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A WOMAN OF FORTUNE

By CHRISTIAN REID, Author of "Armistice," "Philip's Restitution," "The Child of Mary," "Heart of Steel," "The Land of the Sun," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER XI - CONTINUED.

Craven and Cecil found the village of Villemur a very pretty place - its houses, scattered among orchards and small fields, embowered in shade, and with an air of smiling peace and comfort. A bright stream ran through the little hamlet, and turned a mill at the end. The flashing wheel and the red gables of the house made a charming picture, set in a frame of green. The church stood at the end of the village nearest the chateau. It was old and not unpicturesque, but, like almost all parish churches in France, bore marks of neglect and decay - admirable results of the care of a paternal Government.

When Craven and Cecil entered they found a gray interior in which there was very little light or color. What there was flowed in through the tall, narrow windows near the roof. A number of figures were kneeling on the stone floor: for the Curé, just vested, was about to begin Mass. Craven led his companion to one of the wooden benches, expecting her to sit down as a spectator of the scene; and he was not a little surprised when, instead of this, she knelt. "The thing must be certain," he said to himself philosophically, as he sat down, and, while preserving something of a reverential attitude, observed Miss Lorimer out of the end of his eye. Her graceful, fashionably dressed figure formed a striking contrast to those around her, but it was one of which she was wholly unconscious. It needed but a glance at her face to show that no one of the worshippers near them was more absorbed in what was taking place at the altar than this girl, with her noble profile, her clear, earnest eye. She watched every motion of the priest, as if intently studying it, and seeking an answer to some question, some need of her soul. The longer Craven observed her the more he felt certain that she had not come here from mere curiosity, nor yet from any worldly motive such as he had at first credited her with, but from a deep and eager interest, a desire for some great verity which she believed might be found here.

He was so absorbed in these thoughts and the study of her face that he did not notice when the Mass came to an end, until she rose and turned toward him. Then they went out, the bright warmth of the outer day seeming to meet them with a rush as they emerged from the gray old sanctuary.

"That was very interesting," said Craven; "but, I confess, a little chilly and depressing to me. This is more pleasant, do you not think so?" "This is delightful," she replied; "but I liked that too. It was so picturesque and so full of devotional feeling. These old churches affect me peculiarly, quite apart from their beauty. There seems an atmosphere of faith in them. How devout the people were! And how absorbed the priest was in the Sacrifice he was offering! I seemed to realize this morning that it was a sacrifice. One felt it there."

She spoke as if thinking aloud rather than as if expecting an answer; but Craven said: "One always feels in these churches the reality of the faith which made and fills them. But to share it - that is another matter. One might be glad to do so if one could, but the power of the modern world is too strong with most of us."

"I forget the modern world entirely when I enter such a place," she said. "I cannot say, either, that I step back into the Middle Ages, because I simply feel as if time did not matter there - as if it were for all time, as the needs of human nature are for all time."

"With those sentiments it is likely that some day you will become a Catholic," Craven remarked.

"I don't know," she answered. "The religion attracts me very much, from its passionate reality, from the meaning that it gives to human life, and the incentive to great deeds. But I must learn more of its intellectual side before I could think of embracing it. I am not very emotional; my mind must lead my heart."

He looked at her with a smile. "In all things," he asked.

"In most things, at least," she answered; "and I am not sure that I might not say in all."

There was a minute's silence, as, leaving the pretty village street behind them, they walked toward the great gates of the park. Then, nervously, Craven said: "Will you forgive me if I venture to ask what your mind says to your heart about becoming Comtesse de Vêrac?"

She regarded him with astonishment for an instant, then a faint smile appeared around the corners of her mouth.

"It strikes me that the best reply to your question is by another," she said. "Why should my mind, or my heart either, say anything to me about becoming Comtesse de Vêrac?"

"Because you certainly cannot be unaware of what is evident to every one else - the devotion of the Comte de Vêrac."

