

Fate and Marriage

By Clara Mulholland

Meanwhile Margaret was pacing herthe same. "You raise difficulties, and make sure that things will never be what I hope and expect. It's very unkind of you, and you shouldn't do and his unexpected announcement that it."

And then, unconsciously, she had come to look out eagerly for his visits. To meet him in the garden, to see him cross the fields, to converse with him in the pretty dairy, sometimes for a few minutes, sometimes for a considerable time, had become an event of the day, looked forward to with joy. That his presence gave her immense pleasure she had known for some weeks, and, notwithstanding every effort made to stifle these friendly feelings, she had found it impossible, and had told herself that she must really begin to avoid him, that she must be stiff and formal, and do all she could to keep him at a distance.

But every day such a thing became more difficult. Smiling and frank, gay and light-hearted, John would join her and her little stepbrother under the trees, or amongst the hay, and whilst he was with them the hours flew past like moments, and, forgetful of her name, dignity, and family, Margaret was supremely happy. And, yet, John's confession had taken her by surprise, and her feelings as he spoke out in such a straight-forward and manly way were varied and complex; but now in the quietness of her own room she knew that her heart was his, and his only.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Having pleaded weariness and a headache, Margaret had begged Mrs. Danvers to excuse her from going down to luncheon. And, seeing how white and languid she looked as she lay on a couch in her darkened room, the kind-hearted woman had at once declared her willingness to do so.

"And really Hugo is like the chattering brook," she cried, laying a cool hand on her darling's brow. "Men may come and men may go, but he goes on for ever. Mr. Fairfax is most good-natured to listen to him. I don't like to snub the child, but anyone with a headache is best away from him, so lie here, dearest, and I'll send you up your lunch. I hope you," anxiously, "are not sickening for anything?"

"Oh, no, Aunt Miriam." "Well, I hope you didn't get a touch of the sun. That is a dangerous thing." "Not so dangerous as some other things," sighed Margaret as her aunt bustled away. "Oh, John, my heart is sick within me when I remember that you are in London and I must stay here. I have had my fortnight with my father, so need not hope to get away from Riversdale this year again. And," sighing, "what a different place it will be now. How shall I and Hugo get on without you?"

Towards teatime, feeling rested and more tranquil, Margaret put on a fresh muslin dress and tripped downstairs. In the verandah at the back of the house she found Hugo in his big wheeling chair, a table strewn with books and photographs by his side. The boy looked up with a smile of glad welcome as his sister appeared. "At last I hope you are better, carina mia! I miss you sorely when you are away."

Margaret kissed him softly, then took a chair and sat down by his side. "But you had company, dearest, and I was tired." "You need not excuse yourself, dear," the child said, laughing. "I was quite sure you only stayed away because you couldn't help it. You were sad, I know. You will miss John, Fane almost as much as I will, Meg." The girl started, and a quick blush rose in her pale cheeks. "But," continued Hugo, without remarking her change of color, "you need not fret. We'll soon follow him to London, you and I. And when there we'll see him every day."

I am going to do my best to make up for past negligence if she will allow me. I saw her mother to-day." "I am glad of that. Is she well?" "Very, and now I have hurried home to invite you all to tea in my studio to-morrow. Several visitors were going to honor me with their company — people I'd like Miss Fane to meet. Lord and Lady Linton, Sir Peter Goldsmid, and though last not least, Sir Henry Dunstable."

"Henry," Enid cried, astonished. "He never told me." "Because he did not know of the joys in store for him. I only invited him just now, in the hall." "And he accepted your invitation?" Enid asked in doubting tones. "To be sure he did. He'd go anywhere to meet the Lintons. He dotes on the nobility, does your Henry."

"You need not scoff at him," cried Enid, always ready to take offence at a word against her fiancé. "He is an intimate friend of Lord Linton, and he did you a good turn with him, Gerald, in getting him to give you an order for two pictures." "So he did. He's a brick, and I'll never say another word against him. His sister looked at him in astonishment. He laughed, evidently much amused, and kissed Enid on the cheek. "He has done me an immense service, far greater than an order for a hundred pictures," he cried gaily. "Though he knew not what he was doing when he brought Lord Linton to my studio."

"You puzzle us. Why talk so mysteriously?" Enid cried. "It would be kinder to say plainly what you mean. What is this service, Gerald?" "I cannot tell you now. Some day you may know all, but at present everything is too vague." Enid fingered the gold chain round her neck with trembling fingers. "You have heard the strange rumors about poor Madeline's marriage, that Sir Henry Dunstable has just been telling us are being whispered everywhere?"

