

And he wheeled two luxurious easy-chairs to the fire-side and pulled the old-world bell rope to summon the servant with tea.

'I've an old chum staying here with me, mother, for the past few days—Frank Lynam. At present he—'

Dan O'Connor paused for a moment in puzzled surprise, for Ella Graham had started violently, and had directed almost a scared look at Mrs. O'Connor, who in her turn had also started and flushed to the temples, as she returned the girl's startled gaze with mutely eloquent intensity.

'Frank has gone over to Glendore to spend the afternoon with the McCarthys,' Dan hurriedly resumed, instinctively feeling that whatever the situation might be it could be saved only by prompt action on his part; 'or I should say, perhaps, to see Delia McCarthy.'

'Delia McCarthy?' Mrs. O'Connor echoed sharply, and she directed a searching glance at her son.

'Yes, mother—the daughter of your old acquaintance, Kate O'Meara. They are staying in a cottage near Glendore. Frank is a constant visitor, and I shouldn't be surprised if he and Delia—but perhaps it is hardly fair of me to give him away like this!'

He did not look at Elsie Graham as he spoke, but he felt instinctively—and he was still further puzzled and pained at the consciousness that his words had increased her embarrassment.

'I am very sorry these people are so close to us, I must say!' Mrs. O'Connor observed, with a sudden grim severity in her tone and look. 'However, it can, of course, matter nothing to me. I shall not see them during my stay at Droumgarriif.'

'I wonder what on earth is delaying the tea?' Dan said at this juncture, as he quickly rose and moved towards the door. He felt a decided objection to remaining in the room until Elsie Graham had got the better of this disturbing element, whatever the cause of it might be. 'Pardon me for one moment. Perhaps the bell is out of order.'

And Dan vanished from the room.

A long look passed between Mrs. O'Connor and her friend, who was now pale to the very lips.

'Well, Elsie, what do you think of Frank Lynam—now?'

'Oh, do not mention his name, Mrs. O'Connor!' the girl answered almost passionately. 'Talk of anything else.'

'Well, my dear, as you've kindly made me your confidante and told me all about the little matter, I feel privileged to touch on it just once again—and for the last time. From the moment you told me the story, I believed that that young man was not worthy of your affection. I wish you would make up your mind now to be off with the old love from this moment forward, my dear, and— and—'

She was about to say, it seemed, 'and on with the new,' but she checked the words, as she heard Dan's returning footsteps, and waived her hand and nodded significantly towards the door instead, just as her son reappeared.

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They were still over the tea table, when a careless whistle was heard in the hall, then a loose, swinging footstep approaching the door.

Mrs. O'Connor directed a nervous glance at Elsie Graham.

That glance seemed to say:

'He is coming, Elsie. Courage, dear—courage!'

Frank Lynam entered the drawing-room.

'Oh, how do you do, Mrs. O'Connor,' he said, in his genial, somewhat effusive way. 'I am so glad to see you again. I hope your recent illness—'

The words died on his lips.

He was staring with amazement into Elsie Graham's colorless face.

'Elsie!' he gasped, almost incredulously—'Miss Graham!—can it be you?'

Elsie Graham bowed icily and murmured something or other, then turned hurriedly to Mrs. O'Connor.

'Yes, dear—yes,' that lady said, rising all in a flutter of excitement. 'We shall barely have time to dress for dinner.'

Not until Mrs. O'Connor and her companion had left the room did Frank Lynam seem to recover from the shock sufficiently to grasp the true situation.

Then he turned hopelessly to his friend.

'So this is your mother's wonderful discovery, Dan! Good God, man! Elsie Graham is the only girl I've ever loved in this world. I met her when I was in Scotland, at a country house in Argyllshire. We spent a month there with a large house party. But I was shy and diffident, and she, I daresay, was equally shy, as well as proud, and she evidently misunderstood me, and I daresay I misunderstood her.'

'Another chap came by and paid her attentions, and I'd swear she submitted to them simply out of pique, for she very soon gave him his dismissal. And yet my confounded diffidence, or whatever it was, tied my tongue.'

'Then a certain May Cameron, the greatest flirt in Argyllshire, took me in hand (she was also a guest in the house), and although I didn't really like a bone in the girl's body, I was flattered and soothed by her attentions, and, I suppose, I played the part of her ardent admirer for a bit.'

