

**CHAPTER XVI**

One sunny forenoon, as Agatha sat reading on the doorstep of the conservatory, the shadow of her parasol deepened, and she, looking up for something denser than the silk of it, saw Trefusis.

"Oh!"

She offered him no further greeting, having fallen in with his habit of dispensing, as far as possible, with salutations and ceremonies. He seemed in no hurry to speak, and so, after a pause, she began, "Sir Charles--"

"Is gone to town," he said. "Erskine is out on his bicycle. Lady Brandon and Miss Lindsay have gone to the village in the wagonette, and you have come out here to enjoy the summer sun and read rubbish. I know all your news already."

"You are very clever, and, as usual, wrong. Sir Charles has not gone to town. He has only gone to the railway station for some papers; he will be back for luncheon. How do you know so much of our affairs?"

"I was on the roof of my house with a field-glass. I saw you come out and sit down here. Then Sir Charles passed. Then Erskine. Then Lady Brandon, driving with great energy, and presenting a remarkable contrast to the disdainful repose of Gertrude."

"Gertrude! I like your cheek."

"You mean that you dislike my presumption."

"No, I think cheek a more expressive word than presumption; and I mean that I like it--that it amuses me."

"Really! What are you reading?"

"Rubbish, you said just now. A novel."

"That is, a lying story of two people who never existed, and who would have acted very differently if they had existed."

"Just so."

"Could you not imagine something just as amusing for yourself?"

"Perhaps so; but it would be too much trouble. Besides, cooking takes away one's appetite for eating. I should not relish stories of my own confection."

"Which volume are you at?"

"The third."

"Then the hero and heroine are on the point of being united?"

"I really don't know. This is one of your clever novels. I wish the characters would not talk so much."

"No matter. Two of them are in love with one another, are they not?"

"Yes. It would not be a novel without that."

"Do you believe, in your secret soul, Agatha--I take the liberty of using your Christian name because I wish to be very solemn--do you really believe that any human being was ever unselfish enough to love another in the story-book fashion?"

"Of course. At least I suppose so. I have never thought much about it."

"I doubt it. My own belief is that no latter-day man has any faith in the thoroughness or permanence of his affection for his mate. Yet he does not doubt the sincerity of her professions, and he conceals the hollowness of his own from her, partly because he is ashamed of it, and partly out of pity for her. And she, on the other side, is playing exactly the same comedy."

"I believe that is what men do, but not women."

"Indeed! Pray do you remember pretending to be very much in love with me once when--"

Agatha reddened and placed her palm on the step as if about to spring up. But she checked herself and said: "Stop, Mr. Trefusis. If you talk about that I shall go away. I wonder at you! Have you no taste?",

"None whatever. And as I was the aggrieved party on that--stay, don't go. I will never allude to it again. I am growing afraid of you. You used to be afraid of me."

"Yes; and you used to bully me. You have a habit of bullying women who are weak enough to fear you. You are a great deal cleverer than I, and know much more, I dare say; but I am not in the least afraid of you now."

"You have no reason to be, and never had any. Henrietta, if she were alive, could testify that it there is a defect in my relations with women, it arises from my excessive amiability. I could not refuse a woman anything she had set her heart upon--except my hand in marriage. As long as your sex are content to stop short of that they can do as they please with me."

"How cruel! I thought you were nearly engaged to Gertrude."

"The usual interpretation of a friendship between a man and a woman! I have never thought of such a thing; and I am sure she never has. We are not half so intimate as you and Sir Charles."

"Oh, Sir Charles is married. And I advise you to get married if you wish to avoid creating misunderstandings by your friendships."

Trefusis was struck. Instead of answering, he stood, after one startled glance at her, looking intently at the knuckle of his forefinger.

"Do take pity on our poor sex," said Agatha maliciously. "You are so rich, and so very clever, and really so nice looking that you ought to share yourself with somebody. Gertrude would be only too happy."

