

## CHAPTER X

### THE NEW LEAF

WHEN MacGown came up to her, Marjorie Ferrar thought: 'Does he know about Bettie?' Fresh from her triumph over 'that little snob,' fluttered by the sudden appearance of her past, and confronted with her present, she was not in complete possession of her head. When they had moved away into an empty side room, she faced him.

"Well, Alec, nothing's changed. I still have a past as lurid as yesterday. I'm extremely sorry I ever kept it from you. But I did practically tell you, several times; only you wouldn't take it."

"Because it was hell to me. Tell me everything, Marjorie!"

"You want to revel in it?"

"Tell me everything, and I'll marry you still."

She shook her head. "Marry! Oh! no! I don't go out of my depth any more. It was absurd anyway. I never loved you, Alec."

"Then you loved that—you still——"

"My dear Alec, enough!"

He put his hands to his head, and swayed. And she was touched by genuine compassion.

"I'm awfully sorry, I really am. You've got to cut me out; that's all."

She had turned to leave him, but the misery in his face stopped her. She had not quite realised. He was burnt up! He was——! And she said quickly:

"Marry you I won't; but I'd like to pay up, if I could——"

He looked at her.

Quivering all over from that look, she shrugged her shoulders, and walked away. Men of an old fashion! Her own fault for stepping outside the charmed circle that took nothing too seriously. She walked over the shining floor, conscious of many eyes, slipped past her hostess, and soon was in a cab.

She lay awake, thinking. Even without announcement the return of presents would set London by the ears and bring on her again an avalanche of bills. Five thou. and pounds! She got up and rummaged out the list, duplicate of that which Alec had. He might still want to pay them! After all, it was he who had spilled the ink by making her go into Court! But then his eyes came haunting her. Out of the question! And, shivering a little, she got back into bed. Perhaps she would have a brain-wave in the morning. She had so many in the night, that she could not sleep. Moscow with Bertie Curfew? The stage? America and the 'movies'? All three? She slept at last, and woke languid and pale. With her letters was one from Shropshire House.

"DEAR MARJORIE,

"If you've nothing better to do, I should like to see you this morning.

"Affectionately,

"SHROPSHIRE."

What now? She looked at herself in the glass, and decided that she *must* make up a little. At eleven o'clock she was at Shropshire House. The marquess was in his workroom at the top, among a small forest of contrap-

tions. With coat off, he was peering through a magnifying-glass at what looked like nothing.

"Sit down, Marjorie," he said; "I'll have done in a minute."

Except the floor, there seemed nowhere to sit, so she remained standing.

"I thought so," said the marquess; "the Italians are wrong."

He put the spy-glass down, ran his hand through his silvery hair, and drew his ruffled beard into a peak. Then, taking an eyebrow between finger and thumb, he gave it an upward twist, and scratched himself behind one ear.

"They're wrong; there's no reaction whatever."

Turning towards his granddaughter, he screwed up his eyes till they were bright as pins. "You've never been up here before. Sit in the window."

She seated herself on a broad window-ledge covering some sort of battery, with her back to the light.

"So you brought that case, Marjorie?"

"I had to."

"Now, why?" He was standing with his head a little to one side, his cheeks very pink, and his eyes very shrewd. And she thought: "After all, I'm his granddaughter. I'll plunge."

"Common honesty, if you want to know."

The marquess pouted, as if trying to understand the words.

"I read your evidence," he said, "if you mean that."

"No. I meant that I wanted to find out where I stood."

"And did you?"

"Very much so."

"Are you still going to be married?"

Really, he was a spry old boy!

"No."

"Whose doing? Yours or his?"

"He still says he'll marry me if I tell him everything. But I don't choose to."

The marquess moved two steps, placed his foot on a box, and assumed his favourite attitude. He had a red silk tie this morning which floated loose; his tweed trousers were of a blue-green, his shirt of a green-blue. He looked wonderfully bright.

"Is there much to tell?"

"A good deal."

"Well, Marjorie, you know what I said to you."

"Yes, Grandfather, but I don't quite see it. I don't want to stand for anything."

"Ah! you're an exception in our class—luckily! But it's the exceptions that do the harm."

"If people took one as any better than themselves, perhaps. But they don't nowadays."

"Not quite honest, that," interrupted the marquess; "what about the feeling in your bones?"

She smiled.

"It's good to mortify oneself, Grandfather."

"By having a better time than you ought, um? So your marriage is off?"

"Very much so."

"Are you in debt?"

"Yes."

"How much do you owe?"

Marjorie Ferrar hesitated. Should she compromise, or blurt it out?

