

Fate and Marriage

By Clara Mulholland

"Hush! Yer see, its like this, gov'nor," the visitor replied, turning a dirty, tattered old cap round and round in some trepidation.

"Good heavens! Is it possible? Mr. Smith seemed a gentleman. He writes, taking a letter from his pocket and glancing over it, 'and speaks like a gentleman, and you—'

"Gentlemen comes low, sometimes, especially," with a knowing wink and sticking a finger to his nose, "when they lose their own money an' maybe somebody else's that they've not come by altogether honestly. Mr. Smith or Fane 'opes you'll continue your kindness to 'im, my lord, and make it worth 'is while an' mine to keep your secret."

And, chuckling, he seated himself on one of the brocade-covered chairs and quietly crossed his legs. Lord Linton's face grew ghastly in its pallor.

"Mr. Smith should have come himself. He had no business to send you to my house. I refuse to hold any communication with you. How do I know you are not an impostor?"

The grimy, ill-clad creature slipped from his chair, and going close to Lord Linton whispered a few words in his ear.

His lordship staggered back, his face convulsed with terror and anger. "He told you that? Then he may starve, or shoot himself if he pleases, for all I care. I'll have nothing more to say to him."

"He wouldn't be much loss, truly. But if he were gone to-morrow, gov'nor, you'd be no better off. For I, your humble servant, remember," spreading out his arms, "know everything wot 'e knows."

Lord Linton shook his head from side to side. The room seemed to swim round him. Things had come to a climax. On every side he saw ruin staring him in the face. He had taken possession of the name and estates of Linton at the death of his cousin, knowing full well that he had no right to either—morally certain that Archibald's first wife had died some twelve years before he was killed, and that his second wife and, perhaps, several children had survived him. But he had asked no questions, made no inquiries. For years all had gone well. Everything had prospered with him. He had married an earl's daughter, had children born to him, and tasted all the pleasures of a life of luxury and ease. His conscience, 'tis true, was sometimes troublesome, especially at first. But in excitement and champagne, card-playing and riotous living, he had managed to stifle that, and, after a lapse of fifteen years, had begun to feel perfectly secure in his position, when quite suddenly a change came. His sins had found him out. First vague rumors reached him. There were Fane's living, he heard who claimed to be Archibald's children. He smiled at that, and flattered himself that they could do him no harm. But when he met Jeremiah Smith, an out-at-the-elbows actor, who proved to him that he was the Fane whom Madeline Delorme, the beautiful young actress, had loved and married, he trembled with fear. He had given him some money on condition that he told no one, and for the time, even though little Hugo's letter of that morning had caused him some pricking of conscience, he felt secure. And now this man turned up and assured him that he was in possession of his secret, and that he must either submit to his demands or give up everything.

Tristram Fane longed to turn and kick the fellow out. But he was feeling ill and weak, and there was an ugly look about his visitor that made him shrink from laying hands upon his sturdy, thick-set form. So he clenched his fists and ground his teeth in silence, and, staggering towards a chair, sank into it, helpless and inert.

"Oh, come now, gov'nor, don't take on so. Me an' Smith's ready to act fair an' square and tell no tales, if only you'll do the same by us."

"What do you call acting fair and square?" burst from Tristram's white lips. "What do you want?"

The man cast a furtive glance round the room. "My pal wished me to set a few facts before ye, an' then see wot yer wot the information's worth, an' yer wot yer think ought to be done. If rough work's to be the order of the day, I'm yer man. Smith's not hup to much. But Bill Grogan is not a feller to stop at anything. If there's people to be removed, he'll remove them for," waving his big, grimy hands about and clearing his throat, "aleem: a con-side-er-ation."

"What do you mean? Who's to be removed?"

"As if, with a leer and a wink, 'yer didn't know."

"You're drunk, Bill Grogan, and you'd better get out of this while you can walk. I'll call anywhere you like to-morrow and hear what you and Smith have got to say."