She lifted her shoulders with a Gallic gesture. "The devotion of the Comte de Vêrac is as evident to me as to others," she said carelessly; "but do you imagine that I need to be told that it means - just nothing? I have not been three months in France without learning something of the customs of the country. And indeed before I had been with her three days the Vicom-

tesse had fully explained to me the position of her nephew - whom he was to marry, and how and why. Therefore I am able to appreciate the exact value of his devotion to me."

"It is a very sincere devotion, I assure you," said Craven. "You do him injustice if you think otherwise. Of course he is in a manner bound by the customs of his country and the traditions of his class. But his feelings have ignored these things entirely. He is ardently in love with you."

"What then?" she asked.

"Well - the diplomatist found himself hesitating a little - he is naturally anxious to find some way of reconciling his attachment with what he conceives to be his duty to his family. You know he is not rich. It is necessary, if he is to maintain his position, that he shall improve his fortune by marrying. And so -"

"And so," she said, with the same composure, "he has made you his ambassador to discover if he could improve his fortune by marrying me."

"Not exactly," Craven answered. "I will be perfectly frank with you, for I am sure you are too sensible to misunderstand matters. This young man is earnestly attached to you; but, as you have said, you have been in France long enough to learn something of the customs of the country, and you know that in marriage much is considered beside the sentiments of the parties concerned. This is especially the case with him, because he is the head of his family, and the estate having been much impoverished, he is naturally anxious to restore what has been lost. Marriage offers him a recognized and approved mode of doing this. Try to put yourself in sympathy with the position in order to comprehend it."

"I think that I am in sympathy and do comprehend it perfectly," she said. "Have no fear of my misunderstanding anything you wish to tell me."

"Then what I wish to tell you is that this young man is - to use his own form of expression - in despair over his inability to reconcile his attachment to you with his duty to his family and his position. He has expressed his feelings very freely to me, and I volunteered to ascertain if there were no way by which they could be reconciled. I was very prudent, however; give me credit for that. I did not even hint to him that the whole solution lay in Miss Lorimer's own hand; that I had heard she possessed a fortune which would make all things possible."

Cecil turned upon him quickly, catching her breath with a slight gasp. "So you have heard it!" she said.

He laughed slightly. "Yes, I heard it some time ago," he answered; "but I did not know whether or not to believe that any heiress would so conceal her splendor. I am satisfied now."

She colored with vexation. "You did not know then," she said. "You only suspected, and now you have made me betray myself! Do you call that fair?"

"I call it shamefully unfair," he replied cheerfully. "But what does it matter? I have gratified my curiosity - I confess that I was curious on the subject - and your secret is safe with me. If you wish it kept a secret."

She did not answer immediately, but as she walked on at a quickened pace, with heightened color, Craven saw she was displeased.

"I know what you are thinking," he said presently. "You are saying to yourself that I am meddling with what does not concern me, and that I am very impertinent beside. I grant that this would be so if I did not really have your interest at heart. But should I be your friend if I did not try to serve you to the best of my ability? You see most of the game, and I have been a looker on who has observed a good deal. Shall I tell you what I think I have seen?"

Already Cecil's vexation was passing. She looked at him with her frank smile, and said: "Yes, you may tell me, in order that I may see exactly how gross your mistakes have been."

"Oh, my mistakes! I have no doubt made any amount of them," he answered. "Still, I think I have perceived some things which are facts - for instance, I have perceived on one hand a lover held back from declaring his passion by the circumstances in which he stands, and a lady possessing the power to make all things smooth, but concealing this fact, and waiting - forgive me if I vex you again! - for a romantic declaration, which under those circumstances could not come."

The bright blood sprang now in a side to Cecil's face. "She throw her head back haughtily," he said. "I am glad," she cried, "that you have proved how little you really know about me. I waiting for a declaration, romantic or otherwise! I could laugh at the absurdity of such a mistake, if I were not too angry."

"I am glad that you confess to being angry," he said, smiling. "When people are angry they are not always the best judges of things. But, really, what is there to be angry at? I am only crediting you with a little romance, and that is not a crime, although there are people in the world who think it so."

