

(CONTINUED FROM TENTH PAGE.)

And now those new-dawning hopes must be given up—must be fought against, and sternly repressed for friendship's sake.

Yes; it must be done. Those first soft thrills of love in his own breast were as nothing to the mighty passion which had revealed itself so plainly on the face of Sir Gerald.

He must quietly stand aside, and leave her free for him to win.

# CHAPTER VIII.

LADY RUTH IS TROUBLED.

'Gerald,' said Lady Ruth, 'when are you going up to Scotland?'

It was a week or two after that night when Sir Gerald told his friend of his love for Lillian Delisle.

The day was intensely hot.

Lady Ruth was slowly waving a fan to and fro as she spoke, for the heat made itself felt even in the shady drawing-room; she looked not quite so placidly calm as usual as she repeated her question.

Her nephew was lying on a sofa with closed eyes, and he had either not heard, or had affected not to hear it, when she asked it first.

'To Scotland! Oh, I don't know,' he said, indifferently. 'What makes you ask?'

'What makes me ask? Why, isn't it very usual for you to stay so long at the Court as you have done this summer? Other years you have always grumbled about it being so dull.'

'Ah! but, you see, I've got Morewood now.'

A faint flush tinged the clear paleness of Sir Gerald's complexion.

He looked as though he knew he was putting forth a poor and feeble plea.

'Oh!' said Lady Ruth, and there was a shade of gentle satire in her tone.

After a moment or two, she added—

'Then, aren't you going to Scotland at all this year?'

'I really don't know—perhaps not,' said Sir Gerald, speaking a little impatiently, and moving about the sofa as though he were ill at ease. 'Why should I go?'

'Why should you stay? There is nothing to amuse you at the Court. You have always said that to stay on your estate for more than two months at a time would be intolerably dull—and you have been here nearly three months now.'

Lady Ruth spoke very dryly.

Clearly her words were intended to imply more than they said.

'Morewood doesn't get dull. I believe he'd be as happy as a ploughboy if he lived in the country all the year round.'

'Morewood is altogether different from you. He takes an active interest in his estate, looks to everything himself, and, of course, that keeps him from being dull. You, on the contrary, have always been so eager to get away to Scotland when the shooting season came. I can only say I am surprised—very much surprised.'

Again Lady Ruth's words seemed intended to imply a great deal more than they actually said.

Her nephew made no answer, only turned impatiently on the couch, but again his cheek flushed.

Lady Ruth was worried and anxious; but there was no one at the Court to whom she could breathe a word of her worries and anxieties.

She was forced to lock them up in her bosom and bear them all alone.

Presently, however, a confidante came to her relief—the very one whom she would herself have chosen.

Quite unexpectedly she received word that her niece, Lady Hamlyn, was passing through Hampshire, with her husband, on the way to the Isle of Wight, and would spend a couple of days at the Court, it quite convenient to Lady Ruth and Sir Gerald.

Sir Gerald acquiesced with cordial pleasure.

Lady Ruth was at all times welcome to invite whomever she chose and, moreover, he really liked his cousin Emilia and her husband; they were excellent company both of them.

So the Hamlyns came, and, as soon as ever she could seize upon a favorable opportunity, Lady Ruth unburdened her mind to her niece.

It was the morning after their arrival.

Sir Robert and Sir Gerald had gone out together, and the aunt and niece were left to indulge in that sort of confidential chat which women so dearly love.

Lady Hamlyn was a brisk black-eyed woman of about forty—a clever, notable, lively woman, whose advice on most subjects was well worth having.

Her husband was a rising statesman, and he himself would have been the first to admit that he owed no little of his success to the influence of his wife.

Quite a leader of society was Emilia Lady Hamlyn.

Poor Lady Ruth felt comforted as she looked at her sitting opposite.

'She is so clever she is sure to think of some plan,' thought the spinster aunt. 'Emilia, I am so worried,' she said, a little nervously.

'Oh, dear! I hope not. What about?'

'About Gerald. Do you know, I'm afraid—Lady Ruth dropped her voice to a solemn whisper—'I'm afraid he's in love with Sylvia's governess.'

Lady Hamlyn looked up, not startled nor shocked—perhaps she was too used to hearing such confidences for that—but in mild surprise.

'Dear me! I never thought Gerald was one of that sort. But really, there's no trusting any man where women are concerned. She's pretty, of course?'

'Pretty? She's beautiful—the most beautiful girl I ever saw in my life!'

Lady Hamlyn's shapely brow knitted itself in a slight frown.

'Beautiful! and a girl! My dear aunt, however came you to engage such a governess?'

