talk sensibly now. Will you help me with a couple of hundred pounds to carry this through? I should want to take her for a couple of months on the Continent, and bring her back my wife.”

“Two hundred pounds to get you clapped in a cell at Bow Street.”

“No; to marry a hundred and fifty thousand pounds.”

“No, no, no. You are a fool, a visionary, a madman. It is impossible, and I shall feel it my duty to write to James Wilton to forbid, you the house.”

“Once more; will you help me?”

“Once more, no. Now go, and let me get on with my affairs. Someone must work.”

“Then you will not?”

“No.”

“Then listen to me: I’ve made up my mind to it, and do it. I will, at any cost, at any risk. She shan’t marry Claud Wilton, and she shall marry me. Yes, you may smile, but if I die for it I’ll have that girl and her money.”

“But it would cost two hundred pounds to make the venture, sir. Perhaps you had better get that first. Now please go.”

The young man rose and looked at him fiercely for a few minutes, and Garstang met his eyes firmly.

“No,” he said, “that would not do, Harry. The law fences us round against robbery and murder, just as it does women against abduction. You are not in your senses. You were drinking last night. Go back home and have a long sleep. You’ll be better then.”

The young man glanced at him sharply and left the room.

Ten minutes spent in deep thought were passed by Garstang, who then rose, replaced the papers in the tin case, and crossed and rang the bell.

“Send Mr Harry here.”

“He went out as soon as he left your room, sir.”

“Thank you; that will do.” Then, as the door closed upon the clerk, Garstang said softly:

“So that’s it; then it is quite time to act.”

Chapter Four

“Will that Doctor never come!” muttered plump Mrs Wilton, who had been for the past ten minutes running from her niece’s bedside to one of the front casement windows of the fine old Kentish Manor House, to watch the road through the park. “He might have come from London by this time. There, it’s of no use; it’s fate, and fate means disappointment. She’ll die; I’m sure she’ll die, and all that money will go to those wretched Morrisons. Why did he go out to the farms this morning? Any other morning would have done; and Claud away, too. Was ever woman so plagued? – Yes, what is it? Oh, it’s you, Eliza. How is she?”

“Quite insensible, ma’am. Is the Doctor never coming?”

“Don’t ask me, Eliza. I sent the man over in the dog-cart, with instructions to bring him back.”

“Then pray, pray come and stay with me in the bedroom, ma’am.”

“But I can’t do anything, Eliza, and it isn’t as if she were my own child. I couldn’t bear to see her die.”

“Mrs Wilton!” cried the woman, wildly. “Oh, my poor darling young mistress, whom I nursed from a babe – die!”

“Here’s master – here’s Mr Wilton,” cried the rosy-faced lady from the window, and making a dash at a glass to see that her cap was right, she hurried out of the room and down the broad oaken stairs to meet her lord at the door.

“Hallo, Maria, what’s the matter?” he cried, meeting her in the hall, his high boots splashed with mud, and a hunting whip in his hand.

“Oh, my dear, I’m so glad you’ve come! Kate – fainting fits – one after the other – dying.”

“The devil! What have you done?”

“Cold water – vinegar – burnt – ”

“No, no. Haven’t you sent for the Doctor?”

“Yes, I sent Henry with the dog-cart to fetch Mr Leigh.”

“Mr Leigh! Were you mad? What do you know about Mr Leigh? Bah, you always were a fool!”

“Yes, my dear, but what was I to do? It would have taken three hours to get – Oh, here he is.”

For there was the grating of carriage wheels on the drive, the dog-cart drew up, and Pierce Leigh sprang down and entered the hall.

Mrs Wilton glanced timidly at her husband, who gave her a sulky nod, and then turned to the young Doctor.

“My young niece – taken bad,” he said, gruffly, “You’d better go up and see her. Here, Maria, take him up.”

Unceremonious; but businesslike, and Leigh showed no sign of resentment, but with a peculiar novel fluttering about the region of the heart he followed the lady, who, panting the while, led the way upstairs, and breathlessly tried to explain how delicate her niece was, and how after many days of utter despondency, she had suddenly been seized with an attack of hysteria, which had been succeeded by fit after fit.

The next minute they were in the handsome bedroom at the end of a long, low corridor, where, pale as death, and with her maid – erst nurse – kneeling by her and fanning her, Kate Wilton, in her simple black, lay upon a couch, looking as if the Doctor’s coming were too late.

He drew a deep breath, and set his teeth as he sank on one knee by the insensible figure, which he longed with an intense longing to clasp to his breast. Then his nerves were strung once more, and he was the calm, professional man giving his orders, as he made his examination and inspired aunt and nurse with confidence, the latter uttering a sigh of relief as she opened the window, and obeyed sundry other orders, the result being that at the end of half an hour the sufferer, who twice

over unclosed her eyes, and responded to her aunt's questions with a faint smile, had sunk into the heavy sleep of exhaustion.

"Better leave her now, madam," said Leigh, softly. "Sleep is the great thing for her." Then, turning to the maid – "You had better stay and watch by her, though she will not wake for hours."

"God bless you, sir," she whispered, with a look full of gratitude which made Leigh give her an encouraging smile, and he then followed Mrs Wilton downstairs.

"Really, it's wonderful," she said. "Thank you so much, Doctor. I'm sure you couldn't have been nicer if you'd been quite an old man, and I really think that next time I'm ill I shall – Oh, my dear, she's ever so much better now."

"Humph!" ejaculated Wilton; and then he gave his wife an angry look, as she pushed him in the chest.

"Come in here and sit down, Mr Leigh. I want you to tell us all you think."

The Doctor followed into the library, whose walls were covered with books that were never used, while, making an effort to be civil, their owner pointed to a chair and took one himself, Leigh waiting till his plump, amiable-looking hostess had subsided, and well-filled that nearest the fire.

"Found her better then?" said Wilton.

"No, sir," said Leigh, smiling, "but she is certainly better now."

"That's what I meant. Nothing the matter, then. Vapours, whims, young girls' hysterics, and that sort of thing? What did she have for breakfast, Maria?"

"Nothing at all, dear. I can't get her to eat."

"Humph! Why don't you make her? Can't stand our miserable cookery, I suppose. Well, Doctor, then, it's a false alarm?"

"No, sir; a very serious warning."

"Eh? You don't think there's danger? Here, we'd better send for some big man from town."

"That is hardly necessary, sir, though I should be happy to meet a man of experience in consultation."

"My word! What airs!" said Wilton, to himself.

"As far as I could I have pretty well diagnosed the case, and it is very simple. Your niece has evidently suffered deeply."

"Terribly, Doctor; she has been heart-broken."

"Now, my dear Maria, do pray keep your mouth shut, and let Mr Leigh talk. He doesn't want you to teach him his business."

"But James, dear, I only just –"

"Yes, you always will only just! Go on, please, Doctor, and you'll send her some medicine?"

"It is hardly a case for medicine, sir. Your niece's trouble is almost entirely mental. Given rest and happy surroundings, cheerful female society of her own age, fresh air, moderate exercise, and the calmness and peace of a home like this, I have no doubt that her nerves will soon recover their tone."

"Then they had better do it," said Wilton, gruffly. "She has everything a girl can wish for. My son and I have done all we can to amuse her."

"And I'm sure I have been as loving as a mother to her," said Mrs Wilton.

"Yes, but you are mistaken, sir. There must be something more. I'd better take her up to town for advice."

"By all means, sir," said Leigh, coldly. "It might be wise, but I should say that she would be better here, with time to work its own cure."

"Of course, I mean no disrespect to you, Mr Leigh, but you are a young man, and naturally inexperienced."

"Now I don't want to hurt your feelings, James," broke in Mrs Wilton, "but it is you who are inexperienced in what young girls are. Mr Leigh has spoken very nicely, and quite understands poor Kate's case. If you had only seen the way in which he brought her round!"

"I really do wish, Maria, that you would not interfere in what you don't understand," cried Wilton, irascibly.

"But I'm obliged to when I find you going wrong. It's just what I've said to you over and over again. You men are so hard and unfeeling, and don't believe there are such things as nerves. Now, I'm quite sure that Mr Leigh could do her a great deal of good, if you'd only attend to your out-door affairs and leave her to me – You grasped it all at once, Mr Leigh. Poor child, she has done nothing but fret ever since she has been here, and no wonder. Within a year she has lost both father and mother."

"Now, Maria, Mr Leigh does not want to hear all our family history."

"And I'm not going to tell it to him, my dear; but it's just as I felt. It was only last night, when she had that fit of hysterical sobbing, I said to myself, Now if I had a dozen girls – as I should have liked to, instead of a boy, who is really a terrible trial to one, Mr Leigh – I should – "

"Maria!"

"Yes, my dear; but you should let me finish. If poor dear Kate had come here and found a lot of girls she would have been as happy as the day is long. – And you don't think she wants physic, Mr Leigh? No, no, don't hurry away."

"I have given you my opinion, madam," said Leigh, who had risen.

"Yes, and I'm sure it is right. I did give her some fluid magnesia yesterday, the same as I take for my acidity – "

"Woman, will you hold your tongue!" cried Wilton.

"No, James, certainly not. It is my duty, as poor Kate's aunt, to do what is best for her; and you should not speak to me like that before a stranger. I don't know what he will think. The fluid magnesia would not do her any harm, would it, Mr Leigh?"

"Not the slightest, madam; and I feel sure that with a little motherly attention and such a course of change as I prescribed, Miss Wilton will soon be well."

"There, James, we must have the Morrison girls to stay here with her. They are musical and – "

"We shall have nothing of the kind, Maria," said her husband, with asperity.

"Well, I know you don't like them, my dear, but in a case of urgency – by the way, Mr Leigh, someone told me your sister played exquisitely on the organ last Sunday because the organist was ill."

"My sister does play," said Leigh, coldly.

"I wish I had been at church to hear her, but my poor Claud had such a bad bilious headache I was nearly sending for you, and I had to stay at home and nurse him. I'm sure the cooking must be very bad at those cricket match dinners."

"Now, my dear Maria, you are keeping Mr Leigh."

"Oh, no, my dear, he was sent for to give us his advice, and I'm sure it is very valuable. By the way, Mr Leigh, why has not your sister called here?"

"I – er – really – my professional duties have left me little time for etiquette, madam, but I was under the impression that the first call should be to the new-comer."

"Why, of course. Do sit down, James. You are only kicking the dust out of this horrid thick Turkey carpet – they are such a job to move and get beaten, Mr Leigh. Do sit down, dear; you know how it fidgets me when you will jump up and down like a wild beast in a cage."

"Waffle!" said Mr Wilton aside.

"You are quite right, Mr Leigh; I ought to have called, but Claud does take up so much of my time. But I will call to-morrow, and then you two come up here the next day and dine with us, and I feel sure that our poor dear Kate will be quite pleased to know your sister. Tell her – no; I'll ask her to bring some music. She seems very nice, and young girls do always get on so well together. I know she'll do my niece a deal of good. But, of course, you will come again to-day, and keep on seeing her as much as you think necessary."

"Really I – " said Leigh, hesitating, and glancing resentfully at the master of the house.

"Oh, yes, come on, Mr Leigh, and put my niece right as soon as you can," he said.

“But your regular medical attendant – Mr Rainsford, I believe?”

“You may believe he’s a pig-headed, obstinate old fool,” growled Wilton. “Wanted to take off my leg when I had a fall at a hedge, and the horse rolled over it. Simple fracture, sir; and swore it would mortify. I mortified him.”

“Yes, Mr Leigh, and the leg’s stronger now than the other,” interposed Mrs Wilton.

“How do you know, Maria?” said her husband gruffly.

“Well, my dear, you’ve often said so.”

“Humph! Come in again and see Miss Wilton, Doctor, and I shall feel obliged,” said the uncle. “Good morning. The dog-cart is waiting to drive you back. I’ll send and have you fetched about – er – four?”

“It would be better if it were left till seven or eight, unless, of course, there is need.”

“Eight o’clock, then,” said Wilton; and Pierce Leigh bowed and left the room, with the peculiar sensation growing once more in his breast, and lasting till he reached home, thinking of how long it would be before eight o’clock arrived.

Chapter Five

"I should very much like to know what particular sin I have committed that I should have been plagued all my life with a stupid, garrulous old woman for a wife, who cannot be left an hour without putting her foot in it some way or another."

"Ah, you did not say so to me once, James," sighed Mrs Wilton.

