

A MOONLIGHT ESCAPE.

CHAPTER IX.

A mild muggy day in November; the southerly wind and cloudy sky dear to the soul of the hunter; a goodly sprinkling of red coats, black coats, and here and there a well fitting habit in front of the Manor—for the Derings were giving their annual hunt-breakfast. Effie stood on the steps, having just emerged from the dining-room, where she had been ministering to the wants of her latest guests, and now waited for her pet mare Zoe to be brought round. Miss Dering was looking remarkably well in her riding-habit; and it was the best that could be got for love or money, for, if Effie was particular about anything, it was as to the fit of that garment. Standing there in her irreproachable get-up her hat tilted slightly forward, a gardenia in her button-hole, she looked bewitching; and the eyes of two men rested admiringly on her as she ran down the steps to mount.

But it was only Harold Parkinson who started forward to help her into the saddle; Hector sat motionless on a good-looking bay that he intended to try for the first time that day; and, when they all moved off, it was Harold who rode by her side down the avenue. He never made way for Hector now—indeed the latter did not attempt to set him aside. Having made up his mind that Effie had never cared much for him, it mattered little to him for whom she would care eventually—as well Parkinson as another.

Effie was now far more unhappy than her ex-lover. She never could forget that it was through her that the engagement had been broken off—that, had she shown less pride, she might have kept Hector to his allegiance without betraying the secret of the pine-grove. She imagined too that Hector had quite got over the love he had certainly felt once for her, and her constant dread was that he would find out that hers still existed.

In these circumstances their intercourse was not of unmixed delight: still Effie felt that she would rather have him there merely as a friend than not at all. She had not the tortures of jealousy to endure as yet; he had shown no inclination to supply her place, and match-making mothers angled for him in vain. She must be thankful for small mercies. In the meantime not even her mother could divine the anguish to which she was sometimes a prey, or indeed see that she cared for Hector but as a friend.

They found at once in the Manor covert, and then Effie and the two young men rode side by side in the first flight. Zoe was a splendid fencer, and Harold was very well mounted; Hector's bay horse was the worst jumper of the three animals. Effie glanced anxiously at him once or twice as he rushed at his fences, but she had every confidence in Hector's horsemanship; and indeed they ran the fox to ground without any mishap. While they were waiting for him to be dug out Hector approached Effie, who was apart from the others.

"I was afraid you would be in front of me to-day," he said. "I think this animal is a mistake."

"That he is," said Effie; "he is not fit to ride with hounds. As you can afford to be well mounted, why ride a horse that is sure to fall sooner or later?"

"Fancy you preaching prudence!" laughed Hector, thrilled with joy, nevertheless, at the anxious look in her eyes.

"I practice it, I think," she replied. "There is no danger in riding Zoe, and I mount her whenever I can."

"But, when you can't, I have heard that you will ride any horse in the stables."

"They all jump," said Effie carelessly. "What a time they are digging that fox out! I wish we could get on."

Keen sportsman though he was, Hector could not echo the wish. These two were quite by themselves in a corner of a field, and he did not often get a *tele-a-tele* in such favorable circumstances. But Effie's desire was soon gratified, for, shortly after she had expressed that wish, the hounds were running hard again, and these two after them as eagerly as before.

"We are in for a good thing," said Hector, as they dashed along. "I believe this is a fresh fox; he is making for the uplands."

"Then do be careful," she said. "That animal will tire soon and come down at one of those nasty fences."

They were again well in front, this time without Harold, who had been thrown out when they started, and Hector fondly hoped that they had got rid of him. He came up with them soon, however, after they had met with a slight check, and the three friends, the huntsman, one of the whips and a sporting farmer left the rest of the field at one of the nasty fences of which Effie had spoken.

By this time the pace had begun to tell upon most of the horses; but upon none more than Hector's bay, who had taken more out of himself at his fences than the others. Zoe seemed as fresh as ever; she could have carried a couple of stone over Effie's weight, and the girl always nursed her carefully. She now enjoyed the privilege of leading the field.

