

ROMANCE SERIES N° 5

FOR LOVE OF A LAND-GIRL

by WINSTON
CARDEW



1/-

"GO BACK! GO BACK!" SHOUTED DEREK

FOR LOVE OF A LAND-GIRL!

By Winston Cardew

CHAPTER I LAD OR LASS?

"Hi!"

Derek Trent shouted across the field.

There was nothing else to be done. He was lost—hopelessly lost—and it was really a godsend, catching sight of a human figure, at last, wielding a hoe in the field beside that lonely lane.

He was lost in a wilderness. At least it seemed like a wilderness, to the young man accustomed to paved streets and crowds and cars.

It was a pleasant wilderness—if he had not been so tired and dusty and bored and irritated. Great trees shaded the Sussex lanes, over-topping green hedges—fields and meadows stretched, green and fertile, to the shady woods and downs in the distance. But rural beauties were lost on a young man who had been walking for two hours, and had finally come to the conclusion that he was further from his destination than when he had started.

He could have kicked himself for having started to walk to Morcom Court at all. It had looked like a pleasant walk, after the train journey from arid London. But that was not his real reason. His real reason, as he half-realised, was that he was in no hurry to arrive at Lady Morcom's house. So far from being in a hurry to arrive there, he did not want to arrive there at all. He did not want to see her—but he had to see her—there was no help for that. But every minute of delay seemed so much to the good. So he walked—and lost himself! Once out of sight of Cawcross village the wilderness swallowed him up.

He had reached a stile now, in a dusty lane. He was almost certain that he had seen that stile before—that he had traversed that very lane. But he had taken so many turnings that morning, that all sense of direction was gone. Perhaps he had been wandering in circles, as lost people are said to do. Anyhow he stopped at the stile, and looked across it, in the hope of seeing some living creature who might put him on the right road for Morcom Court.

Then he spotted the figure with the hoe—a native at last. It was a godsend. Some young fellow working on the land—it was a boyish-looking figure, in cord breeches and a floppy hat. Of agricultural life Derek knew rather less than nothing: but he knew that it was a hoe that was wielded, though what and why the young fellow was hoeing he did not know, and did not want to know. He waved his hand, thinking that the lad might look round—but the lad did not look round. Then he shouted:

"Hi!"

Still the lad did not look round. He seemed very intent on his hoeing. He must have heard, unless he was deaf. But perhaps he did not realise that he was being addressed. Anyhow he went on hoeing.

Derek Trent breathed hard through his well-shaped nose. He was a rather fastidious young man, and did not like shouting at strangers. But he had to find out where he was, and where Morcom Court was. His desire to delay his arrival at the Court had quite disappeared. He was tired, he was hungry, and he was in a bad temper that was growing worse. He wanted to sit down and rest his weary limbs, out of the glare of the sun, and that he could not do till he reached his destination. At this stage, he would have been glad to find himself at Morcom Court, if he had had to propose to half a dozen women there,

instead of merely one—Francesca, Lady Morcom, baroness in her own right.

"Hi!" He fairly roared.

The lad with the hoe turned his head at last. And then Derek Trent gave quite a jump.

At the distance, he had noticed chiefly the breeches. To all appearances the wielder of the hoe was a boy. But when the agricultural worker looked round, and he had a view of the face, he realised that appearances may be deceptive. It was not a boy's face, but a girl's face, that looked at him from under the shady brim of the hat.

"Oh!" ejaculated Derek.

He stared at that face. It was a lovely face—he could not help noticing that, with softly-rounded cheeks, a charming little straight nose, dark eyelashes over eyes of the darkest blue. Those lovely dark eyes looked at him with cold inquiry.

He flushed and raised his hat.

"Did you call to me?" It was a calm, clear voice, very musical in its tones.

"Yes," stammered Derek. "Please excuse me—I—I—I did not know that it was a land-girl I was calling to—I—I thought——"

The land-girl looked puzzled for a moment, and then smiled faintly.

"No harm done," she said. "What do you want?"

"I've lost my way. I've seen hardly a soul for two hours. I suppose you know this country as you're working here, miss."

She smiled again.

"Yes, I know this country very well," she answered. "I've no doubt I can set you on your way. Are you going to Cawcross?"

"Oh! No! That's where I've come from."

She stood looking at him. Her face was naturally a little grave: but he could see that its gravity was breaking down under a desire to laugh. But she did not laugh: she controlled that impulse.

"You have come from Cawcross, and you have been walking for two hours?" she asked.

"Yes."

"A stranger in the land, evidently," said the land-girl. "You are not more than ten minutes' walk from Cawcross now."

"Oh!" gasped Derek. Ten minutes' walk from Cawcross—and he had been walking about for two hours! Obviously he had done a good deal of circling!

"Well, I don't want Cawcross," he said, "I want Morcom Court, if you can tell me where to find the place."

"Morcom Court!" she repeated. Her dark eyes were very intent on his face. "Did you say Morcom Court?"

"Yes: the residence of Lady Morcom. I suppose you have heard of the place, if you live about here," he said.

"Oh! Yes! Certainly." She paused: then opened her lips to speak—and closed them again, her eyes all the while very curiously on his face. Then suddenly she smiled—a smile that dazzled Derek Trent. "Are you the gentleman from London? I heard that they expected a gentleman from London at the Court this morning."

"I suppose I am," said Derek. "I am expected there, certainly."

"You should have kept to the road," said the land-girl. "There are shorter ways by the lanes, but they are puzzling to a stranger, especially as the road signs have not yet been replaced since the war. You must be tired if you have been wandering about for two hours."

"I am," confessed Derek. "Dog-tired! But I hope I'm good for the distance, if you can tell me where to find the wretched place."

The land-girl gave a little start.

"The wretched place?" she repeated. "What a compliment to Lady Morcom! Well, I can tell you where to find the wretched place, as you call it."

Derek coloured. He was, as he had said, tired—he was hungry, and he was irritated, with himself and everything else. But he had not intended to allow his irritation to escape him in words.

"Is it a long walk?" he asked, hastily.

"A good half-hour, from here—more, if you're already tired."

Derek suppressed a groan.

"I think I'll rest a bit before I go on," he said. "Do you mind if I sit on this stile for a while?"

"Why should I?" said the land-girl. "Sit there as long as you like: and when you're ready to go I'll give you your direction."

"Thank you."

She gave him a nod, and resumed hoeing, the next moment apparently quite forgetful of his existence. Derek Trent sat on the stile, glad to rest his weary limbs, and watched her—almost forgetting that he was missing his lunch, in the rather unexpected interest he found in watching the land-girl.

CHAPTER II

LUNCH FOR TWO!

DEREK TRENT glanced at his wrist-watch. It indicated one o'clock. He had left Cawcross Station at ten—fully intending to loiter on the way, but expecting to arrive in ample time for lunch. It was the unexpected that had happened—after his wanderings, he was no nearer Morcom Court—probably further off! He was hungry—and he was not, as a rule, very patient or good-tempered when he was hungry. Yet, as he sat on the stile and watched the graceful figure with the hoe, he was conscious that he was rather glad of the mischance that had occurred. His interest in watching the land-girl surprised himself.

Perhaps her indifference helped. She did not once glance in his direction. She worked steadily, and apparently tirelessly, with the hoe, moving along rows of what he supposed to be vegetables of some kind. Derek Trent was a good-looking young man, not accustomed to such indifference—indeed, he could not have counted the "glad-eyes" that had been turned upon him without going into high figures. But very clearly the land-girl had no glad-eye for him.

He found himself wondering who she was, what her name was, and how old she was. About twenty-four, he judged: but she might have seemed younger—or older—in other garb. Even those rough garments could not disguise her grace—nothing could hide the loveliness of her face—and he noticed a tress of brown-gold hair that escaped from under the shabby old floppy hat, over a very pretty ear. He almost forgot that he was hungry—though not quite.

But as he looked at his watch, by a coincidence, the land-girl also paused and glanced at a wrist-watch. Then she came towards the stile. It occurred to him that her morning's work was done: no doubt she was going, and doubtless her way lay across the stile. He jumped down, on the inner side of the stile, in the field.

But she did not come quite to the stile. She turned aside, and picked up from under the hedge, close at hand, a bag, which Derek had not noticed before. Then she glanced at him, with a faint smile.

"If you're going on, shall I tell you how to get to the wretched place?" she asked. Evidently she had not forgotten those irritable words.

"I—I suppose I'd better get on," said Derek, reluctantly. Then he smiled, too. "If I don't get a spot of lunch soon, I shall perish."

"Poor boy!" said the land-girl. "You've missed your lunch? I'm just going to have mine—it's in this bag. If you could eat bread and cheese, I'd offer to share with you—there's lots."

"I could eat the hind leg of a mule," said Derek.

She laughed.

"No such delicacies as that in a land-girl's lunch-bag," she said. "But plenty of bread and cheese. May I ask you to lunch, Mr. Trent?"

Derek gave a little jump.

"You know my name?" he exclaimed.

"Naturally! Didn't I tell you I heard that they were expecting a gentleman from London at Morcom Court this morning? That was the name. Yours, I suppose?"

"Yes, my name is Derek Trent," he said. "And yours——"

"Mine doesn't matter," she said, calmly, as she opened the lunch-bag. "Are you really hungry enough to eat bread and cheese?"

"Quite! But oughtn't I to know the name of my hostess, if you're kind enough to ask me to lunch?" said Derek. "I must call you something, you know."

"You may call me Eliza Smith, if you feel the necessity," she answered. "Now let's sit down to lunch, Mr. Trent—plenty of room for two on that stile."

"What a charming name," he said.

"Really? A little homely, don't you think?"

"I like homely names."

"I don't! I like a name like Lady Morcom's—Francesca! Isn't that a lovely name?"

"Oh, I dare say it is," he said, indifferently. They sat side by side on the stile, and proceeded to dispose of thick cheese sandwiches, both with good appetites. "Have you often seen Lady Morcom?" he asked.

"Very often. I work on her land."

"Oh! Is this her land?" asked Derek.

"This—and all the way to the Court. But, of course, you know Lady Morcom, as you are going to visit her."

"Well, I suppose I do, in a way," said Derek. "But as I haven't seen her since she was a kid of sixteen, I can't say that I know her very well—I don't suppose I shall recognise her."

"That's interesting," said the land-girl. "What was she like at sixteen?"

"Chiefly hair and legs."

"Oh! Wasn't she pretty?"

"I shouldn't wonder—I never noticed. But she was a good little kid," said Derek. "I remember I liked her. She was rather serious for a kid."

"She's rather serious now, I believe," said the land-girl. "It's a serious business, managing an estate."

"No doubt," said Derek, rather drily. He did not say that he disliked "managing" women, but his tone said it for him. "Is she pretty now?" he asked.

"I certainly shouldn't say so, myself."

"Oh!" he said. "I suppose that means—plain?"

"After all, there's a proverb—handsome is as handsome does," said the land-girl. "Good looks don't amount to much."

"I think they do—a little!" said Derek. He wondered what Eliza Smith would have said, had she known that he was going to Morcom Court with the intention of proposing to Lady Morcom—if he could make up his mind to it!

"But I believe she is good-tempered," went on the land-girl. "And very patient, too. Even to the extent of suffering fools gladly, as we are all bidden to do."

He gave her a quick look. There was something in her tone that puzzled him. But her face had a placid smile, as she ate bread and cheese. She seemed to be absolutely at her ease with him—as wholly at her ease as if she had been the lad he had first taken her for. And he was quite at his ease also—strange as it was to be sitting there on the stile, sharing her lunch, with a girl he had never seen until an hour ago.

"Do you like your work?" he asked, to change the subject.

"Oh, yes!"

"Not too hard for a girl?"

"Hard or soft, it has to be done," she said, indifferently. "Land-girls do a job that can't be dispensed with."

"Yes, that's so," agreed Derek. "We should hardly have pulled through the war without them, I suppose. You worked on the land in the war time?"

"Like a horse!" said she, smiling. "We all worked pretty hard. I suppose you were slaving away at something like the rest."

"I wasn't much use. Just a unit among millions," he said, discontentedly. "Never had a real chance of getting anywhere."

"You're glad to be out of it."

"Jolly glad," he answered. "But it leaves a fellow at a loose end. You feel sort of unsettled. Nothing much to do."

"No need for you idle rich to do anything, is there?" asked the land-girl.

Derek laughed.

