

THE FAIR IMPOSTOR.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE duke was pacing the room, and started forward as they entered. He was pale and agitated, and stared at Lillian with a strange, troubled earnestness as he held Sir Talbot's hand.

'Sir Talbot—Lillian,' he began, then stopped and mopped his forehead. 'Upon my soul I have never had such a difficult task. And—and—yet, Lillian, I have come about a troublesome business—a stupid piece of blundering which shall not go unpunished. As such a time, too! My dear, I don't know what to do; I must tell one of you, and I don't know which to tell. Sir Talbot, are you strong enough to enjoy a joke? and he smiled, but with unmarked earnestness.

'What is it, duke?' he said, feebly. 'Why don't you sit down? Has anything happened?'

The duke sat down, but jumped up again and stood in front of the fire, rubbing his hands in troubled perplexity.

'Upon my word, it is too bad!' he muttered. 'But what can I do?'

'What is it? What does he say?' said Sir Talbot, looking up at Lillian.

'Look here,' said the duke—'will you go out of the room, Lillian? This isn't fit for your ears.'

'No!' said Sir Talbot, his clasp tightening. 'I cannot let her go.'

'But—but,' said the duke. 'Well, here goes! but mind, I shall expect you to enjoy the joke, and laugh heartily at me for being fool enough to come over about it. You must know, then, my dear, about an hour ago, I was honored by a visit from a mad fellow—no doubt escaped from the county lunatic asylum—who brought me some idiotic, cock-and-bull story about—about Lillian here.'

Sir Talbot looked from one to the other.

The duke laughed, but frowned at the same moment.

'He says that this young lady—now laugh!—is not your daughter—'

'He lies!' broke from Sir Talbot's lips so suddenly that the duke started.

'Of course—just so! Madm n generally do; that's what I told him. For Heaven's sake, my dear child, don't look so disturbed! I won't tell you any more if you let it trouble you.'

'Go on,' said Sir Talbot, leaning forward and gripping Lillian's arm—'go on.'

'Er—er—and he has got some idiotic idea in his head that the dear girl here is an impostor; that she is not Lady Woodleigh's daughter, but an actress—Oh, lord, it's too absurd,' he broke off.

'Go on,' said Sir Talbot, sternly, all his weakness seeming to vanish.

'He says that he can prove that she was an actress—called Hilda Fane, and that—that—well, here's the joke! that she murdered the real Lillian Woodleigh out on the prairie! Did you ever hear such a mad hallucination in your life? Why won't you laugh?'

Why did they not laugh? He had only to look at the white face and glare.

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ing eyes of the girl, held tight in the grip of the old man.

'And—and here is really the best of it! He comes to me—to me! for a warrant to apprehend her! Hah! hah! Good, isn't it?'

Sir Talbot leaned forward, and bent a piercing glance at the white face above him. What he read there he alone could know, but a sudden, horrid dread dropped from him, and, with a faint smile, he waved his hand.

'And you granted the warrant?'

'No; I told him that if he didn't clear out I would have him kicked out and ducked, or taken to the nearest asylum.'

'Well?' breathed Sir Talbot.

'Well'—and the duke's brow knit—'the rascal—for he's more rogue than fool, I'm inclined to think—insisted upon showing me what he called his evidence, and—and a certain book—a diary—'

He stopped abruptly; there were footsteps in the hall; the door opened and Harold entered, followed by Gerald and another person. This last stepped forward, and confronted the party as if he were a witness in a court of justice.

The duke let slip an oath at sight of him.

'I—I beg your pardon; but here is the fellow himself!'

The fellow—no other than Mr. Robert Green—bowed respectfully.

'Sorry to intrude, your grace,' he said, quietly enough, 'but thought I'd come over myself and explain; and asked Mr. Harold Woodleigh and my lord the marquis to accompany me.'

As he spoke, both Gerald and Harold went and stood beside Lillian, and Harold took her hand, but, with a quick gesture, she released it softly elinched in front of her.

Mr. Robert Green's quick eye noted the action, and he nodded.

'This is an unpleasant business, gentlemen,' he said, quietly, 'but I'm in the presence of gentlemen, and as such they will not go back on a man who does his duty.'

'He's mad, stark, staring mad!' ejaculated the duke.

Mr. Robert Green just glanced at him.

'Sir Talbot, I am a detective—or rather I was—I'm a private agent now. I undertook to recover your lost daughter, Miss Lillian Woodleigh—'

'Oh, have him kicked out!' broke in the duke. 'This is the same story he told me.'

Sir Talbot held up his white hand. 'Go on,' he said.

'Thank you sir,' said Mr. Robert Green. 'I went out to America, traced Lady Woodleigh and her daughter, picked up the evidence of her ladyship's death, and was tracking her daughter when I heard that Mr. Woodleigh had come over and found her. I didn't come back to England at once, for the stage company had placed a case in my hands and that detained me. It was a case of highway robbery, stopping the coach, and so on. While engaged in the case I came upon these facts—'

'Oh, for goodness sake,' broke in the duke, but again the uplifted hand stopped him.

'I found that Sir Talbot's daughter had traveled by the coach that was attacked, and I found that another young lady had also been one of the passengers. This young lady was a certain actress, who had created great excitement in San Francisco, and who had disappeared rather mysteriously. She was a certain Hilda Fane—'

He stopped, and without pointing, directed attention to Lillian.

'They one and all glanced at her and a nameless fear seized them as they looked. She was pallid as death, her lips apart, her eyes staring before her into vacancy.

'That wouldn't have taken much effect upon me, but that I happened to find one of the men who had attacked the coach. He turned witness for us, and he told me that he had seen the young ladies in the hut of one of the stations, and he described them. One was dying from a pistol wound, and the one that was dying was no other than Lillian Woodleigh—her description answered exactly to Lady Woodleigh's daughter. The other girl who was with her, I identified as Hilda Fane. The man watched them through the window; he had been wounded by a shot from the guard, and had intended creeping into the hut. He watched them, and saw Lillian Woodleigh give the other girl, Hilda Fane, a little book—then he heard a cry of pain, and saw—distinctly saw—the other girl Hilda Fane, dart out of the hut. He entered a few minutes afterward, and found the real Lillian Woodleigh lying dead.'

All eyes turned to the old man lying in his chair. With a gesture he commanded the man to proceed.

'My witness did not wish to spend the night in such company, and left the hut, but not before he had carefully scrutinized the face of the dead girl, and a description of that face he gave me a fortnight afterwards. It was Miss Woodleigh's face line for line.'

He paused and wiped his face.

'I came back to England; rather naturally I ran down here just to get a glance at the young lady I had been looking for so long, and saw that young lady,' and he pointed to the white, drawn face.

To be continued.

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