

Kate Coventry!

CHAPTER XXIII.

(CONTINUED.)

'Miss Coventry!' ejaculated her husband what is it? A perfect specimen of common house-spider, I'll lay my life. What an energetic girl!—found it on her pillow, and lost not a moment in bringing it here. I'm eternally obliged to you. Where is it?—Mind you don't injure the legs!—Pray don't stick a pin through the back!

'O Mr. Lumley! I sobbed out, 'it's worse than a spider. Get up, please; there's going to be a duel and I want you to stop it. Captain Lovell and Cousin—Cousin—'

I fairly broke down here, and burst into tears; but the kind old man understood me in an instant.

'Margery, my dear,' he shouted, 'got me up directly—there's not a moment to lose. Oh, these boys! these boys! young blood and absence of brains! If they would but devote their energies to science—don't distract yourself, my dear, I'll manage it all. Where does Captain Lovell sleep?'

'First door on the right, when you get got down the steps in the bachelors' wing,' I replied, unhesitatingly, much to the surprise of Mrs. Lumley. She would have known too, if she had been shut up there for a couple of hours in a shower-bath.

'I'll go to him as soon as I'm dressed, promised Mr. Lumley. 'I pledge my honor he shan't fight till I give him leave. Go to bed, my dear, and leave everything in my hands. Don't cry, there's a good girl. By the way, the housemaids here are so infernally officious—you haven't seen a good specimen of the common house-spider anywhere about, have you?'

I assured the kind-hearted old naturalist I had not; and as he was already half out of bed, I took my departure and sought my own couch—not to sleep, Heaven knows, but to toss and turn and tumble, and see horrid visions, waking as I was, and think of everything dreadful that might happen to my cousin, and confess to my own heart how I loved him now, and hated myself for having treated him as I had, and reveal, as it were in self-reproach and self-torture. It was broad daylight ere I fell into a sort of fitful doze, so out-wearied and over excited was I, both in mind and body.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It is very disagreeable to face a large party with anything on your mind that you cannot help thinking must be known, or at least suspected, by your associates. When I came down to breakfast, after a hasty and uncomfortable toilette, and found the greater portion of the guests assembled at that gossiping meal, I could not help fancying that every listless dandy and affected fine lady present was acquainted with my proceedings during the last twelve hours, and was laughing in his or her sleeve accordingly. I cast a rapid and frightened glance round the table; and, to my infinite relief, beheld Cousin John eating his egg as composedly as possible; whilst a reassuring smile and pleasant 'Good-morning' from Mr. Lumley gave me to understand that his mediation had averted all fatal proceedings.

The other guests ate and drank, and laughed and chatted much as usual; but still I could not help remarking on the face of each of them a subdued expression of intelligence, as though in possession of some charming bit of news or delightful morsel of scandal. Lady Scapegrace was the first to put me on a footing of equality with the rest.

'We have lost some of our party, Kate,' said she, as she handed me my tea. 'I confess I suspected it last year, in London. She is a most amiable girl, and will have a large fortune.'

beds was dear old Mr. Lumley. He had hobbled out on his crutches purposely to give me an interview. I thanked him, as if he had been my father, for all his kindness; and he talked to me gently and considerately, as a parent would to a child.

'I promised you, my dear, that they should not fight, and I think I have kept my word. Your cousin, Miss Coventry, is a noble fellow,' said the old man, his benevolent features kindling into admiration; 'but I had more trouble with him than his antagonist. He would not be satisfied till Captain Lovell had assured him, on his honor, that you had yourself declined his advances in a manner which admitted of no misconstruction; and that then, and not till then, he considered himself free. You were right, my dear—I am an old man, and I take a great interest in you, so do not think me impertinent—you were right to have nothing to say to a rouse and a gambler.'

'I was not always the old cripple you are so forbearing with now. I lived in the world once, and saw a good deal of life and men. My experience has convinced me that selfishness is the bane of the generality of mankind; but that nowhere is it so thoroughly developed as in those who live, what people call, 'by their wits,' and enjoy all the luxuries and pleasures of life by dint of imposing on the world. I consider Frank Lovell, though we all vote him such a good fellow, one of that class; and I do not think he would have made a good husband to my young friend, Miss Coventry. Your cousin, my dear, is a character of another stamp altogether. and if, as I hear everybody say, he is really to be married to that Welsh girl, I think you will agree with me that she has got a prize such as falls to the lot of few.'

Mr. Lumley was by this time out of breath; but I could not have answered him to save my life. Like one of his own favorite house-spiders, I had been unconsciously spinning a web of delighted self-delusion, and here came the ruthless housemaid and swept it all away. How blind I must have been not to have seen it long ago! John might be very fond of pheasant-shooting, and I believe, when the game is plentiful and the thing well managed, that sport is fascinating enough; but people don't travel night and day into such a country as Wales, where there are no railroads, merely for the purpose of standing in a ride or knocking over a certain quantity of half tame fowls. No, no; I ought to have seen it long ago; I had lost him now, and now I knew his value when it was too late. Too late!—the knell that tolls over half the hopes and half the visions of life.

'Too late!—the one bitter drop that poisons the whole cup of success.' Too late! The golden fruit has long hung temptingly just above your grasp; you have labored and striven, and persevered, and you seize it at last and press it to your thirsty lips. Dust and ashes are your reward; the fruit is still the same, but it is too late; your desire for it has gone, or your power of enjoying it has failed you at the very moment of fruition; all that remains to you is the keen pang of disappointment, or, worse still, the apathy of disgust. I might have made John my slave a few weeks ago, and now—it was too provoking, and for that Welsh girl, too! How I hated everything Welsh! not ancient Pistol, eating his enforced leek with its accompanying sauce, could have entertained a greater aversion for the Principality than I did at that moment.

To be Continued.

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