

The Adopted Daughter.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FALSE FRIEND.

At an early hour the next morning after Ralph Courtney's return home, the carriage was driven to the door, and Sir John prepared to take his departure for Italy.

"You will be very tender of Amber, Ralph," he said, taking his son aside. "I have been away from here so little that she will miss me greatly."

"She will indeed, father," declared Ralph. "Why not let me go to Italy in your stead? I can negotiate with the brigands as well as yourself."

"True, my son, but I prefer you to remain at home for many reasons. My poor brother has doubtless suffered a great deal among those ruffians, and I must go in person to his release."

The baronet shook his son's hand warmly, and expressed a hope that on his return matters would be on the footing he desired between Ralph and Amber.

As he turned away, Amber threw herself into his arms. "Oh, papa, take me with you!" she sobbed. "I feel as though something will happen to you while you are gone—something terrible!"

"Nonsense, my darling!" responded the baronet, caressing her. "Why, where is all your usual cheerfulness? How can anything terrible happen to me? I shall go armed and disguised when necessary, and besides, I shall always be attended by Gregg, my valet, you know. Cheer up, Amber; don't let my last memory of you be unpleasant!"

Amber struggled to regain her self-possession, and her tone was calmer as she said: "I wish you'd take me with you, father. Can't you manage it? I can get ready in a few minutes!"

"No, dear, I cannot expect you to danger your life for my sake. I will place you in the hands of the best surgeon in the city, and he will attend to you as best he can."

"He folded her to his breast, caressing her again and again, and then he turned to Jasper Longley, shaking hands with him. The greetings were soon over, and the farewells said, and Sir John took his place in the carriage, and was driven toward Geneva."

Amber watched the retreating vehicle until the forms of driver and valet, who sat side by side on the box, seemed melted into one, and then she was aroused from her grief by Ralph, who said: "As you are left in my care, Amber, I propose that you, Blanche, and I devote the morning to getting acquainted with each other. Jasper has, I see, retreated to his own room, but he will, doubtless, soon join us."

Ralph, as he spoke, placed chairs for the two girls, and seated himself near them. Amber was somewhat embarrassed at his frank proposal, but Blanche was never more at her ease. She led her young host to talk to his university and student friends and smiled when she learned that he had few feminine acquaintances, and those not at all young.

"The more hope that I shall captivate him" she thought. "I don't believe he has ever seen so pretty a woman as I am. Young gentlemen fresh from college, are always susceptible."

ney is no ordinary affair. I do not blame Amber for boasting of her future grandeur. She is a very good girl—very good indeed. Not very pretty nor good tempered, perhaps, but blessed with the love of your father and yourself."

Ralph was silent and thoughtful. "As to her temper," said Blanche, as if wishing to excuse Amber's pretended fault, "how many queens and other great women have been bad tempered. She gives away a great deal of money—rather indiscriminately, it is true—but still she keeps giving. And then she has made Mrs. George and every servant at the Hall her fast friends. They all know that she is soon to be their mistress."

She paused to give her words effect. Ralph thoughtfully summed up the faults enumerated by Blanche as belonging to Amber. First, and worst, in his opinion, was a sullen bad temper. Second, a want of delicacy in proclaiming to every one that she was to be the next Lady Courtney. Third, an indiscriminate giving to the poor, doing more hurt than good. Fourth, making the servants her friends and confidants.

Ralph had no thought of doubting Blanche's word. Had he been disposed to doubt her, he would have been puzzled as to what motive could actuate such a false accusation. He believed her implicitly. He had seen himself that Amber was honestly, he believed he had seen her honesty. "I believe the rest was easy."

"Amber will make you a very devoted wife, I think," said Blanche, after a long silence. "She was quite angry when she said that she would not marry me. I owe you and her an apology for coming between you, when you must be so eager to see each other again. My father will run in and make my apologies to Amber, and send her to you."

"She started up as if about to put her words into execution, but Ralph gently detained her. "You are laboring under a misapprehension," he said, quietly. "What you have said has taken me quite by surprise. I do not think you will ever be unpleasanted."

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With this idea she exerted all her fascinations, talking of her gay Persian life, of the celebrities she had seen, and the places she had visited, until Ralph had become thoroughly interested in her. The contrast between the two girls soon forced itself upon his mind.

Amber, with her red eyes and tear-stained face, sat so silent that he thought her sullen, little knowing how eagerly she listened to every word that fell from his lips, nor what a passionate gaze she fixed upon his face when he was not looking at her.

