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Which Was The Heir?

CHAPTER XXXV.

(Continued.)
EIGHT o'clock, then, she said; and Geoffrey, thanking her, left the house.

She flew up to Cottie, who was standing by the window; but she moved away and blushed as if detected in a guilty act.

"Has he gone?" she asked in a low voice.
"Yes, he's gone, my dear," replied Mrs. Sefton, piteously. "But he's coming here again—to dinner—at eight."

Cottie caught her breath, and her hand went to her heart.

"Coming—again!" she breathed, her bosom heaving. "Oh not again!"

"Yes, my dear, he is! I don't know what made me ask him. I got so confused and bewildered—and he looked so ill and so thin! But, oh, dear! how handsome he is! I don't wonder at any woman—My dear, my dear, forgive me!"

"I need not see him," said Cottie. "I will not come down."

Mrs. Sefton jumped at this way out of the difficulty.
"No, dear. I can say you have a headache. You can keep out of his way while he is here. He will only be here a few days."

"A few days! Is he going to stay here?" breathed Cottie, turning away.

When Mrs. Sefton left her, she fell to pacing up and down the room. No, she would not see him. She would let him go back to Eva Rashleigh, whom he ought never to have left. Having failed in her search for her—Cottie—she would soon forget her, soon he consoled in his love for the beautiful Eva. But as the hours went by, the longing to see him again stole upon her and filled her with feverish unrest; and at last, almost desperately she resolved that she would join the dinner-party. It was most unlikely, almost impossible, that Geoffrey, the simple-minded, unobservant Geoffrey, would recognise in the fashionable dressed young lady the rough, unkempt boy with whom he had lived for so many months in the Australian wilds.

It was a daring experiment; but the thirst in her heart, the craving to

see him, to hear his voice, mastered her prudence, and she rang the bell at the dressing hour, and when the maid came, told her that she would dine down-stairs that night.

For the first time the maid found her young mistress exigent as to her dress and jewellery. The bed was strewn with exquisite evening costumes, the jewels and girlish ornaments which Mrs. Sefton had given her were spread upon the dressing-table.

"I want to look my very best to-night, Selina," said Cottie, with a nervous laugh and a quick gesture of her small hands, brown no longer, but white as the driven snow, and soft as the breast of a dove.

"I think I'll have the pink—but there's the black lace—but no, the pink's better—that faint pink; and there's that Alençon lace Mrs. Sefton gave me; will you put that round the bodice. And the pearls—yes, the pearls. But, after all, the black lace—No, it shall be the pink silk."

"Pink is your colour, Miss," murmured the patient and devoted Selina. "I'd wear the pink, miss. It isn't every lady who can carry the colour; but it goes beautifully with your hair and eyes."

When the dress, with its costly lace, was on, Cottie surveyed herself in the glass, eagerly, anxiously, and turned to the girl who was gazing at her admiringly.

"Shall I do? Is it right? What do you think?"

The maid gave a little gasp, and "Oh, miss!" was all she could say.

Cottie took up her fan and went to the door; but there she paused and pressed her hand to her heart. Even now she was, to tell the absolute truth, scarcely accustomed to her female attire; and the thought that Geoffrey was near to her, that she was going into his presence, made her feel like the boy Ronnie; and she looked down at her exquisite dress, at the nuance of shimmering silk and fleecy lace, as if she were masquerading in woman's attire. The colour left her face, and her eyes closed; then, with an effort, she called upon her courage and went down-stairs.

Some of the guests had arrived—there were not many, for it was a small party—and with a sense of relief mingled with disappointment, she saw that Geoffrey was not there.

"Oh, my dear, how beautiful you look!" murmured Mrs. Sefton when Cottie could get to her. "He is not here; perhaps he will not come."

But at that moment the servant opened the door and announced "Mr.

Geoffrey Bell," and Geoffrey entered. Cottie could scarcely suppress an exclamation. Was this Geoffrey—this tall, thin man with the pale face and dark, restless eyes; this distinguished-looking man in the severe simplicity of evening dress? She stared at him, breathless, with conflicting emotions—the most prominent, alas! being that of passionate, wistful love. She stood, unconsciously moving

her fan to and fro, statuesque in her little and graceful beauty—a beauty that would have attracted attention in a bevy of court beauties. Her heart was beating, throbbing in an ecstasy of pain, but she looked calm, and even cold, as she waited for Mrs. Sefton to bring him to her.

It came at last. He came up beside Mrs. Sefton. With the grave, almost preoccupied look on his pale, handsome face, he had all the appearance of a man who was there against his will, and whom nothing or anybody could interest.

