

A CLEVER WOMAN.

(Continued.)

"I beg your pardon!" he said awkwardly. "I did not mean to say that!" Lina took no notice of the apology. She walked up to the table to collect her wraps, and was turning towards the door; when her husband's voice arrested her footsteps.

"Lina, don't go like that!" he said, earnestly. "I want to tell you all about Mrs. Nevil. On my honour, I wanted to tell you the whole story before!"

"Thank you; but I do not wish to hear what you do not want to tell me," she said proudly.

She had intended the words to be very dignified; but there was a suspicious little catch in her voice, and Errington knew she would listen to him.

"Don't be so silly, Baby!" he went on impatiently. "I could not tell you about this new friend of ours before, because, with the exception of late last night, when you were too tired, we have had Trescott with us all the time, and he hates her like poison. That's why I said I came straight home. I didn't want you to hear his opinion of Mrs. Nevil before I gave you mine."

"Why does Dane dislike her?" asked Lina quickly.

She had always been so accustomed to defer to Dane's judgment that her prejudice against Mrs. Nevil was instantly deepened.

"How do I know?" rejoined Bertie. "You know what a peculiar fellow he is! He would like people to have their name and age and all their belongings and ancestors for ten generations past posted about the town! Mrs. Nevil is all right of course, or I should not want you to know her."

"Am I to know her?" inquired Lina blandly. She was quite cool now, and had sat down upon the couch.

"How absurd you are, Baby! Of course you must know her. Let me tell you all about her, dear."

He had resumed his old boyish manner, and, sitting beside her, began his recital. According to his account—and whether it was a true one or not, at all events he believed it to be so—this Mrs. Nevil, whom he had met at an "At Home," was the widow of a naval officer. She had been travelling about until a year back, when she had settled down in London. She was young and strikingly handsome, she had expressive brown eyes and a mass of rippling hair,—and Bertie went on describing her charms in the enthusiastic fashion that Lina knew so well. The widow appeared to be suffering some injustice from the world at large, for the words "poor woman" and "poor desolate thing" occurred pretty frequently during the recital.

"What is there to pity her for?" inquired Lina at last. "Her life certainly seems to be a dismal one; but she can go out into society and enjoy herself, can't she?"

"She cannot. That's just the difficulty!" returned Errington. "There was a rumor that she picked up her fortune at Monte Carlo, and, though that, I think, has died out, still it made people rather shy of her."

Even to Errington's own ears the explanation sounded vague; but, now he came to think of it, he really did not know much more about Mrs. Nevil beyond the fact that she was beautiful. Then he went on to explain what a kind and truly Christian-like act it would be if Lina were to take her up and introduce her to their set.

"It would be carrying brightness and happiness into a very cheerless life—it would be bestowing an incalculable benefit upon a woman whose home is very desolate!"

Errington grew quite pathetic; one would have imagined him to be an ardent philanthropist; but his wife was a very apathetic listener. It was only after he had added that, the next day being Friday, Mrs. Nevil would then call upon her that she answered resolutely—

"She can come if she likes; but I shall not be at home."

"You won't be at home?" echoed Bertie, looking at her in astonishment.

"No, I shall not be at home," said Lina again, the corners of her mouth twitching ominously. "Whether I am in the house or out of it, I shall not be at home to Mrs. Nevil!"

"And why not?"

"Why?" exclaimed Nina, stung by the audacity of the question. "Because I do not choose! Because I had not been back in London an hour before I heard your name and hers coupled together; because I heard from a woman who is certainly not a prude that Mrs. Nevil is not exactly received in society; because, on your own confession, Dane Trescott will not be a friend of hers! No, Bertie! You, of course, will do as you please about knowing her, but I will not have Mrs. Nevil forced upon me!"

She had risen, and was standing near the door; and, as she uttered the last words, she walked out of the room.

The young mother had always resolved that no sad face should be brought within sight of her boy; but some hot tears fell upon the sleeping child as she bent over his cot that night. This was the first quarrel she and Bertie had ever had, and long after her husband was asleep Lina was still wide awake. She felt miserable; but she was convinced that she was in the right. Bertie had gone too far, and her patience was exhausted. Never should Mrs. Nevil enter her house!

Breakfast next morning was far from being a cheerful meal. Errington was gloomy and dissatisfied, and, on going off to his office, he omitted his ordinary good-bye kiss.

"I shall be home at four o'clock to introduce you to each other," were his parting words; but Lina made no response.

Left to herself, she sent a request to her cousin Dane that he would come to luncheon; and, when the meal was over, she proposed that they should go together and see some pictures.

"Hardly any one knows I am in town," she said, in answer to his reminder that this was her day at home; and so to the galleries they went, and the afternoon passed very pleasantly.

