

A CRUEL DECEPTION

OR WHY DID SHE SHUN HIM? BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

(Continued)

this open warfare; for let me inform both you and him, Pennell, that if this man is content to rest under the stain of illegitimacy, I am not! My mother's name is far higher in my eyes than the oldest title or the greatest wealth in the world! If any man dare to insult her memory it will go badly with him, be his proof what they may. You have my ultimatum. Shall we join Trevelyan? I think he would like to speak to you. You will find him marvelously well, considering everything. I hope we can persuade you to stay to dinner."

Lord Taunton's manner was courteous itself; but there was a look on his face that told the lawyer no more words could be spoken on the subject that had brought him to Torre, let the issue be what it might.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The season in London was at its height, the ball of frivolity had been set spinning early in the year and was still revolving in a sparkling, almost furious fashion.

It had been a glorious summer. There had been a real, old-fashioned summer—with a wealth of roses to scent the air, and a sunshine perpetually to gladden the world.

Piecemeal was a block of carriages and automobiles; the streets, the parks, everywhere people of fashion were to be seen, from all appearances full of the enjoyment of life and all its pleasures.

There had been the usual gossiping, slanderous lies, the usual disappointments and triumphs.

Society had its usual share of new amusements—fresh singers, uncouth German pianists, Russian reciters, and American imitators of birds and beasts; but of all these no single entertainer had been so extraordinarily popular, so immensely admired, and so delicious, mysterious as the handsome hypnotist Blair Hunter, with his wonderful gifts of music, singing, painting, acting—goodness only knew what more—in conjunction with this other most marvelous power which had made him the pet and idol of the fashionable world in town.

His wife, too, came in for her share of admiration from the men. The women, though they could not deny the exquisite delicacy of the girl's features, the grace of the slender figure, and the nameless beauty in the large eyes, were not so enthusiastic over Mrs. Blair Hunter, as they were over her husband. They found the wife so dull, so quiet, and she looked so thin and pale and always had such a strange, frightened air. She did not seem as though she were natural, and as she repelled all advances made to her by her cold indifference, she was not popular.

The men admired her beyond words, though they one and all kept their admiration unspoken.

There was something about this patrician-looking wife of a charlatan—for that was what his own sex called Hunter—that awoke a sense of absolute respect in the most frivolous breast, and aroused also in many a feeling of pity, and an unconscious desire to aid the quiet, beautiful girl whose eyes alone seemed to betray the existence of a sorrow deep rooted in her heart.

There were, of course, all sorts of rumors about Blair Hunter. He was declared to be a scion of an old and honorable family, and no mere nobody as the ordinary entertainer generally was. No one had quite the rights of the story, but on one point all were determined—at least, all the feminine portion of the community—that Mr. Hunter was at once an ornament and an addition to any drawing-room, even though he did cull a large income from his hypnotic seances.

Down at Torre news traveled slowly, and the good folk had yet to learn that their late organist had developed into such a successful person; but they did not think so badly of him as they had done, for he had faithfully discharged

every debt due, and proved himself, after all, a man of honor.

The rector and Lady Augusta between them never let a living soul know how much worth there was in Mr. Hunter's honor, and indeed, the man's name dropped out of their converse.

Lady Augusta was full of delightful plans for carrying her husband away for a long invigorating voyage, and she also had another matter in her mind that she greatly desired to have settled. It was the question of Blanche Glenlee and Lord Taunton. What was going to happen? Was anything going to happen? And if not, why not? That was what Lady Augusta wanted to know.

She took the bull by the horns one day. Taunton had been to Scotland for a week, and Blanche had most decidedly sulked throughout the whole of that week.

Lady Augusta was a little annoyed with her brother, not, perhaps, quite justly so; but vexation is not always just, we know. She considered he had been wrong. If he had no intentions concerning Miss Glenlee—well, then he ought to declare himself, one way or the other.

Augusta Trevelyan was not quite sure what Lord Taunton ought or ought not to have done. What she did know was that she desired him most decidedly to bring the present unsatisfactory state of affairs to a satisfactory conclusion, and, acting on a sudden impulse, she spoke to him.

Taunton had returned to Torre intending to stay only a few days. Now that Jack was recovered, he was free again, and there was literally nothing to detain him. The question of the Hunter claim was one that did not trouble him in the least; moreover, he had received no answer to his ultimatum, when he had refused to meet it on any ground save through publicity and legality.

He did not imagine, of course, that Hunter had accepted the situation as final, but he was prepared for him at any time, and with his heart smarting over the loss of the woman he loved he would be no puny enemy. If Blair Hunter were wise and let things rest, well and good, but if not—well, Lord Taunton felt the blood course in his veins with anger at the fellow's daring insult.

