

A CRUEL DECEPTION

OR WHY DID SHE SHUN HIM? BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

(Continued)

"She has a heart of gold, my bird!" Trevelyan said, as he went about his business. "For all her nonsense and her love of excitement, she is the best and staunchest friend in the world! Stands up for anyone like a good man! And after," he mused, as he made his way to the room where he did all his writing—"after all, Gus is in the right. She knows more about this chap than I do, and it's scarcely fair to snuck at a man about whom one knows nothing to his disadvantage, even if one is equally ignorant about the good there is or may be in him!"

And, with this philosophic thought, Mr. Trevelyan sat down to his papers, and speedily forgot Mr. Hunter altogether.

CHAPTER XVI

The next few days that intervened between this spring and the eventual concert were so fully occupied by a variety of business for Lord Taunton that he almost completely forgot that one unpleasant moment he had experienced out on the sunlit lawn, amid the fast-blossoming leaves and sweet-smelling spring flowers. He had also a double reason for dismissing the matter from his mind: for on the following day he had at last received a letter from Mrs. Brabante.

It was not precipitately satisfactory as far as intelligence went. Alwynne's name was not even mentioned. Still, it gave the man great pleasure and satisfaction, and would have settled finally any lingering, uncomfortable doubts in his mind, had any existed, but that one moment of agony had been occasioned only by acute surprise. Mrs. Brabante, in fact, only wrote two or three lines. The letter was dated from the London hotel, and ran as follows:

"Dear Lord Taunton: Thank you so very much for your kind letter. I am in town for a few hours today. I return to the country, in fact, this evening, but I hasten at once to acknowledge your note. I will most certainly advise you of my return to town, and shall look forward with much pleasure to seeing you, not once only, but many times. With kindest regards, most sincerely yours,

"Louise Brabante."

That was all; but although it conveyed no great amount of intelligence, as before said, it was satisfactory to Taunton in some ways than one, and the hope in his heart ran high.

He was in great spirits during these two or three days, and when he was not closeted with Jack Trevelyan and his steward, he was either riding briskly through the country, or walking and driving with Miss Glenlee.

Blanche's complacency and peace of mind had been quite restored to her. She even began to tell herself she might really permit herself to think that Lord Taunton had a distinct liking for her companionship.

As for Lady Augusta, she was by this time very nearly worn to a thread with her musical exertions.

"I shall go to bed for a month—a whole month!" she declared, on the morning of the eventful day, "and I verily believe I shall sleep the whole four weeks."

This remark was greeted most rudely by both her husband and her brother.

"Why, I don't believe you could sleep for a whole hour straight off!" was Taunton's observation; "and even during that time you would have one eye open, just to see what was going on round about you!"

"I am too exhausted to defend myself," was the retort given briskly—Lady Augusta looked as bright as the proverbial button, and was certainly as busy as the proverbial bee—"otherwise," she said, glancing severely at the demure faces of her mankind, "I should feel myself compelled to proceed to extreme measures."

"Lucky for our heads that," Mr. Trevelyan remarked in a loud stage whisper to Hugo. "Augusta's muscles are no joke, I can

tell you, and she aims straight as a die."

"Blanche, come away with me, and leave these monsters to abuse me at their leisure. I have to go and superintend the arrangements of the plants and flowers."

Miss Glenlee followed her bestness, not without some reluctance. She had had a most pleasant morning with Lord Taunton, and had no desire to go and look at the decorations. She consoled herself with thinking that his eyes had expressed a regret as she left the luncheon table, and with remembering that as the principal guest this evening she must of a necessity monopolize his society.

She sank into a chair, and watched Lady Augusta with lazy eyes, as the pretty little person flitted here and there, ordering, re-arranging, considering, and finally doing what she had ordered with her own hands. Her energy almost made Miss Glenlee sigh from very fatigue.

"Does it—it look pretty?" Lady Augusta cried, coming over to her friend and perching herself on the armchair like a bird. "Those palms make a lovely background, and really Mr. Hunter has draped those curtains most wonderfully. It is quite an artistic bit, isn't it, Blanche?"

Miss Glenlee assented. "The rectory quartet will look pretty for once," she said, with a faint smile that came from pity for the four ugly girls.

"They are going to wear pink. I've wept to me about it yesterday. She said it was so unkind of Maude to choose pink, and they should have remembered her hair, which will not harmonize well with the sort of pink Maude is sure to choose!"