"You're only half-right," he said. "Idle—but not rich. I've got to do something. I was always a bit of a slacker—always liked an easy life. And life's tough now. Six years blotted out, and nothing to show for it—looking round at twenty-seven, for something I ought to have found at twenty! And there's nothing much."

"Plenty of work to be done," suggested the land-girl. "The land is simply calling out for willing hands."

"Mine are unwilling, I'm afraid. I've tried several things, but never settled down to any of them. Hard work isn't in my line. That's why——" He broke off, abruptly. Actually it had been on the tip of his tongue to say that that was why he was thinking of marrying for money! His face flushed. "I'm too soft to work on the land, as you do!" he confessed. "To hoe and mow, and reap and sow, and be a farmer's boy—ugh!"

"It's a good life, when you get used to it," said the land-girl. "But I can't picture you with a hoe, Mr. Trent." She laughed. "Poor boy! They would find you expiring among the potatoes and turnips." She glanced at her wrist-watch. "Good luck to you, Mr. Trent, in your search for a lazy life—but I must get back to the hoeing."

She jumped lightly from the stile. The bag was put back under the hedge, and she picked up the hoe. With it, she pointed across the field.

"Go across the field, through the white gate, and follow the next path," she said. "It will take you to a footpath through a wood, and on the other side you'll find a lane, which will lead you directly to the wretched place you're in search of."

She walked back into the field, and he walked by her side. She stopped at the spot where she had ceased work, and began to ply the hoe again. He paused.

"I'm really very much obliged," he said. "Many thanks for the lunch."

He wanted her to look at him again: he hated that floppy old hat that hid her face from him. But she did not look up.

"Okay," she said, carelessly. "But keep to the path—don't trample on the vegetables, please."

"The—the vegetables?"

"Yes. There's a path, if you look for it."

"Oh! Yes." He stammered a little. "I'm sorry if I've trodden on your—your turnips, Miss Smith."

"You haven't trodden on my turnips, but you're trampling on my potatoes," said the land-girl. "Do keep to the path. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Derek, reluctantly: though he hardly knew why he was reluctant to go. And he raised his hat, and walked on—taking care to keep to the scarcely marked path, and not to trample further on what he had now discovered to be potatoes.

He glanced back once or twice—at a figure intent on hoeing. Then he reached a gate on the further side of the field. It was fastened by an immense iron latch, and he was grappling with it, when a shout came echoing across the field.

"Stop!"

He stared round.

The land-girl, no longer hoeing, was coming towards him at a run, calling as she came. He was quite willing to stop: and he waited for her to come up. She arrived a little breathless.

"Lucky I had an eye on you, Mr. Trent," she said. "It's a rough life these days, as you said: but you're not tired of it, are you?"

"I don't see——"

"You would, if you'd gone through that field. We keep the black bull there—and he doesn't like strangers. Didn't I tell you the white gate?" said the land-girl. "Is that a white gate?"

"Oh!" said Derek. "Is—is—is there another gate?"

She pointed with the hoe again. At a distance along the hedge he sighted another gate—a white one this time.

"That's the way," she said.

"You're awfully good, and I'm sorry to be such a bother to you," said Derek.

"Not at all—glad I've saved your life, Mr. Trent," said the land-girl.

"So serious as that?" he asked, laughing.

"You'd think so, if you'd walked into the black bull," she said, drily. "Good-bye, once more, Mr. Trent." She turned.

"One moment." He spoke involuntarily, almost without his own volition. "Shall I see you again some time, Miss Smith?"

She turned back, her dark-blue eyes scanning his face curiously.

"Do you want to?" she asked.

"Yes, very much indeed. Are you often at work here?"

"Not so often as in the war time," she said. "But I shall be hoeing the potatoes again, for several days to come, very likely."

With that, and a nod, she went. Derek Trent moved on to the white gate, and passed through into the next field.

He looked back from the gate—she was hard at work with the hoe again. He went slowly on his way—a wrinkle of thought in his brow.

He had said that he wanted to see her again—and she, apparently, did not care a bean whether he did or not. Did he really want to see her again—Eliza Smith, a land-girl? Why on earth had he said so?

Yet it was true. He did want to see her again. And somehow the thought of her made him feel a deeper repugnance for what lay before him at Morcom Court. He tramped rather moodily across a meadow, and then by a shady path in a deep wood—wondering whether she had already forgotten his existence, in her keenness on hoeing those turnips—no, potatoes!

He did not know that the land-girl with the dark-blue eyes and brown-gold hair, after he was out of sight, leaned for several long minutes on her idle hoe, thinking, with a little wrinkle in her clear brow.

"So that's Derek Trent!" she said, at last, aloud.

Then she shrugged graceful shoulders and left the field by the gate that led into the bull's meadow—walking with a free swing of the limbs that covered the ground twice as fast as Derek Trent's lazy saunter.

CHAPTER III

LOVE?

"FRANCESCA!"

"Yes, ducky."

"You've come in early."

"Yes, a little."

"Fed up, I suppose."

"Oh! No."

"You have queer tastes, for a baroness in her own right," yawned Honour Grant, throwing her book on a chair, and turning from the window. "By the way, the Trent man hasn't blown in. If he'd come after all, I should have had him all to myself. But he never came."

Francesca, Lady Morcom, came across towards the window.

She glanced from the window towards an avenue of old beeches, by which a visitor to Morcom Court would arrive. No one was to be seen on the avenue, and she turned to Honour again, a faint smile on her face.

The two girls were about the same age. Honour was pretty—indeed beautiful in the eyes of the young Army man to whom she was engaged. But she looked almost plain beside the lovely Lady Morcom.

She was aware of it, and did not mind. There could have been no greater test of friendship.

"I gave him up, for the day, when I went out, Honour," said Lady Morcom. "But I think he will come, after all. So—so I came back."

"You are anxious to see him, if he does come," said Honour, laughing.

"No! I don't want to see him."

"Then why ask him to come?"

Francesca did not reply immediately to that question. There was a shadow of thought upon her face.

Honour regarded her rather curiously. She had never seen Derek Trent, and had wondered a good deal what he was like. And she wondered, too, what really were Francesca's thoughts and feelings with regard to the man she had not seen since a boy-and-girl friendship of eight years since.

"You see," said Lady Morcom, at last, "we're old friends, Derek and I. I liked him—he was a nice boy. I believe he rather liked me. But——"

"Well?"

"I suppose I rather despise him a little," said Francesca. "But I rather like him all the same. That's rather mixed, isn't it? But——"

"Well?" said Honour, again.

"We were friends, as boy and girl," said Lady Morcom. "I was poor, and he wasn't any too well off. Afterwards, the friendship survived on my side, but not on his—he forgot all about it." She paused. "I used to think he would write, but he never did. I didn't like to write first. But—but when the war came, I—I wrote. He always answered my letters—he had nice manners even as a boy. I should have been glad to see him before he went out, or on his leaves—but he never had either time or inclination to see little Frankie again."

Her brow clouded a little.

"Not once," she went on. "You see, I was poor then. I was a little nobody. A poor orphan, with nothing to attract him

but a remembrance of a boy-and-girl friendship. Why should he waste time on me? Well, he didn't. It dawned on me finally that he had utterly forgotten me—or would have done, had not my letters reminded him of my existence. So I ceased to write."

"And he——" said Honour.

"Never wrote again," said Lady Morcom, placidly. "No doubt it was a relief to him. Neither of us, of course, foresaw what the future held. Very likely he never knew at all that I had rich and titled relations—I hardly knew myself, for I never had anything to do with them. Nevertheless, there they were—distant relatives of my poor father. I did not even know that Lord Morcom's title descended in the female line if the male line failed—I had no time to think about such things when I was teaching music and doing war work."

Another long pause.

"Even had I known," went on Francesca, "how could I ever have dreamed that it would all come to me—that the war would take so terrible a toll of the relatives I had never seen, wiping out the whole Morcom family—and leaving everything to a poor girl who had had to count her half-crowns carefully all her life? In those days I should no more have dreamed of becoming a baroness in my own right, than of becoming Queen of Sheba. So, of course, Derek never thought of anything so fantastic."

"You think it would have made a difference?"

"I think it has," said Lady Morcom, laughing. "Derek never had an hour to spare for the poor music-teacher or the war-worker. But since he has learned of the change in her fortunes, he has the kindest and friendliest recollections of her, and is very keen to renew the old friendship."

"Nice boy!" said Honour, with a shrug.

"Well, he really was a nice boy, in his way, and I liked him," said Francesca. "But—but—when his letter came last week, I—I—I rather hated it. Never once had he written to me before of his own accord. He had answered my letters—briefly but politely—but when I ceased, he ceased—till now. That, I think, is why I did not hear from him earlier—had he learned sooner of my change of fortune, I think he would have felt this desire to renew the old friendship sooner. And I should have told him, of course, had I continued to write."

"You are growing cynical, Francesca."

"Men like Derek Trent make one cynical. After a long silence, during which he had obviously forgotten my existence, this letter comes like a bolt from the blue—quite touching, indeed, on the subject of old days and friendship. I hope I am not unduly suspicious—but wasn't it a little too palpable?"

"Perhaps," said Honour. "Yet you asked him here."

"Why not? I still rather like him—and I'm sorry for him, too. Although we were out of touch, I had news of him sometimes. Since the war he has drifted from one thing to another, never settling down to anything. He was always lazy, and the war unsettled him and made him lazier."

Honour laughed.

"But why," said Lady Morcom, "is he coming? He has not the slightest desire to renew that boy and girl friendship on its own account. That is sheer humbug. He has not yet fallen to the level of sticking friends and acquaintances for invitations to save expenses—he may come to that in the long run, but he has not got there yet. So why is he coming, Honour?"

Honour did not answer that.

"You know, as well as I do," said Francesca. "He is coming to look little Frankie over, and if he decides that he could endure her for life, to exert his attractions, and propose to her."

"It looks like it," said Honour, slowly. "But——"

"Perhaps it would be more exact to say, to propose to Morcom Court," said Lady Morcom. "I come in as a necessary and unavoidable evil. You see, a man cannot propose to an estate—"

he cannot address a building in melting tones, saying: 'I love you—will you be my home?' He must go through the formula of addressing the proprietress, saying: 'I love you—will you be my wife?' I am sure that Derek would prefer the former method, if it were practicable. But it isn't."

"Yet you asked him here," repeated Honour.

"Yes. I think I rather liked the idea of seeing him again—and I was rather amused to see how far he would go—to what depth of meanness he would descend in order to live comfortably without working for his daily bread." Lady Morcom's lip curled. "My feelings were rather mixed—it is possible to like a man and despise him at the same time, Honour. Perhaps I nourished a faint hope, too, that I might be mistaken—too harsh in my judgment of him—I should have been very glad to be able to respect him—very glad indeed. In this, of course, I was deceiving myself—or rather, trying to deceive myself."

Her face clouded, and she looked from the window, almost moodily.

Honour Grant watched her in silence—her thoughts busy. Was it only the recollection of a childish friendship, which the man had forgotten, that caused Francesca Morcom to take so deep an interest in Derek Trent? Or was there some deeper feeling, perhaps hardly known to herself? She had been hurt and wounded by his indifference—hurt again by the mercenary motive that was bringing him back to her after so long a silence—why, if he was no more to her than any other man?

There was something like compassion in Honour's eyes, as she looked at her friend. Lady Morcom was rich and lovely, and might have been surrounded by lovers had she cared to lift her finger—and she had thrown her heart away upon a man unworthy of it—a man she could not help despising. Honour had wondered many times—but now she wondered no longer—she thought she was sure.

Francesca Morcom's eyes were fixed on the beech avenue—by which Derek Trent would come—if he came! But, suddenly, she looked round at her friend—and something she read in Honour's eyes caused her to start, and blush crimson.

"My dear——" murmured Honour.

"Yes, I am rather a fool!" said Francesca, answering her friend's unspoken thought. "I liked Derek then—I still—like him. But—I should not have asked him here, Honour. Now that he is coming, I've got that clear in my mind. I thought that I should be safe in my contempt for him—but—I'm not so sure, now. I cannot—and I will not—see him here, Honour."

"After all, he has not come," said Honour. "He may have changed his mind—you will get a letter of excuse——"

"Which he would gladly write, if circumstances allowed," said Lady Morcom, her lip curling again. "He cannot be very keen on this business—even Derek! But he is coming!"

"Are you sure?"

"Quite. He walked from the station, and lost his way—that is why he was not here for lunch."

