

MISS HOBBS.

BY MRS. M. A. DENISON.

[Continued.]

CHAPTER IV.

"Really—I'm very sorry—really, I didn't mean to—I hate to disturb a *tea-tete* between a man and a woman, as the French say. I came to look for my Chinese fan, but I don't see it anywhere round. Don't let me interrupt the little drama; I can come again."

"Pray, don't trouble yourself to apologize, adorable Miss Clips," said young Templeton, now very red in the face, "and don't leave the room, which you always abandon. I assure you I am going myself. If I had known that you were within ear-shot I should have said something pretty about you," and he went out, muttering language whose import was that she must be related to a very great and appalling personage, not to be named here.

"Pity to spoil such a tender little interview," said Miss Clips, with a smile.

"Oh, there was nothing particularly tender about it," replied Miss Hobbs, rising to go.

"He is fond of making pretty little scenes, having had more than one rehearsal with my poor niece," said Miss Clips, with something very like a genuine sigh.

Miss Hobbs, as she rose, turned and gave her an amazed glance—very likely a haughty one, as well.

"Miss Clips, I do not understand you," she said, a cool dignity in voice and manner. "Is Mr. Templeton Miss DeWitt's acknowledged lover?"

"You would make a fine tragic queen, Miss Hobbs," was the reply, delivered with a touch of irony, while the woman was deliberating in what way she could compass her object without compromising her niece.

"There are attentations, and attentations, Miss Hobbs, those of deliberate purpose, those of mere egotism and for the purpose of passing time pleasantly; which meant for my niece and which for you I cannot tell. Mr. Templeton enjoys the reputation of being a flirt, in some quarters. He should be married—he is old enough—all of thirty, surely. Still, he may not be worthy of a good woman's love—indeed, well, I have a secret—that is, I know something which might, in a woman of your mature mind, lead you to think twice before you encourage his attentations."

"I wish to hear none of your secrets, Miss Clips, and I assure you that his attentations are nothing to me;" whereupon she blushed a vivid scarlet—and something, some little internal monitor convinced her of falsehood then and there.

Still she lingered.

"They are generous men, the General and his nephew," said Miss Clips, looking down upon her hands, now locked so tightly that the sinuous veins stood out like cords. "As I happen to belong to a benevolent association, I sometimes go on little begging tours among my acquaintances—and, by the way, I shall not omit you in my visitations—so I appealed to the General and his nephew. They responded in a liberal gift of money and scarcely worn clothes, among them a suit of black, and an overcoat of some value, which I gave on my own responsibility to a poor clergyman who is superannuated, but has still a family to support. Not long after he returned, bringing with him a little package of papers."

"My wife, he said, 'in cutting up the outcoat coat for the children, found this in the lining, where it had fallen through from the pocket, and I brought it to you at once, thinking you knew the owner.'"

Miss Hobbs listened as if fascinated, her eyes fastened upon the yellowed package which Miss Clips held in her hand.

"Well, did you give them where they belonged?" asked Miss Hobbs, almost breathlessly.

"No—as yet I have not. I consider them as belonging to me—given, in fact, with the clothes—and so I read them. And if you will allow yourself to read them, as you should—for there are cases in which self-protection demands the reversal of accustomed ideas, you will see why I warn you."

So artfully and so guardedly put was all this, that Miss Hobbs was more than half persuaded that it was her duty to read. She gazed as if fascinated upon the letters, and once her eyes took in the first boldly-written lines, she read all.

"I have saved you from prison, as you say—spare your thanks, and believe that I have acted as I have for the sake of the friendship I feel for that good and honorable man, your uncle, General Templeton, whom you have despised in fact, though he is not aware of it. You know well that I do not have faith in you, that I never had, and never can have, though you profess penitence. I am only too glad that your uncle is blind to your faults, for he is a grand gentleman, and it would kill him to lose faith in you. I cannot imagine how you blind him to your serious—to put it in the mildest form—mistakes. As for the tragic fate of that poor man, your victim, if I did not know that you were miles away at the time, I should not hesitate to connect you with the crime. Now, Templeton, if I were you—and here the letter ended, or rather was torn away."

"Now read the other side, which is only a scrap," said Miss Clips, with a nervous half-smile.

"But I feel guilty already," said Miss Hobbs, standing there, pallid and irresolute, yet there was a strange, defiant flash in her eyes, which were attracted to the lines beneath them.

"If forgery were your only crime," it read, "I could forgive you, but when you add to this all the sins of the decade, I—this time she threw the paper from her hand, a strange horror in her heart. Her throat was dry, and hot flashes went over her frame."

"I was a fool, and worse, to read one line," she said, hoarsely. "What is it all to me?"

"Surely, my dear, that's what I was thinking," said Miss Clips, sweetly; "but then it's all very strange, isn't it? One can hardly believe the sight of one's eyes. However, the young man may have turned over a new leaf; I trust he has. It doesn't seem very

nice though to have a thief in the house, does it? And a thief so very handsome, so elegant in his manners and his dress. Of course you have seen the little landlady who comes here, dying of consumption they say—dying of desertion, would be the proper thing to say. That little creature can show you her marriage certificate, but bless you it's a false name, and she'll never tell. The poor old gentleman never suspects, he has such tremendous faith in—everybody. Don't it seem odd that such romances go on right under one's eyes, so to say? Oh, the General is the soul of honor! Pity his nephew isn't more like him. But then I dare say he's as good as the majority. Little sins—though to be sure this seems to be rather a serious charge."

"Do you want the letter?" asked Miss Hobbs, suddenly possessing herself of it, and before Miss Clips could answer she ran from the room and up stairs, intending to give way to her overwrought feelings in tears, but finding Winifred on the bed in her room she began to sing instead, though her voice was scarcely steady.

