

INCOGNITO.

OR, IS SHE FAIR FOR ME?

(Continued.)

"A messenger from my mother-in-law!" he said, echoing the man-servant's words. "What can her ladyship want at this hour of night?" he added, in a tone so purely reflective as to blunt the sharpest suspicions. "I suppose you must show the fellow up."

"It's a—lad—woman, your honor," corrected the servant, evidently uncertain about the social status of the female Mercury.

"Ah! worse luck, she'll be longer winded," commented the gentleman, with a shrug. "However, send her up and get it over."

The valet retired, and after a short interval ushered into the room a slim personage in black who remained modestly standing just inside the door till the footsteps of the servant who had shown her in died away along the linoleum covered corridor. Then, with a low laugh, mocking but musical, she advanced quickly and threw up her veil. "My disguise must be complete indeed if you do not recognize me," she said.

"Do not talk nonsense," was the acid rejoinder, "after waiting two hours for you I am in no humor to jest. Where have you been gallivanting all this time?"

"Be civil, Othello, or you will regret it," threatened the visitor with a captivating and coquettish smile that did no disgrace at all with the modest mourning or the forlorn and pathetic countenance which she had worn a few moments before. And taking up the bottle of Hochheimer she deliberately poured out and drank off two glasses of wine.

"I've had no dinner, thanks to your Greatorex," she said as she set the glass down, "and if you keep me here long old Gobblesteaks will take care I get no supper."

"Your husband will be at the theatre for the next two hours—you know that," was the cool retort. "Sit down and tell me what passed between you and Greatorex."

"The old fox!" exclaimed the visitor violently, "you don't get me to tackle him again."

"Then you've failed, I suppose!"

This remark was innocent enough, but the tone of it affected the hearer like a goad.

"Whether I've failed or not I mean to have the twenty pounds you promised me to night, or to-morrow I go back to Greatorex on an errand of my own."

A half indulgent, half scornful smile curled the lips of the gentleman.

"Perhaps it might not be as successful as you fancy, my dear," he retorted, but his tones had lost all their previous acrimony. "However, have no fear that I shall drive you to such an extreme—What did the old Q. C. say to you?"

"Not much," responded the fair visitor, mollified. "He looked me and my new mourning all over with his gimlet eyes as if he thought the black wasn't paid for, and when I faltered out my affecting tale, frequently interrupted, as per order, by sobs, about my visit to the grave of the dear departed, and the tears I shed there over the recollections of our school-day friendship, and the longing that I had to know if my poor, ill-used darling had left any children behind her, and if so, where I might find them, the old brute actually interrupted me to ask if I had ever been in the histrionic profession. I replied with a discreet mixture of innocence and virtuous indignation, but doubt whether it took him in. He is up to all the dodges under the sun; and as for feeling—a paving stone isn't more impervious to good looks and cooing smiles. The only thing that made any impression on him was my faithful portraiture of the old Twickenham school, garnished with a whole string of the girls' names. Even he could not guess that my knowledge was acquired in Mrs. Trainingham's servants' parlor, instead of in her school-room; and the details I gave of Lady Laura Golightly's flirtation with the Italian master, and the Honorable Miss Snivelton's ineradicable habit of weeping over her sums, impelled him to divulge the one and only fact of any consequence that I have succeeded in extracting from him."

"And what may that be?" inquired the lady's listener, quickly.

"Why that your quarry is *not* hiding in London or its environs!"

"The deuce it isn't! That's worth knowing anyhow. The search becomes a deal simpler with London cut out. Did he drop any remark from which you could conclude that they had gone abroad?"

"They are not abroad. He made a reference once to 'the fresh air of the Wolds,' and, but for an unlucky hit of mine he might have said more."

"Humph!" said the gentleman, contracting his brows. "Put your foot in it, did you? How?"

"Why I made an allusion *en passant* to my cherished Katie's curly locks."

"Bah! they were as straight as a horse's tail, and about as fine a texture," interposed the male party to this *tele-a-tele*.

"Yes, it was a bow drawn at a venture and shot crooked. I have not the faintest recollection of her personal appearance, and you forgot to post me. It was a pity, for the old fencer was on guard at once, and what was worse, did his utmost to drive me into a corner. Nothing was left me but retreat, and it has taken me two hours to accomplish that successfully."

"What! you let him badger you in his chambers till ten o'clock at night?" broke out the listener in a tone of angry contempt. "Then I'll warrant he's drained you as dry as a sucked orange."

