

A CRUEL DECEPTION

OR WHY DID SHE SHUN HIM? BY EFFIE ADELAIDE ROWLANDS

(Continued)

erness and excitement. "Look here, Alwynne, I've got something I want to say to you—something I must say. It's on my mind, and I am troubling about it. Will you forgive me if I seem as if I were prying into your affairs. You know me well enough by now, and—" he ceased suddenly, and then spoke as suddenly again.

"Alwynne," he said almost nervously, "are you happy with Blair? Is he good to you? Do you regret? Oh, dear, dear Alwynne, do tell me the truth. I get frightened when I am alone sometimes, and I am thinking of you always, you—It was all so quick. You had no time to think over everything, and you were in such distress, but yet Blair seemed—" He thrust his hands into his pockets with the sort of gesture that goes with a boy's actions and yet there was very little else of the boy about him.

"If—if," he said, half brokenly, "if I thought you were not happy that he was not good—yet, how could he be anything but good, with such a face?"

Alwynne sat silent. She neither moved nor spoke, and the boy, deep in his thoughts, was almost unconscious of her silence. It was such a relief to him to think out his thoughts.

"You see, though he is my cousin, I know so little about him," he went on. "Janet remembers him a little fair-haired boy when she used to be in England with our parents; but his mother always lived abroad, and Blair seems to belong to another land and another family. I have asked him to tell me things about himself, but he always laughs. He is always laughing, and he says there is nothing to tell, that my mother and his father were cousins, and that, of course, we were cousins of the second generation. He is kind to me, and he never forgets to ask after Janet; and yet—Blair stopped abruptly. If he had spoken out his thoughts he would have said plainly, and without any hesitation, "You, somehow, I don't like him, and I don't trust him, and I don't think he goes straight."

He checked himself shortly, as he remembered all at once to whom he was speaking. He paused a moment, waiting for Alwynne to say something, and finding she made no reply, he repeated his first question.

"Alwynne, are you happy with Blair? Is he good to you? Only tell me that, and I won't bother you any more. I—"

He broke off again, this time even more abruptly than before, and his face turned crimson as he sprang to his feet. A shadow had suddenly fallen across them; and as Basil leaped up so hurriedly he discovered, in a startled way, that this shadow was none other than the man he was discussing—Blair Hunter himself!

CHAPTER XXIV

Blair had come up to them softly, and had stood beside the old bed before either of them had dreamed of his presence. His voice speaking an answer to Basil's question revealed this, and he laughed heartily as he saw the amazement and other emotions that flitted across the boy's face.

Alwynne had uttered a little cry, half of surprise, half of alarm; but after that, she had sunk back into her old position, and every vestige of color faded out of her face.

"You are a modest young gentleman, Master Basil, upon my word!" Blair said lightly. "You make the most searching inquiries into a woman's secret thoughts, and then you coolly announce that is all you want, and if you get an answer you will be satisfied. Well, you are an invalid, so I suppose you must be humored. Eh, Alwynne? Well, I will speak for my wife!"

He threw himself down on the sand at Alwynne's feet, and, taking one of the girl's hands in his, he carried it to his lips.

"We thank you, Mr. Basil, exceedingly, for your anxiety concerning us, but we are happy to inform you that all is well with us—that we have found life, so far, a path full of flowers and sunshine; that, though our interests have run together for so short a while, and that before that time we were comparative strangers as the world would judge it, yet that our knowledge of one another is now as sweet as it is unlimited, and that we have grown to regard each other as, that one kindred soul created by an All-seeing Power to render our union something higher, purer and better than the ordinary marriage of everyday life. Is this not so, my darling?"

He looked at Alwynne as he spoke; and the boy, standing there still dismayed, uncomfortable, bewildered, noted, in a vague sort of way, how curious was the expression of his cousin's eyes as they were bent on the girl's lovely face.

It also struck Basil, in the same vague way, that he had never realized, until now, what an odd shape and color these same eyes were.

Blair Hunter held Alwynne's slender hand in his two large ones, and caressed it gently, passing it to and fro across his lips.

"Is it not so, Alwynne?" he repeated, in the same low, tender tone. "Answer Basil, and satisfy his anxiety by telling him you are quite happy and contented!"

The girl looked back into the strange gaze fixed upon her. For an instant it was almost as though she struggled feebly against some invisible but potent power. There was a drawn look, a kind of tension in her expression, which hurt Basil in an indefinite sort of way and which puzzled him; but even as this was passing through his mind, a relief came, for Alwynne's face changed. It had a quiet, peaceful look, and her voice was calm and sweet as ever, as she spoke the words her husband had uttered.