Trefusis grinned and shook his head, slowly but emphatically.

"I suppose I *should have no chance*," continued Agatha *pathetically*.

"I *should be delighted, of course*," he replied with *simulated confusion*, but with a *lurking gleam in his eye that might have checked her, had she noticed it*.

"Do marry me, Mr. Trefusis," she pleaded, *clasping her hands in a rapture of mischievous raillery*. "Pray do."

*"Thank you," said Trefusis determinedly; "I will."*

*"I am very sure you shan't," said Agatha, after an incredulous pause, springing up and gathering her skirt as if to run away. "You do not suppose I was in earnest, do you?"*

*"Undoubtedly I do. I am in earnest."*

*Agatha hesitated, uncertain whether he might not be playing with her as she had just been playing with him. "Take care," she said. "I may change my mind and be in earnest, too; and then how will you feel, Mr. Trefusis?"*

*"I think, under our altered relations, you had better call me Sidney."*

*"I think we had better drop the joke. It was in rather bad taste, and I should not have made it, perhaps."*

*"It would be an execrable joke; therefore I have no intention of regarding it as one. You shall be held to your offer, Agatha. Are you in love with me?"*

*"Not in the least. Not the very smallest bit in the world. I do not know anybody with whom I am less in love or less likely to be in love."*

*"Then you must marry me. If you were in love with me, I should run away. My sainted Henrietta adored me, and I proved unworthy of adoration--though I was immensely flattered."*

*"Yes; exactly! The way you treated your first wife ought to be sufficient to warn any woman against becoming your second."*

*"Any woman who loved me, you mean. But you do not love me, and if I run away you will have the advantage of being rid of me. Our settlements can be drawn so as to secure you half my fortune in such an event."*

*"You will never have a chance of running away from me."*

*"I shall not want to. I am not so squeamish as I was. No; I do not think I shall run away from you."*

*"I do not think so either."*

*"Well, when shall we be married?"*

*"Never," said Agatha, and fled. But before she had gone a step he caught her.*

*"Don't," she said breathlessly. "Take your arm away. How dare you?"*

*He released her and shut the door of the conservatory. "Now," he said, "if you want to run away you will have to run in the open."*

*"You are very impertinent. Let me go in immediately."*

*"Do you want me to beg you to marry me after you have offered to do it freely?"*

*"But I was only joking; I don't care for you," she said, looking round for an outlet.*

*"Agatha," he said, with grim patience, "half an hour ago I had no more intention of marrying you than of*

*making a voyage to the moon. But when you made the suggestion I felt all its force in an instant, and now nothing will satisfy me but your keeping your word. Of all the women I know, you are the only one not quite a fool."*

*"I should be a great fool if--"*

*"If you married me, you were going to say; but I don't think so. I am the only man, not quite an ass, of your acquaintance. I know my value, and yours. And I loved you long ago, when I had no right to."*

*Agatha frowned. "No," she said. "There is no use in saying anything more about it. It is out of the question."*

*"Come, don't be vindictive. I was more sincere than you were. But that has nothing to do with the present. You have spent our renewed acquaintance on the defensive against me, retorting upon me, teasing and tempting me. Be generous for once, and say Yes with a good will."*

*"Oh, I NEVER tempted you," cried Agatha. "I did not. It is not true." He said nothing, but offered his hand. "No; go away; I will not." He persisted, and she felt her power of resistance suddenly wane. Terror-stricken, she said hastily, "There is not the least use in bothering me; I will tell you nothing to-day."*

*"Promise me on your honor that you will say Yes to-morrow, and I will leave you in peace until then."*

*"I will not."*

*"The deuce take your sex," he said plaintively.*

*"You know my mind now, and I have to stand here coquetting because you don't know your own. If I cared for my comfort I should remain a bachelor."*

*"I advise you to do so," she said, stealing backward towards the door. "You are a very interesting widower. A wife would spoil you. Consider the troubles of domesticity, too."*

