

THE FAIR IMPOSTOR.

CHAPTER XIV. Great Acting and Dangerous (Continued.)

With a wild imprecation, he sprang to his feet, and paced up and down. 'Let her go, now I have her here, with my hand on her head! Would a drowning man let go his grasp of the saving spar? Would a man relinquish to the winds the dearest desire of his whole life, at the moment he held it in his hand? No! Life is short—too short for such trifling with the greatest joy that can fall to it! Let her go? No! I would rather lose life itself than lose you—you queen, you pearl of woman-kind! Heaven! Can I believe that I held her here—against my heart—where I heard her heart beating against mine—that I felt the sweet breath against my cheek, and the rustle of her hair upon my shoulder?

'It maddens me! It alarms me, too! Man is happy once only in his life, they say, and I have been so happy, so madly happy, to-night—so happy! he murmured, almost fiercely, 'that I could give all that remains to me of this useless life to hold her one short minute as I held her tonight! Give her up—throw aside, like a pig, the pearl fate has thrown in my path! No! Come what may, I seize the chance, if chance it be. By fair means—or foul—I will win her! Win her against them all, even against herself! For who among them all—the gaping idiots! who could love her as I love her? Ah! he broke off, to wipe his feverish brow—'I have sported with love, mocked it and abused it, and now it turns and rends me! Suppose—that I won her, and at the same time lost her—lost her sweet self, her soul? No, no! Such love as mine must create some responsive love in her! It shall be so! I swear it! Is that her window! See what a love sick fool I am! Dying for her shadow! And—ah! it is her! Hilda—Lillian! look down, my darling, on the man who loves you as man never has loved before—see where he stands ready to do all that man dare do to win you, and who swears to succeed!'

With a laugh that was almost a groan, he turned away, with quivering lips and moistened eyes. 'What a fool, idiot, madman I am! he muttered. 'The stage-struck Romeo clings to me still. But—but let her go? No! That would be madness, indeed. Good-night, my queen lily of girls,' he murmured, and held out his arms toward the lighted window; then, as if ashamed of the frenzy that possessed him, he let them drop to his side, and setting his teeth hard, as if it cost him a great effort to tear himself away, he turned and disappeared.

'What part of the story is still unwritten,' he said; 'we none of us know.' 'It is no business of ours,' said her grace, gently. 'None at all, my dear,' assented the duke; 'we are quite satisfied at the result of the quest. Such an acquisition doesn't fall to Woodleigh once in a hundred years.' 'An acquisition, indeed!' said Dawson Slade. 'It is not often that a young lady with Miss Woodleigh's beauty and talent drops from the clouds.'

'It was an artful remark; it produced the vague irritation which it was intended to do. 'Dropped from the clouds is scarcely the idea,' said the duchess. 'But I inferred there was something mysterious about her discovery,' said Dawson Slade, softly. 'Scarcely mysterious,' said her grace. 'It is only reasonable that neither she nor Sir Talbot should be willing to discuss the actual facts of her past.' 'But why?' he said, in the softest voice. 'Well,' said his grace, as the duchess paused, womanlike, 'it is to be supposed that Lady Woodleigh may have been living under an assumed name—in poverty, perhaps. Oh, there are a hundred reasons!'

'And yet I should scarcely have thought Sir Talbot—he sat just behind you last night, did he not?—that he would have been sensitive on such a point.' 'Most sensitive, I should think,' said her grace, 'considering that any trouble poor Lady Woodleigh may have undergone was caused by—by his lamentable misapprehension.' 'I see—yes, of course,' he murmured; 'and Miss Woodleigh, is she like her mother?'

Both the duke and duchess hesitated. 'Like Lady Woodleigh?' repeated her grace, knitting her brows, musingly. 'No, I don't think she is at all like. But,' she added, with alacrity, 'she is very like her father—the resemblance is quite palpable.' Dawson Slade raised his eyes. 'Yes,' he said, almost to himself. 'She is like her father. There can be no question as to her identity.' The duke looked up, with wide-opened eyes. 'Identity! My dear sir! No one has suggested a doubt on the point! There can be no doubt. As you say, her likeness to Sir Talbot is remarkable, but additional evidence is contained in the fact that she was fully acquainted with every detail of Lady Woodleigh's life abroad. Sir Talbot, and Harold himself, told us that much.'

