

The Maid Of The Mill.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART I.

CHAPTER I.

UNDER THE LILAC.

'But, my dear Sir Myles, I cannot bear to hear you despond like this. You speak as though you were going to die when you are really quite a young man yet, and, for you, life ought to hold every thing which makes it worth living.'

The two gentlemen were on the terrace before Heatherfield Manor, a delightful lounging-place in the cool of a summer evening, for the walls of the old house, covered with ivy and Virginia creeper, rose behind, and in front stretched a wide vista of sloping garden and wooded park, with a glimpse in one corner of an idyllic village, where thatched-roofed cottages and a quaint old church nestled among the leafy boughs of stately trees.

Sir Myles Frankford was the owner of all as far as the eye could reach even beyond the rustic beauty, to where the tall chimneys of a smoking, busy town a black blot against the sky.

He was, of course, very wealthy, and had won fame as well, for he had been a brave soldier who for almost twenty years had fought under an eastern sky, until his health had broken down, and he had returned to his native country a singularly lonely man, who lived apart from his neighbours and seemed to be always brooding over his past.

His one relation was his heir, Leonard Frankford, a distant cousin, to whom, however, the property must eventually descend since the entail was strict.

He it was who had spoken the words which began this chapter.

He was a fine, handsome young fellow, with bright dark eyes and a smile which always won for him a way into the good graces of every woman he met.

'Have you not heard of the one thing a woman needs to make life really happy?' Sir Myles asked slowly, speaking with his eyes fixed upon the distant horizon. 'Leonard I am a lonely man. I have come to care for you more than I thought it possible to—care for any human being again; but you cannot fill the void that is always in my heart—you cure my remorse.'

'Remorse, Sir Myles?' Leonard echoed incredulously. 'Surely you have no need to use a word like that?'

'You do not know,' the baronet answered still without looking into the other's face. 'Leonard, you have always seen me cold and stern, living my own life apart from the world. Has it never occurred to you that I once might have loved?'

'Is that your secret?' Leonard asked quickly, guessing something of the truth with ready sympathy. 'Sir Myles, your life has been spoiled by a woman?'

'Yes; but not in the way your words would imply. I ought rather to say that my life was spoiled when her heart was broken by my father's pride. You have heard of him, Leonard—a cold, stern man, who ruled all his household with a rod of iron, and most of all me—his only son. He arranged that I should marry an heiress whom I had never even seen; but I had already given my heart to Ellen Adair, the daughter of one of the tenant-farmers near here.'

'She was not well born, of course, but she had been educated above her position, and her grace and natural refinement would have fitted her for any station in life. But I knew it was useless to ask my father's consent to her becoming my wife, so I took her to London, where we were married secretly; and there I was obliged to leave her when I was ordered abroad, for her health just then would not let her travel.'

'We parted, thinking it would be only for a little time, and soon after I arrived in India I received a letter telling me our child had been born, and that my wife would follow me to the East within a few weeks; but, though I at once made arrangements for her welcome, she never joined me, and no news of her came. And when, in despair, I wrote to my father, confessing all, and begging him to find my wife, he only replied that all his efforts were in vain, for no trace of her could be found.'

'To make matters worse, three years elapsed before I could secure a furlough, and when I came to England the search was doubtless hopeless. From that time to this I have heard no direct news of my darling; but three years ago, when my father died, they sent me a letter out to India, which he had written on his death-bed, and in that was made clear.'

'He confessed that he had suspected my marriage, and that, when he knew I was out of England, he had called upon my wife, pretending he had been sent by me.'

'He told her—Heaven forgive him!—that I regretted the marriage, that I disowned her, and offered her an income if she would swear never to claim me again. He was a clever man, and she, a weak, loving woman. He made her believe the falsehoods he uttered, for she took the oath he dictated that no one should ever know she was my wife, though she scorned the money he offered, and went into the world with her baby in her arms. I feel that she must have died then, have died in poverty and of a broken heart, and no doubt our child died too. All happened so long ago but my heart is buried in her grave, and, because of the pride which has parted us, I shall never know happiness again.'

There was a brief silence, while Leonard

by way of showing the sympathy he could not speak, held out his strong right hand for the older man to clasp.

