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A WOMAN OF FORTUNE

By CHRISTIAN REID. Author of "Armine," "Philip's Restitution," "The Child of Mercy," "Heart of Steel," "The Land of the Sun," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

"I WILL LEAVE IT BEHIND." "And you will certainly go, Cecil?"

"Yes," she said. "There is no reason why I should refuse to do so. It will be an agreeable change in my life—a bit of novelty and social adventure."

"I am rather stupid," she added, with a laugh. "Perhaps Paris will improve me."

Her sister, Mrs. Bernard, did not reply for a moment, but the expression of her face plainly indicated that she dissented from this opinion.

"I do not think any one else would call you stupid," she said. "And I do not believe Paris will improve you."

"You think it will demoralize me?" asked Miss Lorimer, with another laugh.

"My dear, forgive me if I say that such ideas are a trifle narrow. There is no possible reason why Paris should demoralize anybody of good sense."

"Then few of those who go there have good sense," returned Mrs. Bernard; "for you must acknowledge that it does demoralize a great many of them."

"And do you think me likely to swell the ranks of the last? I could not very well belong to the first?"

"You! Don't misunderstand me so dreadfully. I cannot express myself easily, but if you will be patient I will try to tell you what is on my mind—what has been on my mind ever since you received that letter."

"Very well," said Miss Lorimer—and she did not laugh again. "I will be patient, and you shall tell me once for all what is on your mind."

"She certainly looked patient, but it was the patience of one bound by courtesy to undergo something tiresome and useless, as she leaned back in her chair, and absently stroked the head which a handsome Irish setter laid on her lap."

"The modern mind is somewhat prone to overlook the fact that the ancient standard of beauty was an intellectual one—"

"The old sculptors never chiselled a type of unintelligent loveliness. Behind the brows they moulded one feels that the no weakness could dwell; from the lips they sculptured it is impossible to imagine that words of folly could fall."

"And herein lay Cecil's chief claim to classical beauty—that hers was a beauty of almost severely intellectual character, only redeemed from coldness by a flash now and then of imperious brilliancy. It was evident at a glance that she was a person of strong character; one, too, who had been early accustomed to habits of independence and command; but there was a frank nobility in the face which promised well for that power of self-conquest which does not always accompany strength of will."

Her sister resembled her, as relations often resemble one another despite much difference of appearance—the noble outlines of one face being softened to graceful prettiness in the other.

"Whatever superiority for the former this difference implied, Mrs. Bernard would have been the first to acknowledge; for her admiration of her younger sister knew no bounds. In her eyes there was no one so beautiful, no one so charming, no one so clever as Cecil; and her confidence in that young lady's powers of judgment being of the highest order, it cost her no little effort on the present occasion to assume the character of mentor. A minute or two passed before she spoke again, and then it was with some hesitation."

"I am sure," she said, "you do not believe that I think you would find the same attractions in Paris—I might say in Europe—that the foolish people do of whom we spoke an instant ago; but there are attractions there of a different order for people like yourself, and I am certain that if you go in this way, you will either never return, or if you return you will never be contented to live here again."

"What a dark prophecy!" cried Cecil. "I must really ask you to explain it. Why, if I go in this way—in other words, if I accept the invitation of the Vicomtesse—will I be more likely to become sensible of such attractions than if I went abroad as most people do?"

"I think you might see for yourself where the difference is," observed Mrs. Bernard, who disapproved of having to explain her meaning. "People travel abroad to see churches and

scenery and works of art; but you are going to visit a woman who has lived in Europe for thirty years, and who will introduce you into a society where your beauty and wealth must make an impression, and—the end will be that we shall never see you again."

"But what is to become of me? You have not explained that."

"You will be married," said Mrs. Bernard, with melancholy decision. "I am sure of it. The Vicomtesse, who successfully bought a title for herself, will never rest until she has managed to marry you to some impetuous Count or Marquis."

"And that is your opinion of me?" said Cecil. "If it were worth being angry over—but it is not! I am only obliged to you for letting me know exactly how foolish you consider me."

"O Cecil, you are angry, and how unjust you are! You see, I was right in not wanting to explain myself. I knew you would misunderstand me. I think you foolish!—well, that, you know, is absurd. But I do think that you are very ambitious, and not at all sentimental; and how can I help tearing that you will be led to make some great marriage, that will give you a brilliant place in the world, and separate you from us?"

