

* A TANGLED WEB. *

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XII.

On the eleventh the guests arrived at the Grange, and Lady Marlow found herself as she delighted to be found, surrounded by a bright and pleasant party.

They were most of them young, but one or two middle-aged men, old friends of the viscount, had not been forgotten.

It was a delightful house to visit, and Lady Marlow was a model hostess, for, having a splendid digestion, she was in consequence always cheerful and good-tempered, and she was also far too much clever, too, to be guilty of that greatest of blunders—a restless attempt to 'amuse' her and Audrey's guests.

'If a dozen well-bred persons can't amuse themselves in a country house, nobody else can amuse them,' she had said to Audrey, and Audrey had quite agreed with her.

The dressing-bell rang at half past eight, but if any one did not feel disposed to turn out he could take another half hour or hour without fear of getting a lukewarm breakfast, for that meal was served from half past nine to eleven, and during that time one was always sure of crisp toast, fresh coffee, and hot dishes. But, as the breakfast was a very pleasant meal at the Grange most of the guests came down to it soon after the bell rang, and were rewarded by having their coffee poured out for them by Audrey or Lady Marlow, who, seated at the head of the table in their bright morning frocks, were, as one of the men said, 'as good as a tonic to set one up for the day.'

Among the men were a couple of young Guardsmen who could be always relied on to turn themselves with their guns during the day, and who were ready to dance all night if required; there was a young barrister who had, however, deserted the bar for music, and whose light tenor was a continual source of delight to his friends and himself. Percy Hale could not only sing, but to adopt the phrase of Captain Barker, 'could shake the music-box'—meaning the piano—'with any one.' He was always a very decent amateur actor, and there were already rumors in the air of coming theatricals.

Lord Chesterton must not be forgotten. He was one of the middle-aged men, and, as Lady Marlow declared, and she was an authority, the most polished man of his day. He was still a remarkably handsome man, with a smile and a bow and a command of courtly phrases and polished repartee which made most of the young men seem rather rough and curt. No man in Europe could enter a room or walk across it with the grace and ease which seemed so natural to Lord Chesterton, and his manner with the gentler sex was so perfect a mixture of deference, worship, protection, and candor that most of the young girls at the Grange declared that if he were to propose to one of them the girl would find it impossible to refuse him.

But Lord Chesterton, though a widower, prudently stuck to a general worship of the other sex, and delicately maintained his freedom while professing himself the slave of every woman he met.

He had brought his daughter with him—Lady Mary—a homely-looking girl, who though the exact opposite of her father was a general favorite.

There were one or two other girls, and among them the professional beauty—Lillian Lawson.

On the principle that two wits are one too many, Lady Marlow had confined her invitation to one professional beauty, and Lillian Lawson, having no rival present, was therefore always amiable.

To see Lord Chesterton and the Beauty together was, as Percy Hale said, a study. The courtly old gentleman adored beauty, and at once established himself as the belle's knight and servitor, continuing, however to avoid the least appearance of neglect of the other ladies, especially of Audrey, who was one of the old man's favorites. Indeed, Audrey was a favorite of them all. Lillian Lawson might excel her in loveliness—though with many that was stoutly denied—but there was a charm about Audrey which was missed even in the Beauty.

Audrey Hope, said Percy Hale who was something of a poet as well as a musician, 'is like a beautiful bird whose exquisite plumage fills one with admiration one moment, while the music of her voice stirs one's soul to ardor the next.'

'Yes,' said Lord Chesterton, who overheard him, 'but, with all deference—and here he made a bow—your simile, excellent as it is, is not complete. It does not go far enough. For the most exquisite songster of the grove lacks a charm which Miss Audrey possesses to a marvelous degree. Birds, my dear Percy, can not smile, and Miss Hope can. I would rather watch her smile than see the loveliest bird-of-paradise, and hear her laugh than listen to the best nightingale that ever sung.'

This little interchange of sentiment took place in the smoking-room, and the men nodded approval and concurrence, and some said, 'Bravo, Chesterton!' but Lord Lorrimore neither nodded nor spoke.

