A CRUEL DECEPTION

OR WHY DID SHE SHUN HIM? BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

(Continued)

She fanned on for a moment, and her husband waited, knowing she would explain the meaning of this speech in due time. She did so almost immediately.

"I have a confession to make to you, Jack," she said, after a little pause, her small finger caressing his hand tenderly.

"Something very awful, my bird?"

Lady Augusta looked into her husband's face.

"Jack," she said, "you were right, after all, about Mr. Hunter.

Jack Trevelyan uttered a sort of suppressed exclamation.

"What has happened?"

"I have been so distressed and disappointed, Jack, and—and almost ashamed, too, because, you see, I did make a fuss about him; and then naturally the other people here thought he was all—"

Lady Augusta came to a full stop.

'And, Jack," she said hurriedly, "I cannot tell you how sorry I am for that pretty young wife. Her face, her eyes have haunted me ever since the night of the concert. I am afraid she will have a dreadful life'"

"What has happened?" Mr. Trevelyan asked again.

His wife put down her fan.

"Jack, he is not an honorable man, I am afriad! I don't like saying it, but I am afraid he is scarcely honest. The rector came to see me this morning. Of course I have been too far lost in my trouble to know anything of what has been going on in Torre, or, indeed, anywhere except in this bedroom, so I was very much astonished to hear from the rector that Mr. Hunter has never returned to his post. He wrote weeks ago throwing up the situation, and announcing his intention to live in London, where he had a more lucrative employment offered him. Of course, that was all right; there was no reason why he should not do this, but—"

"But," Mr. Trevelyan repeated.

"But there was every reason why he should have paid his debts before he went, and he certainly ought not to have borrowed money from a poor man, unless he knew he had the means to repay it!"

"Ah!" said Jack Trevelyan quietly. "I was afriad he was a wrong un. He had the look of it in his eyes!"

"I thought him a saint—too beautiful to be human!" Lady Augusta cried, going on with her fanning, and putting a strawberry between her pretty red lips.

"And is this all, Gus?"

"I am hurt at his utter neglect of me!" Lady Augusta confessed. "Just fancy, he has never written me one word of regret or sympathy throughout your illness. It seems almost extraordinary when one remembers his enthusiasm about me, and everything belonging to me!"

"My vain little bird!"

"Oh, it is not vanity, Jack, I assure you I am almost grieved; and then to feel that I practically opened the doors of all the best houses in the neighborhood to him, and that he has so disgraced has borrowed money from nearly everybody who had any to lend. Of course, with me it was dif—"

"Oh, so he came to you, did he?" Jack said, his eyes having a touch of his old mischievous twinkle in them. "And how much were you good for, Gus, eh?"

Lady Augusta ate another strawberry defiantly.

"I bought a miniature from him. He said it was a family portrait, grandfather, I think, done by some celebrated artist, and was worth over a hundred pounds. So—"

"So—don't dare to laugh, Jack. Remember, you are in my power now. So I thought it was a bargain, and I gave him—"

"What he asked, eh?"

She nodded her head.

Mr. Trevelyan looked preternaturally grave.

"I should like to see your bargain, little one!"

"I'll go and get it!"

Lady Augusta slipped down from the bed, and ran out of the room, and her husband lay back thinking, his brows contracted into a frown.

"Does Hugo know they are gone? Poor lad, it meant something bad to him, I fear. I wonder what the truth was, and if it will be a lasting pain? I almost fear it. That girl, too. I am sorry for her. There is something I don't understand in all this—some mystery. Hunter himself is the only clear point, and there is nothing mysterious in a very commonplace, everyday scoundrel. Shouldn't be surprised if he had not managed to secrete a few of the spoons about his person each time he dined here?"

His wife flew back at this moment.

"It looks good, Jack!" she said, half apologetically, as she reseated herself on the bed. "The work is very fine, and the frame is distinctly good. This looks like gold, doesn't it?"

Mr. Trevelyan took the miniature in his weak hands, and examined it closely. An expression of indecision, ending in surprise, came over his face.

"This is deuced odd!" he said, half to himself.

Lady Augusta leaned forward in great excitement.