"Your complimentary to-night, Beau Jay. But I am not quite such a fool as you seem to think me, for I discovered, before I had parted from

old Foxy five minutes, that he had put a spy on my track, and a merry dance I've led him I promise you. He's cooling his heels now in an A. B. C. shop in Piccadilly, into which he followed me; but where, unluckily for him, I have a friend who let me out by the back way."

"You are a woman of resources, my fair Mimsie!" said the gentleman making her a mock bow. "I think I shall accord you my respect."

"A fig for your respect," was the saucy reply. "A leaf from your cheque book would be more to my taste."

"Well, my dear, you shall have that too," said the man, rising and going across the room to his secretaire. "It is more than twenty pounds in my pocket to know that my game is not couching in the metropolis."

"Say, Jay, what will you do with them when found!" exclaimed fair Mimsie, smacking her lips over the Hochheimer to which she had again helped herself uninvited.

The man turned on her a strange, half divided look, as if he were listening to something within himself of which her words were only the echo.

"It will be all the better for you, madam, when I get possession of the goose that lays the golden eggs," he said, with a harsh laugh.

"Provided you don't kill it like the old woman in the story," was the careless rejoinder.

Silly as this remark may seem, it gave the individual to whom it was addressed a veritable electric shock. He made a blot on the cheque he was writing, and could not command his voice enough even to swear at the blot. Fortunately for him, the lady did not perceive the effect of her random stroke. She was pulling a pair of black suede gloves over her plump and bejewelled fingers, and to achieve this feat without splitting them absorbed all her attention for the time being.

"I suppose you'll be dutiful enough to send your mother-in-law's messenger home in a cab," suggested Mimsie, as she held out her gloved hand for Beau Jay to adjust its ten buttons, after she had stowed the cheque away in her waistband.

"To be sure."

"Greatorex's bloodhound might be lying in wait in the streets, you see, not to mention the fact that my lord and master is apt to be playful with his fists when his wee wife comes in late to supper."

"P-h! poor wretch! aren't you ashamed to tell such lies about him?" exclaimed the man contemptuously.

"I'm ashamed of nothing, but being found out, and that don't happen often," was the brazen reply.

"You had better drop that tone and keep yourself a little further off, my fair termagant; for I'm going to ring for Sims," pursued the gentleman as he pressed the button of an electric bell.

The next minute the sleek valet entered the room.

"See the lady into a cab, Sims, and pay the fair to Victoria Station," was the order he received. Then fair Mimsie and Beau Jay exchanged bows, very humble on the lady's side, and condescendingly affable on the gentleman's, and the interview was over.

As soon as the door was shut on his visitor the gentleman threw himself into a chair, muttering something the reverse of parliamentary, and began to bite his nails, a habit which in grown persons is the never-failing sign of a villainous temper; and Beau Jay, his beauty shrouded in black ill-humor, looked capable of biting off the head of the person who had offended him, with those long, white, pointed teeth of his.

CHAPTER VI.

The idea of being the object of their new acquaintance's unflattering reflections evidently had not entered Ellice's head, for when the artist presented himself next morning to ask for the photograph, the girl met him with glad, untroubled eyes, and a smile that was as frank as it was bright.

"Grandma has gone to the bank to change a note which was paid to her yesterday," said Ellice, when on entering the empty drawing-room her companion inquired after Mrs. Mornington.

This remark fitted in so exactly with Delgardie's suspicions that he darted a searching glance at the speaker. But she only eyed him with a little wonder as she said—"Perhaps you think I might have done that errand for her, and so I should if she were not so averse to my transacting business in public. I shall be twenty-one in six months, but in dear grandmamma's eyes I am only a child."

"I should have thought you still younger," said Delgardie, looking at her steadfastly, as he stepped down from the chair on which he had mounted to unhook the picture. "The life of retirement you lead is evidently a preservative of youth."

"Perhaps so," assented Ellice with a faint blush. "But I shall be glad to go back to our former way of living—I mean," she added, correcting herself and coloring violently, "I should be well content if we were rich enough to do so."

This candor conjoined with mystery was an inexpressible puzzle to Delgardie; and curiosity as well as his secret admiration for Ellice urged him to seize every opportunity of penetrating into the intimacy of this strange household. The portrait, which he began to copy as soon as it came into his possession, furnished innumerable excuses for popping in upon his neighbors at all hours of the afternoon and evening; and a spell to which he did not yield without a struggle constrained him to spin out these visits long after the object which had motivated them was attained.

One time he went down to inquire if the hair of the original were dark or light, in order to regulate the depth of his shadows; at another he had a question to ask about the eyelashes, which had faded entirely off the photograph; and he found a pretext for a third visit in his desire to obtain Mrs. Mornington's permission to substitute a lace frill for the ungraceful