"By Jove, they are running into him!" cried Harold at last, as he followed Effie over a fence into a stiff bit of ploughed land. "Let us get up in time to secure his brush!" There was rather a bad fence between them and the hounds, but Zoe cleared it, Harold got over with a scramble, closely followed by the huntsman, who galloped on to whip off the hounds. Then Hector rode at it; but by this time the bay horse had shot his bolt, and turned a complete somersault into the field, throwing his rider heavily.

Effie uttered a low cry, and, springing to the ground, rushed to where Hector lay, white and motionless. Harold, running up, found her kneeling by him and supporting his head on her arm.

"Is he dead?" she asked quietly.

"No, dear," replied Harold; "he is only stunned. Is there any house near?"

"Yes; Joe Davis's farm," said Ete. "He could be taken there."

She had not noticed Harold's expression of endearment, nor did he know he had given utterance to it. All he knew was that Effie was lost to him for ever. He knew for certain now that her love was given to Hector Lyndhurst. The despair in her lovely eyes, as she raised them to his own when asked that question, told him that.

Just then Joe Davis himself came running up. He had been at work in a neighboring field, and had come over to see the hounds when the accident happened.

He went to fetch a hurdle, and Effie was left alone with Hector, for Harold, not be-

ing able to do any thing good, moved away, after sending a country lad on his own horse for a doctor.

Hector opened his eyes for a moment and looked Effie full in the face.

"Is that you, Effie?" he asked.

"Yes," she almost whispered. "Do you feel pain anywhere, Hector?"

But he had relapsed into unconsciousness. They carried him to the farm and up to a bed-room; then all they could do was to wait for a doctor.

"Call me if he recovers consciousness," said Harold to Effie, as he left the room.

He could not stay and look at the anguish in her face, nearly as white as the ghastly one on the pillow, so he went out and paced up and down the little garden in front of the house until the doctor's arrival.

The doctor was not long in coming. He pronounced the injuries to be less serious than they had imagined. There had been a slight concussion of the brain, but from that he was recovering and had only to be kept perfectly quiet for some hours; an ankle however was dislocated. It would be better not to move him from the farm for some days; and he, the doctor, would send a nurse from Hillborough, the nearest town, if Patience could not tend to him.

But Patience begged so earnestly to be allowed to nurse Mr. Lyndhurst that Harold, after a glance at Effie, consented. He himself would return that night after taking Miss Dering home, he said, and sit up with Hector. Effie gave him a grateful look.

"Then I suppose it is useless for me to stay here," she said.

"Yes," said the doctor; "if I might be permitted to make a suggestion, you had better return home. I will remain here until Mr. Parkinson comes back. Now I can't leave my patient any longer—he may return to consciousness at any moment."

They were standing in the passage, Harold and Effie having come out of the little parlour, to which they had descended while the patient was being examined, to hear the doctor's verdict, and, as he turned to go up-stairs again; Mr. Dering rode up to the open door. He had had a bad fall himself earlier in the day, and was riding home when he heard of the accident, and, fearing that Effie was there and would have no one to look after her, rode back, in spite of a sprained arm, to take her home.

He went up to see Hector, and found him quite sensible, but in great pain with his ankle.

"He seems terribly shaken," said Mr. Dering, when he came down; "but, beyond the ankle, there doesn't seem much harm done. That comes of riding untrained horses; it never pays. Come along, Effie; I want to get home; my arm is rather painful."

So they left Harold to watch the injured man and to mourn over the death of his own hopes.

"Don't send her away; I love children," said Hector, smiling at little Effie Davis, who had toddled in through the open door and stood staring at him with a finger in her mouth, unheeding her mother's gestures.

"Well, if she will be good," said Patience, nothing loath, rising and putting away her work to take her little girl in her arms.

