

THE DOUGLAS HER.

CHAPTER XX. A STARTLING RECOGNITION.

Meanwhile the evening of Lady Pease's drawing room came and went. Isobel's feelings were no longer of the same nature as they had been on the occasion, and she succeeded admirably.

Her mind dwelt continually upon Adrian's treatment of her, and she felt that she was winning him for herself; for she had been told that his grandfather possessed a rent-roll of sixty thousand pounds yearly, while the young man himself had quite a fortune in his own right; and although she did not stop to analyze the feelings of her heart toward him, yet her interest in him was evidently gaged somewhat according to his expectations.

Her father's unexpected return, and his anger at her own and her mother's treatment of Miss Douglas, had a great effect upon her mind, however. He had manifested that the jewels he brought to him, and another exciting scene ensued over them.

It must be confessed that he was somewhat confounded himself when he beheld them, and a feeling of doubt entered his mind regarding Brownie's honesty; but he would not confess it to his family, and censured them in no light terms for the dishonorable way in which they had become possessed of the rare stones.

It ended in angry tears on the mother's and daughter's part, and in his taking charge of those unfortunate trinkets which had caused so much trouble, and looking upon them severely.

The morning of Lady Pease's drawing room Isobel sought her mother, disconsolately written upon every line of her fair proud face.

"Mamma," she said, "I have not a decent jewel to wear with my costume to-night."

"I am sure you always considered your diamonds good enough for anything until you saw those others," Mrs. Coolidge replied in an injured tone.

"But I had set my heart upon wearing that tiara, and that superb necklace. I do not know."

"It is all too bad from beginning to end, that our trip abroad must be spoiled by that girl. Without looking at her, could I ever forgive you, and your father is very angry with you for entering her room and pulling over her things, and I advise you not to mention the subject to him again."

"Humph! It seems to me that he is wonderfully interested in Miss Douglas's welfare for a married man," sneered the dutiful daughter.

"There! you can leave my presence if you are going to talk in that way!" returned Mrs. Coolidge, coloring an angry red.

She was somewhat sensitive upon that point herself, although she did not like to confess it.

Isobel dawdled away the morning in a state of fretful unhappiness, and declared to herself, over and over again, that her appearance would be ruined without the governess's jewels.

After dinner, however, her father complained of a raging headache; two hours later he was in a high fever, all thoughts of his attending to the evening's festivities were relinquished.

From that moment Isobel's spirits rose, the clouds vanished from her brow, and she was even heard humming a gay opera air.

"Wilbur can act as our escort, mamma; so we shall be all right," she said, when her mother complained of the circumstance as spoiling all their pleasure.

"I have no heart for it, and would not go myself, were it not on your account," she replied, wearily.

Her husband's displeasure, and the fate of the missing governess, still weighed heavily on her conscience.

A few hours later she and Wilbur were waiting in the drawing room for Isobel to make her appearance.

"Does my amiable sister contemplate a brilliant conquest to-night, that she is so long making her toilet?" asked the young man, who had been pressed into the service, and was impatient of the delay.

"Do speak a little more kindly of Isobel my son," said Mrs. Coolidge, adding with a heavy sigh, "In all probability she will marry some day, and it is desirable that she should be well provided for."

"Certainly, only there may be a difference of opinion as to what a good match is," he returned sarcastically.

"I consider that she occupies a good position in the world, and who has plenty of money, an eligible party."

"Regardless of either heart, brain, or principles," interrupted the young man, "why will you be so disagreeable, Wilbur? Of course, I expect your sister will exercise good judgment in the matter, and I have no fear of her letting herself be taken down, or losing her head by any silly nonsense," retorted Mrs. Coolidge, pointedly.

Wilbur understood her insinuation perfectly, but would not notice it enough to reply, and just then the rustle of rich trailing garments was heard upon the stairs.

A moment later the door opened, and Isobel entered.

There was an instant's silence as both mother and son turned to contemplate her.

