

**CHAPTER XIII**

One morning Gertrude got a letter from her father:

"My Dear Gerty: I have just received a bill for L110 from Madame Smith for your dresses. May I ask you how long this sort of thing is to go on? I need not tell you that I have not the means to support you in such extravagance. I am, as you know, always anxious that you should go about in a style worthy of your position, but unless you can manage without calling on me to pay away hundreds of pounds every season to Madame Smith, you had better give up society and stay at home. I positively cannot afford it. As far as I can see, going into society has not done you much good. I had to raise L500 last month on Franklands; and it is too bad if I must raise more to pay your dressmaker. You might at least employ some civil person, or one whose charges are moderate. Madame Smith tells me that she will not wait any longer, and charges L50 for a single dress. I hope you fully understand that there must be an end to this.

"I hear from your mother that young Erskine is with you at Brandon's. I do not think much of him. He is not well off, nor likely to get on, as he has taken to poetry and so forth. I am told also that a man named Trefusis visits at the Beeches a good deal now. He must be a fool, for he contested the last Birmingham election, and came out at the foot of the poll with thirty-two votes through calling himself a Social Democrat or some such foreign rubbish, instead of saying out like a man that he was a Radical. I suppose the name stuck in his throat, for his mother was one of the Howards of Breconcastle; so he has good blood in him, though his father was nobody. I wish he had your bills to pay; he could buy and sell me ten times over, after all my twenty-five years' service.

"As I am thinking of getting something done to the house, I had rather you did not come back this month, if you can possibly hold on at Brandon's. Remember me to him, and give our kind regards to his wife. I should be obliged if you would gather some hemlock leaves and send them to me. I want them for my ointment; the stuff the chemists sell is no good. Your mother's eyes are bad again; and your brother Berkeley has been gambling, and seems to think I ought to pay his debts for him. I am greatly worried over it all, and I hope that, until you have settled yourself, you will be more reasonable, and not run these everlasting bills upon me. You are enjoying yourself out of reach of all the unpleasantness; but it bears hardly upon

"Your affectionate father, "C.B. LINDSAY."

A faint sketch of the lines Time intended to engrave on Gertrude's brow appeared there as she read the letter; but she hastened to give the admiral's kind regards to her host and hostess, and discussed her mother's health feelingly with them. After breakfast she went to the library, and wrote her reply:

"BRANDON BEECHES, "Tuesday.

"Dear Papa: Considering that it is more than three years since you paid Madame Smith last, and that then her bill, which included my court dress, was only L150, I cannot see how I could possibly have been more economical, unless you expect me to go in rags. I am sorry that Madame Smith has asked for the money at such an inconvenient time, but when I begged you to pay her something in March last year you told me to keep her quiet by giving her a good order. I am not surprised at her not being very civil, as she has plenty of tradesmen's daughters among her customers who pay her more than L300 a year for their dresses. I am wearing a skirt at present which I got two years ago.

"Sir Charles is going to town on Thursday; he will bring you the hemlock. Tell mamma that there is an old woman here who knows some wonderful cure for sore eyes. She will not tell what the ingredients are, but it cures everyone, and there is no use in giving an oculist two guineas for telling us that reading in bed is bad for the eyes, when we know perfectly well that mamma will not give up doing it. If you pay Berkeley's debts, do not forget that he owes me L3.

"Another schoolfellow of mine is staying here now, and I think that Mr. Trefusis will have the pleasure of paying her bills some day. He is a great pet of Lady Brandon's. Sir Charles was angry at first because she invited him here, and we were all surprised at it. The man has a bad reputation, and headed a mob that threw down the walls of the park; and we hardly thought he would be cool enough to come after that. But he does not seem to care whether we want him or not; and he comes when he likes. As he talks cleverly, we find him a godsend in this dull place. It is really not such a paradise as you seem to think, but you need not be afraid of my returning any sooner than I can help.

"Your affectionate daughter, "Gertrude Lindsay.

When Gertrude had closed this letter, and torn up her father's, she thought little more about either. They might have made her unhappy had they found her happy, but as hopeless discontent was her normal state, and enjoyment but a rare accident, recriminatory passages with her father only put her into a bad humor, and did not in the least disappoint or humiliate her.

