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A WOMAN OF FORTUNE

BY CHRISTIAN REID. Author: "Armine," "Phillip's Restitution," "The Child of Mary," "Heart of Steel," "The Land of the Sun," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER VII.

"SOME CHARGES PROVE RATHER DIFFICULT." "Well," said Craven, smiling, "what is she like?" The Vicomtesse lifted her hands and looked at him with a comical expression of surprise.

"She is like—what shall I say?" she replied. "Fancy the Venus de Milo with arms and a modern dress—that is what she is like more than anything else I can conceive." "She must be very beautiful."

"And your fears are all dissipated, your doubts all relieved?" "Completely. She is not only handsome, but she has the air of one who has always commanded social homage. That is something which cannot be affected, or learned in a day."

"I suppose not. It has been so long since I was an American beauty and belle that I was nearly forgotten what was incident to the position." Craven paid the compliment which was expected of him here, and then asked if he might hope to have the pleasure of seeing Miss Lorimer.

"She has promised to appear—ah, *vola!*" She looked toward the door communicating with another apartment as she spoke, and Craven turned in that direction. Between the rich folds of the curtains stood a figure that made an instantaneous impression of dignity and grace on his mind.

"You come in good time, my dear," observed the Vicomtesse. "Here is Mr. Craven, who is anxious to meet you." "If you have not heard Jack Bernard speak of me often, Miss Lorimer, I shall think he is a faithless friend," said Craven, as he stepped forward.

"I have often heard Jack speak of you, Mr. Craven," she replied; "and I warn you that if you are able to justify all that he has said, you must be a very remarkable person indeed." "Has he been even more complimentary than I dared to expect?" asked Craven.

"I feel within myself a capability for justifying any moderately good opinion." "Jack is a very enthusiastic friend," answered Miss Lorimer; "but I have had no doubt of your capability to justify his opinion." Craven bowed.

"I hope that I shall be fortunate enough to justify yours," he said; and as they sat down, while Madame de V6rac turned to greet other guests, he added: "I have just congratulated the Vicomtesse on your arrival, and must now congratulate you. Every one has heard of the accident to your ship. It was a wonderful escape for all concerned."

"I think we all feel it so," she answered. "The ship was greatly shattered by the collision, and but for her watertight compartments would have been lost." "It must have been a terrible shock when you came in contact with the ice."

"It was terrible." She paused for a moment as if to recall it, while the beautiful drawing room seemed to fade away, and she saw before her again the long saloon of the ship, the pale, excited faces, the vision of death which had appeared so near, and Tyrone's dark, grave eyes.

"A shock to the strongest nerves, I should think," Craven went on. "Did it not make you apprehensive for the rest of the voyage?" She shook her head. "I was not apprehensive at all, although we saw much more ice. Nothing is more true than that a coward dies a hundred deaths. Now, I cannot see the good of dying more than once."

"You are very sensible as well as very brave," said Craven, smiling; "but most people—most women especially—cannot control their fears." "I think I am brave by nature," she said, carelessly, "and therefore I deserve little credit for it. Jack always prophesied that I shall some day run into great danger, because, as he puts it, I have every sense but the sense of fear."

for his last words to me were, 'Tell Craven to remember my charge.'" "He knows my weakness for this gay capital, and he wrote to me not long ago, giving me a charge which I shall take great pleasure in fulfilling." She glanced at him with a look half inquisitive, half amused.

"Some charges prove rather difficult," she said. "But some difficulties are animating," replied Craven. "That is my favorite maxim," she said, with a laugh. "Well, I have discovered that you are self-satisfied and courageous. What phase of character do you mean to show me next?"

"If you permit me to say so, that of appreciation." "Of me? Ah! that is absurd. Do you fancy I do not know the portrait Jack has drawn of me, the dark colors in which he has painted my character, branding it as 'incurable and willful?'"

"Jack betrayed himself, then? Yet the scamp told me—" He paused abruptly, for the amusement with which Miss Lorimer laughed again told him that he had rather betrayed Jack.