"Fust," he replied, counting on his fingers and paying no attention to Lord Linton's interruption, "ther's

of triumph in her voice. "And before telling anyone about it, I have come to you."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

When Lady Linton left her husband she drove straight to Gerald Fairfax's studio and was soon on the raised dais in the chair in which she was wont to recline whilst her portrait was being painted.

"He can't do it: he has no proof." "I'll not contradict ye. But if you was to blab—Mr. Smith an' me?"

Lord Linton sprang to his feet and strode up and down the room, his face drawn and white, a wild, hunted look in his eyes.

"After this young feller, John," continued his tormentor, "there's pretty Miss Beryl. She's on a visit with the Fairfax family, an' if they take up the case, an' we join in, it'll go hard with you, my lord."

"What the deuce are you driving at? If John Fane and his sister know the truth, and—and can prove it," Lord Linton's blue eyes were blood-shot, his lips were blue, "neither you nor Mr. Smith, nor all the world together, can stop them."

"If they're allowed to do so, they will." Bill Grogan had consumed a goodly supply of whiskey, but he had all his wits about him. "An' if you're fool enough not to stop them they will."

"But what the mischief am I to do?" passionately. "I wish to—"

Bill Grogan crossed and recrossed his legs and cleared his throat several times.

"There's many a thing happens to people nowadays," he remarked quietly. "They meet with accidents and disappear and—"

Lord Linton stared at the man with bated breath. "You would tempt me — to — a crime?" he said, in a hoarse whisper.

Grogan's answer was a laugh that was not a pleasant one, and Tristram, Lord Linton, writhed, and his face grew white with passion as it fell upon his ear.

"It doesn't require me to tempt ye, gov'nor. Ye knows all about it yerself. An' it all comes to this. Will ye give up the whole show, or, with a chuckle, "make over a little trifle of twelve thousand pounds to me an' Smith, an' we'll take all the trouble off your shoulders? Yer'll know nothin', feel nothin', 'ear nothin', see nothin', as I once heard in a play up the West End. The deed'll be done. An' me an' you an' Smith, like the good boys in the story books, 'ill live 'appy ever after."

Lord Linton sank into a chair by the table, and, flinging out his arms, let his head fall forward upon them and groaned heavily.

"I wouldn't take a little matter like that so much to 'eat," said Grogan, in soothing accents "Lord love yer, it's nothin'. A mere scratch or two of the pen an' the thing's done."

Lord Linton slatched his cheque-book and, then sitting up suddenly, took a pen and dipped it into the ink.

Bill Grogan crept up behind him, flushed and excited. "Twelve thousand — not a penny less, mind; and make it payable over the counter. No crossin's an' things o' that sort, mind yer. That's it," following the formation of every letter as Linton filled in the cheque. Splendid. A full twelve thous. An' mind yer, it's cheap at the money. A nasty job. Full of risk an' danger. Now, then, with a loud curse, "Why the mischief don't ye sign? I hear some one comin'. Be quick, man; be quick. Yer name."

Lord Linton let the pen fall from his fingers, and, turning, looked steadily into Grogan's drunken, wicked face.

"And how am I to know that you and Smith will do what you promise? You'll spend my money and leave me just where I am this moment — surrounded by enemies, dangers and difficulties."

Grogan ground his teeth and cursed him under his breath. "Yer goin' to draw back, are ye?" he said, with a sneer. "Well, then, give us a bit now — just for expenses. Two thous., say, an' promise to pay the rest when — well," laughing, "when the job's done."

Lord Linton wrote and signed the smaller cheque, and as he finished, almost before the ink was dry, Grogan seized it and thrust it into his pocket.

"There isn't a minute. Further particulars when yer will. Yer've got the address of me an' the pal. Lee's Court, top floor back. Adoo. Mum's the word. 'Er ladyship's 'ome from 'er drive. I 'ear the swish of petticoats."

The door opened quickly, a tall, slender girl in a dark blue travelling dress stood upon the threshold. Bill touched his forehead and slunk past her into the hall. Lord Linton, unaware of her presence, fell back with a gasping sob, and covered his face with his hands.

"Pappa, are you ill? What has that terrible man been saying. Oh!" with a shudder, "he looked wicked, horribly wicked," she cried, laying her hand upon her father's shoulder.

