

**CHAPTER XIV**

"What has come over Gertrude?" said Agatha one day to Lady Brandon.

"Why? Is anything the matter with her?"

"I don't know; she has not been the same since she poisoned herself. And why did she not tell about it? But for Trefusis we should never have known."

"Gertrude always made secrets of things."

"She was in a vile temper for two days after; and now she is quite changed. She falls into long reveries, and does not hear a word of what is going on around. Then she starts into life again, and begs your pardon with the greatest sweetness for not catching what you have said."

"I hate her when she is polite; it is not natural to her. As to her going to sleep, that is the effect of the hemlock. We know a man who took a spoonful of strychnine in a bath, and he never was the same afterwards."

"I think she is making up her mind to encourage Erskine," said Agatha. "When I came here he hardly dared speak to her--at least, she always snubbed him. Now she lets him talk as much as he likes, and actually sends him on messages and allows him to carry things for her."

"Yes. I never saw anybody like Gertrude in my life. In London, if men were attentive to her, she sat on them for being officious; and if they let her alone she was angry at being neglected. Erskine is quite good enough for her, I think."

Here Erskine appeared at the door and looked round the room.

"She's not here," said Jane.

"I am seeking Sir Charles," he said, withdrawing somewhat stiffly.

"What a lie!" said Jane, discomfited by his reception of her jest. "He was talking to Sir Charles ten minutes ago in the billiard room. Men are such conceited fools!"

Agatha had strolled to the window, and was looking discontentedly at the prospect, as she had often done at school when alone, and sometimes did now in society. The door opened again, and Sir Charles appeared. He, too, looked round, but when his roving glance reached Agatha, it cast anchor; and he came in.

"Are you busy just now, Miss Wylie?" he asked.

"Yes," said Jane hastily. "She is going to write a letter for me."

"Really, Jane," he said, "I think you are old enough to write your letters without troubling Miss Wylie."

"When I do write my own letters you always find fault with them," she retorted.

"I thought perhaps you might have leisure to try over a duet with me," he said, turning to Agatha.

"Certainly," she replied, hoping to smooth matters by humoring him. "The letter will do any time before post hour."

Jane reddened, and said shortly, "I will write it myself, if you will not."

Sir Charles quite lost his temper. "How can you be so damnably rude?" he said, turning upon his wife. "What objection have you to my singing duets with Miss Wylie?"

"Nice language that!" said Jane. "I never said I objected; and you have no right to drag her away to the piano just when she is going to write a letter for me."

"I do not wish Miss Wylie to do anything except what pleases her best. It seems to me that writing letters to your tradespeople cannot be a very pleasant occupation."

"Pray don't mind me," said Agatha. "It is not the least trouble to me. I used to write all Jane's letters for her at school. Suppose I write the letter first, and then we can have the duet. You will not mind waiting five minutes?"

"I can wait as long as you please, of course. But it seems such an absurd abuse of your good nature that I cannot help protest!"

"Oh, let it wait!" exclaimed Jane. "Such a ridiculous fuss to make about asking Agatha to write a letter, just because you happen to want her to play you your duets! I am certain she is heartily sick and tired of them."

Agatha, to escape the altercation, went to the library and wrote the letter. When she returned to the drawing-room, she found no one there; but Sir Charles came in presently.

"I am so sorry, Miss Wylie," he said, as he opened the piano for her, "that you should be incommoded because my wife is silly enough to be jealous."

"Jealous!"

"Of course. Idiocy!"

"Oh, you are mistaken," said Agatha, incredulously. "How could she possibly be jealous of me?"

"She is jealous of everybody and everything," he replied bitterly, "and she cares for nobody and for nothing. You do not know what I have to endure sometimes from her."

Agatha thought her most discreet course was to sit down immediately and begin "I would that my love." Whilst she played and sang, she thought over what Sir Charles had just let slip. She had found him a pleasant companion, light-hearted, fond of music and fun, polite and considerate, appreciative of her talents, quick-witted without being oppressively clever, and, as a married man, disinterested in his attentions. But it now occurred to her that perhaps they had been a good deal together of late.