It was one of those grips which, to Englishmen, mean far more than words.

The pause was only short; then, with a change of tone, Sir Myles continued speaking—

'I have told you my story, Leonard, though I have kept hidden from all the world besides; but in speaking of it now I have had a deep seated purpose. You are young and well born, and some day you will be very rich; but always take warning by me, and if you love a poor girl marry her openly, and trust to her love to atone for any social sacrifices you may have to make. Be brave for her sake, and you will be happy. It was my own cowardice that was to blame for all my sorrow, and for my darling's fate.'

The word 'cowardice' sounded strange upon the lips of a man who had won the Victoria Cross; but Leonard understood what he meant.

No coherent answer was given, but none was needed, and then Sir Myles, after a glance into the thoughtful face of the younger man, went slowly into the stately Manor, wishing, no doubt, to be alone with the memories which came flocking to him from the past.

Leonard watched him until he was out of sight, then he drew a cigar-case from his pocket, and began to smoke, while he paced up and down the terraced walk, thinking of the story to which he had listened.

He was so engrossed in his reverie that he did not notice where he was going.

He went on mechanically, and presently quitted the higher paths to go down through the garden, until he had left the private grounds behind, and reached the white high road which led through the village.

Two hearts are quickly beating,
And hands are clasped in fond;
To them the world has vanished,
They live in love's sweet land.
The breeze was softly rustling,
And carried on its wing
To far-off, shining zephyrs,
The song it heard them sing.

Here where the waters ebb and flow,
Here by the deep, blue sea,
I pledge my truth for aye, dear love,
And live alone for thee.

He had passed abruptly, for from somewhere close at hand a girl's voice, sweet and clear and very musical, even in its untutored melody, had come floating upon the evening air; a voice which thrilled him as no other had ever the power to do.

On the impulse of the moment he swung round upon his heel, to plunge amid the shadows of a narrow lane that led off at right angles near.

Louder and clearer the girlish voice became, and then, in another instant, he had met the singer face to face, for he had been suddenly confronted with the prettiest picture that could be imagined.

One side of the man was hemmed in by lilac bushes; but just there there were parted by a stile which gave access into the most delightful of all old world orchards, where the tender blossoms and sweet fragrance of the apple and cherry trees had transformed the garbled old boughs into a glimpse of fairy land.

And seated on the topmost bar of the stile, with the orchard as a background of her lithe young form, and the lilacs bending in a frame around, was the singer herself—a girl in a pink cotton gown, with a sun bonnet on her head, her lap full of newly gathered harebells and forget-me-nots, which she was intent upon arranging into an artistic bouquet that her song seemed to leave her lips unconsciously, and she had evidently no idea of Leonard's presence.

He had paused in the shadow of a great tree which flung its boughs right across the lane; and, looking at her with an artist's appreciation of the beautiful, he saw how very, very fair she was; but it was with no mere rustic beauty, no so-called dairymaid prettiness, for the girl was tall and slight, with an oval face, whose features were of the real patrician type, her long lashed eyes dreamily blue, so that they seemed quite dark by contrast to the golden ripples that brightened her nut-brown hair, while the graceful hands, which moved so dextrously among the flowers, were slender and white, and well kept, showing no signs of ever having been spoiled by too much laborious work.

His eyes, full of the sudden fire of admiration, must have brought that mesmeric thrill to her which tells us of another's presence.

She lifted her head quickly, the song died on her lips in a state of surprise, and evidently her first impulse on seeing a stranger was to run away; but she slipped as she springing off the stile, and, though she saved herself from a tumble, the flowers were scattered from her apron.

'Pardon me; I started you, so I am to blame for your accident,' Leonard said. 'I hope you will let me do this to make amends.'

Her fears vanished as she met his frank, smiling eyes, for she made no other attempt to run away, while Leonard, remembering that she was quite the prettiest girl he had ever seen and forgetting that she wore a print dress, went down on his knee to gather up the scattered flowers, and give them back into her care.

In doing so, his hand touched hers more than once, and he knew that she thrilled and blushed anew at the brief contact.

'I am so sorry to give you such trouble,' she said frankly, and he was quick to notice that her voice was very sweet and low, while her intonation was that of a cultured lady, not of a country girl. 'The fault was really mine; but, you see, I was so startled at finding I was not alone.'