"Richardson should not admit such people."

"Margaret!" Lord Linton cried with a start of surprise. "You? Why are you here? You came without permission. You—"

"Yes, dear papa, I did. But," she bent and kissed him, "I have made a strange discovery." There was a note

found Beryl and John Fane standing together by the window. Beryl introduced her brother at once, and Gerald grasped and shook his hand warmly.

"You will both come into the studio," he said. "There are many people coming I would like you to meet."

"My sister," John answered, in a low voice, "is in trouble. She has just said good-bye to Lord Hampton, to whom, as you know, she is engaged to be married."

Gerald grew white to the lips. "Partings are always sad," he said, with an effort, "But Lord Hampton will soon return well and — uninjured."

Beryl looked at him with an expression of mute anguish, and Gerald turned away, a sharp pain at his heart, his eyes dim with tears.

"And then," John said, little suspecting the real cause of his sister's woe, and not noticing Gerald's emotion. "I think it wiser not to meet Lady Linton, who, I am told, is still there."

"I see no earthly reason why you should not meet her," Gerald said brusquely. "She knows all about you, and is anxious to make your sister's acquaintance."

"To meet and talk to her as a friend, when, if she only knew who and what I am, seems unnecessary. You understand what my position is, Mr. Fairfax. Beryl says you know everything."

"Everything. Madeline Delorme, the actress who died some fifteen years ago, and whom your father saw that night, was my sister. His wife, the other and older Madeline Delorme, had been dead long, long before. So had he lived he would have given the lie direct to all the false stories circulated at the time. Or, perhaps, indeed, they would never have been written."

John paced the room from end to end in a state of feverish excitement. "That is true, I feel sure. But fate was cruel and his name has been slandered, dragged in the mud. Everyone has judged him falsely—believed the worst of him. We, his children, have been kept in the background, not allowed to raise our heads—forced into a false and humiliating position, whilst others have enjoyed what was ours, and another man bore the name that should be mine."

"Circumstances have certainly been against you. You have been badly treated all round."

"Circumstances!" John's eyes were blazing; "in the shape of a wicked, grasping relative."

"You don't mean to say"—Gerald looked at him in horror—"that you would accuse Lord Linton of being aware all the time that wrong was being done, and that he fraudulently usurped your rightful place?"

"That is just what I say and assert."

"Oh, John! be merciful," Beryl said in a tremulous voice. "Do not condemn him unheard. He may have believed as we did."

"I hope so, little sister," John put his hand caressingly round her shoulder. "But I confess I am full of doubt."

"Well, now, his hour of retribution has come," Gerald said. "Any moment you may demand the restitution of your name and property. With all the proofs that you possess, ready to lay before him, you need not hesitate. And if he is wise he will give up everything quietly—recognize you at once, openly and frankly, as your father's son, and retire in your favor."

John resumed his feverish pacing up and down in silence. "It will not be difficult after all, and need entail no disgrace upon him or his," Gerald continued. "If he declares that a grave mistake was made, the world will believe him, and his children—"

John started and grew red, then pale. "His children," he moaned. "Ah! Fairfax, there's the trouble. Pretty Hugo — and beautiful, stately Margaret. Oh, God! I cannot strike the blow that will make them paupers. For their father — their mother, I hear on good authority, are up to their eyes in debt. Did I assert my claim now, Riversdale would go. Their home, their happiness, Oh, no — for their sake I cannot — cannot do it."

"That I call a trifle quixotic," Gerald said, with an indignant movement. "You should consider your sister, if not yourself."

John took Beryl's hand and drew her to his side. "Beryl won't mind; and then she has won a good man's love. Lord Hampton has asked her to be his wife, believing her to be a nobody."

"If she marries Lord Hampton the truth must be told," Gerald said sternly.

"Is that so, Beryl? Do you think Lord Hampton does not love you well enough to marry you for yourself alone?"

The girl shrank from his side, and she grew very white. "Lord Hampton," she answered with a weary sigh, "loves me only too well. I do not think he will ever ask a question about my birth."

