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### CHAPTER II.

#### AT WINTERTON HOUSE.

A couple of days later the duchess comes to fetch Gladys to pay her promised visit at Winterton House. The girl is warmly attached to the elder woman, and always looks forward to her visits to her with genuine pleasure, which has certainly not diminished since the advent of her step-mother.

The duchess is giving a party on the night of her arrival, and Lady Gladys attires herself in one of her loveliest gowns for the occasion. It is composed of soft pink silk, the bodice lightly draped with choice old lace, and the girl presents a charming picture with her beautiful clear-cut face and exquisite coloring.

She is taken into dinner by Lord Ellerton, a young noble whose head has been somewhat turned by the adulations of society. He is the owner of several estates and a considerable fortune, and in consequence is much sought after by maneuvering mammas. He is very much attracted by the simple, unaffected charm of the beautiful girl beside him, and the two young people appear to be extremely appreciative of one another's society.

Later on, in the drawing-room, he goes across to the duchess and asks softly, "Who is that charming girl I took in to dinner? I did not catch her name."

"Oh, that is Lady Gladys Monckton," his hostess replies; well pleased that her favorite has created so good an impression.

After a time Lord Ellerton contrives to make his way over to Gladys, but she is engaged in conversation with an elderly lady whom she appears to know intimately.

"I heard from my nephew—Eric Weston—today," says the elder lady. "I suppose you remember him, Gladys, do you not?"

"Why of course I do," answers the girl, laughing gaily. "Did I not meet him at a children's party at your house some few years ago? He was most attentive to me I remember."

Her companion smiles. "Well he appears to entertain a very pleasant recollection of you, and frequently asks after you in his letters."

The color in Lady Gladys' cheeks deepens as she answers: "What fun those parties used to be, Mrs. Cuthbertson. I don't think we have anything half so delightful now. Do you give children's parties still?"

"Certainly I do. You shall come to the next one if you like. Eric will be home by that time, I expect. He has got on remarkably well in Australia, but has recently inherited a fortune from his uncle and intends to settle down again in the old country."

Lord Ellerton frowns and passes on. He is not at all anxious for further news concerning the young man who always asks after Lady Gladys.

Apparently he is fated to meet with annoyance this evening, for a few moments later he encounters Lord Esdale—the Duke of Winterton's eldest son. "How do you like Lady Gladys Monckton?" he queries. "I saw that you took her in to dinner tonight."

"Oh, very well. She's rather a nice sort of girl, isn't she?"

"Rather nice!" echoes Lord Esdale, indignantly. "She's one of the nicest girls I ever met, and quite one of the prettiest, too. I have known her all my life, and we're great chums."

Later in the evening Lord Ellerton is chatting to a dowager friend of his mother's, while his eyes incessantly follow Gladys, who just then is talking in an animated fashion to Lord Esdale. His companion does not fail to notice his abstraction, and following the direction of his eyes she says:

"Esdale and Lady Gladys appear to get on remarkably well together, don't they? I wonder if they intend to make a match of it? I suppose his mother approves, or she would not invite her here so frequently, though I daresay she is not particularly happy at home."

"Is she not?" queried his lordship. He appears to take a deep interest in all that concerns Lady Gladys.

"Her father married a little while back, you know—some unknown woman whom no one visits. I don't know

anything of her antecedents, but she is a remarkably beautiful woman. I feel almost tempted to call upon her myself."

"Why don't you?" he answers eagerly, "and allow me to accompany you. I am dying to see this extremely beautiful lady of unknown lineage."

Mrs. Stanhope laughs. "I will take you with me with pleasure if you wish. I have known Lord Castleton for many years, and there is no reason why I should not call on his wife." "A few days later Mrs. Stanhope fulfills her promise, and Lord Ellerton is taken to call upon the parents of the beautiful girl who has shed so potent a spell over him.

Lord and Lady Castleton are at home, but greatly to Lord Ellerton's chagrin Gladys is still absent at Winterton House.

Lady Castleton rises gracefully to receive her visitors, and Lord Ellerton's eyes have a gleam of puzzled recognition in them as they rest upon his hostess' face. Where can he have seen this woman before, he wonders. As they drive away he asks abruptly of his companion: "What was Lady Castleton's maiden name. Do you know?"

"Let me see—I did hear it. Oh, yes, of course, it was Courthorpe. Is it familiar to you?"

Ellerton shakes his head, the perplexity in his face deepening.

"I suppose you don't know anything of her people, do you?"

"Nothing at all," she answers. "She was companion to an old lady before Lord Castleton married her, and that is all I know—or anyone else either, I believe. However, she is an extremely beautiful woman."

"Oh, undeniably," responds her companion, but he cannot rid himself of the impression that he has met this woman before, somewhere, though he cannot recall time or place.

Next day he meets the duchess with Gladys in the park, and she stops her carriage to speak to him, in answer to his imploring look. She is highly amused at his evident infatuation for her young protegee, though she appears oblivious to his manifest endeavors to ascertain their plans. She sees through his maneuvers distinctly, and is not at all surprised when they meet him frequently at balls and dinner parties.

A few nights before Gladys' intended departure from Winterton House the duchess invites her father and stepmother to dine with her. She dislikes Lady Castleton but she would not offend her for the girl's sake.

Her grace's spacious drawing-room is well filled when Lord and Lady Castleton make their appearance, but the buzz of conversation grows perceptibly less at her ladyship's entrance.

She is looking superbly beautiful to-night, in a gorgeous gown of flame-colored velvet, which emphasizes her glowing southern beauty wonderfully. Her big dark eyes are alight with pleasure as she sails up the room toward her hostess, well-aware of the many admiring glances which are being cast in her direction. Lord Esdale's eyes are fixed upon her with undisguised admiration, and he hastens forward eagerly to secure an introduction. Throughout the evening he pays Lady Castleton marked attention, to her grace's unutterable annoyance, and his openly displayed infatuation is remarked upon by many people.

Next day he calls to see Stella at her home in Mayfair, and upon many successive days he is also to be found there. Lord Castleton is anything but pleased at the young man's frequent visits. Very often he returns to find his wife singing love songs to Esdale in the gloaming, while the infatuated young man leans over the piano, his gaze fixed adoringly upon the beautiful face of the singer. He looks upon Esdale almost as though he were a son of his own, for he has known him all his life, but he extremely annoyed at the boy's infatuation for his beautiful wife.

Lord Ellerton meanwhile has contrived to see a great deal of Lady Gladys. He adroitly ascertains the intended movements of her grace, and she and her protegee meet him at most of the society functions which

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