'I think you must be a stranger to Heatherfield, are you not?' Leonard asked looking up from his task, with great interest, as well as admiration, in his eyes. 'At least, I cannot remember having met you before, and I am sure I should not have forgotten such an event. You see, in a small village like this, everyone knows everyone else.'

'Yes, I suppose so, for I know your name already,' the girl answered, with a delightful air of childish innocence. 'You were pointed out to me this morning by Barbara, the old servant at the mill here, when you rode past on your chestnut horse, and she told me you were Captain Frankford, who was staying at that grand old house on the hill. I only came to Heatherfield yesterday. I have lived in London until now, at school.'

'Are you going to return there?' Leonard asked, wondering more and more who she could be.

'I knew that the mill belonged to some people named Maine, who had been what is called well-to-do folk in the long ago; but for some time their fortunes had been on the wane, and it was village gossip that Simon Maine, who alone survived, was on the verge of bankruptcy.'

They young man wondered indeed whether Maine had sold the mill, and whether this charming girl was connected with the purchase.

'Oh, no,' she answered quickly. 'I have already saved at school too long, don't you see, and now I have come away for good. In the future I am going to live here with Simon and old Barbara; and you don't think now how delighted I am at the prospect. Everyone is so kind to me, and I am sure I shall never be tired of this lovely country.'

Then it was Simon—Mr. Maine, I mean—some relation of yours?' Leonard asked. 'I would do as well as know.'

'No, he has no relation to me, though I am quite a distant cousin to his cousin,' she answered frankly; 'and I don't know exactly what the relations are between us, but I am a Maine too—Maya Maine; perhaps you have heard of me?'

'No, indeed I have not, for I am sure I should have remembered a name as pretty as that. I shall never forget it now that I have once heard it.'

He quite forgot those last words, for he had been so taken by her, and had bent his head so that his lips were very close to hers; while he tried to look again into the sweet face which she kept half-veiled from him.

Maya blushed and trembled; she felt she could not look up to meet his gaze; but she had not and no wish now to run away and leave him there alone.

It seemed to her that no music had ever before been so sweet as his low voice. And that in all the wide world there could be no scene so fair as this lilacs and ferns where first they two had met.

'May! Maya!'

A man's harsh voice rang upon the magic hush, startling them both from their reverie, and the girl abruptly drew away the hand which Leonard had boldly taken in his own though he unconsciously she had let it remain in his clasp.

'It is Simon who is calling me. I dare not keep him waiting,' she exclaimed, and then, without another farewell, she had sprung across the stile, to vanish from the young man's sight, and he felt as though the lingering sunset had died suddenly when she had gone, leaving him alone in the darkening lane, with a spray of dying forget-me-nots at his feet.

CHAPTER II.

HER GIVEN WORD.

'It is Simon who is calling me. I dare not keep him waiting.'

Those words, which Maya had spoken at their hurried parting, haunted Leonard all through his walk back to the Manor, and throughout the lonely evening that followed.

Sir Myles remained in his own room, absorbed doubtless in memories of the past but Leonard thought only of the present as he dreamed of Maya's blue eyes, guessing the angle of sorrow and danger to which they yet might lead him.

There was a certain sense of mystery about her.

She was so evidently educated for a different position from that which she was holding, yet she spoke of the mill as her home, and she spoke of Simon Maine as it seemed, her guardian. When the next day came, Leonard made some inquiries about her; but no one in Heatherfield could tell him more than he already knew.

Naturally he wanted to see her again, feeling that the rustic beauty of the lanes and meadows was increased a thousandfold by her presence.

It was not difficult to find her, for he met her as he desired, for in the five days of her residence at the mill Maya was almost always to be found wandering about the lanes, and Leonard of course knew of the most lovely spots within a radius of five or six miles.

They even had impromptu picnics together in the days that followed; for Maya would start out in the morning carrying a day's provisions in a little basket on her arm, and Leonard would join her—without any premeditation, of course—to enjoy a homely feast under the greenwood tree more than he had ever seen any stately banquet in all his life before.

