THE HEIR OF SANTLEIGH

OR THE STEWARD'S SON

CHAPTER XV.

"I do not think of that!" she said, almost inaudibly.

"Ah, how can I help loving you? You do not think of that! No! And, if—suppose that some day I could overcome the earl's dislike to me; suppose some day that I could induce him consent——"

He saw the color rise to her face, saw the light glowing in her eyes, and the restraint he had put upon himself gave way.

"Norah," he said, in a low voice, "it is not for him to dispose of our lives. Give me your answer! Will you let me love you? Will you try and love me in return? Will you be my wife?"

"It is impossible," she faltered.

He stood still, his eyes bent on the ground, fighting for self-control, fighting down the passion that threatened to master her; then he sank down on the seat again.

Norah did not dare to look at him, and, with a whispered "Good-by," was turning to leave him, when a brush slipped from the front of the easel. He stooped to pick it up, forgetting his injured arm, but Norah bent and got it, and was placing it on the easel when he caught her hand and looked up at her.

"Ah," he said, "I cannot let you go without some word less hard, less cruel than that!"

She had withstood his pleading voice, though every note of it had found an echo in her heart, but she could not withstand the touch of his hand. As he looked up at her he saw her face change, a wave of passionate tenderness seemed to pass over it, her lips quivered, and, with a gesture as if she were obeying an irresistible impulse, she held out her hand to him, and, seeing that he could not take both, she let it fall with the simple eloquence of love upon his arm.

"You love me," he murrured, "Norah?"

She met his ardent gaze with her frank, trustful one, and steadily, though her face crimsoned.

"Yes—I love!" she whispered.

He put his arm round her, and drew her toward him, passionately, yet reverently.

"My darling, my queen!" his voice seemed to sing. "In spite of all, you love me! Oh, my darling if you knew how full of love my heart is, how happy——" He broke off, and, raising her hand, kissed it passionately, tenderly; then, as her head fell upon his shoulder, he pressed his lips to hers.

Norah did not shrink, but her face grew pale, for it was the first time a kiss of love such as Cyril's had touched her lips, and she trembled.

"Give me one kiss in return!" he pleaded.

Casper, lying beside them in the bracken, watched them sleepily, the great trees above them turned the gentle breeze into a song of love, the sunlight fell upon them like a benediction, and all nature seemed to be standing by, witnessing and approving the compact of their young and loving hearts. To Norah, as she knelt, with his arm round her, her head upon his shoulder, earth seemed to have transformed into paradise. She had not loved till this moment, she had not known what love meant—but now!

Cyril was the first to speak, and it was almost like sacrilege to break the heavenly silence, to snap the spell of enchantment which their happiness had woven round them.

"Do you know what you have done?" he asked her, with mock gravity, as he kissed the red-gold hair that brushed his cheek.

Norah started slightly, as if awaking from a dream, and stroking his hand with a caressing movement, looked up at him with a smile, half shy, half grave.

"What is it that I have done?"

"Plighted your troth—you, the Lady Norah Arrowdale—to a worthless, poverty-stricken artist," he said but there was the shadow of a smile in his eyes, and the tone of his voice wasnot so solemn as the words.

"Not worthless," she murmured, her eyes bent on his hand.

"Not altogether, if you have found something worthy, dearest!" he said. "But a poor and struggling man, anyway. And you are not afraid?"

"Afraid?" she echoed.

"Afraid of what the world—the earl—will say?"

"Why should I care what the world says—and my father——" She stopped, but her lovely eyes were full of courage. "He may be angry, but he cannot separate us."

The tone in which the words were spoken thrilled him, and he kissed her reverently.

"My brave darling," he said, in a low voice. "No, no one on earth shall separate us now that you have said you love me. No one! As for the earl"—he paused a moment, as if he were struggling with a desire to say something and were keeping it back—"well, even he may in time give his consent. Listen, dearest; I am a poor and struggling artist now but I may win the good fight, may win a name which, though it will never be worthy your acceptance, may make me seem less unworthy in your father's eyes."

She listened with an interest, a delightful feeling that his life belonged to her, the feeling which brings so great a joy to the heart of the woman who has just received the avowal of her lover's love. The slightest, most trivial thing in his life would be hers to share with him now!"

"Yes, you will be famous," she murmured, with sweet confidence, and again her tone thrilled through him.