"This is my ward, Mr. Bell—Miss Constance Sefton," said Mrs. Sefton in a low voice, which she tried to keep steady. "Constance this is a friend of mine—from—from Australia."

Geoffrey raised his eyes and met Cottie's. For a moment he remained motionless, as if he were struck dumb by some sudden emotion. What little colour his face had, deserted it, and he stood looking at her with a strange, in-ent regard which would have driven the colour from her own face and made her quail if she had been a man. But she was a woman, and, summoning all a woman's strength, she forced her eyes to meet his with a calm, even placid regard.

Geoffrey bowed—at last—and stood beside her with his hands behind his back; they were gripping each other in a tight grip.

This girl, this beautiful girl, so calm and statuesque in her loveliness, so imperial in her grace, was like—yes, was strangely like Ronnie!

He stared before him incapable of speech, incapable of movement. Cottie felt as if she were choking; but at last she found her voice.

"Are you staying long in Brighton, Mr. Bell?" she asked.

The words sounded foolish, ridiculous in her own ears; but she knew that she must speak or shriek aloud. At the sound of her voice Geoffrey started and turned his eyes upon her like a man moving in a nightmare.

"I beg your pardon," he said, almost hoarsely. "What did you say?"

She opened her lips as if about to repeat the question, when Mrs. Sefton came up to them. She was hot with confusion and embarrassment, and, in her embarrassment, did that which, of course, she had carefully resolved not to do.

"Will you take my ward in to dinner, Mr. Bell?" she faltered and stammered.

Geoffrey offered Cottie his arm. She shrank back, the color left her face;

then, with a glance of pathetic reproach at poor Mrs. Sefton, she laid her fingers upon his arm. As she did so, Geoffrey winced, almost as if her touch had hurt him and looked in a bewildered fashion at her face—its profile was turned towards him—then with something like a sigh he led her towards the door.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

Cottie had the greatest desire to burst into tears, to scream, to snatch her hand from Geoffrey's arm and fly to her own room. But she was not only a woman now, but she had also learned a great deal since she had been under Mrs. Sefton's care. Good society puts a polish upon us; the wearing of handsome and becoming clothes and costly gowns, a course of theatres and concerts and picture-galleries, of dances and receptions, all go to form an armour behind which we screen ourselves when we are threatened by emotion.

How was Geoffrey to know that the exquisitely beautiful girl whose fingers rested so lightly upon his arm was quivering like a harp swept by a strong and master-hand? How was he to know that her heart was beating so wildly that she felt as if she were going to faint? To him she seemed the most calm and self-possessed of young ladies, one who evidently regarded him as an ordinary man who would take her in to dinner, and who might or might not amuse her during the courses.

As for him, his heart was thumping heavily enough, his brain was in a whirl, so that he stared sternerly before him with what might have looked to a casual observer a ferocious, not to say a sullen, expression. His face still retained this expression when he had found their seats and was fumbling with his serviette, while Cottie leaned back in her chair with an air of the most perfect ease and almost listless languor.

The poor fellow felt as if his fancy were tricking him into a kind of madness. This beautiful girl was so like Ronnie, not only in face, but in voice, that it seemed to him as if it were Ronnie himself masquerading in a lady's dress. Of course, it was absurd, it was ridiculous; but the resemblance had literally taken his breath away, and had left him still confused and bewildered.

Now, it was a long while since he had formed one of a dinner party—though of course he had eaten his meals at the Hall with the due observance of civilised customs—and for a moment or two he sat staring at his soup and turning over his spoon in an absent-minded way.

He was almost afraid to glance at the lovely face beside him, lest the resemblance to Ronnie should strike him again with its first force and deprive him of the power of eating his food; but he knew that he could not sit there throughout the whole dinner, eating like an automaton and silent as a mute; so at last, with a sidelong and half-fearful glance at her, he said, in a voice that sounded noticeably husky in his own ears:

"I suppose you like Brighton very well, Miss Sefton?"

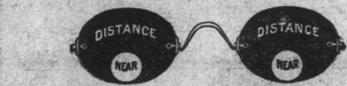
Cottie had been watching him, as women can watch without seeming to look at the object of their attention. She had been noting that, notwithstanding his pallor and thinness, he was still very handsome—the best-looking man she had ever seen, she thought, with a swift rush of pride; indeed, both his pallor and his thinness accentuated that air of distinction which she had noticed the first time she had seen him in company with the other doctors. He was the most distinguished man in the room that night, though there were one or two of good birth and high breeding.

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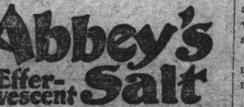
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