

A CRUEL DECEPTION

OR WHY DID SHE SHUN HIM? BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

(Continued)

For himself, he regretted the engagement to Blanche Glenlee most sincerely.

"If," he had said to himself, "the dear old fellow's heart had been quite free save for the memory of the past—well—it might have been a different affair, and, viewed from a practical point, Taunton ought to marry; but under the circumstances—well, if the fair Blanche will not have the power to work unhappiness—I don't see that she is likely to be successful in the opposite direction."

For my part, I would far rather marry an elephant—but that I am not Hugo. I think I can face worse things than I can—perhaps it will go all right."

Whatever his thoughts were, however, Trevelyan kept them to himself, and to his wife he was so full of cheery prospects for the future that before very long he had succeeded in chasing away all the tears and bringing back the smiles again.

Lord Taunton arrived in town too late to dine with Lady Rose Glenlee, but he sent a note, stating he would present himself later in the evening and pay his devoirs to the mother of his future wife.

He found a letter in Mr. Penel's well known writing waiting for him amid a pile of others, but he put it on one side of the table and ran his eye over his correspondence first. They were of the most part letters of congratulation. One was from a well-known jeweler, acknowledging Lord Taunton's order with respectful thanks, and stating that the diamonds he had chosen had been sent to Miss Glenlee, as desired; another was from a florist, couched in the same terms. Hugo had not failed in any respect to do that which Miss Glenlee would consider proper under the circumstances. He had commenced already to surround her with attentions of a costly nature.

Last of all the letters, save that from his lawyer, was an envelope addressed in a round, boyish hand.

Taunton knew it instantly, and his heart beat a little more quickly. What could Basil Canning want with him? The letter was open in his hand, and he was reading it, with a face pale to his lips. It was only a few words written hurriedly, and in great distress, and it bore the date of three days before.

"My lord," Basil wrote, "please forgive me for writing to you, but I am in great trouble. It is not about myself, but for some one I love very dearly. You have been so good to me, my lord, that I have dared to write to you, and ask you if you would let me see you, if only for five minutes. I leave the office at seven, and I could come to you anywhere. I know I ought not to trouble you, but I don't know what to do. I am all alone here, and I can only think of you. Will you forgive me? I am your lordship's grateful and humble servant."

BASIL CANNING.

Taunton put down the letter, and looked at the clock. It was just eight. His dinner was being brought into the room. In a quiet voice, he countermanded it.

"I have to go out immediately," he said to his man. "Have a taxi called in two minutes!"

He dressed more hurriedly than he had ever done in his life, and in an incredible short time he was driving through the streets and squares toward Bloomsbury, where lay the modest and dingy spot that Basil called his home.

On inquiring for the boy, he was shown into a large, gloomy room, habited by half a dozen people, who looked at the handsome young man in his well-cut clothes as at some being from another world.

One of the women came forward and inquired, with a good-humored smile, whom he might wish to see; but, even as she spoke the door opened, and Basil stood there, pale and almost speechless.

"Oh, my lord!" was all he could say.

And at this there was an intense flutter of excitement within that dingy apartment. Was it really a lord who stood there—that quiet, reserved-looking young man?

Lord Taunton took Basil's hand. "Where can we speak? I have only just arrived in town and found your note. Have you a corner to yourself?" Then, hurriedly, before the boy could speak: "No, it is almost too warm in doors. You shall drive with me. We have a good deal to say to one another. Come along!"

With a bow to the curious, flattered inhabitants of the boarding-house, Lord Taunton put his hand affectionately on the lad's shoulder and ran down the stairs with him to where the motor cab stood waiting.

They did not speak at first, not until they were halfway back to the West End, then Taunton said: "Did you think you would receive no answer? I see you wrote three days ago?"

Basil looked up at him, with his eyes full of gratitude, and something more.

"I knew you would answer. I only feared you might be away for a long time."

Taunton paused again and then said: "We will wait to discuss everything till we are in my rooms. Only tell me one thing—this trouble, it is about her?"

Basil nodded his head and bit his lip. Hugo could see his face was white and thin, and he looked as though he had not slept for nights.