"But how do you know?" asked Honour, in surprise.

Lady Morcom laughed.

"He fell in with a land-girl, working on my land, and inquired his way," she answered.

"A land-girl!" repeated Honour, blankly. "Francesca!"

"So I know he is on his way," said Lady Morcom, lightly.

"He may be here almost any minute now, Honour."

"Then it is too late to avoid seeing him."

"Not at all," said Lady Morcom, calmly. "I have still time to be called away from home on important business."

"But—my dear——" exclaimed Honour.

"You will do the honours in my absence," said Lady Morcom.

"Aunt Selina is here to play propriety—and you will find Derek

amusing. He is quite good company. You won't mind—for a few days, Honour."

"I will do anything you like, of course, Frankie. But——"

"Probably he will cut his visit short—finding the bird has flown," said Lady Morcom. "It is a matter of business with him, of course."

"You are quite sure that it is a matter only of business with him, Francesca?" said Honour Grant, slowly.

"Quite!" said Lady Morcom, definitely. "But you'll find him quite amusing, Honour—so long as you don't take him seriously. You can ride with him, and play tennis—and as you're engaged to Captain Carpenter, you'll be safe from his attractions—even if he learns that you are an heiress, and exerts them to the uttermost."

Honour Grant felt a little shiver at the bitterness in her friend's tone.

"Very well," she said quietly. "Leave your guest to me—I'll do my best with him. Probably, as you say, he will go, when he finds that there is nothing doing. It's best for you not to see him, perhaps. But——"

"Now I shall have to run," interrupted Lady Morcom. "You will make my excuses, dear—indeed, you can tell him the exact truth, that I gave him up, when he failed to arrive this morning, as arranged. I was here this morning to meet him if he had come—and he did not choose to come. Say anything you like—Derek Trent really doesn't matter very much. Keep him amused, and give him the best food available—and he will be happy. Good-bye for a few days, Honour."

When Lady Morcom was gone, Honour Grant stood at the window, a thoughtful shade on her face, looking out on the beech avenue. It was almost half-an-hour later that a figure appeared on the avenue: and her eyes fixed on the young man as he came. So this was Derek Trent! Handsome, attractive, idle, lacking in manhood—daunted by life, willing to marry a woman for her money to escape from its problems—Honour shrugged her shoulders. But she contrived to summon up a friendly smile when the door opened and Parker announced Mr. Derek Trent.

CHAPTER IV

MISS SMITH!

*La donna é mobile,
Qual pium' al vento,
Muta d'accento,
E di pensiero.*

Derek Trent hummed the words, with a smile on his face, as he strolled on the terrace of Morcom Court the next morning. It was a bright and sunny morning. He was feeling cheerful and elate. If Lady Morcom could have seen him then, she would have known—what she knew already—that her absence did not depress his spirits.

He had been, perhaps, a little annoyed, when Miss Grant told him of her ladyship's unavoidable departure. It was extremely pressing business, no doubt, that could have called her away, when she was expecting a visit from so old a friend. It was not what he had expected. Really, it was not the sort of thing that was "done." And he was disposed to shrug his shoulders at the idea of a woman having important and pressing business at all. "Managing woman"—of course—something to do with buying or selling stock for the estate, he supposed—she ran the estate just as if she were a man, and did not let social amenities interfere with business! But if his vanity had a slight hurt, it amounted to nothing in comparison with his relief.

For, whether Lady Morcom wanted to meet him or not, he did not want to meet Lady Morcom. It had to come—but any delay was welcome.

Trent was, no doubt, a little ashamed of his errand at Morcom Court. He was determined to go on with it, because he saw no alternative—except a hard struggle with adverse circumstances, from which all his fastidious nerves shrank. But he did wish, from the bottom of his heart, that there had been some other resource. He did not want to marry for money—if he could help it. He did not want to marry at all, if it came to that. All he wanted was his freedom and a fairly easy life! Which Fate denied him!

He was accustomed to following the line of least resistance. Just as he had welcomed a walk from the station, to put the evil hour off, the day before, so now he welcomed Lady Morcom's absence, to put it off a little longer. In the meantime, he was in comfortable quarters, Miss Grant was pleasant and friendly, old Miss Selina Sanderson quite agreeable. He could pass a few days very contentedly, until Lady Morcom returned—only the thought of her return, and what it involved, clouded the outlook!

He wondered, idly, what she had grown into—what she was like. According to what the land-girl had said, not pretty! Did that matter very much—with a lovely old house in Sussex, eight hundred acres, and seven thousand a year? Odd, that she had not been snapped up already—pretty or not!

He smiled.

She remembered him. He recalled her letters in the war time. He had known, then, perfectly well, that she would have liked to see him again. But he had never taken the trouble. But for those letters, he would have forgotten her existence. Indeed, after the letters ceased he had forgotten it. It had come as a strange shock to him when he had learned, almost accidentally, that the Francesca Morcom he had known in those early days was Lady Morcom: that simple, unassuming girl, had been related, it seemed, to a peer, and by the strange chances of war, had now succeeded the peer in title and estate. Only gradually had the idea come into his mind that this might turn out to be the solution of his own problems.

If she had remembered him—and she had—what did it mean? She must have met dozens of boys whom she did not remember. They had been friends, certainly—she, hardly sixteen, he, little over eighteen—but why had she not forgotten him as he had forgotten her? He had never suspected it or thought of it at the time, but she must have had a schoolgirl fancy for him—that was it!

If that was so, how easy to revive it, and fan it into something warmer. Women liked him, as a rule: and she was predisposed in his favour. It did not seem to him that the matter should prove difficult. Indeed, the chief difficulty he foresaw, was that of making up his mind to propose to Francesca Morcom. He did not want to—very much indeed he did not want to. He was not sure even yet that he would do so. Anyhow, he couldn't, until she came back—and it was a relief to have the decision postponed.

Strange, that she should have gone, when all her letters, in those war days, had breathed a desire to see him again, which had never been gratified. Now she could see him, as much and as long as she liked, and she had gone off somewhere on some silly matter of business. How like a woman—and he smiled as he hummed, "*La donna é mobile.*" Changeable as a leaf in the wind—varying in word and thought! Well, he was quite content to await her return—accepting her unexpected absence with an extremely good grace.

He had been down rather late that morning—he was not an early riser. They were to play tennis that morning—he and

Miss Grant—but Miss Grant had gone out before he came down. He breakfasted quite comfortably on his own, waited on by Parker: chatted a few minutes with Aunt Selina: and now he was strolling on the terrace, thinking idle thoughts.

Presently, he descended the steps to the lawn, and sauntered across to the beech avenue, thinking he might fall in with Miss Grant. Her company was, apparently, all he was going to get for a few days. It was dusky and shady under the great, old beeches—a very pleasant walk. He sauntered easily down the avenue: as carefree, at the moment, as the butterflies that glanced in the sunshine. He stopped under the spreading branches of a beech to light a cigarette: and as he stood there, Miss Grant's voice came from somewhere at hand, on the other side of the trees.

"But what nonsense! You can't keep it up! Even for a short time——"

"Why not?" came another voice: a voice that made Derek Trent start so violently, that the cigarette dropped from his fingers.

He felt a sudden beating of the heart.

Was that really her voice? She was there, talking to Honour Grant—hardly a dozen paces from him.

But why did the sound of her voice cause his heart to leap like that? A minute ago, and he had been thinking of nothing in particular—care-free as an insect. And now—his heart was throbbing, his breath came fast, and before his eyes danced a vision of a face with dark-blue eyes under a shabby, old, floppy hat! What was the matter with him?

"We're concentrating on food this year," went on the voice. "Food, my dear, is the crying need of the whole world. Our potato crop is going to beat all records."

It was her voice—music itself: distasteful as the subject might be—she should have talked of asphodel, not potatoes! But if she had talked of mangel-wurzels and fertilisers, still her voice would have been music.

"But——" said Honour Grant.

"We're short-handed, and every hand is wanted. I put in a good day yesterday—and I enjoyed it! Another to-day—and a good many more days. It's no use—I can't idle about with the work crying out to be done. And I don't want to."

"But——"

"There are enough idlers in the world. Too many. It was said once that men must work, and women must weep! We've changed all that. Women must work, while men must talk! Isn't that so?"

Honour laughed.

"Sometimes! But——"

It occurred to Derek that they did not know anyone was at hand, and that he was eavesdropping. And he wanted to see the girl who was talking to Miss Grant. He moved round the big beech, and raised his hat.

"Oh!" ejaculated Honour Grant, as she saw him. She gave him a quick, startled glance—another at the land-girl.

Derek had eyes only for the land-girl. There she stood—lissom, graceful, in spite of those awful clothes—awful in his eyes! A faint colour flushed into her face as she saw him: and her eyes were startled for a moment. But only for a moment.

"Good-morning, Miss Smith," said Derek.

"Good-morning, sir!"

The "sir" jarred on him. It seemed to indicate a distance that he did not like to think of between them.

"I thought I would look for you, Miss Grant," said Derek.

"I met Miss Smith yesterday——"

"Miss Smith?" repeated Honour.

"Yes: she was kind enough to put me on my way, when I had lost it. Otherwise, I might still be wandering about the

recesses of Sussex, after spending a night in the shelter of a haystack! It was very kind of you, Miss Smith."

"I am glad you found Morcom Court, after all, sir!" said the land-girl. "I will not delay you longer, madam," she added, to Honour Grant, who stared at her blankly. "If you wish to speak to me again, I shall be at the hostel in Cawcross when my day's work is done."

"Oh!" stammered Honour. "Yes!"

With a slight bow that included Honour and Derek, the land-girl turned, and walked away: Derek's eyes following her, noting the grace of her carriage—even in those clothes!

Honour looked at him.

"So—so you've met—er—Miss Smith," she said. "The best worker on the estate, Mr. Trent. But did you think I had forgotten the tennis?"

"The tennis?" repeated Derek. He had forgotten it himself—since he had seen Eliza Smith. "Oh! Yes!" He breathed rather hard. Eliza Smith had disappeared—gone, he supposed, to that field where he had seen her handling the hoe. He had almost made a step to follow. After all, she had said that he could see her again, if he liked—and why shouldn't he? But there was that dashed tennis—he had said that he would play tennis that morning with Miss Grant. "Perhaps you are too tired from your walk," he suggested, kindly. "After all, we can always play tennis."

"Not at all," answered Honour. "I was coming back to see if you were ready, when I met Miss Smith."

"Then let us go," said Derek. There was the afternoon, if he lost the morning!

Strange that that was how the thought shaped in his mind!

He was silent as they walked up the avenue to the house. And he had never played worse tennis than he played that morning with Honour Grant.

His thoughts were not on the tennis-court. They were wandering to a distant field where a land-girl in a floppy hat was hoeing turnips—or was it potatoes?

Why, he hardly knew. But he knew that he was glad, deeply glad, that Lady Morcom was away, that he was not tied down to attendance upon an exacting hostess—that he was free to go where he liked, see whom he liked, and talk to whom he liked.

CHAPTER V

IN PERIL OF HIS LIFE!

"CONFOUND the gate!" muttered Derek.

He stood in the dusty lane, looking across the gate, in the golden afternoon.

Far in the distance, across a green, smiling meadow, was another field, and in that field, small in the distance, a figure he knew.

But the gate of the meadow was locked, with a heavy, cumbersome, old lock, and it did not open, to admit him to the foot-path across to the adjoining field. He looked across the gate, at the figure, tiny in the distance. It moved, and a hedge shut it off from his view. He watched for it to reappear, with a strange intentness.

That afternoon, Honour Grant had asked him if he would care for tennis again. No—he was a little tired! Would he care to run the car out? No—he rather liked leaving the scent of petrol behind in London. If he cared to ride—there was good horseflesh available? No, he thought he would rather take it easy in that glorious summer weather. He would look out a book!

He looked out a book, and Honour left him to it. After which, he left the book in a deck-chair, and went for a stroll. And his stroll led him to exactly where he was now—looking

across a locked gate and a meadow towards a potato-field where a land-girl worked tirelessly.

A locked gate was not going to stop him, or cause him to take a long, roundabout walk. He put his hand on the top bar, and leapt over it.