For the sake of exercise, she resolved to carry her letter to the village post office and return along the Riverside Road, whereby she had seen hemlock growing. She took care to go out unobserved, lest Agatha should volunteer to walk with her, or Jane declare her intention of driving to the post office in the afternoon, and sulk for the rest of the day unless the trip to the village were postponed until then. She took with her, as a protection against tramps, a big St. Bernard dog named Max. This animal, which was young and enthusiastic, had taken a strong fancy to her, and had expressed it frankly and boisterously; and she, whose affections had been starved in her home and in society, had encouraged him with more kindness than she had ever shown to any human being.

In the village, having posted her letter, she turned towards a lane that led to the Riverside Road. Max, unaware of her reason for choosing the longest way home, remonstrated by halting in the middle of the lane, wagging his tail rapidly, and uttering gruff barks.

"Don't be stupid, sir," said Gertrude impatiently. "I am going this way."

Max, apparently understanding, rushed after her, passed her, and disappeared in a cloud of dust raised by his effort to check himself when he had left her far enough behind. When he came back she kissed his nose, and ran a race with him until she too was panting, and had to stand still to recover her breath, whilst he bounded about, barking ferociously. She had not for many years enjoyed such a frolic, and the thought of this presently brought tears to her eyes. Rather peevishly she bade Max be quiet, walked slowly to cool herself, and put up her sunshade to avert freckles.

The sun was now at the meridian. On a slope to Gertrude's right hand, Sallust's House, with its cinnamon-colored walls and yellow frieze, gave a foreign air to the otherwise very English landscape. She passed by without remembering who lived there. Further down, on some waste land separated from the road by a dry ditch and a low mud wall, a cluster of hemlocks, nearly six feet high, poisoned the air with their odor. She crossed the ditch, took a pair of gardening gloves from her plaited straw hand-basket, and busied herself with the hemlock leaves, pulling the tender ones, separating them from the stalk, and filling the basket with the web. She forgot Max until an impression of dead silence, as if the earth had stopped, caused her to look round in vague dread. Trefusis, with his hand abandoned to the dog, who was trying how much of it he could cram into his mouth, was standing within a few yards of her, watching her intently. Gertrude turned pale, and came out hastily from among the bushes. Then she had a strange sensation as if something had happened high above her head. There was a threatening growl, a commanding exclamation, and an unaccountable pause, at the expiration of which she found herself supine on the sward, with her parasol between her eyes and the sun. A sudden scoop of Max's wet warm tongue in her right ear startled her into activity. She sat up, and saw Trefusis on his knees at her side holding the parasol with an unconcerned expression, whilst Max was snuffing at her in restless anxiety opposite.

"I must go home," she said. "I must go home instantly."

"Not at all," said Trefusis, soothingly. "They have just sent word to say that everything is settled satisfactorily and that you need not come."

"Have they?" she said faintly. Then she lay down again, and it seemed to her that a very long time elapsed. Suddenly recollecting that Trefusis had supported her gently with his hand to prevent her falling back too rudely, she rose again, and this time got upon her feet with his help.

"I must go home," she said again. "It is a matter of life or death."

"No, no," he said softly. "It is all right. You may depend on me."

She looked at him earnestly. He had taken her hand to steady her, for she was swaying a little. "Are you sure," she said, grasping his arm. "Are you quite sure?"

"Absolutely certain. You know I am always right, do you not?"

"Yes, oh, yes; you have always been true to me. You--" Here her senses came back with a rush. Dropping his hand as if it had become red hot, she said sharply, "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know," he said, resuming his indifferent manner with a laugh. "Are you better? Let me drive you to the Beeches. My stable is within a stone's throw; I can get a trap out in ten minutes."

"No, thank you," said Gertrude haughtily. "I do not wish to drive." She paused, and added in some bewilderment, "What has happened?"

"You fainted, and--"

"I did not faint," said Gertrude indignantly. "I never fainted in my life."

"Yes, you did."

"Pardon me, Mr. Trefusis. I did not."

