

SELECT STORY.

Bought With a Price.

[CONTINUED.]

Chapter XIV.

NEVILLE DOES HIS DUTY.

Y dear Neville, have you any wish that your cousin, Madame Hodges, or 'la belle' Estelle, as she prefers to be called, should be present at Lilly's marriage?

I should not think it at all necessary, Lilly and she have not met for many months.

Then you have not heard that the cousins saw each other in London? It was not my wish that they should be seen together. I suppose you know that 'la belle' Estelle has a notoriety I should hardly wish our Lilly to share?

You must remember, my dear Mrs. Hamilton, that I have been away from England for some months; also that when in London, my time has been too fully occupied to know much of what was going on in the fashionable world. It may appear strange to you, but I have heard very little of my cousin Estelle since her marriage. You are aware I suppose, that she was an inmate of my father's vicarage for some short time after her father's death; but upon her marriage, she sailed far away from our humble fortunes. I can well imagine that her great beauty would attract general notice. I also know Lilly's delicate kindness in not mentioning to me their recent meeting.

So that is the secret which has marred your happiness, my poor Neville, pondered Mrs. Hamilton; I knew well that some great grief had passed over you. So this heartless woman, with her fatal beauty, managed to entangle you in her toils. But what retribution has overtaken her, if all they say is true of the man to whom she sold herself! What a deplorable blunder she has made in throwing aside such a one as Neville Campbell! I must try and open his eyes to her true character, for I sadly fear he has not yet forgotten her. How I hope he will learn to love some noble-minded girl, who will appreciate not only his wealth, but the priceless value of the man himself!

Mrs. Hamilton took care that Neville could not guess she had penetrated his secret, since he still refrained from speaking of it, but she more than ever disliked Estelle, and was rejoiced that Lilly and she were not intimate.

You were saying, my dear Mrs. Hamilton, that my cousin was an object of great notoriety. You surely do not mean that her reputation is in danger? I do not mean that she is wilfully endangering it, or that she is lost to society's good opinion. She is still received but not so warmly as heretofore. She is too much talked about for her to remain scatheless of perhaps much that is mere slander. I hold, my dear Neville, that—'Reputation is dearer far than life. A precious balsam, lovely, sweet of smell, Whose cordial drops once split by one rash hand, Not all the owner's care, nor the repenting toil Of the rude spiller ever can collect To its first purity and native sweetness.

And there I quite agree with you, my dear madam. Will it be troubling you too much to tell me how my cousin's reputation is in danger of losing its first purity?

I shall be better satisfied to do so Neville, more especially as I want your sanction for having done my best to keep Lilly apart from her when in London, and also my objection to her being our guest at Lilly's marriage. Are you aware in the first place, of the character of the man whom she has married?

I know absolutely nothing of him, except that he was said to be immensely wealthy—a millionaire in fact. So my father wrote to me after Estelle's marriage. I never knew more particulars as his death occurred before I met him again.

You will be grieved, then, to hear that he is a man so vile and depraved that he is shunned by all men of good repute.

This is deplorable; but surely my dear madam, society does not reflect his disgrace on his unfortunate wife?

Does it not often occur? But in this case it is not wholly undeserved. Your cousin, I have heard, sold herself to this man for his gold—was 'Bought at a Price,' and then ruthlessly casts him aside, whilst she only indulged in her own pleasures. He was not so degraded in character till he found himself scorned by his wife and her associates. Lawrence will explain to you the vices into which he has sunk.

Is this the only charge brought against my cousin?

I am sorry to say no. You have heard, no doubt of the Hon. Herbert Montgomery.

The most depraved and despicable man in town?

And yet he is constantly by your cousin's side.

Mrs. Hamilton you amaze me. Estelle cannot, surely know the character of the man.

I cannot say, I believe his attraction is the eolot his admiration of her beauty gives her. You will see, I think, how undesirable her society is for your pure-minded sister.

I was sure you had good reasons for keeping them apart, my dear madam. I can scarcely thank you enough for keeping Lilly free from contact with that man. His very presence would be 'Like the blast of pestilential winds, Which taints the sweet bloom of Nature's fairest forms.'

The account which Neville heard of Lawrence of the Squire's new-found occupations left him no doubt that Estelle had made a wretched barter of herself. As regarded her own companion, there was only one course open to him, and Neville determined to do his duty.

But for a time his thoughts must be occupied with a far different subject. Lilly's wedding day had arrived.

Mrs Hamilton had begged that it might take place from the Priory, and thus it was settled.

Sir Hugh was still their guest, waiting to be best man at his friend Lawrence's wedding.

