

A LOST WIFE

A NOVEL.

BY MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON,
Author of "Worth Winning," Etc.

CHAPTER I.

Frederica Clifford, twenty years of age, height five feet four, slim-waisted, fresh-complexioned, with grey eyes, a rousseuse nose, and red brown hair tucked up into a loose shining knot at the top of my head, was standing with my back to the room, and my face to the window panes, where upon my impatient fingers were performing what is enigmatically termed a "devil's tattoo."

Mrs. Thistleby and I had been shut up together indoors the whole afternoon. Women, albeit the dearest of friends, cannot stand too much of each other's uninterrupted society. Probably our tempers—Bella's and mine—were none the better for the enforced tete-a-tete which had lasted from luncheon time till nearly six o'clock. My friend was playing one of Strauss' waltzes. Her touch was what used to be called when we were at school together "bangy." She was hanging away furiously now. I shrewdly suspected that she would very gladly be punning my head instead of the keys of her own cottage Broadwood; I therefore prudently kept my back turned to the window.

The prospect was not inviting. The little green-shuttered lodgings of the town blinked miserably at me through the driving rain; the bathing machines were all drawn high up in a row close under the sea-wall; the cliffs loomed an indistinct gray mass through the fog; the very sea was all but blotted out.

One or two umbrellas went jogging along the esplanade, but none of them came up so far as our house, which stood quite at the end of the little watering-place, isolated from the town.

The square plot of garden which divided the house from the beach, generally a smiling parterre of flowers, is to-day a scene of desolation; the gravel paths are rivers of water; the petunias and calceolarias are hanging their drooping heads in the mud; the scarlet geraniums in the stone vases on the terrace are almost washed away, whilst down upon the statue of the goddess Flora, in the centre, a stream of water trickles continuously, splashing monotonously in big drops off the end of her dirty stone nose.

Decidedly, of all dismal places in wet weather, Mrs. Thistleby's "marine residence" at Seaciff is the very diabolical.

Suddenly, Strauss' waltz came to an end with a crash, and my friend jumped up from the piano with an impetuous whoop, and the music-stool flying half across the room.

"Freda!" she cried excitedly, "you don't mean to tell me that you care for George Curtis?"

"My dear Bella," I answered, turning round upon her with mild amazement, "what can you possibly mean?"

"Mean? Why that it's a sin and a shame for a girl like you to be thrown away on an old man, old enough to be your grandfather; why, with your beauty, you might marry any one, Freda—any one!"

"My beauty, as you are pleased to call it, ought, no doubt, to command a very high price in the matrimonial market," I replied, with a laugh, "supposing only that there were a market to convey it to. You forget, Bella, how very limited are the capabilities of Slopperton. Allow me to bring the stern facts to your notice. On the one hand there are the affections of Mr. Gibson, the curate, the half of his worldly goods amounting to about £75 per annum; also a lodging with the above-named divine, in a three-roomed cottage on the village green, commanding a view of a duck-pond in the foreground, and a fine airy distant prospect of clothes lines behind it, whereon the family wash of the village flutters gracefully in the breeze. These delights are tempting, no doubt; but then, on the other hand, there is my father's oldest friend, for whom I have a very true regard, to say nothing of Eddington Hall, one of the finest old places in the county, and no end of money! Would any girl in her senses hesitate between the two, Bella?"

"I wouldn't have believed it of you, Freda. You are marrying the man for his money!"

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Almost as soon as she left school Isabella Morris married Mr. James Thistleby, and I lost sight of her for several years.

It was purely a love match, I believe, and they were very happy together, until one sad week, whilst they were travelling in Italy, when Mr. Thistleby caught a sort of low typhoid fever which happened to be very prevalent in Turin, where they were staying, and died after a few days' illness.

It was during the first year of her widowhood that I again met my old schoolfellow. She was at that time in very low spirits and in bad health. I did my best to cheer and comfort her, and after a time she recovered her strength, and with it her natural cheerfulness and liveliness. She became warmly attached to me. We had now been best friends for more than three years. Bella was very kind to me. She was a wealthy little widow, with a nice house in town besides the villa at Seaciff; and it was her greatest delight to load her poverty-stricken friend with presents and kindness.

Every year I spent as much time as I could spare from my old father with her, either in London or at Seaciff; and sometimes she paid us a visit, which, considering the many discomforts in my home compared with the luxurious plenty in her own, was certainly very good and unselfish of her.

Curiously enough, in all the time that we had been friends, although she talked of him perpetually, I had never seen her husband's youngest brother, Mark Thistleby. He had been a good deal abroad with his regiment, and when at home on leave I had never happened to meet him. But now he was coming down to Seaciff to stay with his sister-in-law, and this very evening I was to behold this paragon at last.