To compare Audrey with the brightest bird that ever flew seemed sacrilege to

him. There was only one being with wings that he would have likened her to, and that was an angel. He had accepted Lady Marlow's invitation with mingled pleasure and pain. It would be an unspeakable delight to him to be in the same house with Audrey for a fortnight, and yet he knew he should suffer from seeing her surrounded by other men, and the conviction that he was no more to her than any of the rest.

There was a drop or two of Spanish blood in Lord Lorrimore's veins, and sometimes that blood grew hot as he saw her smile upon one of the other men—hot with a jealousy which he had to smother and trample out as best he could.

His infatuation for Audrey was well-known to his friends, and provided them with a continual and interesting topic of conversation. He was young, handsome, and rich, and it was no secret that there was one or two women who would have readily stooped to pick up the handkerchief if he had cared to throw it to them; but his devotion to Audrey was constant and unwavering. For him it was this one woman in the world, and no other. Several men had burned their wings at the bright flame and had gone away singed and sorrowful; but Lord Lorrimore, though very badly burned, still hovered round the flame, and was willing to risk utter cremation rather than fly away.

Lillian Lawson had tried her soft, slow smile and drooping lashes upon him, and posed for him in all the best attitudes with which we are all so familiar in the photographs, but in vain.

It was Audrey Hope to whom the grave silent young man with the dark, handsome and almost Spanish face had given his heart, and he had given it so wholly and completely that there was not the smallest piece left for bestowal upon any other woman. Audrey's manner to him was a charming mixture of gentleness and reserve, tempered sometimes with that coquettish tyranny of which a young and beautiful girl is so complete a mistress. Lord Lorrimore was her slave, the captive of her bow and spear, and she knew it. She had offered him his freedom, but he had declined to accept it, and—well, what is the use of having a slave who persists in remaining your slave if you do not use him?

He was by her side whenever there was an opportunity, and she would permit him to remain. If she needed any assistance in pouring out the coffee at breakfast, it was he who happened to be sitting next her, and who was quite ready to risk scalding himself in helping her with the hot water. When the party rode out, a merry, laughing, careless cavalcade bent upon enjoyment—a cavalcade at which the country folk stared and smiled approval—it was Lord Lorrimore whose strong hands put her in the saddle; and never once did he permit her to start until he had quickly but carefully scanned with his sharp eyes the bit, the bridle, and the girth. If on the road she chanced to admire a flower, that flower he got for her though he had to climb clayey banks or wade through brooks. He watched her horse so that if it should happen to stumble he might catch its precious burden. During the ride he was continually on the lookout for some object which might interest or amuse her.

It was the same thing in the house. If Audrey took up a new book with uncut edges, he was sure to be at hand with a paper-knife; if she went to the piano, he was there to hunt up her music or turn it over, or be sent away, as very often happened.

And all this he did unobtrusively, so that Audrey herself scarcely noticed his attention to her wishes or wants, or had got so used to it as to take it as a matter of course.

Now it must be added that he was a delightful companion. He had travelled far and wide and was well read; but it was only to Audrey that he unlocked the stores of a highly cultivated mind. 'Silent Lorrimore' was one of the names his taciturnity had earned for him, but his silence was broken and dispelled at a word from Audrey; and if she would only let him sit or ride beside her and wanted him to talk, he could make the minutes fly like moments. On the other hand, if she wanted to be silent, he would ride beside her as grave and wordless as a Spanish hidalgo or a North American Indian.

'That man will have you whether you will or not,' said Lady Marlow, one morning, after they had returned from a ride, during which her sharp little ladyship had watched the two. 'No woman can resist that dogged kind of devotion. It would wear her out if she had a heart of stone. You'd better give in with a good grace, my dear, and consent to make the obstinate creature happy.'

But Audrey had laughed and shook her head, though she colored a little.

'I don't think I have a heart at all, dear,' she said; 'and as to wearing me out, he doesn't do that. In fact, to tell you the truth, I fancy I have worn him out. He doesn't say a word or hint a word of—'

'No,' retorted Lady Marlow, ironically; 'he only looks it and acts it every moment he is with you, and that is more effective than repeating it, let me tell you. Beware!'