"Is it really good, after all, Jack?" she asked.

Mr. Trevelyan paused before answering, and when he did speak he said something quite different to what his wife expected.

"Is Hugo in? Go and fetch him, darling; I should like him to come."

Lady Augusta obeyed without a word, and in a few minutes returned, with Taunton following her.

Mr. Trevelyan handed the miniature to his brother-in-law.

"Do you recognize that?" he asked. Taunton looked at it, and shook his head. "I don't mean the picture—I mean the frame. Look at it well!"

Lord Taunton scrutinized the goldwork of the setting, and then he turned to Trevelyan's questioning eyes. Lady Augusta was waiting, perched up in one of her favorite heaplike attitudes, her face full of curiosity.

"I see nothing peculiar about the frame, Jack!" the earl said, slightly puzzled. "It is a very ordinary pattern, just the same as the rest of the Taunton collection of miniatures. What did you mean, old fellow?"

"You have answered exactly as I expected," was Mr. Trevelyan's somewhat enigmatical reply. "That is one of the Taunton miniatures, Hugo, and—little one, just explain how that came into your possession?"

"Stole it from the collection, eh, Gus?" Lord Taunton said with a faint smile.

Lady Augusta looked at her husband, and shook her head defiantly at him.

"I bought the miniature from Blair Hunter for one hundred guineas," said she cooly, and then she gave the rest of the story.

Taunton listened with contracted brows, and lips firmly set. He made no comment at first, and Jack Trevelyan, having a slight clew to the secret in his breast, knew that the fact of Blair Hunter's true character being proclaimed was something that hurt his reserved, proud brother-in-law through the most vulnerable part of his nature.

Lord Taunton looked from the miniature to the honest eyes lying on the pillow.

"What do you think, Jack?"

Mr. Trevelyan laughed.

"That Mr. Hunter is about as clever and bold-faced a thief as one could care to meet. He has the audacity to steal one of the heirlooms of the house, and then to sell it again to one of its proper owners at a magnificent profit to himself. By Jove, he is no fool!"

Lady Augusta was aghast.

"Oh, Jack, darling! You don't surely think such a thing!"

"There is no other explanation that I can see. How otherwise does this man account for having in his possession a miniature of one of your ancestors set in a frame that bears—infinitesimal I grant, but there, nevertheless—the armorial bearings of your house?"

Lord Taunton still stood looking down at the exquisite picture in his hand.

"Where is the collection?" he asked abruptly. "Was it not moved to London from Malworth? Malworth was the estate in Scotland, a large, somewhat bleak property which the present earl had never inhabited.

His sister nodded her head.

"Of course, don't you remember?" she answered, "the miniatures as well as the armor and some of the pictures were all brought up from Malworth four years ago when you lent them to the exhibition. They must be in Eaton Square. It is a very disgraceful thing of me not to have seen after them better, but—"

Lady Augusta did not finish.

"But," she might have said, "in those days it was not my province to interfere, and as your wife always refused to live in your proper town house, declaring it gave her the 'blues,' and insisting on your establishing her in some brilliant mansion—things that should have been carefully looked after drifted naturally into the care of servants, and so became forgotten."

Lord Taunton understood his sister's silence, and Mr. Trevelyan spoke next.

"Laxon can tell us all about everything. I believe he could account for the whole of the Taunton genealogical tree at full length and give us the biography of every member of the family—man, woman, or child. Ten to one he will be able to tell you who this individual in this miniature is, and probably will be able to describe the very spot in the cabinet from which it has been stolen."

"Unless," Taunton said, looking up, with a grim smile, "unless the cabinet itself is gone, too!"

Mr. Trevelyan uttered an almost energetic "By Jove!" and Lady Augusta went to summon Laxon, who held the post of major-domo in the establishment, having lived in the service of the family all his life, his father being butler before him. He was a clean-shaven, almost a superior-looking man, with noble eyeglasses, through which he carefully scrutinized the miniature held out to him. He felt inwardly—and rather contemptuously—amused at the fact that these rich aristocrats had to ask him whose portrait this was, who was their own ancestor!