Thus a week went on, a few short days which sped for them both on the wings of

the wind, and yet served to knit those two hearts closely together. A week's acquaintance is very short, according to ordinary rules, but before half that time had elapsed Maya would have indignantly resented the suggestion that she and Leonard were strangers. No friends had ever been so dear to each other as they were now, she thought.

There came a sunny evening at last, when, after one of their long walks, they returned homeward through the village, and then up Lilac Lane to the old stile where they first met. There the good night was said, a rather long farewell—because under such sad circumstances parting is such a sweet sorrow—and then at last Maya crossed the stile, her sweet blue eyes very downcast and a little sad, though there were laughter on her tremulous lips.

'I shall see you again to-morrow; we have planned to go to the waterfall,' Leonard said boldly, laying his hand upon the little white fingers which rested on the stile, and for one instant the shy, sweet eyes were raised to his face as she whispered that she would not forget.

'We must start quite early too,' Leonard went on, 'for the walk is a long one and the scenery is so beautiful that we must not hurry.' Good night, now; it is not good bye, for we will have another happy day to-morrow.'

She drew a long, quivering sigh—which was almost a sob. The joy at her heart in that moment was almost pain in its intensity, and Leonard, as he looked at her realized for the first time the danger to which he had drifted—the love which he had won.

'The days are all happy now,' Maya said softly, dreamily. 'Ah, I never knew there could be so much happiness as this which has come into my life since I first knew Heatherfield. Sometimes I am frightened at it, it seems so good and so real, it will not end—it must not be answered—but he spoke with strange, unuttered grinding the words, as it were, between his teeth; and then, without any other farewell—though generally there were half-advertisements to be said—he swung round upon his heel and went away, leaving her at the stile, alone.

She loved him—she loved him—he thought as he went onward, the knowledge making the blood rush faster through his veins with a sense of triumph, which he tried in vain to quell. And she is the dearest and most innocent, as well as the prettiest girl in the world. Yes—yes! she has a secret no fool could guess, and there is some sort of mystery over her birth. I wonder if I love her well enough to marry her in spite of the barrier between us. If not, I must part at once, and she must learn to forget.'

Forgotten! He tried to form the word clearly in his worldly wisdom, but in his heart he knew that—forget, at least—forgetfulness would never come. Such love as she had given is a woman's whole existence. He was lost to her—there would be only despair.

Could he, as an honourable man, break the tender, loyal heart which had gone out to him?

He asked himself the question bravely; he was no coward, and not in the least mercenary.

But pride of birth was strong upon him, and if through that evening he remained undeterred, always angry with himself for not having seen the peril ahead; now declaring that he would leave Heatherfield to choose some wife of whose lineage he might be proud—now ready to declare that the world would be well for her love, and that he would give up all for his rustic sweetheart's sake.

Meanwhile, unconscious of the storm which the moment's awakening had raised in her lover's heart, Maya had lingered by the stile, looking after him.

Close at hand the bushes rustled, but she did not hear or heed.

She was thinking only of Leonard in her simple, adoring fashion, trying loyally not to let disappointment become her sad and subtle hurried away.

'Maya!'

A man's voice broke in upon her reverie, and she turned with a start at the bushes close at hand and parted and her guardian, Simon Maine, stride into the path by her side.

'Come back to the house,' he said curtly; 'I have a good deal to say, and we can talk of other things.'

It was not his words alone which vaguely chilled her; it was rather his manner.

He swung round his head and sent back to the mill, while Maya followed him in silence up the path which led through the orchard to the old grey house beside the rushing stream.

A path he turned for the first time to make sure that she had obeyed; and as she saw him thus, with the red sun setting streaming down the lane, her whole alarm grew into terror.

He was a stern, grim-looking man, with a weathered face and a pair of eyes which seemed to pierce straight into the soul. He was a fierce, high-spirited man, and she knew that, if he were to be angry with her, she would be in a very bad way.

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first thought was one of blank amazement. 'What can you mean?' she asked, as she faced him across the centre table, where a few well-bound books lay on the bright cloth at mathematical distances apart from each other.

'You can ask no questions that I will not answer.'

'So much the better for you—and for me,' he said with a certain grim meaning in his voice. 'I may as well tell you that I was behind the bushes in the orchard just now, and so I saw your parting from the fine gentleman at the Manor.'