Audrey laughed too. 'Oh, I am not afraid!' she said. 'What is that you have in your hand?'

'A note from Sir Jordan,' replied Lady Marlow. 'He is coming to dinner to-night.'

Now, it was the fourteenth; the party at the Grange had been in full swing for three

days, and as yet Sir Jordan had not presented himself. He was taking a rest and preparing himself; and, as a matter of fact, he needed a rest. It would have been wise of him to have kept away from the deserted rooms, and to have resisted the temptation which assailed him to make that unsuccessful search in the gloomy apartment in which Sir Greville had died; for the excitement, the strain of nerve, had told upon Sir Jordan, and after a sleepless night, he had found himself too unwell to leave his own rooms. He resolved to nurse himself carefully for two or three days, and then appear at the Grange at his best. He knew that Lord Lorrimore was there—had seen the party ride past the Court—and knew that he, Jordan, would need all his presence of mind to cope with his powerful rival for the failure to find what he had been looking for on the night of his arrival had only strengthened Jordan's resolution to win Audrey Hope, the heiress.

In spite of Lord Lorrimore, or twenty Lord Lorrimores, he meant to marry Audrey Hope and become the master of the Grange—or, at any rate, the husband of the mistress of that rich estate and all Sir William Hope's money.

On the night of the fourteenth he dressed himself with even more than his usual care, and entered the Grange drawing-room a few minutes before dinner.

His appearance, it he did not exactly create a sensation, attracted general attention. The handsome—it might also be called magnificent—room, was brilliantly lighted, the guests were gathered together waiting for the butler's summons, and when Sir Jordan was announced, Audrey was seated in a low chair with Lord Lorrimore leaning against the mantel-shelf and bending over her. She rose at once and went to meet Sir Jordan.

At times he looked, if not absolutely handsome, at any rate good looking and striking, and tonight he was at his best.

He wore a choice exotic in his button-hole. He carried himself with that air which distinguished men—men with a career before them—somehow manage to acquire, and he walked across the drawing-room with a manner which he had copied from some of the great men with whom he consorted.

Lord Lorrimore, who—it must be said frankly—hated and detested him, frowned and thrust his hands in his pockets.

'I am so glad you have come,' said Audrey, giving Sir Jordan her hand. 'Have you been unwell? Are you quite recovered?'

Sir Jordan bent over the small, plump hand.

'I have been rather unwell,' he said, 'but I am quite recovered. One gets used by a long session. There is no need to ask how you are,' and he raised his eyes and looked at her with an expression of respectful admiration.

'Oh, I am always well,' said Audrey, with a smile. 'But then, you see, I have no session to tire me.'

Lady Marlow entered the room at this moment, and Sir Jordan paid his respects to her, then went and greeted the rest of the company.

He was an admirable actor, when there was any need for acting, and could acquit himself as well in a drawing room as on the platform at Exeter Hall; and whereas some of the men lounged about speechless and bored during that terrible quarter of an hour before dinner, Sir Jordan could talk and make himself amusing.

Lady Marlow had to couple her guests. She had hitherto given Audrey to Lord Lorrimore, but to-night the cards had to be reshuffled, and she asked Sir Jordan to take Audrey in to dinner. Lord Lorrimore's face grew darker as he found himself opposite Audrey with Sir Jordan by her side; and the wife of the local baronet, whom he had taken in, was not troubled with much of his lordship's conversation; Lord Lorrimore was fully occupied watching the couple in front of him.

Jordan seemed in the most cheerful of moods and exerted himself, without

seeming to do so, to amuse and interest Audrey, and every now and then the silvery laugh—the laugh which Lord Chesterton declared was as contagious as scarlet fever—rang like a chime of bells above the conversation.

Audrey was no coquette; she did not see that Lord Lorrimore's dark face was growing darker as the dinner proceeded, and if she had seen it, it would not have occurred to her that he was jealous of Sir Jordan. Not only Audrey, but those near her, strained their ears to catch Sir Jordan's speeches. He was the rising man, the clever man of his party, and they were anxious to hear him. The ladies left the room, Audrey radiant and smiling, and Sir Jordan, as if to point the contrast between himself and his somber rival, continued to be brilliant over the wonderful Hope claret and the still more wonderful port—neither of which Sir Jordan touched.