"Tell me so often enough," he responded, "and I shall be. Norah, now that I have won your love, now that it is for you I work"—he drew the letter from Jack Wesley from his pocket and gave it to her—"see, dearest, here is the beginning. I cared very little about it before today, but now I welcome it. It is an earnest of the success your love will bring me."

Norah read the short note, and he told her something of the man who had written it.

"The best friend a man ever had," he said, warmly; "and he will rejoice in my joy."

"Your friend," she murmured. "He shall be mine, too, if he will. I shall love him for your sake, Cyril."

He heard the name from her lips for the first time, though she had called him by it in her thoughts often enough.

"Dear old Jack," he said. "Yes, he will be glad. And, Norah, you have no regrets; you will not mind when your great friends tell you that you have thrown yourself away? That you, a peer's daughter, have acted unwisely in loving an artist."

He looked into her eyes with a strange earnestness, and with the same shadow of a smile upon his handsome face.

Norah touched his hand with her lips as she thought how great, how noble, how altogether perfect he was to her.

"No one will say that who knows you," she said, simply. "And those who do not—ah, why do you ask me? You know, you know!"

"Yes, I know," he echoed, with a long breath of delight and joy: "and the knowledge makes my happiness all the greater. I have won you without the aid of a title, or wealth, or fame. Norah, you cannot guess, not even you, how sweet the knowledge is to me!" and he threw back his head as if he found some mysterious satisfaction in the thought. "Some day, when you and I are together in the world, and you are surrounded by men of title, your equals in rank, I shall say to myself: 'She might have chosen from among these, but she chose me, untitled, poor, unknown."

"I have never thought of these things," she said. "I care nothing for rank. Why, it is only a short time ago that I knew I was the daughter of an earl, and"—she smiled—"the knowledge has not made me any the happier. It would have made no difference to me if you had been noble—I mean titled, if—if I had not loved you." She breathed the last words almost inaudibly.

"Then you would leave the Court and be my wife, and live with me in some little cottage and be content?" he asked, fervently, holding her face in his hands with a tender caress.

"Content!" she echoed, softly. "Is that the word?"

"I may try you some day, dearest; and yet——" He paused, and she regarded him, waiting for him to finish. But he did not; instead, he seemed to thrust the thought from him, whatever it was. "No," he said, "let me enjoy the delight of feeling that you love me for myself alone; that your love is strong enough to make a sacrifice for me."

"What sacrifice can I make for you?" she said, slowly, as if she would have liked to have it in her power to do so.

"Norah!"

She turned her eyes upon him with that rapt devotion which is love's sign.

"Will you think it strange if I ask you to keep our engagement a secret for the present?"

She did not remove her eyes from his face.

"I will do everything you wish. Whatever you wish will be good to me, Cyril! Why should we tell anyone?"

"See, dearest," he said, "I ought to go to the earl this evening and tell him all, but I know what would follow. He would refuse to give you to me—and little wonder!—and he would forbid me to see you."

His face went pale, and her hand closed upon his as if to protest against the mere suggestion of such a terrible calamity.

"He would say that I had taken advantage of your ignorance of the world and won your heart before you had a chance of seeing other men more worthy than I am. And what could I say? Dearest, it is so true! Now, let me tell you all that is in my mind."

"Tell me everything," she said, in a low voice.

"You have read what my good friend says, dearest; the little picture is a success. But there are others ready, and those—well, I am hoping great things for them. I should like to go to the earl and say: 'I am all unworthy of your daughter; I claim to be no more than an artist, but I have made good that claim, and——"

"Yes, we will wait. How clearly you see things, Cyril. My father will consent then."

"Well, dearest," he said, "if he should not?"

"Nothing shall separate us!" she murmured.

Surely if the gentle wind among the leaves echoed their former love vows, it echoed this tender, resolute declaration of her; but it found no echo in the heart of Guildford Berton, who cowering behind a huge oak, listened to every word. He stood close up against the tree, one hand thrust behind him, the other stretched up and grasping a branch with a convulsive, painful clutch. His face was white, and his lips so tightly compressed that he seemed scarcely to breathe.

From his hiding place he could see their faces, but he could imagine the joy and rapture that glowed in them, and the mental vision tortured him as acutely as if he had actually seen them. He longed to fling himself between the two and tear them apart, and his limbs writhed in impotent rage, so that the branch which he held shook and trembled.