I never like other people's paragons. As a rule they do not answer in the least to one's own expectations, or to their friends' enthusiastic descriptions of them. They are generally perfectly commonplace and uninteresting, and one wonders what there can be to admire in them.

I did not in the least expect to find Bella's wonderful brother-in-law an exception to my usual experience in this matter; and yet as I proceeded with my toilette, arraying myself in the ancient black silk I had so maliciously set me to wear, I was conscious of a certain amount of curiosity, and I felt to speculating vaguely as to what Captain Thistleby would be like.

I foresaw it perfectly. A cavalry officer! Did I not know the species well—too well?

Do they not all have long moustaches, a swaggering walk, a flip-pant manner, and very little brains? Do they not all set to work to make love—more or less sham love—to every decent-looking girl they meet? And then do they not go away imagining they have made a conquest of her, and that she is languishing for them ever after? I could see no reason why this particular man should be different from all others of his kind, for Bella, dear little soul! was just the sort of woman to be taken in by a man of that style, and to fall down and worship him.

Meanwhile I heard all the confusion of an arrival in the house. The door-bell rang, there was a hurrying of feet, Bella came flying out of her room along the passage to the hall. There were sounds of laughing and talking, and sounds of luggage being unladen and brought into the house. Presently I heard them come upstairs. Bella was apparently showing him his room. They passed close outside my door, both talking at once, and then more doors were slammed; silence in the house succeeded to the commotion, and I knew that the stranger was safe in his room dressing for dinner.

By-and-by, having completed my own toilet, I opened my door and peeped out. There was a dead silence. I reflected that it would be very embarrassing to be found by Captain Thistleby sitting alone in the drawing-room with nobody to

introduce us to each other, so I retreated again, determined to wait until I was quite sure that Bella had left her room. After a few minutes I heard her door open, and I again issued forth on to the landing. This time they were both going downstairs together, and I peeped cautiously over the banisters upon the tops of their heads, which the hanging lamp above illuminated brilliantly.

Just as I thought! Curly hair and a long moustache; the swagger-walk of course; and—Bella is speaking—and in the absolute horror which filled me at the sound of her words, I utterly forgot to make any more observations upon Captain Thistleby's personal appearance.

"I am so delighted that you will see her at last! I have planned it for ages; she is the very woman in all the world for you, Mark," said that odious, treacherous, wicked little woman.

"My dear girl, does she expect me to make love to her? It will give me a great deal of trouble. You know very well how I always avoid young ladies, head-and-butts is my detestation," was the careless reply, with a soubçon of that drawl which I had, perhaps unjustly learnt to associate with the general tone and manner of her Majesty's cavalry officers.

I flew back into my room in a perfect tempest of rage and indignation. A sudden determination possessed me. Like a mad creature I fell down on my knees before my wardrobe, violently pulling out one drawer after the other, until I last found the something I was looking for, then I stood up before the long glass and began arraying myself in it.

It was a cape of the very richest Spanish point lace, which had belonged to my mother—the only valuable thing I possessed. I had never worn it; in fact, I had only brought it to Seaciff with me with the view of inducing Bella to take it to London to sell for me, in order to provide myself with some indispensable necessities of life. It was far too rich and handsome for a girl. I wrapped it round my slight figure with trembling hands, and I was conscious as I surveyed my image in the glass, that not all the gauze dresses and blue ribbons in the world could make me look half so well as that old lace scarf drawn hastily over my shabby black silk with the brilliant burning color in my cheeks which no maiden modesty, no shy vanity, had called forth; but simply a blind, raging anger.

"He shall see if I am a 'bread-and-butter' girl!" I muttered furiously. "I will make him admire me desperately, and then I will snub him. Oh, how I will snub him! I expect him to make love to me, indeed! I should like to see him dare! Oh, how glad I am that I am engaged to Mr. Curtis!"

The dinner-bell rang, and I sallied forth erect and proud, with the air of a Marie Antoinette on her way to the scaffold.

CHAPTER II.

"Miss Clifford—Captain Thistleby," says Bella, as I enter, "and here is dinner at the same time."

I bowed stiffly. I was conscious of crisp brown hair, a tall figure, and the flash of a wonderful pair of hazel eyes that met mine for an instant, also of a comical upturning of Mrs. Bella's eyebrows as she surveyed my striking and somewhat grotesque costume.

"Now, how shall we manage," debated our hostess. "Two ladies to one gentleman, I think, Freda, as you are the young lady of the party, that Mark ought to take you."

I drew back coldly. "Oh, dear no! as I am engaged to be married, I cannot be looked upon as a 'young lady' any longer." This I uttered with the most chilling coldness.

Captain Thistleby immediately offered his arm to Bella with perfect tranquility, and I followed in the rear, feeling, it must be confessed, somewhat small.

