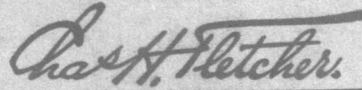


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The Countess of Landon.

CHAPTER XVII.

Half an hour before this, a post-chaise was drawn up to the door of the inn in the town near camp. The horses were faded and panting, the postilion tired and cross, and he swore as he got off his horse and eyed it and its fellow for a moment or two before he went to the carriage window.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said to some one inside, "but my boss is clean beat." The door opened, and Seymour stepped out. He looked as tired as the postilion, and sullen and ill-tempered into the bargain.

"What place is this?" he asked. "Crosby," said the man. "If we are to go on any further to-night, I must have a change of horses, sir."

"Can we get them here?" asked Seymour. The postilion nodded reluctantly as he thought of the comfortable kitchen and the plentiful supper that awaited him if his passengers would only stop.

Seymour went to the carriage. "Will you stop the night here, mother?" he asked. The countess was leaning back, her eyes closed, holding Irene's hand. She sat up and looked at Seymour, and beyond him at the setting sun.

"Can we not go on?" she said in a low, strained voice. "We can go on to doomsday, or the end of the world, if you wish it," he said, with ill-repressed irritation. "But the question is, whether you are strong enough to endure even another hour's journey."

"I am quite strong," said the countess. "It is Irene." Irene pressed her hand. "Do not think of me, dear," she said in a low voice. "I would rather go on, if you are sure you can bear it."

The countess thought a moment. "We will go on," she said, resolutely. "I can not rest. Besides, we may miss them again."

"I think that very likely," said Seymour, as he helped them to alight. Both the countess and Irene looked pale and wear; but there was in each of their faces and shining in their eyes the look of proud unbelief with which they had met Seymour's assertion of Royce's degradation.

The countess drew her fur cloak round her and looked up at the sky. "When and how will this end?" she murmured. Irene caught the words and pressed her hand.

"Do not be afraid, dear," she whispered, encouragingly. "If we find him, it will be to prove that the story is a lie. With every mile we have come my trust in him has grown stronger. You will see!"

Seymour came up to them. "It will take half an hour to change horses," he said. "The man must have some rest. We had better go into the house."

He led them in, and the landlord escorted them to the best room, and brought the wine Seymour had ordered.

"Ask him," said the countess in a low voice. Seymour nodded, and in a careless tone made some remark about the weather.

"An out-of-the-way place, this," he said. "I suppose you have a great many tramps—and gypsies here?" The landlord polished the table with his napkin.

"Now and again, sir," he said. "We lie a bit off the high-road, and don't get so much troubled as some. But, ah, yes! there's tramps and gypsies about, especially at this time of the year. There was a camp in the woods the other day. Maybe it's there still, very like, sir."

Seymour waited until he had gone, then he turned to the countess. "This may be the part of the gang to which Royce belongs," he said. Irene's face flushed.

"Why should you say that?" she said, her eyes meeting his with proud steadfastness. He shrugged his shoulders and drank some wine before replying; then, with a smile, he said.

"Your faith does you infinite credit, my dear Irene. Not even the description of the strange gentleman who, the gypsies we caught up after Markham Fair told us had joined them, appears to shake your conviction that I have concocted this story. That part of the gang which had left the main body traveled in this direction, and the landlord tells us that gypsies are encamped near here. If we do not find Royce among them, I shall be very much mistaken."

"You did not find him before; you will not find him now," she said, proudly. "Time will prove," he said. "Will you not have some wine?"

She declined with a motion of her hand, and, going to the window, gazed out upon the long stretch of road. The countess sat silent and motionless, and Seymour, having half finished the bottle, went out to hurry up the hostler.

If he had been asked whether he wished to find Royce or not, he would have been puzzled to answer. Gambler-like, he was going on with the hope that, if Royce should be found, it should be under such circumstances as would disgust and alienate Irene from him forever. They might find Royce among a set of vagabonds and poachers—the center of a scene which would fill Irene with horror.

The sullen post-boy announced that the horses were ready, and escorted by the obsequious landlord, the countess and Irene re-entered the carriage, followed by Seymour.

Scarcely a word was spoken as the fresh horses dashed along the road; but Irene's hand held the countess's as before, and every now and then she drew the fur cloak round the elder woman or raised her hand to her lips.

They had been traveling for days. By the time they had reached Markham the gypsies had left the place, and Seymour had hit upon the track of the largest part of the tribe, and so missed Royce. But by diligent inquiry he had learned that strange gentleman had joined the tribe, and that he had gone south with a detachment. Thereupon Seymour had tried to induce his mother and Irene to return to Monk

Towers and leave him to pursue the trail; but the countess had announced her resolution to go on; and for three days they had followed the track, sometimes being led astray by ignorant directions, and at others hitting upon it by mere chance as to right.

As the horses tore along, the road grew still more lonely. Dark woods shadowed it on either side, woods through which the moonlight found its way with difficulty, and Seymour, anxious as he was to expose Royce, swore over his cigar at the wild chase.

After covering about four miles they came to the cross-road, and Seymour called to the postilion to stop, while he got down and examined the sign-post.

"The next town is five miles off," he said to the countess. "This moon doesn't last long. Had we not better go on to the town?"

"As you please," she said, as if awakening from a dream. He was mounting to the box again when his keen eyes caught the light of a fire gleaming in the wood to the left.

"Keep the horses still a minute," he said to the postilion, and he walked quickly into the darkness. In scarcely more than a minute he came back, and going to the carriage window, said in a loud tone of conviction:

"There is a gypsy camp here. Shall we—?" The countess inclined her head. "If you think it any use," she said, wearily.