"I am quite happy and contented," she said, and her eyes were looking straight into Blair Hunter's as she spoke.

He kissed her hand, and put it back on her knee. Then he turned to Basil, and laughed. As the boy said, he was always laughing.

"Now, Sir Inquisitive, are you satisfied, may I ask? Wait till you get a wife yourself, and then see how you will like to be cross-examined on your most sentimental emotions. It is my belief you will be furious, Master Basil!"

He ended his speech by flinging a bit of seaweed good-humoredly at the lad.

Basil crimsoned. "Of course I didn't mean to be rude, or inquisitive, or—anything," he stammered. "Only—only—"

Blair Hunter ceased laughing, and his face assumed a gentle expression.

"My dear boy, don't think I misunderstand you for a single moment. I know you only spoke through affectionate interest, and both Alwynne and I are touched by your concern. Are we not, my wife?"

"Yes," Alwynne answered in a quiet, subdued sort of way. She was leaning back against the boat, and her face had a dreamy, peaceful expression on it now.

Blair supported himself on his elbow, and gazed at her. He went on talking in a quiet, soft sort of way, playing with the hem of her gown as he talked.

"Did I frighten you, my own? It was rather a sudden appearance. I came down all in a hurry, got through my business in town much sooner than I anticipated, and took the first train to be had. Fortunately, I caught an express, and was landed at Fordsea Station before eleven. I hurried to the house, and found you were out, so I only waited to get into this toggery—with a glance of satisfaction at his white duck attire—and came off at once to find you!" He laughed softly. "I knew just exactly where you would be, Alwynne; that is what is called instinct, I believe, in

everyday language. Is it not so, Basil? What are you going? Well, you can hurry up the lunch. I am almost starving. By the way, do you return to town this week?"

"To-morrow," Basil said briefly. He turned and walked across the sand toward the parade and the rows of terraces all bearing large-sounding, nautical names.

Once he looked back. He could see that the two he had left behind were sitting in exactly the same position. Alwynne did not seem to have moved an inch, and Blair Hunter was still gazing fixedly into her lovely face.

The boy sighed quickly, and his brow contracted. "I don't understand," he said to himself. "I don't understand!"

He was troubled by the vague, disquieting thoughts that filled his breast—this strange, unquerable doubt that was fast becoming an antipathy—this dread—though of what exact nature or proportion he could not possibly define—this series of self-reproach which burdened his heart. He had never had much occasion to think deeply, either for himself or for others, in the life he had led with his sister for companion and protection; but since his arrival in England, whence he had been sent purely for the sake of his delicate health; and his small taste of independence, strengthened as it had been by Alwynne's sudden claim to his assistance, had roused all at once the spark of manliness within his breast, and turned his thoughts from boyish dreams to stronger material.

He suddenly found developing within him a character and a nature that he had been up to now totally in ignorance of possessing; and it was through his newly-opened eyes, as it were, that Basil regarded this cousin of his, and gauged him so shrewdly, although so indefinitely. He had been won by Blair's manner, by the laughing, unusual hand-on-individuality of the man. His first series of letters back to his sister in America had been full of warm liking and admiration for the relative who had come to meet him and offer him hospitality for a time. But Basil soon began to look below the surface, and dissatisfaction had already commenced to make itself felt in his feelings for Mr. Hunter, when his cousin almost overthrew him, metaphorically, by announcing his immediate forthcoming marriage with Alwynne.

Of course, Basil had not been blind to his cousin's most natural admiration for the girl's beauty. He had seen her the day following her arrival at the humble boarding house Basil called his home, and he had been, as it were, struck silent by the extreme loveliness that was presented to him. His manner had been so full of charm and thought that the boy's heart had gone out to him for that, and Alwynne had accepted his courteous offer of assistance in any way that was possible, because she saw it gave pleasure to Basil, her only friend.

There had been a talk of taking Alwynne to Blair's mother; but a week had sped away, and this scheme was not carried out, although Blair never let one day escape without coming to see Alwynne and discussing her position with her. He told Basil he was endeavoring to persuade the girl to return to her mother, that being the one proper thing for her to do, in his opinion; but Alwynne only shook her head when this plan was put before her.

Basil was tormented by an anxiety for the girl's sake. He had given her the whole of his young boyish loyalty and affection, and he only yearned to be strong in every way so that he might be indeed her knight, her guardian, and her protector. His young heart swelled with pride as he thought of how she had turned to him in her sore distress. He never questioned her as to the secret of this distress, this agony of the mind that had driven her from the luxurious life which had been surrounding her, and had

made her an alien from her mother's care. It was enough that she had come. If only he might have confided all to Lord Taunton—even now Basil winced and crimsoned to himself as he recalled that day at the lawyer's office, when he had been forced, through loyalty to one friend, to be disloyal in a sense to another.

