

Lesmoro was incapable of committing bigamy, in my public capacity I am obliged to admit that the case is an ugly one, and that we must be well prepared with robes of evidence.

"What do you propose doing?" asked Percy, speaking for the first time since he had drawn upon himself his father's anger.

"Sending one of my clerks, a shrewd fellow whom I can trust, into Hampshire. It will be no easy matter to trace Mr. Lesmoro's movements after so many years, but we must do our best."

Lord Glenaughton, who for the last few months had been pacing the room, came and stood opposite Percy as soon as the solicitor had arranged his papers and bowed himself out.

"This girl—Esther or Lestello—like all women of her stamp, must have her price," he said. "Is she not to be bought off? Silence, Percy!" he added imperatively. "I do not share your infatuation, and I will not let it stand in the way of our family interests. Think of the disgrace that will overwhelm us if we are unable to avert a public trial!"

"How is it to be averted, except by tampering with Wyatt Paulton, and paying him the price he would set upon his revelations?" Percy demanded indignantly. "If a villain can be made to throw Lestello over if you can prove to him that it will be to his own advantage."

"I will see this man," said the Earl, thoughtfully.

"No, father, you must not! Percy, you will not permit it," cried Percy, now turning from one to the other in great agitation. "I may not live to see the issue of this affair; I don't think that I shall; but I believe my spirit would come back to reproach you if Lestello were wronged by those who should protect her."

The Earl angrily flung off the hand which had laid on his arm; but Percy answered promptly, "I agree with Percy that there must be no treating with the opposite party. No one can dislike notoriety more than I do; and this matter,"—he colored and his brows contracted as he spoke—"this matter will involve a most unenviable publicity if it comes to a trial."

"How is it to be prevented, if your excessive precision stands in the way of any efforts to prevent it?" his uncle testily demanded.

"Only in this way, my lord. If the proofs Lestello's guardian professes to be able to produce satisfy me that she is my father's daughter by a prior marriage, I shall give up to her whatever was his, and try to forget that I have ever considered myself a Lesmoro. With what remains of my mother's property I will go abroad."

"And Ida—do you forget how painfully this will affect her?" asked the Earl, anxiously.

"Poor Ida!" Percy softly added; and his cousin looked undecided, but only for a moment.

"Of course I release Lady Ida from her engagement. Until my rights are proved beyond dispute, I cannot ask her to become my wife."

"You are too chivalrous and self-denying, my dear boy," Lord Glenaughton replied, "if Ida thinks with me, she will not suffer you to release her. I shall feel greatly disappointed if this affair is permitted to delay your marriage."

"Yes, yes; let the marriage take place," added Percy. "Poor Ida must be spared, let who will suffer."

But Percy was not to be turned from his purpose. He would not wed his beautiful cousin while a cloud hung over his prospects; and Ida, on learning the reason why the ceremony was to be deferred, agreed with him.

"Of course it makes no difference in our feelings, dear Percy," she said tenderly; "but I must not burden you with a wife until we are sure that all is well."

"Why not say at once that you'll not have him till you are sure of his estates?" angrily queried Percy, who had come into the room while she was speaking. "Now is the time to show the sincerity of your affection—if you have any. Don't let Percy sacrifice himself, but be thankful that with your hand you can give him a certain income, and secure your own happiness, come what will."

Ida covered her face with her handkerchief. "You are cruel to reproach me," she sobbed in reply; "and indeed, Percy, you ought not to urge me into a step which I might repent. Percy knows me better than you do, and comprehends that it is for his sake more than my own I am acceding to his wish for our marriage to be postponed."

She hurried from the room, hiding her face as she went, and Percy muttering something about the selfishness and fickleness of women often defeating their objects, went towards his cousin, and laid his arm affectionately on Percy's shoulder.

"Take courage, my dear Percy; the most tangled skein may be unravelled if we do but set about it patiently, and you will find a way out of your difficulties, I dare say."

"I was not thinking of myself, but of the slur upon my father's fame," Percy answered, hoarsely.

"Ay, that is where it stings you; to be obliged to fear that the man you have revered, and who has shown such a fair outside to the world, could sit as heartily as the rest of us! It's a bitter pill to swallow. I wish I could bear all the anxiety and heart-burnings in your stead; and I wish still more fervently that I had died before this episode occurred!"