"His lordship Sholto Dunmare, seventh Earl of Taunton and Torre, and your lordship's grandfather," was his immediate remark, and then his grave, respectful face turned pale. "May I be so bold as to ask you, my lord, where this was found? It has always been a mystery to me as to how and why it had disappeared from the collection."

Lord Taunton's handsome eyes looked keenly into those of his old and faithful servant.

"How long have you noticed this missing?" he asked.

Laxon was quick in answering.

"I never remember it being there at all, my lord. Certainly it has never been there during my time."

The other three were silent.

"And yet," Taunton said, breaking this silence, "and yet you recognized it, Laxon?"

"Yes, my lord, because I knew of it by description from my father, and because also it could be the only one in your possession—at least, according to the records of the house, because—"

"Because?" Lady Augusta broke in impatiently.

"Because, my lady, the rest of the miniatures are in my possession, and no one could possibly reach them except through me."

A little further discussion explained that all the valuables that had been brought from Malworth for the loan to the exhibition had, on Laxon's authority, been stored in two apartments in the large town house, the doors of which had been securely sealed under his supervision.

The question of theft, therefore, in connection with the miniature was impossible, for Laxon had traveled to London only a few weeks before, and had seen that all was exactly as it had been for the past four years. Moreover, his testimony as to this particular picture having been missing for so long set on one side all possibility of Hunter's having possessed himself of it in this way. The question was, then, how had he obtained possession of it?

Jack Trevelyan summed up the matter in a very few words.

"Bought it for an old song probably from a secondhand dealer, who got hold of it in some way—not direct, of course, from the original thief!"

Lady Augusta nodded approval at her husband, and continued fanning him.

Laxon had gone away quietly, and after a moment or two Lord Taunton followed suit. He was quick to see that the invalid was fatigued with the small excitement, and he wanted to be alone to think.

Of late he had not allowed his thoughts to obtrude themselves; but now, as by a touch of fire, this mention of Hunter's name swept away the restraint he had put on himself, and his heart, his brain, his living consciousness was full of one feeling; only, as he went forth into the summer sunshine, the remembrance of his shattered love dream, of the desolation of his hope, of the existence of some horrible, intangible, indefinite fear that hung about the form of Alwynne, and would not be exorcized.

The selfishness of love was not so paramount in his mind at this moment as the tenderness. He yearned over the girl, he longed to stretch out his strong, right hand and draw her into his protecting care; to know that he might never do this was simple torture, a pain as bitter as death!

Lady Augusta sat very silent for a while, and her husband lay watching her. By and by he spoke.

"You have got something in your little mind; out with it!" he said, in a manner that was a faint likeness of his old merry self. "Hope you didn't fall in love with Hunter, my bird!"

His wife pretended to be furious.

"If you weren't so weak I would shake you for an hour! How dare you say such a thing!" She bent forward and kissed the thin hand as she spoke. "I was thinking about that girl, Jack. Do you know, I have felt so sure lately that something was wrong about that marriage! I wish I could have been able to help her a little. She had such a sad, desolate look in her beautiful eyes; and now I know. Jack, supposing he should not be good to her! Oh, I do feel sorry for her! The worst is now I feel she is gone out of my life altogether, and perhaps I may never see her again!"

"One never knows. Life is a strange river; all sorts of crafts meet on its broad, deep bosom. Poor child! I fear she needs a friend!"

Jack Trevelyan sighed a little as he lay back, clasping his wife's hand. The thought of Alwynne was coupled to him now with Taunton. He knew nothing, but he possessed illimitable sympathy, and he needed no words to tell him that this girl's sorrow would be something more bitter and terrible to his wife's brother than anything that had gone before.

CHAPTER XXVII

A solution of the problem of the miniature question was forthcoming far sooner, and in a manner absolutely unexpected by any one of the three who had already discussed it.

About a week later, Lord Taunton was somewhat surprised by a visit from Mr. Pennell, the head partner of the legal firm who had charge of his affairs. It was a day of importance and excitement at Torre, for John Trevelyan had progressed sufficiently well enough to be carried down stairs for the first time.

Lady Augusta flew about like the proverbial bee. She was absolutely her old self once more, and shed a sort of radiance wherever she was. The sudden appearance of Mr. Pennell did not cause her any sort of interest; she was far too deeply engaged in superintending everything to make her darling comfortable and happy.

