

A CLEVER WOMAN.

(Concluded.)

On the first night of their going out Lina was in her room dressing listlessly when her husband entered in a state of great perturbation.

"Have you seen Mrs. Nevil since she dressed?" he asked.

"No," said Lina wonderingly. "What is the matter?"

"Matter enough!" he returned in a tone of intense vexation. "She is so frightfully *decolete* that she would be marked anywhere; but it is the vilest of taste as we are going to the Dean's."

The Dean, who was giving the musical entertainment at which they were shortly due, was noted for the bitter war he waged against "fashionable" dress; and, as he was Syd's godfather, Bertie would have done anything rather than offend him.

"Do go to her, Lina!" he went on. "It is not her fault; she does not understand these things."

"My dear Bertie, how very trying?" said Lina in a tone of the deepest concern, while she was congratulating herself on the way in which matters were turning out. "But I can't really say anything to her! How do you like my own gown?"

"It is perfect!" was the warm response. Fresh from the offending dress in the drawing-room below, his eyes rested gratefully upon his wife's pretty gray gown. "I did not know Malta had made you look so well. You are lovelier than you were last season!" he added; and the words were still ringing in her ears when they entered the reception-rooms.

Bertie Errington was far from being happy that evening. He heard several remarks passed upon Mrs. Nevil's appearance which were more distinguished for wit than for elegance; and she had a way of constantly appealing to him and of openly deferring to his opinion which had the effect of making him look ridiculous.

"It isn't her fault, and she will soon learn tact," he said to himself loyally; but he could not help adding mentally that he was glad that Lina did not keep him in such a state of nervous apprehension.

"I think our friend shines more in home-life—don't you, Baby?" he asked naively, when Lina and he were alone.

The young wife had made up her mind that there would be no more "home-life" that season; but she instantly undertook her rival's defence.

"Oh, do you think so?" she exclaimed. "I thought Clara quite a success to night. She tells me that people said such nice things to her!"

"And of her!" retorted Errington grimly. "Good heavens, Baby, what a gown!"

"Well, it was rather a bright red," Lina admitted; "but I thought you admired her taste?"

"So I do—in morning-frocks," he said, feeling that he was driven into a corner; "but I think they harmonized better with her rooms than they do with ours."

"Then you would like me to have a morning-frock from her dressmaker?" pursued Lina remorselessly.

Feeling vaguely that he was being laughed at, Bertie uttered a cross "Yes."

If he had seen her for only a few hours a day, Errington's admiration for Mrs. Nevil would in all probability have survived the summer; but from seeing her morning, noon and night, it became a case of *toujours perdrix*. She was amusing and she flattered him—and these two traits in her character were doubtless as pleasing as when he first made her acquaintance, but the more assured her position became in the household, the more she presumed upon it. When Errington came in ravenous from a tennis-party, it was not soothing to be told that Mrs. Nevil had asked that the dinner might be postponed an hour to suit her own arrangements; nor was it pleasant to find that a certain man whom he had blackballed at the club had been calling upon Mrs. Nevil. If he complained to Lina that the dinner-hour at all events ought to be kept sacred, it was only to be met with a reminder that, as he had so anxiously desired Mrs. Nevil's presence, they must both do their best to make her visit agreeable. The worst of the matter was that, the more disenchanted Errington became, the more his wife's affection for their guest increased. She began to imitate Mrs. Nevil's manner, an cultivated a peculiarly loud laugh that had always tried him in the original, but was absolutely repellent coming from Lina's lips. The young wife quoted her guest until the woman's very name became distasteful to Bertie.

"For goodness' sake, stop telling me what that woman has said, Baby!" he exclaimed at last, in desperation. "I am tired of hearing about her! When is this ceiling of her's to be finished?"

Lina's heart beat high with exultation; but she only said gently—

"Are you tired of her, dear?" And, grateful for his wife's forbearance, he was forced to confess that he was.

"This shall end at Ascot!" Lina said to herself; and, in fact, the sustained effort was telling upon her sadly. Nothing was more repugnant to her nature than the life she was now leading. Dane Trescott's kind, grave face no longer gladdened her eyes; of her boy she hardly saw anything; while the hardest of all to bear was the knowledge that Bertie was grieving over the change, and longing for a return of those quiet happy days when they had been all in all to each other.

"Bertie has been here asking me how to get rid of a visitor who has not the wit to see that she has outstayed her welcome," Miss Helen told Lina, with an elaborate pretence of not seeing behind the scenes. "He seems dreadfully miserable."

"Poor old Bertie!" sighed Lina remorsefully. "Never mind, auntie dear—it shall end at Ascot."

