

# INCOGNITO.

OR, IS SHE FAIR FOR ME?

(Continued.)

"Are there any military men about the town?" was the artist's final question, and the agent seemed to find it so preposterous that he actually smiled.

"Why, Sir, there hasn't been a garrison here these seventy years," he said; "and if a lad enlists and comes back to the town in his soldier's togs the girls are ready to fight one another for him. As to officers, I don't know when I saw one last; for the earl's family they belong to the diplomatic service, and from what I understand the epaulettes are only second fiddle at Burghley House."

"Then what the asterisks did she mean by that allusion to the general?" muttered Delgardie as the door closed on his visitor. The information he had been at so much pains to obtain put him, when procured, in a downright bad temper, for the little there was of it directly discouraged his hope of securing Ellice for his model. Was it probable that a young lady who had come to this outlandish town to live in strict retirement would yield her features to the publicity of his canvas? And even if she consented, there was the *noli me tangere* granddame and the enigmatical swashbuckler to be demolished.

It was very hard to have the ideal model he had been hunting for so long fenced away from him by all these difficulties, and Delgardie worried so much that the doctor kept him to his room three days longer than he had at first threatened to do.

The epoch of enforced repose—so trying to our artist's patience, came to an end at last. One fine morning in August, when the ardour of most of his acquaintances was being expended in grouse coverts, Delgardie returned, with an eagerness at least equal to the sportsman's, to the scene of his interrupted labors. All the morning he sat before his canvas making memory sketches of the face of Ellice Mornington. But the morning went, and luncheon hour came without finding him any nearer a successful reproduction of the face that had struck his fancy.

The failure discouraged him less than may have been supposed, however, for he promised himself a refreshment of memory before the day was out. Though unprovided with an orthodox introduction to Mrs. Mornington and her granddaughter, Delgardie considered that the courtesy of a visit would be expected of him as soon as he was convalescent, and having discovered that ceremonial calls at Stamford should be paid at five o'clock he denied himself his afternoon cigar, put on a cylinder hat and black coat, and as St. Martin's was chiming the hour set foot on the stairs of Suffolk House.

If any one had attributed his halting ascent and the irregular beating of his heart to the struggles of a new-born passion in its swathing bands, the artist would have laughed scornfully and informed that misguided critic that the quavers of an unaccepted lover are not to be compared in the same week with the mental anguish of an artist liable to be refused the model on whom the success of his masterpiece depends.

## CHAPTER III.

A double door shut off Mrs. Mornington's floor from the rest of the house, and Delgardie's knock was answered by Miss Ellice in person. She seemed slightly surprised, but not at all embarrassed at seeing him, and having deftly shut a door left open behind her, though not quick enough to prevent the artist's sharp eyes catching sight of a petroleum stove with a kettle steaming upon it, she led her visitor across an empty room covered with oil cloth, that served as vestibule, and introduced him into the apartment immediately under his studio, and—save that it was more ornate—the fac-simile of it.

In this room, seated in an arm-chair as venerable as herself, he found Mrs. Mornington, who received him with courtesy but no particular cordiality.

"Take a seat, Mr. Delgardie," she said, indicating a chair opposite her own, "and let me assure myself that you are none the worse for your unfortunate fall."

Somewhat chilled by her manner, our artist obeyed.

"You will remember, madam, that you advised me to consult a doctor," he said. "But for his despotism I should have been here ten days ago to offer my grateful thanks to you and Miss Mornington."

In making this allusion to Ellice, Delgardie looked away towards the younger lady, who was folding back a shutter that had been closed against the too searching summer sunshine. She responded to the look with a slight smile and slight inclination of her head, both grace personified.

Where had she acquired that easy charm of manner which is distinctly not the characteristic of the English middle class? Not at any rate in the life of retirement she was leading now. The searching look peculiar to artists, rested on Ellice so long that, with the evident intention of recalling it, Mrs. Mornington said: "You did well to obey your doctor rather than the demands of politeness, which in our case you are good enough to exaggerate. My granddaughter and I did no more for you than common humanity would have impelled us to do for any fellow creature in need of help."

This was cold water with a vengeance, and perhaps Ellice, who had joined the Likers, felt that her relative's defensive pride had made her a little cruel, for she said with adorable gentleness: "I hope you mean to be very cautious in using your high ladder in future, Mr. Delgardie, for another

time a roll of druggut may not be there to catch your head, and I may be too far off to hear you fall."

Our artist thanked her with a look of eloquent admiration. "I think I must have fallen into a brown study the other night and forgotten I was up the ladder at all," said he, "all that day I had been trying to conjure up a face appropriate to the chief figure in my picture—now I have found it."

