

# THE DOUBLE SECRET

BY FLORENCE MARYATT

## CHAPTER IX.—(Continued.)

One day the idea that Will and she were parted for all their lives bore in so sorely upon her mind that the poor child could find no relief except in tears. She had wandered to a part of the park which was called "The Fairy Dell," on account of the way in which the trees were interlaced above and the lovely carpet of moss and ferns that was spread beneath them.

"Why do you cry?" demanded a child's voice close to her ear.

Evelyn looked up in amazement.

In the fairy dell, with her hands full of blue forget-me-nots, stood the loveliest little girl she had ever seen. In age between six and seven years old, her flaxen hair curled like spun silk about her face and shoulders, and her large blue eyes, shaded by dark lashes, looked out at Evelyn wistfully from a complexion of milk and roses.

Evelyn saw nothing but the face—charming, cherub-like face—that beamed on her like that of a little angel.

"Oh, you darling!" she exclaimed.

"Where did you come from? What is your name?"

"I'm Aggie, and I've run away," replied the little one, with infantile glee.

"But where have you run from, my darling? Come nearer—don't be afraid of me—and tell me where you live."

"I'm not afraid," replied the child, boldly drawing close to her new friend, and raising up into her face. "I'm Aggie, and I live over there," waving her hand in a vague manner about her head.

Evelyn Rayne was affectionate and impulsive. Her heart was hungering for love amidst all the luxury with which she was surrounded, and the child's sympathy touched her deeply. She opened her arms suddenly, and clasped her to her bosom with an intuition that they would love each other. And the intuition proved to be correct. She soon found that the little girl was Agnes Featherstone, the only child of a rich banker and his wife, living at Featherstone Hall, a place about a mile distant from Mount Eden.

Mrs. Featherstone was very pleased her daughter should have the advantage of an older companion to look after and play with her, and Evelyn soon loved Agnes with a devotion that could scarcely have been exceeded had she been her own. Her heart was empty, and she filled it with little Agnes Featherstone.

When Evelyn was nineteen, Miss Middleton left her. She considered her pupil's education was finished, and that it was time she assumed her position as a friend of her uncle's household. But a very few weeks after this change had been made, the most unexpected event of our heroine's life occurred to her.

She came down to breakfast one morning to be told by Mrs. Wedderburn that Mr. Ferryl was no more. He had been found dead in his bed when his attendant went to rouse him.

Evelyn received the news as any young girl would have done—with a terrible sense of horror and bereavement. She would have sent at once for her Aunt Maria to keep her company, but, alas! poor Miss Rayne told her that she had looked forward to that day as one in which Evelyn would not forget her; had joined the great majority six months before, and her niece felt utterly alone.

Then came the funeral, and the lawyers, and the will, and she heard, to her amazement, that instead of a legacy, as she had expected, she was left (failing the return of her cousin Hugh) the sole heiress of that vast estate, with fifteen thousand a year to keep it up on.

## CHAPTER X.

"I don't believe," said Captain Philip, as he stretched himself with more pleasure than gratitude on the thyme-scented, moss-enameled turf, "I don't believe, if you were to search all England—or the world itself, for that matter—you could find a leveler spot than Mount Eden."

"I quite agree with you," replied John Vernon, as he inhaled a deep draught of the fresh, exhilarating air, and his eyes roved over an expanse of undulating hills and fertile pasture lands.

It was spring. The trees had just assumed a mantle of tender green, and the lilacs and laburnums were in blossom.

John Vernon, fresh home from sea, stood by the captain's side, with his sunburnt face and curly head uncovered, looking as if he could never be satisfied with the natural beauties that surrounded him.

"It is lovely," continued Vernon, presently—"exquisitely and unmitigatedly lovely. We've knocked about a bit together, Captain Philip, and we've seen some grand scenery in India and Australia, on the Himalaya Mountains, and in the bush, but nothing to beat this. Just look at those uplands to the left. When the breeze ripples through the young blades of grass, you might fancy you were on the sea again. What splendid timber there is on the estate, too, and what rich pasturage! I counted thirty cows in that field yonder."

"I dare say," rejoined the captain, carelessly, "and that's not the half of the milking herd. A good deal of the revenues of Mount Eden are derived from its dairy and farm produce. I could hardly tell you, without reference to my books, how many head of cattle we send up to the London market annually."

"Such a place must be worth thousands a year."

"It is worth fifteen thousand, or thereabouts."

"And it all belongs to a bit of a girl! How absurd it seems," said Vernon, who considered the Saltic law as a gross injury to the stronger sex.

Captain Philip laughed.

"Your description hardly applies to Miss Rayne. In the first place, she is a woman who has left her girlhood behind her. In the second, she is a very tall and dignified one."

"Oh, I see! An old maid."

