

A CRUEL DECEPTION

OR WHY DID SHE SHUN HIM? BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

(Continued)

Like every other such entertainment that ever yet was projected, difficulties were thrown in her pathway at every step. The local tenor, who was her great stand by of course contracted a cold; her quartette of four sisters—the ugly rectory girls, by the way—could never be got together to rehearse. Life at Torre Abbey had become imbued with the atmosphere that might be supposed to pervade the inner life of an operatic impresario. The rooms were strewed with advertisement bills, with sheafs of new and old music, with a variety of odd-shaped black leather cases which contained the instruments of the several artists who had rashly promised their assistance. In all, and through all the labor, excitement, and bustle, Lady Augusta had, however, one tangible and definite comfort in the handsome person of her coadjutor, Mr. Hunter.

"What should I do without him?" she said to Miss Glenlee at least a hundred times. "He is so kind, so thoughtful, so considerate—tries to do all he can to make things so smoothly, and keeps his temper, no matter what the difficulty may be!"

Miss Glenlee always smiled a languid assent.

"He is certainly a very agreeable person," was what she would naturally have said, but finding that her hostess had rather quickly determined that Mr. Hunter's birth and breeding entitled him to great consideration, Miss Glenlee substituted "man" for "person" and she felt she had made a great concession in so doing; for, despite her languor, Miss Glenlee was primed with a certain kind of what may be termed nowadays old-fashioned class prejudice; and, although she allowed Mr. Hunter every sort of claim to attention, from a physical point of view, she was not quite certain in her mind whether she approved of her lively little friend's undoubted belief in the handsome organist as being not only handsome, but a gentleman into the bargain.

Blanche had none of the keen knowledge of character or insight into human nature which influenced both Trevelyan and Lord Taunton in their somewhat vague objections to this young man. The considerations that moved these two, and would most certainly have moved Lady Augusta, did she feel them, would not have affected Miss Glenlee half so much as the possibility of Mr. Blair Hunter being, as had been discussed jokingly at the first, the son of some tradesman, or to her, other undesirable individual.

Moreover, Miss Glenlee did not wholly enter into the business of the concert. She disliked all fuss and confusion; and slow and stupid as she was, she was sufficiently quick-witted to realize that all the excitement that prevailed—the constant rehearsals, and the wild confusion following on these rehearsals—had the effect of sending Lord Taunton forth at an early hour, and retarding his return to the Abbey until an hour or two before dinner.

After all her lessons to her husband, after all her carefully calculated manoeuvres, it was Lady Augusta who acted in a way that certainly did not throw Hugo and Blanche into the constant companionship she had so desired.

Now and then Miss Glenlee went for a walk with Lord Taunton—a slow, dull, heavy kind of walk—during which they conversed on all the small topics that Hugo thought most interesting and possible to Miss Glenlee's somewhat dull intelligence; but a fortnight had spun into three weeks, and the intimacy between them had not advanced one jot as yet.

Blanche Glenlee was beginning to get irritated. She knew perfectly well just why she had been invited to Torre Abbey, and the knowledge had not been in the least disagreeable to her. She would, in fact, very much enjoy being the Countess of Taunton and Torre, and she was beginning to have a distinct desire for Taunton's society.

Taking one thing with another, therefore, Miss Glenlee could not bring herself to enter very heartily into the concert proceedings. That Lord Taunton shared in her dislike to the proceedings, too, was very clearly expressed, Miss Glenlee which he avoided the house and the grave, pre-occupied look that seemed to be perpetually on his face. She ventured to allude to this sympathy between them one morning just before the all-ambitious occasion.

"I am afraid you are not greatly concerned whether dear Gusie has a great success or not," she said, looking at him with her one smile.

They were standing out on the lawn, under the budding trees. It was a glorious morning, but Miss Glenlee complacently endured the brilliant sunlight. She knew she had nothing to fear from its searching rays; and moreover, she was well aware that in her well-cut blue serge she was looking her very handsomest.

Lord Taunton was looking at the distant form of his baby nephew, who was trying to balance himself and his white fur garments in an erect and dignified manner. His thoughts were very far away from either the baby, the concert, or Miss Glenlee. Nevertheless, he answered her remark.

