

It—also a substantial share of his very considerable worldly goods. He put it in the light of an excellent bargain—you know how the Stock Exchange pervades his conversation. I was to make him happy by marrying him, and he would retrieve our fallen fortunes with his millions—fair profits to each of us, you see. I refused the offer—then—

"The full advantages of the contract did not strike you till afterwards?"

"I suppose I must confess to a fit of cowardice. My courage failed me at the moment when I ought to have said 'Yes'—and besides—"

George lost interest in his strawberries. There was something very strange in Margaret's voice. Putting down his plate, he looked across the table at her averted face.

"Well?" he inquired.

"Oh, I am a woman, and you must let me be unreasonable. My course seems quite clear now, doesn't it? The next time I meet Maurice, I am to let him know that I have changed my mind. It will be very easy. Then we shall be married as soon as we decently can—and he will insist on his right to pay off all Leonard's debts, because Mrs. Maurice Frobisher's brother must be a respectable landowner. Cunningham is a good lawyer, and knows how to keep a secret; Leonard will never know how near he came to losing all he possesses. The simplicity of it appeals to me."

She wondered why he did not answer. It was unlike him not to have listened, but that was the impression he gave when at last he did speak.

"I still fail to see why Leonard can't marry money—if that is the only thing to do. It's his place to save his inheritance if he can not yours. Why should you be sacrificed like this?"

George had an angry vision of Leonard Ingasham in which his worst qualities were prominent. That Margaret should be doing this for the sake of a conceited, thoughtless, selfish young coxcomb—it was shameful.

"You forget that Len is handicapped in that direction."

"How do you mean? He's got the Ingasham good looks, and—well, the girls don't seem to object to him exactly."

"That's just it. The eternal feminine. Have you forgotten about Elaine already? Len has gone to town for the purpose of going to their ball and snatching as many glimpses of her as the whirl of the end of the season will allow. He is living on the hope of being invited to their place in Perth for September."

"I didn't realise it was such a lasting affair. I thought she was a three-weeks' goddess, like all the rest of them. Is he really still in pursuit of her? She wasn't particularly interested in him when he last explained what he called his 'desperate situation' to me."

"Of late she has been kinder. Len's patient pilgrimage from house to house, and his charming attitude towards girls in general—with a reserve supply of intelligent adoration for herself only—seem to have had the desired effect at last." She is quite openly fond of him.

George carefully cut himself a slice of cake. "Then where is the need of Frobisher?" he inquired, as he examined the pink and white icing. "Miss Elaine isn't exactly a beggar-maid."

Margaret gave him a look which suggested that she thought him stupid. "Your innocence is quite refreshing, my dear George: do you suppose that playing with a person has the immediate result of marriage with the same? She will have forgotten his existence by next year. It's different with Maurice—he cares. Of course, it's no question of money matters with him. It is—well, I'll say the other thing if the next word makes you glower like that."

George banished his frown, and laughed, a little grimly. "Not being a millionaire," he replied, "I can't judge of his feelings. But there's nothing very surprising in his falling in love with you—I have known ordinary men do that."

He looked down at himself with apparent amusement. Margaret, as she watched his face, was surprised to find that she did not understand him. Perhaps there were hidden waters under the simplicity which he showed to the world.

The sound of distant carriage wheels broke the silence.

"Frobisher?" queried George, curiously.

"There's no one else in the country yet."

Margaret wondered why he did not go, and was annoyed with herself at being glad that he stayed. "We have been a most unconscionable time over tea," she

observed, holding out her cup towards him.

He rose, took it from her, and slowly put it down on the table. Then for the space of two minutes he stood silent, with his back almost completely turned towards her.

The attitude irritated Margaret—all the more for its uselessness. She knew his blue eyes were as inscrutable as his shoulders. "What are you doing, George?" she asked, with the mirthless laugh of the nervous.

The carriage wheels were growing louder. Three solemn ticks came from the clock on the mantelpiece.

Then George turned and faced her, with both hands resting on the table edge. The tea-things clattered a little under his weight.

Margaret, looking up, found something in his usually placid eyes that frightened her.

His mouth twisted oddly at the corners for an instant, and then came his quiet voice: "As I said before, Meg, I am not a millionaire. I am only an ordinary man with a very small bank account. I can't save Ingasham for you, so I shan't ask you—for what I've wanted more and more each year since you came back from school—what I shall want to the end of my days. But, pardon my foolishness, will you tell me—can you—what your answer would have been if I could have asked to-day? I don't want to know anything else but that."

Margaret shook her head at him, smiling. "No use in discussing might-have-beens, George," she replied.

He had not said quite what she expected. After all, it made things easier. As to telling him—

Here her thoughts came to a standstill, for the butler opened the door, and they heard a confused noise of voices in the hall.

George privately anathematised Frobisher for not being able to enter the house quietly.

Before the butler could speak, he was hurriedly pushed aside by a tall personage evidently in a great hurry to get past. As he strode forward, Margaret and George started back in amazement. "Leonard!" they cried in unison.

"Well," said that individual. "You don't look very glad to see a fellow," he said to Margaret.

He frowned a little, and threw back his head with the defiant tilt of the chin his ancestors had left to him. Six feet of British good looks and muscle are not bestowed on everybody, and the attitude was pardonable.

"I came by the other train," he explained, coming to the tea-table. "Hello, George! glad to see you. Have you left me anything to eat?"

