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The Die is Cast For Better or Worse.

CHAPTER XIV.
A South American Dance.

"Oh, I am sorry to disturb you, my dear," she said. "How comfortable you look! But we want you. There are not ladies enough. The place seems crowded with men! What a change after London, where the men are so precious! Slip on your things, and come down, will you? You have an evening dress? If not, one of mine."

The blood rose to Kittie's face. She remembered that she had an evening dress, the one of Eva Lyndhurst's, which Mrs. Bickers had given her. "Thanks," she said reluctantly, with a kind of resignation. "I have a dress."

"That's right," said Mrs. Vanstone. "Be as quick as you can. We want you to make up a second set of the lancers."

After Mrs. Vanstone had gone, Kittie sat for some minutes without moving. She had said that she had a suitable frock; but the only one she possessed was the one that had been Eva Lyndhurst's, and she naturally felt reluctant to wear it; but she knew that if she gave some reason for not going down—that something had gone wrong with her dress—Mrs. Vanstone would insist upon Kittie's wearing one of hers; therefore, after a time, she rose, and took the pink frock from the wardrobe in which she had hung it. The sight, the touch of it, recalled the past so distinctly that she trembled and turned pale. The bunch of roses which was missing from it she had given to Lashmore as a pledge of love. Where was he? what had happened to him? The questions haunted and harassed her as she dressed, now with a quick and feverish eagerness.

Half an hour before she had been reluctant to go down to the dance; now she was almost eager to do so, for perhaps the movement, the music, the mixing with strange people, would dispel the thoughts which were always concentrated on one subject. When she had got on her war-paint, she stepped back from the pier-glass and looked at herself critically; and the color rose to her face at the reflection in the glass. The least vain of girls knows when she is looking well; and Kittie drew a long breath

of feminine satisfaction as she turned away. She told herself that in joining the party she was only complying with the request of her employer; but as she went down the broad stairs, she was conscious that her heart was beating faster than usual, and that she was thrilling with an excitement which she had not felt since the old days when she had queneed it at some party of the boys.

When she entered the long, well-lit room, a waltz was in full swing, and she made her way by the wall to a settee by the window, the curtains of which almost screened her from view; but Mrs. Vanstone, passing on the arm of a partner, saw her, and stopped, and introduced the man. He asked for the next dance, and while Kittie was giving it to him—it was an informal dance, there were no programs, and he wrote her name on his shirt-cuff—Mr. Murray caught sight of her, and came up with two other gentlemen, who at once asked for dances, and with the eagerness that proclaims the fact that women are scarce.

Her first partner was a young fellow from a neighboring ranch; he danced well, and Kittie, who had learned to waltz in one of the schools at which she had given a spasmodic attendance, soon found her feet. To Kittie, with her keen ear for music, and love of rhythmical movement, dancing came as naturally as swimming to a duck. Her partner was delighted and enthusiastic, and begged for another waltz later on. Kittie sank back in her seat, while the last strains of the waltz died away, and drew a long breath of pleasure that was almost pain; for it seemed so impossible that she, who a few weeks ago had been well nigh starving in London, should be here in this brilliantly lit room, with its atmosphere warmly scented by the glorious flowers which grew in radiant masses close to the window.

Mrs. Vanstone, as she was passing, stopped and looked at her with a curious, but approving, smile. "How beautifully you dance, my dear," she said, in her languid way. "And that dress of yours is—fetching, Paris, isn't it? Strange how one can tell! There's an atmosphere about a Paris dress which the London people strive after in vain. It's your color, too!"

Kittie felt her face flame, then grow pale, and she murmured something inaudibly. Her next partner came up; it was the lancers, and they had time to talk. He expatiated on the beauties and advantages of the country.

"Room to move here," he said. "A man can feel his feet, and he's got twice the energy he has in England. Some of the people here have come twenty miles of more for this dance. Do you notice the difference between this and a London ballroom?"

Kittie was on the point of replying that she knew nothing of London ballrooms; but she checked herself, and her partner went on:

"Strange as it may seem, we are all enjoying ourselves! It's our turn now. I always forget the figures. We're none of us blaze. We're quite ready to work all day and dance all night. And work all the next day, too, by George! I say, how well you dance! I wish you'd give me a waltz. A cousin, or something of the kind, of Mrs. Vanstone's, aren't you?"

"I am Mrs. Vanstone's companion," said Kittie.

He stared at her. "Jolly lucky woman Mrs. Vanstone!" he said.