She sat down again by the fire with the child on her lap. Effie still regarded the stranger with wondering eyes, and Hector was much amused at her inquiring expression. He was beginning to feel terribly bored; not suffering much, but unable to read. It was dreadful work lying there the whole day through, and he even welcomed the advent of this child to break the monotony.

He had now been three days at the farm and had had quite enough of it. He was looking forward anxiously for the morrow, when he was to be taken home.

Hector was rather a Sybarite in spite of his wanderings and the many privations his enforced sojourn had necessitated; and the badly furnished room—beautifully clean though it might be—jarred upon his sense of the artistic. He could not but feel grateful to the worthy couple who nursed him so carefully, but he knew that he would be very glad when he could take his departure.

Patience irritated him beyond expression. She would sit by his fire for hours, if there were no one else with him darning stockings and watching his every movement. He did not know that it was her love for Effie that made her take such care of him. With a woman's instinct, Patience had divined that Effie's love was still bestowed upon Hector, and that knowledge made her do everything in her power for him. The two Davises had simply adored Effie from the time when she had so nobly befriended them, and often said to each other that they would lay down their lives for her, if necessary. So any one in whom she might take an interest would be sure to have a claim to their consideration.

"What a pretty child she is!" said Hector. "What is her name?"

He asked the question in all carelessness and was quite startled by the answer.

Effie Patience, sir; she is called after Miss Dering."

With Hector the little one was immediately invested with a fresh interest.

"Is Miss Dering her godmother?" he asked.

If he had wanted Patience to talk about Effie, he had succeeded completely; and he was bored no longer. Effie's manifold virtues were expatiated upon at the greatest length by her humble adorer, who was glad to be able at last to rouse Hector's interest.

"But then Joe and I can never think enough of Miss Dering," continued the young woman, "after all that she has done for us."

"Has she been particularly kind to you?" asked Hector.

Anything to make her go on talking of Effie!

"Kind, sir? Why, when Joe was in such trouble, hiding in the pinewood, and I broke my leg and could not take him his food, what does dear Miss Effie do but carry that heavy basket for miles, so that he might not come out of his hiding-place?"

"Hiding? I don't understand!" said Hector, bewildered.

"It was rather more than two years ago, sir—that time when Joe was suspected of killing Sam Kirton, the gamekeeper—and he hid so as not to be arrested. I should not have told you perhaps—I know that Miss Dering did not want people to know of it, she being a magistrate's daughter and Joe a suspected criminal, as it were; but I shall never forget her kindness!"

"She actually went and took him food?" said Hector, greatly interested.

"Yes, sir; and a nice, long, tiresome way it was. I could hardly drag the basket there, what with jumping from stone to stone up the stream, and then clambering through the brambles. Indeed, once she went in the middle of the night; and how she could have had the courage to go that lonesome way I can't for the life of me imagine."

"In the middle of the night, you say?" cried Hector, a light breaking in upon him.

"Yes, sir. Joe told me that you might have knocked him down with a feather when he heard her whistle. And she would not let him come back even part way with her. It was as light as day, Joe says, but he could not bear the thought of the likes of her wandering about at night."

A moonlight night! Hector saw it all now.

"How could you let her go at all?" he asked hoarsely.

"I was half mad with despair, sir; and there was not a living soul but Miss Effie whom I could trust."

And then Patience told him the whole story.

He answered never a word, and Patience thought she had wearied him with her chatter and stole quietly from the room with little Effie in her arms, hoping that he would sleep.

Hector lay with closed eyes, as she had left him; but never was sleep farther from him. He had indeed food for bitter reflection. His brave, loyal Effie! How could he have doubted her for a moment? And he had lost her—lost her forever by his own conduct—left her to a worthier man; for Hector had long thought that Effie would eventually become Harold Parkinson's wife.

It was a maddening idea—one not calculated to lower a patient's temperature; and, when the doctor came that evening, he looked grave and told Patience that he would spend the night at the farm. He feared that there had been a graver injury to the head than he had at first imagined, and that Hector might have an attack of brain fever.

