

THE LISCOMBE DIAMONDS.

For the third time in one week Sir Edward Liscombe walked up the trim drive which led to Mrs. Chester's front door. His fingers were not quite steady as he pressed the electric bell; but his voice, as he inquired whether Mrs. Chester was at home, was elaborately careless. A slim figure rose from a low chair as he entered the drawing-room. "I thought I told you not to come again for a long time!" said Mrs. Chester.

It was her visitor who blushed. "I couldn't keep away, besides, I wanted to bring you this."

"This" was a Parisian *bonbonniere*, an airy trifle of brocade, stuffed with *fondants* and *marrons glacés*, which had cost the best part of a five-pound note.

"Oh, Teddy, how naughty—how very naughty of you! I've a good mind to say I won't take it."

Sir Edward looked radiant. "You wouldn't be so cruel," he said, confidently.

Mrs. Chester shook her head at him reprovingly. "You are a dear boy, but a shockingly extravagant one," she said. "Now, sit down; I want to speak to you seriously. Does your mother know this is the third time you have been to see me this week?"

Sir Edward shifted uneasily on the lemon-coloured brocade of his seat. "The matter! I don't know that I've mentioned it to her. Why?"

"Because I doubt whether she would approve."

"She would if she knew you better."

"Perhaps. But, you see, she takes particular care not to know me better." Mrs. Chester's tone was faintly reproachful.

"I'll speak to the mater," said Liscombe, eagerly. "I'm sure she hasn't thought about it. And, by the way, I want to know if you will help in our tableaux? There are some parts just made for you; do say 'yes!'"

"I shall be delighted, if your mother is kind enough to send me an invitation."

Liscombe nodded. "Of course. I only thought I would sound you about it first."

"Thanks; but it would make me a great deal happier if your mother thought more kindly of me. When a woman lives by herself she is apt to brood over little slights."

"Slights! Oh, Lucy!"

"Hush! I said you were never to call me that again."

"I'm awfully sorry—it slipped out," said Sir Edward, penitently.

"I think it's quite time you went," said Mrs. Chester, severely; "and remember, I shall not be at home to you again unless your mother has been civil to me in the interval. But of course you will be able to work that all right."

Meanwhile Lady Liscombe was in a sad quandary, a state of mind for which Mrs. Chester was entirely responsible.

When it first leaked out that Sunnyslawn had been taken by a widow lady, conjecture ran high in Frampton. After a few weeks the verdict was almost unanimous in the newcomer's favor, for Mrs. Chester was charming. Even her own sex admitted as much, and when a woman succeeds in fascinating the majority of her sisters you may safely infer that her gifts are of no mean order. I say "majority" advisedly, for there certainly existed a minority, composed of sundry suspicious matrons, who, possessing marriageable daughters, looked askance upon the delightful widow. And at their head was no less a personage than Lady Liscombe, who had recently made the unpleasant discovery that her son had committed the folly of falling in love with Mrs. Chester.

"Folly" was the only word Lady Liscombe permitted herself to use in discussing the deplorable incident with her legal adviser and tried friend, Mr. Reginald Morton. Her manner, however, was eloquent, and that astute man of the world did not fail to grasp the gravity of the situation.

Now, the youthful baronet dreaded a scene as much as most men, and, moreover, he stood in old-fashioned awe of his mother; for which reasons, in spite of his easy assurances to Mrs. Chester, he approached Lady Liscombe's boudoir with the meanness of a schoolboy who anticipates a rowing from the "head."

The sheepish expression on her son's countenance filled Lady Liscombe with alarm, but she was somewhat fortified by a recent conversation with Mr. Morton, who had strongly advocated a policy of conciliation, and, in accordance with this advice, her ladyship's tone was sugary in the extreme.

"I've been calling on Mrs. Chester!" he blurted out.

"Indeed!" The saccharine element was qualified by a judicious dash of surprise.

"Yes, she's awfully pained because you haven't taken any notice of her."

"I called on Mrs. Chester at the vicar's request."

"I know; but I want you to ask her to take a part in the tableaux—she would be so pleased. Do write something cordial; she is such a jolly little woman."

"I will send Mrs. Chester an invitation if you wish it," said Lady Liscombe, sweetly, and, having gained his point, her son beat a hasty retreat.

Out of deference to Mrs. Chester's scruples,

Sir Edward Liscombe refrained from allotting to her more than three principal characters, leaving the remaining plums to be scrambled for, haphazard, among the other ladies. The pretty widow was unquestionably the life and soul of the rehearsals, and, although she could not have been accused of putting herself forward, it was nevertheless a fact that the entertainment hung fire in her absence. Even Lady Liscombe was forced to admit—to Mr. Morton—that the woman's behaviour so far had been most exemplary.

"Teddy, you must lend me some jewels for Cleopatra," said Mrs. Chester, one day. "Cleopatra ought to be a blaze of jewels, and I have so few. Don't you want me to look my best, Teddy?"

There was a suspicious moisture in the dark eyes. Sir Edward looked into them and was lost.

"I'll do my best to get the family jewels," he said.

Emboldened by the success which had attended his last interview, Liscombe approached his mother with some assurance, expecting merely a slight preliminary opposition to his demand. He had yet to learn that it is the unexpected that happens.

