

Her Adopted Daughter

By J. H. C. C.

Lenore's hand was on her lover's passionate lips, in dread of an answer that might have, perhaps, sent rolling a ball not easily stopped; but she need not have feared—the stake was too great for the wildest tempest to forget.

But her hand was instantly and silently kissed, and Castlenau said with a careless laugh:

"Pardon me—it's all for the same reason. Do as you like. It won't hurt me or mine. I'll take care of that; but it will do for your hopes in that matter."

"You are very enigmatical, Castlenau," impatiently. "What has he got against you?"

"Doesn't a base nature always hate savagely one it has injured?"

"Yes, it is an axiom."

"And a true one. If you want to know more, ask the worthy Everest himself—you're welcome."

"Not I," said Gus, quickly. "I don't care to know your past life more than I do—or his. I shall simply deal with him in a business way—nothing more."

Castlenau had staved off a possible danger, and both he and Lenore breathed freely.

Featherstone was not likely to permit the loss of any good fish to his net for the sake of curiosity. He cared nothing if Castlenau were a scamp, so long as he served his purpose and played into his hands.

Ah! but how long would that be?

CHAPTER XX.

VERY LAUGHABLE SCHEMES

Mr. Gus Featherstone had a good deal to think of that night in the solitude of his own room, and it must have been indeed something of both weight and immediate import to his own interest to keep that worthy awake five minutes after he was in bed or wake him until he was called. But now one or more troublesome problems had rather, if not entirely, unexpectedly presented themselves to him, which promised to throw complications and cross-currents into his plans which might possibly prove as unmanageable as the veritable cross-currents and dangerous tides of the Solway, and which certainly called for his immediate action.

He had several irons in the fire and, though each iron, or scheme, was different, each depended to some extent on the other, since all were heated by the same furnace and therefore any dislocation of the fundamentals was disturbing the whole as one complete scheme for his own financial benefit; and it would have been a curious study of ethics, alike for the moralist and the dramatist, to trace carefully the evolutions of this semi-criminal mind as it put before it the problems now arisen. There was a fine irony of humor in the calm obliquity of any moral point or aspect in the question; it was simply one of expediency and self-interest, a complete moral nakedness and deadly heartlessness under the surface of jovial good-nature and affection. Even that which most men hold dear was to him little, if any more, than a commodity to be used for his advantage if required. Five years ago, for instance, dire necessity had made it expedient for him to sell his young stepdaughter, when too prostrate from recent fever to offer resistance, to a husband because only on his marriage could his fortune be touched and out of it, therefore, Delaware had paid him a handsome price for the girl, who was simply a money-box to them both; but now he would almost as readily, certainly under sufficient pressure of self-expediency, sell the same commodity upon any terms that he deemed were to his own advantage.

First, now, as to this new, and he hoped profitable acquaintance he had recently made, Mr. Clement Everest, as usual, to draw him into the attractions of his social circle, where reigned a woman, who, do what she would, could not help being an attraction and an influence so long as men and women came within the circle at all; the former especially, of course, for if she were haughty, distant, or even wayward, it only plighted them. Men like Montague, for one, were not easily rebuffed into full retreat even if Lenore, under the terror held over her, and in the absence of her protector, had dared to go quite so far. Gus, therefore, had meant to ask Everest to the Lodge, the more so because his "trump card," as he reckoned the man he so little fathomed, was returning—a man whose great personal gifts and charm would enhance the glowing account he would give of the rich mines from which he had just come; and it was naturally more than vexing to the schemer to find his success met by a sudden complication and warning which he dared not disregard, coming from that quarter, for despite his overwhelming confidence in himself Mr. Gus somehow had an uncomfortable instinct that this careless cavalier, Errol Castlenau, was rather a dangerous man and not to be lightly trifled with.

What was the wrong done, the cause of quarrel between two men whose

noble lives must surely have been too widely apart to cross?

"You can ask him if you choose, and believe him, too," Castlenau had said, with the coolest, haughtiest indifference and contempt. "I don't care, but he will have nothing to do with anything I have touched."

"What can it be, I wonder?" mused Featherstone. "I wish I could find out, unknown to either side; it might be something that would give me a grip. By Jove! I'd give much to get hold over that Castlenau, but I don't venture to try in that direction; still, I'm not sure, I won't try to get a step further to-morrow. Now for the more important difficulty, which is the old puzzle renewed with the added complication that Montague will be awfully jealous. I must play my queen of hearts with care, and, by Jove! I'll show you my play—pretty sharply, too, my lady—if there is any nonsense or absurd prejudice against this one or that."

"I won't have fellows worth value so languidly treated that they'll think I am at the bottom of it, and hark off in a huff; and if I find that this one does not care for you—wife or widow—I won't have him sent off for any absurd scruples about not marrying for the chance of Gerald's being alive."