"No, a good many hundred times. It's really horrible."

"But James – "

"There, do hold your tongue – if you can, woman. First you get inviting that young ruffian of John Garstang's to stay when he comes down."

"But, my dear, it was Claud. You know how friendly those two always have been."

"Yes, to my sorrow; but you coaxed him to stay."

"Really, my dear, I could not help it without being rude."

"Then why weren't you rude? Do you want him here, fooling about that girl till she thinks he loves her and marries him?"

"Oh, no, dear, it would be horrid. But you don't think – "

"Yes, I do, fortunately," snapped Wilton. "Why don't you think?"

"I do try to, my dear."

"Bah! Try! Then you want to bring in those locusts of Morrisons. It's bad enough to know that the money goes there if Kate dies, without having them hanging about and wanting her to go."

"I'm very, very sorry, James. I wish I was as clever as you."

"So do I. Then, as soon as you are checked in that, you dodge round and invite that Doctor, who's a deuced sight too good-looking, to come again, and ask him to bring his sister."

"But, my dear, it will do Kate so much good, and she really seems very nice."

"Nice, indeed! I wish you were. I believe you are half mad."

"Really, James, you are too bad, but I won't resent it, for I want to go up to Kate; but if someone here is mad, it is not I."

"Yes, it is. Like a weak fool I spoke plainly to you about my plans."

"If you had always done so we should have been better off and not had to worry about getting John Garstang's advice, with his advances and interests, and mortgages and foreclosures."

"You talk about what you don't understand, woman," said Wilton, sharply. "Can't you see that it is to our interest to keep the poor girl here? Do you want to toss her amongst a flock of vulture-like relatives, who will devour her?"

"Why, of course not, dear."

"But you tried to."

"I'm sure I didn't. You said she was so ill you were afraid she'd die and slip through our fingers."

"Yes, and all her money go to the Morrisons."

"Oh, yes, I forgot that. But I gave in directly about not having them here; and what harm could it do if Miss Leigh came? I'm sure it would do poor Kate a lot of good."

"And Claud, too, I suppose."

"Claud?"

"Ugh! You stupid old woman! Isn't she young and pretty? And artful, too, I'll be bound; poor Doctor's young sisters always are."

"Are they, dear?"

"Of course they are; and before she'd been here five minutes she'd be making eyes at that boy, and you know he's just like gunpowder."

"James, dear, you shouldn't."

“I was just as bad at his age – worse perhaps;” and Mr James Wilton, the stern, sage Squire of Northwood Manor, J.P., chairman of the Quarter Sessions, and several local institutions connected with the morals of the poor, chuckled softly, and very nearly laughed.

“James, dear, I’m surprised at you.”

“Humph! Well, boys will be boys. You know what he is.”

“But do you really think – ”

“Yes, I do really think, and I wish you would too. Kate does not take to our boy half so well as I should like to see, and nothing must occur to set her against him. It would be madness.”

“Well, it would be very disappointing if she married anyone else.”

“Disappointing? It would be ruin. So be careful.”

“Oh, yes, dear, I will indeed. I have tried to talk to her a little about what a dear good boy Claud is, and – why, Claud, dear, how long have you been standing there?”

“Just come. Time to hear you say what a dear good boy I am. Won’t father believe it?”

Chapter Six

Claud Wilton, aged twenty, with his thin pimply face, long narrow jaw, and closely-cropped hair, which was very suggestive of brain fever or imprisonment, stood leering at his father, his appearance in no wise supporting his mother's high encomiums as he indulged in a feeble smile, one which he smoothed off directly with his thin right hand, which lingered about his lips to pat tenderly the remains of certain decapitated pimples which redly resented the passage over them that morning of an unnecessary razor, which laid no stubble low.

The Vicar of the Parish had said one word to his lady re Claud Wilton – a very short but highly expressive word that he had learned at college. It was “cad,” – and anyone who had heard it repeated would not have ventured to protest against its suitability, for his face alone suggested it, though he did all he could to emphasise the idea by adopting a horsey, collary, cuffy style of dress, every article of which was unsuited to his physique.

“Has Henry Dasent gone?”

“Yes, guv'nor, and precious glad to go. You were awfully cool to him, I must say. He said if it wasn't for his aunt he'd never darken the doors again.”

“And I hope he will not, sir. He is no credit to your mother.”

“But I think he means well, my dear,” said Mrs Wilton, plaintively. “It is not his fault. My poor dear sister did spoil him so.”

“Humph! And she was not alone. Look here, Claud, I will not have him here. I have reasons for it, and he, with his gambling and racing propensities, is no proper companion for you.”

“P'raps old Garstang says the same about me,” said the young man, sulkily.

“Claud, my dear, for shame,” said Mrs Wilton. “You should not say such things.”

“I don't care what John Garstang says; I will not have his boy here. Insolent, priggish, wanting in respect to me, and – and – he was a deal too attentive to Kate.”

“Oh, my dear, did you think so?” cried Mrs Wilton.

“Yes, madam, I did think so,” said her husband with asperity, “and, what was ten times worse, you were always leaving them together in your blundering way.”

“Don't say such things to me, dear, before Claud.”

“Then don't spend your time making mistakes. Just come, have you, sir?”

“Oh, yes, father, just come,” said the young man, with an offensive grin.

“You heard more than you said, sir,” said the Squire, “so we may as well have a few words at once.”

“No, no, no, my dear; pray, pray don't quarrel with Claud now; I'm sure he wants to do everything that is right.”

“Be quiet, Maria,” cried the Squire, angrily.

“All right, mother; I'm not going to quarrel,” said the son.

“Of course not I only want Claud to understand his position. Look here, sir, you are at an age when a bo – , when a man doesn't understand the value of money.”

“Oh, I say, guv'nor! Come, I like that.”

“It's quite true, sir. You boys only look upon money as something to spend.”

“Right you are, this time.”

“But it means more, sir – power, position, the respect of your fellows – everything.”

“Needn't tell me, guv'nor; I think I know a thing or two about tin.”

“Now, suppose we leave slang out of the matter and talk sensibly, sir, about a very important matter.”

“Go on ahead then, dad; I'm listening.”

“Sit down then, Claud.”

“Rather stand, guv’nor; stand and grow good, ma.”

“Yes, my dear, do then,” said Mrs Wilton, smiling at her son fondly. “But listen now to what papa says; it really is very important.”

“All right, mother; but cut it short, father, my horse is waiting and I don’t want him to take cold.”

“Of course not, my boy; always take care of your horse. I will be very brief and to the point, then. Look here, Claud, your cousin, Katherine – ”

“Oh! Ah, yes; I heard she was ill. What does the Doctor say?”

“Never mind what the Doctor says. It is merely a fit of depression and low spirits. Now this is a serious matter. I did drop hints to you before. I must be plain now about my ideas respecting your future. You understand?”

“Quite fly, dad. You want me to marry her.”

“Exactly. Of course in good time.”

“But ain’t I ‘owre young to marry yet,’ as the song says?”

“Years do not count, my boy,” said his father, majestically. “If you were ten years older and a weak, foolish fellow, it would be bad; but when it is a case of a young man who is bright, clever, and who has had some experience of the world, it is different.”

Mrs Wilton, who was listening intently to her husband’s words, bowed her head, smiled approval, and looked with the pride of a mother at her unlicked cub.

But Claud’s face wrinkled up, and he looked inquiringly at his elder.

“I say, guv’nor,” he said, “does this mean chaff?”

“Chaff? Certainly not, sir,” said the father sternly. “Do I look like a man who would descend to – to – to chaff, as you slangly term it, my own son?”

“Not a bit of it, dad; but last week you told me I was the somethingest idiot you ever set eyes on.”

“Claud!”

“Well, he did, mother, and he used that favourite word of his before it. You know,” said the youth, with a grin.

“Claud, my dear, you shouldn’t.”

“I didn’t, mother; it was the dad. I never do use it except in the stables or to the dogs.”

“Claud, my boy, be serious. Yes, I did say so, but you had made me very angry, and – er – I spoke for your good.”

“Yes, I’m sure he did, my dear,” said Mrs Wilton.

“Oh, all right, then, so long as he didn’t mean it. Well, then, to cut it short, you both want me to marry Kate?”

“Exactly.”

“Not much of a catch. Talk about a man’s wife being a clinging vine; she’ll be a regular weeping willow.”

“Ha! ha! very good, my boy,” said Wilton, senior; “but no fear of that. Poor girl, look at her losses.”

“But she keeps going on getting into deeper misery. Look at her.”

“It only shows the sweet tenderness of her disposition, Claud, my dear,” said his mother.

“Yes, of course,” said his father, “but you’ll soon make her dry her eyes.”

“And she really is a very sweet, lovable, and beautiful girl, my dear,” said Mrs Wilton.

“Tidy, mother; only her eyes always look as red as a ferret’s.”

“Claud, my dear, you shouldn’t – such comparisons are shocking.”

“Oh, all right, mother. Very well; as I am such a clever, man-of-the-world sort of a chap, I’ll sacrifice myself for the family good. But I say, dad, she really has that hundred and fifty thou – ?”

“Every shilling of it, my boy, and – er – really that must not go out of the family.”

“Well, it would be a pity. Only you will have enough to leave me to keep up the old place.”

“Well – er – I – that is – I have been obliged to mortgage pretty heavily.”

“I say, guv’nor,” cried the young man, looking aghast; “you don’t mean to say you’ve been hit?”

“Hit? No, my dear, certainly not,” cried Mrs Wilton.

“Oh, do be quiet, ma. Father knows what I mean.”

“Well, er – yes, my boy, to be perfectly frank, I have during the past few years made a – er – two or three rather unfortunate speculations, but, as John Garstang says – ”

“Oh, hang old Garstang! This is horrible, father; just now, too, when I wanted to bleed you rather heavily.”

“Claud, my darling, don’t, pray don’t use such dreadful language.”

“Will you be quiet, ma! It’s enough to make a fellow swear. Are you quite up a tree, guv’nor?”

“Oh, no, no, my boy, not so bad as that. Things can go oh for years just as before, and, er – in reason, you know – you can have what money you require; but I want you to understand that you must not look forward to having this place, and er – to see the necessity for thinking seriously about a wealthy marriage. You grasp the position now?”

“Dad, it was a regular smeller, and you nearly knocked me out of time. I saw stars for the moment.”

“My dearest boy, what are you talking about?” asked Mrs Wilton, appealingly.

“Oh, bother! But, I say, guv’nor, I’m glad you spoke out to me – like a man.”

“To a man, my boy,” said the father, holding out his hand, which the son eagerly grasped. “Then now we understand each other?”

“And no mistake, guv’nor.”

“You mustn’t let her slip through your fingers, my boy.”

“Likely, dad!”

“You must be careful; no more scandals – no more escapades – no follies of any kind.”

“I’ll be a regular saint, dad. I say, think I ought to read for the church?”

“Good gracious me, Claud, my dear, what do you mean?”

“White choker, flopping felt, five o’clock tea, and tennis, mother. Kate would like that sort of thing.”

Wilton, senior, smiled grimly.

“No, no, my boy, be the quiet English gentleman, and let her see that you really care for her and want to make her happy. Poor girl, she wants love and sympathy.”

“And she shall have ’em, dad, hot and strong. A hundred and fifty thou – !”

“Would clear off every lien on the property, my boy, and it would be a grand thing for my poor deceased brother’s child.”

“You do think so, don’t, you, my dear?” said Mrs Wilton, mentally extending a tendril, to cling to her husband, “because I – ”

“Decidedly, decidedly, my dear,” said the Squire, quickly. “Thank you, Claud, my boy,” he continued. “I shall rely upon your strong common sense and judgment.”

“All right, guv’nor. You give me my head. I’ll make it all right. I’ll win the stakes with hands down.”

“I do trust you, my boy; but you must be gentle, and not too hasty.”

“I know,” said the young man with a cunning look. “You leave me alone.”

“Hah! That’s right, then,” said the Squire, drawing a deep breath as he smiled at his son; but all the same his eyes did not look the confidence expressed by his words.

Chapter Seven

“Why, there then, my precious, you are ever so much better. You look quite bright this morning.”

“Do I, 'Liza?” said Kate sadly, as she walked to her bedroom window and stood gazing out at the sodden park and dripping trees.

“Ever so much, my dear. Mr Leigh has done you a deal of good. I do wonder at finding such a clever gentlemanly Doctor down in an out-of-the-way place like this. You like him, don't you?”