"But his friends will," Gerald said, in an excited way. "Even now, everyone is asking who you are."

Beryl tossed her shapely head and laughed, as she put her hand in that of her brother.

"Let them ask. I don't care. Neither does Hampton. Till John chooses not a word is to be said. I would not hurt Margaret Fane or darling little Hugo for the world."

John took her in his arms and kissed her. "Thank you, dearest. So, un-

less something very unexpected happens, we'll leave things as they are."

"Will mother agree to that?" Beryl said, with a quick start and flush.

"I think so. She only desires our happiness."

"But our father's name? Oh, John, she longs to see that cleared."

John passed his hand across his brow. "And so do I. But, oh! Beryl, it is hard — very hard. No matter how one turns — no matter what one does." He sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands. "Oh, Margaret," he murmured, "had your love been mine — had you promised to marry me, responded to my love, not knowing who I was, I could have made all things right. But now I am powerless; and I dare not spoil your life, bring you to poverty — and, cost me what it may, I will not."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Having spoken a few words to Enid and congratulated her and Sir Henry on their approaching marriage, Lady Linton turned away and went slowly round the big studio, examining the pictures as she went, but without any very lively feeling of interest. She was not a judge or a lover of art, and looked at Gerald's paintings in a careless way, thinking to herself the while that very soon she would slip away and go home.

"I'd like to make quite sure that that ruffianly fellow was safely off the premises, she thought. "And really, there is no one here so very interesting. Yesterday Mr. Fairfax made a point of Linton coming with me this afternoon, and now he doesn't seem to mind. Ah!" she paused suddenly before the portrait of Madeline Fairfax, known to the world as Madeline Delorme. "What a lovely face. I never saw such an exquisite creature. Who on earth can she be?" She glanced round, hoping to see someone who could enlighten her upon the subject, and saw Sir Julian Goldsmid pushing his way across the room in her direction.

"How fussy he looks; and how important," she reflected, wishing, with an extraordinary feeling that something unpleasant was going to occur, that she could in some way avoid meeting and talking to the consequential solicitor. "One would think he had some strange news to communicate to me. Perhaps," smiling a little ironically, "he has thought of some fresh plan for subjugating the fair Margaret and winning her affections. Well, I must humor him and keep him quiet. If he were to turn nasty and ask for his money, I don't know what I should do. In his present humor Linton is not likely to raise my allowance or give me a handsome present. Indeed, I am doubtful whether he could do so without some difficulty. How do you do, Sir Julian?" with a gracious smile, and extending her hand almost eagerly towards him. "This is, indeed, a pleasure."

"I am delighted to meet you, Lady Linton. And how is your portrait progressing?"

"That I cannot tell you. The artist will not allow me to see it yet."

"Indeed?" raising his brows. "He gives himself airs, then, does Mr. Fairfax?"

"He's a rising man, they say. Why not?"

"He was at Riversdale yesterday?"

"Yes, and is delighted with poor Hugo—says he will make an enchanting portrait. But I," sighing, "would rather see him stronger and less beautiful."

"Time will make him both. Don't fret about Hugo. But what did he think of Margaret? Did he not long to paint her?"

Lady Linton laughed and gave him a comical glance. "You foolish man. He never mentioned her. He is not in love with her; really, to my mind, Margaret is nothing in particular. She looks nice at times. How did she receive you?"

"Coldly, and once more refused me with scorn. But," clenching his fist, "I'll not give up yet. I love her, and I swear I'll win her. Things may happen before long," he said fiercely, "that may make her glad to be my wife."

Lady Linton changed color. "Really, Sir Julian, you sound alarming. Has the dangerous young steward left that part of the country yet?"

Sir Julian glanced round the room, then looked steadily into Lady Linton's face.

"Yes. He is here to-day, somewhere. His sister, Miss Beryl, is a guest of these Fairfax people."

"So the artist told me just now. And she, he says, is like Hugo."

"Curiously like. A very lovely girl."

"And is her brother handsome, too?"

"Hardly that, but a fine fellow."

"That is generous, since he is your rival."

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