"Hardly that, either," returned the captain, dryly; "Miss Rayne was twenty-seven, I believe, on her last birthday. But she is quite equal to managing her own affairs, and wields her scepter over Mount Eden royally."

"Captain Philip," said the younger man, after a pause, "will you forgive me for saying something? This is a beautiful country and a charming estate. I can admire it as much as you do, and after knocking about at sea for the last three years, the rest and the change are but too

delightful. Yet I could not endure it for always. I should miss the excitement and active work of my profession. This peaceful, uneventful life would fall upon me, and I cannot understand your having chucked up the service so suddenly, to bury yourself down here."

John Vernon was a young fellow of perhaps two-and-twenty, who had had but little experience of life. It did not, therefore, strike him as anything strange that Captain Philip should busy himself in filing and lighting a pipe before he answered his observation.

"My boy," he said, when he did speak, "I never cared for the service as you do. I entered it before I knew what I was about, or what lay before me, and I stayed in it because there was no other opening for me. But it was never a profession to my taste."

"And yet you were always quoted to me as such an excellent seaman, with a perfect knowledge of your duties," replied Vernon, in a tone of disappointment.

"I tried to do my duty, Jack, while I remained in it, and probably, had this billet not been offered to me, I might have been in the merchant service to this day. But—but—well, I don't mind telling you, lad, that I was brought up in a higher social sphere, and that the moral atmosphere and surroundings of a seafaring life were never to my taste. It is different with you, Jack. You come of a family of sailors, and, I dare say, your mother mixed your first pap with salt water. You are in your right element at sea, and you will go on till you reach the top of the tree. I shall see you, if I live, with a ship or two of your own, by-and-by, while I am still checking the farrier's and corn-chandler's accounts for Mount Eden."

"And you can prefer such work," exclaimed Vernon, rather contemptuously.

"To the glorious excitement of riding over the waves, and the substantial benefit of trading with foreign countries? Captain Philip, I cannot understand it. To live all alone in that little cottage, pretty as it may be, and spend one's life in looking after somebody else's money, is so tame and unvaried an existence compared to that to which we have been accustomed, that it would drive me mad."

"And to me it is paradise. Therein lies the difference," replied Captain Philip, calmly pulling at his pipe. "I like my own company, Vernon, and I love Mount Eden. My pipe is sufficient society for me, as a rule, and I like to feel that I am directing the management of this vast estate, and making it yield all the profits of which it is capable."

"What is your interest in it?" demanded Vernon curiously.

"His companion started.

"My interest! Why, that of land agent and overseer, to be sure. What other interest could I have? I am Miss Rayne's servant, but I am also her right hand and confidential adviser; and I don't think she would find it easy to replace me. I have the same interest in Mount Eden that I had in my ship; I want to do my duty by it. That is all."

"But you know this part of Hampshire before you came to Mount Eden, captain?"

"Who told you so?"

"I guessed it from your evident familiarity with everything about you. One does not gain such a thorough knowledge of the soil and the idiosyncracies of the people in a twelvemonth."

"Well, I was in the county as a boy—in fact, I was born in Hampshire," said Captain Philip, somewhat reluctantly.

"That fact could have no power to keep me in my present position, for I left it too early to have obtained any serviceable knowledge. And I have no friends living here now—none whatever."

They had been strolling leisurely along a breezy bit of upland, and then through a green lane, on their way to the stables, and had just turned into a copse at the foot of the lower drive. Vernon looked up and saw a tall, gracious woman advancing slowly to meet them, with her hands full of fragrant blossoms. All he saw was a small head, crowned with a luxuriance of chestnut hair, which spoke well for the physical health of its owner; a broad, intellectual forehead, a mouth full of firmness and sweetness combined, and a pair of lovely dark blue eyes, large, long and heavy-lidded, but with a very searching look in their Mediterranean depths. Her beauty burst upon John Vernon like a revelation. He thought he had never seen so truly handsome a woman in his life before.

## CHAPTER XI.

"Good morning, Captain Philip," she said, with a smile and an inch of sparkle in her eye, "but without offering him her hand; 'I saw you coming over the three-cornered path, and waited to speak to you here.'"

"Good morning, Miss Rayne. I hope you are quite well?" responded the captain; "I have been showing my young friend, Mr. Vernon, who is staying at the cottage for a few days, the view from Fern Hill, and he is as charmed with it as the rest of the world."

As Captain Philip indicated the presence and personality of John Vernon, Miss Rayne turned to him and bowed, but very slightly. There was evidently just that understanding between her land agent and herself that there should be. She was perfectly at ease with Captain Philip, but she was not familiar with him.

"I am glad that Mr. Vernon admires our scenery," said Evelyn, after a pause, "and it is a day to make everything look its best. I wonder, she continued, turning on her heel to gaze at her fair domain, "I wonder if there is any country in the world where spring is more beautiful than in England?"

