

Literature.

(Continued.)

LADY OF ABERDEEN HALL

THE MILLINER'S FORTUNE

CHAPTER VI.

THE WORLD'S HONORS AND A SEASON'S MISSTRESS.

Timings are long deferred, and anxious expectations, came at last. The political canvass for a senator to Congress, from the district in which Mr. Wintrop resided, had been a close and laborious one, but it was over at length, and Milford Wintrop was the successful candidate. His name was enrolled among the honorables of his country; there was a seat in the senate hall, at Washington, waiting for his occupancy.

He was very proud of the result, won by his money more than by his worth, and he entered his wife's room with an elastic step. He was the bearer of important tidings, and he gave her them with an air of extreme satisfaction.

"Mrs. Wintrop, you are a senator's wife!" She bowed her head over her child, and simply said, in reply.

"Very well, Mr. Wintrop." These months spent in preparation, and then the month elected senator and his wife set out for Washington. Wintrop had hoped to be left alone, but Mr. Wintrop was proud of her regal beauty, and this beauty could only be gratified by the display of his treasure. He was not content with admiring her himself; he wanted others to see and appreciate the jewel he had in his possession, and no consideration for his lady's wishes would have induced him to forego the gratification of his feeling.

So to the gay capital went Mrs. Wintrop and her child. An elegant mansion, on Madison Square received them, in whose spacious drawing rooms Mrs. Wintrop held receptions unequalled in brilliancy even by those of the President himself.

Her resplendent beauty and queenly bearing were the constant themes of Washington society. The *de m'oeuvres* of her grace, and the stately repose of her perfect features filled every beholder with admiration. Her dresses were copied, her sayings quoted, and she became the model for all the ladies in the fashion-haunted capital.

Once, and once only, during the season, had the long strings of diamonds been stirred in the bosom of the fair Mrs. Wintrop.

A party of inspection were dispatched to New York, by the Administration, to examine some water-works there which had been complained of as defective. Some of the gentlemen on the committee took their wives with them for the pleasure of the trip, and by invitation Wintrop accompanied Senator Gordon and his lady.

It was a beautiful day in early summer—calm, cool and cloudless, and Wintrop wandered off a little way from her party, and directly found herself standing on the bay, from whence a European steamer was about to sail. She glanced hurriedly over the passengers, and was about turning away, when an unaccountable thrill shot through her being. She could neither explain nor analyze it; it was a return of old memories and emotions which she had believed long since in ashes. Some person brushed hastily past her—so near that his arm grazed the folds of her shawl. She lifted her eyes and gazed after him. His firm step sounded on the connecting plank; his dark hair was tossed and threaded by the fresh ocean breeze; and for one little moment the form of Gerard Middleton dazedly reappeared against the sky.

Then the bell sounded; the moorings were cast off, and the great boat steamed rapidly down the river. Wintrop entered the office and looked over the list of passengers. The very first line was filled with what she was looking for:—"Gerard Middleton from London bound to Havre via Liverpool."

The August heats were approaching, but Congress had not yet concluded its session. An unusual press of business still detained the august body at the metropolis, but most of the members' families had left town for some rural place of resort. Wintrop began to languish for cool air of the country; and Mr. Wintrop proposed that she should spend a few weeks at Newport or to Virginia Springs. To this she objected; she wanted rest and quiet rather than a mere change of excitement; some retired place in the country would answer every purpose.

She had heard much of the fine natural scenery of Rappahannock county, and she desired to pass the remainder of the summer in some little village of that mountain region. At the mention of Rappahannock county Mr. Wintrop became more strangely agitated.

"Madam, you will do me a favor by never again referring to this out-of-the-way place as a summer residence. This plan is abominable."

"Why should you object, sir, to a section of our country justly celebrated for its salubrious air and beautiful scenery? Since it meets my wishes, I hardly see what cause you have for interfering in the matter?" Wintrop spoke coolly and laughingly—and he replied as usual.

"I have sufficient cause. My son is to go with you, I presume; and it becomes me to see that he is carried to a proper place. As for my reasons for taking exception to Rappahannock county, it is sufficient that I object."

And for the time the subject dropped. A few days afterwards, Mr. Wintrop obtained leave of absence from congressional duties, and took a journey into the interior of Virginia. When he returned he declared that his objections to Rappahannock county were entirely removed. Business he said, had called him into that section, and he had found it all that could be desired for a temporary sojourn. So well had been pleased, that he had engaged an old mansion a few miles beyond Warrenton—Close to the Blue Ridge—and caused it to be fitted up for the reception of his wife and child.