Had not Alwynne entreated him so eagerly, so passionately, to preserve an utter silence concerning her to Lord Taunton, what a happy relief it would have been for the boy! It was so hard to have to prevaricate to the young man with the marvelous eyes, the strong will, and the great, generous heart. More especially was it hard to allow even a slight wrong to rest on Alwynne; and Basil knew that Lord Taunton had been disappointed at the outset in thinking the girl had forgotten and neglected her humble acquaintance of the steamboat.

The boy wandered, in a sort of weary way, as he walked on, what Lord Taunton's feelings could be concerning Alwynne's marriage. Boys, as a rule, do not see much sentiment in life; but Basil had always been a dreamer and a visionary, and the knowledge of the truth had come to him almost easily.

It was this knowledge which unconsciously was the real secret of his trouble about Alwynne and her happiness. Everything was muddled and chaotic in his mind, and most of all when he tried to define his thoughts and fears about his cousin. It was very nearly becoming a burden to the lad. A sort of responsibility seemed to have been thrust on his shoulders. He had an odd sort of feeling that Alwynne must be his care, that he must protect her; and yet, what protection could he need if the position was viewed calmly?

She had her husband—a man in every way more fitted to guard and protect her than a weak, delicate boy.

So would run the argument of common sense, but Basil could not dismiss this strange weight from his mind. He wished the marriage had not been so hurried. He wished he had urged Blair to take Alwynne to his mother first, and let a few months, at least, elapse before she bound herself to him.

Basil had an uneasy suspicion that Alwynne herself had disliked the hurry of the proceedings, and yet—yet she had acquiesced. She had performed her share in a quiet, yet perfectly voluntary way. There had been no coercion, no extraordinary amount of pleading as far as the boy could see, and yet—yet she always came to the yard yet—why had Alwynne married Blair Hunter? That was the riddle to be solved, and Basil could not think how he might arrive at the true solution.

He knew she had been touched by Blair's sympathy and solicitude, but it wanted more than that to suggest a possibility of making her future with this young man. Had it been a desire to settle the question of that future? Had she done what she had done because she was afraid of becoming a burden on him—Basil? Why had she refused to let Lord Taunton have the least knowledge of her real position? Why had she so resolutely forbidden all mention of his name?

Basil sighed and sighed again as he walked on. There was something strange, something heavy and incomprehensible in the very atmosphere that surrounded all thought of Blair Hunter, and the feeling of fear for a desire to protect Alwynne grew and grew within his breast.

He stood on the terrace, and looked back once again. Alwynne was sitting just in the same attitude, and Blair was leaning on his elbow, looking up into her face. Blair turned away suddenly. The vague fear in his heart seemed to turn all at once into a certainty—the certainty that Alwynne was neither now, nor had she been from the first, a free agent in her actions. That Blair Hunter possessed—in what form or power the boy could not determine, but that he did possess it, he was only too sure—some extraordinary hold over the will and mental attributes of the girl he had made his wife.

To Basil everything that had seemed so difficult to understand became at once clear and comprehensible, and with it came a new fear, vivid and distressing, that this power might be used for evil, not good, and bring an infinity of sorrow to the girl he had grown to love so well.

CHAPTER XXV

The life of John Trevelyan trembled in the balance for many days. They were terrible, awful days for the poor wan-faced little wife, who sat motionless beside the bedside, seeing nothing, conscious of nothing but that strange, almost grotesquely rigid figure which they told her was her beloved, magnificent Jack.

The great London physicians were very grave over their patient, and shook their heads to Lord Taunton.

"He may live!" they said, "but—"

It was an ominous word that "but," and Taunton felt a cold shudder pass through him as he listened. At first, against all his desires, hope would not come; but as day passed day, somehow, he permitted himself to encourage the thought that the doctors, specialists, and world-famed as they were, might after all be wrong, and that life was not at an end for splendid, honest-hearted, gentle-natured Jack Trevelyan.

He said nothing of this hope to any one, least of all to his sister. It would only be a new torture to her to grasp on this hope, and then to realize that it was a myth. Not that Lady Augusta understood, for one single instant the full danger that threatened her heart's beloved. She was not sanguine, nor did her face light with any assurance that some good would come. No. She sat there, a strange, distorted likeness to her former laughing sunny self; and from her drawn, haggard, thin face, one would have gathered that the worst had come to her, and that the truth was known in all its awful bleakness.

