



#### CHAPTER V.

Blackthorn House was the name of a very beautiful mansion in London that Lady Darel had taken for the year; it was looking its brightest and best now; out on the pretty veranda the mignonette, the scarlet verbena, the purple heliotrope stood in great rich clusters. From the large open windows one caught sight of the trees in the park, the gleam of the golden laburnum, the pink and white of the hawthorn, the rich rippling foliage of the tall green trees. People had a fashion of telling Lady Darel how they envied her the beautiful views from the windows. The drawing room—long, lofty, exquisite room—opened on to the veranda, where the sweet, bright flowers bloomed; it was an exquisite room, bright, light, cheerful and beautifully arranged. There on this eventful twentieth of May stood Lady Hilda Dunhaven, awaiting the presence of the man she had been enjoined to marry.

Meanwhile he was holding a conversation with his lady mother. They had taken luncheon together, so as to have an opportunity of talking. He was quite unwilling at first to broach the subject; he talked about his travels, and when he could say no more he threw himself back in the chair.

"Now, mother," he said, "about this matter which has brought me to England—this absurd will."

"I have never dared to think of it, Leonard," said Lady Darel.

"And I have never cared to think of it," he replied, "but the time has come when the question must be decided. I want the money, yet I cannot make up my mind to marry that child. I should like my wife to be a refined, accomplished, spirituelle woman—this child will never be that."

"I have done my best with her; she is improved. She has a good disposition and a refined mind. Lady Hilda is in the drawing room," said the mother, and without another word he went to join her.

She looked up at him, with a little, low cry, and the first sight of her disarmed his impatience. The tall, slender figure, with its promise of future beauty; the fair, sad, girlish face, the sweet, sad eyes; and how wondrously the face brightened at the sight of him.

He had meant to speak but few words, and those of the coldest, but he was a man of tender heart; he held out his hand to her in greeting; he smiled in her upraised face; he almost forgot that he intended to be cold; and all because of the sudden light that had come into her face when she saw him.

As for her, in the sunlight of his smile her whole nature seemed to find warmth and freedom, as a snow wreath melts under the glance of the sun.

"I am so glad to see you," she said, and her face carried out her words. "How long have you been away, Lord Dunhaven? I am so pleased to welcome you home."

"Thank you for your welcome," he said.

Then came a few moments of silence; his task was more ungracious still; how was he to tell this child, who seemed so rejoiced to see him, that he preferred beggary for himself and for her rather than marry her? She seemed to feel quite at home with him, and talked to him with a freedom that astonished him.

She placed a chair near the open window for him—the rare, sweet perfume of the heliotrope came in like a greeting; the warm western wind brought messages from every flower that bloomed.

"Am I to sit here, Lady Hilda, and tell you about Norway? Ah, me, I ought to talk to you about something far less pleasant."

"Less pleasant," she repeated, gravely.

"Yes, far less pleasant. I think we had better discuss the question, had we not?"

"Will it require much discussion?" she said. "I think a few words will settle it."

He looked at her keenly.

"You are the lady," he said; "you ought to be allowed the first choice and the first speech in the matter. That did not occur to me before, but I see it now. Tell me, if you had to decide this question yourself, how would you decide it?"

Again the young face was covered with hot blushes, and turned slyly from him.

"I should decide it so that you should have the money," she said, gently, and there was a short silence.

"Then you would have the marriage take place?" he said.

She thought for a few moments, then she said:

"If we were married as the will said, should I always be with you?"

"I suppose so," was the indifferent reply.

The light that came on her face was beautiful even in his eyes.

"Then if I may be always with you, I should choose that the marriage take place, and you have all the money," she answered shyly, and without raising her eyes to him.

And thus they became betrothed.

#### CHAPTER VI.

The week passed, and Lord Dunhaven went away; but because in going he had shaken hands with Hilda, and told her to be careful during the hot weather, she was in an ecstasy of delight. That any one should care whether the weather should affect her or not was something wonderful, and her delight showed how utterly unused to it she was. Then he was gone and nothing remained but to prepare the trousseau. It was wonderful how the girl brightened and improved; every day developed new beauty in her; only there were no loving eyes to note it.

The days seemed to fly—the earl was to return two days before the day appointed for the wedding. Lady Hilda never remembered how they passed; to her they were one bewildering whirl. She was alone when the earl arrived—he went at once to the library, where his lady mother awaited him; but she was not sent for. She had dressed herself with unusual care and attention, hoping that he would think that she had improved, but hour after hour passed, and no summons came for her.

They met at dinner time, but the greeting between the unwilling bridegroom and the old woman had fed her love on dreams and the past. He held out his hand

to her with a few indifferent words. She was too ignorant, too much engrossed in her own sensations to know how much this cold greeting meant, yet she was conscious of something like a cold chill of disappointment.

When dinner was ended she thought he would probably join her in the pretty little garden that made the back of the great fashionable mansion pleasant as the country. She went there. The drawing room windows opened out to it, great rose bushes half concealed them, and the pretty garden chair was placed among the roses. She sat down there, wondering what he would come; they were to be married in two days.

While the love light gleamed in her eyes, the sudden sound of a voice—the sudden hearing of what were to her terrible words, struck her silent and dumbstruck the smile from her lips, struck the light from the sweet eyes and the music from the saddened heart—the voice she loved best in all the world. The words stabbed her; they slew the bright young life within her.

Lord Dunhaven was speaking; he had entered the drawing room with Lady Darel, and they had taken their seat at the window, quite unconscious that the young girl was sitting among the roses. He was saying:

"I will be happy," said the girl. "He will have all that he wants, and that makes happiness, I suppose, in this world."