However, Hector had sense enough to know that he was not in a fit state to reflect upon this melancholy subject, so, by a great mental effort, he turned his thoughts into another channel, until the doctor's medicine procured him the blessed gift of sleep.

And how was Effie faring all this time? But badly, it is to be feared. It is hard to have to sit with fond misgivings when the beloved of one's heart is lying on a bed of sickness, and one cannot go and tend him—harder still to have to suppress every sign of over-anxiety and restrain the questions that rise to one's lips when friends come to give the latest news. All this had Effie to do, besides trying to appear more cheerful than usual all through the day.

The one hour she looked forward to was that when she accompanied her father or mother to make their daily inquiries at the farm. Mrs. Dering went once, and left Effie in the carriage while she herself went to see the patient. How the girl envied her mother! What would she not have given to be able to sit by Hector's bedside and read or talk to him as he might wish! Mrs. Dering's heart ached for her daughter as she caught the anxious look in the blue eyes when she stepped into the carriage. Could she and her husband have been mistaken in their estimate of Effie's affection for Hector Lyndhurst? At any rate, thought the good lady with a sigh, it is all over now. Hector himself had evidently no idea of coming forward again.

Then Effie rode over twice with Mr. Dering, who was never happy riding without his daughter, except after the hounds.

"Come up and see the poor fellow," he said, as he sprang from his horse at the door.

But Effie declined on both occasions. She could not forget that, when Hector had opened his eyes that day after his fall, he had found his head on her arm; and she dreaded to look him in the face now.

So, even when he was back again at Lyndhurst Park and lying on the sofa in the library, she could not be persuaded to pay him a visit, although her father told her that Hector had said that it would be very kind if she would accompany Mr. Dering the next time he came.

It seemed really hopeless to think of these two over-sensitive and proud young people being reconciled.

CHAPTER X.

Effie sat alone by the fire in the morning-room one afternoon in December. Mrs. Dering was confined to her room with a bad cold, and the Squire was absent attending a political meeting in the neighboring town. It was by a curious coincidence that Hector Lyndhurst chose this day to come and thank the Derings for their kindness to him when ill. The footman naturally enough showed him into the room where Effie sat, and she rose to greet him.

"It is indeed a pleasure to see you about again," she said, shaking hands warmly with him.

Hector looked in vain for a trace of emotion on her part, but found none. The girl had really turned pale when he came into the room, but the fire cast such a glow upon her face that he did not notice it. During these days of enforced inaction, Hector had had plenty of time to review the different incidents that had taken place during his brief engagement, and wonder whether after all, Effie had really cared for him more than he thought, and a few words with Harold Parkinson had confirmed a faint hope that had arisen in his breast.

That young man had been smoking with him one day, and the conversation had turned on matrimony.

"I shall never marry," said Harold in a tone of conviction, knocking the ash of his cigar in a most unceremonious way, and though his heart was very sore as he spoke.

"You are deciding rather early in the day," laughed Hector. "You ought not to marry for the next five years."

"I would marry to-morrow, if the girl I want would have me," rejoined Harold.

"I won't pretend to misunderstand you," said Hector. "You mean Effie Dering."

"I do. I have loved her for more than two years, but it has been only lately that I have given up all hope. When you left her, I made up my mind to try to win her. I have faith in perseverance; but I see now that it is of no use to think of her any more."

Hector made no answer, but lay looking into the fire dreamily. Harold glanced at him as he lay there and thought bitterly

that it was not to be wondered at that a girl, once in love with him, should remain unchanged. What a splendid fellow he was, even with the pallor of his short illness still on his sunburned face! And how stupid, he thought, to let pride stand in the way of his winning such a prize!

"You don't ask me what has decided me to abandon the pursuit?" he asked moodily.

"I leave that to you to tell me," said Hector; "I don't wish to be indiscreet."

"I will tell you," said Harold, looking him full in the face. "I know—I am perfectly convinced—that Miss Dering will never marry unless the right man asks her. And 'thou art the man!' he add emphatically."