"What an absurd little creature you are, Nelly!" said Cecil. "How is one to reason over such nonsense? But it does seem to me that if there was a woman in the world who might be considered apart from the possibilities of which you speak, I am that woman."

"I cannot see why. It is true that no man has ever pleased you yet, but that does not prove that some man may not do so eventually. And in Europe it is natural that men should be more refined, more attractive than with us. They certainly have much more to offer—when they have anything at all."

"I do not believe that any man in the world has anything to offer that I could care to accept," said Cecil, decidedly. "I cannot imagine myself being tempted by rank, and that is the only thing I do not possess."

"You like power—you must know that you do."

"I suppose I do, but it is power which I must win and exercise myself. All my dreams are like a man's: of doing some great work, of making myself of use—of importance, too, I fear—to a great many people. No doubt this is because my dear father filled me with such thoughts. How often he said, 'Wealth is a great responsibility, because it is a great power; never forget that, my dear!'"

"Of course it is," said Mrs. Bernard, as if assenting to a self-evident truth. "But is it a great temptation, also; and when you find what it will purchase for you in Europe, I cannot but fear you will be tempted."

"Then the best way to relieve your mind will be to leave it behind me," said Cecil. "That is easily done. Very few people here know the amount of my fortune, and I doubt whether the Vicomtesse ever heard of it at all. I am not altogether so obtuse as you imagine; the danger of her making matrimonial plans for me did occur to me, and I determined before you spoke to say nothing of my possessions, and simply enjoy a glimpse of foreign life like any modestly dowered American girl."

"But would that be quite—quite right?" asked Mrs. Bernard, hesitatingly.

"Why not? What I possess is my own affair; whom else does it concern? If I choose to protect myself from possible annoyance by simple reticence, have I not a right to do so? When one asks a friend to visit one, the invitation is not supposed to depend upon the amount of his or her income. The Vicomtesse has invited me, not my fortune."

"But think what you will give up in the way of social importance and consequence! I know it is a wretched, mercenary world, but one must take it as it is; and you are not accustomed to being insignificant."

"No," said Cecil, with a laugh. "It would certainly be strange to me to find myself so; but if the degree of my significance depends upon outward things, and not upon myself, then it will be well to know it. So not another word! My mind is made up, and I hope yours is relieved. Are you resigned to my going now?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Bernard, rather doubtfully. "But I wish we knew more of Madame de Verac."

"Ah!" said Miss Lorimer, as she brought the setter's beautiful silken ears over to a point on his forehead. "She is a little of a mystery; but if she were not so, one element of uncertainty and therefore of pleasure would be taken out of my proposed visit. Did you ever see her? I think you said you did long ago."

"Yes, about twenty-five years ago. I was a very small child, of course, but I shall never forget how beautiful she was; the recollection of her is like a picture in my mind. She was then in mourning for her first husband, and I remember hearing mamma say, 'How Adela affects foreign manners!'"

"How Adela affects foreign manners!" She went back to Europe soon, and the next thing we heard she had married the Vicomte de Verac."

"Apres?"

"I scarcely know. There was a good deal of gossip; it was said that the marriage was unhappy. But who can tell what is the truth? They certainly never separated, and since his death she had lived in Paris, and had very little to do with her country people. I do not think she has written to any member of her family for years—until her letter to you."

"It is a little odd. Why should she

write to me when mamma was only her cousin?"

"They were not like ordinary cousins. Both were orphans, and they were brought up together like sisters by their grandmother. I have often wondered—when I chanced to think of her—that she could let us slip out of her life so entirely."

"No doubt, as she candidly says, she forgot our existence until she saw that photograph of me which the Jerninghams—oh!—her hands suddenly dropped from the dog's ears—"

"I did not remember the Jerninghams! They may have spoiled my plan by telling her of my fortune."

"I don't think there is the least probability of it. They have been abroad for years. Mrs. Jerningham considers it cheaper and more amusing than living at home, and better for the education of the girls."

"True. It has been a long time since I saw them—I had quite forgotten how long. So there is no danger of my importance being betrayed, and I am to go, like a crowned head, incog! What a nice joke it is, eh, Leo?"

Hearing his name, Leo responded with a sharp bark. "There, there! I did not mean you to enter into the conversation. Go, bring my hat, and you shall have a walk. I don't ask you to join us, Nelly"—as the dog darted away—"because I know you prefer to wait for Jack."