Lady Liscombe was so much taken aback by the audacious request that she forgot her carefully studied role and spoke her mind freely.

"I was a fool ever to listen to you. I might have known what it would lead to," were among the unwise remarks to which her ladyship gave utterance.

"My dear mother, you talk as though I was threatening you with some dire misfortune," said Sir Edward, soothingly. "What earthly harm could it do to lend the blessed things to Mrs. Chester for that one scene?"

But his honeyed words entirely failed to dispel Lady Liscombe's wrath. She entreated, she argued—had she been of the opposite sex she would have sworn—but through it all her son remained obdurate. When at last his mouth closed in a tight, thin line, a trait inherited from his father, she threw up the sponge. But when the baronet had retired with the honours of war Lady Liscombe sent post-haste for Mr. Morton, into whose sympathetic ears she poured out the tale of her woes.

"He doesn't see that it is tantamount to announcing his intentions," she wailed; "and if he did, he is so infatuated that I believe it would not deter him. If he engages himself to that woman I shall go mad!"

Her ladyship ended with a heavy sigh, but the tragedy-step left Mr. Morton quite unmoved.

"I saw Mrs. Chester for the first time yesterday." His tone was, if anything, more measured than usual.

"And what did you think of her?" demanded Lady Liscombe, eagerly.

"A charming woman—charming!" said Mr. Morton, reflectively, apparently overcome at the recollection.

"Is that all?" fumed her ladyship.

"I think you need be under no apprehension as to an engagement between the parties."

"Why?"

"It is of course, possible that I am mistaken, but— Mr. Morton drew his chair a little closer to Lady Liscombe and continued in a brisk undertone. As he talked her ladyship's expressive countenance displayed many varying emotions, culminating finally in one of triumph.

"I will do it! I will do it! It is worth any risk," she cried, and she seized Mr. Morton's hands and wrung them effusively. When that gentleman had taken his departure as unobtrusively as he had come, Lady Liscombe sent for her son.

"I have been thinking over what you asked me, my dear boy, and have come to the conclusion that I have no right to refuse you," said her ladyship, sweetly. "You shall have the jewels as you wish."

Mrs. Chester asked permission to bring her maid with her on the night of the tableaux, a request which Lady Liscombe granted most willingly, as every available pair of hands in the house would be in demand.

It was not only Sir Edward Liscombe who caught his breath and stared when Cleopatra swept into the green-room. The Liscombe diamonds gleamed on her bosom and in the soft clouds of her dusky hair, her neck showed dimly white beneath rows of pearls, and strings of uncut turquoises intersected with moonstones hung over her shoulders.

"Was I not right to ask you for the jewels?" whispered Mrs. Chester.

Sir Edward's expression was that of a man who has stared inadvertently in the eyes of the sun.

"It's marvellous! marvellous!" he murmured rapidly. Again and again the curtain had to be raised, while subdued murmurs ran through the hall.

"Cleopatra is wearing the Liscombe diamonds!"

"My dear, what can it mean?"

"Lady Liscombe must approve or she would never—"

"Of course the woman is beautiful, but I never have admired that sort of gipsy style."

"Her wearing the jewels can only point to one thing!"

It was fortunate that "Cleopatra's Court" was the final item in the programme, for when the curtain fell for the last time Mrs. Chester slipped to the floor in a faint. Sir Edward carried her to her dressing room, where her maid, an angular, forbidding-looking woman, assured him in gruff tones that Mrs. Chester was subject to these attacks and would be herself again presently. A quarter of an hour later a message was brought to him: "Would he speak to Mrs. Chester for a moment in the green-room?"

He found her there alone. She was exquisitely pale with the pallor of *poudre d'amour*, and there were violet lines drawn by the hand of an artist beneath her eyes. Sir Edward thought she had never looked more beautiful.

"I wanted to say good-night and thank you for all your kindness," said Mrs. Chester, a little shakily.

"You are not going yet—I won't allow it!"

"I must. I can't bear giving trouble, and I should prefer to go home. It was so very stupid of me to faint. The jewels are with your mother's maid, so they are quite safe. Tell me, Teddy, before I go, did you like me as Cleopatra?"

"Like you? Oh, Lucy, you were beautiful—glorious!" said Sir Edward, brokenly.

"I like to hear you say that," murmured Mrs. Chester.

Sir Edward seized the nearest white hand and held it fast. "My angel! my queen!" he said, passionately.

There came a discreet knock at the door. "It is Elizabeth," said Mrs. Chester; "the carriage must be waiting."

She looked up at Sir Edward, her dark eyes unfathomable as the heavens on a starry night. Good-night and—good-bye!" she whispered.

Sir Edward did not catch the words; his own eyes were lit suddenly by the unspoken message in hers; he took her in his arms and rained kisses on her lips. Again came the discreet knock.

Mrs. Chester broke from his arms and ran to the door.

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The last guest had gone. The ladies of the house-party had retired to discuss the events of the evening over their bedroom fires, the men had sought the smoking-room. Liscombe was on his way thither when Morton stopped him.

"I want to speak to you in private," he said.

Liscombe led the way to the deserted green-room. "Fire away," he said lightly.

"I am sorry to say I have unpleasant news for you. Mrs. Chester took the Liscombe jewels with her when she left."

The hot colour surged in a tide over the younger man's face.

Concluded on sixth page.

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