"In America," commenced Vernon, with all the confidence of a very young man, before the other sex has taken to snubbing him; "in the Western States of America, Miss Rayne, the spring—"

Miss Rayne turned upon him suddenly with an unmistakable look of displeasure in her eyes.

"I know nothing of America," she said hurriedly, as she buried her face in her sowers; "Captain Philip, I am afraid you shall have to dismiss Roberts after all. Wilson tells me he was the worse for liquor again last night."

"I was on my way to the stables to inquire into it, Miss Rayne, and into a fresh error in his account. Just look at that

bill," replied Captain Philip, producing a long slip of paper from his waistcoat pocket.

"Absurd," she exclaimed; "forty bushels of oats. Captain Philip, it could be forty. It is too ridiculous!"

"It is written down forty, plain enough," he answered, "but he cannot have fairly used half the quantity. I am afraid there is nothing for it but dismissal. The man will evidently take no warning."

"We must go and see about it," said Miss Rayne promptly.

She turned quickly, and, without another glance at Vernon, walked by Captain Philip's side. The captain saw that she expected him to accompany her alone.

"Go back and wait for me at the cottage, Jack," he called over his shoulder to the young man, who was compelled unwillingly to obey. A few minutes' walk brought him to his friend's cottage. He threw himself into an arm chair, and began to think it must be dinner time.

The cloth was spread upon the table. A large ham, cut, a few fresh, crisp lettuce, and a Stilton cheese stood on it. And when the captain returned, a dish of new potatoes would complete the frugal meal. He had warned Vernon what he had to expect in visiting Bachelor Hall. He had retained all the simple habits of seafaring life. A heavy meal revivified instead of stimulating his appetite, and he lived almost as sparingly as a hermit. But there was nothing hermit-like in the manner in which, half an hour later, the captain entered the cottage. His handsome face was smiling joyfully, and he flung his soft felt hat down on the floor like an impetuous boy.

"No work to-day, Jack!" he exclaimed, "and as soon as we've swallowed our dinner we'll ride over to Leighton and see the retrievers. I was talking to you about this morning. I suppose you can manage to stick on a horse, and I have always the privilege of mounting a friend from the Mount Eden stables."

"But what's in the wind now, captain?" inquired the younger man, as they drew their chairs up to the table and commenced to attack the ham; "I thought you said this afternoon was to see the foundation laid to a new decoy?"

"So it was arranged, my boy; but everything's altered now. Miss Rayne has received news that put everything else out of her head. The Featherstones have returned to the Hall."

"And that circumstance of sufficient importance to upset all her plans?"

"My dear fellow, you don't understand the attachment that exists between Miss Rayne and Miss Featherstone, or you wouldn't ask such a question. I never saw two people so fond of one another in my life before! They are simply inseparable, or rather they have been until this winter. But Mrs. Featherstone took it suddenly into her head that her daughter's education could not be completed without visiting Paris and Rome, and so they left England six months ago, and Miss Rayne has not been the same creature without them."

"I wonder she did not go, too."

"How could she? She has her estate to look after," rejoined the captain quickly.

"She could leave it safely in your hands, surely?"

"Not entirely. You don't know how completely she associates herself with the management of affairs. She is her own bailiff and steward, and I was going to add farrier, but she really knows more about doctoring the stock than the village veterinary. She gave a ball to a horse this morning that the grooms dared not approach."

"I don't like to see a woman do such un feminine things," said Vernon sententiously.

"Don't you?" replied Captain Philip, in his dry way; "at any rate, Mount Eden would get on very badly without Miss Rayne."

## CHAPTER XII.

Meanwhile Evelyn—the same Evelyn we have known, and yet so unlike what she was in her girlish days—was raming about the big house, restless and excited, in anticipation of the promised meeting with Agnes Featherstone. It was not an ordinary affection which she felt for this young girl. One could see that by the trembling eagerness with which she changed her dress in anticipation of the arrival of her friend; by the nervous fingers that arranged and rearranged the ornaments about her sitting room, and the repeated journeys she made back ward and forward to the window to see if there were any signs of Agnes' approach.

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Mamma could not spare me, because—because we are not quite alone. Papa has some friends at the Hall," she said lamely.

"Guests already! and you only arrived last night! What a nuisance for your mamma. How is that, Agnes?"

"They—at least I mean he—there is only one gentleman—crossed with us from Calais," stammered Agnes.

"Some acquaintance you made abroad, I suppose. Is he a foreigner?"

"No—that is, we did meet him abroad—in Florence, I think—but he's not a foreigner, although he has lived for a long time in France and Italy, and looks very much like an Italian. And he sings, Evelyn—oh, beautifully!—and draws, and paints, and plays the violin."

"How nice! And what is his name, dear?"

"Mr. Lyle—Jasper Lyle. Papa says it's a very good name, and he feels satisfied he comes of a good family. But all his people are dead. He is the last of his race. Isn't it sad?"