Of Alwynne he thought night and day. She lived before him, she haunted him. There was such perplexity, such misery, such anguish of remembrance yet. He could not dismiss her. He loved her only deeper and deeper as the days sped by.

This was the mood in which he was when Augusta attacked him suddenly.

"Hugo," she said, wrinkling her pretty brows and looking ridiculously like him for the moment—"Hugo, I want to speak to you seriously."

He half smiled, but, seeing she was in earnest, checked himself.

"Say on, my sister."

Lady Augusta paused.

"Hugo," she said gravely, "what are your intentions toward Blanche?"

"Intentions toward Bl—Miss Glenlee! My dear Gus, explain yourself!"

"Are you going to marry her?"

Lord Taunton stared into his sister's eyes.

"Marry Miss Glenlee—marry her!"

There was a world of amazement in the words.

"Because if you are not," Lady Augusta declared with extreme promptitude, "I think you ought not to see much more of her, that's all; for her sake, I mean, not yours!"

Lord Taunton frowned; the thought hurt him.

"Such a possibility never entered my head," he said slowly; and indeed, he only spoke the truth.

His sister linked her arm in his.

"Darling, why should you not marry her? Why should you not have happiness in your life as we

have in ours? Forgive me, Hugo, dear, for speaking on these intimate subjects; but I am so eager so anxious you should be happy, that you should know the sweets of life as well as the sorrows you have; you have had your full share of the shadow, now turn to the sun. Do you never picture, darling, a future, when this old home might be something dearer and more lovely to you than it is now, when there would be an influence within to draw the joy out of life, when the world would open out a new vista before you, and the sound of your children's voices would ring in your ears?"

Lady Augusta's eyes were not quite dry as she finished. Taunton carried her small hand to his lips.

"Ah, Gus," he said hurriedly, "with almost a break in his voice, 'you touch me there! You are a true woman.'"

"Why should you not be happy?" his sister urged eagerly.

"Hugo, why not?"

He stood for a moment, his eyes, and she waited in silence for him to speak.

"Happiness is not for me, Gus," he said, when he spoke. "I have renounced all thought of it. My dream is over!"

Lady Augusta was still silent.

"There are other things then, dear," she said softly, after a little pause; "there is duty—duty to yourself, to our race!"

"Does duty mean deceit and falsehood?" he asked, in a low, agitated voice.

"Gus, you do not know what you urge me to do. You—you have bright eyes, little sister, but they do not see everything!"

Lady Augusta clung to him a little tightly.

"Hugo," she said, with a catch in her voice, "is it the old past always?"

He shook his head. "The old past is dead," he answered, "but there is something that is not dead Gus—something that lives here, burning me, torturing me, making my life a misery!"

"Oh, Hugo!" his sister put her arms about him—"oh, Hugo, dear, forgive me! I did not know and you have been unhappy all this time. Ah, you are right; I have indeed been blind! Forgive me, forgive me!"

She pressed her face down on his breast, weeping a little, and he stood silent, holding her there. By and by she spoke again.

"And is there no hope?" she whispered.

"Alas," he answered, "none! The woman I love is married to another man!"

Lady Augusta shivered, and crept closer to him. She forgot to be disappointed about Blanche. She forgot all—everything but this new sorrow that had come to one she loved so dearly, so fondly.

"What will you do? Will you go away again, Hugo?"

He kissed her tenderly, and then sighed wearily.

"I don't know. I have been too sore and miserable to think clearly; but I shall be better soon, little Gus. Even sorrow so deep as that which has come to me cannot last forever."

Lady Augusta could make no better answer than to nestle closer beside him. She was dreadfully troubled—troubled not only for Hugo, but for Blanche Glenlee. If only she could have known how hopeless her schemes were; but she had not known, and she had worked, perhaps, a lifelong unhappiness for one whom she had dearest so much in quite the other direction. The longer she thought, the more difficult and uncomfortable the position became.

Lord Taunton was quick to read the perplexity and trouble on her face. He asked her gently to tell him all that was in her mind, and after a moment's hesitation, she plunged into the subject.

She was grieving about Blanche. It was all her fault; she had been so full of hope that everything would go well. She had given Blanche to understand so clearly what she so ardently

desired, and now after all this time she could not fail to know—to see.

"In fact," she finished hurriedly—"it is no use disguising the fact, Hugo—she is very, very fond of you, and I am afraid she will be very unhappy. Oh, I feel wretched about it!"

Taunton's brows were contracted—manlike, he felt every sort of annoyance at the state of affairs.

"It is a most regrettable business," he said, and his voice was colder than was his wont when speaking to his sister. He was, in fact—not unnaturally—angry with her. No man cares to find himself face to face with such an awkward position, and, moreover, he never can be induced to bestow that amount of sympathy on the efforts of another person who, with the best intentions in the world, undertakes to settle the most important moment of his life for him.

