

THE SEA WITCH.

(Continued.)

I saw no reason why we shouldn't. We retired into a small, dimly lighted boudoir adjoining the ballroom, and talked very pleasantly about bygone days for more than the allotted quarter of an hour. She made a good deal of pretence of being younger than I was; she affected ignorance of events which she could not really have forgotten and of persons with whom I myself had seen her flirting in the consulship of Plancus; but she seemed to be interested in what I said, and showed more power of participating in my melancholy mood than I should have given her credit for. I have always admitted that Mrs. Wynne can be a very agreeable woman when she likes. The worst of me is that I am so easily imposed upon. Of course I knew that this shoking old sham was likely to be as false in her sentiment as she was in her person; yet when she spoke affectionately of the daughter whom she was about to lose, turning on a sort of *tremolo* stop in her voice as she did so—when she appealed to me to say what she would do with her life after its chief interest had been removed—and when she alluded with a sigh to the trials and sorrows which she had passed through and lived down—I was touched. I said to myself that one does necessarily become a hardened reprobate because one is a little worldly. As far as that went, wasn't I also a little worldly? I thought I could enter into poor Mrs. Wynne's natural feeling of loneliness, and I was ashamed of the half suspicion which entered my mind for a moment that she might be setting her cap—or, rather, her curly wig—at me.

Not, to be sure, that there would have been anything very extraordinary in it if she had, seeing that, many years before, she had married a man considerably older than I am now. That was her second matrimonial venture—her first husband, a dashing young hussar, having broken his neck steeple chasing, I forget where. Old Wynne died very soon after his little girl's birth, which was an unlucky thing for some people. His estate passed to his nephew, to spite whom he married, and his widow was left but scantily provided for. I fancy she must have found it a hard matter to keep her head above water, living in the way that she did; but she managed it somehow, and never allowed herself to drop out of society. When Alice was old enough to come out, the two ladies went to the first drawing-room of the season together; and I think it was then that Mrs. Wynne assumed that surprisingly youthful aspect which caused her when seen from a sufficient distance, to look like her daughter's younger sister. No doubt she had to swallow down some snubs and slights; for she was an impoverished woman who was bound to live like a moderately rich one, under penalty of being forgotten; and we all know how little mercy is shown by the world to those who deliberately place themselves in false positions. Nevertheless, she did not suffer herself to be discouraged, and now she had reaped the reward of her labors. She had secured a husband for her daughter who was not only the younger son of a duke, but was far better off than younger sons generally are, some member of his mother's family having left him a handsome property.

I felt a genuine satisfaction at her success—for one likes to see pluck recompensed, and, besides, I had known Mrs. Wynne all my life, though I can't say that we had ever been exactly friends. After that evening at the ball, however, she was pleased to treat me quite like a friend—an intimate friend, indeed. We never met anywhere that she did not drag me off into a corner to whisper some confidential piece of information about Alice's approaching nuptials, or to consult me as to some point connected with settlements, although one would have supposed that she might have obtained from her solicitor all the advice that she needed upon such subjects. And then she was always sending me little unnecessary notes, till at last I grew positively to loathe the sight of the buff-colored envelopes which she used, and Wilson my man, smiled demurely when he handed them to me. Now, if there is one thing that I dislike more than another, it is being laughed at by Wilson; and what was, perhaps, even more disagreeable was that the men at the club began to chaff me, my old friend Conington in particular being exquisitely facetious, inquiring whether the double event was to come off on the same day and so forth. I was obliged to tell him at length that that kind of thing, besides being utterly witless, was offensive to me; to which he replied that he only did it out of kindness.

"My good fellow, you can't take care of yourself," he said, "and if somebody didn't catch hold of your coat-tails you'd be swallowed up before you knew where you were. Our friend Mrs. Wynne is a good deal cleverer than you are, I can tell you."

"Very likely," I returned; "I never said she wasn't."

"Yes; and she's a fascinating woman too, in her way."

"I don't find her so," I said; "but I suppose you do, for you are always talking to her. Perhaps you would like to marry her yourself. If so, pray don't let me stand in your way."

Conington shook his head with a wise smile.

"I'm too old a bird," he answered; "and she knows that well enough. She won't waste time in trying to drop salt on my tail. She knows I recollect her ages and ages ago as an old thing with gray hair and false teeth that waggled at you when she talked. She goes in for being a sort of Ninon de l'Enclos now; but that won't do with me, you know."

As far as that went it wouldn't do with me either; and, though I did not remember to have seen Mrs. Wynne in the stage described, I was sure that, whether she had designs upon me or not, I should never fall a victim to her borrowed charms. Still I did feel that it would be a comfort when the wedding was over and the excuse for all these interviews and notes removed. To add to my discomfort the ladies of my acquaintance began with

one consent to give me friendly warnings; and then, only a week before the day appointed for the ceremony, a very annoying thing took place.