'The end of it was that Elsie Graham and I had a quarrel, and we parted in anger, and I've never met her since until this afternoon. And now look at my position! Did you see the bow she gave me? For Heaven's sake, old chap, what did you tell them about Delia McCarthy and myself?'

'Whatever I told them, Frank, make your mind easy about it. Your prospects shan't be blighted for my selfish ends,' Dan O'Connor made answer, with genuine good-nature and sympathy. 'You've done me a good turn, lad, and I shall prove to you that I'm not an ungrateful cad before many days are over your head and mine.'

#### CHAPTER VI.

'No, mother, it is absolutely impossible,' Dan O'Connor said to his mother a day or two later. 'Miss Graham is everything that is charming, I allow, and I sincerely hope she will be married to the man she loves, and will be happy as the day is long with him. I am not that fortunate individual, however; and, moreover, I have quite other views as to my immediate future. I cannot tell you what they are just yet.'

Mrs. O'Connor was bitterly disappointed; but she did not lose hope for all that. She tried to persuade herself that Elsie Graham's irresistible charms would break down all possible barriers existing between Dan and herself.

'I shall leave them together as much as possible,' thought this wily matchmaker. 'When all is said, there is no factor in such cases more potent than propinquity.'

In accordance with which dark resolve, Mrs. O'Connor ordered the pony-trap that same afternoon and started away all by herself for a drive.

Frank Lynam and Elsie Graham had exchanged merely a few formal platitudes during the previous days, and notwithstanding Dan's very unequivocal words of that morning, Mrs. O'Connor persuaded herself to think that a satisfactory fulfilment of her heart's dearest wish was still possible at least.

Mrs. O'Connor was by no means a skilful whip, and 'Bonnie' was fresh and frisky this afternoon—a vicious little devil,' Dan always characterised this pony.

And as Mrs. O'Connor turned a corner of the narrow, winding road, lo! a tinkers' caravan was suddenly revealed, at which Bonnie instantly took fright—and, what was more to the point, took also to her heels and bolted, having succeeded in getting the bit firmly between her teeth.

Poor Mrs. O'Connor uttered shriek after shriek in her terror, and was on the point, it seemed, of throwing herself out of the flying vehicle, when a tall, graceful, sweet-faced girl suddenly leaped from the high bank upon the road, seized the terrified pony, and held her firmly in check.

'I fear the shock has been too much for you,' the girl said, in a low, musical voice, that won the listener's heart at once. 'But pray make your mind perfectly easy now. All danger is over.'

Just then a farm boy came along the road, and Mrs. O'Connor's rescuer handed over the pony to his charge, as she herself took the half-fainting woman in her arms and carried her tenderly to the mossy bank beside the road.

'If you rest here for a few minutes you will be all right again,' the girl whispered. 'Then I will tell that boy to drive you safely home.'

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'The sweetest girl I've ever seen in all my life, Dan!' Mrs. O'Connor enthusiastically described her benefactress, when an hour later she was giving her son an account of her afternoon's adventure. 'I shall never, never forget her goodness to me. Positively, Dan, she saved my life—and yet she refused to tell me her name when I asked her.'

Just then there was a knock at the door of the drawing-room, and a servant entered with a pencilled note from Elsie Graham to Mrs. O'Connor.

'Miss Graham came to the pantry window this moment, ma'am, and handed this to me,' the girl said. 'Herself and Mr. Lynam were walking together in the moonlight.'

Mrs. O'Connor, who was still trembling all over from the effects of the shock she had sustained that afternoon, opened the note and read as follows:

'I am as happy as the day is long, dear Mrs. O'Connor. Frank and I met accidentally in the grounds an hour and a half ago, and all is explained—and I've promised to be his wife in March.'

'I now find I had totally wronged him that time in Argyllshire. It was all a stupid misunderstanding. Oh, dearest Mrs. O'Connor, I can never, never, never thank you sufficiently for persuading me to accompany you to Droumgarriif!'

'Just think of that, Dan!' Mrs. O'Connor said, when she had read this note aloud. 'And I was under the impression—just as you were—that Frank Lynam was flirting with that odious Delia McCarthy!'

'"That odious Delia McCarthy" is my fiancée, mother—and your rescuer this afternoon,' Dan O'Connor said, and he took his mother into his strong arms and kissed her. 'Surely the sweetest girl you have ever seen in all your life is likely to appeal to you, mother dear, as a worthy bride for your most unworthy son!'

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Mrs. O'Connor returned to town on the following day. She had neither refused nor consented to her son's eager