



"Who could help admiring her?" he said.

"Yes; I think her the most lovely woman in the room."

"I don't know that," he responded, gravely; "but she is certainly beautiful."

"And so good—so really good, I mean," she said, fervently.

"All women are good, Lady Ruth," he remarked, with a faint smile.

"Thanks for my sex in general; but I mean what I say. There is not a trace of vanity or coquetry, for instance, in her nature."

"One has only to glance at Miss Constance Grahame's face to learn that," he said.

"Yes, Constance is her name," she murmured, quietly.

"He saw his mistake at once, and looked down at her sharply and suspiciously for a moment."

"Don't you think it a very pretty name?" she asked.

"Very," he replied. "Shall we have another turn?"

"If you are sure I have got your step," "Perfectly," he answered.

"Ah, Miss Grahame would be a better partner for you; I am too short," she said, carelessly. "Have you danced with her yet?"

"I was so unfortunate as to find her card full," he replied; and his voice had grown slow and guarded, for his acute intelligence had caught a strange significance in her light and easy chatter.

"What was it she was aiming at? He watched her face closely."

"Really, would you like to dance with her?"

"That needs no answer, Lady Ruth." "And you would be very grateful if I got a dance for you?" she asked, looking up at him.

"My gratitude would know no bounds," he replied, smiling.

"Well, then, I will come to your aid. This next dance—it is a waltz, is it not?"

"Yes, it is."

"She has promised it to Lord Airle, but he has gone home with his mother, who was tired, and told her that he sent you as his substitute."

"Would that be fair, Lady Ruth?" he said, with a smile, but she saw his face suddenly flush.

"All is fair in love and war," she answered. "And you are very grateful, Mr. Fenton?"

"Very," he answered. "Do you doubt me?"

"Time will prove," she said. "There go now and secure her before she is engaged. Put me in that seat, please."

"Why should I refuse Lord Brakespear's courteous invitation, Miss Grahame?" he answered.

"What is your object, what is it you intend to do?" she demanded.

"Nothing but to regard most reverently the wishes of a lady whom I was once proud to call my friend," he said, slowly, and with the same mocking smile.

"When last we met and parted you desired that we should be strangers. It was as strangers we met to-night, was it not? If you had wished it otherwise, you would have claimed my acquaintance, would you not?"

"But you intimated by your silence that you would prefer that every one, your future husband, all, should regard us as meeting for the first time. I have respected your wish, that is all."

"She saw his advantage, and in her helplessness she could have cried aloud."

"What more do you want?" he said after a pause. "Tell me, and I will obey you—if it be possible."

"I want that you and I should never meet again," she panted.

"He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Alas, that is impossible. You see, the world is such a small place, and we shall meet—to-morrow."

"No," she said, almost inaudibly. "To-night I tell Lord Brakespear—"

"What?" he said, in a low, slow voice. "That I am an old friend? Yes. And what will you say when he asks you to explain why you met me to-night as a stranger, and concealed the past friendship?"

"She turned her head away with something like a moan on her lips."

"Come," he said, looking round the room carelessly, and speaking in the easiest of conventional tones, "you are distressing yourself without cause. Let us forget the gist of our last interview; if you have, I have not. I told you then that I had knelt to you for the last time. The next time—there should ever arise an echo of the past love—it will be you who will kneel to me. Are you satisfied?"

"But to the lips, not to the face crimsoned, and she was turning on him with wild words of scorn and hate, when the marquis came up."

"She caught his arm."

"Well?" he began, then stopped, full of concern. "Why, Constance?"

"Miss Grahame is quite tired out, I fear, Lord Brakespear," said Rawson Fenton, gravely; "I was just going in search of you."

"Take me home, Wolfe," she whispered, clinging to him, "marchioness if you will allow me," said Rawson Fenton.

"The marquis thanked him gratefully; and took Constance to the entrance."

"A few minutes afterward Rawson Fenton appeared with the marchioness."

"I am so sorry," panted Constance, as she leaned back in the corner of the carriage.

"My dear, why didn't you say you were tired before," murmured the old lady, sympathetically. "I should have been glad to go. Good-night, Mr. Fenton."

"Constance saw his pale face as he stood with uplifted hat, and with a shudder drew her cloak round her so that it almost hid her eyes."

"Let her alone, mother," said the marquis, in a low and anxious voice; "she is tired out. It has been a trying evening for her."

"She lay back in silence, and after a time his hand stole towards hers, and took it and held it firmly. Her fingers closed on it with a fearsome little grasp."

"The carriage sped on its way, and stooping forward to arrange her cloak more closely round her, he touched her arm."