*"I like troubles. They strengthen--Aha!" (she had snatched at the knob of the door, and he swiftly put his hand on hers and stayed her). "Not yet, if you please. Can you not speak out like a woman--like a man, I mean? You may withhold a bone from Max until he stands on his hind legs to beg for it, but you should not treat me like a dog. Say Yes frankly, and do not keep me begging."*

*"What in the world do you want to marry me for?"*

*"Because I was made to carry a house on my shoulders, and will do so. I want to do the best I can for myself, and I shall never have such a chance again. And I cannot help myself, and don't know why; that is the plain truth of the matter. You will marry someone some day." She shook her head. "Yes, you will. Why not marry me?"*

*Agatha bit her nether lip, looked ruefully at the ground, and, after a long pause, said reluctantly, "Very well. But mind, I think you are acting very foolishly, and if you are disappointed afterwards, you must not blame ME."*

*"I take the risk of my bargain," he said, releasing her hand, and leaning against the door as he took out his pocket diary. "You will have to take the risk of yours, which I hope may not prove the worse of the two. This is the seventeenth of June. What date before the twenty-fourth of July will suit you?"*

*"You mean the twenty-fourth of July next year, I presume?"*

*"No; I mean this year. I am going abroad on that date, married or not, to attend a conference at Geneva, and I want you to come with me. I will show you a lot of places and things that you have never seen before. It is your right to name the day, but you have no serious business to provide for, and I have."*

*"But you don't know all the things I shall--I should have to provide. You had better wait until you come back from the continent."*

*"There is nothing to be provided on your part but settlements and your trousseau. The trousseau is all nonsense; and Jansenius knows me of old in the matter of settlements. I got married in six weeks before."*

*"Yes," said Agatha sharply, "but I am not Henrietta."*

*"No, thank Heaven," he assented placidly.*

*Agatha was struck with remorse. "That was a vile thing for me to say," she said; "and for you too."*

*"Whatever is true is to the purpose, vile or not. Will you come to Geneva on the twenty-fourth?"*

*"But--I really was not thinking when I--I did not intend to say that I would--I--"*

*"I know. You will come if we are married."*

*"Yes. IF we are married."*

*"We shall be married. Do not write either to your mother or Jansenius until I ask you."*

*"I don't intend to. I have nothing to write about."*

*"Wretch that you are! And do not be jealous if you catch me making love to Lady Brandon. I always do so; she expects it."*

*"You may make love to whom you please. It is no concern of mine."*

*"Here comes the wagonette with Lady Brandon and Ger--and Miss Lindsay. I mustn't call her Gertrude now except when you are not by. Before they interrupt us, let me remind you of the three points we are agreed upon. I love you. You do not love me. We are to be married before the twenty-fourth of next month. Now I must fly to help her ladyship to alight."*

*He hastened to the house door, at which the wagonette had just stopped. Agatha, bewildered, and ashamed to face her friends, went in through the conservatory, and locked herself in her room.*

*Trefusis went into the library with Gertrude whilst Lady Brandon loitered in the hall to take off her gloves and ask questions of the servants. When she followed, she found the two standing together at the window. Gertrude was listening to him with the patient expression she now often wore when he talked. He was smiling, but it struck Jane that he was not quite at ease. "I was just beginning to tell Miss Lindsay," he said, "of an extraordinary thing that has happened during your absence."*

*"I know," exclaimed Jane, with sudden conviction. "The heater in the conservatory has cracked."*

*"Possibly," said Trefusis; "but, if so, I have not heard of it."*

*"If it hasn't cracked, it will," said Jane gloomily. Then, assuming with some effort an interest in Trefusis's*

news, she added: "Well, what has happened?"