Sir Charles had by this time wandered from his part into hers; and he now recalled her to the music by stopping to ask whether he was right. Knowing by experience what his difficulty was likely to be, she gave him his note and went on. They had not been singing long when Jane came back and sat down, expressing a hope that her presence would not disturb them. It did disturb them. Agatha suspected that she had come there to watch them, and Sir Charles knew it. Besides, Lady Brandon, even when her mind was tranquil, was habitually restless. She could not speak because of the music, and, though she held an open book in her hand, she could not read and watch simultaneously. She gaped, and leaned to one end of the sofa until, on the point of overbalancing' she recovered herself with a prodigious bounce. The floor vibrated at her every movement. At last she could keep silence no longer.

"Oh, dear!" she said, yawning audibly. "It must be five o'clock at the very earliest."

Agatha turned round upon the piano-stool, feeling that music and Lady Brandon were incompatible. Sir Charles, for his guest's sake, tried hard to restrain his exasperation.

"Probably your watch will tell you," he said.

"Thank you for nothing," said Jane. "Agatha, where is Gertrude?"

"How can Miss Wylie possibly tell you where she is, Jane? I think you have gone mad to-day."

"She is most likely playing billiards with Mr. Erskine," said Agatha, interposing quickly to forestall a retort from Jane, with its usual sequel of a domestic squabble.

"I think it is very strange of Gertrude to pass the whole day with Chester in the billiard room," said Jane discontentedly.

"There is not the slightest impropriety in her doing so," said Sir Charles. "If our hospitality does not place Miss Lindsay above suspicion, the more shame for us. How would you feel if anyone else made such a remark?"

"Oh, stuff!" said Jane peevishly. "You are always preaching long rigmaroles about nothing at all. I did not say there was any impropriety about Gertrude. She is too proper to be pleasant, in my opinion."

Sir Charles, unable to trust himself further, frowned and left the room, Jane speeding him with a contemptuous laugh.

"Don't ever be such a fool as to get married," she said, when he was gone. She looked up as she spoke, and was alarmed to see Agatha seated on the pianoforte, with her ankles swinging in the old school fashion.

"Jane," she said, surveying her hostess coolly, "do you know what I would do if I were Sir Charles?"

Jane did not know.

"I would get a big stick, beat you black and blue, and then lock you up on bread and water for a week."

Jane half rose, red and angry. "Wh--why?" she said, relapsing upon the sofa.

"If I were a man, I would not, for mere chivalry's sake, let a woman treat me like a troublesome dog. You want a sound thrashing."

"I'd like to see anybody thrash me," said Jane, rising again and displaying her formidable person erect. Then she burst into tears, and said, "I won't have such things said to me in my own house. How dare you?"

"You deserve it for being jealous of me," said Agatha.

Jane's eyes dilated angrily. "I!--I!--jealous of you!" She looked round, as if for a missile. Not finding one, she sat down again, and said in a voice stifled with tears, "J--Jealous of YOU, indeed!"

"You have good reason to be, for he is fonder of me than of you."

Jane opened her mouth and eyes convulsively, but only uttered a gasp, and Agatha proceeded calmly, "I am

polite to him, which you never are. When he speaks to me I allow him to finish his sentence without expressing, as you do, a foregone conclusion that it is not worth attending to. I do not yawn and talk whilst he is singing. When he converses with me on art or literature, about which he knows twice as much as I do, and at least ten times as much as you" (Jane gasped again) "I do not make a silly answer and turn to my neighbor at the other side with a remark about the tables or the weather. When he is willing to be pleased, as he always is, I am willing to be pleasant. And that is why he likes me."

"He does NOT like you. He is the same to everyone."

"Except his wife. He likes me so much that you, like a great goose as you are, came up here to watch us at our duets, and made yourself as disagreeable as you possibly could whilst I was making myself charming. The poor man was ashamed of you."

"He wasn't," said Jane, sobbing. "I didn't do anything. I didn't say anything. I won't bear it. I will get a divorce. I will--"

"You will mend your ways if you have any sense left," said Agatha remorselessly. "Do not make such a noise, or someone will come to see what is the matter, and I shall have to get down from the piano, where I am very comfortable."

"It is you who are jealous."

"Oh, is it, Jane? I have not allowed Sir Charles to fall in love with me yet, but I can do so very easily. What will you wager that he will not kiss me before to-morrow evening?"

