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THE Lady of the Night

Amelia Makes a Success

CHAPTER XVII. A STRANGE MEETING.

"Oh, Mr. Graham, you need not mention 'giving me me, especially to Sir Joseph. Not that there's any harm—but you know what ladies are when they get up to town on the loose!"

Elliot did not know; but he gave the promise readily enough, and carried his wounded heart towards "The Mountain Retreat."

Elliot left London the day after his meeting with Mrs. Ryall. Mr. Striplery saw him off at the station, bought him a halfpenny paper and a packet of butter-scotch, imploring him, at parting, to take care of himself; and as the train moved from the station and disappeared, Mr. Striplery stood looking after it with an air of anxiety and profound reflection.

There may have been a more wretched passenger than Elliot in that train, but it does not seem possible. He asked himself how he could bear to go on living in a place, every inch of which would remind him of the girl he had loved in vain. Even the return to his beloved horses was powerless to raise his spirits. He went about his work in a mechanical fashion, and spent his leisure hours in smoking and brooding; he grew thin, and, indeed, changed altogether so much for the worse that Sir Joseph, happening to stroll down to the stud stables, was taken aback when Elliot informed him of his intention of leaving Sir Joseph's service. The great man took it quietly, and regarded Elliot searchingly.

"What's the matter?" he inquired. "Anything wrong? You seemed all right when I last saw you, and I thought you were pleased and contented with your job. What are you going to do? Where are you going?"

Elliot stared at the ground gloomily. "I don't know," he said. "I think I shall go abroad, back to Australia."

Sir Joseph's lids fell lower, so that they concealed his eyes, and he turned his cigar over between his projecting lips.

"I shouldn't do that if I were you," he said. "They're having a bad time over there. You look to me a little off colour. You want a change."

"I've just been to London," said Elliot. "I might get something to do there. Yes; I want a change. I'm afraid you'll think me very ungrateful, Sir Joseph, but—"

"Oh, it isn't a question of ingratitude," said Sir Joseph. "You've done your work well, and earned your money, and I am perfectly satisfied.

But, of course, if you feel like going, I don't want to stop you. I've been young myself. Look here, there's no particular hurry, is there? You'll wait until I get somebody to fill your place?"

"Why, of course," assented Elliot. "That's all right," remarked Sir Joseph. "I'll come down again and talk it over with you."

He nodded, and walked away thoughtfully.

"It won't do for me to lose sight of him," he muttered. "In fact, I can't. What the devil's the matter with him, I wonder? He was 'appy enough a little while ago."

On his return to the Hall he found Mr. Trunton waiting for him. They discussed business for some little time, but Sir Joseph did not display his usual powers of concentration, and presently he said, apropos of nothing.

"I've got a young fellow on the place who wants to shift. He's a decent chap, and I should like to keep my eye on him. Don't happen to know of anything that would suit him, do you? Not in London, but somewhere in this neighbourhood."

"What can he do?" said Mr. Trunton. "Anything with his hands and feet. And you can trust him, which is rather rare nowadays. He's been looking after my horses at the stud farm; but, as I say, you could put him to anything, except the desk; he'd jib at that."

Trunton considered for a moment or two, then he said slowly—

"As it happens, there is a job that I know of, which, I think, would suit him. You know Lonaway Island, Sir Joseph?"

"Yes; but I've never been there. A God-forsaken sort of place, isn't it?"

"It is rather dull," admitted Mr. Trunton, "but extremely healthy."

"So I should think," commented Sir Joseph drily.

"It belongs to a client of mine," continued Mr. Trunton. "She's a very eccentric woman, and the place has been much neglected. I have always had an idea that there were possibilities about it—granite and so on. The Government will have to make a harbour there some day or other."

Sir Joseph pricked up his ears. "Will your client sell?" he asked.

"She will not," said Trunton decisively. "Nothing would induce her to sell an acre of it. But your man might go over there and look round. I don't want to send a regular surveyor."

"Of course not," said Sir Joseph quickly.

"An ordinarily intelligent man could do what I want. Of course, I couldn't offer him much."

"That doesn't matter," put in Sir Joseph. "You give him what you think he's worth, and I'll make up the rest. Fact is, I want to keep my eye on him; he's a little off colour and thinks he wants a change; he'll be precious glad to come back after he has had a little

time on a lonely place like that."

They came to an arrangement; but Sir Joseph allowed a week to elapse before he went to Elliot with the proposal. To a man in Elliot's condition, a desert island appears the one desirable place on earth to which to carry his wounded spirit; and Elliot at once accepted the offer. His second-in-command was promoted temporarily—Sir Joseph insisted that it should only be temporarily—to Elliot's position; and, as there was nothing to keep him, Elliot at once made preparations for leaving.

The night before he sailed he went down to the plantation, and stood on the spot where he had stood when he had taken Nora in his arms and kissed her, and later he went to look at the house, the window of the room in which he thought she slept, and wandered mournfully up the valley. He was taking farewell, not only of the place which she had endeared to him, but of Nora herself. Thenceforth he would put her out of his mind; out of his heart was a different matter.

CHAPTER XVII. FEBRUARY.

Nora fled until she reached a little hollow in the downs; there she threw herself on the ground and covered her face with her hands. It was not only fear that had driven her to flight, but a sense of shame, strange as it may seem, she realized for the first time the full significance of her metamorphosis. She had faced all the persons with whom she had come in contact, since she had assumed male attire, without a tremor of the sensation which now thrilled her from head to foot, and set her flesh burning and her veins throbbing.

Elliot Graham, the man who loved her, who had actually taken her in his arms and kissed her, was there, on the island. He would recognize her; he might keep her secret, probably would do so; but how could she bear to meet the approach of the condemnation in his eyes? Was there no escape?