"Isabel!" exclaimed the former, in tones of gratified pride.

"When?" replied her brother, under his breath.

"There was cause, truly, for these observations of pleasure and surprise, for the young girl certainly had the appearance of a queen, and, for the first time in her life, she was handsome."

Her tall figure was clad in a rich white silk, with raised figures of golden maize wrought upon it. It fitted her elegantly and swept out behind her in graceful, almost train. It was very simply made, being trimmed only by a fall of elegant lace from the low-cut corsage and sleeves. Its very richness was enough to be used.

her elegance, and it was she who had called forth the above question. "That is Miss Douglas. She is an American, and belongs to a very wealthy family, who are spending a year abroad."

"I should judge she did belong to a wealthy family from her appearance. Why, she has at least a thousand pounds in diamonds on her, said the first speaker."

"She is a stunner, eh?" "She is the most striking woman present this evening; and yet, aside from her jewels, her dress is the most simple. Do you know her?"

"Yes, I have met her several times." "Will you introduce me?" "Certainly, Sir Charles."

A few moments later, as Isobel was about to enter her room, she saw two gentlemen approaching her.

"Miss Coolidge, allow me to present Sir Charles Randall, who requests the pleasure of your acquaintance to you."

Sir Charles bowed low, and Miss Coolidge, rising, swept him a graceful courtesy, and soon after was again circling around the room, supported upon the arm of her admirer.

She had heard of Sir Charles Randall, but had never seen him before. She knew he was reputed to be a very wealthy man, and she was a prospect of more property to come in the future, from a rich aunt.

She had watched long for the approach of her friend, hoping to captivate him at once by her charms. But when he did come, he only noticed her presence by the haughtiest glance, and she would not confess it to his family, and censured them in no light terms for the dishonorable way in which they had become possessed of the rare stones.

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She realized now that Mehetabel Douglas, the governess, must have been a relative of another Mrs. Douglas, and she had to do once been engaged to this peer of the realm, and between whom some misunderstanding had arisen and caused a separation. This account she had heard with the strange titled names upon it, and also for the splendor which had astonished her, and which she could not reconcile with Miss Douglas's otherwise desolate condition.

She had then wondered the governess; the property was hers beyond a doubt, and what she should do with it, she could not return the jewels, for the young girl was apparently lost to them forever, and she would have to carry away the jewels, and she was, as Wilbur had said, the thief. But it would not do to indulge in such thoughts now, and in explanation of her own feelings, she said:

"My lordship thought from my appearance that I was the child of some one whom he knew, and he spoke to me very abruptly."

"My lord is very eccentric about some things; he is getting quite old, too, and people do not mind him," replied Sir Charles, giving the matter no further thought.

CHAPTER XXI. THAT VOICE.

Isabel and her mother were jubilant over the result of Lady Pease's drawing room.

The occasion had been one of signal triumph for the former, for she had been universally declared the belle of the evening—the reigning star in all that brilliant company.

Not so much indeed on account of her superior beauty—for she could lay no claim to beauty of features—as her stately presence, fascinating address, and her rich and elegant attire.

Sir Charles Randall had undoubtedly been deeply impressed, for after his introduction to the fair American, and his recollection of the remainder of the evening. He called the next day, and the next he came to escort her to Buckingham Palace, the queen and her retinue being absent, and having obtained a pass, he had that royal residence so fraught with his toral interest.

These incidents led to a more intimate acquaintance, until the young baronet became her almost constant attendant at the opera and other places of amusement, and it soon grew to be common talk that the fair American was likely to win him for a husband.

Isabel's heart often turned longingly toward Adrian Dremford, for she had been deeply touched by his fascinating ways, and she was not without her ideal of many excellences and nobility, but she knew how useless was that longing, for that look of scorn which he gave her at Lady Pease's drawing room had not plainly how heartily he despised her.

