

LADY MARGARET.

BY FRANCES HENSHAW BADEN.

Judge Vernon had been childless for years, when little Margaret came to him. It was a great disappointment to both parents that the little stranger was not a boy, but loved her none the less. Indeed they made an idol of their beautiful child. The title of "Lady Margaret" had been given her by the nurse ere the little one was fully a month old.

Her constant companion was the gardener's little son Joseph. He was such a spirited, handsome, bewitching boy, that no wonder the cry oft arose to Judge Vernon's lips:

"Why could not such a son have been given me?"

Joseph Grey was five years old when Lady Margaret's tiny fingers clasped tightly his. Her very first smile was given to him. Joseph it was who guided her footsteps in the first attempts to walk, encouraged and coaxed her lisping words, and almost went wild with delight when the pretty ruby lips spoke plainly, "Josie."

When the little lady was seven years old a governess was obtained for her. Every morning, seated beside her in the school-room, Josie was found. It was my little lady's will to have him there, and both parents and teacher were well pleased to have it so. So the years rolled on until Lady Margaret reached her twelfth year.

Mrs. Vernon's health, never robust, had been steadily declining since her daughter's birth. Her physician insisted that she should try the influence of another and milder clime.

Judge Vernon, resigning his law duties, and leaving the homestead in charge of Josie's father, carried his wife and daughter to the south of France. Every fortnight brought letters from Judge Vernon, and for the first two years they always gladdened Josie's heart with messages from the little lady to her playmate. The third year the poor boy was often disappointed. Lady Margaret seldom then sent even a word of remembrance. At length that stopped. All mention of her name with regard to Joseph ceased entirely.

Mrs. Vernon's health was not improved as they had hoped, by the change. Indeed she grew so much weaker they dared not attempt the homeward journey. And so they lingered abroad for five years. Then Margaret and her father came. Three months previous they had placed the loved form in the graveyard of Toulouse. Tenderly Mrs. Grey soothed the motherless girl. She, too, poor woman, had had her sorrow. Josie's father had passed from earth during their absence.

Gently raising the bowed head, she said: "Here is your old playmate waiting to welcome you home, Lady Margaret."

Fondly and proudly the mother's eyes rested on her son as he came forward, his handsome face beaming with the joy her coming had brought him.

"Thank God for your safe return home, my little lady." Ah, the loved title burst forth, although he had thought to say "Miss Vernon."

"For she is a young lady now, and you must never forget that, my boy. She must be called Miss Vernon," Joseph's mother had said, only a few hours before.

And when the beautiful, stately maiden raised her eyes there was a startled expression in them that the poor youth scarce understood.

"Thank you, I am glad to be home again," she said, in answer to his glad greeting, placing her hand in his.

"As if we had parted only a few days or hours before," Joseph said, in an agony of disappointment.

"Such a greeting, after all these years of weary waiting. Oh, my little lady, I would have given years of life to have heard those sweet lips say 'Josie.' But my little lady is Miss Vernon now. And I, let me not forget—I am only the gardener's son."

At the same hour, in her own room, Margaret was thinking of that meeting, and said:

"Yes, I might have been more kind. He, too, has had his sorrow. And not even when the news of his father's death reached us, did I send one word of sympathy to him. Ah, that we were still children together! What is home without mother and Josie! The one gone; the other to be put aside. Yes, yes, better commence the bitter task at once."

The day after Judge Vernon's return, Joseph Grey requested his presence in the library, where he placed for his inspection a book neatly and accurately kept, of the expenditures and receipts during the judge's absence.

"Why, my boy, this is excellently well done, but you have taken a great deal of unnecessary trouble. I explained to your good father, that I wanted him to make the place clear expenses during my absence. But I suppose his illness, and—Well, my boy, we have both had our sorrow. I scarcely feel like attending to business. You can tell me how we stand; what indebtedness?"

"On the contrary, sir," Joseph interposed, "you'll see here that I have placed to your account five thousand dollars," handing a bank book.

"Impossible! Why, my boy—" Here

the judge stopped, took off his glasses, wiped them, and looking intently at Joseph, he said:

"You are no longer a boy. How old are you, Joseph?"

"My own man, sir," Joseph answered, smilingly, adding, "twenty-one, six months ago."

Again arose the cry in Judge Vernon's heart, "Oh, why could not such a son have been given me?"

"Joseph, that sum I shall immediately transfer to your credit. It is justly yours," Judge Vernon said, handing back the books.

"No, sir, I cannot permit that." How handsome he looked; and though his manner was deeply respectful, there was a flush that mantled the noble brow, a light in his eye that Judge Vernon understood, and thought, "How proud he is! Oh, that there were more like him—George Mason, for instance. Then I could give my Margaret to him, feeling confident of her happiness."