"You are crediting me then with something of which I have not a fragment. Surely I had a right to be silent about my fortune, which concerns only myself. One need not be romantic to desire to spare one's self annoyance; and I knew that if it were known how rich I am, I should be annoyed. This is the beginning and the end of the matter. As for wishing to test any one's disinterestedness - no such idea ever entered my head. I am too well aware of the French customs of which you have spoken to have

had any fear of a serious declaration from Mde Vêrac. If I wished to marry him, I would simply let the Vicomtesse know the amount of my fortune, and the affair would arrange itself."

"Then you do not mean to carry him," said Craven, betrayed by his curiosity and interest into a direct questioning which astonished himself.

But instead of rebuking, Cecil looked at him with a half-appealing glance. "I have been asking myself that question," she said. "Will you help me to answer it? I think the time has come when I should like the benefit of the knowledge which you put long ago at my service. You cannot give it to me now, for here we are at the chateau. But we will take the first opportunity for a little quiet speech together. Here comes M de Vêrac. Not another word!"

CHAPTER XII.

"I HAVE BEEN TEMPTED."

The grand salon at Villemur presented a scene in the evening which always delighted Cecil. Its splendid proportions, its great carved chimney-piece, its polished floor reflecting the clustered waxlights, its mirrors and pictures, made a setting for the groups of graceful figures which rendered the whole picturesque in the extreme. The long windows opened on a terrace without, which at this time was flooded with moonlight, and below which lay the gardens and park, a vision of fairy-like beauty.

It had never seemed more charming to her than on the evening after her morning walk and conversation with Craven. She realized now that the time had come when she must put out her hand and make all this her own, or else renounce it wholly. She had played with it, as it were - had felt a pleasure in the sense that it might be hers by a word or gesture. It was like acting a part in a drama to fancy herself transported into this life, chateaufort of this noble place. But now the hour had come when she was bound to decide whether the part was to become real or not; and, if not, it was only right that she should remove herself out of the path of a man whom she did not mean to marry. The decision made her sad. Villemur had never seemed so attractive, so fascinating, as when the need to renounce it was thus sharply felt; and yet not even Villemur was worth the price she would have to pay for it. She felt quite sure of it now.

In this mood Craven found her when he joined her after dinner near one of the great windows opening on the terrace. On one hand was the long, brilliant salon; on the other, the silver, silent night. "Is it not beautiful?" she said, indicating the last with a motion of her fan. "I am tempted to forget I am in France and to take a turn without."

"Come," said Craven, stepping outside and holding back the curtain. "Even in France we may be permitted to walk as far as the end of the terrace. It is a divinely beautiful night."

She followed him after an instant's hesitation, and together they paced the terrace, almost in silence for several minutes. Then Craven, glancing from the stately balustraded terrace, to the wide garden and sleeping park, to the great front of the chateau sparkling with lights, and the brilliant scene revealed through the salon window, said meditatively:

"And so you are in doubt whether you will accept Villemur together with his lord. Do you know that if I were a woman in such a position I think I should be - tempted?"

"Do you suppose I have not been tempted?" asked Cecil. "More than I like to consider. Everything that the worldly side of me likes best is here - great position, high rank, picturesque splendor, and the opportunity to use my wealth in the most effective manner to augment all these things. Why, this very scene, with all it suggests, is a fascination and a temptation! Then I like M de Vêrac very well - as much, I suppose, as I shall ever like any man - why do you laugh?" she asked suddenly and rather haughtily of Craven.

"Did I laugh?" he asked. "Pardon me, but I was thinking how far from flattering to M de Vêrac your sentiments toward him were."

"If you knew me better," she replied, "you would know that, on the contrary, they are very flattering. He is the only man of whom I have ever said so much, or concerning whom I have ever taken into consideration what I have considered with regard to him."

"Well," said Craven, "the last fact is certainly flattering to him; but I am very sure he would hope to inspire a little more warmth of sentiment. However, forgive me if I am impertinent. You think him, then, the most interesting man you have ever known?"

