

At first she made up her mind that the thing was impossible, but when Jack returned with a gloomy face, to tell her that all his efforts to influence the Duke had been failures, she wavered, and finally conquered her pride so far as to write to Ronald Gower asking, as an old friend, his influence on Jack's behalf.

By return came a reply in the curiously familiar handwriting.

'Dear Lady Flora,' it ran, 'I am glad you remembered me and our old friendship. I will do what I can to interest the Duke on your friend's behalf, and perhaps if I am successful you will allow me to make the announcement in person.'

'Always your friend,

'RONALD GOWER.'

After she had read the letter, Lady Flora wept so much that she was unable to appear at breakfast. She sent word by her maid that she was suffering from headache, and Lord Mountbay was obliged to read his papers undisturbed.

She sent a graceful little note of thanks to Ronald Gower, and then, with a sad kind of feeling as to the topsy-turvydom of human things, she sat down to await events.

Events did not seem to move rapidly, for days passed and she heard no news of Jack or of his projects. She was grieved at first at Jack's neglect, then indignant. For his sake she had humbled herself to ask a favor from Ronald Gower, and he had not shown himself decently grateful. If he came now, she said to herself, she would not receive him. But he did not come, but in his place came a hastily scrawled letter, to the effect that there was no use trying to get anything in England, and so he was going out to South Africa as an inspector of mines to Mr. Dalzell. He was grateful for all that she had done for him, but he hadn't the courage to come and tell her so, and he was leaving next day.

Lady Flora read the letter through, with a very white face. Then she walked to the fireplace, put it in the fire, and watched it slowly burn and become ashes.

'That is the end of my last folly,' she murmured, 'and there shall never be another. God help me, to think of my marrying such a thing as that.'

When she kissed her father's forehead in the morning she showed no sign of heart trouble, unless it was that her manner was more affectionate than usual.

'By the way, Flora,' remarked the Earl, 'I see that young protege of yours has been doing rather well for himself. Listen to this: "A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Mr. John Cavendish, only son of Lieutenant-Colonel Cavendish, and Lilian, eldest daughter of Mr. Thomas Dalzell, the well-known millionaire of South Africa. The bridegroom will shortly take up an important post on the Rand mines of his prospective father-in-law." What a strange girl you are not to have told be anything about it.'

'I did not think it would interest you, father,' Lady Flora answered in a low voice.

'Well, it does. Everything does, more or less. And that reminds me that I have to lunch with General Buxton to-day at the United Services, and so I shan't be able to go with you to Lady Burcliff's "At home." You will make my apologies.'

'Yes, father.'

But as the afternoon worked on Flora felt that she could not, at the moment, endure the mild frivolity of a fashionable 'At home.' For one thing, she had to write to Ronald Gower begging him not to take any further trouble in the matter of Mr. Cavendish, since he had already accepted another appointment. The sooner that was done the better, and then she would start afresh. She sent away the carriage, which had waited for her, and went to the library to write her letter.

She sat down at her desk and took a sheet of paper, but for a long time she did not know how to phrase it. What was she to say and how to apologise for trouble given unnecessarily?

A footman opened the door.

'Mr. Gower, your ladyship,' he said, 'is in the drawing-room.'

The color suddenly left her face, and she trembled.

'Show Mr. Gower in here,' she said.

'Yes, your ladyship.'

In a moment her composure came back to her. She stood up, leaning on the desk, then she went forward to welcome her guest.

'It is so good of you to come after all these years,' she said, giving him her hand and looking into his face.

He had not changed much, although the hair about his temples was becoming gray; but his face and eyes were steadfast as of old.

'I was rejoiced to think that I could be of service to you,' he answered in a voice which betrayed some emotion, 'and if I had failed I should not have dared to come. As it is, I have been more successful than I anticipated. The Duke has almost promised me to give the appointment to your friend Mr. Cavendish, and I really think I may say, that the thing is practically assured.'

'I am sorry, Mr. Gower, for having given you so much trouble in the matter but the fact is that Mr. Cavendish has shaken the dust off his feet in this country and has accepted a post in South Africa. I was just about to write to you to that effect.'

'Oh, indeed,' replied Mr. Gower. 'Then my news comes too late.'

'I'm afraid it does,' answered Lady Flora, 'but I am not the less grateful for your kindness. And, after all, Mr. Cavendish will probably find his father-in-law a more considerate employer than any other.'

'His father-in-law!'

'Yes, Mr. Dalzell of South Africa. Mr. Cavendish is to be married to his eldest daughter.'

The news seemed to affect Ronald Gower deeply. He rose to his feet and paced several times up and down the library, whilst she watched him with a beating heart. What a fool she had been! In every line and feature of his face were power and distinction, and she had been satisfied to give herself to a mere brainless boy.

'Shall I ring for tea?' she asked at length.

'Yes, thank you—or not yet, if you please,' he answered. 'I have brought you something which perhaps I ought to have returned long ago.'

He took a case from his pocket and opened it. Inside was a withered rosebud.

'This and my dreams I have kept,' he went on, 'but when I got your letter I thought it was time to surrender both. You see, I was never good at forgetting and so I always remembered the garden of roses at Mountbay and all the dreams that—that—that—'

'Don't, don't,' she cried, stretching out her hands appealingly. 'I can't bear to think of those days.'

'This is the rose that you gave me,' he said. 'Will you take it back, or—'

'What if I do not?' she whispered.

'It is a pledge of our friendship,' he went on, 'but I always kept it in hope that some day, when you had seen the world and laughed at life and love till you were weary, you would remember me and perhaps come to love me.'

'You—you—love me still?' she broke out.

'Yes, now as always,' he answered, 'else I had not kept this rose to torture me with its perfume.'

'Oh, I am unworthy,' she cried, covering her face with her hands.

He drew her hands away and kissed her.

'Let us go back to the garden and gather the roses together,' he said.—*Exchange.*

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