"You shall judge for yourself. I was coming through this field when I saw you gathering hemlock. Hemlock is interesting on account of Socrates, and you were interesting as a young lady gathering poison. So I stopped to look on. Presently you came out from among the bushes as if you had seen a snake there. Then you fell into my arms--which led me to suppose that you had fainted--and Max, concluding that it was all my fault, nearly sprang at my throat. You were overpowered by the scent of the water-hemlock, which you must have been inhaling for ten minutes or more."

"I did not know that there was any danger," said Gertrude, crestfallen. "I felt very tired when I came to. That was why I lay so long the second time. I really could not help it."

"You did not lie very long."

"Not when I first fell; that was only a few seconds, I know. But I must have lain there nearly ten minutes after I recovered."

"You were nearly a minute insensible when you first fell, and when you recovered you only rested for about one second. After that you raved, and I invented suitable answers until you suddenly asked me what I was

talking about."

Gertrude reddened a little as the possibility of her having raved indiscreetly occurred to her. "It was very silly of me to faint," she said.

"You could not help it; you are only human. I shall walk with you to the Beeches."

"Thank you; I will not trouble you," she said quickly.

He shook his head. "I do not know how long the effect of that abominable water-weed may last," he said, "and I dare not leave you to walk alone. If you prefer it I can send you in a trap with my gardener, but I had rather accompany you myself."

"You are giving yourself a great deal of unnecessary trouble. I will walk. I am quite well again and need no assistance."

They started without another word. Gertrude had to concentrate all her energy to conceal from him that she was giddy. Numbness and lassitude crept upon her, and she was beginning to hope that she was only dreaming it all when he roused her by saying,

"Take my arm."

"No, thank you."

"Do not be so senselessly obstinate. You will have to lean on the hedge for support if you refuse my help. I am sorry I did not insist on getting the trap."

Gertrude had not been spoken to in this tone since her childhood. "I am perfectly well," she said sharply. "You are really very officious."

"You are not perfectly well, and you know it. However, if you make a brave struggle, you will probably be able to walk home without my assistance, and the effort may do you good."

"You are very rude," she said peremptorily.

"I know it," he replied calmly. "You will find three classes of men polite to you--slaves, men who think much of their manners and nothing of you, and your lovers. I am none of these, and therefore give you back your ill manners with interest. Why do you resist your good angel by suppressing those natural and sincere impulses which come to you often enough, and sometimes bring a look into your face that might tame a bear--a look which you hasten to extinguish as a thief darkens his lantern at the sound of a footstep."

"Mr. Trefusis, I am not accustomed to be lectured."

"That is why I lecture you. I felt curious to see how your good breeding, by which I think you set some store, would serve you in entirely novel circumstances--those of a man speaking his mind to you, for instance. What is the result of my experiment? Instead of rebuking me with the sweetness and dignity which I could not, in spite of my past observation, help expecting from you, you churlishly repel my offer of the assistance you need, tell me that I am very rude, very officious, and, in short, do what you can to make my position disagreeable and humiliating."

She looked at him haughtily, but his expression was void of offence or fear, and he continued, unanswered.

"I would bear all this from a working woman without remonstrance, for she would owe me no graces of manner or morals. But you are a lady. That means that many have starved and drudged in uncleanly discomfort in order that you may have white and unbroken hands, fine garments, and exquisite manners--that you may be a living fountain of those influences that soften our natures and lives. When such a costly thing as a lady breaks down at the first touch of a firm hand, I feel justified in complaining."

Gertrude walked on quickly, and said between her teeth, "I don't want to hear any of your absurd views, Mr. Trefusis."

He laughed. "My unfortunate views!" he said. "Whenever I make an inconvenient remark it is always set aside as an expression of certain dangerous crazes with which I am supposed to be afflicted. When I point out to Sir Charles that one of his favorite artists has not accurately observed something before attempting to draw it, he replies, 'You know our views differ on these things, Trefusis.' When I told Miss Wylie's guardian that his emigration scheme was little better than a fraud, he said, 'You must excuse me, but I cannot enter into your peculiar views.' One of my views at present is that Miss Lindsay is more amiable under the influence of hemlock than under that of the social system which has made her so unhappy."