Then he walked by the barely marked track towards the next field. Not that it mattered if he wandered from the track here—there was nothing growing in that meadow but grass, and a few shady trees in corners—no danger of trampling on potatoes, turnips or mangel-wurzels! Queer, that the girl, so lissom, so graceful, so lovely, so intelligent, should take so deep an interest in—potatoes! He could picture her, in his mind's eye, in a lovely dance frock— Useful work, no doubt—potatoes were a great stand-by, when the mighty intellects that governed the world failed to produce sufficient wheat. But—her feet should have been upon the lilies—her thoughts among the stars! Harder hands—men's hands—should do the hard work of the earth—and then, suddenly, he laughed, remembering how little hard work he was himself prepared to do. If he was a slacker and an idler, he had at least a saving grace of humour.

As if in answer to his laugh, there came a sound from the meadow, which he had carelessly thought untenanted save by himself. It was a strange, booming, grumbling sound, made by some animal, and he glanced round, a little startled.

Then he stared, at a great black form that had emerged from a belt of willows by a pond in the corner of the field.

“The bull!”

He remembered! The previous day, he had been about to enter that very meadow, from the other side, when the land-girl had called him to a halt. He had been rather amused by her seriousness about the black bull.

But he was not amused now, as he stared at the black bull—a gigantic animal that seemed as large as an elephant, with little fiery eyes that gleamed and glinted with ungoverned savageness.

“Oh!” breathed Derek Trent, and his heart beat a little faster.

He had almost reached the middle of the meadow—distant from the gate over which he had jumped, equally distant from the gate on the further side that gave on the potato-field. Was that savage-looking brute going to attack him? Couldn't a fellow walk in a meadow in the peaceful English countryside, without danger of being attacked by savage animals, as if he were traversing an Indian jungle or an African desert?

He refused to be alarmed. If that towering brute chose to charge at him, he was utterly at its mercy—he would be swept over like a straw in the wind. And the grumbling boom was followed by a fierce bellow, as the bull got into motion towards him. To break into a run—to race for the gate ahead—to let that land-girl see him running away from a bull—never! He had a suspicion that she had thought him idle and useless—at any rate she should not think him a coward, too.

He walked on, steadily, refusing to hurry.

But he kept the corner of his eye on the bull.

The brute was coming towards him—gathering speed into a rush! The vast shaggy head was lowered.

His heart gave a thump! There was no doubt about it—the brute was going to charge. She had said that the black bull did not like strangers—that his life would have been endangered had he crossed the meadow—all of which he had completely forgotten—till now!

He had to run! Not only had he to run, his only resource, but he knew that he had no time to reach that distant gate—he knew that he could not run so fast as the bull! Strange, startling, amazing, in that quiet and peaceful countryside—his life was in danger: in danger as deadly as if he had roused out

a tiger in the jungle! That was why the gate was kept locked—to prevent unwary ignoramuses like himself from endangering their lives! He had jumped over that locked gate without a second thought: a farmer could guard against carelessness, but he could not guard against utter folly.

He was running now. If she saw him, if she thought him a frightened fool, it could not be helped—better than going down under that charging mass, torn and lacerated by those cruel horns. In his army days he had faced deadly enemies, but then it was with weapons in his hands, and a chance for his life—he had no chance against that mass of senseless ferocity. He ran, with every ounce of speed that was in him, and close, close, closer behind, came the thunder of hoofs, and the mad bellow of insensate rage.

One glance he shot over his shoulder. The bull was gaining—gaining fast—he had, as he had known, no chance of reaching that gate ahead—he would be charged down and gored to death before he could reach it. But he was cool—cool enough, in those dreadful moments, to weigh his chances. The thundering brute was hardly three yards behind him, when he suddenly swerved, and shot off at a right-angle—and, as he calculated, the clumsy, stupid brute charged on, too slow on the uptake to change course with equal swiftness.

The hoofs thundered past—as he shot away in a new direction. He had escaped the charge—but his new direction took him right away from the gate ahead. And it did not take the bull many moments to whirl round on a new course, and once more the thunder of hoofs sounded behind him.

He had one chance—if it was a chance—to get to a tree and clamber into safety. On the edge of the field were large, shady trees—but they seemed terribly distant. A smaller tree—little more than a sapling—was nearer at hand. It was that or nothing—the crash of hoofs was fearfully close, as he reached it, leaped, caught a branch, and swung himself off the earth.

He felt something brush his foot as he swung—so close, so narrow had been his escape.

But he was in the tree—clambering on the branch, that bent and swayed under his weight.

Bellow! bellow! came thundering to his ears, as the enraged bull careered back—bellow! bellow!

The stupid brute seemed puzzled at having lost him. But the fierce, fiery eyes detected him in a minute or two. Under the branch where he clung, the bull stood pawing the ground, roaring, lashing himself into madder and madder rage. He was hardly three feet out of reach of the horns. The branch sagged, and sagged—and he clambered along it, to transfer his weight to the trunk. There he was safe—breathless, panting, perspiring, but safe at last from the savage brute that paced and roared below.

He panted and panted for breath.

He was a prisoner in the tree—death waiting for him below—a prisoner unless help came—until help came! Would it—could it—come? Holding on for his life, he stared round the meadow—and gave a cry at the sight of a lissom form that ran into the meadow by the gate from the potato-field.

“Go back! Go back!”

But the land-girl did not go back.

CHAPTER VI

THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH—

“GO back!” shrieked Derek Trent.

He had not been conscious of fear, only of pressing haste and need, while he was fleeing from the savage bull. But he was conscious of fear now—of deadly fear—as he watched the land-girl coming across the meadow towards the tree to which he clung.

He held with one hand, waving the other frantically to her, waving her back. She did not seem to heed.

"Go back! Do you hear? Are you mad? Go back!" he shouted.

But she came on.

The black bull's head was turned—his fiery eyes were on the newcomer. Derek felt his heart die in his breast. Why was she coming?—was she mad to run into so fearful a danger?—a slip of a girl, facing a fearful brute from whom a Spanish toreador might have shrunk. Did she fancy she could help him—she, a mere girl—he, a man? Why did she come? In a moment more the mad brute would be charging, and he would see her crushed to death under his eyes! He waved and shouted frantically.

"Go back! Go back!"

She glanced at him now, and to his amazement there was a faint smile on the lovely face. Her voice came, cool and calm.

"Hold on where you are, Mr. Trent! I will deal with the bull."

"You cannot—you are mad!" he shouted back. "Go—go—or I will descend—he shall kill me, not you, if you do not go back."

He made a movement, as he spoke, to swing himself down from the tree. Sharp and commanding came her voice.

"Hold on for your life! I can handle the bull—he knows me—he is used to me. I am in no danger! For God's sake, hold on."

Her face had gone white.

He could not believe her words. She—handle that mass of senseless, savage rage and ferocity! Yet, as he watched, he had to believe. For the savage bellowing had died away: he realised that the bull, though staring towards her, displayed no intention of attacking her. The fearful brute was ready to rend him limb from limb if he came within reach—but to an accustomed hand he was tame! Yet how she could have the nerve, the courage, to approach the brute, was hard for him to understand. She came on, calm and cool, and she was murmuring soothing words now—her hand was actually touching the vast, muscular neck.

His heart was like ice as he watched. But he obeyed her, and held on where he was. He could not help her—if he intervened, it would only be to reawaken the animal's savage rage, and then, perhaps, even she could not have controlled him.

But she was controlling him. Almost unbelievably he watched her as she soothed the brute, and led him away from the tree.

Her back was towards him now—she was walking beside the vast bulk of the bull, half leading, half persuading him, back to his wallow by the pond. Then he heard her voice—calling to him over her shoulder, without turning her head.

"Mr. Trent! Drop quietly from the tree, get into the potato-field, and shut the gate after you. Lose no time."

That was all:

He gazed after her, without moving. But he realised that he had to do as she said: it was all that could be done. To go—leaving her in the meadow with that fearful brute— Yet she was right—he could not help her, and she could not help him if she lost control of the bull for one moment! If the brute looked round and saw him, even she could not have controlled his fury. It went against the grain—but he knew what he had to do.

Quietly, he dropped to the earth.

He gave her a last look. She did not look round—the bull did not look round. He started for the gate of the potato-field. For his safety, perhaps for hers, he had to get out of the bull's meadow without losing time. He did not run—but he walked very quickly, and reached the gate.

He passed through it, and, as she had bidden him, shut it after him. Then he leaned on the gate, watching her, breathless.

She looked round at last.

He saw that her face was white—it was not fear for herself—was it fear for him? Even at the distance, he could see the relief that flashed into her face, when she saw him on the safe side of the gate.

Then she went on with the bull, and they disappeared among the willows by the pond.

A minute later, she reappeared—alone. She came towards him with that easy, free swing of the limbs he had noticed before. Her face was quite calm now, and there was a slight smile on it.

He held open the gate for her.

"Thank you, Mr. Trent. Quite an exciting adventure—for a stranger from London," she said.

He clanged the gate shut after her, thankful that she was out of the meadow at last. His face was flushed.

"Too exciting for me," he said. "Are you really not afraid of that horrible animal, Miss Smith?"

"Not in the least—when he is not excited by intruders into his domain," she answered. "Did I not warn you yesterday—"

"I had forgotten."

"It is not safe to be so forgetful in our rural regions, Mr. Trent." She smiled. "I heard Tarquin bellowing, and knew that some unwary stranger must have disturbed him—so I came. But—I should have been too late—if you had not taken to the tree. Thank goodness you did."

"It was touch and go," said Derek. "I—I—" His face was still flushed. "Did you see me—running—from the bull? I suppose you thought me—a coward?"

"I should have thought you a fool if you had not run," said the land-girl. "Only a lunatic would think of tackling a bull with bare hands, I suppose. What could you have done?"

"Nothing, of course," he said. "But—but—times are changed when a woman comes to the rescue of a man—it does not flatter one's self-conceit."

"The old order changeth, giving place to the new," said the land-girl, lightly. "We do not live now in the days of knights-errant who rush to the rescue of damsels in distress. Damsels have now learned to take care of themselves."

"And of others," said Derek, moodily.

She looked at him, her eyes brimming with merriment.

"Don't worry, Mr. Trent. I am sure that if I had been in danger from the bull, you would have rushed to the rescue."

"And what would have been the use if I had?" he muttered. "Both of us would have been gored together in such a case. I'm of no use."

"But you don't want to be useful, do you?" she asked.

"No—I suppose I don't, very much," he admitted. "I've faced hard work and hard living, when I had to—but never if I could help it. I'm not wholly a molly-coddle, Miss Smith—"

"I haven't called you a molly-coddle, Mr. Trent."

"No—but you've thought it."

She was silent.

"But—it really was tough, in the war days," he said. "I hated it, but—I did stand for it, while it lasted. Put that down to my credit. I could stand for it again, I think, if it seemed worth while. But what can a man do—left on the beach after six wasted years?"

"Waste six more years—and then six more!" said the land-girl. "Or else look for a job—a hard job by preference—and hold it down."

"As you are doing?" he said.

She laughed.

"I'm not always so hard a worker as you have seen me," she said. "But I learned in the war to hate idleness."

"I learned to love it—it was so far out of my reach," said Derek, smiling. "Now I want an easy time. What would you think of me if I told you——" He paused.

"If you told me—what?"

"If I told you," he said, deliberately, "that I had thought of marrying for money, as the easiest way of getting an easy time?"

She gave a little shiver.

"You think that's—despicable?" he asked.

"Yes!" Her face had set. "Now I have to get back to the hoe—keep clear of that meadow in your wanderings, Mr. Trent." She turned to go.

"Haven't you a few minutes to spare?" he asked. "I was coming specially to see you, Miss Smith."

"Why?"

"Oh!" The question seemed to take him aback. "I—I hardly know why, except that I wanted to."

"And you always do what you want to?" she said. "It doesn't occur to you to do what you don't want to?"

"Well, no—I—I suppose not. But——"

"I'm losing time," she said, quite pointedly. "I must get back to work!"

"And your time is of value, and mine isn't," said Derek. "If I asked you to lend me a hoe, you wouldn't trust me with the turnips——"

"Potatoes."

"I mean potatoes."

"No!" she said. "Good-bye, Mr. Trent."

"You're sending me away?" he asked, his face clouding. "Miss Smith, I'd like to try my hand with the hoe. I—I'd like to show you that I can work. I'd like——"

"You'd like to amuse yourself by talking nonsense to a land-girl, while Lady Morcom is away?"

"Oh!" he exclaimed, startled. "No! No! I——" He stammered. After all, what did he want? Why was he seeking her at all?

She laughed.