"I confess, Gus, I am extremely surprised and annoyed. Had I for a single instant imagined such folly was hatching in your brain I should have taken speedy methods to set you right on a point which—you must forgive me for saying this—is, and must be, essentially my own affair."

Lady Augusta dissolved into tears and flung her arms around Hugo.

"Oh, darling," she cried, in a passion of penitence, "do forgive me! I know just how you feel. I see how wrong I was; but I did not stop to think; I had only one idea in my head—your happiness. I wanted you to be as others are. I wanted you to live here in your proper place, and to see your children growing up about you, to bring you joy and consolation as the years go by."

Taunton held her in his arms and soothed her. His thoughts seemed to congregate and mingle incoherently for one instant, then they sorted themselves out, and one line was formed out of the chaos.

What if he were to put out his hand and grasp this future which his sister's tender love had sketched for him? What if he were to stifle these hopeless and despairing longings, to turn his back on that which never, never could be, and, boldly resolving to be strong in every sense, to make for himself new ties, new duties, new responsibilities, and live a life not for himself, but for others?

He put the memory of Alwynne from him in this moment. His will was strong as iron, his courage indomitable. He had never failed yet in anything he had undertaken. If he set himself this task—horrible, bitter, restless as the pain would be—he knew he would carry it through unflinchingly, almost unflinchingly.

He kissed his sister, unloosened her arms, and turned from her without saying a word; and she, with as infinity of tact and delicate thought, let him go in silence, for she understood him absolutely in this moment.

Blanche Glenlee had almost renounced all and every hope the night he spoke to her.

It was after dinner. She had wandered into the conservatory, and had thrown herself ill-humorously into one of the cozy chairs scattered about. Lady Augusta had flown upstairs to her invalid.

Although he had progressed so well as to be allowed to come downstairs, John Trevelyan was as yet but an infant in strength and his little wife was rigorous in her care of him, insisting on his retiring long before evening came. He was so precious to her, doubly so in his weak, wan condition, she was never happy a moment away from his side.

"I will be down very soon, Blanche, dear," she cried, as she flitted from the dining room up the broad staircase. "I know you will forgive me for leaving you. Poor Blanche, you are so good, and I am sure you must be so dull."

Miss Glenlee smiled faintly.

"Not dull only, but disappointed," she would have said, if she had spoken out the truth of her heart; but she said nothing, only turned and walked into the conservatory in her slow, graceful way.

Lady Augusta glanced after her with a little sigh.

"It ought to teach me in future not to try and arrange everybody else's life as well as my own," she thought to herself ruefully. "Oh, dear, and now I feel sure Hugo will do what I wanted him to do—and—and—I shall tell Jack all about it, he is sure to be able to make me quite happy about it. It is a mistake, and—oh, my poor, poor Hugo, how sorry I am for him! Why is it that I should have so much, and he so little? How strange life is sometimes!"

Blanche rested back in her chair and surveyed the pretty scene about her with definite and decided bad temper.

"I think the sooner I have my things packed, the better," she said to herself, as she tapped the marble floor impatiently with her foot. "My remnant of self-respect should have made me leave long ago." She was bitterly hurt with the fate that had befallen her maneuvers. She never allowed herself to be beaten, if possible, in any small thing. Her mother could bear testimony to this fact, and she had felt so assured of success, too. In all the time of the deepest sorrow at Torre, she had let her hope become greater and greater.

She plucked a delicate blossom close to her hand, and crushed it wantonly between her strong fingers in her wrath, and then she flung it to the ground. She turned in her chair and flushed a little with a sudden thrill of excitement. Lord Taunton was coming toward her, he had not sat for her for some time past now. Somehow, she felt a difference about him tonight, a something she could not quite explain; she forgot her ill temper, and greeted him with a smile.

"I am honored," she said, as he drew up a chair, and sat down before her.

"I want to speak to you," the man spoke in a quiet, low voice, a voice that had a weary sound in it, a tone that matched the drawn, tired look in his face.

There was a little pause between them. Blanche had said "yes" in semi-questioning, semiconfiding fashion, and sat looking down at her white, jeweled hands lying on her lap.

"Blanche, will you be my wife?" The words were spoken, quite gently. She almost doubted her ears at first; to come now in the very moment of despair it was almost incomprehensible.

His next words recalled her to herself with unpleasant rapidity.

"I want to be very frank with you," he said, going on slowly, as though repeating a lesson. "I ask you to be my wife, Blanche, but I do not love you. It seems to me, perhaps, we shall be none the less happy because love is left out of our story."

She did not lift her eyes from her hands.

"If you do not love me, why do you ask me to be your wife?"

