



(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XII.

MOTHER'S DILEMMA.

Canon Weston had intended to stop at Venice. He stopped for two days, and then, to Kathleen's secret joy and no small relief, bronchitis seized him. That stern monitor hurried him off incontinently to Florence.

"I can't tell you how sorry, I'd hold forward to seeing everything in this charming place under your daughter's guidance—she's a capital chorine. I must say, your daughter. We did so enjoy going round the Grand canal with her day before yesterday. It's so delightful to see all these beautiful things in company with an artist. But the damp of the lagoons is really too much for my poor old throat. We're given to throat trouble, you see. It's common to my cloth, and as I went along with Miss Hesselgrave to the academy yesterday in an open gondola I felt the cold air rise up bodily from the canal and catch hold of me and throttle me. It took me just so by the larynx, like a hand, and seemed to choke me instantly. 'Amelia,' said I at the time, 'this chilly air has done for me.' And, sure enough, I woke in the night with a tickle, tickle, tickle in my bronchial tubes, which I know means mischief. When once that sets in, there's nothing for it but to leave the place where you are immediately. Change air without delay, that's the one safe remedy. And indeed, to tell you the truth, Venice is so spoiled, so utterly spoiled, that the Austrians left it that, except for you and Miss Weston, no one would visit it. I shan't be sorry to get out of it. Most sanitary town, I call it—most insubstantial in every way."

Kathleen could hardly even pretend to regret their departure. During the last two days she had lived in instant dread that the canon would somehow knock up against Arnold Willoughby. And if the truth must be told it was the very same dread on the canon's part, not bronchitis alone, that was driving him to Florence. For as they stood on the balcony of the doge's palace the day before, looking out upon the River and the busy quays and the panorama of the harbor, Canon Weston beheld a man's back in the distance, rounding the corner by Daniel's, and he said to himself with a shudder, "Axminster's back or the devil's!" Being an old-fashioned clergyman, the canon, you will perceive, was not afraid of such a very mild unparliamentary expression. And the more convinced he became that the mysterious person thus flitting about Venice was really Lord Axminster the more desirous did he grow to avoid the misfortune of actually meeting him, for if they met face to face and caught sight of each other's eyes he could hardly know how for very shame he could let Algy go on with his claim of right without informing him—which he had never been drowned at all, but had been sighted in the flesh and in sailor costume in the city of Venice.

There are compromises we all make now and again with our consciences, and there are points where we feel the attempt at compromise becomes practically impossible. Now, the canon was quite willing to give Algy and his wife the benefit of the doubt as long as he felt only just morally certain that the person in the street with the trick of twisting his back hair was the last Lord Axminster. But if they met face to face and he recognized his man without doubt, as he felt sure he must do when they came to close quarters, then the canon felt in his heart he could no longer retain any grain of self respect if he permitted the claim to be pushed through the house of lords without even mentioning what he had seen to Algy. He might have kept silence in the face of the man, but he would take his chance if he met him alone, but what on earth could he do if he met him full front while out walking with Amelia? That was the question. And if he may remark parenthetically that most men feel keenly this necessity for preserving their self respect before the face of their wives, which is a very important ally indeed to the cause of all the virtues.

So on the third morning of his stay the canon left Venice. Kathleen breathed freer as soon as he was gone. The load of that gnawing anxiety was much lightened. That very same day, as it chanced, Arnold Willoughby, reflecting to himself in his own room, made his mind up suddenly to step round in the afternoon and have a word or two with Kathleen. Ever since the morning when they picknicked at the water, he had been debating with himself whether or not he should ask that beautiful soul to marry him, and now the matter was made up. He could resist no longer. He had decided that very day to break the ice and ask her. He was quite sure she liked him—liked him very, very much. That she showed unequivocally, and he had not to wonder why because he could not muster up courage to speak to her. Would it be right of him, he asked himself, to expect that any woman should share such fortunes as his would henceforward? Was he justified in begging any painter could earn money enough to keep her in the comfort and luxury to which she had been accustomed?