The girl turned slowly and gazed at the speaker, her brow contracting a little at the inner corners of her straight eyebrows, which were drawn up, giving her face a troubled expression.

“I hardly thing I do, nurse, dear; he is so stern and firm with me. He seems to talk to me as if it were all my fault that I have been so weak and ill; and he does not know – he does not know.”

The tears rose to her eyes, ready to brim over as she spoke.

“Ah! naughty little girl!” cried the woman, with mock anger; “crying again! I will not have it. Oh! my own pet,” she continued, changing her manner, as she passed her arm lovingly about the light waist and tenderly kissed her charge. “Please, please try. You are so much better. You must hold up.”

“Yes, yes, nurse, I will,” cried the girl, making an effort, and kissing the homely face lovingly.

“And what did I tell you? I'm always spoken of as your maid now – lady's maid. It must not be nurse any longer.”

“Ah!” said Kate, with the wistful look coming in her eyes again; “it seems as if all the happy old things are to be no more.”

“No, no, my dear; you must not talk so. You not twenty, and giving up so to sadness! You must try and forget.”

“Forget!” cried the girl, reproachfully.

“No, no, not quite forget, dear; but try and bear your troubles like a woman now. Who could forget dear old master, and your poor dear mother? But would they like you to fret yourself into the grave with sorrow? Would they not say if they could come to you some night, ‘Never forget us, darling; but try and bear this grief as a true woman should’?”

“Yes,” said the girl, thoughtfully, “and I will. But I don't feel as if I could be happy here.”

The maid sighed.

“Uncle is very kind, and my aunt is very loving in her way, but I feel as if I want to be alone somewhere – of course with you. I have lain awake at night, longing to be back home.”

“But that is impossible now, darling. Cook wrote to me the other day, and she told me that the house and furniture had been sold, and that the workmen were in, and – oh, what a stupid woman I am. Pretty way to try and comfort you!”

“It's nothing, 'Liza. It's all gone now,” said the girl, smiling piteously.

“That's nice and brave of you; but I am very stupid, my dear. There, there, you will try and be more hopeful, and to think of the future?”

“Yes, I will; but I'm sure I should be better and happier if I went away from here. Couldn't we have a cottage somewhere – at the seaside, perhaps, and live together?”

“Well, yes, you could, my dear; but it wouldn't be nice for you, nor yet proper treatment to your uncle and aunt. Come, try and get quite well. So you don't like Doctor Leigh?”

“No, I think not.”

“Nor yet Miss Jenny?”

“Oh, yes, I like her,” said Kate, with animation. “She is very sweet and girlish. Oh, nurse, dear, I wish I could be as happy, and light-hearted as she is!”

“So you will be soon, my darling. I don't want to see you quite like her. You are so different; but she is a very nice girl, and by-and-by perhaps you'll see more of her. You do want more of a

companion of your own age. There goes the breakfast bell! What a wet, soaking morning; but it isn't foggy down here like it used to be in the Square, and the sun shines more; and Miss Kate – ”

“Oh, don't speak like that, nurse!”

“But I must, my dear. I have to keep my place down here.”

“Well, when we are alone then. What were you going to say?”

“I want you to try and make me happy down here.”

“I? How can I?”

“By letting the sunshine come back into your face. You've nearly broken my heart lately, what with seeing you crying and being so ill.”

“I'm going to try, nurse.”

“That's right. What's that? Hail?”

At that moment there was a tap at the door.

“Nearly ready to go down, my darling?”

The door opened, and Mrs Wilton appeared.

“May I come in? Ah, quite ready. Come, that's better, my pretty pet. Why, you look lovely and quite a colour coming into your face. Now, don't she look nice this morning?”

“Yes, ma'am; I've been telling her so.”

“I thought we should bring her round. I am pleased, and you're a very good girl. Your uncle will be delighted; but come along down, and let's make the tea, or he'll be going about like a roaring lion for his food. Oh! bless me, what's that?”

“That” was a sharp rattling, for the second time, on the window-pane.

“Not hail, surely. Oh, you naughty boy,” she continued, throwing open the casement window. “Claud, my dear, you shouldn't throw stones at the bedroom windows.”

“Only small shot. Morning. How's Kate? Tell her the breakfast's waiting.”

“We're coming, my dear, and your cousin's ever so much better. Come here, my dear.”

Kate coloured slightly, as she went to the open window, and Claud stood looking up, grinning.

“How are you? Didn't you hear the shot I pitched up before?”

“Yes, I thought it was hail,” said Kate, coldly.

“Only number six. But come on down; the gov'nor's been out these two hours, and gone to change his wet boots.”

“We're coming, my dear,” cried Mrs Wilton; “and Claud, my dear, I'm sure your feet must be wet. Go in and change your boots at once.”

“Bother. They're all right.”

“Now don't be obstinate, my dear; you know how delicate your throat is, and – There, he's gone. You'll have to help me to make him more obedient, Kate, my dear. I've noticed already how much more attention he pays to what you say. But there, come along.”

James Wilton was already in the breakfast-room, looking at his letters, and scowling over them like the proverbial bear with the sore head.

“Come, Maria,” he growled, “are we never to have any – Ah, my dear, you down to breakfast! This makes up for a wet morning,” and he met and kissed his niece, drew her hand under his arm, and led her to a chair on the side of the table nearest the fire. “That's your place, my dear, and it has looked very blank for the past fortnight. Very, very glad to see you fill it again. I say,” he continued, chuckling and rubbing his hands, “you're quite looking yourself again.”

“Yes,” said Mrs Wilton, “but you needn't keep all the good mornings and kisses for Kitty. Ah, it's very nice to be young and pretty, but if Uncle's going to pet you like this I shall grow quite jealous.” This with a good many meaning nods and smiles at her niece, as she took her place at the table behind the hissing urn.

“You've been too much petted, Maria. It makes you grow too plump and rosy.”

“James, my dear, you shouldn't.”

“Oh, yes, I should,” said her husband, chuckling. “I know Kitty has noticed it. But is that boy coming in to breakfast?”

“Yes, yes, yes, my dear; but don’t shout so. You quite startle dear Kitty. Recollect, please, that she is an invalid.”

“Bah! Not she. Going to be quite well again directly, and come for rides and drives with me to the farms. Aren’t you, my dear?”

“I shall be very pleased to, Uncle – soon.”

“That’s right. We’ll soon have some roses among the lilies. Ha! ha! You must steal some of your aunt’s. Got too many in her cheeks, hasn’t she, my dear – Damask, but we want maiden blush, eh?”

“Do be quiet, James. You really shouldn’t.”

“Where is Claud? He must have heard the bell.”

“Oh, yes, and he, came and called Kitty. He has only gone to change his wet boots.”

“Wet boots! Why, he wasn’t down till nine. Oh, here you are, sir. Come along.”

“Did you change your boots, Claud?”

“No, mother,” said that gentleman, seating himself opposite Kate.

“But you should, my dear.”

Wilton gave his niece a merry look and a nod, which was intended to mean, “You attend to me.”

“Yes, you should, my dear,” he went on, imitating his wife’s manner; “and why don’t you put on goloshes when you go out?”

Claud stared at his father, and looked as if he thought he was a little touched mentally.

“Isn’t it disgusting, Kitty, my dear?” said Wilton. “She’d wrap him up in a flannel and feed him with a spoon if she had her way with the great strong hulking fellow.”

“Don’t you take any notice of your uncle’s nonsense, my dear. Claud, my love, will you take Kitty’s cup to her?”

“She’d make a regular molly-coddle of him. And we don’t want doctoring here. Had enough of that the past fortnight. I say, you’re going to throw Leigh overboard this morning. Don’t want him any more, do you?”

“Oh, no, I shall be quite well now.”

“Yes,” said her uncle, with a knowing look. “Don’t you have any more of it. And I say, you’ll have to pay his long bill for jalap and pilly coshy. That is if you can afford it.”

“I do wish, my dear, you’d let the dear child have her breakfast in peace; and do sit down and let your cousin be, Claud, dear; I’m sure she will not eat bacon. It’s so fidgeting to have things forced upon you.”

“You eat your egg, ma! Kitty and I understand each ether. She wants feeding up, and I’m going to be the feeder.”

“That’s right, boy; she wants stamina.”

“But she can’t eat everything on the table, James.”

“Who said she could? She isn’t a stout elderly lady.”

The head of the family looked at his niece with a broad smile, as if in search of a laugh for his jest, but the smile that greeted him was very wan and wintry.

“Any letters, my dear?” said Mrs Wilton, as the breakfast went on, with Kate growing weary of her cousin’s attentions, all of which took the form of a hurried movement to her side of the table, and pressure brought to bear over the breakfast delicacies.

The wintry look appeared to be transferred from Kate’s to her uncle’s face, but it was not wan; on the contrary, it was decidedly stormy.

“Yes,” he said, with a grunt.

“Anything particular?”

“Yes, very.”

“What is it, my dear?”

“Don’t both – er – letter from John Garstang.”

“Oh, dear me!” said Mrs Wilton, looking aghast; and her husband kicked out one foot for her special benefit, but as his leg was not eight feet long the shot was a miss.

“Says he’ll run down for a few days to settle that little estate business; and that it will give him an opportunity to have a few chats with Kate here. You say you like Mr Garstang, my dear?”

“Oh, yes,” said Kate, quietly; “he was always very nice and kind to me.”

“Of course, my darling; who would not be?” said Mrs Wilton.

“Claud, boy, I suppose the pheasants are getting scarce.”

“Oh, there are a few left yet,” said the young man.

“You must get up a beat and try and find a few hares, too. Uncle Garstang likes a bit of shooting. Used to see much of John Garstang, my dear, when you were at home?”

“No, uncle, not much. He used to come and dine with us sometimes, and he was always very kind to me from the time I was quite a little girl, but my father and he were never very intimate.”

“A very fine-looking man, my dear, and so handsome,” said Mrs Wilton.

“Yes, very,” said her husband, dryly; “and handsome is as handsome does.”

“Yes, my dear, of course,” said Mrs Wilton; and very little more was said till the end of the breakfast, when the lady of the house asked what time the guest would be down.

“Asks me to send the dog-cart to meet the mid-day train. Humph! rain’s over and sun coming out. Here, Claud, take your cousin round the greenhouse and the conservatory. She hasn’t seen the plants.”

“All right, father. Don’t mind me smoking, do you, Kitty?”

“Of course she’ll say no,” said Wilton testily; “but you can surely do without your pipe for an hour or two.”

“Oh, very well,” said Claud, ungraciously; and he offered his cousin his arm.

She looked surprised at the unnecessary attention, but took it; and they went out through the French window into the broad verandah, the glass door swinging to after them.

“What a sweet pair they’ll make, James, dear,” said Mrs Wilton, smiling fondly after her son. “How nicely she takes to our dear boy!”

“Yes, like the rest of the idiots. Girl always says snap to the first coat and trousers that come near her.”

“Oh, James, dear! you shouldn’t say that I’m sure I didn’t!”

“You! Well, upon my soul! How you can stand there and utter such a fib! But never mind; it’s going to be easy enough, and we’ll get it over as soon as we decently can, if you don’t make some stupid blunder and spoil it.”

“James, dear!”

“Be just like you. But a nice letter I’ve had from John Garstang about that mortgage. Never mind, though; once this is over I can snap my fingers at him. So be as civil as you can; and I suppose we must give him some of the best wine.”

“Yes, dear, and have out the china dinner service.”

“Of course. But I wish you’d put him into a damp bed.”

“Oh, James, dear! I couldn’t do that.”

“Yes, you could; give him rheumatic fever and kill him. But I suppose you won’t.”

“Indeed I will not, dear. There are many wicked things that I feel I could do, but put a Christian man into a damp bed – no!”

“Humph! Well, then, don’t; but I hope that boy will be careful and not scare Kitty.”

“What, Claud? Oh, no, my dear, don’t be afraid of that. My boy is too clever; and, besides, he’s beginning to love the very ground she walks on. Really, it seems to me quite a Heaven-made matter.”

“Always is, my dear, when the lady has over a hundred thousand pounds,” said Wilton, with a grim smile; “but we shall see.”

Chapter Eight

"I say, don't be in such a jolly hurry. You're all right here, you know. I want to talk to you."

"You really must excuse me now, Claud; I have not been well, and I'm going back to my room."