"My dear general," Mrs. Wynne said one morning, squeezing my hand affectionately (she had taken to squeezing my hand by this time), "I want you to do me a great kindness. I want you to give dear Alice away."

"I—give your daughter away?" I ejaculated, aghast. "Well, upon my word, I don't think I am quite the right person—"

"Ah, don't refuse!" she broke in. "I am sure you won't refuse! You know she has literally no near relations, poor child, and James Wynne, who was to have represented the family, is laid up with chicken-pox and can't come. Unless you will help me out of the difficulty I don't see who there is to apply to, except the verger."

"Couldn't you put it off until James Wynne is better?" I suggested.

"Oh, dear, no! Quite impossible! It might be weeks and weeks. Some people take an eternity to get over the measles, and—"

"You said it was chicken-pox just now," I interrupted suspiciously.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter what it is," she returned. "You couldn't expect him to come into church all over spots and scatter infection among a hundred and fifty people, could you?"

"I suppose not," I agreed. It really was a very cool request to make, and no doubt Conington and other resolute persons would have refused point-blank; but I never can bring myself to be rude to people, unless I am goaded into absolute fury, so I ended by yielding a reluctant consent.

I performed the duty required of me when the festive day came, feeling perfectly wretched the whole time, and not daring to look at anybody; and it was only when the rite was over and we were assembled round the breakfast-table that I recognized James Wynne among the company, looking as well and hearty as I had ever seen him in my life. This was too much. I made my escape as soon as possible, only darting one glance of bitter reproach at that Sapphira of a woman, and early the next day I left town and fled into Dorsetshire to stay with some cousins of mine who had asked me, very opportunely, to pay them a visit.

I did think I should have been safe there, with the London season only just over and everybody hastening to Goodwood, where I rather wanted to have gone myself; but no such thing! I hadn't been two days in the house when Mrs. Wynne arrived, looking more juvenile and blooming than ever, and I found out afterwards that she had actually asked herself down—my poor cousins, who knew nothing of what had taken place in London, welcoming her with the utmost cordiality. Ah, how differently would they have behaved had they guessed the predatory intentions of their visitor with regard to one whose worldly goods may not improbably be divided among them some day!

Mrs. Wynne could not, of course, blush, her natural skin being forever hidden from mortal eyes; and, morally speaking, I should say that she had the hide of a rhinoceros. She did not appear to be the least ashamed of having compromised me in the eyes of all my friends by that unspeakable shabby trick of hers, and I felt that no words of mine would be likely to produce any impression upon such brazen effrontery. I therefore maintained an attitude of cold reserve, only taking good care not to be left alone with her for a single moment. But I need hardly say that she broke down my defence with the greatest ease as soon as she thought fit to do so. She waylaid me on the staircase, as I was making for the smoking-room, on the second evening of her arrival, and touching, me gently on the arm, "You are angry with me," said she, in a tone of soft remonstrance. "What have I done to offend you?"

"I am not offended, Mrs. Wynne," I replied; "but, since you ask me, I will confess that I am annoyed at your having thought it necessary to tell me a—what shall I say?—about James Wynne."

"But I didn't tell you a what shall-you-say," she rejoined, laughing. "He really had something the matter with him. It turned out to be only cold in the head; still it might quite well have prevented him from coming, and I was not at all sorry for the mistake, I don't like James—we have never got on together—and it was much pleasanter to me to see an old friend like yourself standing where you did. I think you ought to be flattered," she added, with a killing smile.

"I am not flattered," I replied, gloomily; for I thought it best to be explicit. "I don't like to be made conspicuous in that uncalled-for way."

"Oh, how rude you are!" she exclaimed, laughing, and rapping me on the knuckles with her fan. "I shall not speak to you again until you have found your manners."

And she turned and ran up the stairs with the buoyant step of careless girlhood.

This was all very well; and if, by dint of bad manners, I could have persuaded her to carry out her threat of not speaking to me any more, matterless I should have remained. But she didn't carry out her threat. Far from it! On the contrary, she spoke to me a great deal; and the thing that she said was so startling that I hardly knew which way to look when she uttered them, while my cousins, who had begun by being amused at her, ended by becoming indignant. Any one, to hear her talk, would have supposed that I had almost lived in her house in London—that little Mayfair house which she had rented for some years past, and which she now announced that she intended, by my advice, to quit. "Certainly, I should find it dreary work to go on living all by myself where I have been so happy with my poor little girl," she said; "I dare say it is better that I should make a change. Where I shall go or what I shall do I can't think; but, dear, kind old friend" (it was thus that she was pleased to designate the reader's humble servant) "has promised to find me a home somewhere before long."

Now it was true that, while in London, she had told me that she contemplated a change of quarters, and had begged me to let her know if I heard of anything that sounded suitable; but the impression conveyed