THE HEIR OF SANTLEIGH

OR THE STEWARD'S SON

CHAPTER XI.

The footman having brought in the tea equippage, had retired, and though the room was as superbly decorated and furnished as the drawing-room at the Court, it seemed almost as homely and simple as the little parlor at Cliff Cottage.

Listening to Lord Ferndale's cheerful, unaffected talk, Norah thought wistfully how much nicer it would be if her father were a little less stately and formal.

"You refused to sing for us the other night, Lady Norah."

"But I will sing now."

He was going to follow her and open the piano for her, but Lady Ferndale motioned to him to remain where he was, and Norah, without a trace of self-consciousness, and only the desire to please these two loving souls who had made so much of her, sat down and sang the first thing that came into her head.

It is not at all probable that Norah would have made a fortune on the operatic stage, but she had a sweet voice that, though it had been carefully trained, was as natural as a bird's, and as it filled the room, softly lighted by the rose-shaded candles, Lord Ferndale looked at his wife with a mixture of surprise and admiration.

"What a dear, clever girl it is," murmured Lady Ferndale.

"A rose in June!" quoted Lord Ferndale, in a low voice. "If anything can melt Arrowdale's heart, she will!"

"You sing very beautifully, Lady Norah," he said. "You must give us one or two more; remember, it is a treat to us."

"I will sing as long as you like," said Norah, simply, and she sang again. Then Lady Ferndale found a duet, and discovered, with delight, that their two voices blended together perfectly.

"Oh, my dear, if you only belonged to me!" she exclaimed involuntarily, with a sigh, as she stooped to kiss her.

Was it no wonder that Norah's eyes grew moist with tears of happiness and gratitude or that when the footman announced that the carriage was waiting she should start with dismay?

Lord Ferndale went out of the room, and returned, bearing in his own hand a decanter of wine, and insisted upon Norah's drinking a glass.

"Better obey, dear," said Lady Ferndale smilingly, "he is a dreadful tyrant, and fearfully obstinate."

When Norah had got her things on and Lady Ferndale had wrapped the soft shawl round her, "making me into a parcel-post bundle," as Norah laughingly declared, a maid came forward in her bonnet and cloak.

"I'll send her with you, dear," said Lady Ferndale, but Norah showed that she could be as obstinate as Lord Ferndale, and point-blank refused the escort.

"Why, what could happen to me in a close carriage between here and the Court, dear Lady Ferndale?" she said. "Please don't send her! I shall not like to come again if I give you so much trouble! You wouldn't send her if—if I were your daughter," she added shyly.

"Norah's right!" exclaimed Lady Ferndale. "But, mind, we take you at your word, and you are just to come to us as if you were our daughter. That's a bargain, my child."

"I'm witness to it," said Lord Ferndale.

They both went to the carriage and Lady Ferndale seemed, as she held her in her arms and kissed her, as if she could scarcely bring herself to part with her, and the last Norah saw of them they were standing arm-in-arm on the steps waving their hands at her.

Norah looked out at the night—the moon was rising, a great yellow orb, above the hilltops—her whole being thrilling like some sensitive musical instrument, her heart melting under the influence of the lovable couple she had just left. For a time she leaned back in the luxurious carriage and recalled their kindness to her and forgot all else; but suddenly, almost with a shock, she found that her thoughts had strayed and that they wandered to some one else, and she found herself thinking of Cyril Burne!

It seemed ungrateful to bestow a single thought upon any one but these two, and she tried to drive him from her mind, but looking out of the window she saw that they were ascending the hill on the other side of which Lady Ferndale had stopped to speak to him, and back he came again.

Would he accept Lady Ferndale's invitation and leave Santleigh? How quickly Lady Ferndale had taken to him? Yes, he was a gentleman, though he might only be an artist, poor and unknown. If he left Santleigh she would, perhaps, never see him again! The thought seemed to drive all the happiness out of her heart, and she leaned back and drew the shawl round her as if the night had suddenly become cold.

The carriage had reached the top of the hill and was going down on the other side, and she bent forward to look at the gate upon which Cyril Burne had been sitting, when she saw something white flit from a tree and cross the road. It was an owl and its screech startled her a little.

It seemed to have startled the horses a great deal, for she felt the carriage swerve, come to a standstill for a second, then rush forward so sharply as to jerk her on to the front seat. With a smile she picked herself up, but the smile vanished and a vague alarm fell upon her as she saw the hedges and trees flying past the window at racing pace.