'She was so highly recommended to me by Lady Agnes—Lady Agnes Dunbar, you know,' said the aunt, with a deprecating look. 'I knew I'd made a mistake as soon as I saw her, but it was too late then. I couldn't send her away after I'd engaged her, and she'd come all the way from France.'

'It was dreadfully imprudent. However, it's no use crying over spilt milk. You must simply get rid of her now as quickly as you can. What makes you think Gerald cares for her?'

'I can see it in his look. You have only to see him with her, and you would be sure of it. Oh! my dear, you can't think how wretched I have been since I found it out. I blame myself so for having her, you know.'

'Of course she encourages him?'

'No; that is the strangest part of it, and the only thing that gives me hope. I have watched her very attentively, and she doesn't encourage him at all—rather otherwise.'

'Oh! I daresay that's a bit of craft on her part. She does the encouraging when you're out of the way, you may depend.'

'I don't know, I'm sure. She certainly behaves very nicely; and, indeed, is a perfect lady. I am sure you will say so. Emilia. And her beauty is really beyond all words. I don't wonder the boy loves her.'

'Who is she?' questioned Lady Hamlyn.

'Do you know anything of her connections?'

'Her father was an officer in the army; her mother was either a Frenchwoman or an Italian—I am not sure which. They both died when she was quite young, and she was their only child. She has been educated in France, and has a little money of her own.'

'H'm! it sounds all right; but, of course she is no match for Gerald. That must be prevented at all hazards.'

'Oh, I wish it could be!' cried Lady Ruth, clasping her delicate white hands together in her fervour. 'I don't say a word to him about it; but I thought, perhaps, you or Sir Robert—'

'Not a bit of good,' said Lady Hamlyn decisively. 'That sort of thing inevitably makes mischief, and often precipitates the very thing you are anxious to avoid. The only way is to separate them.'

'He won't go—not even to Scotland for the shooting. That was what first opened my eyes. You know, Emilia, he isn't in the habit of staying at the court like this.'

'Very well, then she must go. The question is, how to arrange it without unnecessary fuss?'

Lady Hamlyn considered deeply for a minute or two, tapping the floor with her foot to aid her reflections.

Her aunt watched her with admiring wonder.

She was quite sure Emilia would think of something.

'I have it!' cried Lady Hamlyn, her black eyes bright with satisfaction. 'Sylvia must go home with me. Miss Monk can teach her with Irene and Laura. The child certainly does look a little delicate, and that will serve well enough for an excuse. We can say we think change of air will do her good, and that she is to be educated for the next few months with her cousins. That of course, will dispense with the necessity for a governess here. You will be able to get rid of Miss Delisle at once.'

'Yes; that is certainly an excellent idea, if you don't mind the trouble, Emilia.'

'I don't mind at all. Sylvia is such a good little thing, she will be very little trouble. And you may rely on her getting on well under Miss Monk. She is the best of good creatures. I assure you—exactly what a governess should be, neither young nor pretty, but altogether useful and to be relied upon. And now, aunt just for curiosity's sake, I should like to see this young person. Where is she to be found?'

'She is in the schoolroom now. You could go there to speak to Sylvia, and you would be sure to see her.'

'That will do. I'll go alone. I think that will be best.'

In a little more than five minutes Lady Hamlyn came back looking not quite so self-confident, as when she went away.

'Well,' asked Lady Ruth, 'what do you think of her?'

'She is certainly extremely beautiful—well-bred, too, and has quite a grand manner of her own. If only her position had been different, Gerald could not have found a more perfect wife.'

'I told you so. And she is really very sweet and charming. I must confess I like her very much indeed.'

'But as her position is what it is, of course a marriage is not to be thought of. Now I have seen her, I am more than ever sure it is very necessary to get her out of Gerald's way as soon as possible. I really must confess I never saw a more perfect beauty in my life. What a sensation she would make in a London drawing-room!'

## CHAPTER IX.

SIR GERALD SPEAKS.

The next day, Lady Hamlyn and her husband left the Court.

'They did not take Sylvia with them, as had been at first suggested.'

On consideration, Lady Hamlyn judged it might be better not to take this step with two much abruptness.

The matter must first be broached to Sir Gerald, and the objectionable governess got away without indecent haste.

'I can send my maid for Sylvia, you know aunt. On the whole, I really think that will be best.'

To Lady Ruth was committed the task of mentioning the all important subject to Sir Gerald; and this she did the very day after Lady Hamlyn had taken her departure.

The aunt and nephew were alone to-

gether after breakfast, and she, deeming it a favorable opportunity, commenced, in rather a nervous voice—

'Gerald! do you notice how delicate Sylvia is looking?'