When they were seated in the luxurious chamber, discussing the dinner that was immediately brought, the boy spoke out: "I don't know why I should come to you except—except that I found a friend in you both at the same time; but, oh, my lord, I was bound to try and do something, and I am so feeble, such a poor, useless thing, only a boy. All the same, I did what I could. I told him he was a beast, not a man, and a cowardly beast, into the bargain!" Then Basil's eyes filled with tears. "But I only made things worse, and he has ended by not letting me see her or have anything to do with her; and, oh, I am frightened for her, my lord, she suffers so! If he goes on as he is doing he must kill her. I know she must die!"

Taunton was sitting with one elbow on the table, his hand over his eyes.

"Explain yourself more fully, Basil," he said, in a voice that was almost harsh in its tone, but which did not frighten the boy.

"He has got some awful influence over her. I don't know what it is, but he can make her do just what he likes, and I thought perhaps you had heard he is giving entertainments with her everywhere. He throws her into a trance, and she goes through a sort of performance; and she hates him. She is so proud; she knows what it is he makes her do when she is not under the influence; and, oh, she has begged him on her knees—on her knees, my lord, to spare her the humiliation and degradation of being turned into a spectacle for the amusement of others. But he only laughs at her, my lord. Oh, he is cruel! He isn't human! I wish he were dead!"

Lord Taunton lifted his face, his brows black as night.

"Hush!" he said imperatively, yet his own heart was beating like a mad thing in his breast, and his thoughts more than echoed that burst of passionate boyish hatred.

"Hush!" he said, and then he leaned back in his chair, his face drawn and contracted with the force of his thoughts.

The boy sat looking at him with eagerness and expectant hope in his eyes. He felt already as though Alwynne must be rescued, now that he had laid her woes before such a champion.

"You think he had this power over her before her marriage?" Taunton said, breaking the silence at last.

Basil's answer was emphatic. "I am sure of it. She would never have become his wife had she been able to resist him; but she was in great trouble, too, my lord, and it was all too strong for her!"

The man who listened did not speak for a moment, and Basil, feeling his heart so full, went on with his story.

He told of all he knew, of many things he had seen; how Alwynne shrank and faded almost before their very eyes, how one day she had escaped from her house and come to him, entreating him to help her to get her out of the country, anywhere out of reach of the man she was bound to call her husband.

"I did not know what to do, I was just out of my mind, I love her so much. Then he came; he followed her quite easily, and then I spoke out to him and called him by his right name, and then he lost his good humor, he is always smiling like a devil, and he just dragged Alwynne away from me, and knocked me over the head, and then—I didn't remember clearly any more, except that she was gone, and since then I have been able to do nothing except write to you and to Alwynne's mother!"

Taunton's face lit up for an instant.

"And she answered?" he said, in a low, quick voice.

"She sent me back my letters torn in two!" Basil replied.

Lord Taunton sat looking at the table intently, he rose suddenly, he had eaten nothing. It did not seem to him as if he lived in this moment. He was conscious only of a burning, awful agony of anger against her tormentor, of fear of suffering for the one being who was all the world to him. He threw out his hands suddenly.

"Oh, Basil!" he said, his voice choked with emotion. "Oh, Basil, what a horrible thing is life! This base, mean, miserable world! You do not know what it is you ask of me. You think I have power to help her. My dear boy, I am powerless! I can do nothing! She is his! She belongs to him. If I try to help her, I may—who knows?—make her burden only the heavier! It is an awful thing." He broke down suddenly.

"Oh, Alwynne, Alwynne!" he said, and he buried his face in his hands.

Basil furtively wiped away two tears from his eyes. There was a long silence, and then Lord Taunton spoke. He had conquered his emotion, and his voice was almost natural again.

"There is only one way—her mother! You have failed, but I may succeed—may!" he repeated, with a bitter little laugh. "I shall, by gad, I will!"

The sound of the clock striking ten came to his ears at this moment, and recalled him to everything. Horrible, painful as it was under these new circumstances, he had a duty to perform, and must not fail in it.

With his heart wrung with anguish over the girl he loved and had lost forever, he must go and bend over the hand of the woman he had asked to be his wife, no matter how empty and void the ceremony—no matter how much he might revolt from these new chains he had just forged. Duty demanded it of him, and never Taunton forgot his duty.