"Dear little Gus! How energetic she is! She ought to have been a prime minister, at least. She has flung herself into this concert heart and soul. It must certainly be a success, Miss Glenlee, if only out of gratitude!"

Blanche was a little nonplused. This was not quite the tone of a man who was irritated or annoyed.

"Do you care for music?" she queried tentatively, as not quite knowing what to say.

They were sauntering along under the trees. The man's eyes were dreamy—as eyes are when the mind is retrospective. His memory had flown to another morning. How long ago it seemed now to his lover's heart when he had paced the deck beside another blue serge gown, and had caught sight of two dainty little feet that looked as though they could not possibly be strong enough to support the tall, slender, little body above them. There was no such doubt appertaining to Miss Glenlee's feet. They were shapely, but not small. They did not appeal to Lord Taunton as those others had done; nor, indeed, did any part of the tall, fine young woman awaken more than the faintest admiration in the young man's breast. How could there be room for other feelings when the organist's image, weighed as queen, was stamped, as it were, upon his sight? Look which way he would, Alwynne's exquisite individuality arose to blot out the scene, and to gaze into his eyes with those clear, thin windows of her soul.

"I love music," he answered Blanche. "It is a part of my nature. I don't know," he went on musingly; "I don't think I could possibly conceive a life livable without the poetry of sound to harmonize with our sorrows and our joys!"

Miss Glenlee looked straight before her. She felt a little aggrieved with Lord Taunton. She did not quite understand him, and the "poetry of sound" was something she never troubled her mind about in the very least. However, she was not absolutely devoid of common sense, although she would never have taken high rank as a diplomat.

"Life, indeed, would be nothing without music!" she said. And then she sighed; for, truth to tell, she was a little dull, and it was hard to walk for half an hour in the bright morning sunshine and yet not elicit even half a glance of approval or admiration from her companion.

The man heard the sigh, and at once dismissed his dreamy thoughts.

"I hope you are not tired?" he said, in that charming, chivalrous way of his. "I think we had better go back to the house."

Miss Glenlee assented, and they strolled along—she a little smiling, he doing his best to keep his thoughts from wandering, and endeavoring to start a respectable sort of a conversation. He found Blanche very hard to talk to, and he was always relieved when she confessed she had had enough of walking and would go indoors. He was wondering if the second post would bring him any sort of communication from Mrs. Brabante. It was now quite a week since he had been to town; and on his return he had sat down and written to Alwynne's mother, directing it to the London hotel, to be forwarded. It had been only an everyday chatty letter, but it had certainly given scope for an answer; and Mrs. Brabante had held out decided hints of being a good correspondent. Therefore Taunton waited and hoped, almost with the anxiety of a boy, for this letter, which was to bring him news of her, to whom his soul and heart and life were indisputably and altogether given.

"Here comes Gussie! All in a hurry, as usual—rather more than a hurry, to judge by her speed. What! She actually passes her offspring without a word! Then something very much must be the matter!" And Lord Taunton laughed as he watched the little tricolor gowned form come running wildly toward them.

"Hold hard!" he cried, as his sister flung herself on his arm. "My dear child, if you proceed to project yourself through space at this reckless speed, what do you think will happen to you?"

"Guess!" panted Lady Augusta, breathless, and yet aglow with excitement. "Guess!"

It was the only word she could manage to gasp out.

"Jack has done something, of course; or, with a recollection of passing events, 'the concert has burst!'"

"Almost as bad!" Lady Augusta said, recovering her breath with difficulty. She had to sit down on the grass to get better, but was ignominiously hauled up by her brother, who demanded sternly if she wished to get her death immediately, there and then?

"Pooh, a little dew, as if that hurts any one! But do guess what has happened! Hugo! Blanche! Of course you will never guess; so it is rather hard to make you try."

"Something about Mr. Hunter?" observed Miss Glenlee, in her slow way. Then she was obliged to confess: "It was not clever, Gussie. But I see you have a letter from him in your hand!"

Taunton made an involuntary movement to the house. The second post was in, then. Lady Augusta disclosed her letter.

"From Blair Hunter. He is at Westchester. He has been staying there all the week, and I could scarcely believe my eyes! He is married—actually married! Was married four days ago, and—"

"Is this so very surprising, Gussie?" Lord Taunton inquired.