"I certainly do not share your passion for exercise," said Mrs. Bernard. "How Leo will miss you when you are gone!"

"Dear old fellow! I am afraid he will," said Cecil, looking affectionately at the dog, who came back bringing her hat. "Jack must give him exercise. It is a shame for so fine a creature to be spoiled."

"Why not return him to his former master? He would give him exercise enough."

"Mr. Gilbert? I might do that. I do not suppose he would mind the trouble."

Mrs. Bernard laughed. "I do not think he is likely to mind any trouble for you," she said.

Something like an expression of impatient disdain came over Cecil's face. "If you could know how disagreeable such remarks are to me, Nelly," she observed, "I do not think you would make them."

"I have said nothing that ought to be disagreeable to you," replied Mrs. Bernard, who felt that the eccentricities of this young lady should occasionally be checked. "Most people desire to be liked."

"I do not share the taste of most people, then," said Miss Lorimer. "I decidedly object to be liked—in that manner."

Then she put on her hat, descended the steps, and walked away.

CHAPTER II.

THE DESIRE OF THE MOTH FOR THE STAR.

Mrs. Bernard looked after the graceful figure with an expression half-amused, half-veiled.

"Such a girl!" she said aloud. "What is to become of her?"

Naturally the question remained unanswered, and for several minutes silence reigned undisturbed. The pretty country house, with its air of mingled simplicity and luxury, was quiet and empty behind her; while in front long sunbeams were streaming over turf vividly green with the freshness of spring, on flower-beds covered with bloom, and on a distant city that lay wrapped in golden mist. Not many minutes after Miss Lorimer had passed out of sight, however, this quiet was broken by a sound of approaching wheels, and a dog cart containing two gentlemen came spinning rapidly round the drive. As it drew up before the veranda, Mrs. Bernard rose. Both gentlemen were on the ground in a moment, and one of them came toward her, hat in hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Gilbert?" she said, very graciously. "I am glad Jack has brought you out with him."

"Thank you, Mrs. Bernard. You are always so kind that Jack never has the least difficulty in inducing me to accept his invitations," replied Mr. Gilbert. "I sometimes think I should refuse occasionally, if only to increase my value in his eyes; but my strength of purpose is never equal to the effort."

"I hope it never will be," said Mrs. Bernard; "for if it were we should not believe in it as strength of purpose at all, but as the deplorable fact that you had grown tired of us."

"As if such a thing were possible!" said Mr. Gilbert, with a most sincere accent.

He was not at all an ill-looking man as he stood uncovered, a gleam of sunshine falling over his ruddy locks—of that color which discriminating friends call Auburn; his intelligent face lighted up with pleasure, and his eyes—apparently small because deeply set, but clear and keen—passing by his hostess to scan the open windows behind her. Would not a beautiful, stately presence that he knew well appear at one of them?

Mrs. Bernard saw the glance, and understood its meaning at once.

"It is a pity," she observed, "that you did not arrive a few minutes earlier. Cecil has just gone to walk alone. If you had been here she might have had an escort."

"If you will tell me which way she went, I will take great pleasure in following her," said Mr. Gilbert, quickly.

"Oh, don't go rushing away and overheating yourself!" said Jack Bernard, coming up. "Cecil will be back presently."

"So shall I," said Gilbert. "Thanks, Mrs. Bernard," as she indicated the

direction. "I am a famous walker, you know."

"I should think so," said Bernard, regarding the long strides with which he departed. "But what was the good of sending the poor fellow off like that?"

"It pleases him," said Mrs. Bernard, with a laugh; "it will do Cecil no harm, and it gives me an opportunity to say a few words to you. Come! (she put her hand into his arm) let us walk around the veranda while we talk."

"This is almost as bad as being sent to take exercise with Gilbert," said Jack, with a sigh. "Well, what is it?"

"It is about Cecil. I have tried to dissuade her from accepting Madame de Verac's invitation, but she is determined to go."

"So I supposed," said Bernard. "I never entertained the hope that you would change her resolution. When a young lady has had her head as long as Cecil has, she generally knows what she wants to do, and does it."

"I suggested what you spoke of—the probability that the Vicomtesse would try to arrange some marriage for her; and, though she was vexed at my supposing there could be any danger on her part, she acknowledged that she had thought of the possibility of annoyance that way; so, to prevent anything of the kind, she has determined to say nothing of her fortune, but to go accordingly to her own expression—merely like a moderately dowered girl."