He took Kittie into an adjoining room, where refreshments were served with a profuseness and liberality which would have discomfited a London hostess. The tall French windows were thrown open, the big moon shone on the lawns, the scent of the flowers made the atmosphere heavy. Kittie's heart was beating fast, but regularly; she was feeling the satisfaction which comes to every woman when she is approved of and admired. She was only Mrs. Vanstone's companion; but she was enjoying herself, for she was being treated as an equal. For the moment she forgot the past, her own individuality; she was not the girl who had worked in a collar-factory, who had been on the point of starvation, but a lady like—she glanced down at her dress—like Eva Lyndhurst!

The thought dominated her as she danced the next waltz. By this time she had attracted a great deal of attention. As a matter of fact, she was the most beautiful girl in the room, and one of the best, if not the very best, of the dancers. When the waltz had ended, she was surrounded by men who were eager to engage her, and the women were looking at her with that cold smile which recognizes the advent of a new beauty. But Kittie was all unconscious of their criticism, and, in some cases, envy. She was just a young girl, girlishly happy and oblivious, for the moment, of anything but the pleasure of the thing.

"Your companion seems to be enjoying herself," said one of the dowagers to Mrs. Vanstone. "She is a pretty girl, in fact, quite beautiful. Where did you pick her up?"

Mrs. Vanstone shrugged her narrow shoulders.

"In the usual way," she said languidly. "Yes, she is pretty, isn't she? Does he credit?"

"Yes," assented the dowager. "She looks like a lady. What is her history?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Mrs. Vanstone, with a laugh. "I suppose she has one; most women in her position have; but if she has, she knows how to keep it to herself. And I don't worry."

A plentiful supper had been provided, and Kittie's last partner took her in for it. The music had ceased, for the musicians also were taking their supper, and in the comparative quietude Kittie could hear the twitter of the birds, kept from their sleep in the big trees outside, by the lights and the music. She was listening to them, and thinking of the London sparrows that used to chirp outside her window in Denbigh Street, when, suddenly, she heard another sound, that of horses and wheels. Her companion saw that she was listening, and he explained.

"Some one just arrived," he said. "No, not a guest, too late for that, but some one on a journey. He will put up here for the night." He smiled at her surprise. "Oh, it's the usual thing. We're more hospitable than the Arabs. It's not so much a virtue as an obligation. We all keep open house to every traveler, because we are so often travelers ourselves. That sounds like a wagon. They are driving round to the stables. Perhaps we shall see who it is. Murray is going out to him, I see. He will very likely bring him in."

Kittie looked round at the men in their conventional dress-clothes; and



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her companion, divining her thought, laughed.

"Oh, that won't matter," he said. "He won't mind how he's dressed, unless he happens to be a big swell, or a bit of a dandy. We're not in London, you know; though we look as if we were, and try to think we are."

The musicians returned to their places, the dance went on; and, as is always the case, it was freer and more joyous after the supper and the wine, which appeared to be as plentiful as the viands. By this time, Kittie had, all unconsciously, slipped into the position of the belle of the room. Men gathered round her just as the boys had done in the dear old times, which seemed so far away; the remaining dances were soon filled up, her partners came to her with the promptness which men display when they are engaged to a girl who is much sought after.

Inspired by a liberal supper, the musicians played with inspiring vigor, the dancing grew faster, there was a sound of laughter in the air, the room became hot, the men were red of countenance, the bosoms of the women were heaving. Kittie had danced every dance since supper, and she was hot and breathless. Her partner offered to get her a cooling drink; but she felt as if she could not await his return, and she passed through the anteroom and through the open French windows to the veranda. Here it stretched the flower-laden garden, and beyond that the big hills, above which the moon shone resplendent. Something seemed to draw her into the coolness and comparative happiness of the night. She caught up her thin lace shawl, the gift of her father in one of his flush periods, and, flinging it round her neck, stepped off the veranda, and went slowly down one of the garden paths.

She drew a long breath, and inhaled the perfume of the flowers, and looked up at the big moon, sailing in a cloudless sky; and as she did so, the ball, her present surroundings, faded from her; she was back again at Deerbrook. She was sitting on the fallen fir, listening to Lashmore. The memory thrilled her; she was like a harp swept by a mastering hand. It all came back upon her at that moment; the love, the mystery, the deceit, the commingling of pleasure and pain; pleasure predominating so that she was unconscious of deceit. At such times, in such a moonlight, in such a perfumed air, a woman's heart has room to move, to feel under the spell of her surroundings; with the memory of their last meeting and parting vibrating in her heart and mind, Kittie's soul floated out to the past, and longed for the man she loved.

Here she was, arrayed in a beautiful garment; a lady in all but name; the belle of this ball. If he could but see her now!

(To be Continued.)

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