

A FOLDED AMBUSH.

BY BEATRICE HERON MAXWELL.

"Can you tell me the name of the girl in grey?" he asked, as they took their places at luncheon.

The woman whom he addressed directed a languid glance down the long table in the direction indicated, and said indifferently, "I don't quite see which you mean."

"The one with a face like a saint and a halo of grey feather trimming round it," he answered. His words seemed irreverent, but his tone expressed admiration, and the brown eyes looking into his darkened with annoyance.

"That is Estelle Beaulieu," she said briefly, and busied herself taking off her gloves.

"Estelle," he murmured under his breath, "it reminded me of her, yet I hardly thought—do you know that it is five years since I met her last, Mrs. Dameril?" he added more loudly.

"Is it?" Mrs. Dameril's tone expressed only a polite interest.

"Yes, it must be five years this month. Just about the same time since I saw you. We were all staying down at Folkestone. Do you remember? and as a matter of fact she and I quarrelled. By the bye, you were the indirect cause of our difference of opinion, too."

"Really?" Mrs. Dameril had been looking at him attentively, but her long lashes swept over her eyes now; or he would have seen that there was no surprise in them, only a gleam of triumphant pleasure.

He was still occupied with his reminiscences, and went on happily.

"You and I were both staying with the Halwards, I recollect, and used to ride and skate together. She took it into her head we were very great friends, and one day she accused me of saying something uncomplimentary about her to you. I told her she must have misunderstood you, and then she got vexed and wouldn't listen to any explanation. It was the day before I returned to town, and a month after that I went abroad."

"So suddenly that you couldn't find time to say good-bye to any of your old friends," said Mrs. Dameril ironically.

"Did I not?" he queried. "That was very remiss of me. What a lot has happened since then. I had not even heard of your marriage, and now you are a widow."

"But you and Estelle never did get on very well," she remarked. "She was too high-flown and effervescent for you. She was all purpose and theory, and you were all practical energy. To be reciprocal to yours, a woman should have a calm and placid nature; something on which, in your tired moments, you can lean."

She spoke with a quiet, smooth accent, and Mr. Godfrey Basing looked at her for the first time with real attention. The low, soothing voice harmonized well with the repose and refinement of correctly handsome features; there was an air of essential equanimity about her bearing, and it was only at odd moments that the brown eyes negatived this when their sleepy softness flashed suddenly into impetuous life.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, while a touch of sentiment crept into his tone, and for a moment their mutual glance met.

"She is handsomer than she used to be," he reflected, "and even more sympathetic."

"He is beginning to remember," thought Mrs. Dameril "my influence ought to be stronger now. I know my power, and I can make my opportunities." But even while this flashed through her mind she saw that his mood had changed.

His gaze, travelling past her, was resting again on the girl in grey, a girl with a pale, rapt face, out of which shone eyes like stars, and whose lips seemed to hold a world of saving grace in their grave sweetness.

"Still, I think everybody should accomplish at least one thing in their lives," he said; "should set their mark on time in some way however small. I like individuality to be demonstrated. Estelle had individuality, but no enterprise. I used to tell her so, and she did not like it."

"But it is not given to everyone to have the chance of self demonstration," objected Mrs. Dameril. "Some look for it in vain. You have made a name and a fortune as a capable and brilliant engineer; you are qualified to speak certainly; but remember your chance came to you unsought, and your merit lies in having recognized it and made the most of it."

"That is so," he assented, "but I believe that at least one chance comes to everyone. Many people are too blind or too apathetic or too cowardly to take it."

"I fancy I should seize it if it came to me," said Mrs. Dameril, quickly, "but women have fewer chances than men, I am sure. In what way would success command your admiration for a woman?"

"In many ways. There is the gift of song, of dramatic power, the success of the artist, the authoress. Take now, for instance, this book that everyone is talking of. I heard of 'The Vision of Life' as soon as I landed. I read it in the train coming up; I have listened to discussion concerning it at every dinner party I have been to since. If the writer is a woman, as rumor says, she is worthy of all

admiration, for she has written a book that is a key to human hearts. I should like to meet her."

"Would admiration include love?"

"Not necessarily, but in her case, most probably I should say. I am half in love with her already," he added, smiling. The strength expressed in his features and figure, both well-formed, straight and vigorous, was at its best when he smiled, revealing the capacity for tenderness and humor that often goes with strong natures.

For a moment Mrs. Dameril was silent; her whole mind absorbed with a problem that had suddenly presented itself to her. Had the chance for which she had waited so long come at last, and should she, through cowardice, shrink from taking advantage of it? There were intricacies and subtleties to be thought out; but surely these could wait for her later consideration.

Whether success or failure lay in the acceptance, the solution could be summed up in these words: "I loved you and I did it for the sake of winning your love. You, at least, cannot blame me."

Mr. Basing had returned to the contemplation of his plate when she looked up; the luncheon was nearly over, and there was a sustained hum of general conversation which made a confidence possible.

"If I tell you a secret," she said very softly, "will you promise never to give it away?"

"Is it about yourself or me?" he asked, lowering his voice to the level of hers.

"About me entirely."

"Then I promise."

His interest did not seem to be overpowering; she felt a little nettled.

"Will you feel less bored when I tell you that I know who wrote 'The Vision of Life'?"

"And you will introduce me to her?" He was quite eager now.

"There is no need, you know her already." He could not mistake the significance of her tone.

"Bertha—is it really you?"

Quite unconsciously he had used her Christian name; the formality of their re-acquaintance was forgotten; he had gone back to the old days.

Her face lit up, and her eyes were dangerous as she said, in a sort of breathless way, "Do you remember what you said just now?"

"That I was half in love with her already? I meant it."

"It was for you she wrote it, Godfrey. You inspired her with the dreams she wove into that book."

