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LOVE'S MASQUERADE.

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There was not, in the palmy days of Old England, a finer estate than Belle-Air. Its noble mansion crowned a hill of gentle slope, along the foot of which rippled the water of the river, the intermediate space consisting of a broad and ample lawn shaped with magnificent trees. For miles around extended the plantations, with their rows of out buildings, spacious barns, and well ordered fences, afforded an appearance of wealth and prosperity not so familiar in those latter days. From the portico, which fronted the river, the eye wandered over a landscape of surpassing beauty, through which might be traced, for many a mile, the meanderings of the stream.

It was early in the summer, when flowers are fresh and trees wear their greenest foliage; when the birds sing their sweetest lays, and the country offers its brightest charms to lure the denizens of the heated city from care and toil to its sweet repose. Seated on the portico at Belle-Air was a party who seemed fully to appreciate the privileges they enjoyed. First, there was Col. Leigh, a true specimen of an old English gentleman; proud, yet affable; stern, and often dogmatical, yet kind and courteous; prompt to anger, yet quick to forgive; with all the sentiments of generosity and hospitality which so proverbially belonged to his class. On the Colonel's right, in an attitude of gentle entreaty, half playful, half willful, was a girl of nineteen. To say she was beautiful would feebly express the graceful majesty of bearing or the loveliness of person. In form and mind, Laura Beverly was worthy of her lineage, a pure type of that high beauty for which this country has been so celebrated. She was a very woman, too, in all her glory, and some of her weaknesses.

Laura was an orphan, and heiress of the broad estates of Belle-Air; yet, orphan only in name, she had experienced none of the trials or misfortunes of that state. Her parents had died when she was an infant; and, in the family of her uncle, Colonel Leigh, she had enjoyed the tenderest care and affection, sharing equally with an only daughter the love and attention of her kind relatives. Lettie Leigh, who nestled close to her father on the other side, smiling artlessly at her cousin's earnestness, offered a striking contrast in appearance to Laura. She, too, was lovely; but her soft blue eyes, her auburn ringlets, and her fairy form, however charming, gave not the regal air to her beauty which shone in every movement of her companion. The fourth and last member of the family party, was Mrs. Leigh, a gentle and beloved matron, who had been, in her younger days, the counterpart of Lettie; nay, she was still fair, for her life had been one of harmony, and time had dealt gently with her. At the moment we have intruded upon the party, a discussion was going on between the uncle and niece, to which the others were animated listeners.

'Nay, dear uncle, you must let me have my way in this; there can be no harm; and it will be such fun,' urged Laura.

'I tell you frankly, my dear, that I disapprove of your idea. Even a frolic, which imparts deception, is wrong; and then it is undignified,' said Col. Leigh.

'Ay! there's the rub, uncle. Now, for goodness sake, don't harness me with dignity yet awhile. Let me have my girl's freedom for a space. I shall be shackled with forms and dignity soon enough.'

'But you know, Laura, I have expressed certain views in connection with yourself and Mr. Wortham, which would render such a proceeding not only unseemly, but it might prove highly embarrassing.'

'That is just the secret of my plan, uncle.—You wish me to marry Mr. Wortham; and I have vowed if I ever do marry, that I must be loved for myself, and not my estate.'

'Laura,' said Col. Leigh, 'you are forgetful. Why should you think that your uncle would sacrifice your happiness, or that a gentleman, your equal in wealth and birth, was a mere mercenary fortune hunter.'

'Pardon me, dear uncle; I had no unkind thoughts of you; but I confess the eagerness with which Mr. Wortham appears to embrace an almost forgotten and never a binding proposition, and his apparent readiness to take a bride he has never seen, strikes me unfavorably; besides, I hear from Richmond that he has already been congratulated on winning an heiress.'

