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ELAINE'S CHOICE

I was Elaine de Rocher's guardian. At the age of 8 she had lost both her parents. Her health was delicate, and I thought the best thing to do for her was to put her in a convent school in the country. One morning, however, I received the following astonishing letter:

My Dear Guardian—I am tired. After mature reflection I find that I am not cut out for a religious career. Kindly find me a husband as soon as possible. Your grateful and devoted ELAINE.

It does not seem hard to find a candidate for the hand of a young and charming heiress.

I presented quite a number of men to her—nice fellows, too; but none suited her. Summer was passing, and each week Elaine sent me a card with the words, "I am bored."

Things were at this point when my old friend, the curate of Redon, spoke to me of the Marquise de Pen-Valloot and her two sons—old family, distinguished name, good connections, respectable fortune. I proposed to Elaine to spend a few weeks with my wife at Trouville. She joyfully accepted.

"On the way," said I, "we will stop at one of my clients, the Marquise de Pen-Valloot."

The marquise resided on a large estate some miles from Redon. I had been told of her strictly economical way of living, so I was not surprised to find awaiting us at the station an old rattle-trap of a carriage, which smelled so musty that as we started to get in Elaine recoiled.

"Suppose we ride outside; I should enjoy the fresh air."

"Don't be afraid, sir," said the coachman, offering me his strong hand and helping me to mount quite easily.

Elaine seemed no more than a feather in his strong grasp. Before I was seated she was beside me, radiant and happy as a lark.

"You will be afraid," said I, measuring the distance from our perch to the ground.

"Afraid! You don't know me. You will cry quarter before I do. Now, drive quick, quick, quick!"

The man smiled rather sarcastically, I thought.

He gathered up his reins and started his team. Heavens, what a race! My blood curdled at the thought of it. Elaine clapped her hands and incited the pleased coachman to redoubled efforts. I held on with might and main, prepared to jump at the expected crash.

A handsome, refined looking young man of medium height met us and assisted us to alight.

The Marquise de Pen-Valloot received us in the large, gloomy drawing room. She greeted us graciously and herself led us to our apartments.

"My son Rene," she said, designating the handsome young man who had first received us.

Rene was ready. When Elaine reappeared, she looked quizzically beautiful. Rene met her at the door with some compliment which did not displease her.

Just then another guest entered—a man of about 30, tall and with a strong face. Saluting us he took the empty place opposite the Marquise de Pen-Valloot.

"My oldest son, Marquis Horace de Pen-Valloot," she said, presenting him, adding, "Late, as usual."

"You know why, mother," he answered coldly.

"Well," said I when we were alone. She stifled a yawn.

"Let us go to bed. I am tired to death."

"Not until you have told me your impression of the two candidates."

"The younger is handsome; he has a pretty voice and dresses well. That is all I know so far."

"And the other?"

"The other? Why, he hasn't a sou. He doesn't count as a match, guardie, dear."

"True. I always thought you were a sensible girl!"

Next morning it was late when I awoke.

I had hardly finished my toilet before Elaine, fresh and bright as the morning, knocked for admittance.

"What, up already?"

"Already! Why, I have had a long walk through the dewy woods. It was exquisite."

"Alone?"

"Oh, no! I made sure of an escort last night."

"Ah, ah! So things are working?"

"Splendidly, my dear guardian. Open your ears. I have decided to marry!"

"Handsome Rene?" said I, rubbing my hands.

"No. I am going to marry the coachman who drives so well yesterday. As soon as I placed my hands in his I knew he was a man a woman could trust. But here he is to tell you that you are not dreaming."

She opened the door, and Horace de Pen-Valloot entered.

"My dear," he said, smiling at my astonishment. "My story is not long, but rather unusual. I wanted to be a soldier. My mother objected. I obeyed her, but the spirit of adventure possessed me. As soon as I was of age I started on a trip around the world. My mother told you that I spent my fortune and part of hers. I dare say I committed my share of follies. When my means were exhausted, I returned home. The fatted calf was not killed in my honor. On the contrary, I had to put up with reproaches, complaints and frowns. What was I to do? Incapable of earning my living, exasperated at hearing myself reproached for eating the bread of idleness, I offered to take the place of my mother's coachman, who had died."

"When I offered my services to my mother, I was half joking, but she accepted in earnest, so I became the coachman. I take care of my animals, and when it is necessary, put on the livery. At night I resume my dress suit, my title and my rights as eldest son. And this might have gone on forever but for the coming of this liberating fairy, my charming fiancée, who, I think, understands me and will try to love me a little."—Exchange.

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