"What does it matter what they wear?" inquired Blanche, with languid contempt.

"Oh, I don't know!" cried loyal Lady Augusta. "Of course, everybody always likes to look their best, you know, Blanche. Ah, here comes the harp! It gives a finishing touch to the picture, doesn't it? No—no, Brown, not there, on the left—the left side!" And Lady Augusta sprang to her feet. She watched the maneuvers for a little while, and then she turned to Blanche. "If—if I ever commit a murder, I feel certain Brown will be my victim!"

Blanche laughed, and rested back in her chair.

The afternoon wore away quickly and dinner, made much earlier than usual, was announced almost before any one was ready for it.

The neighboring county people, scattered about, were one and all invited to the concert; but Lady Augusta had made no addition to the house party.

"It is only a village affair, and will please the people here, but Londoners would be bored to death with it all!"

In which sentiment Miss Glenlee entirely concurred, for, truth to tell, the affair bored her extremely.

She arrayed herself in one of her smartest frocks, and perhaps a little unworthy feeling of vain emulation led her to select a gown of the softest and most delicate pink—the sort of color that blended most exquisitely with her wonderful skin and hair.

"Blanche, you look lovely—lovely!" Lady Augusta cried, as they met on the top of the stairs, and went down together. "What a pretty frock, and what beautiful pearls! I don't know what I must look like, for I have just scrambled into my gown, anyhow. Murray was furious with me. She wanted me to put on something much smarter, but I hadn't time!"

Dinner was nearly over when a note was brought into the room, and handed to Lady Augusta.

"From Mr. Hunter!" she exclaimed. "Something wrong! Oh, dear, dear!"

"Read it, and see what is wrong!" Mr. Trevelyan observed, as she was about to give way entirely.

Lady Augusta tore open the envelope as though it had been a death warrant, so anxious was the expression of her face.

"I knew I was right! Miss Martin has had an accident—Miss Martin, our one soloist! Oh, Jack!"

The letter dropped in her lap, and there were tears almost in the pretty eyes.

"Go on with it! You have not finished it," Mr. Trevelyan said, his heart touched at once by those tears.

Lady Augusta sighed, and brushed her eyes, while her brother tried not to smile quite easily. After all, with all her fuss and excitement, there was so much earnestness in all Lady Augusta did, he said to himself.

"Fell down and sprained her ankle. So like Grace Martin! She has a lovely voice, but she always has clumsy on her feet. Jack and Hugo, how dare you laugh when you know how I—oh!" This exclamation was drawn from a further perusal of the letter. "How good of him! How sweet of her! I always said he was!"

"Please enlighten us, darling," Mr. Trevelyan said meekly. "Your sentiments of gratitude are, of course, charming, but—"

"Just listen!" Lady Augusta began to read aloud. "I have been with Miss Martin all the afternoon but though she is so anxious to come, and, in fact, has shed tears of bitter disappointment, it is useless to think of it. She can hardly bear her foot to be touched, much less stand upon it. In our dilemma, fortunately, I have had a happy thought: My wife sings charmingly, and if your ladyship will accept her as a substitute she will be delighted to do her best, and help to make the concert go off well. She will sing some Italian songs, and a duet with me if—"

Lady Augusta broke off, and her face beamed.

"Nothing could be better," she declared, somewhat rashly, considering she had never met much less heard, this Mrs. Hunter speak or sing. "Isn't it kind of him and her? Of course, they—"

"I fancy she has to be thanked more than him, considering she does all the work," Taunton observed.

"There must be an announcement from the platform. Jack, you must speak! It will hardly do for Mr. Hunter to announce the kindness of his own wife!"

"You must do it, Gus."

"I should die of fright. Hugo will you?"

"Thanks, dear, but I am the worst speaker in the world. I should make a fool of myself."

"Then, Jack, you must!"

"Not me," returned Mr. Trevelyan quietly. "I was not born for the pulpit or the platform."

"Blanche, what shall I do?"

"Let the rector speak for you," Miss Glenlee said, after a long minute's reflection.

"How clever you are, Blanche! You always know what to do. Of course, the rector shall speak, only," observed Lady Augusta reflectively—"only I shall limit him to two minutes. He must not think he is in church, or he will keep us sitting for an hour, if not more."