Errington could afford neither time nor money to take a house for the

race-week; but he always managed to run down with Lina for the great day—and this year Mrs. Nevil, of course, went too. Lina had horrified her husband by coming down at the last moment in a gorgeous pink dress; but, as she hastened to answer his ominous frown by telling him that it was "dear Clara's" choice, and as that lady was standing by him, his objections could not be disclosed. On the way down he looked displeased and scarcely spoke; but Lina and Mrs. Nevil appeared to be in the highest spirits, and took but little notice of him. Once arrived on the course, both ladies were surrounded by a crowd of the widow's friends; and, too annoyed and depressed to take the slightest interest in the day's proceedings, Errington spent the morning lounging about by himself at some little distance from them.

The afternoon was not very far advanced when his arm was suddenly seized by a strong hand.

"Bertie," said the well-known voice of Dane Trescott, "I have been looking for you everywhere!"

"Have you," returned Bertie listlessly. "What for?"

"What for! Are you mad? Are you blind? Don't you see who is talking to Lina?"

Roused by Trescott's excited manner, Bertie craned his neck to get a better view of the group that was standing at some twenty paces from them.

"I can't help it, Dane!" he said bitterly. "They look a fast lot; but Mrs. Nevil chooses her own friends, and she likes them; and Lina is almost as bad."

"But those people, Bertie! That woman with the black eyes and the man standing by her—they are"—and he whispered a couple of names in the younger man's ear. They were names that had been made known to the world at large through the newspaper-reports of proceedings in the Divorce Court. "Don't you understand, Bertie? Rouse yourself, man! They are cut by every one who has a character to lose; and there is Lina talking to them in full view of the grand stand! Won't you?"

Trescott stopped suddenly as Bertie, breaking away from him, pushed through the intervening crowd that fell back to right and left at the sight of his set white face, until he reached the group and laid a hand upon his wife's arm.

"Lina," he said sternly, "this is no place for you! Come away at once! We must go home!"

The men about her stared insolently, and the woman Trescott had pointed out broke into a laugh; but Lina looked up straight into her husband's eyes and rejoiced at the expression of wrath she saw there. Without a word she turned to obey him; and, still retaining his hold upon her arm, Errington turned to Mrs. Nevil.

"We go home at once," he said coldly. "Do you join us?"

The brown eyes he had so much admired had lost their softness and were flashing angrily as she answered him—

"I stay here. By what right do you assume that tone?"

Bertie turned upon his heel without replying either to her question or to Lina's whispered query, "Shall I not say good-bye to Mrs. Nevil's friends?" and was making his way in the direction of the entrance, when Mrs. Nevil hastened after them, her momentary anger successfully repressed.

"Don't go so fast!" she said querulously. "If you will wait half an hour I will come too; but I won't be taken home like a naughty child."

"Did you know who those people were to whom you introduced my wife?" said Errington frigidly.

"Yes—I knew; but Lina didn't. It was a little bit of revenge on my part. She ought—"

"Lina—" there was a strange new tone in her husband's voice—"say good-bye to Mrs. Nevil. She is not returning with us."

There was a momentary pause, a hurried hand-clasp, an exchange of bows, and Mrs. Nevil was left alone.

Early that same evening Errington heard the sounds of romping and laughter issuing from his wife's boudoir. After smoking savagely in his own room, he had taken to wandering aimlessly over the house, feelingly sorely contrite and angry. What a fool he had been! How could he have imagined that that detestible woman had any charm about her? And now the serious question was how far had she inoculated his wife. Was Lina really enamoured of those loud gowns and fast ways generally, or was it merely a passing infatuation from which she would speedily recover? After he had satisfied himself that she had not the faintest idea to whom she had been chatting, the journey back had been passed in silence; and now he was longing for a talk with her, but he felt too shamefaced to go to her room. The door was ajar; and at length the bright laughter of mother and child proved irresistible, and, standing in the doorway unobserved, he watched them. The room looked cool and inviting, with every trace of Ascot put carefully out of sight, and side by side in the big rocking-chair sat Lina and Syd, wearing the same white dresses in which they had greeted him on their return from Malta.

"There's papa!" cried the child suddenly. "Come in, papa!"

So Errington went in; and then he did the very wisest thing he could do in the circumstances by going straight up to the rocking-chair and kissing them both.

A happy hour followed for Master Syd; for, instead of talking "grown-up talk," both "papa" and "mamma" devoted themselves to him. At the end of that time the young gentleman was carried off to bed, and Errington sank down upon the couch.

"In all probability Mrs. Nevil will send for her boxes and things," he said abruptly. "If she should come here herself, I have told Mary to help her to pack, and to say you are engaged and cannot help her."

"Very well, Bertie," agreed Lina obediently.

"We have had a most wretched season, Baby," he went on—there is no