Sir Gerald looked up in surprise.

'Delicate! Sylvia! No, I've never noticed it.'

'Oh! but she is. Emilia saw it as soon as she got here. I expect the hot weather tries the child. I spoke to Dr. Baker about her yesterday, and he says change of air would probably do her good.'

'Then by all means let her have the change of air.'

'That is just what I am thinking of,' said Lady Ruth, trying to speak quite easily, though she was secretly trembling. 'I spoke to Emilia about it and she was very good. She has actually offered to have Sylvia at Hamlyn Hall for a few months.'

'Very kind of her, I'm sure. Yes, I should think that would do Sylvia good; though, really, I must confess I haven't noticed anything amiss with her.'

'Perhaps not. Men never do notice such things. I have seen the child looking pale for some time past. Of course when she goes to Emilia, Miss Delisle's services won't be required here any longer. But Emilia says she knows of another situation for her—a really excellent one—and I should pay her a quarter's salary, so it will be no loss to her.'

So far Lady Ruth had proceeded quite glibly, apparently, though her inward trepidation was very great; but now Sir Gerald looked up with a peculiar flash in his eye.

'You needn't say any more, aunt. I quite understand what you mean. You wish to send Miss Delisle away from the Court, and you, acting under Emilia's instructions—are making Sylvia the excuse. But I decline to allow any such thing.'

'I'm not sorry you have mentioned the subject, because it gives me an opportunity of saying what I've been meaning to say for several days past. I love Lillian Delisle, and intend to ask her to be my wife.'

Lady Ruth raised her delicate white hands in horror, and with a very good imitation of incredulous amazement.

'You love Miss Delisle?' she cried, just as though the bare idea of such a possibility had never faintly crossed her mind.

'I do,' replied Sir Gerald, coolly, and with decision. 'I know all you would say, Aunt Ruth—all the objections you would bring forward. Let me beg you to consider them as spoken. I know them all so well. When a man reaches thirty years of age he is usually his own master; and I intend to be my own master over this.'

'Then you have quite made up your mind?' faltered Lady Ruth.

'Quite. If Miss Delisle will accept me, I shall make her my wife. At present I have not breathed a word on such a subject to her. Although you may think differently, I am by no means certain she will accept me. She has hitherto given me no encouragement to hope so.'

'Then isn't Sylvia to go to Emilia?' asked Lady Ruth, feebly, feeling herself quite helpless to strive against her nephew, when he spoke in such a tone as that.

He would be master of his own actions when he chose, as she very well knew. Whether her energetic niece Emilia could oppose him or not, it was beyond her power to do so.

'Just as you please. If change of air will do the child good, by all means let her have it. But whether Sylvia goes or not, Miss Delisle must stay here. She would make a charming companion for you; she could stay in that capacity. Of course that is it you choose. I have no desire to force your inclinations; but if you cannot oblige me in this, I have only one alternative.'

'Is to make Miss Delisle an offer of my hand, and, if she accepts it, make her Lady Vere at once. That would settle her.'

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position in this household. But understand Aunt Ruth,' he added, in a soft and pleasant tone. 'I don't want to be precipitate. I should prefer to feel more sure of Lillian's affection before speaking to her. If you wish to oblige me, you will simply send Sylvia to Hamlyn Hall, and keep Lillian with you. You always have been good to me; I hope you'll be good to me now.'

What could poor Lady Ruth say to this, especially as she loved her nephew, and was really quite attached to the beautiful girl he wished to marry?

She got up and kissed him on the brow, without speaking, then went away to report the conversation by letter to Lady Hamlyn.

'We may as well make the best of it, my dear Emilia,' she wrote in conclusion. 'He has quite made up his mind; and you know what that means with Gerald. After all, the girl is as good and charming as she is beautiful. If only she had money, and was of higher rank, everyone would be applauding his choice. Even as it is, many men will envy him. It might have been much worse. Write soon and comfort me by telling me you think so.'

Sir Gerald had told his aunt he had never breathed a word of love to Lillian—and he had told her the strict truth.

He had told her the truth, too when he said he could feel no confidence that the girl would accept his hand if he were to offer it to her.

That he loved her, she must have known. He himself felt certain of so much, at all events.

The passion in his dark eyes had been such that often her snowy lids had drooped before it.

It was impossible that she should not know too deeply she was loved.

A few days after Sir Gerald had made the declaration of his intentions to Lady Ruth, he was sauntering through a glade in the park, was roused from a deep love-dream to hear the voice which was to him the sweetest music on earth, raised in a frightened cry for help.