The postilion guided the horses on to the narrow track through the trees, and the carriage proceeded almost noiselessly over the turf and bracken. Suddenly Seymour signed to the postilion to stop, and leaped from the box.

They had pulled up within sight of the camp-fire. Seymour went stealthily forward a few yards and looked about him. Madge was sitting by the fire; at full length beside her, with her head upon Madge's knee, was Lottie, asleep. Seymour went back to the carriage.

"Come!" he said in a whisper. "If we do not find him, we may hear of him here." The countess and Irene got out, and the three walked slowly toward the fire.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Gypsies are said to sleep, like dogs, with one eye open. Long before they had reached her, Lottie heard them, and she sprung to her feet and peered into the darkness.

"What is it, Lottie?" asked Madge, who thought it was Royce. "It's gentry," said Lottie in a hushed voice. "Oh, my, what fun. They're swells, Madge. What can they be doing here?" and she stood stock still, her unkempt hair falling over her face, her big eyes opened to their fullest extent.

"Come back, Lottie!" said Madge in a low voice; but Lottie seemed incapable of motion, and stood staring like a thing of wood or stone at the gentry, and especially at the fur cloak.

The three figures approached the camp-fire, and then Madge rose. She had been in heaven's love-land a moment before, and there was a startled look in her dark, lovely eyes.

Her first thought was that the visitors were the lord of the manor, or the neighboring squire and his friends, for sometimes the gentry, out of curiosity, condescended to visit the gypsy camp.

She stood with her hands folded, her eyes downcast, and Seymour came forward with a mingled air of patronage and command.

"You are gypsies, I suppose?" he said. Then as the fire happened to glare up and throw Madge's face into relief, he stopped short, and involuntarily touched his hat; for the meanness of nature was awed by purity and loveliness when they are combined, and there was something in the calm face, the graceful bearing of Madge, which extorted his respect.

"We are gypsies—yes," she said; and the musical, low-pitched voice surprised and somewhat embarrassed Seymour.

"So I thought," he said. "Are you of the—?" he was going to say "gang," but said "tribe" instead—"tribe of Lee?"

"We are of the tribe of Lee," said Madge. At this moment the countess and Irene drew nearer, and at sight of Madge, Irene's hand closed on the countess's arm.

"Oh, look, madame!" she whispered. "How lovely!" (To be continued.)

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To Kiss or Not to Kiss

"We are all getting so learned and cautious," contends a scientist, "that even kissing will soon be abolished." Can you imagine for a single minute that the sad state of things will really come to pass?

"Reason, as the years roll on, will surely overcome emotion," argues this scientist. "Sweethearts will be on the alert to guard against germs."

Will they? The merry and happy old world has revolved for a few thousand years while youths and maidens have made love. And all this time erudite men with snow-white beards have issued their solemn warnings and propounded their theories and philosophies concerning the danger of kissing as we kiss to-day, says Isabel Elsom, a charming stage and screen actress.

In spite of it all sweethearts kissed; and they will continue until this globe cools down millions of years hence.

"The victims of Cupid will not, in the course of time, salute each other lip to lip," the scientist remarks, "they will probably adopt a handshake."

Probably not. Just fancy getting the girl you adore under the mistletoe at Christmas, perhaps after waiting months and months, and then, as advised by our intellectual friend, merely taking her tiny hand in yours and shaking it! Something would be sadly lacking. It would be as bad as taking strawberries without cream, or polyp without its luscious jam.

"Another method of osculation for amorous folks," adds the scientific one, "is for the young man, like the Roman soldiers of old, to grip the girl's forearm."

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This is really too bad! Why, only attempting such a scientific method of saluting the lass you love would put even an Adonis out of favor. The modern girl, like all the girls of all the yesterdays, has the sense and instinct to realize that lips are made for kissing. If you venture to adopt these "hygienic" methods she may say something about a "quiet home," but not in allusion to the little love-nest you dreamed that she might share with you.

How many sweethearts care one jot for "reason"? They never did and never will. And is it right that they should? Too much reason is like German competition—a most inconvenient thing. If we wish to get the best out of life we mustn't be too reasonable out of business hours. If we made reason our be-all and end-all, what frightful bores we'd be! Reason is troublesome enough in our hobbies and sports, but when it comes to love-making, well—

Human nature is human nature all the world over, and it's doubtful if any so-called "progressive" movement will affect Cupid's methods one iota—any more than his "will stop the earth revolving on its axis."

Scientists of the hygienic school can recommend various substitutes for the kiss—shaking hands, gripping forearms, rubbing noses or patting heads. But—Why the very idea is laughable. And, in the far-off days, when they fell in love, it's a million to one the girl of their heart was not put off; no—not even by those terrible germs!

THE GROWLER. I said, "What ho," to Richard Roe, "this is a good old earth; wherever I look I see, gadzook, some cause for joy and mirth. All kinds of grief are passing brief, whatever is right; a w congress whacks the income tax, and makes our burden light." "It's always so," said Richard Roe, "with men who have the price; the skies are blue, their cars are new, and everything is nice. You walk abroad and have a wad to buy what you desire, a mustache cup, a pointer pup, a rubber plated tire. You have the dough," said Richard Roe, "and everything is grand, the brasses sweet are good as wheat, birds sing to beat the band. But I am broke; I'd like to smoke, but can't afford cigars; my tired feet burn; in vain I yearn for rides in motor cars. I am in debt, and balliffs get like hounds upon my trail, they bring their writs and throw their fits and rag me for the kale. My wife has chills; to buy her pills I soaked my Sunday casque; I, too, am sick, but I must stick to this my dreary task. So go and blow," said Richard Roe, "your unearned increment, and do not josh with sunshine tosh a tired and heart-sick gent." It seems to me I seldom see a man who's full of bliss; whenever I state that life is great, some fellow starts to hiss.

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