"Thanks for all your kindness, but you need not make yourself so uneasy upon my account," answered Percy, forcing a smile. "I dare say I shall be strong enough to bear any ill fate that may befall me."

Percy shook his head, but said no more, and the subject was not recurred to.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT THE STAGE DOOR.

A week or two after this, as Percy was returning from the office of Mr. Xatley, with whom he had been holding a long and dispiriting conference, he passed the doors of the Theatre, and saw by the flaming bills posted upon them that Lestello was performing one of her favorite characters. He was seized with a desire to see her; to hear from her own lips how far she had participated in the attempt to ruin him. Sometimes he thought of her bitterly, resentfully, as a designing creature, who had exorcised all her fascinations in order to find out the weak points of his character, and perhaps to glean from his thoughtless admissions some piece of information that would strengthen her case. At other moments, he inclined to believe with Percy that she was but a tool in the hands of the arch schemer, Paulton, whom she evidently feared and distrusted.

Wavering between these two opinions, he strolled round to the stage door, where the model of a actress she used was standing, and there awaited her appearance.

She came out at the conclusion of the first piece, leaning on Miss Hill's arm, the hood of her crimson burnouse prettily framing her sparkling face. Her hands, as well as Miss Hill's, were full of flowers that had been flung upon the stage, and she was selecting the freshest for a little boy who ran forward and greeted her eagerly as soon as she appeared.

She smiled at him.

"These roses are for your sister. Tell her I am glad to hear that she is better, and I will pay her another visit soon, poor child."

She was hurrying to escape his thanks for the coin that accompanied the bouquet, when her eye fell upon Percy. Her first impulse was to draw her cloak more closely around her, so as to conceal the elegant evening costume she had worn on the stage. She could not conquer her repugnance to appearing before him as the mere actress, and there was reproach in her tones when she addressed him.

"So you have chosen to forget my injunction, Mr. Lesmoro, and now you know me in more characters than one."

"Perhaps so," he retorted; "but that knowledge has not been obtained within these walls. I am merely a passer-by, who was seized with a fancy to see the Queen of Song enter her carriage."

Lestello would have smiled at this compliment but for the words that preceded it. Pondering upon them, she moved forward, and Percy silently handed her and her companion into their brougham.

"Are you going our way?" Lestello asked timidly. "May I offer you a seat?"

It was accepted, but Percy scarcely spoke till they reached Brompton, and the eyes of the actress invited him to enter the house with her.

"It is too late to intrude upon you," he answered. "Besides, in the position we now hold towards each other, it would be unwise on my part, at all events, to loiter here."

"I do not understand you," said Lestello, dropping her hood, and coming a little nearer to where Percy was standing, just in the shadow of the light veranda. "If I could see your features, I might gather your meaning from them; but, in this darkness, I can only learn what the words of your voice tell me."

"And that is—" he queried.

"That you do not regard me as kindly as you did the last time we met—and parted," she murmured beneath her breath. "What have I done to vex you?"

He evaded a direct reply.

"It would be the height of injustice to be angry with you, if you believe that you are justified in what you are doing."

"Still I am at fault!" she exclaimed. "What have I done?—to what are you alluding?"

He answered rather incredulously.

"Is it possible that your guardian advocates your right to call yourself a Lesmoro, and oust the reputed heir to the Lesmoro property, without your sanction?"

Lestello uttered a faint cry, and grasped his arm.

"Wyatt, you mean—Wyatt Paulton! Then he has struck the blow with which he menaced me! But where?—how? He promised—oh, fool that I was to trust to his promises! What has he done, and what—what am I?"

"According to Mr. Wyatt Paulton," said Percy, coldly, "Madame Lestello is the daughter of the late Arden Lesmoro."

"And who was he?" she demanded so naively that his doubts of her truth began to vanish.

"The Earl of Glenaughton's brother, and—my father!"

Lestello staggered back as if she had received a violent blow.

"No, no!" she gasped. "Don't say that! Don't compel me to hear that ruin has fallen upon you—and through me!"

"I am not ruined yet," he answered, haughtily. "And I not only refuse to believe that my father was a villain, but I will maintain this belief against the assertions of a wily valet and his confederates."

"But how will you do this?" she asked, with her hands pressed to her brows. "The paper that my mother bade me treasure—the proof that I am not the child of shame—is in Wyatt's possession. He stole it from me before I could

decipher its contents. If I am Arden Lesmoro's daughter, you—"

She paused, and Percy turned from her with a gesture that made her tremble from head to foot.