You are a lucky man, 'mon frere,' he said, after seeing Lilly. Next to Edith she is the most lovely girl I have seen.

So thought Lawrence, but without the exception in Edith's favour.

Edith was to perform her part in Lilly's wedding, and very soon after was to take her place in a far more prominent position at her own.

Lady Neville had written, giving her heartiest congratulations to her son, and to Edith she had sent many a loving message. It was by her arrangement that her son's marriage should take place at the same time as her daughter's Lady Clarice. The weddings were to be in London, attended with all the eolot of pomp and splendour befitting the owner of Hill Court, and the bride of a noble duke.

Edith would have preferred less ostentation—a wedding like that of her brother and Lilly—among her own family and acquaintances; but, then, a duke was not married every day, and Lady Neville meant to blazon forth the fact that her daughter was henceforth to be a duchess!

Sir Hugh was a great favorite with all the inmates of the Priory. Mrs. Hamilton no longer regretted her daughter's refusal of Sir Horace. Never were two brides-elect more satisfied that their choice had been made wisely. In the selection of husbands there had been no thought of bartering their beauty for gold, and yet each had secured that for which Estelle had sacrificed so much. But in addition they possessed what no wealth could purchase—the love of two honourable, noble-minded men.

Lilly's marriage had taken place with the usual amount of speech-making and compliments whispered into the ears of her pretty bridesmaids.

As all looked wonderfully hewitching it is to be supposed that Edith had discovered the most becoming colour for them.

Neville had taken care that his sister had not gone to her husband dowderless. So liberal had been his settlement upon her, that Lawrence and Lilly had protested against it.

You need not fear my depriving myself, Neville had said. I can make more than I want by my profession; and, as I shall never marry there is no object in my saving.

Lilly had never heard him before refer, even remotely, to the treachery done him by Estelle.

She knew then he had never forgotten her.

It was again the gay, fashionable season. The newly married pair had returned from their honeymoon quite as much in love with each other as before passing through that trying ordeal.

If Lilly's progress had not been quite such a triumphant one as that enjoyed by Estelle, it was in a great measure owing to her having rather shunned, than courted notice.

That time was sacred to her husband. On their return they would each have their duty to society to perform, and could not then be all the world to each other.

Lawrence was about to take his place in the House, and therefore their home was for the time in London, where Mrs. Hamilton and Edith joined them.

Lady Neville and her daughter Clarice had also arrived in town, accompanied by the Duke of Humbleton, the 'fiance' of the fair Clarice.

Estelle was also in town. What a different position she held to that of Lilly!

The latter was now enshrined with the 'prestige' attending the alliance of her husband's sister with one of England's highest Peers!

Estelle was very far behind her in the world's estimation.

Neville was a guest at the ducal wedding, which was pronounced the great event of the season. The brides were

faultless in their own peculiar styles of beauty; and as a royal personage graced the ceremony at St. George's Church, Hanover Square, Lady Neville was satisfied that she had done her duty to her children.

Neville could not repress a shudder as the bells pealed forth on the conclusion of the wedding service. Never could he forget the day of agony when Estelle's wedding-bells had rung forth the death-knell to his own hopes.

When Neville was once more at liberty instead of his shunning all fashionable assemblies, as he had been in the habit of doing, he delighted Lilly beyond measure by consenting to remain their guest for a time.

Lilly little knew his object, however. This may be seen from a visit which Neville made one morning, long before the hour when fashionable visitors usually made their calls. He had told no one of his intention, nor was it done from pleasure, as any one would have known who could read Neville's face.

He had seen and heard enough during his brief visits to the fashionable quarter of London, to know that Mrs. Hamilton had been right in saying that Estelle was enjoying too great a notoriety. Painful as a meeting with her would be, Neville knew it was his duty to save her, if possible, from the ruin which threatened her.

Estelle was sitting over a late breakfast very languid, as she often was when not engaged in some scene of excitement, as the servant handed her a card. All her listlessness fled. Her hand trembled as she held it. Was it possible she should see and speak to him again! She is for a moment half delirious with joy, then as suddenly her cheeks are dyed with the blush of shame. What had been their relative positions last time they had met? Then she hung upon his neck, and swore to be true to him, to love no one else!

One part she had kept inviolate. It was true she had never loved anyone else.

She loved him still, ah! how much. Was it not a large portion of her punishment that she should ever feel this undying love for one whom she had cast from her?

It was but a few moments before her visitor was in her presence, and yet in that time the events of the last months, comprising her married life passed as rapidly through her mind as though a kaleidoscope.