"Good-bye, Mr. Trent! I really can lose no more time."

With that she left him.

He stood looking after her, for a long minute, before at last he turned away.

What a fool he was, bothering a practical, unromantic young woman, who had no use for idle talk or lazy philandering! She was thinking of crops, of fertilisers, of getting the weeds out of the earth, of producing a record output of potatoes! And he was thinking of—what?

He hardly knew. He knew that he wanted to be near her, to watch the dark eyelashes over the dark blue of the eyes, to hear her voice—even if she said bitter things. Was he—he gave quite a little jump at the thought—was he "falling" for this girl—was this the beginning of what they called "love"?

He laughed. He had come there, to Morcom Court, to try his luck at marrying for money: and was he falling in love—with a land-girl? But his laugh died, and his brow was dark, as he walked away, taking the path back to Morcom Court through the shady wood—and it darkened more and more. Was he in danger of making such a fool of himself? If so, the sooner he got down to business the better. For the first time, he was impatient to see Francesca Lady Morcom!

CHAPTER VII

THE CASTING OF THE DIE

"YOU have heard from Lady Morcom?"

"Oh!" said Honour Grant. "Yes!"

She looked at Derek Trent, curiously. They were taking coffee, after dinner, on the terrace, in the glow of the summer

evening. It was the fifth day of his stay at the Court—and the first time, since the first day, that he had mentioned his absent hostess.

Honour had done her best to entertain her friend's old friend, and not unsuccessfully. She was observant enough to see that it was a relief to him that Lady Morcom was not there—though he little guessed that she observed anything of the kind. She found that she rather liked Derek Trent, though respect was another matter. But at least she was able to give him credit for not being keen on putting into effect the purpose with which he had come to the house.

He was going, if he could, to marry Lady Morcom for her money—Honour knew that as well as Francesca Morcom knew it. But it was in his favour that he was not eager—that he was even glad to put it off.

In the meantime, he was an amusing companion. They rode together sometimes, they played tennis: several times there had been visitors, and bridge, and Derek had been rather an asset. He had seemed cheerful and contented. But in the last day or two she had noticed a change.

He was getting restless, thoughtful, sometimes moody. She half expected him to tell her that he was going to return to town. Probably he was getting tired of the country—bored with waiting for the woman who did not come. Honour, rather unexpectedly, liked him about the place—but it would have been a relief if he had gone: Lady Morcom would never ask him again, she knew that: he would pass out of her life—having done quite harm enough.

Now, over the coffee on the terrace, he was coming out, at last, with what was in his thoughts.

“Do you know when she is returning?”

“It's not definite,” said Honour. She hardly knew what to say. Lady Morcom's return depended on Derek's departure—she was not coming back till he had gone. But certainly Mr. Trent could not be told that!

“But you have some idea, I suppose?” said Derek. “The fact is, Miss Grant, this is rather an odd position—guest of an absent hostess.”

Had that only just occurred to him, she wondered!

“Francesca simply had to go,” said Honour. “I understand that the matter was extremely urgent. Of course, she was sorry—she asked me to do all I could to make up for her absence—”

“And you have been very good,” the young man said, with his pleasant smile. “My own fault, entirely—if I had not been so late, the day I came, I should have seen Lady Morcom—but—” He paused. “You have heard from her, then?”

“Oh, yes,” said Honour. “Several times.”

“I should almost have expected to hear also—a guest and an old friend,” he said, a little moodily. “No doubt she is very busy—” He could not keep an ironical note out of his voice. “But a few lines to an old friend like myself—” He broke off, and put down his coffee-cup.

He was feeling hurt and neglected, poor boy, Honour thought. Like a child who wanted to be made much of, and wasn't! But it had not occurred to him that he was being deliberately avoided by the woman who, in a moment of weakness, had asked him there. That was never likely to occur to him.

But if he remained—if he still waited—and still Francesca did not come, what then? How was this position—this odd position, as he truly called it—going to end?

“Well, if her ladyship has no time to write, an idle fellow like myself can find time,” he said, laughing. “I will write to Lady Morcom, Miss Grant. Where shall I address my letter?”

Honour smiled. He was not going to wait longer, then—wasting his time in rural regions—he wanted to get the matter

settled, and get back to town! He had waited long enough—now he was going to act.

"Lady Morcom's movements are a little uncertain," she said, "but a letter to the Hotel Royal, at Bristol, will reach her."

"Moving about the country on important agricultural business, what?" asked Derek, laughing. "What a busy life—it makes me feel more than ever an idler. Well, I will write to Bristol."

Miss Selina Sanderson came out on the terrace. Honour Grant joined her, and helped her arrange her wraps and her knitting: and Derek Trent strolled down to the beech avenue to smoke a cigarette.

But the cigarette went out, unheeded, as he paced under the old trees, thinking.

He was not thinking of Lady Morcom—wherever she might be, at Bristol or elsewhere. He was thinking of dark eyes under dark lashes—as he was constantly thinking of late.

"You fool!" he muttered, addressing himself. "You fool!"

He knew now how matters stood. That was the cause of the restlessness that had possessed him for the past few days. He had not seen the land-girl since the day of the adventure with the black bull. A hundred times he had hardly been able to stop himself from seeking her. But what was the use? If he saw her again, it would come harder—and it was hard enough already. He would never see her again—he must never see her again. If he did, he would lose his head—and what would be the result of that?

Yet now, as he paced under the beeches, he was thinking of that very thing—to seek her, to tell her what was in his heart. And then?

The idea was sheer madness. He had nothing—a few hundred, and a doubtful prospect of a job—was he a man to face poverty and hard work for the love of a woman? The land, she had told him, was crying out for workers—and he was young and strong, the kind of man the land wanted, if he had willing hands and a willing heart—and he knew that he had neither.

Perhaps he could learn—perhaps she could teach him! A dim vision floated in his mind, of a cottage—a few fields—vegetable crops—perhaps some wheat—chickens and a handful of cattle—hard work from dawn to dark: what a prospect for the man whose ambition it had always been to lounge easily through life—easily, elegantly, and expensively! He was insane to think, to dream of such a thing—had those dark-blue eyes bewitched him? Yet he felt that he could tread even that thorny path—with her hand in his!

Was it possible? Could he—dared he? He played with the thought in his mind, as with a dream. Then, suddenly, he shook himself, impatiently.

"Fool!" he said, aloud.

A peasant's life on the land—for the man who might, for the asking, be master of Morcom Court? Was he mad?

He knitted his brows, and strode up the avenue to the house. Enough of such idle dreams—where might they lead him, if he indulged them? Better make the clean cut—commit himself once and for all: the letter to Francesca written, his boats would be burned behind him: there would be no turning back.

He went directly to his room, and sat down to write. Deliberately he shut out of his mind a lovely face, with its dark eyes and wisp of brown-gold hair. Quietly, coolly, cynically, he wrote:

Dear Frankie,

Forgive me—the old name comes so naturally. I have waited—but now I can wait no longer without telling you why I came.

Shall I startle you? Did you ever guess that the boy who was your friend in such early days, remem-

bered you, thought of you, and that the old boyish regard gradually turned to love?

Yes, Frankie, to love. If you were here, I should have told you—if I had found the courage to tell you. Perhaps it is easier to write. If you do not care—if you think you can never care—tell me so, and I will bear it as best I can. But—my dear—if you think that, in time, you could grow to care as I care, give me one word of hope, and I shall be happy.

I shall be happy, dear Francesca, in the hope that some day you will be my wife.

I will say no more, now. Let me have a word—one word.

Derek.

He read it over, quietly, coolly, with a set face: then sealed it in an envelope and addressed it to Lady Morcom at the Hotel Royal, Bristol. He took it down and dropped it into the letterbox in the hall.

"*Jacta est alea!*" he said, as he strolled on the terrace and lighted a cigarette.

Was he a scoundrel?

He hardly knew, and he hardly cared. What he had written, he had written—and the die was cast!

CHAPTER VIII

"I LOVE YOU!"

IT came suddenly, unexpectedly, and he was taken off his guard, otherwise it could not have happened so.

It was three days since he had written to Bristol. Derek Trent was still at Morcom Court—more restless, more discontented, than ever: hardly able to keep up urbane appearances to Honour Grant and Miss Sanderson. No answer had come to his letter—yet! A couple of days he had expected to wait—but surely on the third day it should have come. But it had not come—Lady Morcom, perhaps, was very busy—buying cattle perhaps in some Somersetshire market, he thought savagely—had she any time for romance?

And yet—and yet—those letters of hers, during the war—had they meant nothing? *La donna é mobile*—had he banked too securely on her remembrances, on her old regard for him—changeable woman! That evening there was bridge, with three or four people he hardly knew at the Court—and he could not and would not stand it: he had pleaded headache, and retired to his room—and then gone out quietly, for a long walk in the summer dusk.

If that accursed letter would only come, and let him know where he stood! If he was wasting his time at Morcom Court, the sooner he went the better. Once away from the place, he would drive from his memory a haunting face that could not be banished so long as he lingered there. Sooner or later, if he remained, he would see her again, and then——' If that accursed letter would only come!

He tramped moodily along the dusky lane, and then, suddenly, he saw her. For the moment, he did not know her—she was changed from the land-girl's garb. Something of the grace in the figure seated on the stile struck him, even under the shadow of dusky branches. Then he saw that it was she—the first time he had seen her in more feminine attire—quietly, simply dressed, and lovelier than ever.

She did not see him.

She sat on the stile, with a letter in her hand, which she had been reading. And her eyes were full of tears.

The girl who had hoed potatoes—the girl who had mastered and led away the savage bull—who had seemed so strong, so

steady—she was in tears. Derek Trent came to a dead stop, looking at her. He saw her clear-cut profile—she did not turn her head—she had not heard his step in the lane. Why was she crying? What had hurt her?

His whole heart went out to her then. He forgot Lady Morcom and Morcom Court—he forgot the letter he had written—the lies he had written—he forgot all things but one thing—that he loved this girl desperately and madly. He came on: and she looked up suddenly and saw him.

Instantly, her face was flooded with crimson. Instantly, she thrust the letter out of sight.

Hardly knowing what he was doing, he caught her hands. And she did not draw them away—she sat looking at him, crimson, the tears glistening in her eyes, as if helpless.

“What is it?” His voice was broken and husky. “My dear, my dear, what is it? I can’t bear to see you cry. My dear, my dear!”

A moment more and she would have slid into his arms. But in that moment she recovered herself. Her hands were snatched away so violently that he almost staggered. The eyes that had been soft with tears flashed at him. For a moment she was all anger. Then that, too, passed, and she laughed.

“I think you are forgetting yourself a little, Mr. Trent,” she said. “Or do you gentlemen from London consider a land-girl fair game?”

“I—I did not mean——” He stammered.

“You have many dears perhaps, and are prepared to add a simple land-girl to the number, while you stay in Sussex?” she suggested.

“Are you angry with me?” he asked.

“I was—for a moment! But——” She gave a shrug of the shoulders that cut him like a knife. “Why should I be? I ought rather to be amused.”

“I was—I am—in earnest,” he said. But he did not attempt to touch her hands again. He stood looking at her. How lovely she was, in the dusk of the branches? Her lashes still glimmered with tears. He could hardly control his desire to take her in his arms to comfort her. But he dared not touch her.

“In earnest?” She laughed again. “Are you ever in earnest, Mr. Trent? Have you ever been in earnest in your life?”

“Not often,” he said, simply. “But now—yes! Yes, in earnest, in earnest, when I tell you—that I love you.”

He could not have kept the words back to save his life. He loved her, and he had to tell her.

She sat silent, on the stile, looking at him. The expression on her face was strange: he could not read it.

“I did not mean to tell you,” he muttered. “I have avoided seeing you again, because I knew that I should tell you. But it is true.”

“True?” she repeated.

“You do not believe me?”

She laughed.

“Why should you not believe me?” asked Derek. “When I saw you—crying—I—I had to speak. I——”

“You have a tender heart, Mr. Trent,” she said, with a note of mockery in her voice. “But—you have not surprised me in a state of deep grief—I assure you that there is nothing the matter. Merely a letter—a letter from a man! I am ashamed that so small a thing should have moved me at all.”

“A man?” he repeated. The savage throb of jealousy in his heart surprised himself. For the first time, it came into his mind that he knew nothing of her—that there might be a man in her life—why should there not be? The bare idea was torment to him—yet how, with that lovely face, could it be otherwise?