Lord Marlow was much pleased with him, and even Lord Chesterton vouchsafed to applaud one of his epigrams.

'You do not drink, Sir Jordan, I see,' he said as Sir Jordan passed the decanter without exacting any tribute.

Jordan shrugged his shoulders and smiled half apologetically.

'I am excitable,' he said, 'and find that wine does not agree with me. But I appreciate its value for those who drink it, and sometimes I envy them.'

Lord Chesterton bowed and glanced at the calm, self-possessed face with its intellectual brow.

'I should not have considered you excitable,' he said. 'But every man must be his own guide. Marlow, the claret is with you.'

'What did Sir Jordan say to make you laugh so much, Audrey?' asked Lillian Lawson, languidly, from the sofa on which she had made haste to stretch herself, it being a maxim of the professional beauty to reserve all her energy for her natural prey—the men.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Audrey, smiling as it at the remembrance of something Jordan had said. 'He was very amusing. He reminded me a little of—'

'Of whom?' asked Lillian Lawson.

'Of his half-brother Neville,' said Audrey, slowly, and with some hesitation; 'and yet he is not a bit like him.'

When the gentleman came in, Lillian Lawson woke up to all her wonted splendor, and left a chair vacant beside her for the famous man; but Sir Jordan, after talking for a few minutes with Lady Marlow, drifted toward Audrey. Some one asked her to sing.

Now, immediately Audrey moved to the piano, Lord Lorrimore was wont to rise and stalk up to her; but to-night Sir Jordan went up to her and arranged the music-stool and opened the piano for her. But Lord Lorrimore stood beside her, and both men in the same breath asked her what she would sing.

She looked from one to the other—from the dark, handsome face of Lord Lorrimore on her left to the intellectual face of Sir Jordan on her right.

'Oh, I don't know,' she said.

'Sing that air from "Martha,"' said Lord Lorrimore, almost curtly.

Sir Jordan stooped and took out a song from the cantabrey beside him and placed it on the music-stand.

'Will you sing that?' he said in his soft voice.

Audrey could scarcely refuse, with the music staring her in the face, and after a moment's hesitation she sang Jordan's song.

The two men looked at her, the soft light of the candles shining on her lovely face—Lord Lorrimore with a passionate intensity which he scarcely concealed, Sir Jordan with a pleasant, reverential smile.

Lorrimore drank in every word, every note of the fresh young voice, which was more beautiful to him even than Patti's and was so absorbed that he allowed his rival to ask her for another song, and choose it, which was weak.

He stood beside the piano for a minute or two, then tore himself away and seated himself in grim silence in a distant part of the room, but still within sight of the woman he loved and the man he hated.

Lady Marlow saw plainly what was going on, but she could not interfere; and even if she could she would have scarcely done so. Here were two good men eager to win her ward—one the Earl of Lorrimore, with an ancient name and rich estates; the other Sir Jordan Lynne, 'the coming man,' and wealthy to boot. The least she could do was to give them fair play.

When Audrey had finished her song, Sir Jordan took her back to her chair and hung over her for a few minutes, then 'spread himself,' as the miners of Lorn Hope Camp would have said in their slangy way, over the rest of the company—paid court to Lillian Lawson; listened with deferentially bowed head to Lord Chesterton; discussed the hunting and shooting with Lord Marlow; talked over the latest scandal with his wife and in a word made himself as agreeable as only a man of the world can. And all the while Lord Lorrimore sat in his corner, gnawing at the ends of his mustache and eyeing his rival with deep-set glances from his dark eyes.

'What are you going to do to-morrow, Sir Jordan?' said Lord Marlow as Sir Jordan was taking his leave, having made a pleasant impression all round.

'I'm sure I don't know,' he replied.

'Then come with us,' said Lord Marlow, cheerily. 'We are all going to Stoneleigh's Burrows. We men are going to take guns and try and get a rabbit or two, and the ladies are going to—well, I suppose, to eat lunch.'

'I shall be delighted,' said Sir Jordan.