"She opened her eyes and leaned forward, nearer and still nearer to him, and suddenly she had slipped to her knees and was resting against his breast."

"Wolfe, Wolfe," she murmured, "you will love me always, Wolfe? Whatever happens—whatever they say, you will love me?" and she clung to him.

"Constance, Constance, my darling!" he murmured, gathering her to him and kissing her. "What has come to you to-night? What has frightened you? Love you? Why, yes, against all the world, and till death."

"CHAPTER XXIII. Constance tossed to and fro that night, sleepless, restless, and consumed by a fever of apprehension. The pale face of Rawson Fenton, with its sinister smile, so cold and confident, haunted her."

"Over and over again, as the slow hours dragged themselves along, she asked herself the question: Why had she not told Wolfe the story of her life in its entirety? If she had done so, the presence of the man, who pursued and persecuted her with such relentless persistence, would have been a matter of indifference to her."

"turb you, Constance, dear," he said, as she put her arms round him and kissed him. "He said you were very tired."

"I am very tired, and the house was to be kept very quiet so as not to wake you. So I waited outside until I heard you pull up the blinds, and here's Mary with some breakfast, and grandma says you are to have a good sleep before you come down."

"Mary came in with a dainty little breakfast on a tray, and was deeply concerned that her beloved young mistress should have got up thus early."

"The marquis's love, misty, and he hopes you will not get up for hours yet; and these flowers are for you. He cut them himself, miss."

"Constance could scarcely speak as she pressed the blossoms to her lips. His loving words and thoughtfulness sharpened the sting of her self-reproach."

"Uncle Wolfe's been telling me all about the ball," said Arol, curling himself up on one of the chairs. "He says you were the most beautiful girl in the room, Constance, and I'm sure that's true. I wish I had been there. How do you do you think I shall be grown-up enough to go to a ball?"

"Not for a long while yet, dear," she replied, burying her hand in his long curls caressingly, and finding comfort and consolation in his presence. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"Because I want to dance with you, Constance, dear," he answered, with the gravity of a statesman. "Uncle Wolfe says all the gentlemen wanted to dance with you last night. Did you enjoy yourself very much, dear? I hope you didn't quite forget me?"

"That I did not," replied Constance, with absolute truth. "Indeed, in the middle of one of the dances, I was thinking that if it should be fine to-day you and I would take the ponies for a drive."

"He sprang up instantly. "Why, it's a lovely day, Constance, dear!" he exclaimed, delightedly. "Very well, then," she said; "you go and order the ponies, and we will start directly."

"He ran off gleefully, and Constance finished dressing."

"Out in the open air, during the drive, she might perhaps arrive at some determination, might see some road out of the difficulty which surrounded her."

"On his way down the stairs, two steps at a time, Arol ran in to the marquis."

"Hallo!" he said, catching him and swinging him on to his shoulder. "Where are you going at this break-neck pace, young man?"

"Going to order the ponies, Constance and I are going for a drive."

"Oh, indeed?" said the marquis. "Well, you are a favored individual! Go and tell Constance that if she will drive over to Mrs. Marsh's I will meet you there, say at twelve o'clock. I am going to ride over to Mrs. Marsh's business, and will take Mrs. Marsh's as I come back."

"It was almost a relief to Constance, much as she longed to see him and get his morning caress, to find that the marquis had started before she came down."

"My dear rather pale this morning," said the marchioness. "You are not ill, my dear?" she added, with tender anxiety."

"No," replied Constance, with a wan little smile, "only a little tired still."

"The drive will do you good, dear," said the old lady. "Wolfe will be with you at Mrs. Marsh's; he has been very anxious about you."

"Constance's pale face flushed, and she averted her eyes."

"I am sorry I distressed him last night," she murmured, sadly. "My dear, he quite understood, and was full of sympathy. The unusual excitement was too much for you. He has been reproaching himself all the morning for not bringing you home earlier."

"Every loving word seemed to stab Constance, and as she got into the phaeton, her heart ached with the longing to throw herself upon the marchioness's bosom and tell her all."

"She drove through the park and along the narrow lanes, all radiant in their autumn glory, but the cold, brighting like a miasma at her side, but the fresh air and the brightness of the morning brought her no peace. Ever before her there loomed the coming ordeal of the evening, when she would have to meet Rawson Fenton, to speak to and listen to him, and play her part of deception and concealment."

"They turned on to the moor, and the ponies were going along at a smart pace, revelling in the autumn breeze that blew over the broad plain, when suddenly Arol exclaimed:

"Look, Constance! Who's that?"