"Did I not recognize the front facade of St. Martin's church?" interposed grandmamma, for whom a sudden light had fallen on the re-awakening ejaculation of which the painter himself was probably oblivious—"The model at last!" "Of late years I have been unable to attend any exhibitions of painting, but I have seen a few engravings of your work, Mr. Delgardie, enough to convince me that you merit the prominent position which you have reached so early. Will you not indulge me with a little description of your contemporary work?" she continued more graciously; for since Ellice rose and glided out of the room, the effort to be cordial evidently cost her less.

The painter wondered whether some personal motive lurked behind old Mrs. Mornington's sudden curiosity about his picture, and took care to avoid any mention of a blank space on his canvas or the sex of the figure designed to fill it. And while he was talking he managed to cast furtive glances round the great, scantily furnished room in search of any objects that would give him a clue to the history, past and present, of its occupants.

The furniture itself told nothing; it had evidently been hired or bought second hand; but there were a few things scattered here and there, which to the eyes of a discerning beholder were like open paragraphs of their owner's biography. For instance, on the tarnished gilt console-table, between the two centre windows, was a precious green malachite tray containing a five o'clock tea-service in egg-shell china, opal and gold; and a little in the rear of the old lady's chair was a dainty hand-painted table with the latest number of the *Nineteenth Century* lying upon it. These things told of intellectual tastes and expensive habits, contracted at some former epoch; but, as they were evidently placed where they stood for present use, they played their part also in the contemporary lives of the two ladies.

One object, however, perceived later, as it hung on the wall almost behind him, interested Delgardie more than all the rest. This was a three-quarter length, half life-size photo of a lady, executed in the worst possible manner of a third-class photographer, with all the high lights glaring, and the half-shadows—if there ever were any—gone. But for the fact that the lady, thus slanderously misrepresented, bore a faded but sufficiently forcible likeness to Ellice to be a relation, Delgardie would have wondered how two women, who talked of appreciating art, could have tolerated the sight of such a wretched abortion of it.

With the conversation running on pictures it required no great skill to introduce the subject of portrait-painting, and after a few remarks, all more or less leading up to it, our artist managed to say—undesignedly as it seemed—"I presume you value that photograph, madam, on account of the likeness, for it was shockingly taken."

"It was done in great haste by a country photographer," Mrs. Mornington replied, and the deep-seated sorrow, always visible in her face, became pathetically prominent as she turned her eyes to the fading picture.

Looking at her, Delgardie received a sudden inspiration. He drew his chair a little nearer to the old lady's and said, in a suave and sympathizing voice, "Does it not grieve you greatly to see a portrait you value so much fading away before your eyes? In another year or two it will have ceased to exist except in your memory."

Mrs. Mornington heaved a deep sigh and her eyes grew moist with the scanty tears of age.

"Will you allow me to suggest a method of averting this calamity?" he continued persuasively.

"Indeed, I shall be most grateful," was the eager response, "the original—my daughter—has been dead four years, and that is the only likeness of her in my possession."

Then, in virtue of our being neighbors and of my being deeply in your debt, pray permit me to copy this portrait in Bartolozzi chalks. It may not be so life-like as an oil painting, but at least it will be unchangeable, and in its present faded state it is impossible to copy it satisfactorily in oils. You will be conferring a real kindness on me," pressed the artist, seeing the effect he had produced, "there are many hours when it will be a positive rest for me to turn from my great composition to the differing tools and touch of a chalk-drawing. This photograph ought to come down. It is a perpetual slander on its subject. Consent to banish it for two or three weeks, and you shall receive in its place a likeness that at least shall not be a calumny on your lost daughter."

Delgardie did not consider himself much of a diplomatist in the usual way, but he was so fortunate as to have happened on the one chord in this reserved and cautious nature which would respond to his touch. Mrs. Mornington was so startled by the proposition made to her, that for once pride and caution went down before genuine emotion. Delgardie had offered her the one and only irresistible temptation. She yielded to it and accepted.

"Dear child!" she exclaimed, as Ellice reappeared with a small silver teapot and some thin bread and butter, "our kind neighbor has actually proposed to take a permanent drawing from your mother's photograph."

"Is it possible?" Ellice stopped short and cast at the artist one of those looks which come from and go to the soul.

"Can you be surprised that I should wish to record my gratitude for the"—happy chance that procured me your acquaintance, the imprudent artist was going to say. But this suicidal speech was nipped in the midst by a lively knock at the outer door, upon which Mrs. Mornington exclaimed, "The general!" and Ellice, resigning her burden into the extended hands of Mr. Delgardie, hastened out of the room.