"Confound the girl! I say, and if you want the very quintessence of self-will, and passion, give me one of those velvet-eyed, fragile sort of beautiful women, whom you would think you could twist round your fingers."

But glorify! if he does care, and you hang fire, I've got a hold on him through you, and on you, through him."

"The question for me is, does, or did, he ever care for the girl? If he does, why did he go off to Sant Anna for two years, without taking her and the child off, too? That caps me."

Not the remotest idea or the barest possibility crossed the dense moral obliquity of the worthy Gus, that honor, loyalty, and love had sent that man into exile—those three were factors in the sum of life absolutely unknown to Gus Featherstone, save as fine-sounding words to trip off the tongue for effect, with a sneer for who ever took them seriously.

No, he surely could not have been in love with her then? And yet, thrown so continually—for months—with one so beautiful, was it likely that such a man could remain insensible to that beauty and if he knew that she was a desert wife, that her manner to women, and delicate soft voice that one would think he was half in love with whatever woman he is with at the time. Well, I'll see what chance I get to find out in my talk to-morrow; but if he wants her he'll have to be—he won't get her for nothing, by Jove! I've got the sword of Damocles still in the background, and if it serves my purpose, what matters the fact. Ugh! I'm dead tired now; I'll go to sleep—

Oblivion!

Happiest of the happy, as only a

child can be in this troublous world, was little Pearl at breakfast the next morning as she sat on her father's knee—he at Lenore's right hand, of course—much like a pet canary.

"Pon my word, you spoil that brat, Castlenau," laughed Featherstone, "and then her mother will be down on you."

"I'm not afraid; petting isn't spoiling, you know, and I have got to make up for lost time besides. And Pearl is obedient to a look even from that lawful authority, aren't you, my jewel?"

"I don't know what that means, Cheri."

"It means," said Featherstone, a trifle shortly, with just a dash of something that grated under his heavy voice; "it means being a good little girl and not refusing to give a nice gentleman a kiss when he asked you, and grandpa told you to go."

The child's face suddenly changed from sunshine to black cloud, the rosy lips set, the straight brows contracted into such a frown—so exactly her father's dark look when his fiery passion was roused—that he saw the dangerous reflex himself with an inward "wheew!" and hastily put his wee daughter's face against his breast, but she showed her paterfamilias still, for the shot was not to be repressed; it was fired boldly, shelter or no shelter.

"He's not a nice gentleman, grandpa, and I won't kiss him; and I shouldn't go if I didn't like."

"You are a naughty little rebel, and like your mother all over," said Featherstone, angrily; but both Lenore and Castlenau, though his brow had darkened, laughed outright.

"She could not take after a better model than Errol," said Featherstone, "You mustn't be cross with the child, Gus, or her mother either. By Jove! one can't force a child's affections, and little folks have as much right to their likes and dislikes as you or I have, you know."

"Oh, then, I give in if you lay lance in rest that fashion," cried Gus, vexed but half laughing to cover it. "You're a perfect simpleton wherever a woman or child is concerned—I never saw such a fellow."

"Reo senza delitto, then," retorted Errol, with a flash of his bright eyes. "I glory in my folly."

"What does that mean, Cheri?" what does that mean?" demanded Pearl, pulling his mustache, but gently.

"It means guilty without crime, my lassie, if that is much more comprehensible to your youthful intelligence," said he, kissing the rosy cupid's-bow mouth.

"Now, Gus, if you are ready for your business talk, I am, and the quicker the better—let's discuss something more attractive here. By the way," he added, carelessly, as they rose from the table, "who is the unhappy being so objectionable to this tiny feminine article?"

He knew perfectly well, as Lenore said, he had at once read the child's little story straight on into Lenore's—the one had been a sequence to the other. Featherstone answered the question.

"Oh, Dudley Montague, introduced by the Wyndhams—you're sure to meet 'em all to-morrow evening (our fortnightly 'At Home' you know); of course you will come; never wait for a special invitation at any time. You

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are 'free of the city,' eh, Lenore?"

"Of course he is," she said.

"Thanks, very much. I shall be wicked enough to take fullest advantage of such carte blanche, you know, Lenore."

She smiled, then drew Pearl to her with a half-sigh, as Featherstone opened the French window and stepped out.

"Come into the garden, Castlenau," said he; "and mix business with cigars. It's a lovely morning."

The young man followed, wishing gold mines just then very much further than this world, I am afraid, and in a much warmer region than the Brazils.