“Yes,” she said, “a man! Shall I tell you, since you are so sympathetic? A man I liked—a man I wanted to respect—and

who wallows in such a depth of baseness that I have no choice but to despise him. That, Mr. Trent, was the cause of the tears you saw——”

“You don't care for him?”

“Have you a right to put such questions to a young woman you don't know, Mr. Trent?” she asked.

“Yes—when I love you.”

“In earnest?” she asked, mockingly.

“You may not choose to believe me, but yes, in earnest.”

“Believe you?” She almost snapped the words. “If you are in earnest, Mr. Trent, you are making me a proposal of marriage—or else you are a blackguard. May I humbly inquire which?”

He stood dumb.

Yes, that was the alternative. And in the letter he had written, which he had to remember now, he had asked another woman to marry him! Even now, Francesca's reply might be at Morcom Court, by the late post—her answer might be awaiting him, accepting him as her husband? He was bound hand and foot, by his own act—he could not ask this girl to marry him.

She was scanning him curiously, her face slowly hardening. He could not speak—the words died on his lips.

“You find that question difficult to answer?” Her voice cut like a lash. “But you need not answer, Mr. Trent. I can guess the answer.”

“You cannot,” he muttered. “I can't explain——”

“No—it would be a little difficult, perhaps.”

“It's true—I love you—I love you—but—but I'm not free——” he muttered miserably.

“Not free? Only free to make love to the first girl who may take your fancy, when you're bored in the country? How flattering to me! You thought to tame a country heart, for pastime 'ere you went to town! Like Lady Clara Vere de Vere? What a model for a man to take!”

She slipped from the stile and laughed, lightly.

“Good-night, Mr. Trent. The dusk of a summer night is romantic, but we land-girls have little use for philandering. Life is real, life is earnest, on the land. Good-night.”

He moved, as if he would have detained her. But she was gone—a shadow flitting in the summer dusk. He stared after her, till she had disappeared—and then he stood, long, in the gathering darkness, before at last he took his way, slowly, to Morcom Court.

CHAPTER IX

DECLINED—WITH THANKS!

“**F**OOL!—fool!—fool!”

Honour Grant gave a start, and caught her breath.

He did not see her. He was tramping on the beech avenue, under the wide branches, in the summer morning, his hands driven deep into his pockets, his brows knitted, his eyes on the ground. He did not look up as she came—and his savagely muttered words reached her ears.

“Fool! fool! fool!”

She looked at him, in wonder. With all his restlessness, and the weight and doubt that were on his mind, he had been able to keep up an outward aspect of polite and cheerful carelessness—under her eyes. But the mask was off now that he was alone—or thought that he was alone. The handsome face was almost haggard—and almost savage in its look. What was the matter with him?

Miss Grant had a letter in her hand. He had gone out before the post came in, late, that morning: but she had seen him on the avenue, from the terrace: and so she came out with the letter that had a Bristol postmark. She knew that he was anxious for

that letter—and she was glad that the answer had come from Lady Morcom. She had little doubt that when he had read that reply, he would return to London—and Francesca would be free to return home. And that would be the end of it—Lady Morcom had been weak once, but she would not be weak again.

She coughed slightly, to warn him that he was not alone.

Derek Trent gave a little jump, and turned towards her, the colour coming into his face. He wondered if she had heard his angry mutterings.

But Honour's face gave no sign.

"The post is in at last, Mr. Trent," she said.

"Is it?" he said, indifferently. He seemed to have forgotten that he had been anxiously expecting a letter from Bristol.

"I thought you would like your letter—so I have brought it out to you," she said.

"Oh! Thank you, Miss Grant! That was kind and thoughtful." He took the letter from her hand.

It was addressed to him in Francesca's hand—he remembered it well enough. He stood with it in his fingers, looking at it; and she saw that he was breathing very hard.

His fate was in that letter! According to what Francesca had written, so had his life to run—it was no longer in his own keeping. Fool—thrice fool that he had been! What did he care for her money—for Morcom Court—for a life of lazy indolence, in comparison with what might have been his?

For the scales had fallen from his eyes now. He knew that he loved the girl with the dark eyes and brown-gold hair, as he had never deemed himself or any man capable of loving—that he valued her incomparably above anything else that the world could offer—that he would have spurned a throne and a kingdom offered in place of her love—if he could have won it. And he had damned himself irretrievably in her eyes—if he had had a chance, he had lost it. And now came Lady Morcom's answer—and Morcom Court would be his for the taking—for he had no doubt of what was in that letter from Bristol. He had lost the woman he loved, and his word was given to a woman he did not and never could love—and now he had found out that love mattered and nothing else mattered! Fool—thrice fool!

Honour Grant, puzzled, a little touched, perhaps, by the harassed trouble in his face, moved away. But he forced a smile and spoke.

"Lady Morcom has found time to write at last, Miss Grant. No doubt you had a letter also, and know when she will return home."

"No, I had no letter," answered Honour.

"Perhaps I shall learn—from this."

"Perhaps," murmured Honour. She did not think it likely! He was too blind to realities, to guess, or dream, that Lady Morcom would not return till he had gone. He would never be able to get it into that handsome head of his that a woman would—or could—deliberately avoid him, when he was graciously pleased to honour her with his attention! Certainly, he had been perplexed, and doubtless hurt, by Lady Morcom's absence—but he would never guess the truth. He was not likely to learn it from that letter.

He had been anxious, she knew, for that reply from Bristol. Yet, evidently, he was not eager to open the envelope. Perhaps he feared what he might read within.

She gave him a nod, and went back to the house.

But from the terrace, she could not help looking at him—visible through the beeches, the letter still in his hand, unopened.

Twice she saw him make a movement, as if to open it: but each time he lowered his hand again, the letter in his fingers still unopened. Yes, there was no doubt—he dreaded to see what might be written there.

He thrust it, at last, into his pocket, and tramped away down the avenue, and was lost to her sight. Honour Grant was left puzzled and a little troubled—but he was not thinking of her—he had forgotten her existence.

From the avenue, he turned into the lane, and then into the wood. Once or twice, as he went, he drew the fatal letter from his pocket—but thrust it back. He tramped on—his steps taking him, unconsciously, in the direction of the field where he had first met the land-girl—was it really little more than a week ago? He was thinking of her—not of the woman who had written. Hardly more than a week—and it had wrought such a change! It seemed to him that he had always known her—that she had been always a part of his life.

He stopped at last, under a massive old oak. He had to read that accursed letter, and know his fate—though he had no doubt that he knew it already.

He had been mad to write—worse than mad—base, despicable. He had written falsehoods, knowing them to be false. Deliberately, he had lied to a woman, because he had wanted her money! Somehow, he had not realised how base it was—self-conceit, and the long habit of selfishness, had blinded him. But he realised it now—now that it was too late!

There was a limit to the baseness of even a fortune-hunter—if Francesca had taken his letter as the truth, of which he could have no doubt, if she had accepted him, of which he could have no doubt either, he had to stand for it—he could not back out. There was a limit!

He had to stand for what he had written, and accept her decision: his fate was sealed. Good-bye to love, good-bye to the sweetness and light of life—he would have to settle down as a rich woman's husband, master of a handsome estate, instead. That was what he had wanted—that was why he had come to Morcom Court—that was why he had written falsehoods—it was what he had wanted. He laughed harshly. It was not what he wanted now!

With a sudden movement, he tore open the envelope. He had to know!

He drew out the folded letter within—and unfolded it, and strange amazement came into his startled face.

He could not believe his eyes. The sheet of note-paper was written on, not in Francesca's hand, but in his own!

Bewildered, he stared at it. He read mechanically: "Dear Frankie! Forgive me, the old name comes so naturally——"

It was his own letter—returned to him! His head seemed to spin. By what strange mistake had she put his own letter into that envelope, instead of her reply? Or was it—was it intentional?

He turned the letter over. Then he saw a line in Francesca's hand written at the end of it.

It was hard for him to believe that the words were written there. Never, in twenty-seven years, had so strange and stunning a shock come to Derek Trent.

For the words he read, in Francesca Lady Morcom's clear hand, were:

"Declined—with thanks."

It seemed as if Derek Trent's eyes would start from their sockets, as he stared at those unexpected and startling words: Declined—with thanks!

He turned the letter over and over. There was nothing else, not even a signature or an initial: only those three startling words.

What did it mean?

Such an answer—to call it an answer—was a deliberate, intentional insult. Was the woman mad?

He could recall her, from old days: quiet, serious, patient, kind. More recently, there were her letters in the wartime—

kind, friendly, affectionate, though they had bored him a little. And then—when he had written from London to Morcom Court, her answer had been frank and friendly, asking him to come. And now—this!—like a bolt from the blue.

He had believed that she remembered him with friendly affection—at the very least. He had half-believed and half-hoped that there was something more—that would make his way easy for him to become master of Morcom Court. And now—

The colour surged into his face.

He knew what this meant—what it must mean. It was not without cause that she had changed so suddenly and strangely. She had found him out!

How, he could not imagine. He had still been the old Derek to her when she had asked him to Morcom Court. She had not then known him—as he was! But she knew now!

That was the only imaginable explanation. Somehow, strangely, inexplicably, she knew that his letter was false, that he did not love her, that he had asked her to marry him simply because she was rich, and he was poor. It was not vague doubt and suspicion—he knew Francesca was not suspicious or doubtful by nature. It was knowledge—somehow, she knew! It was as if some bird of the air had carried to her ears the words he had spoken to the land-girl—when he had told her that he had thought of marrying for money as the easiest way to an easy life!

She knew! He was utterly despicable in her eyes, and she wanted nothing of him—neither his love, nor his friendship. For this meant an end of friendship—even of acquaintance. After this, he could only go—and never think of seeing her again. For some minutes, Derek Trent was conscious only of shame—of deep, racking shame—that he had acted basely, and had been rewarded with the cold contempt that his baseness deserved.

And then, like a gleam of light, came the thought—he was free!

He had dreaded to open that letter, because he had not doubted that it spelled chains and bondage—bondage to a rich woman for whom he did not care, instead of freedom and love. And she had refused him. Bitterly, contemptuously, insultingly—in a way that made his cheeks burn with shame. But she had refused him—he was free—his life was his own to do what he liked with—he was free, free to woo, and to win!

He crumpled the letter into his pocket, and strode away. He threw open a gate, and followed the track in the potato-field. If she was there—

But she was not there.

He stood staring about him, somewhat blankly. She was not there wielding the hoe. No doubt her work there was done—he would not find her there again. Where would he find her? Oh, if he had only known this, that dusky evening in the lane—if he had only known then what he knew now. Perhaps it was too late—perhaps she despised him as much as Francesca did! He had made himself an object of scorn to two women—that reflection made him wince. Well, Lady Morcom could go her own way, with Morcom Court and seven thousand a year—little he cared, if he could make the dark eyes under the old floppy hat smile on him! He recalled something he had heard her say to Miss Grant, that morning on the avenue—about the hostel in the village. Perhaps he would find her there!

He went on to the stile: that stile where he had sat and lunched on bread and cheese on the day of their first meeting: the stile where he had found her, only last evening, crying over a letter that she had thrust hastily out of sight when she saw him. Even in the summer morning, it was a little dusky under the great branches that stretched over the little wooden stile. As he came out of the bright sunlight into the dusky shade, he

saw that someone was seated on the stile—a girl in a simple frock and a jumper—and his heart gave a great leap. He did not need a second glance—he ran towards her.

“Oh!” he panted. “I’ve found you.”

CHAPTER X

A LAND-GIRL’S LOVER!

SHE started, and looked at him. Never, to his eyes, had she seemed so beautiful. Even in the rough garb of the land-girl she had been lovely—now she was loveliness itself. But her face was a little pale, clouded with thought—with sad thought, when he caught sight of her. Now it was suddenly flushed, with a startled look in the dark eyes under their long lashes.

It seemed, for a moment, that she would slip from the stile to the lane, and go—but she checked that impulse. Her colour had changed, but only for a moment. Now she looked at him with calm inquiry.

“I’ve found you,” he repeated.

“Quite—if you have been looking for me,” she said, with a nod, and then she smiled. “Her ladyship has not yet returned to Morcom Court?”

“Eh! Oh! No.”

“I understand. Then you have still time on your hands.”

“You also, it seems,” he said. “Are the turnips—I mean the potatoes—all duly and properly hoed?”

“If you had an agricultural eye, Mr. Trent, you would see that the potato-field is in perfect trim,” she answered. “But what do they know of England, who only London know?”