"Mr. Hunter is a young man, and a very good looking one!"

"Yes, but not to tell me he was engaged. So odd, wasn't it? I confess I am a little hurt with him."

"Perhaps he hasn't been engaged very long," Miss Glenlee said slowly.

"Oh, but he must have known something about it! People can't get married all on a sudden! They must be just a little acquainted first, Blanche."

"I don't see that that is an absolute necessity. It would be possible to be married without any engagement at all!"

"Does he tell you nothing about his wife?" asked Miss Glenlee, who had recovered her temper. She had been taught from childhood to know that any mental expression carried to excess was injurious to beauty.

Lady Augusta thereupon confessed she had not read the letter throughout.

"I only got as far as the beginning, where he says he thinks he must now tell me he is married; and then—" She unfolded the paper, smoothing at the creases, and reads out loud.

"I should have told you of this proposed change in my life had I been quite free to do so, but my wife particularly desired that I would say nothing to any one, except, of course, to the few intimate relations I possess. Bearing her wish in mind therefore, I preserved silence, and I beg you will forgive what otherwise might seem somewhat strange conduct on my part."

"The people at Weston's music—" Lady Augusta broke off.

"Oh, that is all about the concert, and will not interest either of you! Let me see. Um! Um! He certainly is most kind; he forgets nothing. Oh, here we are! I shall bring my wife home the end of this week, and I venture to hope you will extend a little of the kindness and sympathy toward Alwynne that has been so great a factor toward making my life pleasant at Torre, both socially and professionally. I—"

Lady Augusta broke off, and stood staring at her brother. "Why, Hugo, darling," she said, in sudden anxiety, "how you jumped! And how pale you are! What is it? Are you ill? Oh, dear! Don't say you are ill!"

Taunton had his arms about her in an instant.

"Silly child!" he said hurriedly. But there was something strange about his voice. "What should make me ill? I—I twisted my foot. It was the old weak ankle. You remember I hurt it a year ago. I always forget it till it reminds me in this unpleasant way. I beg your pardon, Miss Glenlee. I am afraid I gave you a start, too. Hold up, Gussie; I'm all right! Yes. Of course, Hugo bright, it was only a twinge. Go on reading your letter. What did you say Mrs. Hunter is called?"

Lady Augusta having assured herself all was well again with her brother, returned to the letter.

"Such a funny name—Alwynne—Alwynne! I never heard it before. It is pretty! I wonder if she is pretty? Isn't it a funny name, Hugo?"

"Very!" Lord Taunton answered, as Miss Glenlee looked across at him. She said to herself it must have been a bad twinge that had brought that strange, drawn, gray look over his handsome face.

CHAPTER XV

Lord Taunton found his way into the hall almost mechanically. In the same abstracted manner he sorted out the letters addressed to him, and recognized that Mrs. Brabante's clear, bold-handwriting was still absent from among his correspondence.

He stood holding his letters loosely in his hand while his eyes went through the big, open doorway, and gazed unseeing at the sunlit grounds and gardens beyond.

Alwynne! Alwynne! Was it possible, could it be possible, for two women to bear so quaint, so uncommon a name? He felt stunned, as with a swift, sudden blow. His very being had been tuned in keeping with this name; and its utterance in another's voice, penned from another hand, was something he could not understand in the first supreme moment of surprise.

Alwynne married! Alwynne a wife! Alwynne, the very motive of his existence, as it were! Alwynne, the proud, stately, slender princess, with her cold, sweet voice, her exquisite face her nameless bewitchment, wife to that man whom, at his very first glance, he had divined to be something just a little beyond the pale of what his code of honor would call an honorable or even a desirable individual. Alwynne married to Blair Hunter!

Taunton had a sudden revulsion of feeling. The absurdity of the thing came to him all at once. He almost laughed. Of course it was certainly a very odd coincidence; but it was certainly a coincidence, all the same. Another Alwynne existed, perhaps, to gladden the eyes and senses with her beauty and sweetness; but his Alwynne, the Alwynne he knew now he had loved from the very first moment, she was still apart—alone—above all and any others in the whole wide world.