"Nonsense!" said Bernard. "Does she suppose that out of all the Americans in Paris there will not be some one who knows the amount of her fortune?"

"That was my thought at first, but on consideration I am inclined to think there may not be. After all, though there are stories afloat, not many people here know the exact amount of the fortune she inherited. Her father was very reserved about his affairs, and how can people estimate the value of ranches in Texas and silver mines in Mexico and real estate in San Francisco?"

"Not easily," said Bernard, with a laugh. "Your step-father was certainly a great speculator, and all his speculations turned out well. He left a fortune of five millions, and had he lived a little longer it would have been fifty."

"Five millions is more than enough for one woman," said Mrs. Bernard. "I can't help fancying the Vicomtesse must have heard of it, else why should she have written to Cecil? But if she really does not know—Jack, we are strange creatures! I, who have been unhappy over the fear of Cecil's making some grand marriage, now feel disappointed at the idea of her not doing so. If ever there was a woman who ought to be a princess, it is Cecil."

Jack laughed. "She is very princelike," he said; "quite enough so under existing circumstances, I think. If by a grand marriage you mean a marriage with some ruined nobleman, willing to barter his title for an American fortune, I sincerely hope she may never make it. I had much rather see her marry a good, sensible, straightforward fellow like Gilbert; but I suppose there is no hope of that."

"Not the least. I never saw a girl who thought less of marriage; in fact, it provokes her to hear it spoken of. She has all kinds of ideas about the tremendous responsibility of wealth, and of doing some great work in the world—I don't know what, exactly."

"Nor she," said Jack, with another laugh. "It is a pity that she is cut out on such original lines. It makes her charming, but not safe."

"How can you say that when she is so clever?"

"The most gigantic mistakes in the world are the mistakes made by clever people, and there is no telling into what pitfall the cleverness of such a willful, original young lady may finally lead her. I wish we knew more of this Vicomtesse de Verac."

"So do I. I have felt all the time that I wished it were possible to obtain some information about her."

"I have just thought of a person who perhaps can give it," said Bernard, reflectively. "You've heard me talk of Ralph Craven?"

"Your friend who has been abroad so long? Yes."

"Paris is rather more his headquarters than anywhere else, I think—at least I generally write to a standing address there, and he answers from Russia or Egypt, as the case may be. So I think it likely he may know something of Madame de Verac, and he will also be able to keep an eye for us on Mademoiselle Cecil."

"But how can he keep an eye on her from Russia or Egypt?"

"That could hardly be expected, but he may be in Paris; and if so, he is trustworthy in every point of view—sensible, fastidious; a man of the world, and not at all likely to fall a victim to her charms."

"Then he ought to suit Cecil exactly. I am so glad you thought of him! Pray write at once, but don't mention her fortune even to him."

"Why should I? It will not concern him at all. Confound the fellow! If he cared more for money it would be better for him; he would not be wasting his time and his talents as he is doing."

"What is he doing?"

"Nothing, as far as I am aware. He is one of the class of people who find America too crude for their refined sensibilities. But now I beg to suggest that although this promenade is exceedingly delightful, I should like to go and change my coat before dinner."

"Cecil is right," said Mrs. Bernard, dropping his arm. "One is much

more highly appreciated unmarried than married. Think of Mr. Gilbert's delight at being able to walk with her!"

"Poor fellow, yes! How warm he must be by this time!" said Jack, sympathetically.

"The gentleman thus commiserated was meanwhile unconscious of being in any degree an object of pity. He had overtaken Miss Lorimer without difficulty, and been greeted very kindly, and been aware of his admiration, she wholly ignored it, and by this ignoring, repressed it more effectually than by any possible severity; while there can be no doubt that the consciousness of its existence was pleasant to her. She would have been surprised had any one convinced her of the existence of this pleasure, but she would none the less have missed the homage had it been withdrawn. It was an atmosphere to which she had been accustomed all her life, and to which she only objected when it became too palpable. That men should admire, should even from afar off respectfully adore her, was very well; but that any of them should draw near enough to propose to marry her, filled her with a sense of repulsion and indignation.

"How dare he!" was always her first haughty thought, and it is safe to say that no man whose wooing she rejected ever returned to encounter rejection again.