"Hope it is nothing to worry you, Hugo?" she cried airily, as her brother went to join the newcomer in the library.

Taunton did not anticipate any worry. If Fate had given him many a hard lesson in the matter of his sentiments, in the matter of the more material part of life he had never known the meaning of the word care. Mr. Pennell's somewhat portentous air did not, therefore, impress him very much, but as he threw himself into a chair after a few words of commonplace greeting, and Mr. Pennell began to unfold the object of his visit, Lord Taunton's face was a study in astonishment first, and in wrath last.

"I am afraid I don't understand you!" he said, somewhat coldly.

Mr. Pennell cleared his throat.

"I can quite comprehend that it is not an easy matter to understand, Lord Taunton. I felt, if I may venture to say so exactly as you feel now when first the matter was mooted to me."

"Please state the facts again!"

Mr. Pennell was referring to his notebook.

"This Mr. Hunter, whom I imagine your lordship knows a little about, came to see me last week, and began what I somewhat roughly informed him was a cock-and-bull story touching his intimate connection with your lordship's family, and putting forward a claim for the Taunton title, moneys, and estates, which he asserts are his by right of being your father's son, born in lawful wedlock."

Taunton's brows were drawn together, his eyes were almost black.

"And he brings forward what proofs?"

"He has furnished me with a certificate of marriage between George Craven Dunmare, then Viscount Malworth, afterward Earl of Taunton and Torre, and Caroline Percival, of the County of Perthshire, spinster. The document, of course, is not in my possession, but Mr. Hunter agreed to allow me to make a copy that it might be shown to your lordship."

"And the date of this marriage?"

Save for the deep frown, and the ominous expression of those wonderful eyes, Lord Taunton was perfectly calm and quiet.

"Just three years previous to the date of the marriage between the Earl of Taunton and Torre and Lady Cynthia Marshcombe, youngest daughter of the Duke of Scotia. The certificate of Hunter's birth gives a date of two years previous to this event."

"Are these all his proofs?"

"Certain family papers, jewels, a few pictures, gifts from Lord Malworth to Miss Percival, and a packet of letters from his lordship to the young lady!"

Taunton was silent.

"I thought it better to come down to you at once, Lord Taunton. The matter may be, undoubtedly is, one that may be easily dismissed, but—"

The other man spoke abruptly.

"Why has not this claim been put forward before this? And how comes it that my father was permitted to make a second and a most public marriage, his first wife being still alive?"

He had almost a contemptuous ring in his voice.

"The first question put to Mr. Hunter," the lawyer replied "He answered it with no difficulty. The marriage between Lord Malworth and Miss Percival was a most unhappy one. The young couple led a most stormy existence for a year, separating finally and irrevocably before the birth of the child, which occurred while Lord Malworth was in India. News reached him there of the death of his wife when her child was born, and of the almost immediate death of the child—whereas, so the claimant asserts, neither demise occurred—his mother, having in her blood the taint of madness, which taint had found a vent in her furious and ungovernable temper during her short married life, became hopelessly insane after the birth of her child."

Mr. Pennell cleared his throat, and then went on:

"She had gone to her sister for assistance in her trouble, and this sister, Grace Percival, being under the impression that Lord Malworth had wronged her, instead of marrying her, determined on putting an end forever to all possible further connection between them, caused the announcement to be made of the false news of her sister's death and that of her child; and having carefully installed the unhappy creature in some safe asylum, she took the boy abroad, where he was educated and grew up, knowing nothing of his real history whatsoever."

Lord Taunton took up a paper knife and played with it carelessly.

"And what miracle suddenly revealed the knowledge to him?" he asked, with a faint, fleeting smile. He was full of contempt, not only for the ridiculous story, but for the fact that Pennell, astute lawyer as he was, was considerably more than half impressed by it.

"The death of his aunt, a year ago, and her confession on her deathbed of what she had done."

"And after—"

"And afterward the discovery of his mother's existence—no longer mad, but a sane, broken-hearted invalid."

Lord Taunton flung down the paper knife on the table.