"Bellemonte"—so the place was called had been a fine old estate, but the family to which it belonged were mostly dead; and late, Bellemonte had been sadly neglected.

Mr. Wintrop had secured a trusty negro and his wife to provide over the establishment; and this worthy couple, with Jack the coachman, and Fanny, the

cook, would comprise the kitchen household. Mrs. Wintrop might take with her as many attendants as she chose.

Wintrop immediately commenced her preparations for leaving Washington. Two days afterwards she set forth, Mr. Wintrop accompanying her as an escort; and Rosy her own maid, to attend to the personal wants of her mistress.

After seeing his wife safely installed at Bellemonte, Mr. Wintrop bade her farewell and returned to Washington. Bellemonte was a wild beautiful spot, in the near vicinity of the lofty hills known as the Blue Ridge. It was thickly wooded with fir-trees of a stunted growth; and half the plantation was covered with huge boulders, which the spring floods from time to time had rolled down from the mountains.

The old mansion itself was dreary and weird enough for any tale of darkness that might be related of it. It was a house where men had lived and died; and one of our noblest poets say that all such are haunted houses!

The rooms were low and dark from the creeping vines that covered the windows; the wainscots were black with age, and worn eaten in many places. The chambers were mostly hung with tapestry, once wrought in beautiful patterns of gorgeous colors, by fair fingers now mouldering perchance like their work; and the furniture—all of dark oak, must have belonged to another generation.

A large portion of the house was uninhabitable; but in the north wing, facing the mountains, three apartments, on the first floor, had been fitted up, not only comfortably, but luxuriously.

The sleeping-room of Wintrop only regretted that the basement was at this point so very high as to preclude all idea of getting to the ground from the spacious balcony. She thought she would have liked to go out for her walks, from this room, rather than be obliged to traverse the whole length of a gloomy corridor, amid the rains, to reach the hall door.

Bellemonte was the property of a family by the name of Brandon, the only remaining member of which was far away. And this was all the information that Wintrop could obtain by questioning Aunt Phillis, the colored housekeeper, who was remarkably taciturn for one of her class.

One apartment of the old house, reserved from the general decay by recent repairs, was a very blue-beamed chamber of horror to the fancy of Wintrop. It was much like the other rooms in its vicinity, save that across the windows were strong iron bars, and the doors were secured with treble bolts upon the outside. There was no fire-place or other convenience for warmth, and the walls were covered with thick green moss.

"Phillis," said Mrs. Wintrop, seeking the old woman in the kitchen, "there is a room in close vicinity to mine that has a great curiosity."

"A deed, missus, dat's mighty curious," replied Phillis, giving the sauce-pan she was scouring a vigorous rub with her black hand.

"Can you tell me what it was used for? The room with the bolt on the outside of the door, and the walls covered with green flannel, I mean."

"Like enough 'twas the parlor," said Phillis, "but the lack of fire across the windows and the green cloth?" continued Wintrop interrogatively.

"Bars to keep the owls out, and green good for bad eyes, I've learn say. Seems to me, missus is mighty 'quisite'."

And with this reasonable solution of the green-room mystery, Wintrop was obliged to content herself.

The days passed pleasantly enough at Bellemonte, save that the mistress had too much time for thought. She was alone once more; free to enjoy undisturbed the society of her darling child; but in spite of the sweet satisfaction, she found her thoughts constantly recurring to the pleasant evenings spent in the parlor at Atherton Hall with Gerard Middleton.

And, try as she would, those old memories could not be stifled; and when the anguish they caused became too great to bear, she would take little Willie in her arms, and set out on a long ramble over the hills.

One August night, Mrs. Wintrop sat in her chamber trying to read; Willie slumbered in his crib by her side; Rosy was in bed in the adjoining room, and everything around the house was hushed to the profoundest quiet.

It had been one of those sultry days peculiar to ripe summer, and the dull, torpid atmosphere was prolific to repose. Her book was uninteresting; the lamp burned dimly; a house fly droned lazily on the window; and Wintrop, acted upon by surrounding influence, sank back in her chair and fell asleep.