He opened his letters, and read them through, perhaps not with a quite undivided attention, but still with a mind that was growing each moment more reassured. Taunton was keen and quick to argue out the most difficult problems, and there was so much that militated against any possible connection between this newly named wife and Alwynne Brabante.

Firstly, as she was away in the country under the watchful eye of her mother, how could the thought be entertained, even for a moment that she could have contracted a marriage—to say nothing of so strange a marriage as this would be—a marriage to a man she had never known! It was ridiculous!

As Lady Augusta and Miss Glenlee came into the hall, the man was himself again, and he looked at them, with his rare smile coming over his face and into his eyes.

"You are not resting that far as you promised to do!" his sister said reproachfully. "Oh, Hugo!"

"Oh, the pain is quite gone! It is nothing! I have not felt such a twinge for years."

He spoke with genuine truth in these words; not even in the old horrible trouble that was dead and gone had he suffered more acutely than he had done in the moment just passed.

Lady Augusta looked at him carefully, and seeing that he really had no signs of illness or pain about him, sighed with relief. Her thoughts at once went back to a new trouble.

"Hugo, what do you think? Blanche says she must go back to town the end of the week! Did you ever hear anything so unkind? But of course she cannot be allowed to do anything of the sort!"

Miss Glenlee smiled faintly.

"I have paid such a visitation already," she said, in her slow way.

Lady Augusta was gradually growing furious with herself.

"Of course, I see it all," she thought rapidly. "I have neglected her. Oh, dear, dear! surely two people can fall in love and manage their love without another person always interfering? I know I hated any one who wanted to interfere."

Lady Augusta was scarcely just to herself, or the circumstances of the moment; but then, with so much on her mind, how could she be supposed to be just to anyone?

"My dear—dear child!" she said, in her pretty, pleading fashion. "Oh! you must be sweet and good, and put all such nonsense out of your head. Hugo agrees with me, we can't let you go, can we, Hugo?"

"I am sure Miss Glenlee will not press it when she sees how unhappy she makes us!" Hugo said gallantly, but with no real sincerity in his voice and manner.

Blanche paused dubiously. Of course, she was flattered by his words, but somehow, dull as she was, she was not altogether convinced by them. Moreover, she would have liked something more individual than this—a more personal entreaty from Taunton, or a sudden clouding of his face. It was useless, she knew, as yet to try and assure herself of this man's devotion. Nevertheless, Blanche let herself be swayed even by the sound of his voice.

"Well, if you are not quite tired of me," she said hesitatingly, addressing the words to them both, but glancing at Taunton as she spoke.

The tone in which he answered her this time was different, and produced so much satisfaction in her mind, that Blanche was immediately restored to good temper and to hope. To experience any depth or extreme of feeling, either in one way or another, was a novelty to this woman. Her life up to now had been one of such an even tenor that she had grown to think and feel almost in a monotony. She was hardly sure that

she cared for this awakening, even gradual, and mild as it was. She would have much to learn on this subject before her life was done.

The question of Blanche being satisfactorily settled, there came the remembrance of Mr. Hunter's news to occupy Lady Augusta's active mind.

"I can't get over it," she declared, sitting down in a heaplike attitude on one of the many big chairs scattered about the hall. "I simply can't and that's the truth, Blanche."

Miss Glenlee sank into another chair.

"Why is it so surprising? People marry every day!" Her light blue eyes were following Lord Taunton's well built form as it passed out of the doorway and walked across the lawn.

"Yes. Some people do, of course," agreed Lady Augusta, hugging her knees, and presenting a singular and almost ridiculously youthful appearance for a wife of three years' standing, and a mother of two strapping babies.

"Of course, everybody marries, sooner or later, but—"

"Well, and why not Mr. Blair Hunter?"

Lady Augusta confessed she had no answer ready to this query.

"But so funny to have said nothing about it. Not to me—me. I—I mean who does so love harping about sweethearts and marriages, and all that! Fancy coming here every day, and working so hard at the concert, and all that, and then never say a word! I am just a little, a very little hurt with him."

"I think Mr. Hunter is what mamma would call sly!" observed Miss Glenlee, strangling a yawn successfully.

His friend was in arms at once.

"Oh, dear, no, Blanche! Lady Rose could never say such a thing of Mr. Hunter. Why, only just look at his eyes! He is as handsome as he is handsome, and that is saying a great deal!"