*"I was chatting with Miss Wylie just now, when a singular idea occurred to us. We discussed it for some time; and the upshot is that we are to be married before the end of next month."*

*Jane reddened and stared at him; and he looked keenly back at her. Gertrude, though unobserved, did not suffer her expression of patient happiness to change in the least; but a greenish-white color suddenly appeared in her face, and only gave place very slowly to her usual complexion.*

*"Do you mean to say that you are going to marry AGATHA?" said Lady Brandon incredulously, after a pause.*

*"Yes. I had no intention of doing so when I last saw you or I should have told you."*

*"I never heard of such a thing in my life! You fell in love with one another in five minutes, I suppose."*

*"Good Heavens, no! we are not in love with one another. Can you believe that I would marry for such a frivolous reason? No. The subject turned up accidentally, and the advantage of a match between us struck me forcibly. I was fortunate enough to convert her to my opinion."*

*"Yes; she wanted a lot of pressing, I dare say," said Jane, glancing at Gertrude, who was smiling unmeaningly.*

*"As you imply," said Trefusis coolly, "her reluctance may have been affected, and she only too glad to get such a charming husband. Assuming that to be the case, she dissembled remarkably well."*

*Gertrude took off her bonnet, and left the room without speaking.*

*"This is my revenge upon you for marrying Brandon," he said then, approaching Jane.*

*"Oh, yes," she retorted ironically. "I believe all that, of course."*

*"You have the same security for its truth as for that of all the foolish things I confess to you. There!" He pointed to a panel of looking glass, in which Jane's figure was reflected at full length.*

*"I don't see anything to admire," said Jane, looking at herself with no great favor. "There is plenty of me, if you admire that."*

*"It is impossible to have too much of a good thing. But I must not look any more. Though Agatha says she does not love me, I am not sure that she would be pleased if I were to look for love from anyone else."*

*"Says she does not love you! Don't believe her; she has taken trouble enough to catch you."*

*"I am flattered. You caught me without any trouble, and yet you would not have me."*

*"It is manners to wait to be asked. I think you have treated Gertrude shamefully--I hope you won't be offended with me for saying so. I blame Agatha most. She is an awfully double-faced girl."*

*"How so?" said Trefusis, surprised. "What has Miss Lindsay to do with it?"*

*"You know very well."*

*"I assure you I do not. If you were speaking of yourself I could understand you."*

*"Oh, you can get out of it cleverly, like all men; but you can't hoodwink me. You shouldn't have pretended to like Gertrude when you were really pulling a cord with Agatha. And she, too, pretending to flirt with Sir Charles--as if he would care twopence for her!"*

*Trefusis seemed a little disturbed. "I hope Miss Lindsay had no such--but she could not."*

*"Oh, couldn't she? You will soon see whether she had or not."*

*"You misunderstood us, Lady Brandon; Miss Lindsay knows better. Remember, too, that this proposal of mine was quite unpremeditated. This morning I had no tender thoughts of anyone except one whom it would be improper to name."*

*"Oh, that is all talk. It won't do now."*

*"I will talk no more at present. I must be off to the village to telegraph to my solicitor. If I meet Erskine I will tell him the good news."*

*"He will be delighted. He thought, as we all did, that you were cutting him out with Gertrude."*

*Trefusis smiled, shook his head, and, with a glance of admiring homage to Jane's charms, went out. Jane was contemplating herself in the glass when a servant begged her to come and speak to Master Charles and Miss Fanny. She hurried upstairs to the nursery, where her boy and girl, disputing each other's prior right to torture the baby, had come to blows. They were somewhat frightened, but not at all appeased, by Jane's entrance. She scolded, coaxed, threatened, bribed, quoted Dr. Watts, appealed to the nurse and then insulted her, demanded of the children whether they loved one another, whether they loved mamma, and whether they wanted a right good whipping. At last, exasperated by her own inability to restore order, she seized the baby, which had cried incessantly throughout, and, declaring that it was doing it on purpose and should have something real to cry for, gave it an exemplary smacking, and ordered the others to bed. The boy, awed by the fate of his infant brother, offered, by way of compromise, to be good if Miss Wylie would come and play with him, a proposal which provoked from his jealous mother a box on the ear that sent him howling to his cot. Then she left the room, pausing on the threshold to remark that if she heard another sound from them that day, they might expect the worst from her. On descending, heated and angry, to the drawing-room, she found Agatha there alone, looking out of window as if the landscape were especially unsatisfactory this time.*