'You were eavesdropping,' Maya exclaimed indignantly, forgetting her fear of him for a moment, while the hot color sprang into her pretty face. 'Why should you have stooped to this?'

He did not answer the question, though there was no sign in his manner to show that he was ashamed of the part he had played.

'I heard what you said, and I saw enough to convince me that you and Mr. Leonard Frankford have met a good many times,' he went on sneeringly. 'What does it all mean? Has he dared to make love to you?—to turn you foolish little head?'

'Mr. Frankford is a gentleman,' Maya exclaimed indignantly. 'You may be sure he would do nothing that was wrong. He has been very kind to me. He saw I was lonely here, and that I loved this beautiful scene, so he undertook to show me some of his favorite walks. We have been friends nothing more; and I am proud of his friendship, not ashamed.'

'You talk like a foolish girl,' Simon retorted harshly. 'His eyes were riveted upon her face; he could not help seeing how flushed and animated it had become—how brightly her blue eyes flashed in her defence of Leonard. 'You acknowledge I suppose that you owe me some obedience? you will not deliberately defy me, if I order you never to speak to Leonard Frankford again?'

'You will not do that?' Maya exclaimed quickly. 'Oh! it would be cruel, and you could have no reason for it.'

Her fair face had blanched, and there was a passion of entreaty in the clear, girlish tones, which roused all the fire of his hidden jealousy into fresh strength. He smiled as he looked down upon her, but it was with conscious triumph, not with pity.

I have a very good reason for what I say, he returned slowly. 'I have spoken plainly, and you understand that for the future you are to avoid this Captain Frankford. I distinctly forbid you ever to speak to him again.'

There was a moment's silence, while the girl's bright eyes—which had flashed with indignation before—slowly overflowed with weeping tears. Her lip quivered so that she could not trust herself to speak, for, suddenly, in the moment when Leonard seemed for ever lost to her, she realised how dear he had become. She knew that she loved him, and that for love's sweet sake it would be easier to give up life itself than to lose the hope of meeting him again—to wander by his side through rustic lanes, listening to his dear voice, seeing the love-light shining in his eyes.

'Why have you said this?' she asked after that moment's pause, for the greatness of her pain seemed to goad her to fresh strength, and she forced herself to speak clearly and calmly. 'You have no right to insist that I should avoid and insult Captain Frankford after his kindness to me.'

No right!

He hissed the words between his clenched teeth, and a change swept over his face.

It grew livid with furious anger, and his dark eyes were doubly bright, as, striding forward, he caught her wrist in an iron hold from which she could not break.

I have the best right in the world, Maya, for I love you, I have sworn to make you my wife!

She shrunk from him as far as possible, though he still held her a prisoner.

They were at arm's length apart as she looked into his face, and what she read there made her heart grow cold with fear.

There was no sign of love in his eyes, not even of such a mad, blind passion as is sometimes dignified by the name.

She saw only a great resolution, a wild jealousy there, but the very absence of love made him seem only the more terrible.

She felt like a bird that had been trapped by ruthless hands; she knew that she could not escape.

'Your wife!' She echoed the words with white lips. 'It is impossible, I do not love you.'

He laughed harshly, a laugh that thrilled her inmost soul with terror.

'I don't ask for your love—at least, not just yet, because I am confident that I shall win it in the end,' he said grimly.

You are a bold man, you do not know your own mind, but at least you are strong enough to understand the debt you owe me, a debt you can only pay by being my wife!

What do you mean? she asked, brokenly; he did not try to hide her terror now. 'You are my guardian, but—but—'

You do not understand how you can be very deeply in my debt, you would say, he sneered, guessing what were the words that her trembling lips tried in vain to utter. 'No doubt when you were at school you fancied that the fact of having a guardian at all proved you a young lady of property. Your bills were regularly paid, you have been well educated, your every whim and caprice has been gratified. You had really been a most successful pupil, your life could not have been more happy.'

A proper? She echoed the words in a low tone, shuddering as she spoke. 'You are not to be in earnest. How is it possible for me to be?'

'It is not to be in earnest,' he answered, once again, 'but I am in earnest, and I have kept it from you until now, and the time has come when you must know what I mean. You are my guardian, and you are my wife.'

Continued on page 11.