"I knew it!" she exclaimed. "I felt sure he had written in that manner. But why? How could he fancy that my character would interest you?" "You have surprised me into betraying part of Jack's confidence, Miss Lorimer; do you not think I should respect the remainder? I am at liberty to say only that he thought I might guard you against a few pitfalls, and he conferred on me the rank of your guardian."

"I believe it is an accepted law, Mr. Craven, that one must have authority one's self in order to confer it on another. I do not therefore clearly see how Jack could confer on you powers which he does not himself possess."

"It is not a question of powers, but only of privilege. My rights, if you allow me any, extend only to counsel." "I am not aware that I am in need of counsel."

"But you know the proverb that 'two heads are better than one, even though one be a blockhead.' Now, I am not quite a blockhead, and I should be more gratified than I can say if you would promise to call upon me for counsel should any need for it arise. You are in a foreign country, and it is not impossible that such a need might arise. It was to provide for it that Jack called upon my old and sincere friendship."

"He had dropped his tone of light banter, and spoke so earnestly that Cecil was pleased. 'Justing apart, I am sure that you are very kind,' she said. 'But you forget that I have my cousin to call upon in such an emergency.'"

"The Vicomtesse," said Craven, "is everything that is most charming; but she is *plus royaliste que le roi*. In other words, she has lived abroad so long that she is steeped in foreign ideas, and might look at things very differently from yourself."

Cecil smiled. "We are discussing a very improbable event," she said. "If Jack told you anything of me, he might have told you that I am generally my own counsellor."

"It was not necessary for Jack to tell me that," said Craven; "your face assures me of it. Alas!" he added quickly, in a different tone, "the Vicomtesse does not mean me to monopolize you longer. Here she comes with De V6rac. Have you met him?"

Cecil had only time to answer in the negative when the Vicomtesse approached them on the arm of a young man, whom she presented to Cecil as "My nephew, the Comte de V6rac." Cecil's intuition was too quick for her to give a merely surface-reading to the pride which filled the words "My nephew;" and as she glanced at the bearer of the title, she thought kindly that pride was permissible in claiming connection with one in whom grace and distinction were so happily blended.

Instead of the small, dark Frenchman with whom one is familiar, she saw a tall, blonde gentleman, with manners of quiet repose, who looked at her with evident admiration, but not the least trace of gallantry. "I hope, Mademoiselle, that you have quite recovered from the fatigue and perils of your long journey," he said in English, without a trace of foreign accent; "and, since first impressions are strong, that France has pleased you."

"I hope that you will see something of France outside of Paris," said the young count. There is much in the provinces that I think would interest you. Foreigners are too apt to believe that Paris is France. There could be no greater mistake."

"I am very sure that provincial France will interest me most of the two," said Cecil. "For there, surely, some remnants still exist of old royal France. That is what I care for, and wish most to see."

"Then I must persuade my aunt to bring you down to my old chateau. It is an interesting relic of the past; for, by a series of fortunate circumstances, it escaped destruction in the Revolution, and remains almost untouched as it was previous to 1789."

"Oh, I should like that very much!" said Cecil quickly. "In that case it must certainly be done," said De V6rac. "I think I can answer for my aunt, who likes the chateau—for a time—at the right season. You must prepare yourself for a great deal of antiquity. Since the Revolution the family finances have not admitted of much restoration."

"Which is often another name for demolition. I am glad they have not admitted of that." The young man shrugged his shoulders, laughing slightly. "I cannot say that I am exactly glad of it," he observed. "But the result is at least interesting."

"I am sure that it will interest me," said Cecil frankly. And indeed, as their conversation proceeded, she found M. de V6rac himself interesting. A man of the world, with the grace of its highest society, he had also a well-cultivated mind and a charm of manner quite irresistible.

It was impossible not to like him; and Cecil had already conceived quite a cordial and friendly feeling for him, when the Vicomtesse interrupted their conversation by summoning her to be presented to a very great lady. The interruption was so gracefully made that it did not occur to Miss Lorimer until some time later that it had been done with a purpose.

It was not until after the guests had departed that Madame de V6rac's reason for ending the conversation between her nephew and Cecil began to dawn upon the mind of the latter. "You are not tired, my dear, are you?" said the Vicomtesse caressingly, when they were finally left alone. "I want to tell you how much I am charmed with your success this evening. It is a great pleasure to me to introduce to my world one whom the most critical must admire."