*"Selfish little beasts!" exclaimed Jane, making a miniature whirlwind with her skirts as she came in. "Charlie is a perfect little fiend. He spends all his time thinking how he can annoy me. Ugh! He's just like his father."*

*"Thank you, my dear," said Sir Charles from the doorway.*

*Jane laughed. "I knew you were there," she said. "Where's Gertrude?"*

*"She has gone out," said Sir Charles.*

*"Nonsense! She has only just come in from driving with me."*

*"I do not know what you mean by nonsense," said Sir Charles, chafing. "I saw her walking along the Riverside Road. I was in the village road, and she did not see me. She seemed in a hurry."*

*"I met her on the stairs and spoke to her," said Agatha, "but she didn't hear me."*

*"I hope she is not going to throw herself into the river," said Jane. Then, turning to her husband, she added: "Have you heard the news?"*

*"The only news I have heard is from this paper," said Sir Charles, taking out a journal and flinging it on the table. "There is a paragraph in it stating that I have joined some infernal Socialistic league, and I am told that there is an article in the 'Times' on the spread of Socialism, in which my name is mentioned. This is all due to Trefusis; and I think he has played me a most dishonorable trick. I will tell him so, too, when next I see him."*

*"You had better be careful what you say of him before Agatha," said Jane. "Oh, you need not be alarmed, Agatha; I know all about it. He told us in the library. We went out this morning--Gertrude and I--and when we came back we found Mr. Trefusis and Agatha talking very lovingly to one another on the conservatory steps, newly engaged."*

*"Indeed!" said Sir Charles, disconcerted and displeased, but trying to smile. "I may then congratulate you, Miss Wylie?"*

*"You need not," said Agatha, keeping her countenance as well as she could. "It was only a joke. At least it came about in a jest. He has no right to say that we are engaged."*

*"Stuff and nonsense," said Jane. "That won't do, Agatha. He has gone off to telegraph to his solicitor. He is quite in earnest."*

*"I am a great fool," said Agatha, sitting down and twisting her hands perplexedly. "I believe I said something; but I really did not intend to. He surprised me into speaking before I knew what I was saying. A pretty mess I have got myself into!"*

*"I am glad you have been outwitted at last," said Jane, laughing spitefully. "You never had any pity for me when I could not think of the proper thing to say at a moment's notice."*

*Agatha let the taunt pass unheeded. Her gaze wandered anxiously, and at last settled appealingly upon Sir Charles. "What shall I do?" she said to him.*

*"Well, Miss Wylie," he said gravely, "if you did not mean to marry him you should not have promised. I don't wish to be unsympathetic, and I know that it is very hard to get rid of Trefusis when he makes up his mind to act something out of you, but still--"*

*"Never mind her," said Jane, interrupting him. "She wants to marry him just as badly as he wants to marry her. You would be preciously disappointed if he cried off, Agatha; for all your interesting reluctance."*

*"That is not so, really," said Agatha earnestly. "I wish I had taken time to think about it. I suppose he has told everybody by this time."*

*"May we then regard it as settled?" said Sir Charles.*

*"Of course you may," said Jane contemptuously.*

*"Pray allow Miss Wylie to speak for herself, Jane. I confess I do not understand why you are still in doubt--if you have really engaged yourself to him."*

*"I suppose I am in for it," said Agatha. "I feel as if there were some fatal objection, if I could only remember what it is. I wish I had never seen him."*



*Sir Charles was puzzled. "I do not understand ladies' ways in these matters," he said. "However, as there seems to be no doubt that you and Trefusis are engaged, I shall of course say nothing that would make it unpleasant for him to visit here; but I must say that he has--to say the least--been inconsiderate to me personally. I signed a paper at his house on the implicit understanding that it was strictly private, and now he has trumpeted it forth to the whole world, and publicly associated my name not only with his own, but with those of persons of whom I know nothing except that I would rather not be connected with them in any way."*

"What does it matter?" said Jane. "Nobody cares twopence."