The ballroom was filled to repletion. It was really wonderful what a number of inhabitants Torre seemed to possess, when one saw them massed together, and recalled the lonely, scattered appearance of the little village.

"What a beautiful room!" Blanche said to Lord Taunton. She was sitting with him in the front row, the cynosure of all eyes. She gazed about her at the old walls and the massively carved ceiling, quite conscious that not one of her movements escaped notice, and that Lord Taunton's attention to her was probably being estimated at what she hoped would be its real value before long. "What a lovely room!" she said again. "Lord Taunton, you should be very proud of your home."

mark, and tried to keep the conversation going briskly. It was not an easy matter, for conversation did not come naturally to Blanche and Lord Taunton had long ago found that there were few subjects that could be called congenial to her.

He chatted to her about the people in the room, telling her this anecdote and that; and now and again Lady Augusta came fitting toward them in her dress of glittering jet, and exchanged a few words with them. She was quite radiant now, and everything was in shape to go well.

The concert started with a flourish of trumpets, a duet for two pianos, which careered its way triumphantly to a noisy end, and was greeted with tumults of applause. The harp solo was an enormous success, so was the rector's quartet, with its four gawky figures in deep rose pink, that defied and gloried over the redoubt of the tallest and plainest.

Blanche gave a passing glance to her own most dainty robe and was satisfied. It was a poor triumph, but to a woman like her, any triumph was better than none. Then came a solo from Mr. Blair Hunter, who certainly looked supremely handsome, and who, Lord Taunton was compelled to admit, played like an artist. Then the local tenor appeared, and after him the quartet again. And then there came a little lull, and the rector advanced, smiling unbecomingly upon his flock, and in unctuous tones, informing them that a sad, though not very serious, accident would deprive them of the pleasure of hearing their dear friend, Miss Martin, sing on this auspicious occasion; but that on learning the news, with a kindness that would certainly never be forgotten among them, a newcomer, Mrs. Blair Hunter, would sing for them two or three songs, and trusted to their generosity to cover all pardonable nervousness or blenches.

This speech, given in good, round length, being ended, Lady Augusta disappeared; and, having waited another few minutes, the audience broke into a warm welcome of applause as Lady Augusta, with that charming constancy which characterized her every action, appeared, leading by the hand a tall, slender, white-robed figure, whose beauty in one instant had communicated itself to the whole room. Country folk as they were, they realized they were in the presence of a most refined and lovely girl—woman she could scarcely yet be called. The applause grew and grew as the girl stood by the piano, very pale, smiling faintly, and bowing gracefully, though coldly.

As the first bars of the accompaniment were struck, Blanche Glenlee withdrew her eyes from that beautiful figure. There was a slight frown on her face. A sort of blow had been struck at her success, as it were, for, magnificent as she was, this girl surpassed her. She turned to make some trivial remark to the man beside her, and then she realized what till now had escaped her, that Lord Taunton was not there, as she had imagined; his program lay on the ground, and his chair was empty.

CHAPTER XVII

Blanche Glenlee frowned more decidedly as she turned and found Lord Taunton had disappeared; but it was only a momentary frown, and, imagining that he had in all probability, obeyed some urgent summons from his sister and had gone to give his assistance in some shape or form, she turned around again, leaned back languidly in her chair, and gave her attention to the opening tones of Mrs. Hunter's song.

The voice was small—almost too small and delicate for the large room; but it was of an exquisite tone and plaintiveness, and it had a nervous thrill in it that only enhanced its pathos.

The tall, slender form had moved back from the edge of the platform, and was standing by the piano, which responded softly to Blair Hunter's artistically played accompaniment.

The girl was exceedingly nervous. Those in the front rows of chairs could see that she was trembling from head to foot, and that her small hands were clasped together, as if to give a sense of

strength and courage.

Miss Glenlee did not bestow much thought or sympathy on this symptom of natural weakness. She was occupied in examining the organist's wife critically and carefully. She determined, almost in the first moment of scrutiny, that she did not quite approve of Mrs. Blair Hunter. As to the reasons for this determination, she did not trouble herself to inquire into them at all. She was not in the habit of probing her thoughts at any time, and was content, having come to any conclusion, however big or small, to accept that conclusion as absolute in every sense of the word. So now, without investigating the why or wherefore of her decision, she came to a full and final determination that she neither approved of or liked this newly made wife of Lady Augusta's musical protégé.