Presently he peered round the tree and saw Cyril gather together his painting materials—Norah helping him with a proud tenderness displayed in her every movement and glance—and then he watched them as they walked slowly away, side by side, their eyes meeting, their hands touching. Once, as they were nearly out of sight, he saw Cyril bend his head and kiss her, and at this, the last straw as it seemed, Guildford Berton flung himself on the ground, face downward, as if to shut out his remembrance.

Five minutes passed, and then, as if with an effort, he got up and began to pace up and down.

"Let me think!" he muttered. "Let me think!" and he pressed his hand to his forehead as if with an effort to gain composure. After a time calmness seemed to come back to him, and, with something of his usual impassive manner, he sat down at the foot of the tree, and, with his hands tightly clasped, sank into deep thought.

Lord Ferndale had said to Norah that he did not understand Guildford Berton. Few people did. He was a mystery to all save himself, and that a young man, generally accounted clever, should give up his profession—in which he had shown promise of distinguishing himself—and bury himself in a country village, seemed to all who thought of it the wildest folly.

But Guildford Berton was no fool. Even at this moment he was wise ed. "After all! I was winning, slowly, but surely! Slowly, inch by inch, I was getting that proud old fool under my thumb. Sooner or later his vagabond nephew, the viscount, would have sold his birthright, and the earl would have made me his heir! Then this girl turned up. But I had reckoned on that. She is a woman, and to be won, and I would have won her! Yes, I feel it! Slowly and surely I would have gained the ascendancy over her, as I have gained it over her father. Everything was in my favor. She would have been thrown into my society every day. I would have won her. I the steward's son, would have been the husband of an earl's daughter. I should have ranked as an equal in the place where my father was servant! But now!"—he looked at the spot where Cyril had sat, and gnawed at his lip—"now, this wandering vagabond, this scamp, steps in between me and her!" His hand opened and shut convulsively. "He will marry her in spite of her father, and all that should have been mine will be his! All! Even Norah!" The word dropped from his lips with an intensity which seemed to startle even himself. "Yes, I am a fool," he muttered. "I—I love her! That is my mistake! It is that which has made me weak and set my brain on fire! I love her! But for that I could be cool and play the game carefully, but—but my love confuses me—drives all the thoughts out of my head!" He sprang up and paced up and down. "And she, she hates me, or is near to hating me! And I feel it whenever I am in her presence; I read it in her face, in her voice when she speaks to me! And she will marry this artist fellow, who comes from no one knows where, and I"—he ground out an oath—"I suppose I must give it all up, go back to London, and begin the old hateful life, made all the more hateful by the thought of all I had hoped to gain, all I have lost! "No, by Heaven!" he exclaimed, raising his hand as if he were actually registering a vow, "I will not. There is time yet! I set my brain against yours, Mr. Cyril Burne, and I will fight to the last—the last!"

Footsteps in the bracken startled him at this moment, and, thinking it was Cyril or Norah coming back, he was preparing to return to his hiding-place, when he saw that it was Becca South.

He muttered an imprecation, but, resuming his usual impassive manner, he went to meet her with a forced smile on his dark face.

Becca pulled up a few paces from him, and looked aside, as if she were not in the best of humors, and her first words were spoken in a piqued and injured tone.

"I didn't expect to meet you," she said.

"Well, Becca," he retorted, taking her hand, after a slight struggle, and kissing her. "Unexpected pleasures are all the sweeter. What is the matter now? In one of your tantrums?" and he smiled down at her with affected good-humor.

"No, I'm not," she said, shortly, but walking by his side as he moved away from the glade; it was just possible Cyril or Norah might return. "But I ought to be. You're keeping away from me!" and she began to pout and flash her black eyes upon him.

"Now, Becca," he said, fighting with his impatience and speaking in a soft, persuasive voice, "do try and not be silly. Keeping away from from you! Why, you silly child, I should like to be with you always."

"And why aren't you?" demanded Becca. "Why can't all the world know we're engaged——"

He cast a glance around as if he dreaded that the trees would carry her words to human ears.

"I'm tired of this playing at hide-and-seek. You're ashamed of me, Mr Berton!"

Guildford Berton bit his lips, but still kept on the patient, humoring smile.

"Now, Becca, don't talk nonsense," he said soothingly. "We'll take all the world into our confidence over our love affair, as you wish, but presently, presently. You know how often I have told you that if it were known that you and I were going to be married," he spoke the words quite glibly, but it was fortunate for Becca that she did not see his eyes at that moment, "it would ruin all my plans! You must wait patiently, Becca, dear."

She began to cry in an angry kind of fashion.