"I care," said Sir Charles angrily. "No sensible person can accuse me of exaggerating my own importance because I value my reputation sufficiently to object to my approval being publicly cited in support of a cause with which I have no sympathy."

"Perhaps Mr. Trefusis has had nothing to do with it," said Agatha. "The papers publish whatever they please, don't they?"

"That's right, Agatha," said Jane maliciously. "Don't let anyone speak ill of him."

"I am not speaking ill of him," said Sir Charles, before Agatha could retort. "It is a mere matter of feeling, and I should not have mentioned it had I known the altered relations between him and Miss Wylie."

"Pray don't speak of them," said Agatha. "I have a mind to run away by the next train."

Sir Charles, to change the subject, suggested a duet.

Meanwhile Erskine, returning through the village from his morning ride, had met Trefusis, and attempted to pass him with a nod. But Trefusis called to him to stop, and he dismounted reluctantly.

"Just a word to say that I am going to be married," said Trefusis.

"To--?" Erskine could not add Gertrude's name.

"To one of our friends at the Beeches. Guess to which."

"To Miss Lindsay, I presume."

"What in the fiend's name has put it into all your heads that Miss Lindsay and I are particularly attached to one another?" exclaimed Trefusis. "YOU have always appeared to me to be the man for Miss Lindsay. I am going to marry Miss Wylie."

"Really!" exclaimed Erskine, with a sensation of suddenly thawing after a bitter frost.

"Of course. And now, Erskine, you have the advantage of being a poor man. Do not let that splendid girl marry for money. If you go further you are likely to fare worse; and so is she." Then he nodded and walked away, leaving the other staring after him.

"If he has jilted her, he is a scoundrel," said Erskine. "I am sorry I didn't tell him so."

He mounted and rode slowly along the Riverside Road, partly suspecting Trefusis of some mystification, but inclining to believe in him, and, in any case, to take his advice as to Gertrude. The conversation he had overheard in the avenue still perplexed him. He could not reconcile it with Trefusis's profession of disinterestedness towards her.

His bicycle carried him noiselessly on its india-rubber tires to the place by which the hemlock grew and there he saw Gertrude sitting on the low earthen wall that separated the field from the road. Her straw bag, with her scissors in it, lay beside her. Her fingers were interlaced, and her hands rested, palms downwards, on her knee. Her expression was rather vacant, and so little suggestive of any serious emotion that Erskine laughed as he alighted close to her.

"Are you tired?" he said.

"No," she replied, not startled, and smiling mechanically--an unusual condescension on her part.

"Indulging in a day-dream?"

"No." She moved a little to one side and concealed the basket with her dress.

He began to fear that something was wrong. "Is it possible that you have ventured among those poisonous plants again?" he said. "Are you ill?"

"Not at all," she replied, rousing herself a little. "Your solicitude is quite thrown away. I am perfectly well."

"I beg your pardon," he said, snubbed. "I thought--Don't you think it dangerous to sit on that damp wall?"

"It is not damp. It is crumbling into dust with dryness." An unnatural laugh, with which she concluded, intensified his uneasiness.

He began a sentence, stopped, and to gain time to recover himself, placed his bicycle in the opposite ditch; a proceeding which she witnessed with impatience, as it indicated his intention to stay and talk. She, however, was the first to speak; and she did so with a callousness that shocked him.

"Have you heard the news?"

"What news?"

"About Mr. Trefusis and Agatha. They are engaged."

"So Trefusis told me. I met him just now in the village. I was very glad to hear it."