She was awakened suddenly by some strange sound. The lamp had gone out, but the starlight streamed fairly into the room. Plainly discernible in the gloom of the place was a tall, gaunt figure standing erect between the starlight and the window, from which the curtain was

August was drawing to a close. The middle of September Mrs. Wintrop was to leave Bellemonte, and return to Maplewood, where she would remain until the winter session of Congress should usher in the gay season at Washington.

It was a bright summer day, and the unusual coolness of the air had invited to out-door exercise. Wintrop had indulged herself in a very long walk, and being quite weary, she went to her bed earlier than was her custom. Willie had coaxed mamma to lie down beside him and tell him a story; and the simple tale finished, the two mother and child were locked in slumber.

Willie's head was nestled close to his mother's bosom, her bright, soft curls mingling with the brown rings that clustered around her full white forehead.

Wintrop slept uneasily—a vague sense of insecurity had oppressed her all the day, and her slumber was troubled with wild dreams and distorted visions.

The touch of some cold substance upon her face awoke her. She knew not at this substance was, but it struck an icy chill to her heart. She lifted her hand to push it away, and that wild, unearthly 'Ha! ha! ha!' heard once before, burst on her ears.

With a terrified cry Wintrop sprang from the couch and peered into the gloom. The same demon face, with horrid blood red eyes and snow-white hair, hovered above her! The same savage tooth, with the lips drawn tightly away from their glittered border!

Wintrop bounded forward, and seizing the heavy bronze candlestick, huried it at the intruder. The light was extinguished as the missile fell; there was a dull, dead sound as of the closing of a great door at some immeasurable distance—and then the silence of death fell upon the chamber.

Willie slept quietly in his bed, and Wintrop stood alone in the centre of the floor.

CHAPTER VII.

THROUGH THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

It was a horrible mystery! Wintrop longed yet trembled, to fathom it. She hoped not to be obliged to ask for aid. She would rather encounter all the danger, if danger there was, and run all the risks.

Night followed night, and during the dark hours that determined woman never closed her eyes. What little rest she had was taken by day, when the household were asleep, and Rosy awoke to take charge of the child.

Wintrop's father had but one brother, named George; and this George Atherton was one of the bravest and most daring men in the country. He had hardly earned the title of colonel, and though now an old man, he had always taken a great delight in teaching his niece the use of warlike weapons. To please the old colonel, the girl had taken lessons in fencing, and was quite an adept in the use of fire arms. In a sportive moment her father had presented her with a case of pistols, and these little desperate weapons had been for years in the false bottom of her trunk.

Now she took them out, loaded the barrels carefully, and placed them by her side, resolved that if she should be again favored with a visit from the mysterious fiend that had twice appeared to her, to try the effect of cold lead upon it.

But it did not seem likely that her courage would be tested. Time passed on monotonously, without variation, and but two nights more remained to Wintrop at Bellemonte.

The intervening day must be spent in packing and making other needful arrangements for traveling; and wearied and drowsy, Wintrop threw herself upon the lounge, without undressing, to catch a few moments' repose before the depth of the night should come. She knew that all her strength would be required for her labors of to-morrow.

She gave Rosy imperative orders to remain awake until she called her; and the girl, seated before the little fire, the dampness of the night had made agreeable, with an entertaining novel in her hand, readily promised obedience.

Wintrop soon fell asleep, for she was very weary, and she knew nothing more till a clock striking one. She started up and put out her arm to clasp her child, but he was not by her side! His place was empty—she was gone! A wild shriek rose from her lips, but she stifled it instantly. Rosy must have taken him up, she said to herself, by the way of assurance. She flew to the side of the girl—Rosy was sound asleep.

"Willie! where is Willie?" demanded the distracted mother, in a frenzy of suspense.

Rosy rubbed her eyes, and stared around her with a blank air. "I have not seen him, madam," she said, "since I laid him down on the bed with you. As I hope for heaven, mistress, I have not!"

Oh! but those who called Mrs. Wintrop cold and passionless should have seen her then. She roused the whole household instantly, and searched the mansion in mad haste. She went herself into the deepest recesses of the mouldy, tomb-like cellars, and through the heavily-framed arches which supported the massive weight of the buildings.

Flambeaux were lighted, and the terrified negroes, led on by that resolute woman, searched every dell and dingle and ransacked every nook in the vicinity. Slaves from the nearest plantations turned out and joined them, their quick sympathies awakened by the cry:—"The child of the Lady of Bellemonte has been stolen!"

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