"No," said Cecil. The word came from her distinct and clear-cut in its denial before she even stopped to think. It was a sudden, leaping memory which rose before her like a vivid picture. She saw the deck of a ship, she looked at the long track of silver foam stretching across illimitable water, and she heard a voice saying:

"Your kindness has made the voyage like that track of foam across the ocean - a pathway which I shall never find again, but which will remain always in my memory as luminous and as enchanted as it looks now." The haunting melody of the voice which uttered these words seemed sounding in her ears, rendering it impossible for her to say that the Comte de Vêrac was the most interesting man she had ever known. But within a minute she had qualified her denial; for she felt, not

for the first time, an emotion almost of anger against the depth of impression which a stranger had made upon her. "The mysterious always interests me more than the known," she said. "Therefore it is natural that a man whom I knew for a short time only might interest me more than M de Vêrac, whom I now know very well. There are no longer any mysteries about him to pique one's curiosity; but he satisfies my taste - which is not easily satisfied - and he is a man who would not devote his life to ignoble ends."

"Believing these things of him," remarked Craven, who began to find this young lady as much of a puzzle as her family and friends had already found her, "why do you hesitate to marry him?"

"For many reasons," she answered. "I wonder if I can hope to make you understand them."

"I can venture to say for myself that I am not, as a rule, very obtuse," Craven observed.

She did not reply at once, but stood leaning against the massive balustrade, herself a picture in her dress of creamy lace, the folds of which seemed of ethereal softness in the moonlight, while her beautiful head rose above them with statue like grace. She did not look toward the brilliant salon, but out over the silver-flooded gardens, as she said, slowly:

"A little while ago I told you that the things which M de Vêrac offers - or would offer if he knew the amount of my fortune - tempted the worldly side of my nature, for they are all things which I like extremely. I need scarcely say that it is not the mere splendor of Villemur which fascinates me - I could build a more splendid house myself if I wished to do so - but the spell of the past, the associations and traditions which throw a charm over it. I have always dreamed of doing something great with the power which my money gives me. Unless I can do that, I confess that it is of small value to me and can buy little for which I care. Now since I have been here I have seemed to see an opportunity where it could accomplish much; but when I put it all before myself I think, 'Granted all that appears possible to be accomplished, what then? Who will really be the better for it in any enduring sense?' I am afraid it is a case of anticipated *vanitas vanitatum*," she said, looking at him with a smile.

"I believe I understand you," he said, thinking that she was quite the most interesting study in the form of a young woman that had ever crossed his path. "You would restore Villemur, you would render the house of De Vêrac again one of the foremost in France, you would enable the young Comte to become probably a noted if not a great man. But having done this, you would not feel as if you had really served any very lofty end."

"No," she said; "for it would all be more or less selfish, and would reflect back upon myself. I should share in it all, benefit from it all. And I fear that, except M de Vêrac, scarcely any one else would be benefited by it, save very indirectly. Now this is not the sort of object that I have always had in view. What I should like to do is something that would benefit a great number - something in which I would have no share except the pleasure of knowing that I had done it. Does all this seem to you very foolish?"

"No," Craven answered, "it seems to me just the opposite of foolish. I wish all heiresses had such thoughts. But worldly prudence bids me warn you that unless you are very cautious they will lead you into quicksands of philanthropy. It is possible to make awful blunders, and do much harm, too, in trying to benefit one's fellow-creatures."

"I know that," she replied, "and I have been cautious. I do not think that I am yet old enough or wise enough to decide what it is best to do. But I don't want to put it out of my power to do anything - I don't want to burden my soul with the life-long regret of a lost opportunity. That, I suppose, is why I have never thought of marriage as other women think of it. I have felt that I wanted free hands when I saw at last the opportunity which I have been looking for. I claim no credit for these thoughts; my father taught them to me. He never meant to leave so much money to me; he meant himself to do some great good with it. But he was cut off suddenly in the midst of a busy life, and he had only time to remind me that he left me a great responsibility as well as a great fortune. 'Use it nobly for others, not selfishly for yourself,' he said; and, God helping me, it is so that I will use it."

"Surely God will help you," said Craven, touched to unwonted reverence. "You told me this morning that I did not know you. I find now that you were right. How small and petty my idea of you seems beside the reality you show me! Villemur is a noble place, Miss Lorimer, but it is not noble enough for you."