"Can you give me a reason for this conviction?" asked Hector.

Then Harold told him of Effie's repeated refusals of himself, of her expressed determination never to marry, and, above all, of her agonized look as she bent over Hector's senseless form that day in the hunting-field.

"I am cutting my own throat, I know," said Harold, "by telling you all this; but I love the girl so dearly that I would willingly suffer torture to see her happy. I tried to bring you together again, Lyndhurst, when you quarrelled more than two years ago; I felt in honour bound to do so, as I was in a way mixed up in the misunderstanding. Then, having done all I could, I felt justified in trying for my own happiness; but as I have told you, it was of no avail. Now I have said my say, and will never willingly again allude to the subject."

The conversation then drifted on to unimportant topics. But these earnest words of Harold's bore such fruit that the next day found Hector Lyndhurst, regardless of the remonstrances of his housekeeper at his rashness in venturing out for the first time on such a day, giving orders for the carriage to be brought round to take him to the Manor. And, as has been seen, he could not have timed his visit better.

"Now," said Effie, after her first frank greeting, "I must make much of you now that you have come. Take that arm-chair; it is the most comfortable. Or will you have the sofa wheeled to the fire?"

Hector decided in favour of the arm-chair and Effie brought him another chair on which to rest his injured leg, a cushion for his back, and rang for tea, though it was early in the afternoon.

"You ought to have something after your drive this cold day," she said. "I was beginning to feel rather dull; mother is down with a bad cold, and my book is not thrilling."

"I have any quantity of novels to lend you, if you are hard up for one," said Hector. "I have got through an enormous number since I have been laid up."

"Yes; what a nuisance it must have been for you to be all this time in the house!"

"And to think it was by my own fault!" said Hector. "You were a true prophetess, Effie."

"No one can be more sorry than I am to find myself right," was the reply. "I hope this will be a warning to you, as the old ladies say."

At this juncture the man brought in the tea-tray, and Effie busied herself with Hector's wants.

Could Harold Parkinson have been right, he thought; and had he only to ask and to have? But no; the friendly warmth of that greeting had at once chilled his rising hopes. No girl would have so openly expressed her pleasure at meeting a man she loved. He did not understand the subtleties of a woman's mind. It was to hide her embarrassment that Effie had thus greeted him. Her one desire was to hide her love from him, and she thought that she could not do this better than by being most cordial in her manner. She rightly imagined how Hector would construe it.

The snow was falling, and the flakes whirled past the window, darkening the room. The firelight flickered upon the young people; and a silence fell upon them, born of their conflicting emotions—a silence that Effie was the first to break.

"I have just heard from Mable Fenwick," she said—"Miss Parkinson that was you know; she is soon coming to Copston. By-the-by, this was her wedding-day two years ago. How well I remember it! I was one of the bridesmaids, and was so afraid that my nose would be bright crimson before I got to Copston! It was snowing harder than it is now and bitterly cold."

She was merely making conversation, and Hector answered mechanically.

"Mable has such a darling little girl," Effie went on; "I hope she will bring her."

"What a lovely little child that is at the farm!" said Hector suddenly.

"Oh, isn't she a darling? She is my great pet; they have called her after me."

"They seem devoted to you," said Hector slowly, looking Effie full in the face.

The blue eyes fell before his glance and something they read in it, and the colour mounted to her face.

"They say you were kind to them when they were in trouble," pursued Hector, hoping that Effie would now take the opportunity of explaining the mystery of that moonlight adventure, to which Patience had given him a clue—"that you helped them when no one else could."

"I was of some use to them once," said Effie Dering evasively.

Hector bit his lip. Surely, if she cared for him, she would at least mention what she had done for the Davises and leave to him the task of putting his construction on it!

The words "so young and so untender" came to his mind as he looked at Effie leaning back indifferently in her chair, playing with a hand-screen she had taken up to shade her face from the heat of the fire.