"You are too good," said Cecil, who saw that these words were spoken with perfect sincerity, and were indeed the overflowing of the Vicomtesse's great satisfaction. "I am very glad to do you credit," she added, with a laugh. "It was something of a risk to invite an unknown cousin to Paris. You must have been a trifle nervous over the result."

"My dear," replied Madame de V6rac, so relieved that entire frankness was possible, "to tell you the truth, I was miserable. I knew you were handsome from your photograph, but manner is so much more than looks! How could I tell what you would be?"

"I felt sure you were frightened at your own rashness," said Cecil. "In your place I could not have been so courageous. But now let me say how much I am pleased with your friends. They are altogether delightful."

"*Cela va sans dire*. I know only the best people. Few have been more successful, I think, than myself in forming a most desirable circle. But tell me what you think of Armand."

"M. de V6rac? I find him very charming, and do not wonder that you call him your nephew with an air of pride." "He is more like a son than a nephew to me," said Madame de V6rac, in a tone of genuine feeling; "and I am devoted to him. But like other men, he can be very provoking sometimes."

A short pause followed. Cecil neither felt bound to ask nor curious to know how M. de V6rac was provoking; but presently the Vicomtesse continued: "Now that you have seen Armand, you can imagine that there is nothing so near my heart as his success in life. He is very talented, and has lately entered politics. Belonging to the Royalist party, he has little to hope for at present, but works for the day of reaction, which he and others believe certain to come. Meanwhile his friends desire to see him strengthen himself by a suitable alliance—you know that in France, in certain rank like, all marriages are arranged for the mutual advantage of the parties concerned."

"Yes," Cecil replied, she was aware of it. "I have read a few French novels," she added, with a smile. "It is a very wise custom," said Madame de V6rac. "Well, an opportunity for an alliance of this kind is presented to Armand, with only one disadvantage on his side. He has rank, social prestige, and talents, but he lacks fortune. His father was a notorious *vivier*, who impoverished the family estates; and Armand himself led a life of gay extravagance for several years. Consequently there is this drawback to his presenting himself as a suitor to the lady in question, who is a daughter of the Duc de Mir6court."

"Indeed!" said Cecil, with polite attention. "But is fortune always essential? I fancied that rank, social prestige, talent, would atone for the lack of wealth."

"It would atone for it in ordinary cases, and more than atone for it if he were thinking of marrying beneath his rank. But in Mademoiselle de Mir6court's suitor exceptional advantages are demanded."

"What then?" asked Cecil, beginning to be amused. "Will he resign hope since he has not the necessary fortune?" "He is inclined to do so, but I am opposed to such an idea. The alliance would be so suitable in every way that I have set my heart upon it, and if he would listen to me—" She paused a moment, then said quickly: "I desire to assure him of the absolute inheritance of my fortune. That, united to his own, would make him an eligible *parti*."

"You are very generous," said Cecil. Surprise was her first feeling, her next was an almost overpowering inclination to laugh; for it occurred to her that Madame de V6rac was offering her a timely warning against any hopes of such inheritance for herself. "M. de V6rac must have been very much gratified to find his difficulty so smoothed away," she added after a moment.

"He will not consent to accept the assurance," said Madame de V6rac, in a tone of irritation. "I have urged, I have pleaded, but he is like steel; I cannot make him bend." "Perhaps he is not anxious for the marriage," hazarded Cecil. "It seems to me that he might object to an arrangement of the kind. A woman must submit, I presume; but a man—"

"My dear," said the Vicomtesse, majestically, "you don't at all understand. Armand is thoroughly conservative in all his tastes and opinions—an aristocrat of aristocrats. He desires the alliance very much, and it would be so suitable in all respects that I hope he will yet hear reason with regard to it."

"For your sake, I hope so," said Miss Lorimer. "But I approve him for declining your offer. He must be an interesting person." This remark was uttered so carelessly, with so much of the princess-like air and tone which was characteristic but quite unconscious on the part of Cecil, that her cousin was for an instant uncertain whether to be amused or offended. What was to be thought of a girl who condescendingly remarked that she "approved" of the Comte de V6rac?