The furious barking of a dog indicated the nature of the danger.

Dashing aside the intervening boughs, Sir Gerald was on the scene, swift as lightning.

A savage brute of a dog, belonging to one of the keepers, had got loose; and it was its barking which had so terrified Lillian.

A word from Sir Gerald cowed the animal, and sent it sulking away; but it was not so easy a matter to recover Lillian from the shock her nerves had undergone.

She had been very brave—wonderfully brave for a woman.

She had faced the savage brute with an undaunted front, and with an eye which had almost quelled it.

But now the danger was over, the reaction came, and she leaned against the tree, white and trembling, vainly trying to articulate her thanks to her deliverer.

To Sir Gerald she seemed more lovely in her woman's weakness than ever she had done before.

His heart thrilled with irresistible tenderness as he noted the paleness of the exquisite cheek, and the slight tremor of the lip, the downward glance of the dark eye.

Almost before he knew what he was doing, his love leaped to his lips in tender impassioned words.

He had got her soft, white hand in his and, though it trembled and fluttered, it did not struggle to release itself; the touch of that soft hand sent an electric thrill through his veins.

If his life had been at stake, he could not at that moment have resisted speaking to her of his love.

What he said he knew not.

The words poured forth in a torrent—he felt no lack of them; for some minutes he went on passionately pleading, until suddenly he realized, with a swift, heart-sickening pang, that he had no power to call the soft flush of maiden love to her cheek, that she was still as pale marble, and that in her eyes there was a look which seemed akin to pain.

'I have been too abrupt—I have startled you! Oh, forgive me!' he cried, with swift penitence, and as humbly as though their positions had been reversed—as though he had been the paid dependant, and she the mistress of that beautiful ancestral home.

'You are unnerved,' he continued. 'It was cruel of me to distress you now. What a brute you must think me—'

'No, no!' she said, forcing herself to speak, though the effort was plainly discernible. 'No, no, you are always too good to me, Sir Gerald! Too good—too considerate and kind.'

He drew nearer to her.

He took her other hand, and, thus holding them both, gazed into her face with eyes of imploring, devouring love.

'And may I hope to win you? Oh, my love, my heart's best treasure, if only you could care for me just a little—if only you would bid me hope!'

'Sir Gerald,' she said, slowly, 'you have spoken in a hasty moment, ill-advisedly, without thought. Let it be as though it had not been said.'

'No, by Heaven! You wrong me, Lillian, if you think that, because I have spoken on a sudden impulse, that impulse does not represent the true feelings of my heart. But you know better, dearest—you know I love you. You must have seen it in all these weeks and days. I could not hide it quite—there have been times when I knew I did not. True, I had meant to wait, simply because I didn't dare to hope you could care for me as yet. You are so pure, so good, so altogether above and beyond me. Oh! Lillian, if you could only know how unworthy a man feels when he asks for the love of such a one as you!'

His voice—singularly rich and musical at all times—vibrated with tenderness.

His face wore all the abandonment of a great love.

There was something marvellously touching about a passion such as this.

And she, that beautiful girl, was touched by it.

A shade of sadness passed over her expressive features—of sadness mingled with pity, and with some other emotion not so easy to define.

She drew her hands away from him gently—ever so gently—and her voice faltered a little as she said—

'Sir Gerald, I wish you had not spoken to me like this.'

A look of dread, of dawning despair, terrible to witness, stamped itself on his handsome face.

'Lillian, think a little,' he said hoarsely. 'Don't say there is no hope; don't say you could never care for me. I could wait—I would be very patient. Oh, my love, try me!'

'I know how generous you are—how truly generous and kind,' said the girl, softly; 'but, indeed—indeed, I must say again that it would have been better if you had not spoken to me as you have just now.'

'Lillian, couldn't you care for me?' he demanded, passionately.

'I cannot tell you that,' she answered, gently. 'I am not sure of it, even in my own heart. I will not deceive you. You shall know the truth, exactly as I understand it myself. At the present moment, while respecting and esteeming you most highly, I do not love you with that love of which you speak. Whether I ever could so care for you, I cannot say. But, remembering how far our positions lie apart—how much there is to raise a barrier between us, I feel it would have been better—for your sake at any rate—if those generous words of love had not been said.'

She was still very pale; and when she spoke of how much there was to raise a barrier between them, she had turned even paler.

It was as though some painful image had obtruded itself before her inner mind.

But Sir Gerald caught her hand again. He saw, in all this, some glimmering of hope.

'Dearest!—forgive me, I must call you so—my heart's dearest, my one beloved, tell me one thing. Is your