Mrs. Hunter sang her little song to the end. It was something pretty and commonplace of the ordinary lyric type, and did not call for any particular criticism in a musical sense. Nevertheless, the words were pretty, and the refrain had a touch of melody in it, and given its full value by the sympathetic, delicate notes. It was most vociferously enjoyed, and undoubtedly enjoyed by the audience assembled in the old Torre Abbey hall.

Miss Glenlee did not join in the applause. She leaned back still farther in her chair, and looked around for Lord Taunton. He was nowhere to be seen, but his place was no longer vacant, for at that very moment Lady Augusta came fluttering from some mysterious corner behind the scene, or, rather, platform, and subsided, a sparkling mass of jet, into the chair beside Miss Glenlee.

"Isn't she perfectly lovely, Blanche?" she cried, in an ecstatic whisper. "I give you my word I cannot take my eyes off her. I think she is quite the prettiest girl I have ever seen!"

Lady Augusta spoke in the honest enthusiasm of her honest heart and never thought for a single instant that her words could, by any possibility of means, give Blanche even a momentary annoyance.

Miss Glenlee was, however, more than momentarily annoyed. For the first time almost in her career she was conscious of a distinct sensation of anger. A hot wave of color flashed into her cheeks. She unfurled her fan and moved it to and fro quickly, as her lostness continued to pour forth a stream of admiration.

"I assure you I was almost startled when Mr. Hunter brought her up and introduced her to me. I had expected he would, in all probability, have married a pretty girl, but I never imagined anything so sweet and beautiful as this. She is something quite out of the ordinary. I wonder who she was, and where he found her?"

Miss Glenlee shut her fan with a jerk. "Behind some counter, I dare say," she said shortly. "One sees really very decent looking girls in shops sometimes!"

Lady Augusta was gazing at the whiteclad figure on the platform. She was so deeply engrossed in this occupation that she scarcely heard Miss Glenlee's remark, and certainly did not notice her disagreeable tone of voice.

"It is a singular face," she said, almost to herself, "and what a splendid bearing the child has! She sings so well, too. Really, Mrs. Hunter's unexpected appearance has settled the success of my concert, Blanche."

Miss Glenlee was unaccustomed to being angry, and it made her face red and hot, and her manner short and perky.

"I think your success was secured without Mrs. Hunter, Gus," she said, speaking for her, quite quickly, and then she added, in a semiconciliatory, semipatronizing way: "She is pretty, certainly, but she seems to be somewhat of an amateur. Her voice is very weak."

"Oh, she doesn't profess to sing in the very least!" Lady Augusta hastened to say promptly. "She has only come forward now because her husband urged her to do so, and told her I was in such a dilemma, otherwise, poor dear, I think she would have been only too glad to have sat down meekly

in some corner. She is so shy she seems almost frightened to open her lips. It was not so much her singing that I regard as helping our success, though that is sweet enough; but her beauty, that is—"

"It requires a good deal of nerve to sing!" observed Miss Glenlee tartly.

Lady Augusta suddenly realized that her friend was out of temper, and at once jumped to the true cause.

"What a funny thing," she thought to herself, "that so few women can bear to hear another one admired! Blanche is as handsome as she can well be, yet she is quite huffy with me for admiring this lovely little thing! Well, I can't help it. She is lovely, and I must admire her, whoever she is; and Hugo—where is Hugo?"

Lady Augusta repeated the last question aloud to Miss Glenlee.

Blanche shut her fan slowly. She was regaining her normal condition.

"Lord Taunton?" she said, in a questioning way. "I don't know. I missed him just now, and wondered if you had called him!"

"I have not seen him," Lady Augusta began; and then relapsed into silence, as Mrs. Hunter commenced her second song, a little Italian serenade with a delicious rippling accompaniment.

The applause that followed on this was even greater than before, and as Mr. Hunter led his wife from the platform Lady Augusta jumped up and fluttered away again to speak her thanks to the lovely young singer who had come so opportunely to her rescue. She ran against her husband in the doorway.

"Jack, isn't she lovely—lovely?" she cried. "Yes, I see by your eyes that you admire her. I am bewildered by her. She is something so out of the common. Every one is in love with her!"

"Including Miss Glenlee," said Mr. Trevelyan, with a shrewd expression around his mouth, and a twinkle in his eye.