Nothing more was said on the subject, but before Miss Lorimer retired to her pillow, she wrote a long letter to her sister, and this was one passage in it: "Now that I have described Madame de V6rac, I hope that you and Jack will set your dear, solemn heads and hearts at rest about any matrimonial intrigues on her part with regard to myself. In the first place, she has no suspicion that I am matrimonially desirable; and in the second place, all her attention in that line is bestowed at present on her nephew (by marriage). She has already given me two items of information which have very much amused me, because her intention in giving them was obvious. One is that the inheritance of her fortune is absolutely assured to this young Comte de V6rac; the other, that he is 'an aristocrat of aristocrats,' who desires an alliance with the daughter of the Duc de Mir6court. It seems, however, that a slight obstacle in the way of this alliance is the fact that he has squandered a large part of his fortune. So the Vicomtesse comes forward and desires to throw hers into the scale, to facilitate his ambition and make the Duke's daughter possible. This is very kind of her—or would be if one could overlook the fact that the generosity really costs her nothing, and is attended by much *ceal*. I feel shabby in writing this; but, charming as Madame de V6rac is, I see already the cloven foot of adoration for rank peeping out in more than one respect. Can any one live as she does and avoid the contagion, I wonder? With her, I fancy, it is held in check by good taste; but I am sure she would consider the Duc de Mir6court alliance cheaply purchased at the cost of pledging her fortune—after she can no longer enjoy it. You may imagine how much I was amused by her warning me not to hope for any share of this fortune, and not to set my ambitious thoughts upon the nephew, whom, I suppose, I must soon see quite often. Oh, what comedy there is in life! I think I am really going to enjoy my visit very much."

CHAPTER VIII. "I FIND HER ADORABLE." Certainly if Miss Lorimer's prophecy was not fulfilled, it was not the fault of the Vicomtesse. Delighted to find her young relative so presentable, Madame de V6rac spared no effort in securing her success in the world in which she had made good her own place. It was a pleasure to show the exclusive circle which had received her that the stem from which she herself had bloomed was capable of producing other flowers as fine. "You have in you all the material of a *grande dame*, my dear," she said one day to Cecil. "You ought to make a great alliance; but, unfortunately, money—a good deal of money—is necessary for that."

"Oh, my prophetic soul!" thought Cecil, with a smile. Aloud she said: "I should not care for an alliance that had to be made by money; so do not regret that the *grande dame* in me is not likely to come to light. After all, I am not sure that it exists."

"I am sure," said the Vicomtesse. "But you have the romantic ideas of your country—or at least what are supposed to be the ideas of your country. I find, however, that most Americans are quite ready to lay them aside when they come over here—provided they have money enough."

A quick answer—an answer which would have betrayed her—trembled on Cecil's lips, but she restrained it, and only said: "I am afraid I must bear the odium of being romantic, for I should not like money to be a factor in my marriage—if I ever marry. But I think that doubtful."

Madame de V6rac shook her head. "It is doubtful, if you are too romantic," she said. But she dropped the subject there; for, dearly as she would have liked to arrange a grand marriage for this beautiful, stately creature, she knew the ways of her adopted country too well to think of it for a moment as possible. Had she been aware of Cecil's fortune, nothing could have withheld her from match-making schemes; and, perceiving this, the young lady felicitated herself on the forethought which had caused her to maintain silence on this point.

"I should be as much tormented with suitors as Miss Percival in 'L'Abb6 Constantin,'" she said to herself. "The Vicomtesse would give me no peace. Who knows? I might even be considered worthy to become Comtesse de V6rac."

For one so accustomed to admiration as Miss Lorimer could not fail to perceive that the young Comte admired her extremely. She was, in fact, charming to him, with her beauty, her cleverness, her unconsciously princess-like air. Like his aunt, he thought that she had in her the making of a *grande dame*. "What a pity," he thought, with an involuntary sigh, "that she has not one of the great American fortunes!" He did not add even to himself the unexpressed idea that was, nevertheless, in his mind, that in such a case he might resign with philosophy his pretensions to the hand of Mademoiselle de Mir6court, and follow the example of his uncle.