CHAPTER XXX

"I must leave you now, Basil," he said hurriedly, "but there is much to be said between us. You had better stay here tonight, and we can talk in the morning."

He called his man, and gave all instructions, bidding him look after the boy with every care, and then, with a silent handpick, he left his faithful little friend and drove rapidly to Lady Rose Glenlee's small house in Mayfair.

From the row of carriages outside the striped awning over the doorway, and the glimmer of the linkman's lantern, he soon perceived that, small as the house was, it would have to be large enough to hold a goodly crowd of people. He knew a little about

these London crushes, and he sighed impatiently at what awaited him, and yet he was relieved at the same time. He would be spared the misery of a private conversation with his fiancée, which, under the circumstances, was an inexpressible comfort—one almost too great to be realized at first.

There were many other little matters, however, to fret him. His spirit, burdened as it was with the knowledge of Alwynne's purgatory, rendered him more than intolerant of the congratulatory speeches which awaited him, and he was inundated with them, of course, immediately he entered the house and essayed to make his way up the small staircase that was absolutely congested with every shape and size of the human form divine.

At the head of the staircase, and midway between that and the doors of the drawing-rooms, Blanche Glenlee stood, tall and magnificent in a gown of superb brocade. She had never looked more beautiful. The hour of her triumph had at last worked its influence upon her appearance. She was no longer coldly indifferent to the envy and congratulations of her friends. Her ambition was absolutely gratified, and, for once, she let the nature that was within her speak in her face.

She saw Taunton in the distance, and sent him a smile that had in it already an enormous portion of ownership. It was some time before he made his way to her, and then there was only a moment for a hurried greeting and a few words.

"You will find many friends in there," Blanche said, "and something that may surprise you. Mamma never told me she intended having this entertainment until just at the last moment, otherwise I should have objected, as I neither like the man nor his curious sort of amusement!"

Taunton only barely grasped what his fiancée said, and he misunderstood her meaning. He thought she meant to convey that she did not approve of the party taken as a whole, and wished him to understand she would have preferred a quiet evening with this crowd of people.

He stood by her for two or three minutes, and gave her a brief outline of what he had done on board the yacht with the Trevelyan. And then he was seen by Lady Rose, and greeted affectionately.

"Traunt!" Blanche's mother cried. "Here you are at last, and just in time, fortunately, for the excitement. If you go into the back room, I think you will see best. And you must give me your candid opinion, Hugo, and say if you don't think she is one of the loveliest things you ever saw. I feel sorry for her, somehow, and yet—"

And here Lady Rose was borne away to attend to some late newcomers.

Lord Taunton looked after her for a moment; there was a curious sort of presentiment upon him. The actuality of Alwynne was so vividly present in his mind that he experienced no shock as he pushed his way into the throng, and beheld her standing alone in the center of the other room—a white specter of the exquisitely lovely creature he had first met. Her cheeks were wan and almost hollow, her eyes set in circles of deep blue, shading her whole face, drawn and pinched looking, as the face of one who had fought a long, bitter struggle with some terrible illness.

A pain went through the man's heart as he saw her, so fair, so peerless still in her beauty—she whose proud spirit had been strong enough to sacrifice her very heart's life for that same pride; she to stand there helpless in her humiliation, society's latest amusement, a toy with a breaking heart.

He heard the voice of Blair Hunter speaking in the distance. He was uttering commands, and the white figure moved at his voice like some graceful automaton.

Taunton watched with eyes that could see nothing but that drawn face, that slender figure grown almost too frail. His hands were clenched together. For the moment he forgot where he was; he forgot everything but that she had called aloud for mercy to the

brute who held her, called and called in vain. All Basil had said came back to him with poignant clearness.

"She will die!" the lad had said. And, of a truth, it seemed as if she were already dead.

He pushed his way, almost roughly, to the front of the curious, interested crowd. Blair Hunter was talking to a great social personage. He had finished his experiments for the moment. With a few passes of his hands he had awakened Alwynne out of the hypnotic sleep. He had turned his back on her, and was busy explaining the matter to the great person in question.