"Of course."

"But I had a special reason for being glad."

"Indeed?"

"I was desperately afraid, before he told me the truth, that he had other views--views that might have proved fatal to my dearest hopes."

Gertrude frowned at him, and the frown roused him to brave her. He lost his self-command, already shaken by her strange behavior. "You know that I love you, Miss Lindsay," he said. "It may not be a perfect love, but, humanly speaking, it is a true one. I almost told you so that day when we were in the billiard room together; and I did a very dishonorable thing the same evening. When you were speaking to Trefusis in the avenue I was close to you, and I listened."

"Then you heard him," cried Gertrude vehemently. "You heard him swear that he was in earnest."

"Yes," said Erskine, trembling, "and I thought he meant in earnest in loving you. You can hardly blame me for that: I was in love myself; and love is blind and jealous. I never hoped again until he told me that he was to be married to Miss Wylie. May I speak to you, now that I know I was mistaken, or that you have changed your mind?"

"Or that he has changed his mind," said Gertrude scornfully.

Erskine, with a new anxiety for her sake, checked himself. Her dignity was dear to him, and he saw that her disappointment had made her reckless of it. "Do not say anything to me now, Miss Lindsay, lest--"

"What have I said? What have I to say?"

"Nothing, except on my own affairs. I love you dearly."

She made an impatient movement, as if that were a very insignificant matter.

"You believe me, I hope," he said, timidly.

Gertrude made an effort to recover her habitual ladylike reserve, but her energy failed before she had done more than raise her head. She relapsed into her listless attitude, and made a faint gesture of intolerance.

"You cannot be quite indifferent to being loved," he said, becoming more nervous and more urgent. "Your existence constitutes all my happiness. I offer you my services and devotion. I do not ask any reward." (He was now speaking very quickly and almost inaudibly.) "You may accept my love without returning it. I do not want--seek to make a bargain. If you need a friend you may be able to rely on me more confidently because you know I love you."

"Oh, you think so," said Gertrude, interrupting him; "but you will get over it. I am not the sort of person that men fall in love with. You will soon change your mind."

"Not the sort! Oh, how little you know!" he said, becoming eloquent. "I have had plenty of time to change, but I am as fixed as ever. If you doubt, wait and try me. But do not be rough with me. You pain me more than you can imagine when you are hasty or indifferent. I am in earnest."

"Ha, ha! That is easily said."

"Not by me. I change in my judgment of other people according to my humor, but I believe steadfastly in your goodness and beauty--as if you were an angel. I am in earnest in my love for you as I am in earnest for my own life, which can only be perfected by your aid and influence."

"You are greatly mistaken if you suppose that I am an angel."

"You are wrong to mistrust yourself; but it is what I owe to you and not what I expect from you that I try to express by speaking of you as an angel. I know that you are not an angel to yourself. But you are to me."

She sat stubbornly silent.

"I will not press you for an answer now. I am content that you know my mind at last. Shall we return together?"

She looked round slowly at the hemlock, and from that to the river. Then she took up her basket, rose, and prepared to go, as if under compulsion.

"Do you want any more hemlock?" he said. "If so, I will pluck some for you."

"I wish you would let me alone," she said, with sudden anger. She added, a little ashamed of herself, "I have a headache."

"I am very sorry," he said, crestfallen.

"It is only that I do not wish to be spoken to. It hurts my head to listen."

He meekly took his bicycle from the ditch and wheeled it along beside her to the Beeches without another word. They went in through the conservatory, and parted in the dining-room. Before leaving him she said with some remorse, "I did not mean to be rude, Mr. Erskine."

He flushed, murmured something, and attempted to kiss her hand. But she snatched it away and went out quickly. He was stung by this repulse, and stood mortifying himself by thinking of it until he was disturbed by the entrance of a maid-servant. Learning from her that Sir Charles was in the billiard room, he joined him there, and asked him carelessly if he had heard the news.