"I—I don't believe you care for me now!" she sobbed. "Ever since that girl came you've changed—yes, you have."

"That girl! What girl?"

"Why, Lady Norah! Oh, I'm not blind!"

"You are sillier than ever, you foolish girl!" he said banterinly. "What on earth can Lady Norah have to do with you and me?"

Somewhat reassured, Becca pulled out her pocket handkerchief to wipe away her tears, and in doing so out came the photograph of Catherine Hayes.

Guildford Berton's sharp eye caught it in a moment, and he stooped and picked it up, and, holding it over his head above her reach, shook his head at her smilingly.

"Hallo, Becca! What's this? Come, that's good! You talk like this to me, and at the same time carry young men's portraits in your pocket eh?"

"It isn't a young man's. Give it me back!"

"After I have admired my rival," he said, with mock jealousy. "Really, Becca, I knew you were a little flirt, but—what's this?" he broke off, as he looked at the portrait. "It is Lady Norah's?" he added, as he red the inscription, and his voice changed. "Where and how did you get ot?"

"I found it on the staircase. She must have dropped it."

"Very likely."

"Well, give it me back if you've looked at it long enough."

But with a smile he put the photograph in his breast pocket, where it lay near the little blue phial.

"Not just yet," he said. "Don't be afraid, you shall have it back presently."

"What do you want it for?" she demanded.

He could not have given her the only reason: that anything belonging to Norah was precious to him.

"For nothing," he said, lightly. "You shall have it back to-morrow. Now, don't bother, Becca," and he drew her arm within his and put back a tress of her black hair behind her ear in a caressing, lover-like fashion; and Becca ceased to think any more of the photograph of sad-looking woman she had "picked up on the stairs."

(To be Continued.)

WHEN THE WAR IS OVER.

About the only indemnity the Russian and Jap private soldier will get.

FOUND BY TELEPHONE.

The latest use of the telephone is in locating shoals of fish. The electric apparatus is a German patent. A microphone, enclosed in a watertight case, connected with an electric battery and telephone, is lowered into the water. So long as the telephone hangs free no sound is heard, but on its coming into contact with a shoal of fish the constant tapping of the fish against the microphone case produces a series of sounds which at once betray their presence. The cord attached to the microphone is marked so that the exact depth of the shoal is designated.

NEW BREASTPLATE.

The Russian Government has bought a new breastplate, which is impenetrable to rifle-bullets and swords, and a number of the officers gone to the front in the Far East have been equipped with this new protection against Japanese bullets. The breastplate, which is the invention of an Italian, Giorgiano, is made of soft, elastic material, about one-fourth of an inch thick, and weighs 4 lbs. Experiments made at St. Petersburg show that bullets fired at the breastplate remained in it, and were flattened, without penetrating the inner surface, though a severe shock was distinctly felt by the wearer when shots were fired at a short distance.

A CLEVER RAILWAY DOG.

A curious example of a dog's intelligence is to be seen on the Midland Railway Station at Wellingborough, England. This dog, a tertier, belonging to an official, has taken upon himself the duty of welcoming every train arriving there on which there is a restaurant car. He takes up his position on the platform opposite the kitchen compartment, and it is rare that he is not rewarded with a bone, with which he trots off to some quiet nook. Jack is quite indifferent to all ordinary trains, and will not stir from his master's office.

BARRELS MADE OF PAPER.

Another recent and novel use to which paper is being put is in the manufacture of barrels. The wine-growers of Greece, being badly off for wood with which to construct their casks, and the cost of its import being excessive, lately resolved to employ paper in the manufacture of their barrels, which will, it is said, be soon in universal use throughout the country.

FOR COUNTING HERRINGS.

Very clever is a Swedish inventor named Ekenberg, who has constructed a machine which takes herrings as they come from the net, sorts them into the four sizes recognized by the trade, scrapes off their scales, cuts off their heads, splits, cleans, and washes them inside and out. The machine does all this automatically, and turns out 20,000 herrings per hour.

EMOTION STOPS A CONCERT.

The tenth bar of Chopin's "Funeral March" had been reached at a concert in Strasburg when the pianist found himself playing alone. The other members of the orchestra, overcome by emotion, had ceased playing. The pianist rose in tears and left the room, and the programme abruptly closed.

THE SMALL BOY.

He knows not who slew Goliath
Or who by the ravens was fed,
For Sunday school picnics are over
And Christmas trees are ahead.