"Well, Joseph, you have plans for the future; of course you cannot stay here. Regret as I shall to lose you, I would send you forth, I feel sure, to a path of honor and distinction. Can I help you?" Judge Vernon said, with much feeling.

Joseph caught his hand, and pressing it warmly, answered:

"Thank you, dear sir, both for your offer and good—say, flattering opinion. You can help me; I heard you say you should resume your legal duties. I should like to read law with you."

"With pleasure, my boy. Then we shall not be separated yet a while. I see plainly how much knowledge you have gained during my absence. You have studied hard—you must have."

"I have studied much, sir. But 'twas not hard, I love it so."

The conversation was interrupted by a gentle knock on the door, and immediately Margaret came in, saying:

"Please, papa, go see Mr. Mason. He is in the drawing-room. I do not feel like receiving calls to-day. Excuse me, please."

"Well, well, to-day I will. But you must be polite to him, my love. I cannot forget how attentive he was to us across the water. His father was my dearest friend."

Joseph's heart gave a bound of joy. She would surely linger a few moments—speak, perchance, of the old times, and call him again Josie.

He raised his eyes, full of glad expectation. They met hers, and with a pleasant smile and "Good-morning," she passed from the room.

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"Indeed, my little lady, I must learn to call you differently. I can scarcely believe my own eyes, you have grown so tall and womanly. But five years bring great changes. Look at Josie!" There was pride in the mother's voice and eyes.

"Yes—you may well be proud of Josie, nurse. I suppose he is a great favorite with the village girls?" Margaret said.

If the mother had read Margaret's eyes aright, she would have seen more interest there than she would imagine, from the cold, steady voice.

"Ah, yes, indeed. And there is more than one, whose eyes would brighten at his coming. But he only cares for his books, my lady. Every spare hour he is in the library."

The anxious look gave way, and Margaret's beautiful eyes were full of peace, as she turned to meet Joseph.

"The first flowers and fruit of the season, Miss Vernon," he said, holding towards her a bouquet of roses and violets, and placing on the table a basket of strawberries.

How smiling and happy he looked! She knew he must have heard her last words to his mother. Her face was hid among the flowers, to hide the crimson-tide.

"How beautiful! Thank you," she said. Placing the flowers in a vase, she turned away.

"She might have put them in her own room," sighed Joseph. "But I will not grieve for this. She is not altogether indifferent to me. She called me Josie. She cannot have forgotten—no, she remembers—that she is Miss Vernon, and the difference, nay, the distance between us."

Indeed, after that day the distance seemed to widen. Mrs. Grey, who, during the absence of the family, had occupied apartments in Vernon Mansion, a few days after their return went back to the gardener's cottage.

A few weeks after this, Joseph Grey was in the library at Judge Vernon's request, copying a legal document, when the door opened, and Margaret and her father entered.

"Can you give your father a few moments, my daughter? Since your young friends have been here, I hardly get a look at you, or have you a moment all to myself."

"Oh, you dearest of fathers, do not be jealous! Do you not know that you will have me all alone to yourself as long as you live!" Margaret said, clasping her arms about his neck and pressing her lips to his.

"No, no, love! No, little lady. I want to talk to you about just this very thing. I have a letter from George Mason. You must read it, and give me his answer."

More rapidly went Joseph's pen. Louder the scratching on the paper. He could not get out without passing them. He hoped they would hear him. He was revolving in his mind what to do, when Margaret said:

"I shall never marry, father."

"Nay, nay, love. You distress me. I should not be content to seek your mother leaving you alone here. You do not dislike Mason, my dear?"

"Oh, no. But I do not like him well enough to marry him, papa."

"Let me give him hope! for my sake, dear! There is no one that I could give you to that I like so well. Ah, if it were not—"

An exclamation of pain, almost simultaneously with which Margaret, in a low, warning voice, said: "Father!" and Joseph Grey came forward.

"What is it, Joseph? You are ill surely."

"No, dear sir. A sudden and sharp pain which I hope will not be continual," Joseph answered.

"Ah, I know you have been working too hard. There, go home and rest, my boy."

As Joseph passed Lady Margaret he raised his eyes to hers. She could not have mistaken the wild, appealing look; yet turning away she said:

"I will try to make you happy, father."

That evening Joseph Grey announced to Judge Vernon his intention of leaving home the next day.

"So sudden this is, my boy," surprised and pained, the judge said.

"No, sir. I've been intending for several weeks to tell you; but I dreaded so much this separation I have delayed speaking of it until the latest moment," Joseph answered, with much feeling.

There was a long conversation, and the judge concluded by saying:

"I will say good-by to-night. I may not be up in the morning. Write to me, dear boy. And call on me if I can help you. Feel as if you were applying to your father, Joseph; and now God bless you!"

Early the next morning a wild cry arose in the Vernon mansion. Judge Vernon's spirit had fled.

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The hour for Joseph's departure came. He had watched an opportunity when finding Margaret alone to say good-by.

