

One Night's Mystery.

By May Agnes Fleming.

CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

'It is not worse, do they?' 'By no means. He only fancies he is. They tell him to avoid excitement, to go on with the drops as before, to take gentle exercise, light diet and wines, and he may linger ever so long. Now, have you finished, my dear? because I want to show you the things.'

Sydney had finished, and putting her arm around mamma's waist familiarly, went with her up stairs. The bridal apartments were first-upstairs—sitting-room, bed-room, dressing-room, all in different colors, all of different degrees of sumptuousness. Pretty pictures, gilded boxes, stands of music, a new piano and work-table, knick knacks, pretty trifles, costing hundreds of dollars, and making an elegant whole. Everything was the best and rarest money could buy.

Sydney went into raptures—school-girl raptures; but her color came and went, for the first time she was beginning to realize that she was really going to be married. The trousseau was displayed next. Dresses of silk, black, brown, blue, pink, white, all the colors that blend girls can wear; dresses of lace, black and white; dresses of materials thick and thin—all beautifully made and trimmed. Then heaps of linen, ruffled, laced, and bordered, marked with the letters 'S. W. O.' twisted in a monogram—Sydney's name and her own.

Gradually, as she examined and admired, she fell upon her. She was beginning to feel overpowered; her life of the past and present seemed closing forever, and another of which she knew nothing about to begin. A sensation, akin to dread of meeting Bertie Vaughan, was inexplicably stealing over her. She shook it off indignantly. What nonsense! Afraid to meet Bertie! Bertie with whom she had quarrelled and made up, whose ears she had boxed scores of times, whom she had laughed at and made fun of for his incipient young-manish airs years ago—afraid of him! It was all very fine, and must have cost oceans of money, still she was glad when the sight seeing was over and she could nestle up to her father's side and kiss him a little, silent, grateful kiss of thanks.

'How do you like it, Mamma?' 'You're all I have to be good to, child, he answered, sadly. 'Let me make you happy—I ask no more. You think you will be happy with our boy, don't you, pettie?' 'I like Bertie very much, papa.' 'In a sisterly way—oh, my dear? Well, that is a very good way—much the better way, in a little girl of seventeen. This time next year he will be something more than a brother to you. He will be very good to you, that I know.'

'It is not in Bertie to be bad to any one, papa. He always had a gentle heart.' 'Yes, my dear, I think he had. There may be nobler qualities than gentleness and softness, but we don't make ourselves, and, as young fellows go Bertie is a harmless lad, a very harmless lad. Be a good wife, Sydney, and don't be too exacting—men are mortal, my dear—the best of 'em very mortal. Be happy yourself, and make your husband happy—it's all I ask on earth.'

'I'll try, papa, Sydney sighs, in a weary way, leaning against his chair, 'but—' 'But I wish I need not be married at all. I wish I might just live on as I used, with you and mamma, and have Bertie for my brother. It is very tiresome and stupid being married, whether one will or no, at seventeen.'

'That is what she would have liked to say, but an instinctive conviction that it would displease her father held her silent.'

'But what, little one?' he asks.

And look sheer down two hundred feet into the scudding waters beneath, had ever been her dangerous delight. She walked slowly, rather slowly and soberly at first, thinking in her childish way, how proxy and humor it was to be married in this manner, the very moment one left school. All the married ladies she had ever known were staid and grave house-mothers, not a frisky matron among them all. Was she expected to be a solemn and steady-going house-mother too? It was a little too bad of papa she thought, with a reproachful sigh. If he had only let her have a good time first, for three years at least—twenty is old, but it is not too old, after all, to be married. She might have come out, had a winter in Newport, another in Washington, a trip to New York, and a couple of seasons at Saratoga and Newport. But of course poor sick papa must be obeyed; so with another heavy sigh the little wonder-elect put aside her grievance, and wondered where Bertie might be at that particular moment, and whether he really would be at home to-night at all.

It was satisfactory—very satisfactory, Miss Owenson mused gravely, that he was so nice-looking, and was a 'clothes-wearing man,' and was fastidious, as mamma had said, about his nails and teeth and sleeve-buttons. Limited as her knowledge of the nobler sex had been she had known gentlemen—Colonel Delamere and sundry officers of his staff notably among the number—who were not.