He put that question to himself seriously, and he answered it in the affirmative. Willoughby had had now made himself by his own act, he need never have doubted. Any young man just starting in life would have thought himself justified in asking the girl he loved best in the world to marry him till he was in a position to marry her. He should be not do what any other man might do lawfully? He had cast the past behind him, and he was a painter, not a sailor now, but why need he be a painter? He should be a sailor, wouldn't he? And Kathleen was adapted to make a good man so surely as she was adapted to make a good woman. And then Mrs. Hesselgrave, leaning forward in her chair, grew really pale as she spoke. "You are almost confidential. Had Mr. Willoughby noticed that Mr. Mortimer, the rich young American, thought so much of Kathleen? Well, he certainly did. He quite haunted the house, though Mrs. Hesselgrave believed in her heart of hearts Kathleen didn't really care one bit for him. And she was a girl of such high principle—such very high principle! Unless she truly loved a man—was fascinated, absorbed in him—she never would marry him, though he

When he got to the door, Francesca, who opened it, told him with a sunny display of two rows of white teeth that the signorina was out, but the signorina was at home, if he would care to see her.

Much disappointed, Arnold went up, anxious to learn whether any chance still remained that later in the afternoon he might have a word or two with Kathleen. To his immense surprise, the moment he entered Mrs. Hesselgrave rose from her seat with obvious warmth and held out her hand to greet him in her most gracious manner. Arnold had noticed by this time the seven distinct gradations of cordiality with which Mrs. Hesselgrave was accustomed to receive her various guests in accordance with their respective and relative positions in the table of precedence as they were established. This afternoon, therefore, he could not help observing her manner was that with which she was wont to welcome peers of the realm and foreign ambassadors. To say the truth, Mrs. Hesselgrave considerably overdid it in the matter of graciousness. There was an inartistic abruptness in her sudden change of front, a practical inconsistency in her way of status which couldn't fall to strike him. The instant way in which Mrs. Hesselgrave, who had hitherto taken little pains to conceal her dislike and distrust of the

dreadful sailor man, flung herself visibly at his head made Arnold at once suspect some radical revolution must have taken place in her views as to his position.

"Why, Mr. Willoughby," she cried, holding his hand in her own much longer than was strictly necessary for the purpose of shaking it, "well, you may come near us now. It's really quite unfriendly of you. Kathleen was saying this morning we must write round to your chambers and ask you to dine with us. And she has written you for the last day or two on the Xatterer's! Poor child, she's been so occupied! We've had some friends here who've been taking up all our time. Kitty's been out in a gondola all day long with them. However, that's all over, and she hopes to get to work again on the quay tomorrow. She's so anxious to go on with her spirit and canal. Wrapped up in her art, dear girl, you know it's all she lives for. However, she'll be back at it, I'm glad to say, at the old place in the morning. Our friends are just gone—couldn't stand the climate—said it gave them sore throats—and Kathleen's gone off to say goodbye to them at the station."

"That's fortunate," Arnold answered a little stiffly, feeling somehow a dim corner more a lord and lapsing for the moment into his bad habit of social snobbishness. "For the lights on the canal have been lovely the last three days, and I've regretted so much Miss Hesselgrave should have missed them."

Hesselgrave went on to quite archly with a blandest smile—"Mother's society must be that irrevocable boy Reggie was wont to term it. 'I don't know why, I'm sure, Mr. Willoughby, but Kathleen has enjoyed and sprung a great deal more than she ever before enjoyed it. It's been a perfect treat to her. She says she can't bear to be away for one day from the dear old San Trovaso. She just loves her work, and I assure you she seemed almost sentimentally sad because these friends who've been stopping with us kept her away from her beloved picture and art so long from her. Mrs. Hesselgrave added after a pause in some little trepidation, uncertain whether that last phrase might not go just one step too far in the right direction.

Arnold Willoughby eyed her closely. All his dearest suspicions were being fast aroused. He began to tremble in his heart lest somebody had managed to pierce that close disguise with which he had so carefully and so long surrounded himself.