"A few strawberries. But you must explain yourself first. Why didn't you come in the 7.15?"

"You'd make a capital criminal lawyer, old fellow. No getting round your questions. I had my reasons, very urgent reasons for seeing Meg—and you (stop looking for your hat!)—both of you, soon as possible."

He sank into an armchair, and smiled at them from its depths. "I was lucky to get a lift in Frobisher's trap," he went on: "the heat up the Dean Hill was enough to melt you. I was recruiting on the roadside when he came along. At first he thought I was a tramp, for I'd rammied my panama down over my face in hopes of keeping the sun off. What with that, and the dust, I must have looked pretty disreputable, and—"

"Leonard," said Margaret, severely, "stop babbling, and tell us your urgent reasons for coming home."

The colour flooded the lad's smiling face. "Oh!—well..." He dropped his long lashes in a sudden fit of shyness, and then threw up his head and faced them joyously. "I came for your congratulations on my engagement," he announced, with the grandiloquence of youth.

Margaret ran to him and caught hold of his square shoulders. "Oh, Len!" she panted, between vigorous shakes. "What do you mean? It isn't—it can't be—Elaine?"

"How could it be anyone else? Did you think I should marry an old dowager,—out of pique? Of course, it's not surprising that you are a bit astounded. It's so wonderful, I can scarcely believe it myself. And so—glorious! Wig, Meg, you're crying. You little goose! And, upon my word, George almost looks as if he were going to join in! Cheerful way of congratulating me!"

"Leonard," said George, holding out his hand, "you've rather startled us,

that's all. We congratulate you with our whole hearts—don't we, Meg?"

She leaned forward, and put her hand over the linked muscular ones of her two companions.

"Yes," she said, looking at her white fingers in contrast to George's bronzed ones—"with both our hearts."

"I must go and wash off some of this grime," announced Leonard, surveying his hands. "Not much of the landed proprietor about me at the present moment."

He went to the door, and then paused, smiling at their watching faces.

"So the House of Ingasham is saved from disgrace and ruin in the nick of time," he said, quietly.

George, who had picked up his riding-crop, suddenly let it fall unheeded, shouting—"What?"

Margaret stood rigid, her face in white bewilderment. "Leonard!" she gasped, helplessly.

He opened the door. "Don't you think it would have been better to tell me, Meggy?" he resumed, stooping to caress an excited fox-terrier who had squeezed himself through the half-opened door, having just discovered his master's return. "Cunningham did it rather badly."

"Cunningham?" demanded George, fiercely.

"Yes. You see I was so filled with longing to tell somebody the joyful news that I didn't know what on earth to do with myself all this morning. So it occurred to me that I might go and see old Cunningham, who always takes an interest in our doings. Well, he was only too profuse with his congratulations. Then he began to reel out compliments by the yard, and finished up with something like this—'And allow me to admire the good sense which inspired your choice of a young lady who not only possesses beauty and charm of character, but a fortune of some three or four thousand a year.'"

He paused, opening the door a little wider and gently shoving the barking terrier through the aperture.

"Go on," said George, sternly.

"I told him the money wasn't of the least importance—it was entirely an affaire de coeur. He opened his eyes at that, and said he should have thought, in the present unfortunate state of my exchequer, the money was of the greatest importance. I demanded what the dickens he meant. He said—'Good Heavens! Hasn't Miss Margaret told you?'—and, for a long time, I couldn't get anything out of him. He kept reproaching himself for what he called his 'indiscretion.' Evidently he thought my first visit to his office meant that I had been told all about it. Shall I go on?"

"Of course," said George, tapping his foot impatiently.

"Then I made him describe the pleasing sort of mess my private affairs were in. The news was rather a shock: I didn't realise what a lot it all meant to me before—the—well, the swagger of it, you know. Leonard Ingasham, of Ingasham, was—somebody; but Leonard Ingasham of nowhere particular wasn't worth knowing. That was the worst of it."

"Go on," repeated George.

"Of course I dashed off to Elaine and backed out at once. I began to try and explain sensibly that the offer I had made must be considered unsaid, I didn't ask her to marry a penniless good-for-nothing. But she wouldn't listen. She said, among a great many other things, that we cared for each other, and nothing else mattered. So, in the eyes of the world, I'm going to do the right thing—marry a nice girl with a fortune, which will save me from ruin."

He stepped back into the hall, and turning, faced them in the doorway.

"And I'm doing right in my own eyes too—for I was going to marry the girl who comes before all other girls—this girl I love!"

His voice returned to its natural cheerful tones.

"I'll be back in a minute or two. Don't go, George—I want to see more of you. Make me some fresh tea, will you, Meg? The stuff I had on the train wasn't worth drinking."

He finally shut the door, and they heard his steady footsteps echoing across the hall, to the whistled accompaniment of "Bill Bailey."

George picked up his riding crop, and stood twirling it between his large fingers. Margaret sat down, limply, in the nearest chair.


"Well, Meg," he said, slowly, "have you got time—for me—now?"

Margaret looked into his blue eyes,

which for the first time hid nothing from her. Then she got up and leaned against the sturdy shoulder she found ready for that purpose.

"I don't think I shall ever have time for any one else," she said, indistinctly, from her tweed-scented resting-place. By Eleanor Viceq in "Fall Mail."

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