'Some idle gossip. You wrong Mr. Wortham, and scarcely do justice to your uncle, in your version. In making very natural inquiry after the family Mr. Wortham mentioned, what he was aware was well known to me, that, between your father and his, there had been some hope expressed, rather an agreement made, that a union might be effected at the proper time between their children. It seems his father, with

whom you were, when a child, a great favorite, laid considerable stress upon this point in his last letter to Charles; but I assure you there was nothing exceptional in the modest and unassuming manner in which it was referred to by him. The excellent character which Charles Wortham bears, and his gentlemanly deportment did incline me to hope, I confess it, that Providence would conform events to the views of your parents.'

'Uncle,' said Laura, in a low, earnest tone, 'I don't like these infantile betrothals; they seem a sacrifice on the holiest feelings of our nature.'

'Laura, you misunderstand altogether the subject. There never could have been a thought on the part of your father or General Wortham, to force the inclinations of their children, any more than I would force from my side this dear girl, should the heir of Redwood prove worthy of her hand. Do you not know that a similar misunderstanding existed between his father and myself? Such things have been customary among our gentry from the earliest time; and many a happy union has been the result: princely estates have been preserved, and our class strengthened.'

'The heir of Redwood? Why, Lettie, are you to be the mistress of your stately old castle, which has been so long shut up that it is inhabited, they say, by ghosts and ghouls?'

And as Laura spoke, she pointed to where, some miles distant, there rose, amid a park of ancient oaks, a mansion of baronial proportions and appearance.

'Uncle,' said Laura, 'I am going to talk both seriously and sensibly. I wish you to permit me to carry out my plan. If I have to receive Mr. Wortham in my own proper character, knowing what I do, and under the constraint I cannot resist, I shall never like him, if he were the Chevalier Crichton. Let this little fairy here be for the time the heir of Belle-Air—and a charming one she will make. I will be your dutiful daughter. If Charles Wortham falls in love with her, you will have a son to your mind, and I will wait for the wandering heir of Redwood. On the contrary, if the fates have declared union, and *eclairecissement* will be quite romantic.—But if nothing comes of this, we shall have some fun; and Mr. Wortham, as a true chevalier, will forgive and laugh at a girl's frolic.'

There was something in Laura's reasoning which shook the Colonel's resolution; and when his wife, who knew the somewhat willful disposition of her niece, and judged, with woman's tact, that the only chance of controlling her inclination was to indulge her fancy, added her persuasion, he was ready to yield.

'And suppose I consent to this masquerade, how are you to keep it up, foolish child, without detection through your servants?'

'Trust me for that, uncle. Cato is a miracle of discretion, and rules his subordinates most absolutely. I will go now and give him his lesson. In the meantime, Lettie, dear, just con over your own part.'

And, so saying, Laura danced off in high glee. Col. Leigh gave a sigh, Lettie uttered a low laugh, and the kind-hearted Mrs. Leigh applied herself to soothe her somewhat ruffled humor.

Scarce half an hour had passed ere Laura returned, and, throwing a bunch of keys in her cousin's lap, she said:

'There, my dear, you are now mistress of Belle-Air, and we are your guests. Here comes Cato for his orders, so let us have the most princely entertainment your establishment will afford.'

Lettie, who was quite a little actress, assumed her charge with an air of mock gravity; and when Cato, the fine old negro steward, whose dignity and manners might have put many a gentleman to the blush, approached with a smile to receive instructions about the dinner, they were given without embarrassment, and with all the address which would be required to carry out the farce.

As the weather was quite pleasant, Col. Leigh ordered his horse to ride to one of the neighboring plantations, and the ladies retired to their morning avocations.

It was considerably past noon, and near the dinner hour, when the ladies, having made some slight change in their dress, again entered the portico to watch for the return of the colonel. It was not many minutes before he was seen riding up the avenue, accompanied by two cavaliers, whose appearance at once betokened not only strangers, but travelers.

'Our guest!' exclaimed Laura. 'Now, Lettie—Laura, I mean—your part commences in earnest: play it well. But who can the other be?' she exclaimed. 'And which is Mr. Wortham, think you?'