"Constance looked into the direction to which he pointed, and saw a tall, thin figure standing up distinctly against the sky. It was a gentleman in shooting attire, and carrying a gun. She recognized Rawson Fenton, far off as he was, and her heart sank."

"He is coming across the moor towards us," said Arol; "I wonder who it is?"

"Constance checked the ponies almost instinctively, and her face grew pale. "Why, you are not afraid of him, whoever it is, are you, Constance, dear?" Arol asked.

"The question was more significant than he imagined."

"Yes, she was afraid of him, and she knew it; but she must crush all fear out of her heart. She touched the reins with her whip, and they bounded forward."

"Lancebrook," and her face flushed with resentment at his persistence. "This is Mr. Rawson Fenton, Arol," she said, reluctantly."

"Arol took off his hat and held out his hand, but with no very great promptitude."

"The duchess has been telling me of his illness. He looks quite recovered, thanks to you, Miss Grahame."

"He is quite well," said Constance, mechanically.

"I hope you have had good sport, Mr. Fenton," said Arol, with all the brakespots gravely, and anxious to be polite to a friend of "dear Constance's."

"Thank you, yes, Lord Lancebrook," he replied; "very good sport."

"What have you shot?" asked Arol. "Some plover and a rabbit or two. Would you like to see them? I left them in the hollow there; I'll go and fetch them."

"Oh, no, please don't trouble; I'll go," said Arol, eagerly; and he jumped out and ran to the spot to which Rawson Fenton had pointed.

"Immediately he had got out of earshot Rawson Fenton drew closer to the phaeton, and laying his hand on it, bent forward."

"I thought it likely that I might see you this morning," he said in a low voice.

"The color mounted to Constance's brow, and she flashed an indignant glance upon him. Did he dare to think that she had driven out on the chance and hope of seeing him?"

"I wished to see," he said, fully comprehending the flush and her look. "Last night I seemed to have seen you, were rather unwilling that I should become a guest of Lord Brakespear."

"Ah! I was right," he said, his eyes fixed on hers keenly. "Well, I was desirous of telling you that you need have no such reluctance; to remind you that by no word or deed of mine will any one learn that we were anything more than strangers till last night. I think you can trust me, Miss Grahame."

"Constance's heart beat. "I have nothing to trust to you," she said, coldly. "There shall be no such word between us, Mr. Fenton."

"I will not insist upon a word," he said, with a sinister smile. "All I wanted to say was, that you need be under no apprehension because I happen to spend a few hours under the same roof with you. That is all. I am a man of my word, as you know, and what I said last night I shall stand by. Don't let my presence make you unhappy, or even uneasy."

"Constance set her lips tightly. "Will you please tell Lord Lancebrook that I am waiting, Mr. Fenton?" she said.

"He is coming," he answered, glancing over his shoulder, "and I have said all I wanted to say."

"Arol ran up with half a dozen plover in his hand."

"Aren't they pretty, Constance? It is almost a pity to shoot such pretty birds," he said, as he handed one of the fowls, Mr. Fenton?"

"Rawson Fenton cut off some of the wing feathers."

"You make me quite remorseful, Lord Lancebrook," he said, with a smile. "What will you do with them? Put them in your cap?"

"No, I'll give them to Constance for her hat."

"Then I must give you some more," said Rawson Fenton, with a glance at Constance's pale face. "Will you accept them, Miss Grahame?"

"Thanks, I do not care for them," said Constance. "Come, Arol," and the moment he had leaped in she bowed slightly to Rawson Fenton and drove on."

"He was very kind," said Arol, taking off his cap and sticking the feathers in it. "Is he an old friend of yours, Constance?"

"A lump rose in Constance's throat. Must she lie even to the child?"

"I met him at the ball last night," she said, painfully.

"Oh, I thought he knew you very well, because I saw him talking so—so friendly to you while I was gone," he said innocently.

"Take those feathers out of your cap, Arol!" she exclaimed, almost sharply. "I—I do not like them."

"He whipped off his cap, snatched the feathers out and fung them in the road with a look of surprise at her. "By the way, I am so sorry I put them in," he said. "You are not angry, Constance, dear?" and he nestled up to her."

"She put her disengaged arm around him. "No, no, dear," she murmured, the tears springing to her eyes. "Why should I be? But I—I don't like to see you wearing the feathers."

"Yes, he gave me a wing for my cap, but Constance didn't think it suited me, and I threw it away."

"What base ingratitude," remarked the marquis, absently, as he leaned against the side of the phaeton, and watched the lovely face of his darling."