When they returned home, she found cards lying on the hall table—Mrs. Nevil had called.

"Yes; master was at home," said the servant, in answer to Lina's inquiries. "He went down to the carriage-door to speak to the lady, and then they drove away together. Master left word he wouldn't be home till the evening."

"Very well," returned Mrs. Errington. "Tell cook no dinner will be required, as I shall dine at Mrs. Martin's. Dane, I am going to Auntie Helen. Will you come?"

Trescott looked at his cousin with an anxiety he did not care to conceal. He too had seen Mrs. Nevil's cards; but though he disliked the lady in question, the circumstance of her calling hardly accounted for the curious paleness of his cousin's face.

"You are not well, Lina," he said. "Let us stay at home with Syd."

Lina roused herself and shook her head impatiently.

"I am quite well, Dane. 'Tell your master,' she added to the maid, "that I shall be in by nine o'clock."

The little Kensington home proved such a haven of peace that, dreading the coming storm which she knew to be inevitable, Lina delayed her departure, it was nearer ten than nine o'clock when she at last reached home. Trescott had almost guessed the true state of affairs, and pleaded hard for admission; but she dismissed him at the door, and went up to the smoking-room alone. Her husband had returned, and was waiting for her.

Then the storm burst; for Errington was desperately angry. What reason could Lina give for flatly disobeying him? She had put him in such a predicament that he looked like a fool! Mrs. Nevil had been kind and friendly to him during his wife's absence—any one would therefore have imagined that his wife would have been properly grateful to her. Instead of which, she must needs take the earliest opportunity of insulting her! Lina's silence only irritated him the more, and the scene finished by his striding out of the room and going off to his club.

Early the next morning Miss Martin was astonished by Lina's rushing in, flinging her arms around her neck, and bursting into tears.

"What is the matter, my pet? Is Bertie ill, or the boy?" cried the bewildered old lady.

"Oh, no auntie—they're all right! Only I am very miserable!"—and Lina sobbed passionately.

Miss Helen held her niece in her arms and soothed and petted her until the tears ceased to flow and she was able to speak. Then Lina explained the cause of her grief. Bertie had forgotten all about her during her long absence from home, and had fallen in love with a Mrs. Nevil, who was a dreadful woman whom Dane would not know. Bertie had insisted that she should receive her, and, as she had very properly refused, he had been terribly angry, and they would never be happy any more.

After much patient questioning, Miss Helen at last understood what had really happened; but she rather disappointed poor passionate Lina because she did not respond with loud lamentations. On the contrary, she laughed at the girl's doleful prophecy, and then said briskly—

"Oh, no—it is not so bad as that! But you and Bertie have both been very silly!"

Mrs. Bertie Errington drew herself up in a dignified disapproval.

"Yes—both of you!" continued the old lady. "Bertie was impulsive and most inconsiderate; you were very silly in riding the high horse. He behaved very badly, I admit, in trying to force you to know some one of whom you disapprove. But so long as you do know her no harm can come of the flirtation. Don't you see that, Lina?"

"I will never know Mrs. Nevil, Auntie?"

"Don't be obstinate dearie—I know something of the lady."

"From Dane?"

"Yes, from Dane. She is rather an objectionable woman, but not so black as she has been painted. She is very attractive and fascinating, and it was certainly brighter for Bertie to be with her than to be sitting alone at home."

Lina walked to the window and stood looking on, trying hard to keep back her tears.

"Well, it doesn't matter," she said airily, after a pause; "I suppose we can behave fashionably as well as anybody else. If Bertie likes to go about with Mrs. Nevil, I can go about with Dane."

This last speech troubled Miss Helen. Many years before she had guessed the truth, and knew that Trescott's love for Lina had been more than that of a cousin. He had been too poor to marry her, and too good a man uselessly to disturb her peace; but when, some five years back, the loss of his arm had procured him his discharge from the army at the very time when his father's death had made him a tolerably rich man, it was hard to return to England and find Lina young Errington's bride. This secret was among the many in Miss Helen's possession; and, although she knew Dane to be as true as steel, Lina's words were very distasteful to her.

"Ah, well," she replied, "I can understand what you mean! Dane Trescott is a finer fellow to go about with than Bertie Errington."

"Oh, no, he is not!" cried Lina hotly. "Bertie is the dearest and best husband under the sun! Only he has been spoilt all his life, and wants a great deal of amusing. It is all Mrs. Nevil's fault—not his!"

"Dear me," rejoined Miss Helen innocently, "I thought he was so 'unkind' and 'cruel' and 'heartless'!"

"Who? Bertie? Of course not!" exclaimed Lina. "He is not strong