



Yes, oh, yes; say everything, anything; do not keep anything from me," replied Constance, fervently.

"Well, then, I'd say, put away all such thoughts as that which was worrying you—it was worrying you a little, wasn't it?"

"Ah, yes, yes," and she stifled a little sigh.

"Well, then, don't think of it any more. It is true that Wolfe might have found a wife in that called our own class—might have married a rank and file—like the Brakespear look for money; but the old lady's eyes, we are not, I think, in want of money; and as for the rank—she smiled—"well, we are proud of that that it is of very little consequence."

Constance bent and kissed the sweet, placid face.

"Oh, how good, how good you all are to me!" she murmured, and she looked at the marchioness, laughing; "it is nothing to what we will be. You shall see—you shall see! My dear, this is the happiest day I have spent since Wolfe came back to me, and it almost seemed that night as if you had brought him."

"You both came together, and it was you who brought me the news of his return. I shall never forget that. And then there is another thing. Who knows how long he would have remained with us but for you? He was getting restless, he might have gone any day or any moment, but now that he has fallen in love with you he will stay. Yes, he will stay, and it is to you that I shall owe my presence. So you see, my dear, what good came of me for loving you."

Constance, softly, "So strange, so improbable."

"That he should have fallen in love with you?" asked the old lady, with a smile. "Well, I think it would have been a stranger if he had not. You see, my dear, for the first thing you are very pretty; there will be another 'beautiful lady' in the portrait gallery presently, and she laughed at Constance's crimsoned face.

"Then you have that sweet, moustache-like way with you which men find so irresistible, and naturally; and then, my dear, we all know how good you are. But there, I don't want to make you vain, and so spoil Wolfe's wife. Happy Wolfe!"

"Happy Constance!" murmured Constance, hiding her face on the old lady's shoulder.

"And now, my dear," said the marchioness, "you must tell us exactly what you would like done. You wish your friends to know."

"My friends?" echoed Constance. "No, no, no, do not tell them like some of them to come and see you. Remember that this place will be yours very soon, and that you must consider it as such. Now, whom shall I ask to come and stay?"

"No one," said Constance, quietly. "The only one I do not think I have a relation in the world; at least, there is none that I know of or remember."

"My poor child, how lonely you must have been!" and the tender-hearted old lady stroked her hair.

"Yes," said Constance, gently, "I have been very lonely since my father died."

"I will go up to Arol now," said Constance, uneasily.

"Not just yet," he said, holding her arm tightly, and standing stock-still at the entrance to the drawing-room.

The servants, a small army, came trooping from upstairs and down-stairs, and entered in the hall in expectant silence.

"Are you all here?" he said, his head erect, his dark eyes glowing with his newly born happiness.

"Yes, my lord," said Belford, looking over the crowd.

"Very well, then," said the marquis. "I have sent for you because I wish you to know and to share my happiness. Some of you have been in the service of my father—"

"Your grandfather, my lord," said a tremulous voice, and an old woman, whom Constance had seen about the house once or twice, dropped a court-salute.

"Yes," he nodded, "and my grandfather. You have served us faithfully, and we have tried to prove ourselves your friends."

"Yes, yes, my lord," came the eager response. "God bless your lordship!"

"So I have sent for you to-night, tell you that a great happiness has come to me. This lady," and he took Constance's hand, "is my future wife."

Constance, pale and trembling, stood with downcast eyes.

A shout went up, a shout of pleased surprise.

"You were good enough to welcome me home when I came back a little while ago," he went on, "and you said you hoped that I should stay. Well, I am going to stay, but if that gives you any pleasure, you must thank Miss Graham."

"Ah, don't do that!" he said, as they entered the drawing-room. "I wanted to see you alone for a few minutes, and mother is discreetly keeping upstairs till the last moment. Do you know what I want?"

"Your dinner?" said Constance. She was so full of happiness that she too had grown younger, and was able to hide the love that thrilled her under a girlish playfulness that gave her a new charm in his eyes.

"So I do," he replied. "But I want something else; I want to seal our compact."

She looked round appreciatively. The butler of one of the servants might come in, probably would, at any moment.

He laughed and drew something from his waistcoat pocket.

"Hold out your hand."

She did so wonderingly.

"Let me see, which is the finger?"

"I don't know. You see, I was never engaged before," she replied, blushing and laughing.

"I thank God for your ignorance, dearest," he remarked, devoutly under his breath. "The third, isn't it. Now our compact is almost sealed."

"What a lovely ring!" she exclaimed, holding her hand up to the light. "Why, where did you get it so?" and she turned her face away.

"So quickly?" he finished for her with a smile. "Do you think I carried it about with me on the chance of winning it?"

"No," replied Constance, shaking her head. "There is no one excepting Lady Armistead."

"Well, then, I'll write to her at the same time you do, my dear," said the marchioness. "I suppose the wedding will be very soon."

"Oh, not soon!" murmured Constance, blushing.

"I hope so. You see, when you are married I shall feel as if I had got Wolfe quite safe and secure. Oh, my dear, a little thought that, night when you came and told me that my son had come back to me, that I should gain a daughter as well! I hope, I pray that he may make you happy, and I think he will. The Brakespears are not half-hearted in their love; with all their faults, they are true and constant. God bless you both, my dear!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

The wife of the marquis!

Constance sat beside the window in her own room trying to realize it. Would she wake presently to find that it was all a dream?

She could feel his kisses on her face and hair, hear his voice ringing in her heart. She knew now that she had loved him from the first; she understood now why, whenever she thought of him—and when she ceased to think of him—her heart had throbbled with a strange mixture of pleasure and pain.

With the unspeakable joy that filled her whole being there came, too, a sense of peace and rest.

She had been alone in the world, at the mercy of every wind that blows; at the mercy of Rawson Fenton, and as the thought of him a faint shudder ran through her. She need fear him no longer; one stood beside her now who could and would protect her from any harm Rawson Fenton might attempt to do her. She would put all remembrance of him away from her. It would have been better if she had told Wolfe about him; but she had never yet dreamed of it.

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