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Under False Colors

Lord Somerton's Ally.

CHAPTER XII.

They left the church, laughing and talking, and he heard the jingle of the keys. Then Ernscliffe and Miss Sterne advanced toward him, and he tried to compliment the baronet's daughter upon her playing. He walked with them a little way, and remarked at length:

"Are you leaving Blairwood tonight, Mr. Ernscliffe?"

"I desired to do so, but fear that I cannot catch the last train to London."

Colin was quick to notice the rector's perturbed manner.

"Miss Sterne," went on Mr. Vallance, "can you spare me half-an-hour to-morrow afternoon at the Park? I have a little matter of business to discuss with you."

"Yes," replied Elsie, brightly. "Try and come to Lady Helena's five o'clock tea. I am sure that we shall be delighted."

"I will come, but what I have to say is for your ears alone," was the grave reply.

Colin turned away. He knew that the rector's "business" referred to himself.

Mr. Vallance looked after them when they had exchanged good-evening with him and were walking down the hill.

"A handsome couple!" he murmured, "but I must know more of this artist. I must learn if Sir John knows anything of him, and how long this intimacy has been ripening into love. Can it be possible that Sir John overlooked this one item? No—no! And it would appear that Miss Sterne had been guilty of a little deceit. I can hardly believe it of her; but must credit what has passed before my own eyes! I will try and learn all to-morrow, and upon that must base my future conduct toward Miss Sterne. The charge I have undertaken is a serious one, and God help me to act uprightly."

CHAPTER XIII.

Lady Helena was both surprised and mortified that Miss Sterne should confess to having walked to the church with a comparative stranger, and return home in the gathering twilight,

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after an absence of nearly three hours!

"It was ridiculous of Sir John to invest the slightest power in the hands of a mere child, to my prejudice!" she thought, "and when he returns home he will see the folly of it. I am unable to assert the authority which my seniority warrants in consequence, and must really consult with the rector."

It was one of the peculiar coincidences that occasionally happen, for the rector was at that very moment thinking of speaking to Lady Helena upon the same subject!

Mr. Ernscliffe coolly announced that he was obliged to remain at the Park until the next day, and after dinner spent a full hour in the library, alone, busy with pen, ink and paper.

"It is all stuff and nonsense," Lady Helena said, irritably. "Mr. Ernscliffe could easily have caught the train if he had desired to do so. It is extremely bad taste upon his part, but I know what these artists, poets and literary men are. They ignore all the set rules of society, and carry their abominable license labeled 'genius' everywhere with them, in defiance even of the common rules of propriety."

Though Elsie strongly resented this interference, she pretended not to hear a word of Lady Helena's complaint, but became absorbed apparently in a new novel from Muddie's.

When Mr. Ernscliffe's letters were written he reappeared in the drawing-room, and dangled about Miss Sterne in a way that Lady Helena considered disgusting. What there was to talk about in an underbone she was at a loss to conceive, unless a flirtation was being carried on under her very eyes! A flirtation between the daughter of Sir John Sterne and a man who was really little better than a stranger!

Her ladyship ran up to her private apartments, and opening an escritoire, hastily penned a letter to Lord George Somerton:

My Lord—I am sorely in need of your advice. I promised to send you news of Miss Sterne's latest developments, and regret to inform you that Mr. Ernscliffe has not returned to London, but is still at Blairwood Park, and carrying on a shameful flirtation with his youthful mistress. I would not presume to pen these lines to you, but for your assurance that Miss Sterne is your promised wife, and will certainly one day become Lady Somerton. My position here is now a most untenable one, and I await your commands. Sincerely yours, HELENA GRAHAM.

She addressed this to Lord Somerton's town house, whither he had returned that day. She did so with a flush of pleasure, conscious that she was doing something for the annuity my lord had promised her upon his marriage with Miss Sterne.

Lady Helena, with all her middle-aged "gush" and outward simplicity, had a keen eye to the main chance. She knew that her business as chaperon was practically drawing to a close, and she had no liking for the position of a mere housekeeper.

She went downstairs, and sent the letter to the post by a special messenger, and it was a great relief, half-an-hour later, to hear that the rector was announced.

"What can bring him here at this hour?" she thought, with a little thrill of pleasure. "He has heard of Elsie's abominable conduct."

Mr. Vallance met her gravely. He had been unable to rest, after what he had seen in church. He felt that he was neglecting a serious duty by delaying until the next day.

He heard Elsie's voice and that of Mr. Ernscliffe in the west drawing-room, and he asked to see Lady Helena elsewhere.

At the moment of his arrival she was crossing the hall, and greeted him enthusiastically.

"I wish to speak with you alone, Lady Helena," he said. "I promised Miss Sterne that I would see her to-morrow, but upon consideration I



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think that it will be best to talk to you first."

She motioned to him to follow her into a room where they would not be disturbed, and when they were seated, he began without any further preamble.