"Well!" exclaimed Gertrude, outraged. Then, after a pause, "I was under the impression that I had accepted the escort of a gentleman." Then, after another pause, Trefusis being quite undisturbed, "How do you know that I am unhappy?"

"By a certain defect in your countenance, which lacks the crowning beauty of happiness; and a certain defect in your voice which will never disappear until you learn to love or pity those to whom you speak."

"You are wrong," said Gertrude, with calm disdain. "You do not understand me in the least. I am particularly attached to my friends."

"Then I have never seen you in their company."

"You are still wrong."

"Then how can you speak as you do, look as you do, act as you do?"

"What do you mean? HOW do I look and act?"

"Like one of the railings of Belgrave Square, cursed with consciousness of itself, fears of the judgment of the other railings, and doubts of their fitness to stand in the same row with it. You are cold, mistrustful, cruel to nervous or clumsy people, and more afraid of the criticisms of those with whom you dance and dine than of your conscience. All of which prevents you from looking like an angel."

"Thank you. Do you consider paying compliments the perfection of gentlemanly behavior?"

"Have I been paying you many? That last remark of mine was not meant as one. On my honor, the angels will not disappoint me if they are no lovelier than you should be if you had that look in your face and that tone in your voice I spoke of just now. It can hardly displease you to hear that. If I were particularly handsome myself, I should like to be told so."

"I am sorry I cannot tell you so."

"Oh! Ha! ha! What a retort, Miss Lindsay! You are not sorry either; you are rather glad."

Gertrude knew it, and was angry with herself, not because her retort was false, but because she thought it

unladylike. "You have no right to annoy me," she exclaimed, in spite of herself.

"None whatever," he said, humbly. "If I have done so, forgive me before we part. I will go no further with you; Max will give the alarm if you faint in the avenue, which I don't think you are likely to do, as you have forgotten all about the hemlock."

"Oh, how maddening!" she cried. "I have left my basket behind."

"Never mind; I will find it and have it filled and sent to you."

"Thank you. I am sorry to trouble you."

"Not at all. I hope you do not want the hemlock to help you to get rid of the burden of life."

"Nonsense. I want it for my father, who uses it for medicine."

"I will bring it myself to-morrow. Is that soon enough?"

"Quite. I am in no hurry. Thank you, Mr. Trefusis. Good-bye."

She gave him her hand, and even smiled a little, and then hurried away. He stood watching her as she passed along the avenue under the beeches. Once, when she came into a band of sunlight at a gap in the trees, she made so pretty a figure in her spring dress of violet and white that his eyes kindled as he gazed. He took out his note-book, and entered her name and the date, with a brief memorandum.

"I have thawed her," he said to himself as he put up his book. "She shall learn a lesson or two to hand on to her children before I have done with her. A trifle underbred, too, or she would not insist so much on her breeding. Henrietta used to wear a dress like that. I am glad to see that there is no danger of her taking to me personally."

He turned away, and saw a crone passing, bending beneath a bundle of sticks. He eyed it curiously; and she scowled at him and hurried on.

"Hallo," he said.

She continued for a few steps, but her courage failed her and she stopped.

"You are Mrs. Hickling, I think?"

"Yes, please your worship."

"You are the woman who carried away an old wooden gate that lay on Sir Charles Brandon's land last winter and used it for firewood. You were imprisoned for seven days for it."

"You may send me there again if you like," she retorted, in a cracked voice, as she turned at bay. "But the Lord will make me even with you some day. Cursed be them that oppress the poor and needy; it is one of the seven deadly sins."

"Those green laths on your back are the remainder of my garden gate," he said. "You took the first half last Saturday. Next time you want fuel come to the house and ask for coals, and let my gates alone. I suppose you can enjoy a fire without stealing the combustibles. Stow

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256 pay me for my gate by telling me something I want to know."

"And a kind gentleman too, sir; blessings."

"What is the hemlock good for?"

"The hemlock, kind gentleman? For the evil, sir, to be sure."

"Scrofulous ulcers!" he exclaimed, recoiling. "The father of that beautiful girl!" He turned homeward, and trudged along with his head bent, muttering, "All rotten to the bone. Oh, civilization! civilization! civilization!"