Did Neville recall to mind as vividly as did Estelle, in this interview, when he again saw her face to face, the circumstances of the last meeting?

If so, Neville did not allow it to appear. So calm was he in outward appearance, that Estelle's first thought was,—

He has quite forgotten my treachery to him.

And yet, desirable as this world seem to be, Estelle's heart died within her at the thought.

No one who had witnessed the meeting of these two would ever have supposed they had once sworn eternal fidelity to each other.

Estelle gave one rapid glance at the man whose image was still engraven on her heart.

He is altered, was her verdict. But, oh, how incomparably superior to all others! That touch of gravity, which has replaced the almost boyish joyousness of former days, is infinitely more becoming to him.

Her heart almost ceased to throb as she recognized again the worth of the treasure she had cast from her.

How proud—how enviable would be her position at this moment could she but call herself this man's wife.

Estelle knew that Neville had not made this visit without some important reason—he had not come to trifle away an hour with a mere morning call.

She was feverishly anxious to know his object, and yet as eager to delay it, whatever it might be.

Whatever it was, Neville, with all his legal experience, did not seem to find words so easily.

The task was rendered all the more difficult by the circumstances under which he found this woman, who had been—ah! and still was, hide it as he may—so dear to him!

Had he seen her radiant in health and beauty, as he had last seen her, he would have steeled his heart against her.

But Estelle, in the greatness of her surprise, had forgotten to don the mask which she wore before the world.

Then, too, she was not often subjected to so astute a guest.

Neville saw enough to know that Estelle was a wretched woman—he read more in his cousin's face than she was at all aware of.

There had been some talk on general topics, and Estelle had been eager to hear of Lilly and her husband; but still the object of Neville's visit had not been touched on.

Estelle herself gave the desired opening by her question:—

Do you not find me looking shocking old? My health is not as good as it was. These seasons try my strength.

Certainly you are not looking so well as when at Ashton. By the bye, when do you return there? I should think you were loth to leave such a home as you have made of the Manor House. I saw the grounds as I passed, on my last visit to Ashton, and was amazed at their beauty.

I scarcely care to go there alone, and my husband has always objected to retire into the country.

Estelle, I have to implore your pardon for what you may consider an impertinence of mine, but believe me, it is only a wish for your welfare which leads me to touch upon so delicate a matter as your domestic concerns. Have I your permission to speak?

Assuredly, Neville. I am only too grateful that you think my welfare worthy of your care.

It is of your husband I would first speak. Are you aware, Estelle, how and where the squire's hours are spent? Do you know that his present companions are professional gamblers, and that your husband had long been one of them? I thought it my duty to let you know this, that you may use your wifely influence to withdraw him from what will otherwise be your and his ruin.

Alas! Neville, I have no influence. It will be worse than useless for me to try and reason with him, but I am not quite hopeless of influencing him through another. I have one friend, whose aid I have often to call in and save me from my husband's brutal treatment.

Is this friend the Honourable Herbert Montgomery?

The same, Neville. He has unbounded control over my husband, even in his most violent moods.

My poor Estelle, I am deeply grieved for you. This man who has wormed himself into your confidence, is the worst of characters. He is the originator of your husband's present degrading vice. I dare not defile your ears with an account of his ways of life. Sufficient for you to know he is a man that every virtuous woman must shun. To be seen in his society is sufficient to ban any one's fair fame. I speak thus plainly to you, my cousin, because I know you cannot be aware of his character. Whatever happens, do not allow this man to interfere in your domestic affairs. Keep him wholly away from you, and from your husband, if possible.

Estelle's face had flushed painfully as Neville spoke of the ill-repute of his friend's life.

Had she been so innocent of it as Neville surmised?

Her conscience told her "No."

She shuddered as she saw the precipice on which she was standing—the ruin of even her good name, which she had already endangered by her eagerness for admiration.

Neville's warning awakened her in time.

For the first time she saw whether her intense vanity was hurrying her.

Then there came a thrill of delight that it was Neville who had saved her!—Neville, who still thought well enough of her to believe she was innocent!

Neville, you may never know the good you have done me. Your trust in me shall not be betrayed. Henceforth I will strive to do my duty, even by my husband. You little know how utterly worthless I have become since my first step in crime—my mercenary marriage.

You are very good, Estelle, to have taken my advice so cordially. I almost feared you would resent it. You will write to Lilly, I suppose, from time to time? If so, I hope to hear that your health is better, and also that you have succeeded in winning the squire from his too alluring vice. Let me, also, know at any time when I can be of service to you. Call upon my help freely—it shall always be extended to you. Remember me if at any time you are in trouble, and be sure I will befriend you.