Miss Glenlee yawned altogether. Truth to tell, the subject of Mr. Hunter was one that bored her. She did not consider the young man to come even within the borders of her social world, and beyond those borders Miss Glenlee had neither the desire nor had she been trained to extend the courtesy of even a passing interest. Moreover the sudden spring warmth, combined with her early walk, an unusual exertion for her, had produced a delicious sense of sleepiness.

Lady Augusta looked at the magnificent Junoesque figure, at the fair, placid face, and at the drooping eyes and lips.

"Blanche will spread," she determined to herself. "In five or six years she will be immense, unless she does something very vigorous to stop the spreading, which I don't fancy she will ever do. I hope she won't get too fat. I don't think Hugo will care for that, and she is large already; one can't deny it."

And then Lady Augusta sprang out of her heap, and flitted away, leaving Miss Glenlee to enjoy a nap undisturbed, while she found her husband, and imparted the news of the Hunter marriage to him.

Mr. Trevelyan made a slight grimace, and then pinched his wife's glowing cheek.

"And already you are plotting and planning all sorts of schemes whereby you may cultivate an acquaintance with the bride. Gus, you are really the most sentimental little goose in the world! How do you know Mrs. Hunter is not the plainest woman in the world? And she may be old, too. I have an idea she is forty, and sergery into the bargain!"

But this idea was vetoed.

"Mr. Hunter has too much artistic feeling. He simply couldn't do such a thing!" Lady Augusta declared.

"He may have artistic feeling, but I doubt if he has much artistic money," was her husband's prosaic rejoinder.

"He gets a good salary for being organist, and then he teaches so much, and it can't cost them much to live here."

"I don't think Mr. Hunter has tested the living at Torre very far as yet."

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proachfully, "that is not like you. You mean something by that. You don't usually say nasty things about people unless you have good reason for so doing."

"What have I said?" inquired Trevelyan innocently.

"It is not exactly what you said, it is what you hinted at." Lady Augusta was frowning, it had not been, as she said, her husband's words so much as the tone of his voice, and a sort of half-veiled insinuation about Blair Hunter and his ways of life. "I can't think," the little woman went on warmly, "why you and Hugo are so nasty about this poor man. That is what I want to know."

"And what I should like to know also," Mr. Trevelyan quothed himself. Out loud he only remarked that his wife was a small goose, with a very vivid imagination.

"I don't think I imagine things more than other people do, and I am certainly not drawing on my invention when I say you don't like Mr. Hunter. Jack, you can't deny it, can you?"

"Do you really think Mr. Hunter is worth an argument between you and I, my bird?" Trevelyan asked lightly. Then he changed the subject. "Oh, by the way, Gus," he said, "I have just had a letter from Darryl. He tells me that Graham has actually married that woman already!"

Lady Augusta gave an exclamation of surprise and pain.

"Oh, dear!" she said. "How sorry I am for poor Lena, and her mother not a month dead! Surely this will do Sir Henry a great deal of harm, Jack?"

"Socially, of course it will be very bad, but I don't think it can touch his professional career very much. As I told you the other day, Graham is too big and useful a man to be allowed to drop out of things, and you know, dear, we are not living in the puritanical age nowadays, Gus! We are none of us so easily shocked by things as we used to be."

"I hope I shall remain a Puritan all my days, then!" Lady Augusta cried hotly, "if to be otherwise is to sanction such cruelty, and wrongdoings as Sir Henry Graham has been capable of!"

"Little spitfire!" laughed her husband. "Here comes Brown! From his portentous air I should imagine he brings now some tremendous information!"

Lady Augusta was off at a tangent at once.

"Something wrong at the rectory, of course," she cried instantly. "Ethel has the mumps, or given the measles, or something has happened to Maude's thumb. Whenever," Lady Augusta declared solemnly to her husband, "whenever we want to have anything quite perfect with our quartette, something always happens to Maude's thumb. Well, Brown, what is it?"

"Mr. Hunter has arrived, my lady, and is in the library!"

Lady Augusta gave a little exclamation, and sped away like an arrow from a bow, leaving her husband laughing heartily at her excitement and the amazement depicted on the immaculate footman's face.

(To be continued)

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