Lady Darel looked thoughtfully at her; she did not understand the girl in this mood; it was unusual; there was some subtle change in her face and her manner, as though she had passed through some ordeal. Yet that could not be; there had been nothing to disturb the even tenor of her way. Still her ladyship was baffled.

Then came another rap at the door; this time it was a superb bouquet from the young earl.

"Flowers," said Lady Hilda. "Look, Annie, for the thorns."

"The thorns, my lady?" she replied; "there are none."

And the thought came to her that the stinging thorn of all was the one planted in her own heart.

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It was five in the afternoon when they started for Dover; they went across to Calais by the evening boat and on to Paris by the express train; every detail of the journey had been arranged, therefore no word was spoken during the drive to London bridge, save once, when the earl said he never remembered to have seen London so crowded.

Then came the confusion of starting. The earl purchased every paper or periodical he thought she would like, and gave them to her. The white lips were never unlocked for one word.

Then at last they were on their way to Dover, and the earl looking for the first time that day at his wife's face, saw how white and set and sad it was.

#### CHAPTER VIII.

"Hilda," said Lord Dunhaven, "this is our wedding day; give me one kiss."

No flush came to the fair, sad face. It grew whiter, and the lips quivered.

"No," she replied, proudly, turning from him. "There can be no kiss from you to me because you do not love me."

He was vexed and disconcerted.

"But you are my wife," he said.

"It does not follow that you love me," she added. "I have heard you call yourself a truthful man. Can you say honestly that you love me even in the least?"

The dark, clear eyes were fixed with such unwavering truth on his that he could not speak a false word to her.

"There is no question of love, but of obedience to your father's commands," he said. "You must do me the justice to admit that there has been no love in the matter."

"No, there has not. Then, why do you hesitate to answer my question. Do you love me?"

She knew quite well that he did not. She had heard him say that a man could love her, but she wanted the satisfaction of hearing him say so.

"I will answer you," he said. "No, I do not; but I think we may be very comfortable together. I do not doubt but we shall get on as well as other married people do."

"I am sorry for married people, then," he said, with a little flash of satire which her companion left unanswered.

"I think, Hilda, if we both try that we may be really comfortable," he said. "I shall try my best to make you happy. You shall have all you want."

Again the strange little laugh that he could not understand.

"Thank you," she said, "you can give me everything except love."

"Plenty of people live without that," he answered; and then again there was silence. He did not ask her to kiss him; he did not even touch the little gloved hand that rested so lightly on the cushion. He went back to his old seat, feeling more puzzled about her than he had ever been before. They went on for some time, past the great white chalk hills, and then the young wife, looking up suddenly, said:

"Lord Dunhaven, I do not understand human nature; I want you to tell me something."

"I will tell you anything you may wish to know."

"I have signed my deeds and papers. I want you to tell me if all that money is safely yours now?"

"Yes, it is mine and yours."

"Will you tell me what part of it is mine?" she asked.

"You would have known had you listened to Mr. Preston," he said; "you have settlement of so much a year out of it for your own purposes," he said. "If I die before you it will all revert to you, unless I cannot explain more."

"Tell me," she repeated, "what would become of it?"

"My dear Hilda, do not talk about dying in that cold-blooded fashion."

"Still, will you answer my question?" she said.

"What would become of it?"

"In that case," he said, "it would all come to me."

"And you would do as you like with it?" she asked.

"Yes; it would be at my own disposal," he replied.

"You might marry again and be quite happy," she said.

He laughed.

"How your imagination travels, Hilda," he said. "I have only been married about seven hours, and you are talking about my second marriage."

"I want you to answer me the question simply from a business point of view," she said. "If I die could you marry again and keep it?"

"Yes, certainly I could," he answered.

"If I died, you could marry again and keep it?"

"This should have been here before to

have taken its place among your other wedding presents, but it was not sent home until this morning. There was a difficulty in matching some of the stones. I wish you to wear it to-day, and whenever you look at it to assure yourself of my affection for you."

The young girl thanked her briefly. A few weeks since and such kind words would have wrung from her a heart full of love; it was too late now. She knew that it was for her money, and not for herself, that mother and son valued her.

But still further, to her intense surprise, Lady Darel bent down and kissed her—not merely touched her face with her lips, as was her ordinary fashion, with a touch as light as a butterfly's wings. She kissed her and said:

"My dear Hilda, you become my daughter to-day, and I hope we shall always be good friends. You will wear the bracelet to-day?"

"Yes."

"I love my son very much, and I am very proud of him. I hope he will be happy. I hope you will have many years together."

"He will be happy," said the girl. "He will have all that he wants, and that makes happiness, I suppose, in this world."

Lady Darel looked thoughtfully at her; she did not understand the girl in this mood; it was unusual; there was some subtle change in her face and her manner, as though she had passed through some ordeal. Yet that could not be; there had been nothing to disturb the even tenor of her way.

"Look," she said, "at that young lady; how beautifully she is dressed. I am thinking she is, yet she has a look like coming death in her face."

The young countess, who overheard the words, smiled to herself and clasped more tightly the letter she held in her hand. She walked with her husband in silence on the pier; there was the lovely, laughing summer sea; the waves that she had loved and listened to. A great longing came over her to open her arms and spring into that friendly sea, the chime of the waves was so familiar to her. She saw the Channel boat at the end. The earl cried out:

"The British Queen. I went in that same boat last year."

The earl descended the steps and stood together on the deck while all the luggage was brought in. Lord Dunhaven said at last:

"Now we are all right: the two servants are here, the luggage is all safe; we shall start in a few minutes."

She looked wildly around.

"I should like to go to the cabin," she said. "I will go alone."

She turned to him and looked in his face.

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Then at last they were on their way to Dover, and the earl looking for the first time that day at his wife's face, saw how white and set and sad it was.

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