'Very well, then; we start at eleven. Pick us up as we pass your place.'

Jordan consented to the proposition, and went to Lady Marlow to take his leave.

Lady Marlow was gracious—very gracious.

'You must drop in upon us whenever you feel inclined, Sir Jordan,' she said. 'You must be neighborly, you know.'

'You are very good, Lady Marlow,' he said dropping his voice to a gratified pitch—'very good to take pity on a solitary man.'

Then he went up to Audrey, who, the center of a group, was busy explaining the last new game, which consisted in flicking a certain number of ivory counters into a small wooden bowl.

'Lord Marlow has been kind enough to ask me to join your expedition to Stoneleigh Burrows to-morrow,' he said.

'Oh, do come! she said, looking up at him with her bright smile. 'The Burrows belong to you, and you will be our host, won't you?'

'That is irresistible,' he said, as he bent over her hand. 'Yes, I will come.'

Lillian Lawson looked after him as he left the room.

'He is very amusing for a great man,' she said, languidly. 'Most of the great men I have met have seemed too much taken up with their own greatness to think of anything or any one else. I suppose Sir Jordan is as immensely rich as they say, and will be a peer in time.'

Lord Lorrimore stalked off to the smoking-room, and lighting a huge Havana, smoked in gloomy silence, listening to the other men discussing Sir Jordan's chance of getting into the Cabinet at the next session.

Meanwhile, Sir Jordan walked home, thoughtful, but not dissatisfied. Indeed, a smile curved his thin lips as he went over the incidents of the evening. He had succeeded in cutting out his powerful rival, and he ought to be satisfied. But as he entered the huge, gloomy house which called him master, the smile died away, and the expression of anxious fear and uncertainty took its place; and as he passed the narrow passage in the corridor which led to the deserted rooms, he hesitated as if drawn toward them—as if impelled by some secret impulse to unlock the thick oaken door and once again renew the search he had made on the night of his arrival. But he shook his head, muttered, 'No, no,' and passed on to his apartments, where his valet awaited him.

CHAPTER XIII.

On the morrow Sir Jordan chose the best horse in his stable, and with his gun under his arm, rode to the east gate and waited for the Grange party.

He had slept well that night (it is too often the unjust who sleep and the just who like awake). Conscience makes cowards of us all, and Sir Jordan aware of this, had got rid of his conscience years ago. He had slept well that night, and, on the back of his well-bred, well-groomed horse, looked ten years younger than his age.

He had not to wait long. The Grange party came riding up, breaking the silence of the country road with merry voices and laughter, and Sir Jordan joined them with a smile on his face as radiant as if no plot or scheme had ever been hatched in his shrewd brain.

Audrey was riding her favorite horse, and Lord Lorrimore was close beside her on one of Lord Marlow's horses—a great big-boned hunter which few men could ride.

Jordan rode up to Audrey at once, returning Lord Lorrimore's cold nod with a pleasant bow and smile.

'What is the programme?' he said.

'Is there a programme?' she said, turning her brightly beautiful face to him. 'I don't know. You men are to shoot rabbits, and we women—oh, well, I suppose we are only to lunch and look on. You have brought your gun, I see.'

'Yes,' said Jordan, modestly. 'But it is some time since I used it.'

He was a good shot and a good rider, for all his assumed modesty.

'The last time I was at Stoneleigh Burrows,' said Audrey, 'was with Neville. He shot thirteen rabbits, I remember. Of course, I said it was unlucky, and he laughed at me; he always laughed.'

Jordan sighed in that conspicuous way which men adopt when their sigh is fluctuations.

'Neville?' said Lord Lorrimore. 'Your brother, I believe, Sir Jordan?'

'My half-brother—yes,' said Jordan, suavely.

'What became of him?' asked Lord Lorrimore. 'I ask because he was an old friend of Miss Hope.'

'Oh, a very old friend—a playmate,' said Audrey with a sigh.

Lord Lorrimore looked at her fixedly, then turned his eyes upon Sir Jordan, as if waiting for an answer.

'Neville?' said Sir Jordan. 'I am sorry to say that I did not know where he is at'

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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