"Of course you haven't been well, Kitty – I say, I shall call you Kitty, you know – you can't expect to be well moping upstairs in your room. I'll soon put you right, better than that solemn-looking Doctor. You want to be out in the woods and fields. I know the country about here splendidly. I say, you ride, don't you?"

"I? No."

"Then I'll teach you. Get your old maid to make you a good long skirt – that will do for a riding-habit at first – I'll clap the side-saddle on my cob, and soon show you how to ride like a plucky girl should. I say, Kitty, I'll hold you on at first – tight."

The speaker smiled at her, and the girl shrank from him, but he did not see it.

"You'll soon ride, and then you and I will have the jolliest of times together. I'll make you ride so that by this time next year you'll follow the hounds, and top a hedge with the best of them."

"Oh, no, I have no wish to ride, Claud."

"Yes, you have. You think so now, because you're a bit down; but you wait till you're on the cob, and then you'll never want to come off. I don't. I say, you haven't seen me ride."

"No, Claud; but I must go now."

"You mustn't, coz. I'm going to rouse you up. I say, though, I don't want to brag, but I can ride – anything. I always get along with the first flight, and a little thing like you after I've been out with you a bit will astonish some of them. I shall keep my eye open, and the first pretty little tit I see that I think will suit you, I shall make the guv'nor buy."

"I beg that you will not, Claud."

"That's right, do. Go down on your poor little knees and beg, and I'll get the mount for you all the same. I know what will do you good and bring the blood into your pretty cheeks. No, no, don't be in such a hurry. I won't let you go upstairs and mope like a bird with the pip. You never handled a gun, I suppose?"

"No, never," said Kate, half angrily now; "of course not."

"Then you shall. You can have my double-barrel that father bought for me when I was a boy. It's light as a feather, comes up to the shoulder splendidly, and has no more kick in it than a mouse. I tell you what, if it's fine this afternoon you shall put on thick boots and a hat, and we'll walk along by the fir plantations, and you shall have your first pop at a pheasant."

"I shoot at a pheasant!" cried Kate in horror.

"Shoo!" exclaimed Claud playfully. "Yes, you have your first shot at a pheasant. Shuddering? That's just like a London girl. How horrid, isn't it?"

"Yes, horrible for a woman."

"Not a bit of it. You'll like it after the first shot. You'll be ready enough to shove in the cartridges with those little hands, and bring the birds down. I say, I'll teach you to fish, too, and throw a fly. You'll like it, and soon forget all the mopes. You've been spoiled; but after a month or two here you won't know yourself. Don't be in such a hurry, Kitty."

"Don't hold my hand like that, Claud; I must really go now," said Kate, whose troubled face was clouded with wonder, vexation, and something approaching fear. "I really wish to go into the house."

"No, you don't; you want to stop with me. I shan't have a chance to talk to you again, with old Garstang here. I say, I saw you come out to have this little walk up and down here. I was watching and came after you to show you the way about the grounds."

"It was very kind of you, Claud. Thank you; but let me go in now."

“Shan’t I don’t get a chance to have a walk with such a girl as you every day. I am glad you’ve come. It makes our house seem quite different.”

“Thank you for saying so – but I feel quite faint now.”

“More need for you to stop in the fresh air. You faint, and I’ll bring you to again with a kiss. That’s the sort of thing to cure a girl who faints.”

She looked at him in horror and disgust, as he burst into a boisterous laugh.

“I suppose old Garstang isn’t a bad sort but we don’t much like him here. I say, what do you think of Harry Dasent?”

“I – I hardly know,” said Kate, who was trying her best to get back along the path by some laurels to where the conservatory door by the drawing-room stood open. “I have seen so little of him.”

“So much the better for you. He’s not a bad sort of a fellow for men to know, but he’s an awful cad with girls. Not a bit of a gentleman. You won’t see much more of him, though, for the gov’nor says he won’t have him here. I say, a month ago it would have made me set up on bristles, because I want him for a mate, but I don’t mind now you’ve come. We’ll be regular pals, and go out together everywhere. I’ll soon show you what country life is. Oh, well, if you will go in now I won’t stop you. I’ll go and have the little gun cleaned up, and – I say, come round the other way; I haven’t shown you the dogs.”

“No, no – not now, please, Claud. I really am tired out and faint.”

He still kept her hand tightly under his arm, in spite of her effort to withdraw it, and followed her into the conservatory, which was large and well-filled with ornamental shrubs and palms.

“Well, you do look a bit tired, dear, but it becomes you. I say, I am so glad you’ve come. What a pretty little hand this is. You’ll give me a kiss before you go?”

She started from him in horror.

“Nobody can’t see here. Just one,” he whispered, as he passed his arm round her waist; and before she could struggle free he had roughly kissed her twice.

“Um-m-m,” exclaimed Mrs Wilton, in a soft simmering way. “Claud, Claud, my dear, shocking, shocking! Oh, fie, fie, fie! You shouldn’t, you know. Anyone would think you were an engaged couple.”

“Aunt, dear!” cried Kate, in an agitated voice, as she clung to that lady, but no further words would come.

“Oh, there, there, my dear, don’t look like that,” cried Mrs Wilton. “I’m not a bit cross. Why, you’re all of a flutter. I wasn’t blaming you, my dear, only that naughty Claud. It was very rude of him, indeed. Really, Claud, my dear, it is not gentlemanly of you. Poor Kate is quite alarmed.”

“Then you shouldn’t have come peeping,” cried the oaf, with a boisterous laugh.

“Claud! for shame! I will not allow it. It is not respectful to your mamma. Now, come in, both of you. Mr Garstang is here – with your father, Claud, my love; and I wish you to be very nice and respectful to him, for who knows what may happen? Kate, my dear, I never think anything of money, but when one has rich relatives who have no children of their own, I always say that we oughtn’t to go out of our way to annoy them. Henry Dasent certainly is my sister’s child, but one can’t help thinking more of one’s own son; and as Harry is nothing to Mr Garstang, I can’t see how he can help remembering Claud very strongly in his will.”

“Doesn’t Claud wish he may get it!” cried that youth, with a grin. “I’m not going to toady old Garstang for the sake of his coin.”

“Nobody wishes you to, my dear; but come in; they must be done with their business by now. Come, my darling. Why, there’s a pretty bloom on your cheeks already. I felt that a little fresh air would do you good. They’re in the library; come along. We can go in through the verandah. Don’t whistle, Claud, dear; it’s so boyish.”

They passed together out of the farther door of the conservatory into the verandah, and as they approached an open window, a smooth bland voice said:

"I'll do the best I can, Mr Wilton; but I am only the agent. If I stave it off, though, it can only be for a short time, and then – Ah, my dear child!"

John Garstang, calm, smooth, well-dressed and handsome, rose from one of the library chairs as Kate entered with her aunt, and held out both his hands: "I am very glad to see you again – very, very sorry to hear that you have been so ill. Hah!" he continued, as he scrutinised the agitated face before him in a tender fatherly way, "not quite right yet, though," and he led her to a chair near the fire. "That rosy tinge is a trifle too hectic, and the face too transparently white. You must take care of her, Maria Wilton, and see that she has plenty of this beautiful fresh air. I hope she is a good obedient patient."

"Ve-ry, ve-ry, good indeed, John Garstang, only a little too much disposed to keep to her room."

"Oh, well, quite natural, too," said Garstang, smiling. "What we all do when we are ailing. But there, we must not begin a discussion about ailments. I'm very glad to see you again, though, Kate, and congratulate you upon being here."

"Thank you, Mr Garstang," she replied, giving him a wistful look, as a feeling of loneliness amongst these people made her heart seem to contract.

"Well, Wilton, I don't think we need talk any more about business?"

"Oh, we're not going to stay," cried Mrs Wilton. "Come, Kate, my child, and let these dreadful men talk."

"By no means," said Garstang; "sit still, pray. We shall have plenty of time for anything more we have to say over a cigar to-night, for I've come down to throw myself upon your hospitality for a day or two."

"Of course, of course," said Wilton, quickly; "Maria has a room ready for you."

"Yes, your old room, John Garstang; and it's beautifully aired, and just as you like it."

"Thank you, Maria. You aunt always spoils me, Kate, when I come down here. I look upon the place as quite an oasis in the desert of drudgery and business; and at last I have to drag myself away, or I should become a confirmed sybarite."

"Well, why don't you?" said Claud. "Only wish I had your chance."

"My dear Claud, you speak with the voice of one-and-twenty. When you are double your age you will find, as I do, that money and position and life's pleasures soon pall, and that the real enjoyment of existence is really in work."

"Walker!" said Claud, contemptuously.

Garstang laughed merrily, and while Wilton and his wife frowned and shook their heads at their son, he turned to Kate.

"It is of no use to preach to young people," he said, "but what I say is the truth. Not that I object to a bit of pleasure, Claud, boy. I'm looking forward to a few hours with you, my lad – jolly ones, as you call them, and as I used. How about the pheasants?"

"More than you'll shoot."

"Sure to be. My eye is not so true as it was, Maria."

"Stuff! You look quite a young man still."

"Well, I feel so sometimes. What about the pike in the lake, Claud? Can we troll a bit?"

"It's chock full of them. The weeds are rotten and the pike want thinning down. Will you come?"

"Will I come! Indeed I will; and I'd ask your cousin to come on the lake with us to see our sport, but it would not be wise. How is the bay?"

"Fit as a fiddle. Say the word and I'll have him round if you're for a ride."

"After lunch, my dear, after lunch," said Mrs Wilton.

"Yes, after lunch I should enjoy it," said Garstang.

"Two, sharp, then," said Claud.

"Yes, two, sharp," replied Garstang, consulting his watch. "Quarter to one now."

"Yes, and lunch at one."

“By the way,” said Garstang, “Harry said he had been down here, and you gave him some good sport. I’m afraid I have made a mistake in tying him down to the law.”

Wilton moved uneasily in his chair and darted an angry look at his wife, who began to fidget, and looked at Kate and then at her son.

Garstang did not seem to notice anything, but smiled blandly, as he leaned back in his chair.

“Oh, yes, he blazed away at the pheasants,” said Claud, sneeringly; “but he only wounded one, and it got away.”

“That’s bad,” said Garstang. “But then he has not had your experience, Master Claud. It’s very good of you, though, James, to have him down, and of you, Maria, to make the boy so welcome. He speaks very gratefully about you.”

“Oh, it isn’t my doing, John Garstang,” said the lady, hurriedly; “but of course I am bound to make him welcome when he comes;” and she uttered a little sigh as she glanced at her lord again, as if feeling satisfied that she had exonerated herself from a serious charge.

“Ah, well, we’ll thank the lord of the manor, then,” said Garstang, smiling at Kate.

“Needn’t thank me,” said Wilton, gruffly. “I don’t interfere with Claud’s choice of companions. If you mean that I encourage him to come and neglect his work you are quite out. You must talk to Claud.”

“I don’t want him,” cried that gentleman.

“But I think I understood him to say that you had asked him down again.”

“Not I,” cried Claud. “He’d say anything.”

“Indeed! I’m sorry to hear this. In fact, I half expected to find him down here, and if I had I was going to ask you, James, if you thought it would be possible for you to take him as – as – well, what shall I say? – a sort of farm pupil.”

“I?” cried Wilton, in dismay. “What! Keep him here?”

“Well – er – yes. He has such a penchant for country life, and I thought he would be extremely useful as a sort of overlooker, or bailiff, while learning to be a gentleman-farmer.”

“You keep him at his desk, and make a lawyer of him,” said Wilton sourly. “He’ll be able to get a living then, and not have to be always borrowing to make both ends meet. There’s nothing to be made out of farming.”

“Do you hear this, Kate, my dear?” said Garstang, with a meaning smile. “It is quite proverbial how the British farmer complains.”

“You try farming then, and you’ll see.”

“Why not?” said Garstang, laughingly, while his host writhed in his seat. “It always seems to me to be a delightful life in the country, with horses to ride, and hunting, shooting and fishing.”

“Oh, yes,” growled Wilton, “and crops failing, and markets falling, and swine fever, and flukes in your sheep, and rinderpest in your cattle, and the bank refusing your checks.”

“Oh, come, come, not so bad as that! You have fine weather as well as foul,” said Garstang, merrily. “Then Harry has not been down again, Claud?”

“No, I haven’t seen him since he went back the other day,” said Claud, and added to himself, “and don’t want to.”

“That’s strange,” said Garstang, thoughtfully. “I wonder where he has gone. I daresay he will be back at the office, though, by now. I don’t like for both of us to be away together. When the cat’s away the mice will play, Kate, as the old proverb says.”