'The slightest one on the right,' said Lettie. 'How gracefully he rides!'

'No, by my faith! he is the tall and stately one on the left. See! he sits firm as Cœur de

Lion on his war horse. But ring for Cato, dear.'

The prompting was unnecessary, for the old servant at that moment made his appearance with his assistants to take the gentlemen's horses. With a bearty politeness and urbanity, Cato received the cavalcade, took their horses, which he assigned to his assistants, and ushered in the guests with every demonstration of welcome.

Colonel Leigh presented his companions, first to his wife as Mr. Charles Wortham, and his friend, Mr. Leftwell, and then said—

'My niece and daughter, gentlemen.'

It was only from the keys which Lettie still carried, and the movement of old Cato, not unintentional it might be, in asking some instruction, that they were led to distinguish her as the mistress of the mansion.

The surmise of Lettie was correct; the slightest figure was Charles Wortham; he was handsome—nay, almost too handsome, with bright black eyes, regular features, a graceful form, and a profusion of glossy curls. Yet there was a manly air which forbade the idea of effeminacy, and a sincere expression which at once enlisted sympathy.

There was a little triumph in Lettie's smile, and a shade of disappointment on Laura's brow, when his name was announced. As the eyes of the heiress rested, however, on his companion, a quick flush passed over her face, leaving it unusually pale; and a strange light gleamed from her eyes as they fell beneath his gaze.

His was indeed a form of stately beauty, with youthful grace and manly dignity combined; his hair was light, and curled closely around his well-shaped head; his brow was smooth and ample; his eyes, fringed with dark heavy lashes, were blue, large and thoughtful, save that, when he spoke or moved, they fairly flashed with light; his nose was straight, with delicate nostrils; his mouth firm, and well formed, and on his short upper lip was a full brown mustache; his complexion was fair, except where browned by exposure; and, though his form was one of great power and strength, his movements were elastic and his step graceful. In fact a more proper cavalier, in field or fleet, it would have been difficult to find.

After the usual salutations and inquiries as to the journey, Col. Leigh addressing his daughter for the first time, in her assumed character, said—

'My dear, it is near your dinner hour, I suspect, and you had better make Cato show these gentlemen their apartments.'

When the party reassembled at the dinner table, Laura and Lettie seemed in some respects to have changed characters as well as names.—The former was as quiet and reserved, though a shade more thoughtful and sedate, as her cousin had ever been; while Lettie, entering into the true spirit of the farce, played her part with inimitable tact and grace. Charles Wortham alluded to his friend Mr. Leftwell, as young gentleman with whom he had formed an acquaintance on the continent, which mutual tastes and sympathies had ripened into friendship; and the subject of travel having been broached, the latter gentleman displayed a store of rich and varied information, with which his hearers were greatly entertained.

Indeed, the marked interest which Laura evinced in the discourse of Mr. Leftwell was apparent, and Col. Leigh certainly experienced some qualms of dissatisfaction at the entanglement which the masquerade seemed likely to produce. The bright and spirited Charles Wortham appeared, however, to be perfectly satisfied with his place beside the *so-distant* heiress whose frankness and gaiety were congenial to his own disposition, and so far from envying his friend's qualities, he did all he could to bring him out and set of his brilliant discourse. Mr. Leftwell naturally addressed his attentions more particularly to Laura, and, without ostentation, lent himself easily to the entertainment of the party. And even the colonel was entertained, despite his inward vexation over the anticipated *contretemps*.

Conversation, music, and a moonlight stroll occupied the afternoon and evening; and the party separated for the night with a general sense of enjoyment, but with various and somewhat confused emotions.

Colonel Leigh was serious, very serious. I do not like the masquerade at all; it must end, said he. 'I knew something would come of it.'

'What is there wrong, my dear; and how will you end it?' asked the wife quietly.

'What is there wrong, madam? Why, the threatened disappointment of my hopes; and I shall end it simply by making the girls resume their proper places in the morning, and asking the young gentlemen to excuse this wild freak.'

ward thing to break rudely in upon her little plot now, and cause her embarrassment and mortification, which would go far to defeat your views.'