"About Miss Wylie?" said Sir Charles. "Yes, I should think so. I believe the whole country knows it, though they have not been engaged three hours. Have you seen these?" And he pushed a couple of newspapers across the table.

Erskine had to make several efforts before he could read. "You were a fool to sign that document," he said. "I told you so at the time."

"I relied on the fellow being a gentleman," said Sir Charles warmly. "I do not see that I was a fool. I see that he is a cad, and but for this business of Miss Wylie's I would let him know my opinion. Let me tell you, Chester, that he has played fast and loose with Miss Lindsay. There is a deuce of a row upstairs. She has just told Jane that she must go home at once; Miss Wylie declares that she will have nothing to do with Trefusis if Miss Lindsay has a prior claim to him, and Jane is annoyed at his admiring anybody except herself. It serves me right; my instinct warned me against the fellow from the first." Just then luncheon was announced. Gertrude did not come down. Agatha was silent and moody. Jane tried to make Erskine describe his walk with Gertrude, but he baffled her curiosity by omitting from his account everything except its commonplaces.

"I think her conduct very strange," said Jane. "She insists on going to town by the four o'clock train. I consider that it's not polite to me, although she always made a point of her perfect manners. I never heard of such a thing!"

When they had risen from the table, they went together to the drawing-room. They had hardly arrived there when Trefusis was announced, and he was in their presence before they had time to conceal the expression of consternation his name brought into their faces.

"I have come to say good-bye," he said. "I find that I must go to town by the four o'clock train to push my arrangements in person; the telegrams I have received breathe nothing but delay. Have you seen the 'Times'?"

"I have indeed," said Sir Charles, emphatically.

"You are in some other paper too, and will be in half-a-dozen more in the course of the next fortnight. Men who have committed themselves to an opinion are always in trouble with the newspapers; some because they cannot get into them, others because they cannot keep out. If you had put forward a thundering revolutionary manifesto, not a daily paper would have dared allude to it: there is no cowardice like Fleet Street cowardice! I must run off; I have much to do before I start, and it is getting on for three. Good-bye, Lady Brandon, and

everybody."

He shook Jane's hand, dealt nods to the rest rapidly, making no distinction in favor of Agatha, and hurried away. They stared after him for a moment and then Erskine ran out and went downstairs two steps at a time. Nevertheless he had to run as far as the avenue before he overtook his man.

"Trefusis," he said breathlessly, "you must not go by the four o'clock train."

"Why not?"

"Miss Lindsay is going to town by it."

"So much the better, my dear boy; so much the better. You are not jealous of me now, are you?"

"Look here, Trefusis. I don't know and I don't ask what there has been between you and Miss Lindsay, but your engagement has quite upset her, and she is running away to London in consequence. If she hears that you are going by the same train she will wait until to-morrow, and I believe the delay would be very disagreeable. Will you inflict that additional pain upon her?"

Trefusis, evidently concerned, looking doubtfully at Erskine, and pondered for a moment. "I think you are on a wrong scent about this," he said. "My relations with Miss Lindsay were not of a sentimental kind. Have you said anything to her--on your own account, I mean?"

"I have spoken to her on both accounts, and I know from her own lips that I am right."

Trefusis uttered a low whistle.

"It is not the first time I have had the evidence of my senses in the matter," said Erskine significantly. "Pray think of it seriously, Trefusis. Forgive my telling you frankly that nothing but your own utter want of feeling could excuse you for the way in which you have acted towards her."

Trefusis smiled. "Forgive me in turn for my inquisitiveness," he said. "What does she say to your suit?"

Erskine hesitated, showing by his manner that he thought Trefusis had no right to ask the question. "She says nothing," he answered.

"Hm!" said Trefusis. "Well, you may rely on me as to the train. There is my hand upon it."

"Thank you," said Erskine fervently. They shook hands and parted, Trefusis walking away with a grin suggestive of anything but good faith.