“Then why don’t you stop at the office, you jolly old sleek black tom, and not come purring down here?” said Claud to himself. “Bound to say you can spit and swear and scratch if you like.”

There was a dead silence just then, which affected Mrs Wilton so that she felt bound to say something, and she turned to the visitor.

“Of course, John Garstang, we don’t want to encourage Harry Dasent here, but if – ”

“Ah, here’s lunch ready at last,” cried Wilton, so sharply that his wife jumped and shrank from his angry glare, while the bell in the little wooden turret went on clanging away.

“Oh, yes, lunch,” she said hastily. “Claud, my dear, will you take your cousin in?”

But Garstang had already arisen, with bland, pleasant smile, and advanced to Kate.

“May I?” he said, as if unconscious of his sister-in-law’s words; and at that moment a servant opened the library door as if to announce the lunch, but said instead:

“Mr Harry Dasent, sir!”

That gentleman entered the room.

Chapter Nine

“Hello, Harry!” said Claud, breaking up what is generally known as an awkward pause, for the fresh arrival had been received in frigid silence.

“Ah, Harry, my boy,” said Garstang, with a pleasant smile, “I half expected to find you here.”

“Did you?” said the young man, making an effort to be at his ease. “Rather a rough morning for a walk – roads so bad. I’ve run down for a few hours to see how Kate Wilton was. Thought you’d give me a bit of lunch.”

“Of course, my dear,” said Mrs Wilton, stiffly, and glancing at her husband afterwards as if to say, “Wasn’t that right?”

“One knife and fork more or less doesn’t make much difference at my table,” said Wilton, sourly.

“And he does look pretty hungry,” said Claud with a grin.

“Glad to see you looking better, Kate,” continued the young man, holding out his hand to take that which was released from his step-father’s for the moment.

“Thank you, yes,” said Kate, quietly; “I am better.”

“Well, we must not keep the lunch waiting,” said Garstang. “Won’t you take in your aunt, Harry? And, by the way, I must ask you to get back to-night so as to be at the office in good time in the morning, for I’m afraid my business will keep me here for some days.”

“Oh, yes, I’ll be there,” replied the young man, with a meaning look at Garstang; and then offering his arm to Mrs Wilton, they filed off into the dining-room, to partake of a luncheon which would have been eaten almost in silence but for Garstang. He cleverly kept the ball rolling with his easy, fluent conversation, seeming as he did to be a master of the art of drawing everyone out in turn on his or her particular subject, and as if entirely for the benefit of the convalescent, to whom he made constant appeals for her judgment.

The result was that to her own surprise the girl grew more animated, and more than once found herself looking gratefully in the eyes of the courtly man of the world, who spoke as if quite at home on every topic he started, whether it was in a discussion with the hostess on cookery and preserves, with Wilton on farming and the treatment of cattle, or with the young men on hunting, shooting, fishing and the drama.

And it was all so pleasantly done that a load seemed to be lifted from the sufferer’s breast, and she found herself contrasting what her life was with what it might have been had Garstang been left her guardian, and half wondered why her father, who had been one of the most refined and scrupulous of men, should have chosen her Uncle James instead of the polished courtly relative who set her so completely at her ease and listened with such paternal deference to her words.

“Wish I could draw her out like he does,” thought Claud. – “These old fogies! they always seem to know what to say to make a wench grin.”

“He’ll watch me like a cat does a mouse,” said Harry to himself, “but I’ll have a turn at her somehow.”

James Wilton said little, and looked glum, principally from the pressure of money on the brain; but Mrs Wilton said a great deal, much more than she should have said, some of her speeches being particularly unfortunate, and those which followed only making matters worse. But Garstang always came to her help when Wilton’s brow was clouding over; and the lady sighed to herself when the meal was at an end.

“If Harry don’t come with us I shall stop in,” said Claud to himself; and then aloud, “Close upon two. You’d like a turn with us, Harry, fishing or shooting?”

“I? No. I’m tired with my walk, and I’ve got to do it again this evening.”

“No, you haven’t,” said Claud, sulkily; “you know you’ll be driven back.”

“Oh, yes,” said Garstang; “your uncle will not let you walk. Better come, Harry.”

“Thanks, no, sir; I’ll stop and talk to Aunt and Kate, here.”

“No, my dear; we must not tire Kate out, she’ll have to go and lie down this afternoon.”

“Oh, very well then, Aunt; I’ll stop and talk to you and Uncle.”

“Then you’ll have to come round the farms with me if you do,” growled Wilton.

“Thanks, no; I’ve walked enough through the mud for one day.”

“Let him have his own way, Claud, my lad,” cried Garstang. “We must be off. See you down to dinner, I hope, Kate, my child?”

She smiled at him.

“Yes, I hope to be well enough to come down,” she replied.

“That’s right; and we’ll see what we can get to boast about when we come back. Come along, boy.”

Claud was ready to hesitate, but he could not back out, and he followed Garstang, the young men’s eyes meeting in a defiant gaze.

But he turned as he reached the door.

“Didn’t say good-bye to you, Mamma. All right,” he cried, kissing her boisterously. “I won’t let them shoot me, and I’ll mind and not tumble out of the boat. I say,” he whispered, “don’t let him get Kate alone.”

“Oh, that’s your game, is it?” said Harry to himself; “treats it with contempt. All right, proud step-father; you haven’t all the brains in the world.”

He followed the gentlemen into the hall, and then stood at the door to see them off, hearing Garstang say familiarly: “Let’s show them what we can do, Harry, my lad. It’s just the day for the pike. Here, try one of these; they tell me they are rather choice.”

“Oh, I shall light my pipe,” said the young man sulkily.

“Wise man, as a rule; but try one of these first, and if you don’t like it you can throw it away.”

Claud lit the proffered cigar rather sulkily, and they went off; while Harry, after seeing Wilton go round to the stables, went back into the hall, and was about to enter the drawing-room, but a glance down at his muddy boots made him hesitate.

He could hear the voice of Mrs Wilton as she talked loudly to her niece, and twice over he raised his hand to the door knob, but each time lowered it; and going back into the dining-room, he rang the bell.

“Can I have my boots brushed?” he said to the footman.

“Yes, sir, I’ll bring you a pair of slippers.”

“Oh, no, I’ll come to the pantry and put my feet up on a chair.”

The man did not look pleased at this, but he led the way to his place, fetched the blacking and brushes, and as he manipulated them he underwent a kind of cross-examination about the household affairs, answering the first question rather shortly, the rest with a fair amount of eagerness. For the visitor’s hand had stolen into his pocket and come out again with half-a-crown, which he used to rasp the back of the old Windsor chair on which he rested his foot, and then, balancing it on one finger, he tapped it softly, making it give forth a pleasant jingling sound that was very grateful to the man’s ear, for he brushed away most diligently, blacked, polished, breathed on the leather, and brushed again.

“Keep as good hours as ever?” said Dasent, after several questions had been put.

“Oh, yes, sir. Prayers at ha’-past nine, and if there’s a light going anywhere with us after ten the governor’s sure to see it and make a row. He’s dreadful early, night and morning, too.”

“Yes, he is very early of a morning, I noticed. Well, it makes the days longer.”

“Well, sir, it do; but one has to be up pretty sharp to get his boots done and his hot water into his room by seven, for if it’s five minutes past he’s there before you, waiting, and looking as black as thunder. My predecessor got the sack, they say, for being quarter of an hour late two or three times, and it isn’t easy to be ready in weather like this.”

“What, dark in the mornings?”

“Oh, no, sir, I don’t mean that. It’s his boots. He gets them that clogged and soaked that I have to wash ’em overnight and put ’em to the kitchen fire, and if that goes out too soon it’s an awful job to get ’em to shine. They don’t have a hot pair of feet in ’em like these, sir. Your portmanteau coming on by the carrier?”

“Oh, no, I go back to-night. And that reminds me – have they got a good dog-cart in the village?”

“Dog-cart, sir?” said the man, with a laugh; “not here. The baker’s got a donkey-cart, and there’s plenty of farmers’ carts. That’s all there is near.”

“I thought so, but I’ve been here so little lately.”

“But you needn’t mind about that, sir. Master’s sure to order our trap to be round to take you to the station, and Tom Johnson’ll be glad enough to drive you.”

“Oh, yes; of course; but I like to be independent. I daresay I shall walk back.”

“I wouldn’t, sir, begging your pardon, for it’s an awkward road in the dark. Tell you what, though, sir, if you did, there’s the man at Barber’s Corner, at the little pub, two miles on the road. He has a very good pony and trap. He does a bit of chicken higgling round the country. You mention my name, sir, and he’d be glad enough to drive you for a florin or half-a-crown.”

“Ah, well, we shall see,” said Dasent, putting down his second leg. “Look a deal better for the touch-up. Get yourself a glass.”

“Thankye, sir. Much obliged, sir. But beg your pardon, sir, I’ll just give Tom Johnson a ’int and he’ll have the horse ready in the dog-cart time enough for you. He’ll suppose it’ll be wanted. It’ll be all right, sir. I wouldn’t go tramping it on a dark night, sir, and it’s only doing the horse good. They pretty well eat their heads off here sometimes.”

“No, no, certainly not,” said Dasent. “Thank you, though, er – Samuel, all the same.”

“Thank you, sir,” said the man, and the donor of half-a-crown went back through the swing baize-covered door, and crossed the hall.

“Needn’t ha’ been so proud; but p’raps he ain’t got another half-crown. Lor’, what a gent will do sooner than be under an obligation!”

Even that half-crown seemed to have been thrown away, for upon the giver entering the drawing-room it was to find it empty, and after a little hesitation he returned to the hall, where he was just in time to encounter the footman with a wooden tray, on his way to clear away the lunch things.

“Is your mistress going out?” he said. “There is no one in the drawing-room.”

“Gone upstairs to have her afternoon nap, sir,” said the man, in a low tone. “I suppose Miss Wilton’s gone up to her room, too?”

Dasent nodded, took his hat, and went out, lit a cigar, and began walking up and down, apparently admiring the front of the old, long, low, red-brick house, with its many windows and two wings covered with wistaria and roses. One window – that at the end of the west wing – took his attention greatly, and he looked up at it a good deal before slowly making his way round to the garden, where he displayed a great deal of interest in the vineries and the walls, where a couple of men were busy with their ladders, nailing.

Here he stood watching them for some minutes – the deft way in which they used shreds and nails to rearrange the thin bearing shoots of peach and plum.

After this he passed through an arched doorway in the wall, and smoked in front of the trained pear-trees, before going on to the yard where the tool shed stood, and the ladders used for gathering the apples in the orchard hung beneath the eaves of the long, low mushroom house.

Twice over he went back to the hall, but the drawing-room stood open, and the place was wonderfully quiet and still.

“Anyone would think he was master here,” said one of the men, as he saw Dasent pass by the third time. “Won’t be much he don’t know about the place when he’s done.”

“Shouldn’t wonder if he is,” said the other. “Him and his father’s lawyers, and the guv’nor don’t seem none too chirpy just now. They say he is in Queer Street.”

“Who’s they?” said his companion, speaking indistinctly, consequent upon having two nails and a shred between his lips.

“Why, they. I dunno, but it’s about that they’ve been a bit awkward with the guv’nor at Bramwich Bank.”

“That’s nothing. Life’s all ups and downs. It won’t hurt us. We shall get our wages, I dessay. They’re always paid.”

The afternoon wore on and at dusk Garstang and Claud made their appearance, followed by a labourer carrying a basket, which was too short to hold the head and tail of a twelve-pound pike, which lay on the top of half-a-dozen more.

“Better have come with us, Harry,” said Claud. “Had some pretty good sport. Found it dull?”

“I? No,” was the reply. “I say, what time do you dine to-night?”

“Old hour – six.”

“Going to stay dinner, Harry?” said Garstang.

“Oh, yes; I’m going to stay dinner,” said the young man, giving him a defiant look.

“Well, it will be pleasanter, but it is a very dark ride.”

“Yes, but I’m going to walk.”

“No, you aren’t,” said Claud, in a sulky tone of voice; “we’re going to have you driven over.”

“There is no need.”

“Oh, yes, there is. I want a ride to have a cigar after dinner, and I shall come and see you off. We don’t do things like that, even if we haven’t asked anyone to come.”