"No heel-taps, Marjorie."

"Well, then, five thousand about."

The old peer screwed up his lips, and a melancholy little whistle escaped.

"A good deal of it, of course, is due to my engagement."

"Your father won a race the other day, I see."

The old boy knew everything!

"Yes; but I believe it's all gone."

"It would be," said the marquess. "What are you going to do now?"

She had a strong desire to answer: "What are you?" but restrained it, and said:

"I thought of going on the stage."

"Well, I suppose that might be suitable. Can you act?"

"I'm not a Duse."

"Duse?" The marquess shook his head. "One must go back to Ristori for really great acting. Duse! Very talented, of course, but always the same. So you don't choose to marry him now?" He looked at her intently. "That, I think, is right. Have you a list of your debts?"

Marjorie Ferrar rummaged in her vanity bag. "Here it is."

She could see his nose wrinkling above it, but whether at its scent, or its contents, she could not tell.

"Your grandmother," he said, "spent about a fifth of what you seem to own about five times the acreage of clothes. You wear nothing nowadays, and yet it costs all this."

"The less there is, Grandfather, the better it has to be cut, you know."

"Have you sent your presents back?"

"I've had them packed."

"They must all go," said the marquess. "Keep nothing he or any one else gave you."

"Of course not."

"To frank you," he said, suddenly, "I should have to sell the Gainsborough."

"Oh, no!"

Gainsborough's picture of his own grandmother as a little girl—that beautiful thing! She stretched out her hand for the list. Still holding it, he put his foot to the ground, and stood peering at her with his bright, intent old eyes.

“The question is, Marjorie, how far it's possible to strike a bargain with you. Have you a ‘word’ to keep?”

She felt the blood mounting in her cheeks.

“I think so. It depends on what I've got to promise. But, Grandfather, I don't *want* you to sell the Gainsborough.”

“Unfortunately,” said the marquess, “without doing your uncle Dangerfield in the eye, I've nothing else. It's been my fault, I suppose, for having had expensive children. Other people don't seem to have had them to the same degree.”

She stifled a smile.

“Times are hard,” went on the marquess. “Land costs money, collieries cost money, Shropshire House costs money; and where's the money? I've got an invention here that ought to make my fortune, but nobody will look at it.”

The poor old boy—at his age! She said with a sigh:

“I really didn't mean to bother you with this, Grandfather. I'll manage somehow.”

The old peer took several somewhat hampered steps, and she noticed that his red slippers were heelless. He halted, a wonderfully bright spot among the contraptions.

“To come back to what we were saying, Marjorie. If your idea of life is simply to have a good time, how can you promise anything?”

“What do you want me to promise?”

He came and stood before her again, short and a little bent.

"You look as if you had stuff in you, too, with your hair. Do you really think you could earn your living?"

"I believe I can; I know a lot of people."

"If I clear you, will you give me your word to pay ready money in future? Now don't say 'Yes,' and go out and order yourself a lot of fallals. I want the word of a lady, if you understand what that implies."

She stood up.

"I suppose you've every right to say that. But I don't want you to clear me if you have to sell the Gainsborough."

"You must leave that to me. I might manage, perhaps, to scrape it up without. About that promise?"

"Yes; I promise that."

"Meaning to keep it?"

"Meaning to keep it."

"Well, that's something."

"Anything else, Grandfather?"

"I should have liked to ask you not to cheapen our name any more, but I suppose that would be putting the clock back. The spirit of the age is against me."

Turning from his face, she stood looking out of the window. The spirit of the age! It was all very well, but he didn't understand what it was. Cheapen? Why! she had *raised* the price of the family name; hoicked it out of a dusty cupboard, and made of it current coin. People sat up when they read of her. Did they sit up when they read of grandfather? But he would never see that! And she murmured:

"All right, dear, I'll be careful. I think I shall go to America."

His eyes twinkled.

"And start a fashion of marrying American husbands? It's not yet been done, I believe. Get one who's

interested in electricity, and bring him over. There are great things for an American to do here. Well, I'll keep this list and work it off somehow. Just one thing, Marjorie: I'm eighty, and you're—what are you—twenty-five? Don't get through life so fast—you'll be dreadfully bored by the time you're fifty, and there's no greater bore than a bored person. Good-bye!" He held out his hand.

She took a long breath. Free!

And, seizing his hand, she put it to her lips. Oh! He was gazing at it—oh! Had her lips come off? And she hurried out. The old boy! He was a darling to have kept that list! A new leaf! She would go at once to Bertie Curfew and get him to turn it over for her! The expression in his eye last night!