Gerald started, and clenched his fists in quick anger. "He might have spared you," he cried. "But that was perhaps too much to expect. What did he tell you?" "He said that there were many rumors afloat that made him and a number of people doubt the legality of poor Madeline's marriage with the late Lord Linton."

"Madeline's marriage was perfectly legal. But her husband never was and never will be Lord Linton. For which I am very thankful." "Gerald! Never will be! Then he is living?" "Yes, one of the greatest scamp—but, Enid, I to-day made a great discovery that cleared up everything very well, and made me very happy. There were two Madeline Delormes. One who died years before our darling sister took the name."

"I know, Gerald. Someone—my mother—told me long ago, mentioned her to Madeline and she cried out—'When I go on the stage I'll call myself Delorme—Madeline Delorme—it runs beautifully, and then no one will ever know I was a Fairfax. So I'll not disgrace the name.'"

"I wish I had known this, Enid. Why did you not tell me?" "I had forgotten all about it. It was only when you mentioned that there had been two actresses of that name I suddenly remembered what my mother had told me. So it was the late Madeline Delorme that was the first Lord Linton's wife?"

"Yes, and died thirteen or fourteen years before he did." "Is this generally known?" "No, and I only found it out by mere accident." "Then that was what Henry meant when he said that there were rumors afloat that would cause more trouble and anxiety to Lord Linton than to us." "That is exactly what he meant, dear." "Do you think, Gerald, that Lord Linton really knew that she was not his wife at the time?" Gerald started, and looked at his sister with a strange expression of astonishment and horror. "What a curious idea, Enid! Who put it into your head?" "Hush!" cried Marion, holding up a warning finger. "Here comes Beryl. Let us talk of something cheerful when she appears."

Hampton will surely take you down to dinner." Beryl did not flinch, though her color deepened just a little. "And at what hour do we dine?" "At seven thirty, sharp. So we have no time to lose. Gerald, I am sorry," turning to her brother, "but we are all going out to-night." Marion remarked, "Beryl and I dine with the Masters and go with them to the opera."

"That's good news," he answered; "for I am doing exactly the same thing." "How amusing. Well, I declare, you're a regular oyster. Why didn't you tell us that long ago?" "Because until to-day—this afternoon, in fact, I was not sure that I would go. Fred Masters said I might leave the matter an open question till the last moment. So I wired that I would go on my way here."

"How condescending. And what moved you to do so, pray?" "The knowledge that you and Miss Fane—bowing low—would both be there." "Well, really. Wonders will never cease," cried Marion, and putting her arm round Beryl's waist she swept her out of the room.

Many were the wondering and curious glances cast in the direction of the Masters' box as Beryl, white almost as the soft chiffon gown she wore, entered with Lord Hampton in close attendance, and took the chair facing the stage. "She's lovely. Who is she?" was whispered on all sides.

All unconscious of these remarks, Lord Hampton's eyes were fixed in mute adoration upon Beryl's face. He dared not speak to her, for she was absorbed in the singing. So he watched her, longing for the moment when the curtain would go down, and she would turn and look at him with the sweet, bright glance that thrilled him more than any music—gave him more joy than anything else on earth.

But although she felt his gaze, Beryl looked steadily out before her. Her heart was in a tumult; her soul was sick within her. She had made a grievous mistake, had thrown away her chance of happiness, had done a wicked thing in promising to marry this man, whom till the day of her death she knew she could never love.

At the end of the second act, as, mustering up all her strength and courage, the girl turned to answer a question addressed to her by Lord Hampton, a tap came to the door of the box. "His lordship is wanted urgently," said a messenger. "Lady Hampton is waiting in her carriage at the door of the theatre—must see and speak to him at once."

Lord Hampton bit his lip and frowned angrily. But there was no help for it. He was bound to obey his grandmother's summons without delay. "I'll be back in a few moments, dear love," he whispered, pressing Beryl's hand, as it lay upon her lap. "I hate to leave you, but I must."

"Of course, of course; I know you must." As the door closed behind him Gerald Fairfax stepped from the back of the box, and slipped into the seat he had just vacated. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody good," he cried gaily; "and really Lord Hampton has had more than his fair share of your company to-night, Miss Fane. He took you to dinner, and escorted you to your carriage and sat beside you here, whilst I have not been allowed to say one word to you."

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