Kate made her appearance again at dinner, and once more Garstang was the life and soul of the party, which would otherwise have been full of constraint. But it was not done in a boisterous, ostentatious way. Everything was in good taste, and Kate more than once grew quite animated, till she saw that both the young men were eagerly listening to her, when she withdrew into herself.

Mrs Wilton got through the dinner without once making her lord frown, and she was congratulating herself upon her success, as she rose, after making a sign, when her final words evolved a tempestuous flash of his eyes.

“Don’t you think you had better stop till the morning, Harry Dasent?” she said.

But his quick reply allayed the storm at once.

“Oh, no, thank you, Aunt,” he said, with a side glance at Garstang. “I must be back to look after business in the morning.”

“But it’s so dark, my dear.”

“Bah! the dark won’t hurt him, Maria, and I’ve told them to bring the dog-cart round at eight.”

“Oh, that’s very good of you, sir,” said the young man; “but I had made up my mind to walk.”

“I told you I should ride over with you, didn’t I?” growled Claud.

“Yes, but – ”

“I know. There, hold your row. We needn’t start till half-past eight, so there’ll be plenty of time for coffee and a cigar.”

“Then I had better say good-night to you now, Mr Dasent,” said Kate, quietly, holding out her hand.

“Oh, I shall see you again,” he cried.

“No; I am about to ask Aunt to let me go up to my room now; it has been a tiring day.”

“Then good-night,” he said impressively, and he took and pressed her hand in a way which made her colour slightly, and Claud twitch one arm and double his list under the table.

“Good-night. Good-night, Claud.” She shook hands; then crossed to her uncle.

“Good-night, my dear,” he said, drawing her down to kiss her cheek. “Glad you are so much better.”

“Thank you, Uncle. – Good-night, Mr Garstang.” Her lip was quivering a little, but she smiled at him gratefully as he rose and spoke in a low affectionate way.

“Good-night, my dear child,” he said. “Let me play doctor with a bit of good advice. Make up your mind for a long night’s rest, and ask your uncle and aunt to excuse you at breakfast in the morning. You must hasten slowly to get back your strength. Good-night.”

“You’ll have to take great care of her, James,” he continued, as he returned to his seat. “Umph! Yes, I mean to,” said the host. “A very, very sweet girt,” said Garstang thoughtfully, and his face was perfectly calm as he met his stepson’s shifty glance.

Then coffee was brought in; Claud, at a hint from his lather, fetched a cigar box, and was drawn out by Garstang during the smoking to give a lull account of their sport that afternoon with the pike.

“Quite bent the gaff hook,” he was saying later on, when the grating of wheels was heard; and soon after the young men started, Mrs Wilton coming into the hall to see them off and advise them both to wrap up well about their chests.

That night John Garstang broke his host’s rules by keeping his candle burning late, while he sat thinking deeply by the bedroom fire; for he had a good deal upon his brain just then. “No,” he said at last, as he rose to wind up his watch; “she would not dare. But fore-warned is fore-armed, my man. You were never meant for a diplomat. Bah! Nor for anything else.”

But it was a long time that night before John Garstang slept.

Chapter Ten

"I say, guv'nor, when's old Garstang going?"

"Oh, very soon, now, boy," said James Wilton testily.

"But you said that a week ago, and he seems to be settling down as if the place belonged to him."

The father uttered a deep, long-drawn sigh.

"It's no use for you to snort, dad; that doesn't do any good. Why don't you tell him to be off?"

"No, no; impossible; and mind what you are about; be civil to him."

"Well, I am. Can't help it; he's so jolly smooth with a fellow, and has such good cigars – I say, guv'nor, rather different to your seventeen-and-six-penny boxes of weeds. I wouldn't mind, only he's in the way so. Puts a stop to, you know what. I never get a chance with her alone; here are you two shut up all the morning over the parchments, and she don't come down; and when she does he carries me off with him. Then at night you're all there."

"Never mind! he will soon go now; we have nearly done."

"I'm jolly glad of it. I've been thinking that if it's going on much longer I'd better do without the four greys."

"Eh?"

"Oh, you know, guv'nor; toddle off to Gretna Green, or wherever they do the business, and get it over."

"No, no, no, no. There must be no nonsense, my boy," said Wilton, uneasily. "Don't do anything rash."

"Oh, no, I won't do anything rash," said Claud, with an unpleasant grin; "only one must make one's hay when the sun shines, guv'nor."

"There's one thing about his visit," said Wilton hurriedly; "it has done her a great deal of good; she isn't like the same girl."

"No; she has come out jolly. Makes it a little more bearable."

"Eh, what, sir? – bearable?"

"Yes. Fellow wants the prospect of some sugar or jam afterwards, to take such a sickly dose as she promised to be."

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense. But – er – mind what you're about; nothing rash."

"I've got my head screwed on right, guv'nor. I can manage a girl. I say, though, she has quite taken to old Garstang; he has got such a way with him. He can be wonderfully jolly when he likes."

"Yes, wonderfully," said Wilton, with a groan.

"You've no idea how he can go when we're out. He's full of capital stories, and as larky when we're fishing or shooting as if he were only as old as I am. Ever seen him jump?"

"What, run and jump?"

"Yah! When he is mounted. He rides splendidly. Took Brown Charley over hedge after hedge yesterday like a bird. Understands a horse as well as I do. I like him, and we get on swimming together; but we don't want him here now."

"Well, well, it won't be long before he has gone," said Wilton, hurrying some papers away over which he and Garstang had been busy all the morning. "Where are you going this afternoon?"

"Ride. He wants to see the Cross Green farm."

"Eh?" said Wilton, looking up sharply, and with an anxious gleam in his eyes. "Did he say that?"

"Yes; and we're off directly after lunch. I say, though, what was that letter about?"

"What letter?" said Wilton, starting nervously.

"Oh, I say; don't jump as if you thought the bailiffs were coming in. I meant the one brought over from the station half-an-hour ago."

"I had no letter."

"Sam said one came. It must have been for old Garstang then."

"Am I intruding? Business?" said Garstang, suddenly appearing at the door.

"Eh? No; come in. We were only talking about ordinary things. Sit down. Lunch must be nearly due. Want to speak to me?"

All this in a nervous, hurried way.

"Never mind lunch," said Garstang quietly; "I want you to oblige me, my dear James, by ordering that brown horse round."

Wilton uttered a sigh of relief, and his face, which had been turning ghastly, slowly resumed its natural tint.

"But I understood from Claud here that you were both going out after lunch."

"I've had a particular letter sent down in a packet, and I must ride over and telegraph back at some length."

"We'll send Tom over for you," said Claud; and then he felt as if he would have given anything to withdraw the words.

"It's very good of you," said Garstang, smiling pleasantly, "but the business is important. Oblige me by ordering the horse at once."

"Oh, I'll run round. Have Brown Charley here in five minutes."

"Thank you, Claud; and perhaps you'll give me a glass of sherry and a biscuit, James?"

"Yes, yes, of course; but you'll be back to dinner?"

"Of course. We must finish what we are about."

"Yes, we must finish what we are about," said Wilton, with a dismal look; and he rang the bell, just as Claud passed the window on the way to the stables.

A quarter of an hour later Garstang was cantering down the avenue, just as the lunch-bell was ringing; and Claud winked at his father as they crossed to the drawing-room, where his mother and Kate were seated, and chuckled to himself as he thought of the long afternoon he meant to have.

"Oh, I say, guv'nor, it's my turn now," he cried, as Wilton crossed smiling to his niece, and offered her his arm.

"All in good time, my boy; all in good time. You bring in your mother. I don't see why I'm always to be left in the background. Come along, Kate, my dear; you must have me to-day."

"Why, where is John Garstang?" cried Mrs Wilton.

"Off on the horse, mother," said Claud, with a grin. "Gone over to the station to wire."

"Gone without saying good-bye?"

"Oh, he's coming back again, mother; but we can do without him for once in the way. I say, Kate, I want you to give me this afternoon for that lesson in riding."

"Riding, my dear?"

"Yes, mother, riding. I'm going to give Kitty some lessons on the little mare."

"No, no; not this afternoon," said the girl nervously, as they entered the dining-room.

"Yes, this afternoon. You've got to make the plunge, and the sooner you do it the better."

"Thank you; you're very good, but I was going to read to aunt."

"Oh, never mind me, my dear; you go with Claud. It's going to be a lovely afternoon."

"I should prefer not to begin yet," said Kate, decisively.

"Get out," cried Claud. "What a girl you are. You'll come."

"I'm sure Claud will take the greatest care of you, my darling."

"Yes, aunt, I am sure he would; but the lessons must wait for a while."

"All right, Kitty. Come for a drive, then. I'll take you a good round."

"I should prefer to stay at home this afternoon, Claud."

"Very well, then, we'll go on the big pond, and I'll teach you how to troll."

She turned to speak to her uncle, to conceal her annoyance, but Claud persevered.

"You will come, won't you?" he said.

“Don’t worry your cousin, Claud, my dear, if she would rather not,” said Mrs Wilton.

“Who’s worrying her?” said Claud, testily. “I say, Kate, say you’ll come.”

“I would rather not to-day,” she said, quietly.

“There now, you’re beginning to mope again, and I mean to stop it. I tell you what; we’ll have out the guns, and I’ll take you along by the fir plantation.”

“No, no, my boy,” said Wilton, interposing. “Kate isn’t a boy.”

“Who said she was?” said the young man, gruffly. “Can’t a woman pull a trigger if she likes?”

“I daresay she could, my dear,” said Mrs Wilton; “but I’m sure I shouldn’t like to. I’ve often heard your papa say how badly guns kicked.”

“So do donkeys, mother,” said Claud, sulkily; “but I shouldn’t put her on one that did. You’ll come, won’t you, dear?”

“No, Claud,” said Kate, very quietly and firmly. “I could not find any pleasure in trying to destroy the life of a beautiful bird.”

“Ha, ha! I say, we are nice. Don’t you eat any pheasant at dinner, then. There’s a brace for to-night. Old Garstang shot ’em – a cruel wretch.”

Kate looked at him indignantly, and then began conversing with her uncle, while her cousin relapsed into sulky silence, and began to eat as if he were preparing for a famine to come, his mother shaking her head at him reproachfully every time she caught his eye.

The lunch at an end, Kate took her uncle’s arm and went out into the veranda with him for a few minutes as the sun was shining, and as soon as they were out of hearing Claud turned fiercely upon his mother.

“What were you shaking your head at me like that for?” he cried. “You looked like some jolly old Chinese figure.”

“For shame, my dear. Don’t talk to me like that, or I shall be very, very cross with you. And look here, Claud, you mustn’t be rough with your cousin. Girls don’t like it.”

“Oh, don’t they? Deal you know about it.”

“And there’s another thing I want to say to you. If you want to win her you must not be so attentive to that Miss Leigh.”

“Who’s attentive to Miss Leigh?” said the young man, savagely.

“You are, my dear; you quite flirted with her when she was here with her brother last night, and I heard from one of the servants that you were seen talking to her in Lower Lane on Monday.”

“Then it was a lie,” he cried, sharply. “Tell ’em to mind their own business. Now, look here, mother, you want me to marry Katey, don’t you?”

“Of course, my dear.”

“Then you keep your tongue still and your eyes shut. The gov’nor ’ll be off directly, and you’ll be taking her into the drawing-room.”

“Yes, my dear.”

“Well, I’m not going out; I’m going to have it over with her this afternoon, so you slip off and leave me to my chance while there is one. I’m tired of waiting for old Garstang to be out of the way.”

“But I don’t think I ought to, my dear.”

“Then I do. Look here, she knows what’s coming, and that’s why she wouldn’t come out with me, you know. It’s all gammon, to lead me on. She means it. You know what girls are. I mean to strike while the iron’s hot.”

“But suppose – ”

“I shan’t suppose anything of the kind. She only pretends. We understand one another with our eyes. I know what girls are; and you give me my chance this afternoon, and she’s mine. She’s only holding off a bit, I tell you.”

“Perhaps you are right, my dear; but don’t hurt her feelings by being too premature.”

“Too gammon! You do what I say, and soon. I don’t want old Garstang back before we’ve got it all over. Keep dark; here they come.”

Kate entered with her uncle as soon as he had spoken, and Claud attacked her directly.

“Altered your mind?” he said.

“No, Claud; you must excuse me, please,” was the reply.

“All right. Off, father?”

“Yes, my boy. In about half an hour or so; I have two or three letters to write.”

