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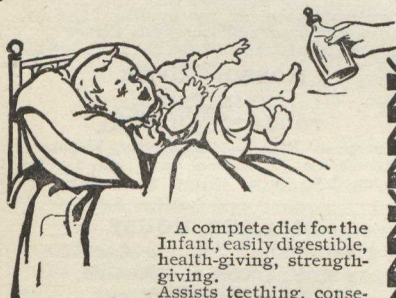
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city," said Hugh dryly. "The picture is delightful. Oh! Sybil, it's splendid to be with you again. If it could only last always like this."

"Why cannot it?" she asked in a whisper that set his pulses throbbing. He paused for a moment to master his voice before he answered.

"Because," he said steadily, "I have news to tell that will carry you for ever out of my reach."

At the word she leapt from her seat. The bright, impetuous school-girl he had known so well. "That settles it," she cried, "I won't wait a minute, a second; out with your news at once and let me be the judge. If you fancied I was back with you in Connemara, remember I always had my own way there—you never could refuse me in the old days when I said 'please.'"

"I cannot refuse you now," said Hugh. "You shall hear the story and judge for yourself. Here goes."

While he spoke of Ella and her lover, Sybil showed the most languid interest in the story.

"Ella Pallacio, yes," she thought she remembered her. "Dark-eyed girl, wasn't she? good-looking, too, rather. Browne was the painter you used to think such a lot about; rather a rough diamond. Well, it seemed a very suitable match, and she hoped they would be happy."

But when he came to tell the story of Pallacio and the stolen picture, and the confession of the dying man, her interest grew intense. With parted lips and eyes aflame she listened to his mad adventure in the picture gallery of Sternholt Towers, the theft of the picture, the finding of the letter and the will.

Hugh drank in her beauty with an eagerness of which her excitement seemed to make her wholly unconscious. More than once the words faltered on his lips, and he tangled the thread of his tale. When he got through at last the girl sat for a long time rigid and silent, while her soft, deep breathing gently swayed the lace on her bosom.

SHE found her voice at last. "Oh, it is wonderful, Hugh," she cried, "wonderful, wonderful. It is something like out of an old romance. Can it be true?"

"Quite true, my lady," he answered gravely. "You are the daughter of Vincent, Earl of Sternholt, and heiress to his lands, tenements and heriditaments as surely as I am plain Hugh Limner."

"Mother, mother," Sybil cried, hearing a step she knew on the stairs, "here is Hugh come to stay with us. He has a wonderful fairy tale to tell you."

Mrs. Darley's kindly face showed at the door full of surprise and pleasure.

"You are very welcome, Hugh," she said. "I see Sybil has already welcomed you."

She glanced aside at Sybil's blushing face, well pleased at what she saw there. For she and Mrs. Limner had made a match for those two before they were well out of their cradles.

"Tell her, Hugh," Sybil commanded imperiously, and Hugh had to begin his strange story again.

Sybil sat on the side of her mother's chair, her arm round her waist, and pushed in a word impatiently if Hugh paused for a second in his tale. She was still intoxicated with excitement.

"You are a dowager countess, mummy," she cried at last, "aren't you proud? I feel just like the goose girl in the fairy tale when she suddenly discovers she is the princess."

"There is no doubt of all this, Hugh?" Mrs. Darley asked tremulously.

"None."

"Then he is surely dead," she said sadly. Through all those years she had kept hope warm hidden away in the depths of her heart that her husband was still alive.

"You have his letter," she asked after a pause. "I should like to see it."

"I have only a copy," he answered. "I have placed the original, the will, and other papers with the picture in the strong room of the bank. I don't trust my Lord Sternholt—"

"There must be a trial, I suppose. For myself, I should not trouble about it, but his daughter must take her place in the world. He was right, al-

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