Miss Owenson, musing thus over the serious things of this very serious life, continued her way, as you have been told, at first slowly and soberly, but accelerating her pace gradually, and brightening up. It was so good to be free from school discipline; now and forever done with lessons and lectures. It was such an exhilarating night too. The stars sparkled brilliantly and numberless. There was no moon, but a steady radiance skimmed over everything. Down below the pretty baby waves lapped the ribbed sand, and the great ocean melted blackly away into the sky. She paused, leaning over with Chiff, and gazing with fascinated eyes at that illimitable stretch of black water. She was still lingering there, when there came her voices and footsteps on the high-road beyond. She glanced carelessly over her shoulder—carelessly at first; then she started swiftly upright, and looked at the two advancing with keen, surprised interest. A man and a woman, both young, going toward the town, the woman an utter stranger, but the man—surely the man looked like Bertie Vaughan.

She caught her breath. Could it be Bertie? It was his height, his walk, his general air and look. His hat was pulled over his eyes, and in that light, and at that distance, she could not discern his face. His head was bent slightly forward, moodily as it seemed, and he traced figures in the dust with his cane as he walked. His companion, a small, stylish-looking young lady, with a ringing voice and laugh, was rallying him as she leaned upon his arm.

'That's all very fine, Sydney heard her say. 'Very easy for you to tell me you only want to see a friend; but how am I to be sure it is true? I know you men—deceitful every one of you. How am I to tell you hadn't a flirtation on hand up there? Only, if you have—'

The man raised his head and answered her, but in too subdued a tone for that answer to be audible. It was the refined, the educated tone of a gentleman, and markedly different from hers.

She laughed again at his reply, whatever it was, and began to sing, in a low, mellow voice:

'It is good to be merry and wise, It is good to be loyal and true. It is good to be off with the old love Before you are on with the new.'

The last words were faint in the distance. The pair—lovers, it would seem—passed out of view.

'And Sydney roused herself, her heart beating in the most absurd manner. The man was so like Bertie. Could it be?—Then she broke off. What a ridiculous idea! Bertie was doubtless on his way from New York, and she was idly loitering here after promising papa not to stay a moment longer than she could help. She hurried on, and in five minutes was in Mrs. Simpson's cottage, and in Mrs. Simpson's arms.

Next time she comes. Now then, Hetty, I really must go to bed. I ought to be on my way home now, but I lingered in my old fashion to look over the rocks—do you remember?' 'I remember, Miss Sydney it was the terror of my life that you would break your neck over Witch Cliff. Ah! that path isn't as quiet now as it used to be; they've got to call it Love's Lane of late. All the factory girls and their young men go courting along that way Sunday nights, and the actors and actresses at other times. I suppose you know they started a theatre over in Wycliff?'

'No, I didn't know it. Have they?' 'Yes, and the best actress of them all boards in Brown's next cottage to this—Miss Dolly De Courcy she calls herself, a fine, fat, black-eyed, drowsy young woman, with more young man running after her than you could shake a stick at.'

'Happy Miss De Courcy! Well, good-by Hetty, I'll run over to-morrow, or maybe next day. Good-by, baby—div Aunt Syd one more time!'

'How fond you are of babies! Ah! wait, until you've got one of your own,' says Mrs. Simpson very prophetically, at which Sydney laughs and blushes, and runs out, and starts more briskly than she came on her homeward walk.

'She encounters no one this time; it is the loneliest walk conceivable, but she does not feel lonely. She sings as she goes; she is singing as she enters the gates of The Place, singing, as it chances, the refrain of the ballad she had overheard, half an hour before:

'It is good to be off with the old love Before you are on with the new.'

The belated moon has arisen as she emerges from the shadowy drive, upon the broad belt of sward that encircles the house. On the portico steps stands a tall, dark figure, smoking a cigar. Her heart gives a quick beat, but she sings gaily on.

With the last words she runs up the steps and stands beside him.

He has not offered to move—he stands coolly waiting for her to come to him.

'Bertie!' she exclaims, her frank gladness at seeing him overcoming her new and disagreeable shyness, and she holds out both her hands.

'Your cousin! How never told me you had a cousin before, Bertie?' 'Didn't I, Dolly? (Bertie) forgot every thing and everybody in the world but you. I suppose, when I am with you—'

'That is all very fine, says Miss Dolly, whose serious protest evidently is not returned. 'Is she pretty, this cousin?'

'Still harping on my cousin!' laughs Bertie. 'Not small, my dear. A skim-milk school-girl, pale, delicate; no more to you than a penny candle to the moon.'

'And then she's your cousin, besides, says Miss Dolly in a mouing tone, 'and I suppose you wouldn't fall in love with your cousin, even if she was ever so pretty. I've heard English people are like that.'

'Fall in love with my cousin! ha, ha! laughs Bertie again. 'That's a good joke. Oh, no, Dolly; one young woman's enough to be in love with at a time.'