She sprang to her feet, and ran fast, but, cautiously, up the hill, to see the Happy Lucy speeding towards the mainland. Captain Marks had taken advantage of the outgoing tide, and was already on his way back. Pale and trembling, she went back to her hollow; but she knew that she could not remain there; if no one else on the farm missed her, she thought bitterly, Margery would, and would come in search of her. Yes, she would have to go back, would have to face Elliot Graham. She actually shook at the prospect; but she clenched her teeth, and tried to brace herself to meet it.

Presently she began to wonder whether she could impose upon Elliot as she had imposed upon so many persons. It did not seem probable, but it was just possible. His was a singularly unscrupulous nature; she might, by careful acting, persuade him that he was mistaken as to her identity; at any rate, small as was the chance, it was her only one.

She began to imagine the first moment of their meeting; she would not return to the farm until it was dark; the room would be only dimly lit by the one small lamp; she might manage to escape to her room under the plea of a headache, could leave the house early in the morning, and remain away until night-time again. It was just possible that his stay at the island would be a short one. But what was the use of planning and scheming? She had to meet him, to run the risk.

Now, while she was thus tormented by fear and shame, she was subtly conscious of another emotion—that of a strange pleasure, which, like a silken thread, ran through the carcase and harder wood of her other sensation. Afraid as she was, she was glad that he was on the island; she would like to have seen him without being seen by him, to have heard him without his being conscious of her presence.

Nora was not given to introspection or self-analysis; so she did not worry over this complicated mental condition; besides, she was growing fearfully hungry; in fact, it was her hunger as well as the dark which drove her back to the farm. As she came in sight of it her heart beat faster, she felt the blood burning in her face; but she pulled herself together for the ordeal, and entered.

Without apparently looking at him, she saw Elliot sitting beside the fire. He was leaning forward with his arm loosely resting on his knee; he was talking, or rather listening, to Hodges, and Margery stood by, gazing at the new-comer as she had gazed at Nora, with wide-open eyes.

"They looked to Nora as she entered, and Elliot looked round. Her heart seemed to stop beating; and yet, in that moment of intense anxiety, she saw the change in him; her heart grew suddenly heavy, and she was smitten with a sense of self-reproach. The light was dim, and at first Elliot looked at her with but faint interest; then his eyes grew keener, and he stared at her fixedly.

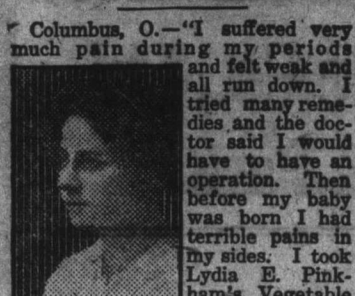
"And this be the young gentleman I was a-telling you of," said Hodges, by way of introduction. "Here be a gentleman from the mainland, Mr. Cyril. Don't know as I exactly caught your name, sir. Do 'ee please tell me again."

"Graham, Elliot Graham," said Elliot, still looking at Nora. His eyes seemed to be burning two spots in her—his voice thrilled her; like his face, it had changed, was grave, listless, and moody.

"Tain't often we have two gentlemen on the island together," went on

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Hodges, with cheerful geniality; "don't know as I can call to mind such an event, as you may say, ever appearing afore. Well, you'll be comphy for each other. I'm afraid Master Cyril here has found it rather dull at times, though he's too purtick a gentleman to let on as he has."

"They were all looking at Nora; the time had come when she must speak. "I have not been dull; I have enjoyed it very much," she said, imitating a boy's half-broken voice more cleverly than she knew; for her own words buzzed indistinctly in her ears.

Elliot threw up his head, and his hand closed on his knee; his eyes were still fixed on Nora, but he did not speak.

"Come to the table, Master Cyril," said Hodges; "you must be main hungry.—Come, Margery, come, we be all waiting for bit and sup! Do 'ee look sharp, my girl."

Nora went to the table; she instantly abandoned the idea of taking refuge in her own rooms; there was something alluring, a fearful joy in the dangerous part she was playing; she felt like an actress whose efforts might meet with success and overwhelming applause, or with as overwhelming failure. She took her seat with her back to the light, as far from Elliot as possible. Margery put on a huge dish of ham and eggs, and some jam, and Hodges hospitably implored his guests to fall to. As he took his place, Elliot lowered his eyes and gazed at the cloth abstractedly; then raised them and said to Nora, "Have you been here long?"

She saw by the expression of his face that he was again waiting for the sound of her voice, that he was started but puzzled.

"Not very long," she replied, clutching at a piece of bread and munching it.

Elliot looked down again, and she knew that he was still more puzzled.

"You came over alone?" he said. "I understood that an old man had been sent from Miss Halton's."

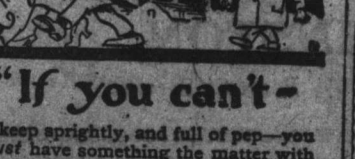
"I came instead," said Nora. "Have you come from London?" she added, with an audacity which surprised herself; but she was well into her part now, and was gradually rising to the occasion. She had expected him to start to his feet immediately on her entrance, and to cry out her name; but it was evident that he already doubted her identity; that a small chance still remained for her.

"No, I have come from Byeworth," replied Elliot. "Do you know it?"

"I've heard oft," she said carelessly. "Have you come over on business or on a holiday trip?"

"Both, I think," replied Elliot. "I am over here on business. There's a granite quarry here—"

"Why, of course there be," broke in Hodges. "And a rare fine 'un it be." (To be continued)



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