Has any one ever yet been able to describe all the phases by which an accident progresses to the final catastrophe?

Norah knew and realized nothing more until she experienced a jar, as if the wheels had caught upon something and felt the carriage sway and fall over; but as she fell with it she was conscious of hearing, amid the stamping and snorting of the frightened horses and the voice of the coachman, the sound of another voice.

If she fainted, it must have been only for a moment or so, for without any appreciable interval she saw the uppermost door of the overturned carriage wrenched open and felt a man's strong arm round her.

The next moment she was in the road, the arms still encircling her, and, looking up, she met Cyril Burne's eyes looking into hers with alarm and anxiety—and something else that even in that moment brought the blood mantling to her cheek.

"Are—are you hurt?"

"No—no, I think not!"

"Are you sure? Ah, you can't tell!" he exclaimed.

"I'm not hurt, I'm sure."

"Don't move!" he implored her. "Please, please don't move!" And his strong arm wound round her, and seemed unconsciously to lift her off her feet, so completely did it support her.

"I don't think I have broken anything," she said, her color coming and going. "No, I am sure I have not! Oh, please, don't mind me; the poor horses!"

"Never mind the horses!" he said, almost curtly. "Hold on to my arm and walk just three steps; no more, mind!"

"I haven't even broken my leg," she said, forcing a laugh. "And I don't see how I could have done! I am not in the least hurt—and do, please, not to think of me! The horses——"

He paid not the slightest regard until he had assured himself that she could walk without pain, then she heard him draw a breath and murmur, "Thank God!" with fervent solemnity.

"Sit down and rest; quite still, please!" he said.

"Yes," obediently.

She looked up for a second and met his eyes, still full of the deepest anxiety, then lowered hers suddenly, and watched him under her long lashes as he hurried to the side of the coachman.

One horse was standing quivering in ever limb, but the other was still lying in the road, apparently inextricably jumbled up with the harness.

She noticed that he seemed to take in all the details of the situation with instant promptitude, and she watched him, still under half-lowered lids, as he took out a claspknife and cut the trace, and gently, but firmly got the struggling, panting horse on to his feet.

The coachman and footman stood for a second eyeing the wreck and wiping their perspiring foreheads; the footman's hat was gone and his coat torn.

"Are you hurt in any way?" demanded Cyril Burne.

"No, sir; thank you. But her ladyship?"

"I think—I hope—she is all right," replied Cyril.

"Thank God for that, sir!"

"Amen!" responded Cyril, almost inaudibly.

"Yes, sir, I don't know what my master and mistress would have done if anything had happened to her." His voice shook. "I've been in his lordship's service for twenty years, sir, and this is my first accident—to speak of; but," he looked at the wreck with dismay, "it's an awful one! And it would have been a deal worse," he added with respectful earnestness, "if it hadn't been for you, sir, catching them as you did. It's a mercy you wasn't got down under 'em and kicked to bits."

"Never mind that. Let us see what damage is done," and he went and examined the carriage.

"The wheel's broke, sir," announced the footman.

"And the pole's gone like matchwood," said the coachman, dolefully. "I'm afraid it's impossible to take her ladyship home," he added, reluctantly.

"It is not very far to the Court. I will see Lady Norah safely home."

"Thank you, sir."

"Well, then," said Cyril, for the two men still seemed shaken and confused, "if you are sure you and the footman are uninjured, you had better lead the horses to the village and leave him here by the carriage until you can help to get it all away."

"Yes, sir," he said; "but I'd better take the horses back to Ferndale as soon as possible. My mistress will be terrible anxious if we're late, and fancy an accident has happened—which it has."

Cyril nodded, and taking an envelope from his pocket, wrote on the blank side in rather shaky characters for there was a funny feeling in his arm:

"Lady Norah is quite safe and unhurt, and will have reached the Court before you get this. The coachman was not in any way in fault. Cyril Burne."

He read this to the men, and they touched their hats gratefully.

"Thank you, sir," said the coachman. "It's very good of you to speak up for us, but you haven't said that you risked your own life stopping——"

"Never mind that," said Cyril. "There is no need to mention that; I'm all right. Here, let us drag some of the wreck further out of the road," and he went to help them, but he stopped suddenly, and his face grew momentarily pale.