The pleasure of her triumph had gone. That which she had so earnestly desired was hers at last, yet the satisfaction she had imagined was absolutely absent.

She felt she almost hated him in this moment. But for the fact of his being what he was, she would have risen and turned her back on him there and then. She did not indulge in sentiment as a rule, but his blunt, quiet assurance had struck her in the most vital part—her vanity—and, come what may, she would never forgive him this slight.

He answered her question quietly.

"My home requires a mistress. It will be honored by your acceptance of the title."

She nodded her head. Angry as she was with him, she had no intention of letting him see it. Was she going to allow a feeling of weak folly to upset all her calculations? She was not such a fool!

Taunton went on speaking. He did not touch on his new sorrow; he only dwelt vaguely on the unhappiness of his life in general, and, as she was so conversant with his past story, she accepted that as the real translation of his words.

"If you will accept me—knowing all," he said, his voice quiet

and almost cold, "knowing that I can offer you no deep sentiment, that I make no protestation of affection, but that I assure you on my honor to endeavor by every means in my power to render your life good and pleasant. If you are prepared to face the future with me on this understanding, Blanche—then—"

She interrupted him almost hurriedly.

"Please say no more," she said, smiling faintly, and looking wonderfully handsome, despite the chilliness of her pale-blue eyes. "Please say no more. I understand you most thoroughly, and I will be your wife whenever you wish."

He stood motionless for a moment, then bent over her hand and kissed it, and a few minutes later he had left the softly lit conservatory, and was striding through the summer twilight, walking how or where he knew not, conscious only of the overwhelming fact that by his own hand he had sealed the future, and that now, more than ever, was Alwynne dead and lost to him.

CHAPTER XXIX

Blanche Glenlee was regarded in the light almost of a heroine by her mother, her intimate friends, and the rest of the fashionable world which constituted society. A heroine of a romance. To have caught Taunton and Torre! It was a fairy story. A magnificent chance such as came once only in a hundred years. She was overwhelmed immediately on her arrival in town—and she left Torre Abbey the day following her engagement—by congratulations. The house was besieged with feminine callers of every age and rank, and Blanche was kissed and caressed and teased, and regarded with intense enviousness and admiration by all her so-called friends.

She bore her position gracefully, of course, and smiled languidly at all the pretty speeches. She adopted almost an indifferent manner on the subject of her forthcoming marriage.

She knew she was regarded as having achieved something very clever indeed, in having secured the man whom all the world had put on one side as utterly hopeless, and in her heart of hearts she had been as much astonished at her satisfactory culmination of her ambition's desire as others were, but she did not choose to allow that anything very extraordinary had come to her.

Lord Taunton had not accompanied her to London. He had been permitted to excuse himself from this duty in order to assist his brother-in-law and sister in starting on their long sea voyage.

Lord Taunton was very quiet about his forthcoming marriage, and his sister was not altogether happy in her mind about him. She took her cue from him, however, and said nothing, but to her husband she unburdened her mind. They had traveled down easily to Cowes, and were aboard the earl's beautiful yacht, preparing to start on a long cruise the following morning. Taunton was going with them for two days and would land at some point and travel back to London by train.

Lady Augusta, nestled on a comfortable chair on deck, watched her husband smoking in silence for a while, and then burst forth.

"Sometimes I wish I had never spoken!" she cried impatiently.

Trevelyan laughed. "What a confession! Now, if I had dared to suggest—"

"Oh, don't be tiresome, Jack! You know what I mean," she retorted petulantly.

Her husband smoked in silence for a moment, and looked across to where Taunton was leaning by the rail talking to his captain.

"You mean about this marriage, Gus?"

Lady Augusta said "yes" sharply, and her husband regarded her in her turn.

"Well, my dear," he said slowly, "isn't it a little too late to worry your little head about the matter now?"

"I suppose it is, and that's just what troubles me."

Mr. Trevelyan shook away the end of his cigar ash.

"What is on your mind, little one?"

"I am so afraid it may turn out unhappily, Jack—you see—if they don't love one another."

"I thought you said she was over head and ears in love for him?"

"So I did, and so she is—at least, as much over head and ears as Blanche could be."

Mr. Trevelyan said "Oh!" in a tone that exasperated his wife.

"I do wish people would speak out what they mean, and not grunt like pigs!" she snapped.

"All right," Trevelyan said good-humoredly. "I'll speak out, but I will taken ten to one you would much rather I had confined myself to grunting."

"Oh!" Lady Augusta cried, kicking away a light rug her maid had flung over her feet, "if you have nothing consoling to say you can keep it to yourself."

After this there was a little pause, which was broken by a small, pensive voice.

"Jack, do you think—he—they—will be happy?"

Trevelyan put out his big hand and took his wife's small one.

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