"It will be very mean and nasty of you if he does. You seem to think that I can be treated like a child."

"So you are a child," said Agatha, descending from her perch and preparing to go. "An occasional slapping does you good."

"It is nothing to you whether I agree with my husband or not," said Jane with sudden fierceness.

"Not if you quarrel with him in private, as wellbred couples do. But when it occurs in my presence it makes me uncomfortable, and I object to being made uncomfortable."

"You would not be here at all if I had not asked you."

"Just think how dull the house would be without me, Jane!"

"Indeed! It was not dull before you came. Gertrude always behaved like a lady, at least."

"I am sorry that her example was so utterly lost on you."

"I won't bear it," said Jane with a sob and a plunge upon the sofa that made the lustres of the chandeliers rattle. "I wouldn't have asked you if I had thought you could be so hateful. I will never ask you again."

"I will make Sir Charles divorce you for incompatibility of temper and marry me. Then I shall have the place to myself."

"He can't divorce me for that, thank goodness. You don't know what you're talking about."

Agatha laughed. "Come," she said good-humoredly, "don't be an old ass, Jane. Wash your face before anyone

sees it, and remember what I have told you about Sir Charles."

"It is very hard to be called an ass in one's own house."

"It is harder to be treated as one, like your husband. I am going to look for him in the billiard room."

Jane ran after her, and caught her by the sleeve.

"Agatha," she pleaded, "promise me that you won't be mean. Say that you won't make love to him."

"I will consider about it," replied Agatha gravely.

Jane uttered a groan and sank into a chair, which creaked at the shock. Agatha turned on the threshold, and seeing her shaking her head, pressing her eyes, and tapping with her heel in a restrained frenzy, said quickly,

"Here are the Waltons, and the Fitzgeorges, and Mr. Trefusis coming upstairs. How do you do, Mrs. Walton? Lady Brandon will be SO glad to see you. Good-evening, Mr. Fitzgeorge."

Jane sprang up, wiped her eyes, and, with her hands on her hair, smoothing it, rushed to a mirror. No visitors appearing, she perceived that she was, for perhaps the hundredth time in her life, the victim of an imposture devised by Agatha. She, gratified by the success of her attempt to regain her old ascendancy over Jane--she had made it with misgiving, notwithstanding her apparent confidence--went downstairs to the library, where she found Sir Charles gloomily trying to drown his domestic troubles in art criticism.

"I thought you were in the billiard room," said Agatha.

"I only peeped in," he replied; "but as I saw something particular going on, I thought it best to slip away, and I have been alone ever since."

The something particular which Sir Charles had not wished to interrupt was only a game of billiards.

It was the first opportunity Erskine had ever enjoyed of speaking to Gertrude at leisure and alone. Yet their conversation had never been so commonplace. She, liking the game, played very well and chatted indifferently; he played badly, and broached trivial topics in spite of himself. After an hour-and-a-half's play, Gertrude had announced that this game must be their last. He thought desperately that if he were to miss many more strokes the game must presently end, and an opportunity which might never recur pass beyond recall. He determined to tell her without preface that he adored her, but when he opened his lips a question came forth of its own accord relating to the Persian way of playing billiards. Gertrude had never been in Persia, but had seen some Eastern billiard cues in the India museum. Were not the Hindoos wonderful people for filigree work, and carpets, and such things? Did he not think the crookedness of their carpet patterns a blemish? Some people pretended to admire them, but was not that all nonsense? Was not the modern polished floor, with a rug in the middle, much superior to the old carpet fitted into the corners of the room? Yes. Enormously superior. Immensely--

"Why, what are you thinking of to-day, Mr. Erskine? You have played with my ball."

"I am thinking of you."

"What did you say?" said Gertrude, not catching the serious turn he had given to the conversation, and poisoning her cue for a stroke. "Oh! I am as bad as you; that was the worst stroke I ever made, I think. I beg your pardon; you said something just now."

"I forget. Nothing of any consequence." And he groaned at his own cowardice.

"Suppose we stop," she said. "There is no use in finishing the game if our hands are out. I am rather tired of it."

"Certainly--if you wish it"

"I will finish if you like."

"Not at all. What pleases you, pleases me."