As soon as we were fairly launched into the middle of soup, that dreadful Bella began her persecutions.

"My darling child, what a lovely lace fichu! Where did you get it, and how is it I have never seen it before? As I live, it's the best bit of Spanish I have ever seen! Mark, you are a connoisseur in lace, do look at Miss Clifford's scarf."

Thus adjured, Captain Thistleby vouchsafed to turn his eyes towards me, and gazed fixedly, not at me, at my shoulder, during which inspection I became gradually of a fine deep peony color.

"It's a very good specimen," he said, when he had finished staring at it; and turning round again to Bella, without so much as a glance at my face, by which slight I felt

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uncomfortably piqued. "It reminds me very much of that bit we bought at Rome, Bella, in that dirty little street behind the Via Babuini. Do you remember how eager you were to give the old woman her hundred and fifty francs, and how I kept interrupting you, and shouting to her seventy-five, not a sou more?"

"Yes; and how you dragged me out of the shop almost in tears at last, because you wouldn't let me be cheated, and how the old woman was half way down the street, crying 'Prendete lo, signora,' and flung it at my head wrapped in a dirty bit of old newspaper."

"Ah! but that was nothing to the bargain we got at Verona, in the little grocer's shop, where we had spied a heap of rags of lace in the corner of the window."

"Yes, and you would ask for candies, and coffee, and tobacco, and heaven knows how many other smelling horrors, for fear they should find out what we really had our eye on. I thought you would never lead up to the subject."

"Didn't I get you the whole lot for five francs, you ungrateful woman?"

"Think Freda!" turning to me, "five francs! It cost me £3 to have it mended in London, and it is the handsomest lace flounce I possess! Did you go to the old curiosity shop at Lyons, Mark, last time you came through?"

"No; I had not time. Do you remember, Bella, the first time we went there, and how angry poor old Jen was with us for wasting our money on that 'trashy tin plate' as he called my beautiful Limoges enamel?"

And so on, and so on, through half a dozen more reminiscences of their foreign travels together.

I began to feel very much out of it. Decidedly I had wasted my Spanish lace and my indignation together upon this utterly unimpassive man, who simply appeared to ignore my existence.

I yawned and began looking about at the pictures on the walls, with all of which I was perfectly familiar, in a futile attempt to create an independent line of amusement for myself.

I began to think I need not have announced my engaged position with so much precipitation. Captain Thistleby did not seem inclined to pay me even the ordinary civilities of society. Perhaps, I mused, he does not care for tall girls, with reddish hair and gray eyes. Perhaps he prefers pigmy little blondes, like Bella, with pink cheeks and round blue baby eyes. Perhaps—and here he looks up and catches me staring at him, which sends my own eyes back to my apricot jelly and the color hotly up into my tell-tale cheeks.

After dinner it is much the same story. I go to the piano at Bella's desire, and she further requests her brother-in-law to come and turn my music over.

He excuses himself. "I am very stupid at that sort of work," he says, without a sign of rising from the comfortable arm-chair in which he has ensconced himself. "I should be sure to make a mess of it. I think Miss Clifford would rather be without me."

I think so too; but as it would not be civil to say so, I merely remark that I never require anybody to turn over the pages of my music.

"What will you sing, Freda?" asked Bella. "What sort of songs do you like, Mark?"

"I don't think songs are much in my line," answers this extremely disagreeable man. "You know I was never sentimental, and I don't understand music. Young ladies' songs—engaged young ladies' songs—are all very sweet—roses, capids, true-lover's knots, etc.—are they not, Miss Clifford?"

"Not all," I answered, feeling vicious; and straightway I sat down and began to sing that well-known quaint old English ditty:

"Once I loved a maiden fair,
But she did deceive me."

I put into it all the vigor of which I was capable, and the bitter animus which I concentrated into the last line of the song surprised even myself.

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"Now I go and adore thee," I sang almost murderously. I was surprised to hear a low laugh behind me, and to find that Captain Thistleby was standing by the piano.

"I have not done you justice. You evidently understand the passion of hatred perfectly," Miss Clifford, he said with a mocking bow.

"I felt myself properly snubbed, and took refuge behind my novel, leaving to Bella the sole entertainment of her guest for the rest of the evening."

"So you did beautifully yourself, Miss Freda," said Bella, as we stood, flat candlestick in hand, at our bedroom doors. "I could hardly hold my tongue. I was so amazed when you came in. I nearly told Mark about the blue gauze then and there, only I was so afraid of your anger."

"I am very glad you did not."

"You made yourself look extremely captivating, Freda."

"I assure you I had not the least wish; that is to say, I put it on with quite another motive—for quite a different reason from what you suppose," I stammered, somewhat confusedly.

"Oh, I daresay! Well, how do you like him?"

(To be Continued.)

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