"Never mind," he said; "the footman will see that no one runs into it."

He took the one carriage lamp that was still burning and examined the horses with a practised eye.

"Not much damage done, wonderful to say," he said, cheerfully, "but the sooner you and they are home, the better. Good-night."

Then he went back to Norah. She had obeyed him so implicitly that she seemed to have been motionless. She looked up as he approached her with a question on her lips, for she had heard nothing of the conversation between him and the men; but the simple "Well?" would not come.

"It is all right," he said, answering the look. "Neither of them is hurt, and the horses seem very little the worse, barring the fright. It has been a wonderful escape. And you?" His eyes wandered over her anxiously.

"I have come off better even than the horses," she said, "for I am not even frightened."

"And you can walk?" he asked.

"Oh, yes."

"I am afraid you will have to walk to the Court," he said, reluctantly, "unless I leave you in charge of the footman and bring some kind of conveyance from the village; it is not very far."

"Oh, no, no," she said, quickly. "I can walk home quite easily, and would not give you so much trouble for the world."

"It would not give me trouble," he said, quietly. "But ill news flies apace, and the earl might hear of the accident, and be alarmed on your account."

"Yes, yes," she assented at once, "I will walk, please."

"You must take my arm," he said.

She put her hand on his arm, then drew back with a sudden color, and her eyes dropped as she said:

"But—but I need not trouble you to come all that way."

"You cannot go alone," he said. "If you will not let me go with you, there is only one other way; I will stay by the carriage and send the footman with you."

She caught her lip in her teeth, and stood irresolute for a space while one could count ten, then she looked up at him.

"If you will be so kind," she said.

He thought that she meant him to send the footman, and turned, a little sigh escaping him, but Norah said quite innocently:

"Will you tell him, please, that I will send him any help if he wants it?"

"Yes, yes," he said, and he gave the message to the footman and was back in an instant.

"You must take my arm," he said, and though he tried to speak in a matter-of-fact voice, there was a suspiciously joyous thrill in it.

Norah would have declined, but it seemed to her that it would only emphasize the situation, and once more she put her hand upon his arm. She did not notice that he had given her the right one, instead of the left.

For a minute or two they were silent as they made their way along the lane filled with the perfume of a summer's night. Above them the moon slowly sailed upward, a thrush sang sleepily somewhere in the hedge, and the bats whirled through the silver light.

Norah was still trembling a little, but, as she had said, she was not frightened. It was not fear that caused her heart to beat so fast that it almost seemed to her as if he must hear it.

The silence at last grew tangible, almost embarrassing, and suddenly Norah almost stopped.

"Lady Ferndale!" she said, in a tone of remorse, "She will think that it is worse than it is, and I forgot to send her a message."

"That's all right," he said, "I wrote a line or two saying you were safe, and sent it by the coachman."

"You seem to have thought of everything."

"That was not much to think of, Lady Norah."

"And yet I forgot it," she breathed, with self-reproach.

"Oh, don't blame yourself," he said. "Why, the shock alone was enough to drive everything out of your head. I think you have behaved wonderfully."

"How strange that you should have been there!" she said. "You saw it all—or didn't you? I mean the horses first took fright?"

"Yes, I was watching the owl, and saw it go swooping across the road in front of them. I thought they would be startled. It"—the color flashed into his face for a moment—"it was rather strange my being there." He could not tell her that he had returned to the spot where he had seen her in the afternoon, that he might dream of her in the gloaming, and perhaps get a glimpse of her on her way back to the Court. "I'm rather fond of mooning about in the evening. I am so glad I happened to be there."

"So am I—so were we all," she corrected herself. "What made the horses stop?" she asked, innocently.

"The carriage caught in the trunk of a tree and the near horse fell," he replied, simply. "The coachman was not to blame; no one could have held them from the box."

"Poor men," she said. "You will be able to tell Lady Ferndale how it all happened, and that they were not to blame?"

"Yes, it will be an excure for calling on Lady Ferndale."

"Ah, yes; you will like her so much."

"You have spent a happy evening?" he asked, and his voice was subdued by sympathy; the touch of her hand, the sound of her voice was thrilling through him. Her very nearness to him was casting a glamor over him, so that it seemed almost impossible to speak any words than "I love you! I love you!"