'But do you not see, madam, that the whole thing has commenced at cross purposes? Here is Charles Wortham devoting himself assiduously to Lettie, and seeming as contented as if she were really the heiress of Belle-Air, and the whole matter arranged; while Laura shows an interest in Leftwell I never before knew her to exhibit for any one else. I tell you it is all wrong, madam.'

'But, my husband, will you right it by the course you propose? Believe me, no. Laura has dreaded, or rather felt a repugnance to this meeting ever since it was spoken of; and only by consenting to her innocent scheme did I believe Charles Wortham would have any chance to win her regard. As to the rest, I think you attribute too much importance to trifles.—Charles and Lettie were naturally the most embarrassed of the party—he from ignorance of the plot, she from having no interest in it. As for Mr. Leftwell he is certainly a highly accomplished and remarkably fascinating young man; yet Charles does not appear to disadvantage beside him.'

'Well, my dear, I only wish the farce were over,' said Col. Leigh, yielding with a sigh to his wife's persuasion, and preparing to retire.

Laura and Lettie occupied the same apartment, and had no sooner dismissed the attendant than the latter exclaimed—

'Well, dear Laura, how did I play my part? Admirably, dear; so well that you bid fair to carry off the prize.'

'Now, Laura, that wasn't kind,' said Lettie, the tears springing to her eyes.

'Why, sweet child,' exclaimed the other, fondling her in a warm embrace, 'you could not think I meant to be otherwise. No, indeed, Lettie, I shall never fancy Mr. Wortham as a husband, though I might like him, well enough for a kinsman.'

'Now don't,' said Lettie, blushing. 'Or I shall come out and spoil the whole plot.'

'Then,' said Laura, kissing her. 'I won't, for that would be too awkward; and I half suspect my uncle had a mind to do it anyhow.'

'So do I,' said Lettie, slyly. He thought Richard Cœur de Lion was about to make a conquest.'

'How can you, Lettie?' exclaimed Laura, reddening in her turn—'a gentleman I never saw or heard of before.'

'And yet a very proper man. But there! there! sweet cos, let us sign a truce.' And the laughing girl entwined her arms about her cousin's neck, and gave her the kiss of peace.

'Well, Wortham, my boy, you are not disappointed in your finance?' asked Lettie.

'Why, yes! but that kind of disappointment to which one becomes easily reconciled. She is certainly an angel of grace and loveliness, though, perhaps, I should have expected a little more embarrassment in receiving me under our peculiar relation.'

'You are certainly hard to please,' said the other, 'if you object to too kind a reception from such a source.'

'No! no!' exclaimed Charles Wortham.—'I am perfectly satisfied; and I should think you might find equal contentment if you could only make yourself out to be the wandering heir of Redwood.'

A singular expression, half smile, half frown, passed quickly over Leftwell's features. He merely asked:

'How so?'

'Why, his father and Colonel Leigh entered into the same sort of arrangement, I believe, as did Major Beverly and my own.'

'Ah!' said Leftwell, quietly. 'Well he will be a happy fellow if he can win that proud, high beauty—as surely as I trust, dear Wortham, you will secure your own lovely bride.'

A fortnight had passed very pleasantly indeed, but not without its anxieties to Mrs. Leigh, its annoyances to the Colonel, and a few contretemps among the young folks. The plot had been kept, however, perfectly secret from the visitors. Since the truce signed and sealed on the first evening, Laura and Lettie had been as affectionate and cordial as ever, but perhaps, less confidential; there was a preoccupied air in each, undiscovered by the other, because the change was mutual, but apparent to Colonel and Mrs. Leigh.

As for Charles Wortham, he appeared the very personification of happiness and contentment, while his friend Leftwell, around whose lips there was wreathed an occasional smile of mysterious meaning seemed just as happy, though more sedate.

