



The Die is Cast For Better or Worse.

CHAPTER XXVII.
A Desperate Expedient.

It is to me, please," he said. "It is mine. As you are. Now, now that I have proved you are my wife, will you tell me why you have left me, why you have treated me thus?"

Eva regarded him in speechless wonder and trouble. She did not know what to do, what to say. She was not angry with him; through all her bewilderment pity struggled to the front and predominated. Suddenly her woman's wit, her woman's instinct, came to her aid. She turned to Sir Talbot and said in a low voice: "Leave us alone together, father."

Sir Talbot started, and naturally enough looked doubtful and anxious. "Leave you? My dear Eva!"

"I am not afraid," she said. "There is no cause for fear. Leave us, father."

Still hesitating, looking from one to the other apprehensively, Sir Talbot left the room. At the door he paused and said: "I shall be outside, Eva—if you call."

When the door had closed, Eva began to tremble. She was like a gambler staking on all the hazard of a die. She was going to appeal to nature, to the high court of love, going to subject the problem to the ordeal of proximity of actual contact. She needed all her nerve, but the latent spirit in her rose at her call, and inspired her. She raised her eyes to Lashmore, who stood on the other side of the table with his folded arms pressed hard against his breast, as if to hold in check his throbbing heart.

"You loved your wife, Mr. Lashmore?" she said, in a low voice.

The emotion which tore him did not

Eva took up the flower and looked at it with bent brows. "I remember," she said, bewildered, confused. "I remember the pink dress—you split some claret over it when you were staying at the Court. But I never wore it again. What became of it? I can't remember! I may have given it to my maid, the maid I had then; she has left me."

Lashmore held out his hand. "Give permit of surprise, and he answered at once.

"I love her, yes," he said. "Say, rather, that I loved her. She can lay no claim to my love now."

"You love her still," said Eva, your agitation prove it. You think that I am your wife. Ah, don't speak! It is difficult for me to say, to do, what I am going to say and do. Don't make it harder or—I shall break down. You think that I am your wife?"

"Before Heaven, I do!" he said hoarsely.

"Well, then," she said very sweetly, very solemnly, her face white, so spiritual an expression in her eyes that they might have shone in the face of an angel. "Well, then—"

She moved slowly round the table, and, advancing to him, held out her hand.

With a cry Lashmore seized it, his other arm went round her, and, breathing her name in accents of relief and joy, he drew her to him. Then suddenly a chill, like that of a cloud, seemed to fall upon him, envelop him. He held her at arm's length, his burning eyes scanning her face, feature by feature, line by line. His eyes sought hers, patient, mild, pitying. He began to shake in every limb, doubt crept over him, followed by certainty. With a cry, almost of horror, he released her and fell back, supporting himself by the mantelpiece.

Eva swayed, as if she were about to faint, and called out:

"Father!"

Sir Talbot rushed in, in time to catch her.

"Father, he knows—he knows the truth! He knows now that I am not his wife!"

Lashmore had covered his face with his hands; suddenly he threw them up and cried like a man distraught: "God help me! Whom have I married? Where is she?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.
The Rightful Heir.

Lashmore went out of the house like a drunken man. The shock almost stunned him; and he was like a man suddenly plunged into Cimmerian darkness, uncertain where he stood, where next to place his feet. If the girl he had married was not Eva Lyndhurst—and he knew now that she was not—who was she?"

That the beautiful, pure-hearted girl he had made his wife out there in South America, every day of whose life had impressed him with her in-

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innocence and her goodness, should be an imposter, impersonating another woman, seemed to him beyond the range of possibility. Until a few minutes ago he would have answered for her truth, her honesty, her incapability of wrong-doing, with his life.

He would also have been as ready to answer for her love for him. His wife, the girl who had lain in his arms, who had proved her love for him, an imposter! And yet how could he avoid not only the evidence which had been given by Sir Talbot, Eva Lyndhurst, Owen Osborne, the persons who vouched for the fact that Eva Lyndhurst had not left England, but the still stronger irrefutable evidence of his own senses and instincts? He had known the moment Eva Lyndhurst had surrendered herself to his arms that she was not his wife, and that he was the victim of an extraordinary resemblance.

Who, then, was the girl he had married, and why had she deceived him? These questions surged through his mind, but above them all arose one which was ever more important than all the others: Where was she? For he loved her still, his heart ached for her. He wanted to hold her tightly, to wring the truth from her—yes, and to forgive her. He loved her, notwithstanding all she had done, and he wanted her badly.

Instinctively he went back to Osborne. Osborne was shocked at his appearance, but he saw that Lashmore had been deceived.

"You know the truth?" Osborne said gravely.

