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A Cabinet Secret.

From All the Year Round.

CONTINUED.

"I hurried back to town the same day. I felt I could endure the uncertainty, the anxiety, no longer, and that to obtain my desire my sacrifice I could make must be made; so, don't laugh too much—I was resolved upon my return to ask Miss Crofton to become Mrs. Headley, and then upon the day of our marriage the severest test would be reunited. True, she must be somewhere about 50, while I was just 30; but from what I had seen of her I believed she was a very worthy woman; and, anyway, the china would be mine.

"You will scarcely credit it, but I carried out my resolution. Two days later I was at the fair spinner's side, beseeching her to be my wife. I could not bring myself to profess a sudden passion for her; but I told her I was tired of living alone, and asked her to share my lot. I said I was well-to-do in the world, and I would try to make her future life happy one; and as, while speaking, my eyes rested on the four cups and saucers, the cream jug, and the two dishes, I no doubt pleaded with a show of fervor which must have considerably pleased her. Like a sensible woman she expressed the greatest astonishment.

"Let me understand you clearly," she said. "Do you mean to say you are in love with me?"

"I will make you a good husband," I replied, thinking as I spoke how beautifully modelled the handle of the cream jug was; "and I am sure you will never regret accepting my offer."

"But do you really love me?" she persisted, "an old woman as am I?"

"Oh, please don't say that," I said mentally, "that must be about the date it was made; and then I answered, looking at the four cups and saucers, and thinking of the vacant space at home: 'I esteem and respect you highly, dear Miss Crofton, and I am sure you will make a satisfactory home cheerfulness.'

"Suppose," said Miss Crofton, "I were to take the poker and demolish that china. Would you still repeat these flattering assurances of affection?"

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future spouse, and was surprised as I entered the house to hear the sound of a piano. I know something of music, so at once became aware that the instrument was played with great skill, and much I wondered who the performer might be. I had not as yet discovered that my Lesbia possessed musical talent. The maid opened the door of the drawing room, the music ceased, and I walked in and found myself face to face with one of the loveliest girls I had ever met. Perhaps the surprise, the contrast, when I saw her instead of the middle-aged lady I expected to greet, made this stranger look even more charming. I could realize only at first a bright young face, with masses of light hair around its face, and who entered, and a well-moulded figure, showing to great advantage as she sat before the piano. Her dress was of simple black, but well and becomingly made, and as she rose when I entered, I could see she was over middle height.

"Women always behave with less awkwardness than men in chance meetings; so while I stood still and stared some words of apology advanced with perfect ease and said:

"Mr. Headley, I am sure! My aunt told me to expect you. She has gone out for a short time, but hoped you would wait until her return."

"I was only too pleased to accept the invitation so frankly given, and recovering my self-possession, in a few minutes was in full swing of chat with my Lesbia's niece.

"I found her an unaffected girl, full of spirits, and looking forward to the pleasures of a stay in town. 'I suppose you will stay some time?' I asked. 'Your presence will quite brighten Miss Crofton's house.'

"I shall stay as long as ever my aunt will keep me," she replied. 'Then I shall be a dear old soul, Mr. Headley?'

"I winced, and began to realize that my situation was a painful one. 'She is so antiquated,' she continued; 'and yet so romantic in many things.'

"I felt more foolish than ever, and for the sake of saying something remarked:

"I wonder she did not tell me you were coming. I suppose she meant to surprise me."

"I suppose so. But I assure you she has talked to me a great deal about you, Mr. Headley. You appear to be great friends. Quite a flirtation, I tell her."

"I colored up to my ears, but managed to keep my face as usual. 'Then I conclude her report of me has been favorable.'

"Then I conclude her report of me has been favorable. 'Mr. Headley, and, anyway, it would have no weight with me, as I prefer to form my own opinions.'

"I felt we were getting on delicate ground, I begged her to resume the music my coming had cut short."

"She played a piece of Chopin's with great feeling and brilliancy, and then, at my request, sang a couple of ballads. Her voice was sweet and well trained—altogether she was a very charming niece-to-be."

"Do you play or sing?" she asked.

"Neither, unfortunately. I am only an indifferent critic, and every one who has been to my house has been so kind as to praise me."

"Ah, I forgot; you are a great china collector."

"And as she spoke it struck me that this was the first time I had ever been inside this room, and I forgot to look and assure myself of the safety and well-being of the cups, saucers, cream jug, and dishes."

"And, as the thought of the china brought other thoughts in its train, I felt that I would give a great deal of money to get out of the room."

"Your niece has the advantage of me in knowing my name," I replied.

"Mr. Robert Headley, let me present you to Miss Ethel Crofton, my favorite niece," said Lesbia, with the politeness of an old school."

"After that, unnecessary ceremony I shall go and dress for dinner," said Miss Ethel Crofton.

"I closed the door after her, and turned to greet my aunt with the accustomed salutation. Perhaps from the same reason that the china had lost its charm to-day, I found that semi-matrimonial affection was scarcely satisfying enough, and could not help thinking my future bride looked very aged."

"Robert," she said—it was, I believe, the first time she had used my Christian name—"I should much prefer that Ethel should have nothing of our engagement at present. She is young and giddy, and might not look upon it in the right light."

"I promised secrecy with a joy I could scarcely conceal. At any rate Ethel knew nothing about it as yet."

"I dined that evening with the ladies. Miss Crofton did the honors in a dress of such antiquated design and fashion that Ethel openly rallied her upon it. She herself was beautiful in pale blue silk, and I was so struck by her fair, young, bright face, her pleasant, natural manner, that before the evening was half past I had fully realized what an error I had made of myself."

"My visits to Shepherd's Bush for the next few days were as frequent as the most exciting fancies could have expected; but I am afraid that had my Lesbia been a jealous and suspicious nature she would not have derived the pleasure from them she appeared to feel. I sat no longer in the chair-cummand-

ing the best view of the cabinet that onshrined the treasures for which I contemplated sacrificing myself and my affections. I was ever by Ethel's side; at the piano, turning the leaves of the music; reading my favorite poems to her; holding her cravens, or winding wool for her. Considering the tender relations between Miss Crofton and myself, I must own that my behavior toward her was unsupporting piece was disgraceful. Indeed, had Lesbia thought fit to pour a storm of reproach upon me, and order me to quit her presence, she would have been fully justified. However, she did nothing of the kind, but sat in her favorite corner, knitting and apparently paying no attention to the flirtation, or something more serious, which was proceeding under her very eyes.

"Soon matters reached a climax. I could no longer deceive myself. I was hopelessly in love with Ethel Crofton, and I felt bound in honor to inform her aunt, and to throw myself on the fair spinner's mercy before I made the avowal of my love to Ethel."

"I found Lesbia alone one day, so I took the little key from my waistcoat pocket and handed it to her. 'And what is this for, Robert?' she asked gravely."

"In a shamefaced manner I said: 'I can't marry you—I love Ethel.'

"Oh, Robert—Robert!" said Miss Crofton, putting her handkerchief to her eyes; 'what can I say to you? Only a month ago I was indispensable to your future happiness, and yet you forsake me for the first young face you see, and she appeared to sob bitterly.

"It was the china," I expostulated. "I see; and now you think you can have Ethel and the china, too. I shall stay as long as ever my aunt will keep me, and I shall be a dear old soul, Mr. Headley?'

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