CHAPTER XVI.

"LOVE THE GIFT."

Her answer was altogether astonishing; she leant back in the boat and looked him full in the face. A quick flush tinged her own, and the incomparable eyebrows were raised and arched; but underneath there was an honest tenderness which Olivia was not the girl to conceal.

"Was that your water-lilies?" said she; but this was not the astonishing speech. He had lured her afloat on impudently false pretences; she had a right to twit him with that.

"There are no water-lilies," he confessed; "at least, never mind them if there are. Oh, I was obliged to make some excuse! There was nowhere else where we could talk so well. I tell you again I have the cheek to love you! I can't help it; I've loved you ever since that day in London, and you've got to know it for good or bad. If it makes
you very angry I’ll row you back this minute.” He was resting on his oars under cover of the little island; the Towers were out of sight.

“Why in the world didn’t you speak yesterday?” was Olivia’s extraordinary reply.

“Yesterday?” faltered Jack.

“It was such a chance!”

“Not for me! My tongue was tied. Olivia, I was under a frightful cloud yesterday! You don’t understand——”

“What if I do? What if I did at the time?”

“I don’t see how you could,” said Jack.

“Instinctively,” replied Olivia, to screen her mother. “I knew something was wrong, and I have since been told what. If only you had spoken then!”

She dropped her eyes swiftly; the tear ran down her cheek.

“But why? Why then, better than now?”

“Because I care, too,” she whispered, so that the words just travelled to his ear.

“Olivia? My—do you know what you’ve said? Do you mean it?”
"LOVE THE GIFT."

"Of course I care. I mean that much. You are different from everybody else."

"Then—"

"There must be no ' then.'"

"But you said you cared. Tell me—I don't understand."

"I can never marry you," said Olivia, looking him once more in the face. And her eyes were dry.

"Why not, if it is true—that you care?"

"Because you are what you are—and I—oh! how can I say it even to you? I am so ashamed. I have been thrown at your head from the very first—not, I have no right to say that. How I hate everything I say! You must understand; I am sure you do. Well, in the beginning I couldn't bear to speak to you, because I knew—what was hoped—and I seemed to see and hear it in every look and word. It hurt me more than I ever can tell you. The same sort of thing had happened before, but I had never minded it then. I suppose all mothers are like that; it's natural enough, when you come to think, and I'm sure I never resented it before. I wouldn't
have minded it in your case either; I wouldn't have minded anything if I hadn't—"

The words would not come.

"Hadn't what?" he said.

"If I hadn't liked you—off my own bat!"

"But if you really do, my glorious girl, surely that fixes it? We have nothing to do with anybody else. What does it matter how they take it?"

"It matters to my pride."

"I don't see where your pride comes in."

"Of course you don't; you are not behind the scenes. And I can't make you see. I'm not going to give my own people away to that extent, not even to you. But—I can just picture my mother's face if we went in this very minute and told her we were engaged! She would fall upon both our necks!"

"That wouldn't matter," said Jack stolidly.

"That would be all right."

"It would be dreadful—dreadful. I couldn't bear it when I know that yesterday—"

She checked herself firmly.

"Well, what of yesterday?"
"LOVE THE GIFT."

"It would have been quite a different thing."
"What! if I'd spoken then?"
"I—think so."
"You would have said——"
"I should have found out what your trouble was. You would have told me everything. And then—and then——"

He leant still further forward.
"If you had wanted me very much——"
"I do want you very much."
"I should have found it easier to say 'yes'— the word was hardly audible—'than I ever shall now!'"

"But why, Olivia? Tell me why!"
"You force it from me, word by word," complained the girl.

"Then let me see. I think I begin to see. You like me in myself almost well enough to marry me. Well, thank God for that much! But you don't want to marry the Duke of St. Osmund's, because you're mortally afraid of what people will say. You think they'll say you're doing it for the main chance. And so they will—and so they may! They wouldn't say it, and you wouldn't think it, of any other man
in my position; no, it's because I'm not fit for my billet, that's how it is! Not fit for it, and not fit for you; so they'd naturally think you were marrying me for what I'd got, and that you couldn't bear. Ah, yes, I see hard enough; it's as plain as a pikestaff now!"

The girl saw, too; with the unconscious bluntness of a singularly direct nature he had stripped her scruples bare, and their littleness horrified Olivia. The moral cowardice of her hesitation came home to her with an insupportable pang, and her mind was made up before his last sentences put her face in flames.

"You are wrong," she could only murmur; "oh, you are dreadfully wrong!"

"I am right," he answered bitterly, "and you are right. No wonder you dread the hard things that would be said of you! Take away the name and the money, and what am I? A back-block larrikin—a common stockman?"

"The man for me," said Olivia, hoarsely.

"Ah, yes, if I were not such a public match!"

"Whatever you are—whatever you may be—if you want me still—"
“LOVE THE GIFT.”

“Want you! I have wanted you from the first. I shall want you till the last!”

Her reply was indistinct; her tears were falling fast; he took her two white hands, but even them he did not touch with his lips. A great silence held them both, and all the world; the island willows kissed the stream; in the sheet of gold beyond, a fish leapt, and the ripple reached the boat in one long thin fold.

The girl spoke first.

“We need not be in a hurry to tell everybody,” she began; but the words were retracted in the same breath. “What am I saying? Of course we will tell. Oh, what a contempt you must have for me!”

“I love you,” he answered simply. “I am too happy to live. It’s all too good to be true. Me of all men—the old bushman!”

She looked lovingly on his bearded and sunburnt face, shining as she had never seen it shine before.

“No; it’s the other way about,” she said. “I am not half good enough for you—you who were so brave yesterday in your trouble—who have been so simple always in your prosperity.”
It was enough to turn anyone's head, but you—ah! I don't only love you. I admire you, dear; may God help me to make you happy!"

They stayed much longer on the lake, finally disembarking on its uttermost shore, because Olivia was curious to see how the hut would look in the first rosy light of her incredible happiness. And when they came to it, the sunlight glinted on the new iron roofing; the pine-trees exhaled their resin in the noon-day heat following the midnight rain; and the shadows were shot with golden shafts, where all was golden to the lovers' eyes.

Jack made a diffident swain; it was the girl who slipped her hand into his.

"You will never pull it down?" she said. "We will use it for a summer-house, and to remind you of your old life. And one day you will take me out to the Riverina, and show me the hut you really lived in, and all your old haunts. Oh, I shouldn't mind if we had both to go out there for good! A hut would take far less looking after than the Towers, and I should have you much more to myself. What fun it would be!"
Jack thought this a pretty speech, but the girl herself was made presently aware of its insincerity. They had retraced their steps, and there in front of them, cool and grey in the mellow August sunshine, with every buttress thrown up by its shadow, and the very spires perfectly reflected in the sleeping lake, stood the stately home which would be theirs for ever. Olivia saw it with a decidedly new thrill. She was looking on her future home, and yet her husband would be this simple fellow! Wealth could not cloy, nor grandeur overpower, with such a mate; that was perhaps the substance of her thought. It simplified itself next moment. What had she done to deserve such happiness? What could she ever do? And a possible tabernacle in the bush entered into neither question, nor engaged her fancy any more.