'And that's me, says Dolly giving his arm a tender little squeeze, her anger totally gone, and the twain walk in delightful silence on for some yards. 'I suppose that grumpy old uncle of yours wouldn't consent to your marrying an actress, though?' the girl asks again, with an impatient sigh.

'Well, no, Dolly, I am afraid he wouldn't. My uncle is a man of tolerably strong prejudice, and tolerably strong selfishness. I hate selfish people!' says Mr. Bertie Vaughan, savagely.

'He would cut you off with a shilling, I suppose as the heavy fathers do in the piece!' suggests Dolly.

'Precisely, cut me off without a shilling; and, by Jupiter, Dolly, I haven't a penny, not a halfpenny, but what the old duffer gives me.'

'Well, you could go on the stage, says Dolly, reassuringly. 'With your face and your figure, and your aristocratic air, and your education, and everything, you'd make a tip-top walking girl.'

'Don't say 'tip-top,' Dolly, and don't say 'gent,' corrects Mr. Vaughan. 'Yes there's something in that. I could go on the stage, and I always liked the life. Well, if the worst comes to the worst, who knows—I may do the sock or brocade. Meantime, here we are at your lodgings.'

And oh! by-the-by, Bertie, I nearly forgot, cries Dolly, keeping fast hold of his arm. 'We're to have a sailing party over to Star Island to-morrow afternoon, after rehearsal, a clam chowder, a dance, and a good time generally. I've refused everybody, because I wanted to go with you. You'll come?—half-past one sharp.'

'Really, Dolly, much as I would like to, I'm afraid—'

'What! You won't come?'

'I'm afraid—'

'You must stay home and make love to the boarding-school coquet. Oh, I see it all! cries Miss Dolly, in bitterness of spirit.

'Nonsense, Dolly! Make love—nothing of the sort; my uncle—'

'Oh! your uncle, of course, cried Dolly again, with ever increasing bitterness. 'Very well, Mr. Vaughan! do as you please. I wouldn't think of coaxing you for the world. Only I can tell Ben Ward I take back my refusal and will go with him. I hope you'll have a good time with your uncle and cousin!' The sneering scorn with which the actress brings out these two family titles is not to be described. 'A real good time. Good night, Mr. Vaughan.'

Ben Ward is the richest and best-looking young mill-owner in Wycliff, and Miss Dolly De Courcy's most obedient humble servant. As she says good-night she turns to go, leaving him standing irresolute at the gate. She is half way to the door, when he lifts his head and calls:

'I say! Look here, Dolly. Don't ask Ward, confound him. It'll be all right. I'll be there.'

'I have another engagement—that is all. I— I might break it, of course,' says Mr. Vaughan, rather apologetically.

'Oh-h! You might break it, of course! Then will you have the very great goodness. Mr. Albert Vaughan, to break it! When I propose a pleasure excursion in honor of my daughter's arrival, no one pleads a prior engagement in my house. At half-past nine, sharp, young man, you will be ready?'

An angry flush arose, hot and red, into his delicate face of Bertie Vaughan. He set his lips with rather a sullen air and went silently on with his breakfast.

'But Sydney came bravely to the rescue. She was not a whit the less of her dominating, temperamental nature, and naturally, had twice the pluck of Bertie Bertie.

'But, papa, if Bertie really has an engagement, it isn't fair to make him break it. When he made it, how was he to know you would propose this? Let him keep his engagement whatever it is, and afterwards let him join us. I am sure that will do every bit as well.'

'Humph!' growled the squire, 'you are taking up the cudgels for him, are you? Well, lad, let us hear what this wonderfully important engagement is all about, and if it really is worth nothing, we will let you off duty. Come—speak up.'

'But speak up, was the last thing Bertie could do on that subject. Good Heaven! if he thought, his blood absolutely chilling, if his father old sailor really knew. A lie Mr. Vaughan would not have struck at a second, but he was not quick-witted enough to invent a lie. So there was but one way to get out of the dilemma.

'It is an engagement of no importance,' he said hurriedly, that sensitive conscious color deepening again, 'only a trifle. I'm sorry I mentioned it at all.'

'Bertie has no tact,' Sydney thought, a provoked feeling rising in her mind against her good-looking feeble father. 'If his engagement really was an engagement, why didn't he keep it through thick and thin?—papa would have respected him for it, even if it did cross his life. It was only a trifle, as he says, why did he mention it at all? Now he has spoiled everything beforehand.'

The meal ended with a sonorous grace, said with lowering brow and suppressed, angry intonation by the master of the house. Then he arose and glared defiance across at Bertie.

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