But he philosophically resigned himself to the inevitable and went in to the matter as far as his knowledge and part in it were concerned. He made his statement of facts, reported what had been done; explained, advised, suggested, answered questions promised the full accounts directly his "traps" were unpacked, and concluded, as a summing up:

"I've given you the straight, bare truth, good, bad, and indifferent, unpleasant and pleasant; and, to my experience, I'll stand to the fullest and in the best light it will bear, and ask no questions, for conscience's sake as to what you make of it, for that's your look-out, not mine, and I'll carry mental reservation to the extreme point of casuistry—which I believe in—but there I draw the line. Don't ask me to assert that the mines are and will pay the nobody-knows percent, because I won't do it, when I know that, if such had been paid, or ever is, it must come out of capital and write ruin within very measurable distance."

"Oh, that's all right, my dear fellow," said Gus, with a laugh, but secretly rather startled to find that this man, reckless though he was, was not quite as unscrupulous a scamp as he had, very stupidly reckoned him to be; or was it that for some purpose of his own, that he chose to affect to be less? Ha! perhaps the girl was the main-spring of this; but what

ever it was—whether real or affected—therein Lenore was his trump card to play against the chance of any dangerous restiveness. Gus decided at once to bind him—nay, involve him if he could—through his stepdaughter and, thought Gus, quickly:

"He isn't the man to be scrupulous about obstacles if he is in love with a girl; and it's easy for him to get any woman in love with him if he chooses, and come round her to marry him, and chance it all. Yes, that's my game at present—play him and Montague."

It never entered this worthy's head that the proposed puppet had his game to play, and was by far the cleverer player of the two, in every respect including the fact that he fully gauged and read his opponent, while he himself remained a complete enigma to Gus Featherstone.

So, said he, with his full, round laugh:

"Oh, that's all right, my dear fellow!" returned the other, coolly. "Your doings and speculations, ins and outs, in detail and practical working, are quite out of my line, thank Heaven! I don't know much about them, and I don't want to."

"Don't suppose you do," said Featherstone, with a dry, little knowing laugh. "It's best sometimes for even a quick-witted man of the world, who has knocked about everywhere and seen life in all its phases, to be unlike the heathen gods. Turn into this walk; it's more sunny, and will please you better."

The two strolled on in silence for a few moments. Gus was considering how to touch on the question he wished to reach, but he soon hit on an opening.

CHAPTER XXI.

"HE HATH BEEN A VILE THIEF THIS SEVEN YEARS."

Lighting a fresh cigar, Featherstone remarked:

"I expect that to-morrow evening when some of the fellows interested in it hear that you are the man, my friend, just back from Sant Anna, you will have to stand a perfect fire of questions."

"They are quite welcome," with a shrug. "I can stand very hot fire without flinching—except from bright eyes, of course."

"Ha! ha! I guess you can do execution in return if you choose, you scamp. Apropos of bright eyes, I do not fancy that the person I spoke of at breakfast, Montague, will be especially delighted at your advent here."

"Why not?" said Errol, opening great, dark eyes of naughty surprise.

"What has it to do with him or any other man where I am?"

"A great deal, perhaps," laughed Gus, "if he looks upon you as a possible rival, and a more successful one for the favors of la diva."

For a moment Castlenau set his very teeth to keep down the fierce indignation and tempest within, and the passionate, wild heart rose up once more in rebellion against the dictum that strove to check it "will." Then he answered, half carelessly, half haughtily:

"It's a fair field and no favors, except at the diva's own choosing. I take it; that's beauty's inalienable right from all time; and as she does not appear to respond to the adoring Montague, he is jealous as Othello, isn't that it? and it takes two to a flirtation."

"Oh, she has taken an absurd prejudice and fanciful dislike to him," said Gus, very vexedly; "she lets him see that his attentions are unwelcome, and would go much further only that I remonstrated with her about it quite decidedly."

"What a mild way of putting it, biting his lip."

"And now she's wayward; but as that only piques him on, I haven't said much to her lately."

"Oh, wise Solomon!" said the other ironically. "Look here, Gus: a rose is the most exquisite of flowers, but if you gather it roughly its thorns will tear your hand sorely."

"Do you speak from experience?" said Featherstone, with a sharp look.

(Continued on page three.)

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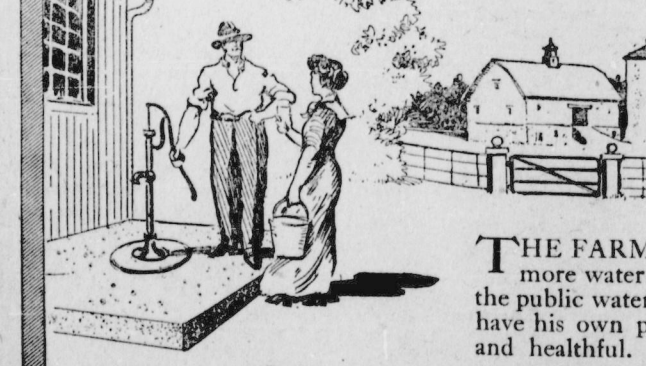
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