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Love Stories of the Footlights

A Fight for Name and Honour.

A cheering, roaring crowd. From hundreds of throats came the cry, "Bravo, Belle!" while hundreds of hands were stretched out in an endeavour to touch the beautiful, smiling girl who emerged from the Law Courts and slowly made her way through the surging crowd of admirers to her carriage.

It was the final scene of a woman's fight for name and honour--the closing of a poignant chapter in a drama of love, romance, secret marriage, family hatred, and intrigue, which could not have been excelled by the most fertile imagination of our novelists.

That day, Belle Bilton, the pride of the London music-halls, the toast of the West-end, had vindicated her right to a place in the peerage. She had completely refuted the charges against her honour, brought by an embittered father-in-law, a peer of the realm, who had sought to besmirch her character and thus free his son from a marriage which he hated because this girl was "a common music-hall artiste."

That, in fact, was the main reason why the fourth Earl of Clancarty left no stone unturned to separate his son, Viscount Dunlop, from the woman he had secretly married at the Hampstead Registry Office exactly thirty years ago, after three months' courtship. He was aghast when he was first made aware of the marriage by a newspaper paragraph. Raging with wrath, he sent for his son, poured torrents of reproach and denunciation on his head, and finally demanded that the bridegroom should separate

immediately from his wife and go abroad. If not, the Earl washed his hands of him--disowned him entirely.

It was a powerful weapon he used, for at that time the Viscount was entirely dependent on his father. He was only twenty--a few months younger than his wife--and possessed no private means whatever. In fact he had not finished his education, his father, at the time of the marriage, having arranged to send him for a tour abroad with a tutor.

His plight was painful and pitiful. The few days' honeymoon was simply a prolonged, bitter struggle between the Viscount's feeling of love and duty towards the girl he had married and his father's rigid demands.

Belle Bilton, who was still fulfilling her engagements, implored her husband not to leave her. But the Viscount was forced to bow to the family storm, and nine days after the wedding he started for the other side of the world.

It was a terrible blow to the new Lady Dunlop. The story of her romantic marriage into the peerage had been the sensation of London for days, and then came this compulsory desertion by her husband.

What did it mean? the public were asking. Ugly stories and rumours began to get afloat, fostered by the grim, unrelenting attitude of the Earl. He had made his plans. He should not only never be admitted into the Clancarty family, but that, by hook or by crook, she should be legally and irrevocably separated from his

son, who, he asserted, had been tricked into the marriage by a scheming adventuress with the sole idea of exploiting him and mulcting him of his money.

In this, however, Lord Clancarty, as we shall see, did Belle Bilton a rank injustice.

To understand his bitter attitude, however, we must lift the veil a little from Belle Bilton's early life. His lordship might have forgiven, as he is reported to have said at the time, her lowly origin. He would have overlooked the fact that from childhood she had appeared, with her sister Florence, in the choruses of plays and pantomimes, and that she and her sister ultimately became the toast of the young "bloods" of the sporting and music-hall world through their beauty and talents as singers and dancers.

But he contended that there was a scandalous chapter in her life. It was a chapter, he alleged, in which a man, on whom Belle Bilton had first bestowed her love and affection, proved a scoundrel and a deceiver.

It was said that the look of sadness, which added so much to the distracting beauty of Belle Bilton--beauty which made level-headed, sober-minded men rave about her charms--was not natural, but the haunting look of tragedy caused by the man who deceived her.

Be that as it may, Belle Bilton tried to put him out of her life. She sought consolation in the society of her friends, and particularly that of a noted financier, who, later, was cited as co-respondent in the divorce case which the Earl forced his son to bring against his wife. This man wanted to marry Belle when she discovered the treachery of the man who had abused her love. But she refused. She told him frankly that she did not love him and preferred him to be, as he undoubtedly was, her sincere and true friend.

The fact, however, that she accept-

ed certain gifts and monetary aid from the financier led to scandalous gossip, and her private affairs got much undesirable publicity when a case of forgery came to light, brought about by her endeavours to help her former lover. Having employed him on several occasions to cash cheques made payable to her by her friends, he became familiar with the handwriting of both parties. Getting into low water, he forged a couple of cheques for £500 and £800, purporting to be drawn by the financier and endorsed by Belle Bilton, and the subsequent criminal proceedings revealed the unconventional relationship between the two.