"Ah, yes," said Norah; there never were such lovable people, never! At least," she sighed softly, "I have met so few people, and never any who were so kind to me."

"Kind to you! How could they help it?"

The warmth, and something more than warmth, the subdued passion in his tone sent the blood to her face, and she was silent for a moment; then suddenly she stopped.

"Look, there is a glow worm!" she exclaimed with girlish eagerness, and in a low voice, as if she feared to startle it.

"Yes," he said at once; "would you like to have it? I will get it for you," and he went forward and carefully picked it up. "There it is," he said, holding it in the palm of his hand. "It is not so pretty as its light, and even that vanishes in any other. See," and he held it in the full rays of the moon.

She bent forward, so near that the red-brown hair almost touched his lips. His breath came fast, and he stood still as a stone—but, ah! how unlike a stone with that fast beating heart!—and Norah, entirely absorbed in the curious insect, touched it with her forefinger.

"I don't quite like it," she said, drawing back her finger and looking up at him with a smile and a little feminine shudder which he thought surely the most charming gesture he had ever imagined. "No, I am sure I don't like it," and she laughed.

"Then good-bye, glowworm," he said. "Poor thing, I pity you!" he added, inaudibly, as he laid it on the grass; "to be disliked by her!"

"I dare say he is immensely relieved," said Norah.

"Ah, he didn't know when he was well off," he said.

Norah moved forward, and instinctively laid her hand on his arm again.

She had crossed round to the other side of him while she had been examining the glowworm, and it was his left arm that she now touched, and lightly as she touched it, she felt a faint shudder run through him.

Her hand flew from his arm, and she stopped and looked at him.

The moon was shining full upon his face, and she saw that he had gone deathly pale, and that he had caught his under lip in his teeth.

She stood for a moment, her face going from red to white, then the red fled, and the white alone remained.

"You are hurt," she breathed, and there seemed to be almost a sob in the simple words.

(To be Continued).

NAVY DRESS REFORM.

Sailors Will no Longer Make Their Own Clothes.

It is understood in British naval circles that Admiral Sir John Fisher is about to introduce a reform in the matter of clothing that is probably only the preliminary step toward the abolition of what has long been one of Jack's most burdensome grievances, says the London Chronicle.

So far the men's clothing have been provided almost entirely at their own cost upon a plan that was explained the other day by an official at the marine and naval clothing store department, Depford.

"To begin with," he said, "the proposed reform will apply only to trousers. Under the present regulations, whenever necessary, the cloth is issued to the men, who have either to make it up themselves or pay another man for the work. That in itself, of course, is hard enough. When one remembers that the army is clothed at the expense of the nation, it seems rather ridiculous that the cost of naval clothing should have to be deducted from the men's pay.

"But that is not the worst of it. Although there is a regulation pattern, such a detail as the width of the "bell" of a man's trousers is entirely a matter depending upon the taste of the individual captains. One officer may prefer that the trousers should be narrow. The result is that a man transferred to that vessel may have to supply himself with new "togs" simply for the sake of a faddy officer. And the system results in still greater hardship when you remember that even name ribbons may have to be changed perhaps two or three times in a month—transfers are sometimes as frequent—a serious matter, considering that each ribbon costs 10 pence, though the man might buy it in the shops at Portsmouth for 4 pence.

"I don't know that under Admiral Fisher's scheme there will be any radical change in the uniforms. The trousers will be all the same width, and transfer to another ship will therefore involve no alteration."

Nothing has been heard of the proposed change in any of the army clothing departments, and it is therfore believed that the work will be placed in the hands of contractors.

As the matter stands at present, the men will still have to pay for their uniforms. But the new regulations will undoubtedly be a great saving to the men. The uniform is also to be designed on more 'handy' lines, and will therefore be more tight fitting than the style at present in vogue.

HEARD AT THE SEASIDE.

"As a high roller," remarked the wave, boastfully, "you are not in it with me." "For which you should be thankful," rejoined the beach. "Because why?" queried the wave. "Because," answered the beach, "you have me to fall back on when you go broke."

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

Tommy—"Ain't yer goin' ter cane me ter-day, teacher?

Teacher—"No. Why should I?"

Tommy—"Because if I go home and show no signs of bein' caned, father will think I've been playin' truant!"

RUSSIA ON THE ANXIOUS SEAT.