Well without stooping to conquer, he would find out, and that speedily too, whether she did care for him or not. An idea had just entered his head.

"How happy and devoted these two are!" he said. "I assure you I often thought, as I saw them together, that I would exchange Lyndhurst Park for the farm and my life for that of a working man's, if I could taste such happiness as theirs."

"Do you think people are more devoted in cottages, then?" asked Effie, trying to smile and look indifferent, though her heart was beating wildly. "I don't think that Patience and Joe are happier in each other than are Mabel and Sir James Fenwick, though Mabel and Sir James have a large place and thousands a year; it is not the income that matters."

"At any rate, the sight of such domestic happiness made me envious," said Hector;



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"and I am thinking of trying it on my own account. Would you welcome my wife, Effie, if I brought a Mrs. Lyndhurst to the Manor?"

Just for an instant the girl caught her breath; but her hesitation was scarcely perceptible, and she replied bravely.

"Of course, Hector, your wife would be my friend. What are you thinking of? You are sure not to choose one with whom I could not get on."

"I am very fond of Isabel Nicholson," pursued Hector—which was perfectly true as to the letter, the young lady in question being a great "chum" of his, principally because she was secretly engaged to a great friend of Hector's, and the latter was the recipient of Isabel's confidences and her pet partner at dances, during the absence of the adored one. "Do you think she would make a good mistress of Lyndhurst Park, Effie?"

This was carrying the war into the enemy's camp with a vengeance. Vaguely talking of a prospective wife was bad enough, but actually to name an individual as such was terrible.

Effie sat appalled, trying to repress the tears that would rise at the thought of this girl as Hector's wife—her Hector that had been, that would have been still but for cruel fate! She did not personally care much for this Isabel Nicholson—there was nothing in common between the two girls; but, had she been her dearest friend, Effie felt that she would still have had to struggle against a sudden and violent hatred of her. She tried hard to subdue this feeling and speak generously of her supposed rival; but, when the words came, they sounded forced to her ears.

"I think Miss Nicholson a very pretty girl, Hector," she said quietly. "I have no doubt she will make you a good wife."

"Then I have your consent, Effie!" he asked gaily.

He could tell by her manner that she loved him now. Had she been merely a friend to him, she would not have treated the question of his marriage so coldly. She would, at any rate, for the sake of common politeness, have shown some little interest in the matter—have plied him with questions as to his hopes and fears, the length of his attachment to the girl, and gone into the numerous details involved in a love-affair, instead of sitting there so calmly with half-averted face, gazing into the fire.

There was more hesitation this time; then the answer came bravely.

"I should always wish for your happiness—you know that," she said gently; "and I am sure your choice is a wise one." Just a little gasp at the last word.

Hector rose from his seat and came nearer, leaning against the mantelpiece.

"At one time we neither of us could have imagined that one day I should be consulting you about the choice of a wife, could we?" he asked softly.

There was no answer. He had gone a little far. The bright head was bent down now, the little hands were trembling.

"Could we, Effie!" continued the cruel young man.

Down came a large tear on to Effie's hand, but she answered not a word.

But the sight of this tear was too much for Hector's self-control. The next moment he was down upon his knees before her, passionately kissing the little hands, and then, emboldened by their not being withdrawn, leaving them there and seeking with his lips the tear-stained face; while Effie laid her head upon his shoulder and wondered that so much happiness did not kill her.

"You naughty girl!" he said at last. "And you have loved me all this time and hidden it so well; leaving it to others to tell me of it? Effie what do you deserve?"

Kisses, apparently, for he continued showering them upon her; while she lay contentedly in his arms, oblivious of everything save the fact that they were reconciled.

Meanwhile Mr. Dering had entered unperceived, and was staring in astonishment at the sight.

"Bless my soul!" said the worthy gentleman, as the lovers started apart of seeing him.

"A ten!" laughed Hector.

[THE END.]

Ferguson says that he wishes the law that compels the saloons to shut up at twelve o'clock applied to his wife.