It was a painful chapter in the life of the beautiful artiste, and afforded the Earl of Clancarty an excuse for the vindictiveness with which he ultimately pursued her. And it explains, although one doubts the wisdom of the step, why Belle, after Lord Dunlop had deserted her, turned to the financier for help and advice. It was unwise, because no sooner had the Earl got rid of his son than he began to have Belle Bilton shadowed, hoping to get sufficient evidence to bring about a divorce. His methods were thorough, so thorough, indeed, that Belle was forced to

leave her lodgings because of her notoriety and the fact that other lodgers objected to living in a house so constantly shadowed.

To add to her troubles, the man who had already blackened her life, returned to persecute her, and at last she took refuge in a house in St. John's Wood, which the financier placed at her disposal.

It was indiscreet, but natural under the circumstances. For it must be remembered that her husband could not make provision for her, and she was dependent entirely upon her profession, which at that time brought her in about £10 or £15 a week. She had no home of her own, and so lived with her sister in the house at St. John's Wood, making no secret of her friendship with the financier, and dining and supping with him in public.

The arrangement, however, gave the Earl of Clancarty his opportunity. His son heard rumours which led him to write:

"Don't go too much about with W. People will talk; not that I care, for I trust you with all my heart and soul." "All bosh," he replied, when he heard that steps were being taken to get the marriage annulled. Such pressure, however, was brought to bear on Lord Dunlop that ultimately he signed the petition for divorce. Tremendous influences must have been at work to induce him to take this step, for his letters showed how much he was in love with his wife.

"Now, Belle," he once wrote, "I don't believe one word of it. You know how every person talks whenever they get the chance. Belle, I love you dearly."

Queen Alexandra's Belief. When the case came before the Court, he frankly acknowledged that he did not believe the charges against his wife, and made it evident that he had signed the petition against his will. And the result was a triumphant vindication of the honour of the

woman whom he had sworn to cherish. She was judged guiltless of the charges brought against her. The methods of Lord Clancarty were condemned, and the curtain fell on the triumphant fight for the name and title in the peerage to which the daughter of the Woolwich recruiting sergeant, and the pantomime chorus girl, was justly entitled.

The sequel proves that Belle Bilton was actuated in what she did, not by greed but by love for the Viscount she had secretly married. Her whole life might have been wrecked--but she forgave. The fourth Earl never forgave her, and he died, less than twelve months after the momentous trial, still embittered against the beautiful artiste who had married his son. She was appearing at Plymouth

when the news was brought to her of his death, on May 20th, 1891. Tired of theatrical life, she left the stage, and joined her husband and almost immediately took up her residence at Garbally Park, Ballinasloe, the family seat in County Galway, where her beauty and charm endeared her to the hearts of her husband's tenants.

For thirteen years Belle Bilton lived a happy and contented life with her husband proving herself a model wife and endearing herself to all with whom she came into contact. Then disease brought about a final separation. Cancer killed the fortunate who had suffered such slings of fortune. But she died happy in the fact that, among hundreds of other people, Queen Alexandra always believed in the honour of the "Pride of the London Hall."

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Wise Men Say--

That the principal ingredient in luck is common sense.

That no person is so rich that he can afford to lose a friend.

That being ignorant is not so much a shame as being unwilling to learn.

That a good many people spend most of their time in telling others how busy they are.

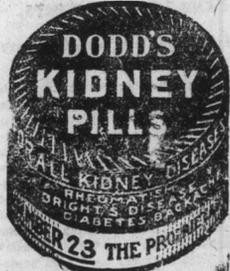
That opportunity may make a man--but generally speaking the man makes the opportunity.

That the man who is satisfied to sit down and wait for something to turn up will need a good soft seat.

That when you have a number of disagreeable duties to perform, always do the most disagreeable first.

That the test of a man's qualities is in his remembrance, when he has reached the top of the friends he left behind lower down.

That depression, gloom, pessimism, despair, discouragement slay ten human beings to every one murdered by typhoid, influenza, diabetes, or pneumonia.



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