"No; half the truth," said Lashmore. "I know that Eva Lyndhurst is not my wife; she has proved it to me; but I do not know who my wife is. I do not know where to find her. I must search, search! And I do not know where to turn, where to begin!"

"You must let me help you, Lashmore," said Osborne. "You are broken up just at present, and no wonder! The first thing to do is to cable to Quirapata and ask when she sailed. We will go down to the shipping-office at once. You want action; you shall have it."

They drove down to the shipping-office, and at once learned that "Mrs. Lashmore" had sailed by the Fortuna and that she had disembarked in England with the other passengers. Then came a block; for, of course, the shipping-people could give them no further information. From the docks they went round to the newspaper offices and inserted an appeal to "Mr. L. of Q." Osborne would have gone to Scotland Yard and set the detectives to work, but Lashmore would not hear of it. At the back of his mind was a dread that his wife had done something which rendered her amenable to the law; no, there must be no police.

From the newspaper offices, they went in a cab through some of the by-streets on the chance of seeing her; it was a ridiculously remote one, but Osborne knew that it would afford Lashmore some relief; anything, however ridiculous, was better than inaction and brooding. Lashmore returned in the evening to Chelsea pretty nearly exhausted by the stress and strain. He found Levison there, and for a moment he felt inclined to tell that astute person of the new trouble and ask his assistance, but unfortunately he suppressed the desire; his

wife was still so sacred to him that he could not speak of her, and her story, without anguish.

Levison had come to tell him that the first step in the claim had been made, and that writs had been served on Lord Herndale and other persons. Lashmore received the news almost indifferently; to him, at that moment, mattered little whether he got the title and estates or not.

Reading Forbes' anxious inquiries and distress at his appearance, Lashmore forced himself to take some food; then went out again to pace the streets in his feverish search.

Meanwhile Herndale had gone to his club and found a letter, brought by hand, from Mr. Wensley, the family solicitor, requesting him to call at the office without a moment's delay. Herndale sat with the note in his hand, biting at an unlit cigar for some minutes; then he went down to the lawyer's office. Mr. Wensley was an old man, and an honorable and an upright one. He received Herndale very gravely.

"I do not know whether what I have to tell you will be a surprise to you, Lord Herndale," he said. "We have this morning received a writ in connection with a claim to the title and estates made by the late Lord Herndale's son. I have been through the statement of claim, and I am bound to admit that it has startled me and caused me much anxiety. It appears—of course, from their statement—that there was a marriage between Lord and Lady Herndale, and that this gentleman, your cousin, is legitimate. It is a most extraordinary story; and, of course, we have to examine it most closely. In any case, you will, of course, contest the claim. The onus of proof lies with the other side; you are in possession, and it is only right to assume that you are in lawful possession."

Herndale was very pale, his eyes were almost hidden by their lids; he not only looked like a man who has received a bad shock, but like one who was calculating, turning something over in his mind.

"It is not altogether a surprise," he said in his dry voice. "I met the man the night before last under peculiar circumstances. Probably you have heard something of them?" Mr. Wensley nodded. "You said just now that we must fight. I should like to ask you a question. Are you sure that there is no ground for the claim, are you convinced that it is a false one?"

Mr. Wensley fixed his eyes on the blotting-pad. "That is scarcely a fair question, Lord Herndale," he said. "As a lawyer, and a very experienced one, you must know that it is my duty to assume, as I am acting for the person in possession, that the claim is a false one."

"To assume?" said Herndale. "Quite so. But I am asking you as man to man."

Mr. Wensley colored and frowned. "As man to man," he said reluctantly and very gravely. "I think the claimant has a good case. I will go no further than that. You will fight it, I presume?"

Lord Herndale was silent for a moment or two; then he said: "I will give you my decision within twenty-four hours. If this person—my cousin—is entitled to the estates—"

But, as I say, I will give you my decision to-morrow."

Mr. Wensley looked at him curiously as they shook hands, and, returning to his desk, sat staring and frowning at the blotting-paper for some time. It had been on his conscience that he had never liked Lord Herndale, had always entertained a vague suspicion of him. He felt ashamed of himself as he thought of it; for it looked as if Lord Herndale were going to act up to a standard of honor as high as any man could attain to. He felt ashamed of himself; and yet he was puzzled and uneasy.

Herndale drove to his rooms, locked the door, mixed himself a stiff glass of brandy and soda, and, taking from a safe a despatch-box with a Bramah lock, opened it and took out a slip of paper. It was a copy of the late Lord Herndale's marriage-certificate. Herndale had found it among some papers at Herondyke; and had, therefore, known that his uncle had been married, at any rate, in some more or less valid form, and that he, Herndale, was probably a usurper.

(To be Continued.)

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