"Does this man intend to press his claim, or—" He paused.

"He suggests a compromise," Mr. Pennell said. And to this Lord Taunton made answer in one word only, the word "Ah!" but it was full of significance.

Mr. Pennell frowned slightly. Of course, he could quite understand and sympathize with Lord Taunton's anger, and objection to the mere mention of such a disagreeable business as this; but at the same time Mr. Pennell did not think the young man should have adopted such a sarcastic manner toward himself. Was it likely that he, Ralph Pennell, would permit himself to be swayed by anything except the most convincing and overwhelming proofs, not that Mr. Hunter had as yet produced any such effect on Mr. Pennell's learned mind; but the lawyer had been undoubtedly staggered by all he had seen and heard, and the matter to him was one far too serious to be treated with contempt or sarcasm.

"Mr. Hunter, I am bound to confess, my lord, exhibited an amount of thoughtfulness and generostily which is quite unusual in this prosaic age. Naturally being fully convinced in his own mind that he is the legitimate Earl of Taunton—"

The man who listened started as though he had been shot, and a deep red inflamed his temples. It was a sign of furious wrath with him. He made as though he would speak; then, with an enormous effort, restrained himself, and let the lawyer proceed.

"Being convinced in his own mind that as the sole offspring of that early marriage he is legitimately entitled to his father's name and position, has yet sufficient nobility of nature and pride to consider the question from your point of view as well as his own."

"His consideration is extraordinary," Lord Taunton said quietly. He was playing with the paper knife once again, this time more slowly.

"Mr. Hunter desired me, above all things, to impress upon your lordship that his belief in his connection with the Taunton family is one that fills him with a sense of pride almost too great to be adequately described; and it is from this great pride that he wishes you to comprehend the full meaning of the word compromise as broached by him."

Taunton's eyes became blue for a moment, then black.

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"I think I comprehend it entirely," he said, in the same quiet way.

Mr. Pennell, unconsciously eager to defend the man whose extraordinary personality and charm had worked far deeper into his matter-of-fact mind than he could have thought possible, did not notice the tone in which this last speech was made. He was, indeed, lost in the importance of the affair.

"He, therefore, trusts implicitly to your lordship's good faith in him"!

"Ah!" Lord Taunton said, rising at this, and standing by the fire, and then looking down at the andirons in a ruminatig fashion.

"Good faith," repeated the lawyer, "and generosity to believe most truly that when he determines to waive his right to push his claim to the name and position your lordship now bears; it is because his pride is too great to permit him to sully the honorable escutcheon of the house by—"

Mr. Pennell paused abruptly; and Lord Taunton filled up the pause.

"By doing that by which he might possibly land himself in jail, Pennell," he said very quietly.

"My lord," the lawyer said, ruffled, "I am afraid that you will not see the serious import of the case, and that—"

"And I am afraid, Pennell," Taunton said, in a courteous but cold tone, "that for once that shrewdness and legal genius which has been for so many years my assistance and my guide has played you false." He stopped abruptly. "You have a sneaking belief in the truth of this man's story?"

Mr. Pennell found himself answering involuntarily, although he was exceedingly angry.

"The facts are most powerful!"

"Yes, they are. The facts are about as bold and impudent an attempt at extortion as I have ever come across. Why, man alive, do you think that there exists such a creature as this Hunter desires to represent himself to be, a man who has so much pride and honor in his name as to allow himself to be branded with the stain of illegitimacy in return for a certain round sum of money? No!"—with a sweep of the hand. "Had you brought me a thousand proofs, each more apparently convincing than the last, I should have judged the case by the man himself! Why, Pennell, you should surely know a little more of human nature than to have been misled by such a miserable pretense of a fraud as this!"

Mr. Pennell rose. He was quite angry now.

"Of course," he said stiffly, "I can quite understand and sympathize with your irritation, but—"

Lord Taunton interrupted him very quietly:

"I have one answer to Mr. Hunter. I cannot entertain the question of a compromise for one single instant. Mr. Hunter has the proper channel open to him—let him bring forward his claim, and substantiate that claim in a court of law before all the world! I will meet him in

(To be continued)

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