But now, as ever, thoughts of marriage were little in Cecil's mind. She liked the social atmosphere in which she found herself—that charming atmosphere of high-bred French society into which foreigners seldom penetrate—its culture, its grace, its exquisite refinement; she expanded in it like a flower, adapting herself readily to manners which pleased her, and receiving on all sides fresh impressions.

One thing which struck her forcibly was the tone of unaffected piety which seemed to pervade the best of this society. Religious questions were discussed with as much interest as the latest development in politics or discovery in science. And when Cecil, who had hitherto thought of religion as a thing belonging as little as possible to the intellectual world, heard it spoken of in its intellectual aspect, affecting the gravest social questions and influencing the politics of great nations, she felt as if she had awakened in another world. They interested her very much, these questions; she seemed to catch a glimpse in them of something greater, higher, nobler than she had ever known before; and she began to enlarge her knowledge of them with all the energy which characterized her.

It was not long before she discovered that she could not hope for much assistance in this direction from the Vicomtesse. Madame de V6rac had indeed entered the Catholic Church at the time of her second marriage, but religion was in no sense a vital force in her life. She attended Mass decorously, played her part in charitable affairs as befitted a great lady, and listened to the sermons of great preachers with apparent appreciation; but all this was, in a certain sense, a deference to the world—that portion of the world with which she desired to identify herself—and had little interest for her in itself. Yet as far as she went she was sincere. She admired the Catholic Church, and believed all that it proposed for belief, without troubling herself to inquire into the grounds of that belief. To Cecil's questions, therefore, she returned but vague and unsatisfactory replies; and, observing this, Miss Lorimer soon ceased to ask information from her. But her interest in the subject did not cease. She went to the functions in the great churches with eyes and ears open to learn if possible their full meaning; and the more she saw, the more deeply she was interested. Here was something which in greatness appealed to her love of greatness, while in majesty and poetry it fulfilled her highest ideal.

TO BE CONTINUED. The Circumcision. Why did our Lord fulfill the law of Circumcision? First to give it an honorable end, by terminating it in His own person. Second, to prove the reality of His human body, which was denied by some ancient heretics. Third, to show that he was a son of Abraham, of whose seed the Messiah was promised to come. Fourth, to offer an early proof of His love for us by enduring this sharp pain for us. Fifth, to teach us obedience to divine law. Sixth, to give us a lesson in humility. Seventh, to inculcate the need of spiritual circumcision—of suffering for sin, of detachment from the comforts of life, of separation from the worldly spirit.—Catholic Columbian.

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JANUARY THE POWER

The Helper of "The quality of life is twice as good as the quantity. Within my century I will tell you the truth of the matter. It was a case of who had sufficient serious disappointments he was well-groomed precepts of the inclined to view and what seemed endless chain of impressions on state of melancholy incapable of kindly influence ever went to really afflicted even the bright luster and flowers seemed lost their cheerfulness perplexing mood he viewed animated and dislocated nothing in that was destined for afflictions that. In this despond of mind he house of sorrow which the laid and left his that abode of the bed where laid, and seen case of pain relieve it by whatever remand. He be exhausted consolation the, from His truly resigned insignificant comforts never ending patient and in the next shorter also that all English or at Dispenser of only sends according to correction a that if rom unbidden perverse w the first did back from t The inmate cheered and tions, and t upon the coming face and harsh own grievance, and he pretended mere sophistry. Herein he of mercy is doubly blessed he made to his own illness before reg now recog guise. Wily impres began to untold mis nurture in ing petty a and by t helping to valleys into. If the go from the later were the practice what an Adam could days of da bitterness with Chris not they s fellow crea mand has "bear e thereby fit We all average great prom in intrusion dens or natural s heart of n fortunate period of of Adam of being i vile tain animated murderer which the heart of this day. heedless life with or claim they can't comfort I always all ages has been of sancti selves to the prop these hol themselves charity world's a virtuous ing mas of the ri benefact relieve motives the Chr concern tears an wretched upon th