Dawson Slade nodded, with easy acquiescence. 'And Lady Woodleigh's life abroad was known, then?' he said. 'His grace knitted his brows. It was a subtle question; but the duchess came to his rescue. 'Yes, a great portion of it. As I said, Sir Talbot had been searching for her for years, and one of his agents had—nearly succeeded in tracing her—or, rather, Lillian, for Lady Woodleigh was dead—but failed. He learned all about her, however, and wrote the story to Sir Talbot.'

'I see—I see,' said Dawson Slade, helping himself to marmalade. And when Mr. Harold Woodleigh discovered her—' 'Her story tallied with that which the agent had sent over,' put in the duke. 'Exactly,' said Slade. 'Very satisfactory! Pray do not think I

CHAPTER XVI. HER SOUL SHINES THROUGH HER EYES.

The morning broke as clear and gay as only an English summer morning can be. At the Grange prevailed a hush and quietude thoroughly well understood, for Lord Gerald lay a-bed with one of his nervous headaches, the outcome of last night's excitement and exertion. Dawson Slade came down to breakfast cool and impassive as ever, looking, in his loose chevot, as unlike the Romeo of the previous night as it is possible to imagine. His first words, as he bent over her grace's hand, were those of apology. 'I played truant last night, I am afraid,' he said, in his low-toned voice. 'A long journey, with an accident thrown in as unaccountable, and the additional exertion of remembering a part I hadn't played for years, quite exhausted me. I should not have liked to have fallen asleep in the drawing room, your grace.'

The duchess smiled good-naturedly. 'Please don't apologize; it is we who ought to apologize; it was too bad of Gerald to tease you into playing. And yet I freely forgive him. The stage has lost an ornament in you, Mr. Slade.'

He sank into his seat, with a smile. 'I think Rayburn would have done better,' he said, modestly. The duke laughed. 'Not he, I'll answer for it. By the way, a telegram came from him last night, but it fell into the hands of a new footman, and—remained there till this morning. He—Rayburn not the footman—was summoned to the sick bed of a relative. It was, indeed, fortunate that you arrived to save us from a breakdown! Poor Gerald has one of his bad headaches, poor boy.'

'Just what I expected,' said Dawson Slade. 'He could have borne failure with equanimity, but success—' 'And such success!' said the duchess. 'Did she not act splendidly, Mr. Slade? The duke says that he never saw anything in his life to equal it.'

'Miss Woodleigh, you mean,' said Dawson Slade, paying the greatest attention to the buttering of his toast. 'Yes, she played remarkably well; wonderfully, as you say, for an amateur, and for her acting for the first time. By the way, I have not seen her on any of my previous visits; did not even know that Sir Talbot had a daughter.'

Her grace looked down thoughtfully, and the duke stirred his coffee as if he meant to stir a hole in the bottom of the cup. 'It was not generally known,' said the duchess. 'She has been away from him since she was quite a little child, and returned only lately—about three months ago, in fact.'

Dawson Slade looked with polite interest, nothing more. 'Is there a mystery?' he asked. 'A romance, say, rather,' said the duke. 'You will hear it sooner or later, Slade; the country is full of it. Miss Lillian is the daughter of Lady Woodleigh, who left her home more than 20 years ago. No!' for Dawson Slade had raised his eyebrows and dropped his eyes. 'No! there was no guilt on her part, if some blame. Sir Talbot—he is an old friend of mine, and I do not wish to speak hastily—Sir Talbot is a peculiar man; there is not a prouder man in the county. At that time he was not only proud but haughty, stern and inflexible. He fancied he had reason to doubt his wife, and—well she left her home and took her child—this charming young lady—with her. They disappeared for years, for long after Sir Talbot learned that he had been unjust, and instituted steps to discover them. He didn't succeed until, as I say some few months ago, it was too late, so far as Lady Woodleigh was concerned; she was dead. But the child, Lillian Woodleigh, remained, and Harold brought her home.'

Dawson Slade looked up, with a sudden gleam in his eyes. 'Harold—her cousin?' 'Her cousin,' said the duke; 'quite so. He was the lucky man to find the woman whom many had sought for in vain.'

Dawson Slade took an egg, and chipped it with minute care. 'And how and where did he discover her?' he asked, quietly. The duke put down his cup, wiped his iron-gray mustache, and smiled.

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Dawson Slade looked up. 'Excess of joy is almost as bad to bear as excess of grief,' he said, in his soft quiet voice. 'He looks changed—much older.' 'Much!' said the duke. 'It has told upon him. He lives entirely for, and in her; you can see that.'

The duchess rose, as Dawson Slade gently pushed his coffee cup aside. 'What are the plans for the day?' she asked. Dawson Slade smiled. To be continued.

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