Gertrude made him a little bow, and idly knocked the balls about with her cue. Erskine's eyes wandered, and his lip moved irresolutely. He had settled with himself that his declaration should be a frank one--heart to heart. He had pictured himself in the act of taking her hand delicately, and saying, "Gertrude, I love you. May I tell you so again?" But this scheme did not now seem practicable.

"Miss Lindsay."

Gertrude, bending over the table, looked up in alarm.

"The present is as good an opportunity as I will--as I shall--as I will."

"Shall," said Gertrude.

"I beg your pardon?"

"SHALL," repeated Gertrude. "Did you ever study the doctrine of necessity?"

"The doctrine of necessity?" he said, bewildered.

Gertrude went to the other side of the table in pursuit of a ball. She now guessed what was coming, and was willing that it should come; not because she intended to accept, but because, like other young ladies experienced in such scenes, she counted the proposals of marriage she received as a Red Indian counts the scalps he takes.

"We have had a very pleasant time of it here," he said, giving up as inexplicable the relevance of the doctrine of necessity. "At least, I have."

"Well," said Gertrude, quick to resent a fancied allusion to her private discontent, "so have I."

"I am glad of that--more so than I can convey by words."

"Is it any business of yours?" she said, following the disagreeable vein he had unconsciously struck upon, and suspecting pity in his efforts to be sympathetic.

"I wish I dared hope so. The happiness of my visit has been due to you entirely."

"Indeed," said Gertrude, wincing as all the hard things Trefusis had told her of herself came into her mind at the heels of Erskine's unfortunate allusion to her power of enjoying herself.

"I hope I am not paining you," he said earnestly.

"I don't know what you are talking about," she said, standing erect with sudden impatience. "You seem to think that it is very easy to pain me."

"No," he said timidly, puzzled by the effect he had produced. "I fear you misunderstand me. I am very awkward. Perhaps I had better say no more, Gertrude, by turning away to put up her cue, signified that that was a point for him to consider; she not intending to trouble herself about it. When she faced him again, he was motionless and dejected, with a wistful expression like that of a dog that has proffered a caress and received a kick. Remorse, and a vague sense that there was something base in her attitude towards him, overcame her. She looked at him for an instant and left the room.

The look excited him. He did not understand it, nor attempt to understand it; but it was a look that he had never before seen in her face or in that of any other woman. It struck him as a momentary revelation of what he had written of in "The Patriot Martyrs" as

"The glorious mystery of a woman's heart,"

and it made him feel unfit for ordinary social intercourse. He hastened from the house, walked swiftly down the avenue to the lodge, where he kept his bicycle, left word there that he was going for an excursion and should probably not return in time for dinner, mounted, and sped away recklessly along the Riverside Road. In less than two minutes he passed the gate of Sallust's House, where he nearly ran over an old woman laden with a basket of coals, who put down her burthen to scream curses after him. Warned by this that his headlong pace was dangerous, he slackened it a little, and presently saw Trefusis lying prone on the river bank, with his cheeks propped on his elbows, reading intently. Erskine, who had presented him, a few days before, with a copy of "The Patriot Martyrs and other Poems," tried to catch a glimpse of the book over which Trefusis was so serious. It was a Blue Book, full of figures. Erskine rode on in disgust, consoling himself with the recollection of Gertrude's face.

The highway now swerved inland from the river, and rose to a steep acclivity, at the brow of which he turned and looked back. The light was growing ruddy, and the shadows were lengthening. Trefusis was still prostrate in the meadow, and the old woman was in a field, gathering hemlock.

Erskine raced down the hill at full speed, and did not look behind him again until he found himself at nightfall on the skirts of a town, where he purchased some beer and a sandwich, which he ate with little appetite. Gertrude had set up a disturbance within him which made him impatient of eating.

It was now dark. He was many miles from Brandon Beeches, and not sure of the way back. Suddenly he resolved to complete his unfinished declaration that evening. He now could not ride back fast enough to satisfy his impatience. He tried a short cut, lost himself, spent nearly an hour seeking the highroad, and at last came upon a railway station just in time to catch a train that brought him within a mile of his destination.

