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MOIR'S CHOCOLATES

THE HEIR OF LANCEWOOD

CHAPTER XXIX.

Vivien's perplexities increased. A note came from Lady Smeaton asking her to drive over, as she wanted to speak to her. Vivien went, and after the first greetings were over Lady Smeaton said—

"I have sent the girls out riding, for I wanted, Vivien, to speak to you alone. My dear, who is this gentleman staying at Lancewood?"

Her heart sank at the question; a sense of passionate misery came over her. What could she do? She looked up into the kindly face of her old friend, and it was only by a violent effort that she controlled herself.

"He is a tutor engaged by Lady Neslie for the education of her son."

"So it is with her son's tutor that her ladyship rides all over the country and gets herself talked about! Vivien, do you know that people are saying very disagreeable things about this?"

"I am sorry to hear it, but powerless to help it," said Vivien.

"I hope there will be some stop put to it at once," observed Lady Smeaton, "or Lancewood will be no home for you, Vivien."

"Dear Lady Smeaton, I can never leave it. My father left the honor of his name in my hands."

"Can you do nothing to prevent the scandal, then?" asked Lady Smeaton, anxiously.

"No," replied Vivien, drearily. "Monsieur de Nouchet is a distant relative of Lady Neslie's, and she claims the right of treating him as a guest, although he is a paid dependent."

"I have my own ideas," said Lady Smeaton, "but I need not make you uncomfortable with them. It is ten thousand pities that Sir Arthur married again. You must be very unhappy, Vivien?"

"I am unhappy," she replied.

"Remember always," said Lady Smeaton, "that when you can no longer live at Lancewood my home is yours."

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fluence her in any way. She went to her one day when she saw her in the rose garden, and, for a wonder, unattended by Monsieur de Nouchet.

"Valerie," she said, gently. "I have been for some time trying to speak to you. I want to ask you who Monsieur de Nouchet is, and what his real place is in this house."

"He is Sir Oswald's tutor," replied miladi, with a laughing gleam of mischief in her eyes.

"Then, if he is a tutor, why treat him as you would a distinguished guest? Why ride out with him? Why dine and converse so confidentially with him? Do you know that people are remarking it?"

"Are they? I am quite indifferent," said miladi.

"But I am not indifferent," returned Vivien, quickly; "I am thinking of the honor of our house."

"That must take care of itself," said Valerie.

"You say he is your son's tutor, yet you treat him as though he were master of the house—indeed, you make him so."

"Have you discovered that much?" asked miladi laughing.

"I am sorry to tell you," continued Vivien, trying to speak calmly, "that the very servants make all kinds of comments upon your conduct, and some of them reflect keenly upon you."

"Well, Vivien, I am very good tempered as a rule, but I really think if I heard the least whisper of the kind, I should dismiss the whisperer without a character."

"You cannot dismiss your neighbor and your friends—you cannot dismiss the whole county. And I assure you they are all discussing you."

Lady Neslie's face flushed, and she looked uncomfortable for half a minute; then she said—

"I am quite indifferent, Vivien. Indeed, as they are kind enough to talk about me, I will, in return, give them something really worth mentioning. And, as for yourself, I say to you what I have said before—if there is anything you do not like at Lancewood, you cannot do better than leave it."

It was useless speaking. Another week passed, and then miladi announced her intention of giving a series of dinner-parties.

"Vivien," she said, "you know our friends' addresses, will you write them down for me?"

"With what object are you giving these parties, Valerie?"

"Because I wish to introduce Monsieur de Nouchet to our friends."

Vivien looked at her in wonder.

"My dear Valerie," she said, "you are either strangely ignorant or strangely blind. Do you know what you are doing? A tutor is always supposed to be a gentleman, but you mistake the position altogether when you talk of giving parties for the sake of introducing him to society. Forgive me if I say that the place of a tutor is the school-room or the library."

"Sir Arthur used to invite Mr. Dorman to dine with us," rejoined Valerie, defiantly.

"Once in a way—not often. You will find that English people like to keep up the barriers of caste."

"Monsieur de Nouchet is my relative," said Valerie.

"Then introduce him as a relative—and him in a false position. Before long you will find the truth of what I am saying, Valerie. As sure as fate, people will look shyly on you."

"They can look as they please; I am my own mistress."

"Be content with that; do not try to make Monsieur de Nouchet seem like master—it does not look well. Believe me, Valerie, you will be compelled in time to recognize public opinion if you do not now—no one can live and defy it."