"Oh!" Lady Augusta was whirling on, but she looked back at an instant. "Oh, darling, be an angel. Go and talk to Blanche. I fancy she is a little cross. Hugo has disappeared, and she doesn't like to be neglected, I know!"

"Um!" said Trevelyan to himself. "The fair Blanche has some feelings, then, after all. I did not fancy she would admire Mrs. Hunter very much—it would be odd if she did. Wonder where Hugo is? Had enough of it, I expect. Mustn't confess as much to my little bird, but I am rather of his opinion. Horrible bore—those pathetic displays of amateur talent!"

Lady Augusta rustled up to where Mrs. Hunter was standing beside her husband. The pale touch of color called into Alwynne's face by excitement or nervousness had vanished, and she was very pale. Blair Hunter was sipping to her, but he moved forward to receive the hostess; and, as he left her, a sort of expression passed over the young wife's face—of what exact nature it would have been difficult in the moment to determine.

Lady Augusta was full of her prettiest words and ways. Nothing could have been warmer or more genial than her greeting. She held both the small white-gloved hands in hers, and expressed her thanks in the most gracious ways, all the while feeling a deeper sense of amazement as she looked into the lovely face before her.

"Her eyes are divine!" she said to herself. "But she is shy. No, not shy; cold, proud, reserved almost to a fault. How on earth has she come to marry Blair Hunter?"

She glanced after the handsome young man as he hurried again to the platform. Yes, he was decidedly handsome; but he looked tonight something that Lady Augusta could hardly have defined, but which made itself felt most determinately—something which marked a great difference between himself and the girl he had just made his wife—this girl with the flowerlike face, the beautiful, sad mouth, the eyes full of magnificent mystery.

Lady Augusta's warm woman's heart was suddenly drawn toward this young creature. She was not given, as a rule, to dive very much below the surface, but somehow

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she found herself not merely acknowledging the unusual beauty before her, but allowing her imagination to weave a sort of complimentary and expansion of the feature, the sort of chilly apathy which this beauty expressed. She would have been exceedingly angry with herself had she fully realized the purport of her thoughts, and more than exceedingly angry with any one else—her husband, for instance—who would have translated those thoughts in a few plain words.

"How good of you!" she said several times, just a little chilled, as it confessed, by Mrs. Hunter's very quiet manner. "How good of you to help us so very much!"

"I have done very little," the girl answered coldly; she stood looking down at a pile of music on the table before her. "I never sang in public before," she went on, in her low voice. "I did not know I could do it. I am afraid I do not deserve your thanks very much, for I should never have sung had not Mr. Hunter persuaded me to do so."

"I am very glad for our sakes your husband was so persuasive, although," Lady Augusta added gently—"although I am sorry if it has caused you any inconvenience or nervousness."

Mrs. Hunter received this gracious little speech with a bend of her head, and then stood very quietly, while Lady Augusta chatted on, and tried to lure her into conversation.

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Hunter?" she said at last. "You must be tired. Will you come into my little sanatorium? I can safely recommend you a most cozy chair, and you can sit there absolutely undisturbed if you would prefer that. I am afraid Mr. Hunter will not be free for another hour at least."

Alwynne smiled faintly. "You are very kind," she said, with the first touch of warmth she had yet expressed creeping into her voice. "Very kind, Lady Augusta; but if you will forgive me, I think I will drive straight home. I—I am a little tired."

"There was, in truth, a look of exceeding weariness in the eyes that gazed into Lady Augusta's bright ones, which touched the latter's warm heart at once.

"You shall do just exactly what you like," she said. "I am sorry, of course, that you are going, but I had hoped Blair and yourself would have remained and had supper with us; but I know what it is to be tired myself, and you don't look very strong, my dear."

Blair Hunter's wife smiled very faintly.

"I think I am really very strong," she said.

She had gathered a large, white fleecy shawl about her as she spoke and Lady Augusta's imaginative and poetical mind at once likened her to some beautiful white flower as she stood there. Nothing could have been more simple or unostentatious than the clothes she wore. Her gown had the look of being made at home, and the shawl was an ordinary large-size woolen one, such as are seen in any hosiery shop window; yet she had a queenly air in these humble garments, and one forgot that they were cheap and ordinary as one looked at her.

(To be continued)