When he rose from the cushions of the railway carriage he found himself somewhat fatigued, and he mounted the bicycle stiffly. But his resolution was as ardent as ever, and his heart beat strongly as, after leaving his bicycle at the lodge, he walked up the avenue through the deep gloom beneath the beeches. Near the house, the first notes of "Grudel perche finora" reached him, and he stepped softly on to the turf lest his footsteps on the gravel should rouse the dogs and make them mar the harmony by barking. A rustle made him stop and listen. Then Gertrude's voice whispered through the darkness:

"What did you mean by what you said to me within?"

An extraordinary sensation shook Erskine; confused ideas of fairyland ran through his imagination. A bitter disappointment, like that of waking from a happy dream, followed as Trefusis's voice, more finely tuned than he had ever heard it before, answered,

"Merely that the expanse of stars above us is not more illimitable than my contempt for Miss Lindsay, nor brighter than my hopes of Gertrude."

"Miss Lindsay always to you, if you please, Mr. Trefusis."

"Miss Lindsay never to me, but only to those who cannot see through her to the soul within, which is Gertrude. There are a thousand Miss Lindsays in the world, formal and false. There is but one Gertrude."

"I am an unprotected girl, Mr. Trefusis, and you can call me what you please."

It occurred to Erskine that this was a fit occasion to rush forward and give Trefusis, whose figure he could now dimly discern, a black eye. But he hesitated, and the opportunity passed.

"Unprotected!" said Trefusis. "Why, you are fenced round and barred in with conventions, laws, and lies that would frighten the truth from the lips of any man whose faith in Gertrude was less strong than mine. Go to Sir Charles and tell him what I have said to Miss Lindsay, and within ten minutes I shall have passed these gates with a warning never to approach them again. I am in your power, and were I in Miss Lindsay's power alone, my shrift would be short. Happily, Gertrude, though she sees as yet but darkly, feels that Miss Lindsay is her bitterest foe."

"It is ridiculous. I am not two persons; I am only one. What does it matter to me if your contempt for me is as illimitable as the stars?"

"Ah, you remember that, do you? Whenever you hear a man talking about the stars you may conclude that he is either an astronomer or a fool. But you and a fine starry night would make a fool of any man."

"I don't understand you. I try to, but I cannot; or, if I guess, I cannot tell whether you are in earnest or not."

"I am very much in earnest. Abandon at once and for ever all misgivings that I am trifling with you, or passing an idle hour as men do when they find themselves in the company of beautiful women. I mean what I say literally, and in the deepest sense. You doubt me; we have brought society to such a state that we all suspect one another. But whatever is true will command belief sooner or later from those who have wit enough to comprehend truth. Now let me recall Miss Lindsay to consciousness by remarking that we have been out for ten minutes, and that our hostess is not the woman to allow our absence to pass without comment."

"Let us go in. Thank you for reminding me."

"Thank you for forgetting."

Erskine heard their footsteps retreating, and presently saw the two enter the glow of light that shone from the open window of the billiard room, through which they went indoors. Trefusis, a man whom he had seen that day in a beautiful landscape, blind to everything except a row of figures in a Blue Book, was his successful rival, although it was plain from the very sound of his voice that he did not--could not--love Gertrude. Only a poet could do that. Trefusis was no poet, but a sordid brute unlikely to inspire interest in anything more human than a public meeting, much less in a woman, much less again in a woman so ethereal as Gertrude. She was proud too, yet she had allowed the fellow to insult her--had forgiven him for the sake of a few broad compliments. Erskine grew angry and cynical. The situation did not suit his poetry. Instead of being stricken to the heart with a solemn sorrow, as a Patriot Martyr would have been under similar circumstances, he felt slighted and ridiculous. He was hardly convinced of what had seemed at first the most obvious feature of the case, Trefusis's inferiority to himself.

He stood under the trees until Trefusis reappeared on his way home, making, Erskine thought, as much noise



with his heels on the gravel as a regiment of delicately bred men would have done. He stopped for a moment to make inquiry at the lodge as he went out; then his footsteps died away in the distance.

Erskine, chilled, stiff, and with a sensation of a bad cold coming on, went into the house, and was relieved to find that Gertrude had retired, and that Lady Brandon, though she had been sure that he had ridden into the river in the dark, had nevertheless provided a warm supper for him.