She was sometimes reasonable enough to ask herself what possible right she felt in this manner—why it was she conceived her dignity outraged by proposals over which other women waxed exultant as proofs of power, or regretted as sufferings they had no alternative but to inflict. Such questioning was vain: the feeling was too instinctive to be reasoned away, nor was it in any degree due to the circumstances of her life. It was no doubt owing to these circumstances—to her great gifts of wealth and beauty—that it had been brought into prominent exercise; but it would have existed in the same force had her position been wholly different, since its spring lay deep in a nature too proud to rate its value by extraneous things.

Mr. Gilbert, wiser than many of those who had gone before him in the perilous path of admiration for Miss Lorimer, knew exactly how hopeless was any expression of the feeling which he entertained for her. He was too sensible to deceive himself for an instant, and he often laughed in the very mirthful fashion over the folly which made him continue to emulate a moth, and singe his wings in the vestal flame that allured him. "But I am not like other men," he sometimes remarked to himself. "A hopeless passion is the only kind of a passion possible for me, because I should have so poor an opinion of the woman who could be satisfied to find her ideal—and I would not want a woman who did not have an ideal—in me, that she would fall from her pedestal at once."

In this whimsical manner he consoled himself for the fact that nothing could be imagined more unlikely than that Cecil Lorimer would find her ideal in him; and, secure in the belief that no other man was any nearer his goddess than himself, he was content to worship from afar—the more readily since she was a woman whom no man of intellectual culture could fail to enjoy meeting on other grounds than those of mere sentiment. If in her somewhat crude youth it was not possible to pay her the famous compliment paid long ago to a noble woman, and say that "it was a liberal education to have loved her," it was possible—at least Gilbert felt it possible—to have been led to many high sources of interest and pleasure through loving her.

Those two, therefore, were very good friends, notwithstanding the fact that it was not entirely friendly regard that looked out of Gilbert's eyes, and that his companion was too thoroughly a woman not to be aware of this. When Leo's welcome told her whose was the quick step along the shaded road behind her, she turned with a cordial smile.

"Mrs. Bernard encouraged me to come," said Gilbert. "I hope I don't disturb you."

"Not at all," she replied. "I am very glad to see you, and Leo speaks for himself."

"He certainly does. Hold your tongue, sir!"—for Leo was still uttering short barks expressive of delight.

"What a beautiful dog he has become!"

"Has he not? Did you think he would be so pretty when you gave him to me?"

"Oh, yes; for I knew his parents—splendid imported dogs both. It is almost a pity so fine a dog should not be trained for sport."

"Then take him and train him, will you not? Oh, I know what you will say"—as Gilbert looked vexed at having let his thought unconsciously escape—"that you gave him to me for my pleasure. Well, he has given me a great deal of pleasure; but now that I am going away, I should like for you to take him and keep him, if you will. Nelly and Jack care little for dogs."

"Of course I will take him and keep him if you wish it," said Gilbert seriously. "But I am sorry to hear that you are going away. May I ask where?"

"Only to Paris, which seems very near at hand in this age of the world, although I have never been there."

"When do you go?"

"Not for a week or two, so you will not be called upon to take Leo home with you to-night. But one always feels like making one's arrangements for departure as soon as a decision is taken—at least I do."

"I fancy you are always ready for anything," said Gilbert. "There is a

soldierly quality of promptness that one does not find in a woman."

"That is because I was a man. My father taught me important promptitude how irritating the lack of it was."

"A wise teaching, but would not have profited."

"I think I am more of a woman," said the girl, and she has always thought of her passion for men's work as a like women's work at a man's manly ambition would I should never rest until I minister of some general-in-chief of some army."

"You would permit me to salute you from afar, Gilbert, laughing too, with a painful sense which is familiar to all, hopelessly, that she loved a country or to lead an army, though she was a fancying," he added.

"That you will play the world, though it were rather than doer."

"I am afraid that I am enough to care to do for others," she said. "Is it ambition, I should not have an opportunity for it to vaulting ambitions a disappointment must be such a case."

"And to fall, would have climbed."

"But what would world if nobody cared?"

"That is hard to see people glad to climb risk. The world is a few more quiet people who prefer that other both the labor and undertakings."

"I really think I envy person I know."

"You are so thorough your lot, so perfectly all that you want from to me an embodied essence of moderate desires."

"Yes," said Gilbert, secret sense of amused conscious irony of his desires are, general moderate; and if by eyes on something he do not deceive myself of ever gaining it; but excellence, I am glad richer for possessing not, and never can I

TO BE CONTINUED

CHATS WITH