“I shall learn in time,” he said. “At the moment, I am rather in the dark about the exact distinction between turnips and mangel-wurzels: but I have no doubt that there is a difference—is there?” he added.

“Oh, quite!” She gave him a curious look. He was in high spirits—his eyes were laughing. She could not help thinking how handsome he was, with that boyish look on his face. Why was he so happy?

“I shall learn,” he said. “I shall make a deep study of it. Already I have learned not to tread on growing crops, or to wander in meadows sacred to black bulls. I learn, too, that rural life is not all hard work—even a land-girl may sometimes be found, on a summer’s morning, sitting on a stile, as idle as the laziest young man from London. Is this stile your favourite spot?”

“In some ways, yes,” she said. “This is the second time you have found me here—luckily it is not so romantic in the morning as in the summer dusk.”

“It is packed with romance for me,” said Derek. He leaned on the stile, quite near here, his eyes on her face. “Have you forgotten that delightful lunch—how I wolfed your bread and cheese?”

She did not answer: she sat looking at him, wondering why he was so bright, so happy, so elated.

“Last night,” he said, “you thought me a philandering fool.”

“You are a thought-reader, Mr. Trent.”

“But you were mistaken,” he said. “A fool, yes—I have made the somewhat painful and disheartening discovery that I am a fool. Odd experience, to be a fool for twenty-seven years, without even suspecting the fact.”

“That’s interesting! How did you come to make this remarkable discovery?” asked the land-girl.

“We live and learn,” said Derek. “A fool—admitted! But not a philandering fool, Miss Smith—I have never been that. I’ve never bothered my head much about women—hitherto. Put that down to my credit.”

"It came on suddenly?" she asked.

"It never came on at all. I couldn't help falling in love, could I? That's not philandering, is it?"

She made a little grimace.

"You told me that her ladyship had not yet returned. Is Miss Grant the honoured lady? I have heard that she is engaged."

"Miss Grant is a charming young lady, I believe, but she is not the honoured lady—in this case. I have fallen in love with you, Miss Smith."

"I can see that it is time I returned to the village," said the land-girl. "The evening and the morning seem to be the same to you, Mr. Trent." She made a movement.

"Don't go," said Derek. "If you do, I shall call at the hostel—in fact, I was coming there, when I found you here."

"Oh! You must not come there!" she exclaimed, startled.

"I should come there, whether I must or not, or anywhere else, if necessary, to see you. I've something to say to you——"

"You said more than enough last evening, Mr. Trent——" Her voice was sharp. "Please let me hear no more nonsense!"

"But I am not talking nonsense," said Derek, calmly. "Something has happened since I saw you last evening."

"Some spot of good fortune?" said the land-girl. "You look very pleased with yourself, at all events."

"Yes, a spot of good fortune," assented Derek. "I am free now—indeed I was free then, if I had only known it—but I did not. But now I know it—the Gordian knot is cut—I am a free man: and when I tell you that I have fallen in love with you, it is, as you told me last night, either a proposal of marriage, or I am a blackguard. And—I am not a blackguard."

She caught her breath.

"What are you saying?" she exclaimed.

"I am saying that I love you, and that I want you to marry me," he answered, steadily. "Will you?"

She stared at him, quite blankly.

"Take time to consider, if you like," he said. "You've not known me long, and what you know of me isn't much to my credit. I don't know how I've got the cheek to ask you, really. But—I do want you so much. You are the loveliest thing I have ever seen—but it isn't only that! I don't quite know what it is. I've never been through this before. All I know is that I love you—not only in the dusk of a summer evening, but morning, noon and night——"

"You are talking wildly," she said, but there was a tremble in her voice. "You—an idle young man, accustomed to an easy life—you are asking a land-girl—a poor girl—a girl who works hard with her hands—to marry you? You must be out of your senses, Mr. Trent—if you are in earnest."

"I can't make you believe that I'm in earnest—that there's any earnestness in me?" he asked. "Well, if you will marry me, I'll prove it."

"But—but it's impossible—impossible——"

His face changed.

"I'm a conceited ass, I suppose. I've fallen in love with you, my dear—but why should you fall in love with me? Of course, you wouldn't—you couldn't!"

She was silent.

"And—and——" He remembered the letter she had been reading, the night before, and what she had told him. "And—and—— Tell me this, at least—is there somebody else? I suppose there is—I suppose there must be. Is that it?"

"No! No! No!" Her voice was low and hurried. "No! No! Nothing of that kind! Nobody else! But——"

"That's something." His face was bright again. "Let me tell you—you don't love me now—why should you? But I'm not wholly the weak waster you may have supposed me to be. I've

stood up to life in my time—when I had to. I can stand up to it again—with something worth fighting for. I'm lazy—I like an easy life—I hate problems—I love ease. But there's something I love more than ease. I know that now. I'm a rotter—a bit of a rotter—you see, I'm coming clean. But if you will marry me——”

She shook her head.

“And I shall not be marrying you for your money—for you haven't any, I suppose, any more than I have,” he said. “That means work! Do think of it! You shall teach me how to hoe potatoes, how to distinguish a turnip from a mangel-wurzel, how to handle black bulls—all the vast knowledge that is an open book to you, and a sealed one to me. Is there a cottage to be found in Sussex?”

“A cottage? Why?”

“With a little land,” he said. “I have a few hundred. Is that enough to start farming on a small scale?”

“You cannot be serious——”

“Potatoes, turnips, mangel-wurzels, a few chickens, some sheep, perhaps,” he said. “And a cow—can you milk cows?”

The land-girl laughed.

“Yes, I can milk cows.”

“And I can call the cattle home, like Mary on the sands of Dee,” he said. “Dear! Do you think—do you think for one minute, that—that—that you could come to like me enough——”

He broke off as he caught the look in her eyes. His heart beat almost to suffocation. He seized both her hands.

“Dear! You could?”

“It's madness,” she whispered. “You think you are in earnest now—I—I believe that—but—but—it is madness.”

“If love is madness, who would be sane?” said Derek, holding her hands fast. “Listen to me, dear. A few days ago, I had made up my mind—or almost made it up—to ask a woman to marry me whom I did not love, to live on her money. I—I—it was not clear to me how base it was—I knew it was rotten, but I did not understand how rotten it was. And—and—don't shudder—I did ask her——”

“That was why——”

“Yes, that was why! I—I wrote—I lied to her—God forgive me! It is only a few days, but it seems—it seems long ago now. Dearest, it came to me what I had done, and I dreaded her answer. If she had taken me, I should have had to stand for it—but thank Heaven, she did not! Thank Heaven for that! Somehow—I can't imagine how—she divined the truth—knew that I lied, knew that I wanted her money—knew me for the rotter I was. I got what I deserved—contempt!” He gave an uncomfortable wriggle. “Only this morning, her answer reached me—it came from a distance. It shamed me to the very soul. I—I saw myself—as I was. But—but it left me free—free to be a man—free to turn my back on ease and idleness and cowardice and softness—free to marry the woman I love, if she will have me. Dearest, I've told you all now—you know what a rotter I've been—what a rotter I should still be, if I'd never met you. You've made a man of me. Won't you carry on the good work?”

Her eyes were swimming in tears. She did not speak—she could not—but he read all he wanted to know, in her face. His arms closed round her, under the shade of the great branches.

“Dear! You will marry me?” he whispered.

“But—but think! We should be—poor——”

“Didn't old Bill tell us that 'poor and content, is rich, and rich enough,?'” asked Derek.

“Could you be content?”

“With you?” He smiled. “Don't you ever look in the glass, dear? Who would not or could not be content with you?”

“But—but——” She shook her head again. But his arms were round her, and he was pressing his lips to hers.

"I'm no use in London," he said. "We'll live in the country. You'll teach me how to work—you know, and I don't! I've got enough to buy a cottage with a spot of land—and you like the land, don't you?"

"I love it," she said. "Even if—if—if I were rich, if I had a great house, I should still love the land, and work on it sometimes, as I did in the wartime. But you—you—— Oh, my poor Derek!"

He laughed delightedly.

"You've called me Derek! I never liked the name much—now I love it! Say it again—you make it sound so sweet."

"Derek!" she whispered.

Her face burned under his kisses. But she drew herself from his arms at last.

"You'll marry me?" he said.

"Yes—if—— No, don't kiss me any more—if—if——" She hesitated. "It's too much to believe all at once—Derek! I shall go back to the village now——" Her eyes danced. "Shall I tell you why I love this stile—why I came here? It was because—because——"

"Not the bread and cheese lunch?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Oh, you darling!" he said. "You darling."

"Now I must go—no, you must not come! Derek, you must think this over—think, and be sure! I shall not see you again for two days——"

"Two centuries!" he said.

"If you are still of the same mind two days hence, come to this same stile in the evening, the day after to-morrow. And I shall be here."

"If!" he said, reproachfully.

"Yes, if!" she said, resolutely. "You must have time to think—to realise what you are doing. If you come, I shall be glad—and happy. But if you do not come, I—I shall understand."

With that, she hurried away, and the leafy lane took her from his sight.

CHAPTER XI

LOVES MAKES A MAN!

"I SHALL make it spades!" said Derek.

Honour Grant raised her eyebrows. Miss Selina Sanderson looked up from her knitting, quite startled. They were on the terrace, after lunch, and for some time Derek Trent had been in deep thought.

He had been silent—but Miss Sanderson, deep in knitting, did not mind. Miss Grant, who was thinking of her army man, minded still less. But they both looked at Derek as he made that unexpected remark. Aunt Selina even took off her spectacles, wiped them, and put them on her nose again, to give him a second look—perhaps thinking that the young man was wandering in his mind. At bridge you might, or might not, make it spades: but there were no cards in the offing.

"Spades!" repeated Honour, blankly. "Did you—say—spades?"

"Yes!—And hoes and rakes!" said Derek.

"Hoes and rakes?" gasped Honour: and Miss Sanderson, this time, gave Derek a more than startled look—almost of alarm. Obviously, he was wandering in his mind!

"And pitchforks and—and—and what else do they use?" asked Derek. "I suppose you know all about agriculture, Miss Grant? One uses a hoe for potatoes, and—and, I think, for turnips. Do they do cabbages with rakes or pitchforks?"

"Is that a new game?" asked Honour.

"Game? Not likely! Life is real, life is earnest, Miss Grant. A poet—of sorts—has told us so. And the great philosopher

of Chelsea told us all about the Dignity of Labour. Carlyle knew, what?"

"Yes—a looker-on sees most of the game," agreed Honour, laughing. "People who don't work are pretty strong on the dignity of labour, I believe."

"What's that question he asks somewhere," said Derek, unheeding. "I remember—'What are you doing in this world, where whoso is not working is either begging or stealing'? I never saw the truth of that before, Miss Grant. Working, begging, or stealing—they're the choice. I'm going to work. Perhaps I've left it rather late in life—twenty-seven. Better late than never. Back to the land—and put your back into it, what?"

Honour regarded him very curiously. He had come in from his morning walk in overflowing spirits. Evidently, he had fully recovered from that letter from Bristol—whatever Lady Morcom had said in it. At lunch he had talked airy nonsense from sheer happiness. Now he was talking nonsense again—his face as bright as a holiday schoolboy's.

"Can you buy a farm for four hundred pounds?" he asked.

"Only a wee, small one, I'm afraid," said Honour.

"Great things may grow from small," said Derek. "You begin with a few acres, put your back into them, and later on you're farming half a county. I'm going to make it spades, Miss Grant—and I'm beginning to-day."

"You're not serious, I suppose?"

"Sober as a judge. I'm going to be married, you see. That sobers a man."

Honour almost jumped from her chair. Miss Sanderson nearly dropped her knitting needles. Both gazed at Derek Trent.

"You're going to be married!" gasped Honour.

"Yes: I got engaged this morning," said Derek, calmly.

"You—you—you got engaged?" repeated Honour, dazedly.

"Anything surprising in that? Are you not engaged yourself?" said Derek. "It's the sort of thing that happens, Miss Grant. The way of all flesh."

"But—but—anybody I know?" gasped Honour.

"You are acquainted with the lady, at least—I saw you speaking to her one morning, on the avenue. One of the land-girls," said Derek.

"A—a—a land-girl! You?"

"Why not? Miss Smith——"

"Smith—Miss Smith!" stammered Honour.