Blanche, on the contrary, with her sparkling face, her luxuriant curls quivering with every motion of her little head, and having her peevish and animated voice, seemed the embodiment of loveliness. Blanche was delighted at the silence and unexpressed admiration of Amber, but her manner was full of assumed tenderness, as she paused in one of her liveliest descriptions, and said: "I don't give you any opportunity to say anything, Amber dear. You mustn't allow me to monopolize the conversation!"

"I know nothing of society, Blanche," returned Amber, gratefully. "But I like to hear you talk."

colored yet familiar looking face. What a worn and anxious expression is on his features!"

"It is Sir John, declared the doctor, sadly. There is no mistaking the Courtney features. I hoped against hope until now."

"He looked a little longer on the dead man's face, and then softly withdrew, leaving the mourning son alone with his grief."

"No mistaking the Courtney features," repeated Ralph, gazing through a mist of tears. The words suggested an idea, and he turned the bell, ordering Gregg's to be sent to him.

The valet speedily made his appearance. He was an elderly man, who had been in Sir John's service for many years, and his face and hair were grizzled with age. "Sit down, Gregg," said Ralph, indicating a chair. "I want you to give me the particulars of this morning's affair. My uncle—was he not rescued? Is he still with the brigands?"

"He is dead, too," replied Gregg. "Let me tell you how it happened. When we arrived at Salerno, we went to a hotel in town, and the next day a peasant came with a note for Sir John, appointing him to meet his uncle at a certain place. Sir John disguised himself and went thither, taking me with him. He took no money, and I carried the checks for security."

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"I—I—" she faltered. "Papa wished—"

Ralph misunderstood her. He supposed that she desired to urge his father's wish upon him, and thus force him to marry her, and his voice was cold and stern as he said: "My father would have wished me to suit myself in the choice of a wife. I shall never marry a woman, Amber, whom I can not thoroughly esteem."

"There are many reasons why I should not choose you for a wife, if you will allow me to speak plainly. No man desires to marry a forward, ambitious girl, who is determined to thrust herself upon him—"

Amber uttered a wild wail of anguish. "We will drop the subject here," continued Ralph, his tone softening, and he gave her a look of pity. "I will be a brother to you and look after and protect you. You shall have every further advantage of education, and you have only to express a wish to have it gratified. I thank you for your love for my father, and shall never doubt that that love was genuine. In memory of that affection, which was so warmly returned by him, you may always command me to any reasonable extent."

"Ready to sink to the earth with shame and mortification at having been so cruelly misunderstood, poor Amber clutched her papers, and, with blinded eyes and quivering brain, tottered in silence from the room."

How little had Sir John foreseen that the love he had so carefully fostered in Amber's heart would so soon prove to her a source of exquisite misery. How little had he foreseen for his darling such an hour of terrible anguish!

"Oh, if I could only die!" wailed Amber, as she crept to her room, and flung herself upon a couch. "Alone she despises me! Alone I love me! Alone—friendless—Oh, must I live any longer!"

(To be continued.)

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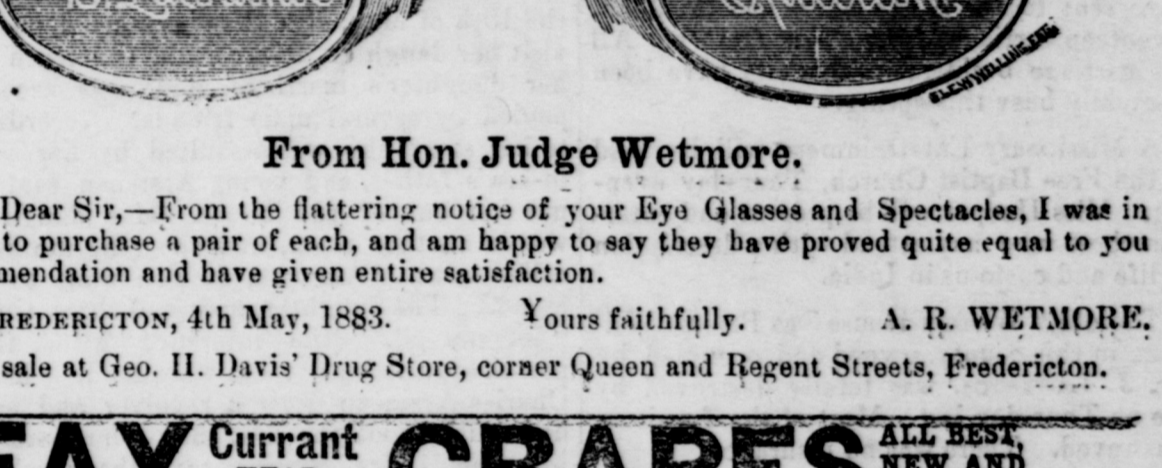
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