Taunton was close beside Alwynne. He saw the hot flush cover her face; he saw how she shrank back from the myriad of eyes resting on her, then how she turned deathly white, and reeled, with faltering limbs, against the wall.

His arms were about her in that instant, and his authoritative voice forced a passage for himself and his unconscious burden through the crowd. Outside, he encountered Lady Rose.

"Lead the way to some quiet room," he said, his tone of command, his brows dark as night.

Lady Rose, with a smothered exclamation of distress as she caught sight of the deathlike face, obeyed him eagerly. They made their way, not without difficulty, to a small boudoir.

Taunton turned, almost savagely, on the mother of the woman who was to be his wife.

"Are you women of London human that you can permit such a thing as this?" he asked, as he laid Alwynne on a couch and looked down at her.

Lady Rose Glenlee, whose heart was full of kindness, had not words with which to reproach herself.

"I told you I was sorry for her Hugo," she said, as she rang the bell for stimulants, and then knelt down and tried to restore the girl with her salts and scent bottle.

"Sorry for her!" was all the man could say. "Why, she is all but dead, and this is what society calls amusement!"

Lady Rose looked the picture of misery.

"Why doesn't some one come! If we had some brandy! I will go. Don't let any one come in, unless, of course, her husband. I will be back in—"

And, still murmuring, Lady Rose emerged into the throng outside once more, and had to answer a hundred questions all at once.

Taunton stood motionless, looking down at the white figure that reminded him of some beautiful blossom that had been ruthlessly plucked, and thrown on one side to droop and die.

As he looked, a mist coming over his sight, she opened her wonderful eyes. She did not seem to know him. Her words were disjointed, incoherent almost.

"Water! Give me something! Oh, have pity! Some water, some bread, some—"

Her two feeble hands went out to him in supplication, and a chill horror broke over the man as he beheld them. They were hollow and attenuated, as the hands of one who has been wasted by illness, or—

"He starves her!" was the cry to his thought. "He brings her down to this condition, otherwise he would have no power over her. Oh, that I might kill him—kill him!"

In this moment, all that had mystified him before was explained. It had been a perplexity equal only to his pain to know and bring himself to believe that this girl, so strong in her pride, and in her horrible nature, could so easily become the tool of a man who used his power only to humiliate her for his own ends. Now, as at a glance, Lord Taunton could read the story.

There was indeed some truth in Basil's fears. There was more danger to her than he had imagined, actual bodily sufferings as well as mental torture. As the door opened, and a maid came in, followed by Lady Rose, he went forward, and hurriedly poured out some very weak brandy and water. Then, as he dismissed the servant, bidding her, in a few brief words, ask one of the guests

—a celebrated doctor—to come to him, he pointed out to the other dismayed and distressed woman the truth of all he had discovered.

"Speak to her, and give her this! It is better you should do it. It may frighten her to see me."

"You know her?" Lady Rose asked, looking at him for an instant.

"Yes, I know her, poor child!"

The eager way in which Alwynne's parched lips drained the liquid struck another horrible pain through his heart. He motioned Lady Rose to give her a biscuit. It was devoured almost ravenously, and her hand went out for more. Then, as though even the effort of swallowing this small amount of food exhausted her feeble strength, her eyes closed, and her head fell back.

Taunton drew Lady Rose on one side.

"You are a good woman. I know," he said, "and powerful. You must be good and strong now. You will be her friend?"

The answer was given by the outstretching of Lady Rose's jeweled hand. There were tears in her faded eyes—tears such as would never disfigure her daughter's blue orbs.

"It is a horror, a disgrace! Trust me, I will help her! How shall I act?"

"Refuse to allow her to go with him tonight. You have Carden here I see. Get him to come and authorize you not to have her moved."

He spoke almost with difficulty.

The woman before him looked at him with deep interest. She was a very clever woman, and she read his heart in that look. But, though she did this, her sympathy was unabated. She did not forget she was Blanche Glenlee's mother. She only remembered she had lived once in the long ago, through such a dream of sorrow as she saw written in this man's eloquent eyes now.