"I have no such thought as that," she answered quietly; "but in saying that Villemur tempted me, I think that I put the matter in the right light. It was a temptation from what I have always felt to be a duty, and so I must put it behind me and go on, not looking back."

"May I ask how long you have felt sure of this?" Craven said.

"Only since this morning," she replied. "Up to that time I was so doubtful that I said to myself - see how freely I am talking to you, Mr. Craven! but I think you will comprehend if you do not sympathize with me."

"I certainly comprehend, and I hope that I sympathize with you," he responded. "More than that; I am deeply interested in all that you care to tell me of your feeling in this matter."

"Briefly, then, you know what Catholics believe - that God Himself is present upon their altars. Well, in my doubt, my uncertainty, I said to myself: 'Surely, if I go and address Him directly, there where so many pious souls believe Him to dwell, He will enlighten and direct me.' I went, as you know, and while I was there some strong influence seemed upon me - I could not doubt; I could not say to myself as I say now to you, 'If this is true,' I felt that it was true. And if I never have another such hour of faith again, it is something to have had it once - something to have realized that I was in the immediate presence of God, that I could speak to Him with the certainty of being heard. I did speak with all the energy of my soul, and I believe that I have had my answer. At least since then my doubts are at an end. All this - she waved her hand toward the stately chateau and noble park - "is but a brilliant temptation, which I must put away and go."

"I am sorry for M de Vêrac," said Craven; "but I believe that, whatever power has inspired your resolution, you are right."

"I have no doubt of it," she said. "And now what I have to ask of your kindness is that you will if possible spare M de Vêrac the knowledge of what he has lost - of course I allude to my fortune. I hope that he will never hear of it. And, in sparing him, you will also spare me one of the most painful things which can be laid on a woman - the necessity of rejecting a man whom she really likes."

"I will hold your confidence sacred as far as the fortune is concerned," said Craven, "and will endeavor to restrain M de Vêrac's ardor; but, after all, there is a great deal of human nature even in French nature, and the human nature may triumph over the French nature in his case if you do not take your dangerous attractions out of his way."

"I am going to do that as soon as possible," she answered. "My friend, Miss Marriot, with whom I came over, is at one of the German spas. I have written saying that I would like to join her. As soon as I hear from her I shall bid adieu to the Vicomtesse as gracefully as I can; and, unless she should hear of my fortune meantime, she will be glad to let me go, for I think she begins to consider me dangerous."

"There is no doubt of it," said Craven. "She is trembling - a poor woman! - lest the very best that could befall her nephew should befall him. What a lesson on our blindness in this life! I am sufficiently sorry for her to hope that she may never learn the truth."

"So do I hope so," replied Cecil. "One thing at least is certain: she will never learn it from me. And now that all is clear and settled we must remember *les convenances* and return to the salon."

TO BE CONTINUED.

Tribute to the Church.

Volumes have been compiled that are made up exclusively of the choicest tributes from Protestant writers to the Catholic Church; and if all of such testimonies, and those from other non-Catholics, were collected they would form quite a library. Nor are these encomiums things of the past; for many additions have been made by men and women now living, are, in fact, being made almost every day. But one has recently appeared in the *Bookman* that equals the best in beauty, terseness and enthusiasm. It is from the pen of Mr. H. T. Peck, and occurs in a criticism of Huysman's French novel, "En Route," a translation of which has recently been published in London and New York. It is as follows: "To those of us who are Protestants the book is full of deep instruction in revealing with startling force the secret of the power of that wonderful religious organization which has made provision for the needs of every human soul, whether it requires for its comfort active service or the mystical life of contemplation. We see how every want is understood and how for every spiritual problem an answer is provided, how the experience of twenty centuries has been stored up and recorded, and how that man has ever known is known to those who guide and perpetuate this mighty system. And in these days, when doctors of divinity devote their energies to nibbling away the foundations of historic faith, and when the sharpest weapons of agnosticism are forged on theological anvils, there is something reassuring in the contemplation of the one great Church that does not change from age to age, that stands unshaken on the rock of its convictions and that speaks to the wavering and troubled soul in the serene and lofty accents of divine authority."

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