"Yes, Miss Smith. It's no secret," said Derek. "So far from that, I feel like shouting from the house-tops. Miss Smith has as good as accepted me—I am an engaged man—and I feel like stopping every person I meet and saying: 'Miss Smith is going to marry me! Am I a lucky dog?'"

Honour gazed at him, speechless.

"Are you interested?" asked Derek. "I'm naturally rather full of it, and I admit I don't care whether you're interested or not—I just want to talk. Can you imagine Miss Smith taking a lazy, worthless loafer like myself? Throwing herself away on me? But she's an angel, Miss Grant—and angels do throw themselves away on undeserving fellows. If they didn't, how would any man get married at all? We shan't have any money——"

"Won't you?" gasped Honour.

"Or precious little. Work—hard work—is the order of the day. I'm going to begin this afternoon. I must get in the way of it. Presently, Miss Grant, my brow will be wet with honest sweat. If you walk down to Giles's cottage on the Cawcross road, you'll see me at it."

"Giles's cottages?"

"I've taken a room there," said Derek. "Looked in on my way back this morning, after proposing to Miss Smith, and being—provisionally—accepted. I'm sorry to be leaving you so suddenly——"

"You are leaving us?"

His face became a little graver.

"Yes! There—are circumstances that make it impossible for me to remain here as Lady Morcom's guest." His face flushed a little, as he remembered the letter he had read in the wood. "I shall not be able to stay till her ladyship returns. Neither would my new way of life be suitable to these surroundings," he went on, his face breaking into a smile again. "What would Parker think, if he saw Lady Morcom's guest with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, slogging away with a spade at the mangel-wurzels? Indeed, what would you think—Miss Grant—or you, Miss Sanderson? The homes of the idle rich are no places for an agricultural worker. I must go and pack my bag. At Giles's cottage we shall not dress for dinner—I shall probably have to use my boiled shirt to make lint for my blistered hands. Giles is a good old boy. He is letting me a back room for five shillings a week——"

"Mr. Trent!"

"And has agreed to lend me spades and things to dig in his garden. I throw in the labour free of charge in return for the training. This afternoon I shall be digging up a cabbage-patch for him. To-morrow, he is going to show me how to plant cabbages. Later I am to learn how to keep them clear of slugs. And snails. Did you know that slugs and snails are a perpetual worry to the cabbage-grower, Miss Grant?"

"You can't be serious," said Honour.

"Wait and see!" chuckled Derek. "I've lunched my last lunch with you idle rich. My dinner to-night will be my supper, also, and it will not be served by a butler. I don't know of what it will consist—very likely boiled cabbages and potatoes and things. I shall dine—or sup—with Mr. and Mrs. Giles, at the kitchen table. I pay a pound a week for board, and five shillings for my room—that's reasonable, I think—very reasonable. Giles says I can get some second-hand clothes at Cawcross, more suited to the dignity of labour than my present outfit. But my outfit will be very carefully preserved—I shall need a best suit when I take my wife to the fair on holiday occasions."

"Bless my soul!" said Miss Sanderson.

Derek Trent rose.

"Now I'd better pack," he said.

"If you are really going, when shall I order the car?" asked Honour.

Derek laughed.

"I don't want a car to take me to Giles's cottage half a mile away. I shall carry my bag, Miss Grant. I'm done with cars—though we may have a lorry, if it runs to it, to carry our produce to market. But in these matters I shall have to let my wife judge—she's an expert. I'm afraid you mayn't want to know me any more, Miss Grant, if we meet again—but if you pass me in the lanes, I shall touch my hat, respectful like——" He chuckled.

"If you mean all this," said Honour, "I shall like you more that I have done hitherto, Mr. Trent. But do you mean a single word of it?"

"You will believe me when we put up the banns, I suppose," said Derek. "Till then you must take my word for it."

He went into the house by the french windows: leaving Honour Grant and Miss Sanderson staring blankly at one another.

"Bless my soul!" said Miss Sanderson, again.

"It must be some sort of a joke," said Honour.

But if it was some sort of a joke, Derek Trent was carrying on with it. Half an hour later he took his leave: and walked down the avenue carrying his bag. They watched him from the terrace, and he turned once, to wave his disengaged hand, with a bright and happy face.

Later in the afternoon, Honour Grant made it a point to walk down the Cawcross road, past the fence of Giles's cottage.

She stopped at the gate in the fence, and looked over it. Her eyes dwelt on a young man in his shirt-sleeves, the sleeves rolled up, his face red, and spotted with perspiration, industriously digging. She could hardly believe that it was Derek Trent. The handsome face turned towards her, and she smiled.

"You look very busy, Mr. Trent," she said. "Do you find it hard work?"

"Well, yes, ma'am," said Derek, stopping for a moment, and leaning on his spade. "It comes a little hard to a beginner. Tough on the palms, at first. I've got blisters already. But Giles says the hands get hardened to it in time. I hope he's right—it feels a little tough at the moment."

"I have been on the phone speaking to Lady Morcom," said Honour. "She will be home this evening."

"Perhaps you'll make my excuses to her ladyship—I won't call," said Derek, and with a cheery grin to Miss Grant, he touched his hat, and resumed spade work.

She watched him for a few minutes, and then went thoughtfully on her way. He meant it, then—he was in earnest: the idle, discontented slacker had become a man, ready to tackle a man's job—to keep a wife with the labour of his hands, rather than live by sponging on a rich woman's money. The fortune-hunter who had come to Morcom Court with mean, greedy schemes in his mind, had changed as much as this—for love of a land-girl! Even Lady Morcom would be able to respect him now, Honour thought, as she gave a last glance at the man who was cleaving the stubborn soil, and turned away.

CHAPTER XII

LAND-GIRL OR LADYSHIP!

"**D**EAREST!" whispered Derek.

It was deeply dusk, in the summer evening, under the heavy branches that shadowed the stile in the lane. For a moment, when he came, he feared that she was not there: then he saw her. She was leaning on the stile, waiting for him—she was first at the tryst. She was wrapped in a cloak: a dark cloak that merged in the shadows. But he saw her face—her lovely face—under a little hat: glimmering in the gloom, as it turned towards him. It was the land-girl—his land-girl—his wife that was to be. And he whispered "Dearest" as he drew her into his arms.

"So—you have come?" she whispered.

"Did you doubt that I would?"

"No! No! Oh, Derek, I knew you would come. But—are you sure—quite sure—are you quite, quite sure?"

He kissed her.

"That's my answer to that," he said.

"Let me look at your hands."

"My hands? Why?"

"Let me look at them."

"I'd rather you didn't, dear," he said, with a grimace. "The—fact is—I—I've got some things to tell you——"

"I know already! Let me see your hands—your dear hands."

She looked at them, at the blisters on them, and found it hard to keep back her tears. She kissed them softly.

"I'm not used to it," said Derek, apologetically. "I—I suppose I'm soft—soft all through. But I shall get tougher, dear."

"What have you been doing?"

"Digging, chiefly. Breaking the stubborn glebe!" said Derek, with a grin. "And breaking myself in, at the same time."

Not to mention nearly breaking my back. Have you done much digging, my land-girl?"

"Lots and lots—in the wartime."

"Well, you'll leave it to me, later," said Derek. "I'd rather you milked the cow—if it will run to a cow."

He leaned on the stile, his arm round her. She knew that he was tired—hard work was new to him. His face was bright and happy, but it was thoughtful.

"I left Morcom Court," he said. "I'm digging in with old Giles at his cottage. He's taught me a good many things already. I shan't be quite a useless ass when we get going, dear. But we've a lot of things to discuss. We've got to get something for a start. I've got four hundred pounds. We can get something—even if it's only a cottage and a smallholding. Giles says one can do well with tomatoes, selling them in the town. Do you know anything about tomatoes?"

She looked at him, in the dusk. It was hard to believe that he was serious. But he was deeply serious.

"Yes," she whispered, tremulously. "I—I know a lot about tomatoes."

"You'll put in the expert knowledge, and I'll put in the hard work," he said. "But I'm not really a fool, dear—I can learn. We shall push through. But—there's one thing—" He paused.

"What is that?"

"It's asking you to take a chance," said Derek. "But—I don't want to wait. I know there's a lot to be said for waiting, and getting into a more assured position, and all that—but—I can't help thinking that—together—we'd have a better chance. Will you risk it? Will you take a chance with me, my dear? I—I want you to marry me, just as soon as we can fix it up—and we'll face it together—and we'll make a go of it, dear—I'm sure of that. We shall never be rich—but do we want to be rich? All I want is—you."

"And all I want is—you, Derek."

"My dear!" He drew her close to him, and kissed her again. "Dearest! That's settled, then. We go into it together?"

"Yes—always together," she whispered.

"It seems too good to be true," said Derek. "Only a matter of days, since I stopped at this very stile to ask the way to Morcom Court—"

"And I told you the way to the wretched place."

"Ah! You remember that?" He laughed. "It seems to me as if years have passed, since then. What a lovely lunch that was—bread and cheese! And—and I believe I fell in love with you the first minute, though I didn't know it then. I was a silly, sulky, discontented ass—what a difference you've made in me. And I might have—" He broke off abruptly.

"You might have—what?"

"Never mind! All clear now," said Derek. "If I could go back a couple of weeks, I'd kick myself for being what I was. I'm not good enough for you, dear. But—I'm going to try to be! When you're my wife—" He lingered, happily, on the word.

"Lady Morcom is home again," she said, suddenly.

He made a grimace.

"Never mind Lady Morcom, now," he said.

"Don't you like her, now?"

"Eh! Oh! Yes. I suppose so. I hardly remember her. You see, I'd left the house before she came home, and I haven't seen her. No need to see her now. Our way of life won't include places like Morcom Court," he said, laughing. "Unless her ladyship would let us one of her cottages, for old times' sake." He chuckled.

"Derek! I've got something to tell you."

"Carry on."

"It's about Lady Morcom."

"I don't like the subject, much—but carry on, all the same."

"I—I think you would like her—if you saw her."

"I don't want to see her."

"She was not always rich, Derek, as you know. In the war she worked as a land-girl."

"More power to her elbow," said Derek. "Not so lovely a land-girl as my very own land-girl!"

"Even after she became Lady Morcom, owner of this estate, Derek, she often put on her old land-girl's outfit, and worked on her own land."

"Capable woman," said Derek. "I never much liked capable or managing women—conceited ass! You'll have to do a lot of managing for me, dear, until I get sense enough to manage things."

"The day you were coming to Morcom Court, she gave you up for the day, as you were so late, and went out to do a land-girl's job—hoeing potatoes."

"I'm sure she did not hoe them so superbly as you did."

"She knew why you were coming, Derek."

His face altered.

"She couldn't! What do you mean? How do you know?"

"That was why she was absent all the time of your visit."

He stared at her.

"Do you remember—that evening you found me here—I had a letter—and—and you saw——"

"You were crying over it," he said. "I remember! My dear, you're bewildering me. What——"

"That letter had come on from Bristol. Lady Morcom never went to Bristol. She was much nearer at hand all the time, Derek."

"What do you mean?"

"Derek—dear Derek—forgive me. It was your letter——"

"My letter!" he stammered.

"I could not see you, Derek—I knew why you had come. I—I——" She stammered, and went on hurriedly. "No—don't interrupt me—listen! You stopped here to ask your way—of a land-girl! You never dreamed of Lady Morcom in land-girl's clothes, hoeing her own potato-field! And—and when she saw you—and—and lunched with you, Derek, on this stile—she knew—why you were going to Morcom Court—and determined that you should not find her there, and do what you had planned to do—she could not bear it, Derek—loving you as she did!"

"Loving me?"

"Oh, Derek, how long have you loved me? I have loved you all my life." She was sobbing in his arms now. "You almost made me hate you—but I loved you, Derek—my dear! my dear! Now I can respect and trust you as well as love you—now that you have asked a land-girl to be your wife. Don't you understand, Derek? Lady Morcom left her house before you came—but to go only as far as the land-girl's hostel in the village. Your land-girl is Francesca Morcom."

He look at her, as if stunned.

"But—but you love me just the same, Derek? You don't love me less because I have loved you all my life?" she whispered.

He found his voice.

"My dear! Land-girl or ladyship, what does it matter? I love you, and love you, and love you." He drew her close to his heart. "Oh, my dear, I'm not fit to blacken your shoes, but I love you—and love you—and love you."

It was not love-in-a-cottage, after all. But Derek Trent would never have been master of Morcom Court but for love of a land-girl.