Col. Leigh, however, was restless; and even

kind Mrs. Leigh did not always exhibit her wonted equanimity.'

'Thank Heaven,' exclaimed the Colonel, as he sat smoking on the piazza one afternoon, while the younger part of the company were strolling on the lawn, 'the farce will end to-morrow. I shall accompany these gentlemen a short distance on their way, and explain, as I best can, this foolish masquerade.'

'They leave then to-morrow?' asked his wife. 'Yes, for a tour, and will rejoin us at Malvern.'

'Mrs. Leigh mused awhile, then said: 'My dear, have you ascertained fully from Charles who this Mr. Leftwell is?'

Colonel Leigh startled somewhat as he replied:

'Yes; a gentleman of wealth, and excellent family. But why?'

'Because I think it imports the happiness of our dear Laura to know.'

'You don't think so?'

'I do.'

'And Charles Wortham?'

'If I mistake not, has found all the conversation he desires.'

'But Lettie—he has been betrothed, you know, madame, to the heir of Redwood.'

'My dear husband, if Lettie has made her choice, and one so worthy as this, I know you will never permit that affair to mar her happiness. And if Paul Lacy chooses to loiter in foreign lands, supposing he knows, or remembers, or cares anything about it, he must not be surprised if another wooer takes his place.'

'Well, well! it's all meddling with woman's gear!' said the colonel, leaning back, and giving his faculties to meditation and tobacco.

The young people, who had gone forth to enjoy their accustomed walk on the lawn, had paired off, as usual. While Leftwell escorted Laura to a rustic seat from whence was had a charming view of the river, and a portion of the surrounding scenery. Wortham had strolled further on with Lettie; and now they both stood gazing at the effect of the moonbeams on the rippling waves. Neither had spoken for some minutes. At last, Charles said:

'Miss Beverly,' he called Lettie by her supposed name, 'you know I leave to-morrow.'

Lettie did not speak.

'And,' continued he, 'though it may seem premature, I cannot separate, even for a short time, without giving some expression to those deep feelings, and, may I say, those fond hopes—not presumptuously predicated upon any imaginary claims—which have so filled me with joy and doubt.'

'Oh, stop! stop!' exclaimed Lettie, impetuously; 'you are mistaken; I am not—oh, heaven! why did I ever consent to this?' And the poor girl bowed her head in a paroxysm of grief.

Charles Wortham was astonished. Certainly Lettie had given him no reason to think himself beloved; but, mistaking, of course, her identity, and believing that she must know the proposed relations between them, he had deemed—it may be a little confidently—that her frankness, and the evident satisfaction with which his attentions were received, at least excused this early declaration on his part. His own affections were deeply pledged, and misinterpreting Lettie's exclamation, he could but shrink, grieved from what seemed repugnance on her part to his suit; but, ever generous, he sought to bear all the blame.

'Pardon me, lady, if I have presumed too far upon hereditary friendship, the mutual hopes of our parents, and your own kindness in ever asking a hearing for my unworthy suit.'

The proud, sad tone in which this was said gave Lettie exquisite pain.

'Oh, no! no! there is no presumption, so far as I am concerned. But you mistake—I am not Laura Beverly.'

'Not Miss Beverly!' demanded Wortham, in bewilderment.

'A freak, a foolish girl's freak,' sobbed Lettie, for her emotions were last getting the upper hand. 'I only changed names to humor cousin Laura—and—and—oh, I am so unhappy!'

A soft and beautiful, but still triumphant, smile stole over Charles Wortham's handsome face, as he passed his arm gently around the trembling girl—merely to support her, good reader—and asked, playfully—

'And who are you, then?'

'Only Lettie Leigh.'

'And still Laura Beverly for me,' said Charles drawing her to his bosom in one fond embrace, and gazing into her beautiful eyes until the low light of his own found itself reflected there.

'But my Cousin Laura?' asked Lettie, re-suming some of her playfulness.

'Oh! she may take the wandering heir of Redwood, if she chooses. She will be easily consoled.'