She had met him since at a number of parties of amusement, but he never asked her to dance, or noticed her presence save by a grave, cool bow, and the involuntary curling of his handsome lips; so she turned the battery of her charms upon the baronet, and with much better success.

Sir Charles was accounted a very fine young man, and a great catch, for he, too, was very rich; so the young man spread her motherly wings, ruffled her most gorgeous plumes, and made much of her, feeling immensely gratified at her daughter's evident success, although no proposals had as yet been made.

Two months passed thus; the search for Brownie had been given up by Mr. Coolidge who considered the probability of a clew to her whereabouts, and he finally came to the conclusion that, despairing of obtaining a situation in excitement and adventure, he would return to her native land, hoping to be more successful there.

What to do with her property was a puzzle to him, and he was not without an account of it, but he could only look it carefully away, hoping some time in the future to see her and return it.

When she was returned to her father, she had her own property, and she had the gems she had worn to the casket without his knowledge, and emboldened by her good luck, she continued, from time to time, to abstract some of them to garnish her ravishing toilets. At length her triumph was complete.

Sir Charles Randall proposed and was accepted, and great was the rejoicing thereof.

His mother, at first, was somewhat troubled at the idea of his marrying out of his own country—she had hoped he would choose some one of his own race, but as she was eager to multiply his worldly possessions, and she had heard such accounts of Mr. Coolidge's fabulous wealth, she consented, and, as far as possible, and the contract was fully completed to the satisfaction of all parties.

Mr. Coolidge, who could not fail to honor the young man, and who was not without a gem or two, was getting a husband much too good for her, unless she mended her ways in the future, and it certainly seemed as if she had adopted his advice, for she became so amiable, apparent, that she excited the admiration of all for the time.

Lady Randall was a widow. At the death of her husband she had been left with two sons and a fifteen-year-old daughter, and she was Sir Charles, ten.

The elder died in just a year after his title, and that the younger came into the title and property.

There had been a prospect two years after Sir Charles's birth of another addition to the family, but Lady Randall was so unwell, and she died in the year of her birth, and remained a year after the event occurred; therefore it occasioned scarce any remark when it was reported that there was a new daughter.

When, after her return to England, a friend ventured to speak of her disappointment, Lady Randall had put her hand to her forehead, and she had said, and remarked that "it was so hard to lose one's children," and there the matter dropped.

Not more than a week after the engagement between Sir Charles and Isobel was announced, Mr. Coolidge was suddenly recalled to New York upon important and unforeseen business.

His partner telegraphed for his immediate return, and he departed in that haste, having only a few hours in which to make his preparation and catch the steamer. And in his haste, he had taken with him, as he had intended, Miss Douglas's casket of jewels.

As soon as Lady Randall knew of his departure, she sent a white card containing an invitation to Mrs. Coolidge and her family, to spend a month with them at their country seat, as they were about departing for a season from town.

This was exceedingly flattering to the Coolidges, and the last of February found them domiciled at "Vallingham Hall," near the ancient and beautiful town of West Malling, Kent county; all but Wilbur, who, still heart-sore and filled with anxiety upon Brownie's account, resolved to stay in London, and in a few days returned to his father; he drew his tall top hat to his eyes, and with a courteous, though dignified, attention to Isobel, he said, in his usual stately way:

"I beg your pardon for my seeming rudeness. There are certain circumstances under which I sometimes forget one's self. I beg you to forgive and forget what has just occurred."

He turned and left them almost as abruptly as he came, while Isobel sank back into her seat, weak and frightened, although considerably enlightened upon some points. Her tongue had seemed glued to the roof of her mouth, and she could not have answered his questions had he given her the opportunity. She was immensely relieved, however that it had not been required of her; for she feared she should have committed herself, since it was evident that he knew the history of the jewels which she wore.

A vestibule, with its floor of richly colored tiles—"all Mosaic, choice plann'" led into a wide hall, which divided the dwelling through the center.

On the right was a charming drawing room, not too large, and furnished with rare taste and elegance.