"Who is this Mr. Ernscliffe, Lady Helena?"

"I have not the slightest idea, except that he claims to be an artist," replied her ladyship. "He is very handsome and disfigure in appearance, but I do not like him, Mr. Vallance. His manners are so unconventional. For all we know, he may be a mere adventurer."

"Mr. Colin Ernscliffe, the painter, is a member of the Royal Academy, and I should imagine that he is a gentleman," the rector said, thoughtfully. "I do not like to doubt any man without proof, but there are so many masquerading scoundrels with handsome exteriors that one has to be careful."

He left his seat and paced the floor.

"I suppose that Miss Sterne met the artist in London some time since," he asked, presently.

"Good gracious no! She never saw him until one day last week," exclaimed Lady Helena. "He came here presenting that he had been sent by Sir John's wicked nephew, Noel Campbell, but Sir John refused to see him. Immediately after he knew that Sir John was safely out of the way he came again, and I believe that he intends to stay! He is flirting with Miss Elsie in an abominable manner."

"It is almost incredible," groaned the rector. "I would have staked my salvation upon Miss Sterne's honesty, and yet, what am I to think now? Lady Helena, do you know what they are to each other? Lovers? Yes, lovers! How blind you must have been—how willfully blind!"

Lady Helena affected to be shocked, and resolved to write another letter to Lord Somerton next morning.

"It is cruel that I should have to bear the blame of this," the whim, "when Sir John practically deprived me of all control in the household the very day he left. Oh, Mr. Vallance, what are we to do? I can assure you that Miss Sterne can be very willful if she pleases. I believe that it is an understood thing that she is to marry Lord Somerton, and yet she conducts herself in this disgraceful way. It is always the same with your innocent-looking beauties."

"Stop!" the rector said, sternly. "I will not hear one word against her. She shall tell her own story. As for Lord Somerton, he has paid me several unwelcome visits to the rectory, but I do not believe one word that he has told me. I do not like Lord Somerton."

"It will be a lengthy letter to my lord to-morrow," thought Lady Helena.

"I do not think that I shall speak to Miss Sterne until to-morrow afternoon, your ladyship, and in the meantime I beg of you to be upon the alert. I cannot say that I doubt Mr. Ernscliffe, and I have no right to question him. Whether I do or not depends upon the result of my conversation with Miss Sterne."

The rector went away a little later, and looked into the west drawing-room as he passed the door. He distinctly saw that Mr. Ernscliffe was holding one of Elsie's hands, and that she was looking up at him with a happy smile.

Neither knew that Mr. Vallance had been to the house, and Lady Helena did not see fit to mention the matter.

Personally, she did not feel at all gratified. The rector had not taken her into his confidence, and he had spoken of Lord Somerton in terms of disparagement. He had not even hinted that he required her presence when he spoke to Miss Sterne on the following day, and had expressed a certain amount of blind faith in Mr. Ernscliffe, a man whom her ladyship now cordially detested.

"The rector was Sir John's confidant," she told herself, "and I really believe that the baronet had a skeleton in his cupboard. I will find out what it was, and then we shall see who will dare to dictate to me! Lord Somerton shall find that I am of use to him—I will earn that annuity!" (To be continued.)

Loaf of Bread for 800,000,000 Marks

Berlin, Oct. 11 (Associated Press)—The people of Berlin awoke yesterday to find the dollar "at two billion marks" and last night went to bed with the knowledge that the mark fell to 6,500,000,000 in unofficial quotations with little hope that to-day will bring improvements.

"Prices were as wild as the market quotations and shoppers who had to have food and other necessary supplies rushed madly from market to market in an effort to get some. There was utter confusion in the price scales."

"Although dealers generally quote prices on larger articles in gold marks they vary greatly in their quotations and use such a sliding scale in converting the gold piece into paper that the public is frantic. From hour to hour yesterday the prices varied with rumors of the mark's further fall and housewives were dazed by the staggering sums asked for foodstuffs."

Railway rates increased 50 per cent yesterday and will again go up 50 per cent Saturday, which will not be an increase comparable to the decline of the paper mark in relation to the pound and the dollar.

Best of the cheapest quality was quoted yesterday morning at 150,000,000 marks for a pound of twelve ounces, but none was available. People, especially old persons, are wholly incapable of comprehending the size of the bills.

A twenty-four-ounce loaf of bread sold yesterday for 80,000,000 marks, but the price to-day will be 110,000,000. Butter was 500,000,000 marks yesterday for a twelve-ounce pound, but scarce. Potatoes brought 7,500,000 marks per pound and grapes 100,000,000 marks per pound.

Household Notes.

Serve jellied sweet cider with whipped cream.

Serve mushroom sauce with chicken timbales.

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Serve fruit dumplings hot with heated fruit syrup.

Scalloped boiled rice with tomatoes and season with cheese.

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