"Bertha—"

"Hush! You must tell no one, remember. You promised. I had not meant to acknowledge it even to you, but the temptation was too great. I shall have to leave directly after luncheon, because I am driving out into the country to call on some friends. If you cared to drive with me—"

"Of course I care. Good heavens! surely we are not going to have a speech."

The conversation had ceased, and everyone was looking at the host, who, standing up at the head of the table, was clearing his throat ominously.

There was nothing stereotyped about these Sunday luncheons at the great publisher's house, and the company, including the most distinguished of Bohemians in various walks of art were prepared for unconventionality.

"Mr. Pritchard is as successful at speaking as he is at publishing," whispered Mr. Dameril. "He is sure to be amusing."

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Pritchard, "I want to propose a health to you. This little party was arranged by my wife as a birthday greeting to a great friend of hers. We were both of us unaware at the time that it would be the birthday also of an author for whose name the world of readers and writers has been clamoring for some time past. That has only come to our knowledge this morning, and I have asked permission to give you a day's start of the public, and make it known to you here and now. Today is the lady's 24th birthday, and tomorrow a second book will be published by the author of 'The Vision of Life,' and will bear on its title page the name that I am about to give you. Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to drink to the health, happiness and continued success of Miss Estelle Beaulieu."

There was a burst of enthusiasm as they all rose to the toast, and every voice and look were directed toward the girl in grey, those who were near enough leaning forward to shake hands with her, and each vying with the other to express the most appropriate sentiment of congratulation and good wishes. And through the midst of all her gaze turned full on Godfrey, dwelt on his face, while her starry eyes seemed to hold his own under a spell, and to tell him something that had come to him before in dreams, though never in his waking vision of life.

He waited till the clamor was abating, and then, still looking at her, formed with his lips one word—her name—"Estelle," and raised his glass and it was not until they had resumed their seats that the remembrance of what had immediately preceded this revelation occurred to him. He turned to Mrs. Dameril with an unspoken question, in a tumult of supreme astonishment.

Her eyes were full of stormy passion and

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her face was very pale.

"I told you that you were the inspiration of that book," she said, mockingly. "It will be easy for you to find out now whether I spoke the truth or not."

"But," he said, bewildered, "you did know then? I thought you meant—"

"I meant to put you to a test," she interrupted. "I don't think you have come out of it very well. Thank goodness, lunch is over. If you are going to smoke with the rest I am afraid I cannot wait for you. We must postpone our drive to another day."

She had passed out of the room with the other ladies before he had time to reply, and by the time he reached the drawing room, ten minutes later, she was gone.

The two thoughts that possessed her mind were anger at her failure in the very moment when success seemed certain, and relief that a retreat, however lame, had been possible to her.

Meanwhile Godfrey had made his way to Estelle, and was saying to her:

"Am I still in disgrace, or have you forgiven me after all these years?"

"I forgave you long ago," she answered.

"I found that I have been unjust to you. The fault was on my side really, and it is my turn to ask pardon now."

"And to think that it was you who wrote that book," he went on. "Will you let me tell you some time all I felt as I read it? I can scarcely believe that it is you who have accomplished so much. Do you remember how I used to scold you for wasting your time and your talents?"

"You used to tell me that my indolence would be the ruin of me; you used to say that you would despise me in the future for not doing what I had in me to. That was how I first came to write. You made me so angry and so hurt that I wanted to do anything to make you in the wrong."

"Then you cared what I thought?" He longed to hear from her lips the confession that her look had already made to him.

"You did not hate me for an interfering and conceited fool that I was?"

"I never hated you."

"It was all a mistake then—our quarrel?"

"All a mistake. If you had written me one line of good-bye, I would have written and told you so. As it was, I wrote my book instead."

"What a blessed chance, it was, my coming here to-day," he said irrelevantly.

"You met another friend," Estelle said gravely. "What did Mrs. Dameril say to you? Did you like her as much as ever?"

"Did I ever like her?" he echoed. "I don't know; I never thought about it."

"You seemed very glad to meet her again."

"Was I? I think that I am rather sorry that I did. But it does not matter either way. Estelle when can I talk to you? May I see you home? Will you walk across the park with me?"

If you really would like it."

"There is an air of romance about those two," said Mr. Pritchard to his wife as, from the balcony, they watched Estelle and Godfrey walking side by side.

"It appears that they are old friends, I would not be surprised if they were beginning the third volume together."

And Mr. Pritchard was a man of observation.

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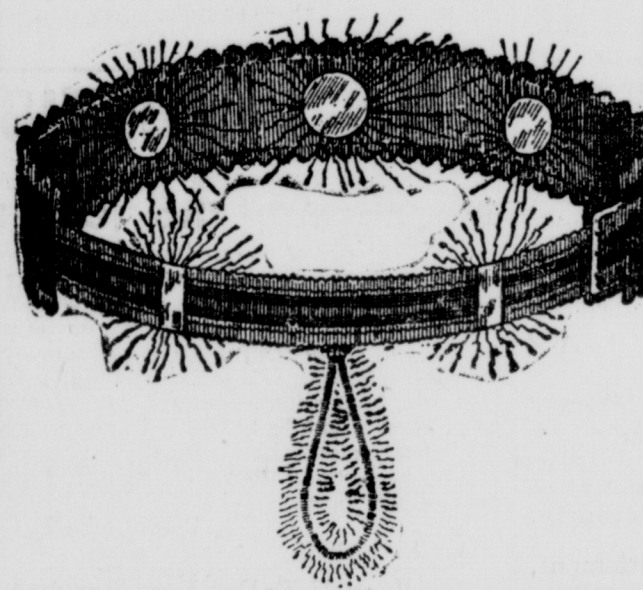
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