

Mademoiselle Stephine, consulting which would best suit her.

"I wonder what Lady Westbrook will wear?" she said, meditatively.

"*Tiens!* it would be no guide, your ladyship. She is fair, you are dark."

"I did not require a guide," retorted Esmer, proudly. "My taste, I hope, is as good as hers. Stephine, which is the handsomest, she or I?"

"She for de blonde," was the wise response; "you for de brunette; you need de richer couleur."

"Then I will go as this Spanish Infanta. See, Stephine."

"Ah, you will look superb. With your dark eyes, your small hands—you will look a princesse."

And so Esmer did. Her *petite* figure and elfish beauty gave her the appearance of a princess out of a fairy tale. Well satisfied was she with herself, and the words of real admiration with which Gerard, attired in the costume of a French mousquetaire, greeted her.

"I shall outrival my Lady Westbrook tonight," she pondered, leaning back in the carriage by Lady Davenant. "Pale beauties never look so well in fancy dress as dark ones."

When, leaning on her cousin's arm, they entered the splendid rooms, already filled with a gay assembly of motley costumes, that put chronology to the blush, Esmer's eyes eagerly sought the means of ratifying her speech and gratifying her self-love. Her heart was buoyant—she was happy because she was triumphant.

Abruptly, while they were moving on—as if it had been arranged beforehand—the crowd of guests separated, and some yards in advance, facing her, Esmer beheld Lucille.

She was dressed as Berengaria; her golden hair streamed far below her waist, and was held back from her white brow by a simple crown. A pleased smile rested on her countenance as she leaned on the arm of her cousin, dressed as Richard Cœur de Lion.

Esmer's heart fell, as Gerard's leaped. What was there in this woman which dominated, awed her, and filled her soul with fury? The girl's white teeth came sharply on her pomegranate lip as she heard some one—Lord Hampton—say close to her:

"By Jove! there is Lady Westbrook, as Berengaria; the belle as usual. By Jove! if she'd only come as an angel, she would make us all saints by a mere flutter of her silver wings."

Esmer lifted her eyes to Gerard's. What did he think of her?

The Earl's face was so cold and impassive she could not read it, only she felt him turn, apparently desirous of avoiding Queen Berengaria. With a sharp, hard laugh, she said:

"Don't run away, Gerard. Let us speak to her majesty, who ought to be an angel with silver wings. Did you not hear her called so? You are not afraid?"

He looked quickly, sternly at her, then his lip curled with pitying scorn.

"Come," he said, "Esmer, you are the creator of your own misery. No, I do not fear Lady Westbrook, as you shall see."

They met, exchanging a few words; Lucille genuinely praised Esmer's toilet, but the girl's happiness had gone.

She danced first with Gerard, then he danced with Lucille. Esmer was their *vis-à-vis*, and she could not keep her eyes off them. Her evening's pleasure was ruined. Whenever both were out of her sight she grew restless and feverish. She was sure they must be together. Thus will a mean, jealous, suspicious mind create, as Gerard said, its own causeless misery. Such is the fruit of jealousy.

It was about midnight when Esmer's self-torture reached its height. Leaning on the arm of a partner, she was promenading the ball-room, her brilliant eyes searching restlessly for Gerard and Lucille. Everybody seemed there but those two. They had been dancing together last—they must be together now. Where could they be? Oh, if she could but find them!

Her veins throbbled with the fever of restrained passion, and, finally sinking on a couch in the conservatory, she begged her companion to fetch her an ice.

It was merely an excuse to be alone. Directly she was she crossed to one of the open glass doors leading to the grounds, and, leaning there, let the air blow on her hot temples.

The night was misty, yet with a chill in its breath that felt refreshing. As the girl stood gazing out over the lawn to where the trees and shrubs commenced, she saw the shadow, apparently of a man, pass quickly into them.

Esmer started up. Her desire, her prayer, was answered. She had found them. They had sought the grounds, where they were sure of not being disturbed.

Without an instant's reflection she drew her velvet mantle about her, and, cunningly keeping in the shade, swiftly crossed the grass and penetrated the alley wherein she had fancied the figure had disappeared.

Noiselessly, rapidly, every pulse throbbing, burning with expectancy, she proceeded, searching, listening, but in vain—all was darkness, silence, solitude.

"They avoid me—they are hiding," she murmured, in a burst of fury. "Yet I will find them."

She renewed her quest, unconscious in her excitement that her satin, pearl-worked slippers were little suited for the damp ground. All was futile, and twenty minutes afterwards she found herself again on the lawn.

"It is useless this time; they have, no doubt, returned."

She drew her mantle closer, shivering; for the first time she felt the chilliness of the night. It was chill as her angry heart. Then she hastened back to the bright, warm ball-room.

As she stepped through the glass doors she perceived two gentlemen coming out of the conservatory, which extended along the whole length of the house. They were Lord Vavasour and Gerard. Perceiving her they hastened forward.

"My dear Esmer," said the Earl, "do not stand by the door. The night is damp, you will catch cold."

"I was so warm, I wanted a little air," she said; adding, with forced gaiety, "but where have you been hiding?"

"Scold me, not him," laughed Lord Vavasour. "I carried him off for a chat in the library, where we forgot time in politics. I didn't know we had been so long. You look cold; allow me to lead you back to the warmer apartments."

Esmer took his arm, and, as they went, said:

"Where is the queen of the ball, fair Berengaria, my lord? I have not seen her lately."