Leading from this was a small concert-parlor or boudoir, which was the choice collection of plants to be found, and which filled the whole room with fragrance, while the happy songsters, which hung in their gilded cages, made the air resonant with melody.

On the left of the hall were three spacious rooms, the first an exquisite parlor or boudoir, which was the choice collection of plants to be found, and which filled the whole room with fragrance, while the happy songsters, which hung in their gilded cages, made the air resonant with melody.

Back of this was an L, or sort of gallery, containing the dining-room, and other apartments, where a boxroom, good natured damsel presided with vigorous care and skill in the culinary department.

Above were charming little suites of rooms, beautiful and luxurious enough to satisfy the most exacting, and fit bowers for the fairest virgins to dwell upon.

The whole place was a gem, and one could not but cry with a great poet: "Oh, all things fair to sate the curious eyes! Oh, shapes and hues that please them well!"

But, unlike that "Palace of Art," one did not come upon "Uncertain shapes; nor unwarmed Oh white-eyed phantasms weeping tears of blood, And horrible nightmares?"

No; everything, from the airy cupola, with its many rich hues above, to the solid foundations beneath, was perfect, harmonious, and cheerful.

But what of the occupants. More of them anon. Vallingham Hall was already gay with company when the Coolidge arrived, and more was expected the following week.

Just who the maternal Coolidge could not learn, although quite anxious to do so, and she had questioned the maid who was assigned to serve them as far as politeness would allow.

Excursions, croquet parties, archery parties, and picnics were planned for every day, when the weather would allow, while the evenings were filled with gayety and pleasure within the great drawing-room.

Sir Charles's courtship seemed to be of the most blissful nature, at least to two persons.

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"A little—it was so quiet before." "I think very fine," he replied, stopping to listen again to the clear, beautiful tones of her voice.

"Who lives there?" Isobel asked, an anxious expression on her face.

"Lady Ruxley, an aged aunt of my mother's."

"Indeed! I thought she resided with you," she said, wondering why a lady of such high degree should be living in what appeared to her such limited quarters.

She had heard of Lady Ruxley before and knew that it was from her Sir Charles was to inherit a large amount of his property.

She had never met her, although she was quite curious about her, having heard much about her peculiarities.

"Lady Ruxley always makes it her home with us while we are in town, but when we come to Vallingham Hall she prefers to be by herself, and a few years since she had this villa built, so as to escape the gayety and confusion which always reign there," Sir Charles explained.

"Does she live alone?" Isobel queried with a thoughtful look.

"She has never had any one but her servants, until within the past few years she has had a companion to read to and amuse her. She is quite odd."

"Ah, then it must be her companion who is singing now," and she leaned eagerly forward to listen again. "Who is she?" she asked, somewhat sharply, when after a moment the sweet singer suddenly ceased.

"I really do not remember the name—some unfortunate individual, I believe who met with an accident, enlisted Aunt Ruxley's sympathies, and she insisted upon having her as a companion. I have never seen her. Indeed," he added, smiling, "my time has been so fully occupied in another direction lately that I have not paid much attention to other people's affairs," and Sir Charles bestowed a fond look upon his betrothed which called the bright color to her cheeks, and the smile to her lips again.

She asked no more questions, and they remained a few moments longer gazing into the valley; then, as the sun sank out of sight, and the air began to grow cooler, they turned their faces homeward.

As they passed the villa they caught a glimpse of an old woman bent nearly double with age, hobbling into the house from the vine-covered porch.

She was leaning upon the arm of a slender, graceful figure, who seemed to stand in deep mourning, the sight of which made Isobel's heart throb again with a sudden fear, and she bent forward for a better view.

She could not distinguish the person clearly, for the shadow of the vines about the door made it impossible, but a nameless dread of something she knew not what, pursued her the entire evening, and she was not without her ideal of many excellences and nobility, but she knew how useless was that longing, for that look of scorn which he gave her at Lady Pease's drawing room had not plainly how heartily he despised her.

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