Estelle could only wring his hand in hers—speak she could not—and thus they parted.

Little did either of them guess under what circumstances Neville's help would be required!

Chapter XV.

LILLY HEARS STRANGE TIDINGS.

LD not know you were in town, Thornhill. Thought you had turned bushranger in Australia, or prairie hunter, or something of the sort. Had no idea of your turning up in such a civilized place as the crush-room of the opera—thought you were patronizing squaws rather than Patti.

And that would have been my fate had not luck befriended me and taken off my eldest brother. You know there was no love between us. He would have seen me starve rather than give me a helping hand. The most he ever did for me was to pay my passage out to Australia, with the fraternal hope that he might never see me again.

Do you mean he is dead?

Yes, did you not hear of it? He and two others were lost in crossing Mount Blanc.

Then you have come into the title and estate? Lucky dog, how I envy you. How long have you been in England?

Just arrived, Dashwood, and have seen no one; so tell me all the news you can. I have heard nothing for months.

Pity you were not here a few weeks ago. You would have seen a sight worth seeing—two of the most interesting brides the season has produced. You remember Clarice Neville?—she caused quite a sensation when she was brought out.

You mean the 'bijou' beauty. Was she one of the brides?

By Jove! yes. And a clever capture she made, too. I always thought that lady-mother of hers a wonderful woman. But it puzzles me still how she managed to secure the prize she did. You know how wary the Duke has always been, and how long he has managed to escape the matrimonial toils in which so many manoeuvring mammas tried to entangle him?

Is he caught at last?

He just is, and by the 'bijou.' I shall always think that story of 'la belle' Clarice's health failing was a myth. I believe her lady-mother thought it a good opportunity to secure the prize for which she had angled ever since her beautiful daughter's presentation. The Duke was known to be cruising about the Mediterranean in his yacht. It was just possible that by wintering at Rome and Naples, they might fall in with him; and as that astute lady calculated, so it fell out—the Duke saw 'la belle' Clarice at Rome, and forthwith became a lost man.

And who were the other interesting couple?

No other than the sister of a great friend of yours, Lawrence Hamilton. However mercenary may have been the choice of 'la belle' Clarice, it was otherwise with the fair Edith. By the by I have not told you the bridegroom was Sir Hugh, the 'bijou's' brother. Theirs was a case of true love. It is reported that 'la belle' Edith was willing to follow her 'fiance' into the backwoods of America, but that was rendered unnecessary by lady Neville having graciously allowed the marriage, and settled Hill Court upon Sir Hugh. But as you have been so long shut out from the civilized world, I suppose you have not heard of the marriage of Lawrence Hamilton? Also that he is entitled to M. P. after his name?

That is good news!—glorious! He was only just acquitted of the foul charge of murder the last time I heard of him. I expected to have heard that he had retired from the world in disgust; knowing how a charge of that kind would influence one so sensitive as he always was. Those highly-talented men are not always the best to battle with the world. I am curious to know what sort of a wife he has chosen. Lawrence's estimation of a woman would be far above the average.

Well, I should think—however high his standard—he must be satisfied with his choice. She is a gem—the most bewitching, delightful little woman you ever saw! She had been buried for years in a country vicarage. I wish it was my fate to unearth just such another enchanting little creature. Lawrence was, as you feared, just bordering on becoming a misanthrope—hard as that sensible mother of his tried to prevent it—when he met with his present wife. She saved him; and, if I judge her rightly, will do much to stimulate his talents to take a higher flight. She is just a woman who would glory in her husband's popularity. She is beautiful too; not one of your dazzling beauties, but a sweet, enticing little creature that you could not help loving.

By Jove! I think Lawrence was lucky in securing her when he did. You seem to have been smitten in that quarter yourself.

I don't mind owning I was. But there was no chance for anyone. She appeared a 'fiance' her first season. It did not hinder her, however, from being the reigning belle.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

THE STAR.

AND CONCEPTION BAY SEMI-WEEKLY ADVERTISER.

Is printed and published by the Proprietors, ALEXANDER A. PARSONS and WILLIAM R. SQUAREY, at their Office, (opposite the premises of Capt. D. Green, Water Street, Harbor Grace, Newfoundland.

Price of Subscription—THREE DOLLARS per annum, payable half-yearly.

Advertisements inserted on the most liberal terms, viz.—Per square of seven lines, for first insertion, \$1; each continuation 25 cents.

Book and Job Printing executed in a manner calculated to afford the utmost satisfaction.

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