"Oh! Lady Westbrook? She had to leave nearly an hour ago, having to put in an appearance at the Premier's. Such are the arduous necessities of fashion, my dear Lady Mortmain."

Esmer's heart fell. All her jealousy, then, had been without foundation? She felt sick, discontented, irritable, wretched.

"Gerard," she whispered, beckoning him to her, "my head aches. Do you mind leaving?"

"On the contrary, I shall be delighted. I'll fetch Lady Davenant."

And Esmer drove home the most miserable instead of the happiest of Lord Vavasour's guests.

"But to-morrow, to-morrow," she murmured, leaning back, her eyes closed, "I shall be Countess of Lethrington."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE NEW SITUATION.

"I NEVER was so surprised in my life, dear, never. You were so very comfortable, I thought you were a fixture."

The speaker was a slightly-made little woman of over forty, with a brisk bird-like movement, a bright, clear, bird-like eye, a chirpy voice, and the kindest nature in the world.

The scene was a parlour in the house in Percy Street; the time, morning, and a neat, plain breakfast was on the table; one side was occupied by the small, bird-like lady, the other by no less a person than Maria Saprioni.

She was, perhaps, a trifle paler, but a smile was on her lips as she sat leaning over the pages of the *Times* and tracing down the columns of "Wanted."

Miss Pyefinch, for this proved the hostess's name, was the Italian's only friend. Chance had thrown them together years before.

Maria in her loneliness had eagerly clung to the kindly soul, and had made her her confidante respecting one of her engagements wherein she was not happy. Whereupon Miss Pyefinch, drawing herself to her full height, four-feet-four, and looking as if she were going to peck some one, had exclaimed, resolutely:

"My dear, you must not stop here—you shall not. It's a shame—you a young girl and a foreigner. How can you help your pretty face? and it is very pretty. If these men will make love to you, and her ladyship hasn't the nerve or power to protect you, I say you shall not stop."

"I will not," had responded Maria quite as decisively. "And her ladyship approves; she pities, and does not blame me. But—" now helplessly and despairingly—"where can I go? I am friendless, and a stranger in London."

"Not friendless," pecked Miss Pyefinch. "Where can you go? Why, to my home, of course. It isn't rich"—apologetically, then—"neither am I. I, too, have few friends, and only a small annuity; but it's enough to afford me the pleasure of your company, my dear—that is, if you don't object to plain furniture and plain living, when they are graced with a hearty welcome?"

Concluding, Miss Pyefinch, according to a habit she had, pushed up the knot of hair ornamenting the back of her head, which knot had a propensity for getting into the nape of her neck.

Maria had gratefully caught at the offer, since when the little annuitant's home had always been hers when she was out of an engagement.

"I was as comfortable, as happy as I have been in my life; nay, more so," remarked Maria, answering Miss Pyefinch's speech opening this chapter.

"Yet you have left. Peculiar;" and the little woman pushed up the lace cap, which now, in later years, covered the knot of hair until it gave her the appearance of a cockatoo.

"Never mind its peculiarity, dear friend," smiled Maria, apologetically. "Suffice I have left, and now must look out for another situation. Please listen to this:—

"Wanted by a lady, single, a companion. Nothing menial. Must be amiable and obliging, also must like dogs—"

"Stop—stop—stop!" interrupted Miss Pyefinch, putting her fingers in her ears. "Won't do at all, my dear. Nothing menial, only you'd have to wash Mimi and Fido every morning, cut up their diurnal chop, and take them—poor asthmatical creatures!—for their constitutional."

"Well," proceeded Maria, laughing merrily, "what do you think of this?—

"Wanted by a lady a female amanuensis. Must write rapidly and distinctly from dictation. If possessing any literary powers, an admirer of the works of John Stuart Mill and an upholder of 'Woman's Rights' preferred. Address, Miss Tomasina Amazon."

Miss Pyefinch fell back, uttering a musical peal of chirping laughter.

"Oh! my love, what a contrast you and Miss Tomasina Amazon would be!" she cried. "I can see her, I'm sure I can. Hat and mantle of as masculine a cut as possible; boots with soles defying damp, blue spectacles, umbrella, black bag, large, hard features, and, my dear, a grave suspicion of a moustache. You'd have to write all her lectures, and worse, to hear them. Save us from female stump-orators. No; better wash Fido than that."

"If I'm so difficult to please I shall never get on," smiled Maria. "Beggars must not be choosers." Ah! stay, here is another:—

"Wanted a lady's-maid; must be lady-like in manner and appearance. Apply between eleven and twelve at No.—Chester Square."

"Ah-h-h!" ejaculated Miss Pyefinch, slowly and reflectively as she pushed her cap on to her forehead, "that sounds something better. Chester Square is a nice locality. But you should try after something higher than a lady's-maid, my love—indeed you should."

"I would; and such was my intention," answered Maria, taking up her coffee-cup; "but owing to circumstances I should prefer this employment. It is less public. A lady's-maid's radius need not go beyond her employer's dressing-room."

"True," Miss Pyefinch paused meditatively. Then, a wistful, woman's curiosity in her eyes, blended with a little pain, perhaps, at her friend's reticence, she said:

"Why this secrecy, my love? Why, you tell me I mustn't even let your name be known here. It all seems so very, very strange. Can't you trust me?"

There was a moisture in the bright, dark eyes, and a sadness in the soft, treble voice.

Maria was touched, and could not resist the appeal.

"Trust you," she exclaimed, "why should I not? Dear Miss Pyefinch, I hesitated from no mistrust, only because the secret is sorely my own. It concerns others; but I know I may confide in you."