“Two or three letters to write!” muttered the young man, as he went out into the veranda, to light his pipe, and keep on the watch for the coveted opportunity; “haven’t you any brains in your head?”

But James Wilton’s half-hour proved to be an hour, and when, after seeing him off, the son returned to the hall, he heard voices in the drawing-room, and gave a vicious snarl.

“Why the devil don’t she go?” he muttered.

There were steps the next moment, and he drew back into the dining-room to listen, the conversation telling him that his mother and cousin were going into the library to get some particular book.

There, to the young man’s great disgust, they stayed, and he waited for quite half an hour trying to control his temper, and devise some plan for trying to get his mother away.

At last she appeared, saying loudly as she looked back, “I shall be back directly, my dear,” and closed the door.

Claud appeared at once, and with a meaning smile at his mother, she crossed to the stairs, while as she ascended to her room the son went straight to the library and entered.

As he threw open the door he found himself face to face with his cousin, who, book in hand, was coming out of the room.

“Hallo!” he cried, with a peculiar laugh; “Where’s the old lady?”

“She has just gone to her room, Claud,” said Kate, quietly.

“Here, don’t be in such a hurry, little one,” he cried, pushing to the door. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” she said, quietly, though her heart was throbbing heavily; “I was going to take my book into the drawing-room.”

“Oh, bother the old books!” he cried, snatching hers away, and catching her by the wrist; “come and sit down; I want to talk to you.”

“You can talk to me in the drawing-room,” she said, trying hard to be firm.

“No, I can’t; it’s better here. I say, Kitty, when shall it be?”

“When shall what be?”

“Our wedding. You know.”

“Never,” she said, gravely, fixing her eyes upon his.

“What?” he cried. “What nonsense! You know how I love you. I do, ’pon my soul. I never saw anyone who took my fancy so before.”

“Do your mother and father know that you are talking to me in this mad way? – you, my own cousin?” she said, firmly.

“What do I care whether they do or no?” he said, with a laugh; “I’ve been weaned for a long time. I say, don’t hold me off; don’t play with a fellow like silly girls do. I love you ever so, and I’m always thinking about your beautiful eyes till I can’t sleep of a night. It’s quite right for you to hold me off for a bit, but there’s been enough of it, and I know you like me.”

“I have tried to like you as my cousin,” she said, gravely.

“That’ll do for a beginning,” he replied, laughingly; “but let’s get a little farther on now, I say. Kitty, you are beautiful, you know, and whenever I see you my heart goes pumping away tremendously. I can’t talk like some fellows do, but I can love a girl with the best of them, and I want you to pitch over all shilly-shally nonsense, and let’s go on now like engaged people.”

“You are talking at random and of what is unnatural and impossible. Please never to speak to me again like this, Claud; and now loose my wrist, and let me go.”

“Likely, when I’ve got you alone at last I say, don’t hold me off like this; it’s so silly.”

She made a brave effort to hide the alarm she felt; and with a sudden snatch she freed her wrist and darted across the room.

The flight of the hunted always gives courage to the hunter, and in this case he sprang after her, and the next minute had clasped her round the waist.

“Got you!” he said, laughingly; “no use to struggle; I’m twice as strong as you.”

“Claud! How dare you?” she cried, with her eyes flashing.

“Cause I love you, darling.”

“Let go. It is an insult. It is a shame to me. Do you know what you are doing?”

“Yes; getting tighter hold of you, so as to kiss those pretty lips and cheeks and eyes – There, and there, and there!”

“If my uncle knew that you insulted me like this – ”

“Call him; he isn’t above two miles off.”

“Aunt – aunt!” cried the girl, excitedly, and with the hot, indignant tears rising to her eyes.

“Gone to lie down, while I have a good long loving talk with you, darling. Ah, it’s of no use to struggle. Don’t be so foolish. There, you’ve fought long enough. All girls do the same, because it is their nature to fool it. There! now I’m master; give me a nice, pretty, long kiss, little wifie-to-be. I say, Kitty, you are a beauty. Let’s be married soon. You don’t know how happy I shall make you.”

Half mad now with indignation and fear, she wrested herself once more free, and, scorning to call for help, she ran toward the fire place. But before she could reach the bell he struck her hand on one side, caught her closely now in his arms, and covered her face once more with kisses.

This time a loud cry escaped her as she struggled hard, to be conscious the next moment of some one rushing into the room, feeling herself dragged away, and as the word “Hound!” fell fiercely upon her ear there was the sound of a heavy blow, a scuffling noise, and a loud crash of breaking wood and glass.

Chapter Eleven

“My poor darling child! – Lie still, you miserable hound, or I’ll half strangle you.”

The words – tender and gentle as if it were a woman’s voice, fierce and loud as from an enraged man – seemed to come out of a thick mist in which Kate felt as if she were sick unto death. Then by degrees she grew conscious that she was being held tightly to the breast of of some one who was breathing hard from exertion, and tenderly stroking and smoothing her dishevelled hair.

The next moment there was a wild cry, and she recognised her aunt’s voice, as, giddy and exhausted, she clung to him who held her.

“What is it? What is it? Oh, Claud, my darling! Help, help, help! He’s killed him – killed.”

“Here, what’s the matter? Who called?” came from a little distance. Then from close at hand Kate heard her uncle’s voice through the mist. “What’s all this, Maria – John Garstang – Claud? Damn it all, can no one speak? – Kate, what is it?”

“This,” cried Garstang, sternly. “I came back just now, and hearing shrieks rushed in here, just in time to save this poor, weak, suffering child from the brutal insulting attack of that young ruffian.”

“He has killed him. James – he has killed him,” shrieked Mrs Wilton. “On, my poor dear darling boy!”

“Back, all of you. Be off,” roared Wilton, as half a dozen servants came crowding to the door, which he slammed in their faces, and turned the key. “Now, please let’s have the truth,” he cried, hotly. “Here, Kate, my dear; come to me.”

She made no reply, but Garstang felt her cling more closely to him.

“Will some one speak?” cried Wilton, again.

“The Doctor – send for the Doctor; he’s dead, he’s dead,” wailed Mrs Wilton, who was down upon her knees now, holding her son’s head in her lap; while save for a slight quiver of the muscles, indicative of an effort to keep his eyes closed, Claud made no sign.

“He is not dead,” said Garstang, coldly; “a knockdown blow would not kill a ruffian of his calibre.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Mrs Wilton, turning upon him now in her maternal fury; “he owns to it, he struck him down – my poor, poor boy. James, why don’t you send for the police at once? The cruelty – the horror of it! Kate, Kate, my dear, come away from the wretch at once.”

“Then you own that you struck him down?” cried Wilton, whose face was now black with a passion which made him send prudence to the winds, as he rose in revolt against one who had long been his master.

“Yes,” said Garstang, quietly, and without a trace of anger, though his tone was full of contempt; “I told you why.”

“Yes, and by what right did you interfere? Some foolish romping connected with a boy and girl love, I suppose. How dared you interfere?”

“Boy and girl love!” cried Garstang, scornfully, as he laid one hand upon Kate’s head and pressed it to his shoulder, where she nestled and hid her face. “Shame upon you both; it was scandalous!”

“Shame upon us? What do you mean, sir? What do you mean? – Will you come away from him, Kate?”

“I mean this,” said Garstang, with his arm firmly round the poor girl’s waist, “that you and your wife have failed utterly in your duties towards this poor suffering child.”

“It isn’t true,” cried Mrs Wilton. “We’ve treated her as if she were our own daughter; and my poor boy told me how he loved her, and he had only just come to talk to her for a bit. Oh, Claud, my darling! my precious boy!”

“Did I not tell you that your darling – your precious boy – was insulting her grievously? Shame upon you, woman,” cried Garstang. “It needed no words of mine to explain what had taken place. Your own woman’s nature ought to have revolted against such an outrage to the weak invalid placed by her poor father’s will in your care.”

“Don’t you speak to my wife like that!” cried Wilton, angrily.

“I will speak to your wife like that, and to you as well. I forbore to speak before: I had no right; but do you think I have been blind to the scandal going on here? The will gives you full charge of the poor child and her fortune, and what do I find when I come down? A dastardly cruel plot to ensnare her – to force on a union with an unmannerly, brutally coarse young ruffian, that he may – that you may, for your own needs and ends, lawfully gain possession of the fortune, to scatter to the winds.”

“It’s a lie – it’s a lie!” roared Wilton.

“It is the truth, sir. Your wife’s words just now confirmed what I had noted over and over again, till my very gorge rose at being compelled to accept the hospitality of such people, while I writhed at my own impotence, my helplessness when I wished to interfere. You know – she knows – how I have kept silence. Not one word of warning have I uttered to her. She must have seen and felt what was being hatched, but neither she nor I could have realised that the cowardly young ruffian lying there would have dared to insult a weak gentle girl whose very aspect claimed a man’s respect and protection. A lie? It is the truth, James Wilton.”

“Oh, my poor, poor boy!” wailed Mrs Wilton; “and I did beg and pray of you not to be too rash.”

“Will you hold your tongue, woman?” roared Wilton.

“Yes, for heaven’s sake be silent, madam,” cried Garstang; “there was no need for you to indorse my words, and lower yourself more in your poor niece’s eyes.”

“Look here,” cried Wilton, who was going to and fro beyond the library table, writhing under the lash of his solicitor’s tongue; “it’s all a bit of nonsense; the foolish fellow snatched a kiss, I suppose.”

“Snatched a kiss!” cried Garstang, scornfully. “Look at her: quivering with horror and indignation.”

“I won’t look at her. I won’t be talked to like this in my own house.”

“Your own house!” said Garstang, contemptuously.

“Yes, sir; mine till the law forces me to give it up. I won’t have it. It’s my house, and I won’t stand here and be bullied by any man.”

“Oh, don’t, don’t, don’t make things worse, James,” wailed Mrs Wilton. “Send for the Doctor; his heart is beating still.”

“You hold your tongue, and don’t you make things worse,” roared her husband. “As for him – curse him! – it’s all his doing.”

“But he’s lying here insensible, and you won’t send for help.”

“No, I won’t. Do you think I want Leigh and his sister, and then the whole parish, to know what has been going on? The servants will talk enough.”

“But he’s dying, James.”

“You said he was dead just now. Chuck some cold water over the idiot, and bring him to. Damn him! I should like to horsewhip him!”

“You should have done it often, years ago,” said Garstang, bitterly. “It is too late now.”

“You mind your own business,” shouted Wilton, turning upon him; “I can’t talk like you do, but I can say what I mean, and it’s this: I’m master here yet, and I’ll stand no more of it. I don’t care for your deeds and documents. I won’t have you here to insult me and my wife, and what’s more, if you’ve done that boy a mischief we’ll see what the law can do. You shall suffer as well as I. Now then: off with you; pack and go, and I’ll show you that the law protects me as well as you. Kate, my girl, you’ve nothing to be frightened about. Come to me here.”

She clung the more tightly to her protector.

"Then come to your aunt," said Wilton, fiercely. "Get up, Maria," he shouted. "Can't you see I want you here?"

"Get up? Oh, James, James, I can't leave my boy."

"Get up, before you put me in a rage," he yelled. "Now, then, Kate, come here; and I tell you this, John Garstang. I give you a quarter of an hour, and if you're not gone then, the men shall throw you out."

"What!" cried Garstang, sternly, as he drew himself up. "Go and leave this poor girl here to your tender mercies?"

"Yes, sir; go and leave 'this poor girl,' as you call her, to my tender mercies."

"I can not; I will not," said Garstang, firmly.

"But I say you shall, Mr Lawyer. You know enough of such things to feel that you must. Curse you and your interference. Kate, my dear, I am your poor dead father's executor, and your guardian."

"Yes, it is true," said Garstang, bitterly. "Poor fellow, it was the one mistake of a good, true life. He had faith in his brother."

"More than he had in you," cried Wilton. "Do you hear what I say, Kate? Don't visit upon your aunt and me the stupid folly of that boy, whose sin is that he is very fond of you, and frightened you by a bit of loving play."

"Loving play!" cried Garstang, scornfully.

"Yes, my dear, loving play. I vouch for it, and so will his mother."

"Yes, yes, yes, Kate, dear. He does love you. He told me so, and if he did wrong, poor, poor boy, see how he has been punished."

"There, my dear, you hear," cried Wilton, trying hard to speak gently and winningly to her, but failing dismally. "Come to your aunt now."