"Wyatt has done this to revenge himself upon me for my obstinacy!" she exclaimed. "Tell me what I must do?"

Percy could not resist smiling rather bitterly at the question, "Would it not be somewhat ridiculous to constitute as your adviser the man who must lose all if you triumph?"

"And you think I could endure to be enriched at your expense?" Lestello reproachfully demanded. "No, Mr. Lesmoro; whatever the law gave to me I would return to you, and rejoice in it only as it enabled me to prove the sincerity of your disposition to doubt."

"You talk generously; but could you restore to me my father's good name—my own self-respect and standing in society? Money, however lavishly bestowed, would still leave me a nameless and disgraced man."

She wrung her hands despairingly.

"And you think I could have averted this? You hate me because this claim has been made in my behalf?"

"Nay, now you are wronging me. If you are convinced that it is a just one, I have no right to complain. Yet I had rather any other hand had crushed me than yours, Lestello!"

Weeping bitterly, she leaned against one of the slender columns of the veranda.

"You break my heart! For years I had dreamed of establishing my birth, and clearing the name of my poor deserted mother; yet now that the moment has arrived, it overwhelms me with misery. Do you say that mine is the hand that injures you? Mine! Alas! I would have laid down my life to have saved you a moment's pain or sorrow."

Percy could no longer restrain himself. He took her cold hands in his, and wiped away her tears.

"Dearest Lestello, I will not have you grieve thus. Now that I am convinced you have not taken a willing part in this business, I can better bear it. The worse sting of all—the belief that while you spoke me fair you were dissembling—has gone never to return; and not even in my thoughts will I ever reproach you again!"

She smiled at him gratefully. "I will deserve this goodness. Weak and bound in the coils of a villain, I will yet prove that I am not leagued with Wyatt Paulton to injure you!"

"It is unnecessary. Come what may, Lestello, I will have faith in you! And now I must not detain you any longer. Farewell, and if we meet no more—"

But, with bowed head, she was already hurrying into the house. Shutting herself in her room, she changed her dress, and then seating herself at the window, watched the misty sky till the first streaks of dawn began to chase its shadows. Then, haggard and changed to a degree that would have been marvellous to any one who did not divine the terrible mental struggle she had undergone during those solitary hours, she wrapped herself in a large, dark shawl, and with her face thickly veiled, left the house. In another hour she was sitting in Wyatt Paulton's breakfast-room, waiting for him to emerge from his chamber.

(To be continued.)

LITTLE MISS FRERE.

I.

It was the evening of a November day. The wind whistled down the valley and sang a doleful song through the branches of the tall pine-trees surrounding the house on the hill. Overhead the heavy clouds which had hung low all through the day were broken asunder and dragged towards the earth on either side as though by their own weight, leaving filmy ragged edges through which the great, calm sky looked down. In the west, covering his retreat, bristled the golden lances of the sun just above a bar of deepest red, which shone like the pillar of cloud and fire in the days of the promise. Lights gleamed out from the windows of the house; pointed arrows of brightness shot through the half-closed shutters or between the folds of the curtains left awry, and touched the road below, where the working people from the town were plodding home to the dingy little cabins on the flat along the bend of the river.

Within the house summer and sunshine seemed still to reign. A flood of light poured from the empty drawing-room; and from the open door across the hall came the odor of fruit and flowers, with the bright sparkle of silver. Dinner was just over, and the family lingered a moment in the dimly lighted hall before proceeding to the drawing-room.

"Let us stay here," pleaded pretty Mrs. Benchley, sinking into one of the cathedral chairs so stiffly against the wall. "To gather in a drawing-room after dinner is a mere conventionality. I am sure it is much nicer here;" and the widow shook out her soft black draperies and drew her chair nearer to the register where they had all gathered for a moment, as though the change from the bright warm room, where the halolopes were even so soon withering in the open air, had brought a chill. The rays from the blazing star upon the forehead of the bronze dancing-girl at the foot of the winding stairs lit up the group—the fair-faced woman, the guest of the house, who had spoken, leaning forward with white outstretched hands; the Professor, tall, angular, with a stoop

about his shoulders, and shaggy red-brown hair hiding his strong face, and the kindly eyes smiling down upon the widow through his glasses; last of all, but first in importance, the Professor's mother, Madame Poffle, the hostess, standing upon the threshold of the drawing-room where the strong light brought out every tint of her quaint many-hued dress, every line of her gentle old face shaded by its queer little front of white curls. A child had been pulled playfully after the widow by a silken scarf, like a pet spaniel; a little blue-eyed, fair-haired creature who called her "mamma," and curled down now at her feet.