Taunton knew better—not only because his sister's nature was something he had studied from earliest childhood, but because humanity was a subject he had gauged just as keenly, and he understood how much human nature clings to the last remnant of hope, be it ever so small, and ever so unconscious.

Blanche Glenlee was still at the Abbey, and very dreary she found it. She would have gladly gone away, and have joined her mother in town, but for a dogged determination to carry out the project for which she came to Torre, and for which she had eschewed the season and all its allurements.

Her mother, Lady Rose, approved most highly of this prolonged visit. She had more than a hard task to please Blanche, and the thought of a probable marriage with such a man as Taunton was something that gave her the keenest satisfaction. She had known Lord Taunton since his childhood, and was very fond of him. Blanche never permitted her mother to share in her life, but in this case she had broken through her rule so far as to let Lady Rose guess at what she most desired.

Miss Glenlee did not quite know how she managed to live through the dreary succession of days that followed one another in slow, even, monotonous fashion. She read a little, and wrote long letters to her female acquaintances, and she went out on an occasional stroll or drive through the grounds.

The weather had grown daily more delicious, and Blanche had set up a habit of having a chair carried to the wide hall entrance, and there, garmented in some delicate hued robe, rich in lace, or almost severe in dainty severity, she would sit, book in hand, gazing over the grounds with an air as though there was no subject so exquisite or sweet to her as the study of nature. From this point of vantage she could not fail to catch sight of Lord Taunton, as he came and went, either passing from his study or ascending or descending the stairs to and from the sick room.

He would sometimes spend five minutes beside her chair; but there were other times, and these were the most frequent, when he

was so deeply lost in his sad train of thought as to be absolutely unconscious of the beautiful woman sitting just close to his reach.

He had been greatly touched by Blanche's apparent loyalty to her friendship, and then, later, he had dismissed all thought of Blanche; and save for an occasional sense of pleasure in hearing her utter some soft word of regret, or make some gentle offer of assistance, he almost grew to forget her presence altogether.

Miss Glenlee certainly possessed one good quality. She was never inharmonious, save, perhaps, when her not particularly sharp intelligence failed to keep pace with others more keenly strung.

Blanche's mind was occupied generally during these silent days in sketching out future alterations in the various apartments of the Abbey when she should have acquired the right to make these same alterations, somehow she grew more and more sanguine as the days passed, and yet Taunton's manner never changed; and had Blanche been a more skilled reader of human countenances she would have quickly discovered that there was more than one cause for Lord Taunton's grave, quiet exterior, and heavy air of preoccupation.

Fortunately for her own peace of mind, Miss Glenlee had determined that Lord Taunton was akin to herself—a man ignorant of anything amounting to emotion or agitation. His coldness of bearing, almost his indifference, misled Miss Glenlee here as it would have misled any creature in whom sympathy was not strongly developed. How was she to guess at what lay beneath?

And so the days sped by, and June brought a feast of roses about the old time-worn Abbey.

The news from the sick room was always the same. Blanche went through the usual formula every morning of standing at the door of the darkened chamber, and whispering a salutation to the thin, haggard, almost old, little woman who came toward her. There never was anything she could do for Lady Augusta, and Blanche always gave a sigh of relief when she turned away and went down to sit in her accustomed place.

The poor distraught, little wife was full of gratitude to her friend for the earnest affection and interest her manner expressed, and said so at odd times to her brother, who always agreed, with some kind word for the guest who was so sympathetic in her silence, and unobtrusive in her presence. There came a change in the monotony at last.

One afternoon, as Miss Glenlee stood at the open doorway, gazing out somewhat drearily over the gardens, she heard a quick light step behind her. There was a sort of smothered cry, and then a little figure was clinging to Miss Glenlee's magnificent form.

"Oh, Blanche! Blanche! He has spoken. He knows me. He called me by my name. He will live. Oh, God, let him live. It is all I ask. I will—I will—"

The voice died away in a choked sort of way. The little figure lay heavily against Blanche. She looked across the hall to where Lord Taunton came hurrying.

"She has fainted!" she said, and he took the unconscious form in his arms, and laid it back in the chair.

Even Blanche's selfish nature was shocked as she looked at the woeful change these terrible weeks of watching and dreading had worked in Augusta Trevelyan's brilliant youth and piquant prettiness. The small face looked pinched and pale, as with the pallor of death.

Taunton's lips moved involuntarily as he bent over his sister. His hands ministered to her tenderly. He would let no one touch her but himself; and, as Blanche stood by silently watching him, there came once again into her heart a flame of something more than ambitious desire and vanity—a something that was as near akin to passion and love as Blanche Glenlee would ever know or feel. It was not so much his name or his position or his possessions that became desirable to her in this moment, it was the man himself she felt she most cared

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