As their hands were clasped, the door opened, and Blair Hunter came in. He was frowning, and his youth and handsome looks seemed gone for the moment. He measured swords, as it were, with Lord Taunton as their glances met. He advanced toward the sofa, but Lady Rose was before him, and courteously, but coldly she would not allow him to address his wife.

"Sir Hector Carden is coming in to attend to Mrs. Hunter," she said, as she sat down and held one of Alwynne's hands in hers.

Hunter's face darkened. "My wife needs no medical attention!" he answered haughtily. "I am sorry to seem ungrateful for your thought, Lady Rose, but I am the best person to judge of my own affairs, and Mrs. Hunter is my affair!"

"That has to be proved," Taunton broke in, clearly and promptly. "We have, thank God, a law in the land that provides some protection to helpless women from unnatural brutes who, through starvation and other atrocities, so reduce—"

The words died on his lips. With a spring, Hunter rushed at him, and would have struck him full on the mouth, but Taunton caught the outstretched hands with his iron strength, and forced him backward. They stood for an instant silent, yet with their faces eloquent with enmity.

"You think you have won!" Hunter said, in a low, fierce voice as he struggled in vain to free himself from the other's iron hold. "You! Curse you! You think to war with me. You—you—an imposter! A base—"

The blow that would have answered the last infamous word was not struck—the frezy on Taunton's face died suddenly, and as the form of the celebrated doctor moved forward hurriedly to stand between the two men, he bowed and turned away.

"You are right, I was forgetting!" he said, and he stood motionless by the wall, his arms fallen to his sides.

Hunter's face grew ashen pale with the fury that raged within him. He seemed to have lost himself for the moment; his hatred obliterated all other feeling. As Sir Hector bent over the silent figure on the couch, he seemed to realize all at once what was hap-

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peping, and with an effort, became a semblance of what he usually was, and stepped forward to offer the most specious explanation of his wife's illness, all of which was received by the doctor in perfect silence.

Blanche Glenlee had followed Sir Hector into the room, and now stood riveted to the spot, her brain slowly revolving round that strange, mysterious, horrible insult Hunter had hurled at Lord Taunton.

It had some meaning, but what? So little had been said, yet Blanche's dull intelligence was quick for once. She was true to her nature in this moment, for the sort of threat, the shadow of dishonor conveyed in those furious words, was something that concerned her almost as much as it could concern Lord Taunton. Was she not his affianced wife? Her large eyes rested for a moment on her betrothed's pale, drawn face. He was not looking at her, his gaze was fixed on the group at the sofa. Blanche's cold, selfish heart grew hot with anger. There must be an explanation forthcoming, she determined immediately, and an explanation she would demand.

CHAPTER XXXI

The explanation Miss Glenlee desired was forthcoming sooner than she could have imagined, and in a manner that was something almost like a catastrophe to her narrow, egotistical, and proud nature.

The day following Lady Rose Glenlee's soiree, society was electrified by an announcement in the morning papers of an extraordinary piece of news, a scandal that gave a flicker of excitement to the fading season.

The papers announced that an action would be started almost immediately to substantiate a claim made by one Mr. Blair Hunter to the titles, estates, and moneys belonging to the earldom of Taunton and Torre. Mr. Hunter's claim was based on the grounds of being the son of the late earl by his first marriage, contracted when he was Vincent Malworth, and, by giving forth un doubted proofs of this marriage, and the existence of the first wife when the second marriage was celebrated, Mr. Hunter, of course, must place the present holder of the title and his sister, Lady Augusta Trevelyan, under the painful stigma of being, not only usurpers of his place, but of having no legitimate status or place in society whatsoever.

To say the world was astonished would be to convey not the faintest indication of the amazement, incredulity, and horror that this news created. Taunton and Torre to be assailed in such a fashion. A man who was himself the living incarnation of pride! A man whose name and place was one that stood untroubled through centuries, until the shame of his wife's dishonor had come to blot its fair escutcheon.

Every one was aghast. It was universally regarded as some hoax and the evening papers were eagerly scanned to find some confirmation of this theory. The excitement and amazement deepened, grew, and spread, when, instead of this statement, it was given

(To be continued)

Mindard's Liniment Cures Distemper