"I like this place," she said, with a deep sigh of contentment, throwing back her head to embrace in one long, lingering glance every charm of her surroundings; from the ghostly shadows enveloping the winding stairs, to the queer family portraits ranged in double rows where the light struck full upon the wall before her. "Yes, I like this place," and she nestled her cheek against her mother's knee. Each one of the group spoke in reply to the child.

"If you do, you must remain with us a long time," said hospitable Madame Poffle.

"Fussy utters aloud what some of us only think deep down in our hearts;" and the widow threw a glance, half shy and half coquettish, towards the Professor, who had bent over the child. "And I like you," he said. But though his hand rested upon the child's hair, his eyes were upon the mother.

"How beautiful are the mother and child!" he thought. "How beautiful is the mother-love, and here in my own home!" That was all. But the very thought breathed a suggestion; and in these stray thoughts and ways begins the conjunction of a certain verb the varying moods and painful tones of which the Professor had learned by heart once, years before.

The words had been uttered almost in chorus. A pause followed; the widow's head was bent to the child; a soft color had crept into her face. Ah, if it might be! She was no longer young. All the warmth which youth knows had departed with its freshness. Love could never again be a sweet surprise—the stealthy creeping out of the heart while the sentry slept. But here was rest and peace, and something which even wealth could not bring. She was weary of carrying her burdens, which others envied, since they were called riches. She was tired of facing the world alone. O, if it might be!

Madame Poffle broke the silence with a platitude. She had taken up her knitting and resigned herself with a sigh to this arrangement for the evening, which did not include the grand drawing-room. Had her guest been less charming or of a position less assured, the small host gathered so informally here would have been marshaled upon the other side of the wide doors, towards which Mrs. Benchley had turned her pretty shoulders. But certain thoughts, amounting almost to schemes, as she glanced from the widow to her tall son and drew the thread of her knitting over her left forefinger, resigned her to almost any possible innovation. "What is so charming as the frank innocence of childhood?" she said. "I would we might all utter our thoughts aloud."

Unconscious hypocrite! who would have suffered martyrdom sooner than reveal the schemes at that moment working in her own brain.

"Happy state!" exclaimed the Professor—"Swedenborg's heaven, where things are as they seem; and none ever thinks three and says four." But that would hardly do for mortals. A certain amount of deception is absolutely essential to—well, to the progress of civilization, let us say."

"Robert!" The exclamation was uttered in a tone of horror, accompanied by a side-long movement of the white curls. The Professor turned a quizzical glance towards his mother.

"You are shocked? The creed we exemplify in our lives would startle the most of us, I fancy. For example: article first, To lie at the very last extremity, where the truth positively will not screen us, or when the truth would involve a breach of good manners. We all do that, you know."

But Madame Poffle preserved a dignified and displeased silence.

The Professor laughed, but moved nearer. "Are you ashamed of your son? Are you fearful that your guest may think him a pagan? Mrs. Benchley, pray don't."

"Robert, Robert, you talk nonsense, if nothing worse." And though the tone was reproving, the eyes raised to his were full of love. "I only expressed the wish that we might all speak from our hearts as freely as that little child."

"Could you?"

"I—I think I might." There was a slight quaver in Madame Poffle's voice, suggesting the possibility of a doubt.

"Suppose I try you now," he answered. "Tell us your thoughts of a moment since, when you took up your knitting."

The thread snapped in her fingers. "One cannot recall. How can I tell?" she began.

The Professor laughed. "It is easy to theorize," he said. He turned to the widow. "At least we may guess. She was taking John to task, mentally, for having forgotten the dining-room windows last night."

"Indeed I was not."

"Ah!" exclaimed the Professor, "so you do remember." But to this she vouchsafed no reply. There was an air of triumph in her denial. They were far from the truth. They were cold as ice, as the children say in hunt-the-thimble. Possibly he knew it. Possibly he surmised it.