"Yes, Kate, darling, do, do please, and help me to try and bring him round. You don't want to see him lie a corpse at his sorrowing mother's feet?"

"Come here, Kate," cried Wilton, fiercely now. "Don't you make me angry. I am your guardian, and you must obey me. Come away from that man."

She shuddered, and began to sob now violently.

"Ah, that's better. You're coming to your senses now, and seeing things in their proper light. Now, John Garstang, you heard what I said – go."

"Yes, my child," said Garstang, taking one of Kate's hands, and raising it tenderly to his lips, "your uncle is right. I have no place here, no right to protect you, and I must go, trusting that good may come out of evil, and that what has passed, besides opening your eyes to what is a thorough conspiracy, will give you firmness to protect yourself, and teach them that such a project as theirs is an infamy."

"Don't stand preaching there, man. Your time's nearly up. Go, before you are made. Come here to your aunt, Kate."

"No, my dear, do nothing of the sort," said Garstang, gently, as she slowly raised her head and gazed imploringly in his face. "You are but a girl, but you must play the woman now – the firm, strong woman who has to protect herself. Go up to your room and insist upon staying there until you have a guarantee that this insolent cub, who is lying here pretending to be insensible, shall cease his pretensions or be sent away. There, go, and heaven protect you; I can do no more."

Kate drew herself up erect and gazed at him mournfully for a few moments, and then said firmly:

"Yes, Mr Garstang, I will do as you say. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," he said, as he bent down and softly kissed her forehead. Then she walked firmly from the room.

"Brave girl!" said Garstang; "she will be a match for you and your plans now, James Wilton."

"Will you go, sir?" roared the other.

“Yes, I will go. Then it is to be war between us, is it?”

“What you like; I’m reckless now; but you can’t interfere with me there.”

“No, and I will not trample upon a worm when it is down. I shall take no petty revenge, and you dare not persecute that poor girl. Good-bye to you both, and may this be a lesson to you and your foolish wife. As for you, you cur, if I hear that you have insulted your cousin again – a girl that any one with the slightest pretension to being a man would have looked upon as a sister – law or no law, I’ll come down and thrash you within an inch of your life. I’m a strong man yet, as you know.”

He turned and walked proudly out of the room; and as soon as his step had ceased to ring on the oaken floor of the hall Wilton turned savagely upon his son, where he lay upon the thick Turkey carpet, and roared:

“Get up!”

Mrs Wilton shrieked and caught at her husband’s leg, but in vain, for he delivered a tremendous kick at the prostrate youth, which brought him to his senses with a yell.

“What are you doing?” he roared.

“A hundred and fifty thousand pounds!” cried Wilton. “Curse you, I should like to give you a hundred and fifty thousand of those.”

Within half an hour the dog-cart bearing John Garstang and his portmanteau was grating over the gravel of the drive, and as he passed the further wing he looked up at an open window where Kate was standing pale and still.

He raised his hat to her as he passed, but she did not stir, only said farewell to him with her eyes.

But as the vehicle disappeared among the trees of the avenue she shrank away, to stand thinking of her position, of Garstang’s words, and how it seemed now that her girlish life had come to an end that day. For she felt that she was alone, and that henceforth she must knit herself together to fight the battle of her life, strong in her womanly defence, for her future depended entirely upon herself.

And through the rest of that unhappy afternoon and evening, as she sat there, resisting all requests to come down, and taking nothing but some slight refreshment brought up by her maid, she was trying to solve the problem constantly before her:

What should she do now?

Chapter Twelve

Kate was not the only one at the Manor House who declined to come down to dinner.

The bell had rung, and after Mrs Wilton had been up twice to her niece's room, and reported the ill success of her visits to her lord, Wilton growled out:

"Well, I want my dinner. Let her stay and starve herself into her senses. But here," he cried, with a fresh burst of temper, "why the devil isn't that boy here? I'm not going to be kept waiting for him. Do you hear? Where is he?"

"He was so ill, dear, he said he was obliged to go upstairs and lie down."

"Bah! Rubbish! He wasn't hurt."

"Oh, my dear, you don't know," sobbed Mrs Wilton.

"Yah! You cry if you dare. Wipe your eyes. Think I haven't had worry enough to-day without you trying to lay the dust? Ring and tell Samuel to fetch him down."

"Oh, pray don't do that, dear; the servants will talk enough as it is."

"They'd better. I'll discharge the lot. I've been too easy with everybody up to now, and I'll begin to turn over a new leaf. Stand aside, woman, and let me get to that bell."

"No, no, don't, pray don't ring. Let me go up and beg of him to come down."

"What! Beg? Go up and tell him that if he don't come down to dinner in a brace of shakes I'll come and fetch him with a horsewhip."

"James, my dear, pray, pray don't be so violent."

"But I will be violent. I am in no humour to be dictated to now. I'll let some of you see that I'm master."

"But poor dear Claud is so big now."

"I don't care how big he is – a great stupid oaf! Go and tell him what I say. And look here, woman."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs Wilton, plaintively.

"I mean it. If he don't come at once, big as he is, I'll take up the horsewhip."

Mrs Wilton stifled a sob, and went up to her son's room and entered, to find him lying on his bed with his boots resting on the bottom rail, a strong odour of tobacco pervading the room, and a patch or two of cigar ashes soiling the counterpane.

"Claud, my dearest, you shouldn't smoke up here," she said, tenderly, as she laid her hand upon her son's forehead. "How are you now, darling?"

"Damned bad."

"Oh, not quite so bad as that, dearest. Dinner is quite ready."

" – The dinner!"

"Claud, darling, don't use such dreadful language. But please get up now, and let me brush your hair. Your father is so angry and violent because you are keeping him waiting. Pray come down at once."

"Shan't!"

"Claud, dearest, you shouldn't say that. Please come down."

"Shan't, I tell you. Be off, and don't bother me."

"I am so sorry, my dear, but I must. He sent me up, dear."

"I – shan't – come – down. There!"

"But Claud, my dear, he is so angry. I dare not go without you. What am I to say?"

"Tell him I say he's an old beast."

"Oh, Claud, I can't go and tell him that. You shouldn't – you shouldn't, indeed."

"I'm too bad to eat."

“Yes – yes; I know, darling, but do – do try and come down and have a glass of wine. It will do you good, and keep poor papa from being so violent.”

“I don’t want any wine. And I shan’t come. There!”

“Oh, dear me! Oh, dear me!” sighed Mrs Wilton; “what am I to do?”

“Go and tell him I won’t come. Bad enough to be hit by that beastly old prize fighter, without him kicking me as he did. I’m not a door mat.”

“No, no, my dear; of course not.”

“An old brute! I believe he has injured my liver.”

“Claud, my darling, don’t, pray don’t say that.”

“Why not? The doctor ought to be fetched; I’m in horrid pain.”

“Yes, yes, my dear; and it did seem very hard.”

“Hard? I should think it was. I’m sure there’s a rib broken, if not two.”

“Oh, my own darling boy!” cried Mrs Wilton, embracing him.

“Don’t, mother; you hurt. Be off, and leave me alone. Tell him I shan’t come.”

“No, no, my dear; pray make an effort and come down.”

“Shan’t, I tell you. Now go!”

“But – but – Claud, dear, he threatened to come up with a horse whip and fetch you.”

“What!” cried Claud, springing up on the bed without wincing, and staring at his mother; “did he say that?”

“Yes, my love,” faltered the mother.

“Then you go down and tell him to come, and I’ll knock his old head off.”

“Oh, Claud, my dear boy, you shouldn’t. I can not sit here and listen to such parricidal talk.”

“Stand up then, and now be off.”

“But, my darling, you will come?”

“No, I won’t.”

“For my sake?”

“I won’t, for my own. I’m not going to stand it. He shan’t bully and knock me about I’m not a boy now. I’ll show him.”

“But, Claud, darling, for the sake of peace and quietness; I don’t want the servants to know.”

But dear Claud – his mother’s own darling – was as obstinate now as his father, whom he condemned loudly, then condemned peace and quietness, then the servants, and swore that he would serve Kate out for causing the trouble.

“I’ll bring her down on her knees – I’ll tame her, and make her beg for a kiss next time.”

“Yes, yes, my dear, you shall, but not now. You must be humble and patient.”

“Are you coming down, Maria?” ascended in a savage roar.

“Yes, yes, my dear, directly,” cried the trembling woman. “There, you hear, darling. He is in a terrible fury. Come down with me.”

“I won’t, I tell you,” cried the young man, making a snatch at the pillow, to raise it threateningly in his hands; “go, and tell him what I said.”

“Maria! Am I to come up?” ascended in a roar.

“Yes – no – no, my dear,” cried Mrs Wilton. “I’m – I’m coming down.”

She hurried out of the room, dabbed her eyes hastily, and descended to where the Squire was tramping up and down the hall, with Samuel, the cook, housemaid, and kitchen maid in a knot behind the swing baize door, which cut off the servants’ offices, listening to every word of the social comedy.

“Well,” roared Wilton, “is he coming?”

“N-n-not just now, my d-dear. He feels so ill and shaken that he begs you will excuse him.”

“Humbug, woman! My boy couldn’t have made up such a message. He said he wouldn’t, eh? Now then; no prevarication. That’s what he said.”

“Y-yes, my dear,” faltered the mother. “Oh, James dearest, pray – pray don’t.”

She clung to him, but he shook her off, strode to the umbrella stand, and snatched a hunting whip from where it hung with twisted thong, and stamped up the stairs, with his trembling wife following, sobbing and imploring him not to be so violent; but all in vain, for he turned off at the top of the old oaken staircase and stamped away to the door of his son's bedroom – that at the end of the wing which matched to Kate's.

Here Mrs Wilton made a last appeal in a hurried whisper.

"He is so bad – says his ribs are broken from the kick."

"Bah!" roared the Squire; "he has no ribs in his hind legs – Here, you, Claud; come down to dinner directly or – Here, unlock this door."

He rattled the handle, and then thumped and banged in vain, while Mrs Wilton, who had been ready to shriek with horror, began to breathe more freely.

"I thought you said he was lying down, too bad to get up?"

"Yes, yes, dear, he is," faltered the poor woman.

"Seems like it. Able to lock himself in. Here, you sir; come down."

But there was no reply; not a sound in answer to his rattling and banging; and at last, in the culmination of his rage, the Squire drew back to the opposite wall to gain force so as to dash his foot through the panel if he could, but just then Eliza opened Kate's door at the far end of the long corridor, and peered out.

That ended the disturbance.

"Come on down to dinner, Maria," said the Squire.

"Yes, my dear," she faltered, and they descended to dine alone, Mrs Wilton on water, her husband principally on wine, and hardly a word was spoken, the head of the house being very quiet and thoughtful in the calm which followed the storm.

Just as the untasted pheasants were being taken away, after the second course, Wilton suddenly said to the footman:

"Tell Miss Kate's maid to come here."

Mrs Wilton looked at her husband wonderingly, but he sat crumbling his bread and sipping his claret till the quiet, grave, elderly servant appeared.

"How is your mistress?" he said.

"Very unwell, sir."

"Think the doctor need be sent for?"

"Well, no, sir, I hardly think that. She has been very much agitated."

"Yes, of course; poor girl," said Wilton, quietly.

"But I think she will be better after a good night's rest, sir."

"So do I, Eliza. You will see, of course, that she has everything she wants."

"Oh, yes, sir. I did take her up some dinner, but I could not prevail upon her to touch it."

"Humph! I suppose not. That will do, thank you. – No, no, Maria, there is no occasion to say any more."

Mrs Wilton's mouth was open to speak, but she shut it again quickly, fearing to raise another storm, and the maid left the room. But the mother would speak out as soon as they were alone.

"I should like to order a tray with one of the pheasants to be sent up to Claud, dear."

"I daresay you would," he replied. "Well, I shouldn't."

"May I send for Doctor Leigh?"

"What for? You heard what the woman said?"

"I meant for Claud, dear."

"Oh, I'll see to him in the morning. I shall have a pill ready for him when I'm cooled down. It won't be so strong then."

"But, James, dear – "

“All right, old lady, I’m getting calm now; but listen to me. I mean this: you are not to go to his room to-night.”

“James!”

“Nor yet to Kate’s, till I go with you.”

“My dear James!”

“That’s me,” he said, with a faint smile, “and you’re a very good, affectionate, well meaning old woman; but if ever there was one who was always getting her husband into scrapes, it is you.”

“Really, dear!” she cried, appealingly.

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