"Will Miss Hesselgrave be back by and by?" he asked in a coldly official tone. "Because if she will I should like to stop and see her."

As she murmured on, floundering further and further into the mire, Arnold Willoughby's conviction that something had gone wrong grew deeper and deeper with every sentence. He shuffled uneasily on his chair. For the first time since he had practically ceased to be an earl he saw a British mamma quite obviously paying court to him. He would have liked to go indeed; this queer talk made him feel so awkward and uncomfortable. It reminded him of the days when adulation was his bane. More still, it jarred against the sense of maternal dignity. But he couldn't get away. Now the doubt was aroused, he must wait at least till Kathleen returned, that he might see her and be rid of it. Yet all this strange dangle of inartistically wrought flims before the victim's eye was disagreeably familiar to him. He had heard a round dozen of Mayfield mammas talk so to him of their daughters and always in the same pretended confidential strain when he was an earl and a catch in London society, though he confessed to himself with a body of do it quite so fatuously, transparently and woodenly as Kathleen's mother. She, poor soul, went on with his satisfaction, convinced in her own soul she was making the running for Kathleen in the most masterly fashion and utterly unaware of the disgust she was arousing in Arnold Willoughby's suspicious bosom.

At last Arnold's suspicious bosom no longer be concealed. The deeper Mrs. Hesselgrave probed the more firmly convinced did her patient become that she had some-



"You may say goodbye for me to Miss Hesselgrave."

how surprised his most inmost secret and was trying all she knew to capture him for Kathleen, and trying most ineffectually. This sudden change of front from her attitude of sullen nonrecognition to one of ardent sympathy roused all his bitterest and most cynical feelings. Was this day one had faded? Was Kathleen, the girl he had invested to himself in his fervid faith with all the innocent virtues, to crush his heart a second time as Lady Sark had done? Did she know who he was, and what title he bore? Was she allowing him to make love to her for his money—such as it was—and his earldom?

With a sudden resolve he determined to put the question to the proof forthwith. He knew Mrs. Hesselgrave well enough to know she could not strike his face or sed her emotions. Whatever passed within that quick countenance betrayed to the most casual observer. So at a pause in the conversation, when Mrs. Hesselgrave was just engaged in wondering to herself what she had a good fresh subject to start next with an earl, he discreetly turned to her beloved picture and art so long from her. Mrs. Hesselgrave added after a pause in some little trepidation, uncertain whether that last phrase might not go just one step too far in the right direction.

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Mrs. Hesselgrave jumped at the chance with unwise avidity. This was the very first time, in fact, that Arnold Willoughby had ever asked to see her daughter in so many words. She scented a proposal. "Oh, yes," she answered, acquiescent, with obvious eagerness, though she plumed herself inwardly as she spoke upon her own bland ingenuity. "Kathleen will be back by and by from the station and will be delighted to see you. I know there's some point in that last year's picture she's touching up that she said she wanted to consult you about if possible. I shall have to go out myself at 4 unfortunately—I'm engaged to be at home at dear Lady Devonport's, but I dare say Kathleen can give you a cup of tea here, and no doubt you can make yourselves happy together."

She beamed as she said it. The appointment with Lady Devonport was a myth, to be sure, but Mrs. Hesselgrave thought it would be wise, under the circumstances, to leave the young people alone with one another. Arnold Willoughby's suspicions grew deeper and deeper. Mrs. Hesselgrave was one of those transparent people whose little deceptions are painfully obvious. He could see at half a glance some thing must have occurred which gave her all at once a much more favorable view of him. He measured her doubtfully with his eyes. Mrs. Hesselgrave in return showed her sweetest smile upon him. She was all obsequiousness. Then she began to talk with ostentatious motherly pride about Kathleen. She was such a good girl! Few mothers had a comfort like that in their daughters. The only thing Mrs. Hesselgrave couldn't bear was the distressing habit of Kathleen's smiling upon him. She was all obsequiousness. Then she began to talk with ostentatious motherly pride about Kathleen. 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