Paler than the pale girl before him, he approached her.

"Miss Vernon, I am going. I have come to say good-by."

She did not speak. She had been prepared for it. She arose and held out her hand.

"Good-by, Miss Vernon."

He stood before her, holding her hand tightly between his own. She raised her eyes, to meet a world of love in his. Quickly her own drooped, and seeking to release her hand, she said:

"Good-by."

"And this is all. You will send me forth without a word, a kind wish! Oh, my little lady, say 'I'll not forget you, Josie!' Oh, turn not away, Lady Margaret! Speak to me! For never loved man as I love you! my lady! my queen!" Joseph cried, still tightly holding her hand.

Ah, she raised not her eyes as she spoke the cruel words.

"You forget! The women of our race have never blushed for the object of their love. They never unite their fate except with those of whom not only they, but their country were proud. Go! May you be prosperous and happy. Farewell!"

She disengaged her hand, and turned away.

The door closed after him. A moment more and she hid her face amid the cushions of the sofa, and with a moan of agony, cried:

"Alone! Alone! All gone now!"

"My little lady!"

She sprang up to see Joseph bending over her.

"Why are you here?" she asked, reproachfully.

"Why? To pledge my heart, my life to you! To tell you, my proud lady, that I will win you! Heaven will reward such love as mine. I ask no word of hope now. But I shall work and pray, and you may know that I am waiting for you to bid me 'come.'"

"Go! Oh, go!" she cried, beseechingly.

He turned, hesitated, and sprang forward to catch her to his heart—to hold her there an instant only, press his lips to her brow, and cry:

"God bless and keep you, my love, my life!" and passed from her sight.

If Joseph confided his love to his mother, she gave no intimation whatever of it to Margaret.

Immediately after her son's departure, Mrs. Grey became again an inmate of Margaret's home. Then as a guest and esteemed friend, Margaret never again addressed her by the old title of "nurse." Very soon the servants caught their mistress's mood, and ere long, it seemed that the household, even Mrs. Grey herself, forgot that she had ever been other than the dear friend and guest of the Vernon family.

Margaret seldom went into society. Still her beauty attracted many admirers. Suitors she had, one after another, meeting the same fate. Perhaps it was harder for her to put aside her father's choice, or perhaps, he was more determined than

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the others. At any rate, George Mason continued his visits. Joseph, in his far Western home, knew of this, but his faith never grew less.

From letters to his mother, Margaret only knew of his good health and good spirits. Thus the months grew into years. Then from the political journals she learned of Joseph's rapidly growing popularity. Of his advance to one and another position of greater importance.

Five years past—oh, such long weary years to the waiting hearts at home. In answer to the oft-repeated cry, "My boy, come to me!" he would write:

"Not yet can I come! Would to Heaven I might!"

Margaret alone understood this.

"Oh, why will he not come? I am almost dying to see my boy!" his mother said. Margaret's heart echoed this cry, yet she would not send that one little word.

George Mason, at length, despairing of winning Margaret, had transferred his affections to her dearest friend, a beautiful little blonde, whose loving nature soon comforted him for any disappointment he might have suffered.

Eagerly Margaret watched the papers to know of Joseph's upward career. She knew that he was to represent his adopted State at the national capital. There she would go with his mother, and amid the throng meet him. This she had determined. The prospect of seeing her boy was joy too great for the anxious mother. As the time drew near, her excitement grew intense; and the day which was to have carried them to Washington brought to Joseph the long-looked-for word from Lady Margaret:

"Come," she wrote, "your mother is ill. We cannot come to you."

Ah, did ever so few words bring so much of joy and sorrow combined!

Weary with long watching in the sick-room, Margaret stole out to wait for Joseph's coming.

"If in his eyes I find the same old look, the love of years shall find its own. Oh, my love shall have a joyful greeting," she said.

Watching, waiting, eager, she pressed her hand over her heart to still its wild beating.

"Oh, why does he not come? What can detain him?"

Wearily she sank back, her heart filled with fears.

Presently a murmur of hushed voices, slow, cautious steps; and the dreadful words—"dying or dead," reached her ear. Then she heard of a frightful collision, and when the door opened, she sprang up with a cry of agony:

"Oh, my love! my love! you must not die!"

"Die? Why, you have been dreaming, my darling! No, dear love, I have just now begun to live," Joseph said, holding her closer to his heart, as he read in her eyes all the love for which he had waited and worked.

When Joseph had spent an hour, cheering and making well his mother, he coaxed Margaret away, to whisper in her ear:

"My lady, do you know, you have not said to me even one little word of love, save those from a terrible dream! Oh, my love is a proud little lady still," he said, playfully raising her face, more beautiful than ever, now flushed with joy. He was more than satisfied, when she placed her hand in his, and said:

"Yes, I am prouder now than ever in life before; and my greatest pride shall always be to be worthy of your love, Josie."

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