But, in spite of all Vivien could say, miladi had her own way—she gave some magnificent dinners. Miss Neslie had influenced her in one respect—she was more reserved in public. Sir Harry Lane said he did not think there was really any harm in the matter; if miladi liked to give the post of tutor to a relative, she had a right to please herself, and he did not suppose that any one would blame her for showing kindly attention to her relative—and Sir Harry's opinion carried due weight with it. Perhaps, also, Monsieur de Nouchet had a hint




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of danger in the distance, for he gave up his obtrusive manner; he did not call during dinner for particular wines—he remained rather in the background—so that Lady Neslie's dinner-parties were not quite a failure.

Emboldened by success, she determined upon giving a grand ball—such a ball as people should remember and talk about. In one of her most gracious moods she pressed Mr. Dorman to attend, and hoped Vivien would not be absent. She was perhaps a trifle subdued when she found how many invitations were refused.

All the single men accepted, the matrons, and the old maids; but she noticed that mothers, with young daughters in most cases declined.

"We shall have a dearth of pretty girls," she said. "Vivien, you must look doubly beautiful to make up for it."

Lady Smeaton would have declined but that Vivien implored her to be present. The ball was fixed for one of the last evenings in August.

Certainly Lancewood had never looked more beautiful, with its profusion of flowers of every hue, its fragrance of rich blossoms, its pleasant ripple of fountains, its superb decorations. Lady Neslie looked very bright and radiant in a dress of magnificent brocade. She wore a costly parure of diamonds, her golden brown hair was crowned with a tiara, her bright, laughing face was flushed.

Vivien, tall, stately, and splendid, with a sweeping train of black velvet and white azuleas in her hair, looked majestic. There could not be and there was not any comparison between the two ladies—between the fickleness and caprice of the one, and the elevation and nobility of soul of the other.

So far as lights, music, flowers and decorations went, Lady Neslie's ball was a success; but, looking round the rooms, Vivien wondered to see how many familiar faces were absent. Lady Castledine and her three beautiful daughters were absent; Mrs. Seymour with her fair nieces had declined; the lovely Ladies Rawthorn pleaded another engagement. Vivien saw at once that the brilliant throng crowding the room was chiefly composed of second-rate people.

That ball did more mischief than anything else could have done. The lights, the music, the excitement somewhat dazzled Lady Neslie. She laid aside some of her usual prudence; she seemed absolutely to forget that there was any one in the world except Henri de Nouchet. She opened the hall with him, to the intense wonder of every one present. She danced with scarcely any one else. She flirted outrageously with him; they loitered in the cool, silent

conservatories, in the moonlit balconies. Miladi neglected her guests and devoted herself to him. He led her down to the supper-table; he sat by her and monopolized the whole of her attention.

"She must mean to marry him," said Mrs. Farnham, one of Sir Arthur's oldest friends; "she never would behave in that way if she did not."

The comments were many and bitter; the guests were one in their warm, true sympathy with Vivien.

"Lady Neslie will marry the Frenchman," they said to one another. "It is hard on Miss Neslie."

"Vivien had seen and noted Valerie's strange behaviour—the fact that she might eventually marry the tutor had not occurred to her. She believed that Valerie was purposely showing the world how little she cared for its opinion. The hall was not a great success; people did not remain late—they were anxious to get away to discuss the behavior of their hostess. The verdict of one and all was that Lady Neslie must be "black-balled." Society must refuse to recognize her, unless the French gentleman left Lancewood; then the verdict should be reconsidered.

If Lady Neslie knew of this she made no sign. Ten days afterward she issued invitations for another ball. She sent out a hundred and fifty—more than a hundred were refused. She affected the utmost surprise, but took the matter very coolly.

"We had better postpone the ball," she said; "people seem to be all engaged;" and the ball was postponed.

Lady Smeaton was the only one who did not shield herself under the plea of a prior engagement. She wrote plainly to Lady Neslie—

"In common with many others I disapproved of the proceedings at the late ball, and I refuse myself to visit, or to allow my daughters to visit at Lancewood. I shall always be delighted to see Miss Neslie, but it must be at my house—not at hers."

Lady Valerie gave the note to Vivien.

"I call that insolent," she said. "Lady Smeaton is—insane, I should imagine."

"Most of the people shared Lady Smeaton's opinion, although they did not express it," Vivien replied. "I warned you, Valerie. Very soon you will find all the respectable houses in the county closed to you."

"Bah!" cried miladi. "That will not trouble me."

(To be Continued.)

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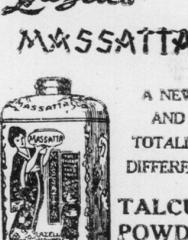
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