"Well, perhaps it was," admitted Arol. "But you see, we didn't either of us like Mr. Fenton, so—"

"The marquis looked up with a laugh. "In—deed! Dear me! Oh, you neither of you like Mr. Fenton; is that so, Constance?"

"Constance raised her head, but with downcast eyes, and was silent a moment. Then it flashed upon her that now was the time to tell him all."

"She looked up with a half-eager, half-apprehensive expression in her lovely eyes."

"No, Wolfe," she began, then suddenly Mrs. Marsh's voice crooned behind them. "You are to come to see me, my lord! And the pretty young lady too. Hah, hah!" and she chuckled and shook her head. "That weren't such a bad guess of mine, after all, Lord Wolfe. Bless her sweet face! Ah, my lord, you've got a prize, you've, begging the dear young lady's pardon. But there, the Brakespots' 'ud always have the best wherever it was to be found, and you be a true Brakespear, Lord Wolfe."

"Thank you for both of us, Mrs. Marsh," he responded, laughing. "You must come and dance at our wedding, remember."

"Ay, that I will," crooned the old lady. "But you must make haste about it, or I'll be getting too old. And here's some milk for the young lord, lookin' as well and rosy as a pippin; ay, and we all know who to thank for that," with a courtesy to Constance.

"The chance had gone. Was it to prove her last chance? Constance asked herself as she drove home with her lover riding beside her."

"CHAPTER XXIV. The color had left Constance's face long before the dressing-bell rang, and its reflection shone on her face as she sat in the glass, startled and warned. One glance at the pale face would tell Rawson Fenton that she was afraid of him. She could not endure that. At all costs she would meet him unflinchingly, to outward show, at any rate. So while she dressed she schooled herself into something of the look like self-possession and indifference."

"After all, she asked herself over and over again, what had she to fear? Was it likely that Rawson Fenton would go to the marquis and say, 'I loved the woman you are about to marry, and I have persecuted her? No, he could scarcely be mean enough to have his own unmanliness. Besides, he had some object in view in cultivating the marquis's friendship—this political business he was pursuing; he would scarcely have risked from it to wreak his spite against her, and he must know that she was now lost to him forever, and accept the fact."

"Yes, she was wrong in being afraid of him, and would be doubly wrong in letting him see it."

"She dressed herself with more than usual care to-night, and had the satisfaction of seeing that her face was less pale as she threw a last glance at it before descending. He should not detect by a ribbon away how much his presence affected her."

"The guests had not arrived, and the marchioness was alone in the drawing-room when she entered."

"Did I tell you that Ruth was coming, dear?" she said, placidly, looking up at the tall, graceful figure with loving admiration. "How well you are looking to-night! Wolfe almost thought of putting them off of you."

"I am glad he did not," said Constance, crushing down the exactly opposite thought. "Oh, yes, I am quite well. No, you did not tell me Lady Ruth was coming."

"Well, Constance, dear," she exclaimed, bestowing a pecking kiss upon them both. "Quite recovered? What a sensation you created last night. I'm afraid you didn't see it all, aunt."

"I heard of it," said the old lady, with a smile.

"Quite a triumphal progress, I assure you. All the rest of us 'paled our ineffectual fires before her. By the way, dear, I must congratulate you upon a most distinct conquest."

"Yes?" said Constance, without looking up from some flowers she was arranging in a vase.

"Yes, quite a case of 'I came, I saw, I conquered.' I never saw a man so badly hit, really. He scarcely took his eyes off you while you were there, and seemed quite disconsolate when you had gone."

"Constance smiled coldly. "May one ask the name of the unfortunate man, Ruth?" asked the marchioness, serenely.

"Oh, yes; it was Mr. Rawson Fenton, who is going to dine here to-night," she replied. "Can I help you with those flowers, dear?" and she moved to the table."

"Constance had not schooled herself in vain, and her eyes, as she raised them to the sharp ones bent on her, were perfectly calm and steady."

"No, thank you; it is done now."

"You don't appear to be much moved by the tidings of your victory," said Lady Ruth. "Really, I think you are the least vain of any girl I know, my dear."

"Constance is certainly not vain," remarked the old lady, placidly.

"And it is to be hoped that Wolfe has outgrown his jealousy," said Lady Ruth with a laugh. "Do you remember how fearfully jealous he used to be as a boy, aunt?"

"Wolfe has changed very much—for the better," said the marchioness, glancing at Constance with tender gratitude.

"Oh, yes, of course. Love is an excellent schoolmaster. But, still, I don't think we had better tell him of poor Mr. Fenton's disaster."

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