"My head ached, and I believe I have been asleep," said Winifred, rising, and going languidly towards her basket of wools. "I got so puzzled over this tid! Do you know olive green?" she looked up at her curiously; "I happen unfortunately to be a little color-blind."

"Yes, there it is," said Miss Hobbs, saying her finger on it. Winifred took the work up silently, but not before she had seen a tear, like a white pearl, drop among its meshes.

"I think I'll go home," said Miss Hobbs a few moments later, as she stood before the mirror. "The atmosphere here is not good for my complexion. I'm beginning to have that old muddy look."

"Nonsense; your visit is not half out yet," said Winifred, with a glad throb of the heart and a little sigh of content.

"Oh, yes, nearly! I should certainly have gone next Friday. I came on a Friday. I shall leave on a Thursday. Friday is a fateful day in my calendar. All the good luck I ever had came on Friday."

"Then you must stay Friday out," said Winifred, impulsively, laughing as she spoke, "and see what luck it will bring you here."

"I believe I'll take your advice," said Miss Hobbs, after a pause. "Saturday morning will do; that will get me home by Saturday night."

Winifred was silent. She had not really meant what she said, and she was puzzled for it. As for Miss Hobbs, queer thoughts thronged through her brain.

"You know you love him," she said to herself, again and again; "but forger, and all the sins in the decalogue! Heaven help me!"

Friday came. Miss Hobbs had packed away all her splendid dresses except one which she had never worn. It was time, she told herself that she should go. She had not been her natural, brilliant self since she had come into possession of that letter. After all, had she judged him harshly? Might not the letter be a forgery? She knew that it was so, for the last few days she had been absolutely cruel, jesting, laughing, dancing, and her heart near to breaking all the time, while he, bewildered at her changed aspect, seemed at times so troubled, at others so defiant, but never in all his life so handsome, so apparently worthy of a woman's worship, as now.

Twilight set its soft shadows into the parlor, where sat Miss Clips, exulting over the success of her little plot. How wonderfully it was working, to be sure! To-morrow, and the DeWitt mansion would know Miss Hobbs no more, forever. Well, she had but done her duty; her heart was not made of the material that relents.

Most of the boarders had gone to their rooms. Winifred and Miss Hobbs were practising a piano duet in the apartment adjoining. The soft, dancing freight lighted over the heavy folds of the rich crimson curtain that framed the folding doors, and the pretty Japanese screen in the corner opposite seemed in its glow to be studded with jewels and gold.

And now came one of those charming society interludes, which the hostess of a fashionable boarding house sometimes arranges for her guests. The doors were open, the gas was turned high, and in the moment the room was filled with a merry throng in costumes of great variety and beauty. Everybody was surprised, yet delighted. The scene had changed; jests and little shafts of laughter went around, together with questions and guesses, and very soon they were all dancing.

Mr. Templeton, junior, was besieged by a merry group of girls, who led him, protesting to the piano, and for an hour kept him playing, improvising, singing. When he was tired a pretty young lady took his place, after which the dancing went on, but there were no admiring crowds about the piano.

Miss Hobbs had never looked more charming. At a hint from her hostess she had made the most of her toilet. Her dress was Nile green, crinined with pale-pink rose-buds. A pink rose snuggled in the fold of fine lace at her throat; another nestled in the folds of her dark hair.

As Robert Templeton left the piano he saw this vision of grace and beauty leaning on his uncle's arm.

"He is in her toils as well as the rest," he muttered. "Great heaven! I'd give my life, almost, if she would look at me like that! But no—she scarcely deigns to notice me of late. But there's a reason for it, and I will know it to-morrow."

After the dancing came refreshment. Miss Hobbs turned to speak to an old French professor, who had been talking with her but a moment before, and behold! Robert Templeton had taken his place.

"I could find no other opportunity to speak to you," he said, absently at her glance. "I suppose I may sit for a moment."

"Certainly," she made cool reply. "How well your uncle dances!" she said, after a pause.

"Very—for fifty-six," he said dryly.

"Really, he is so old! I should never have thought him over forty—and he is so handsome! Handsomer than most young men."

Having thus said small, general, she fell to eating sugar almonds.

"Oh, decidedly!" said Robert, with a

grim smile; "I myself dote on white hair; I believe I'll play court to Miss Winifred's mamma."

"Do I know she would take it as a compliment, seeing that I have monopolized the General?" said Miss Hobbs. All this time the French professor was waiting for a chance to speak.

"Adorable Mamma," he said, gaining his opportunity, "will you take some value with me?"

"I never wait but with very old friends," she made reply, with a sweet smile.

"Then will you take one turn with me?" asked Robert, eagerly.

"When I say old friends, I mean old gentlemen, like your uncle."

"I am a fool," muttered the young man, anxiously.

"It is excellent to be conscious of one's failings," she said, quietly.

"Of one thing be sure, Miss Hobbs, I will never ask you again," he coldly retorted.

"Till next time," she made questioning and laughing answer.

"You are unnecessarily cruel!" and he saw his lip quiver. All her resentment faded out; women-like, she repented.

"Please ask a favor of me—just one," she said, in her sweet womanly way.

"I will—once, and perhaps the last," he said in suppressed tones—"only that you will tell me a little story."

"A story I dear me, how nice! Is it a fairy story?"

"Not exactly."

"Not exactly, then."

"Not exactly that, either; but I promise you it shall be true."

"I don't like true stories unless they are very interesting." She turned her bright face towards him. She had forgotten everything for the moment, and she trusted him.

"Of that you shall be the judge. There is no one in the conservatory during the dancing. Will you give me a hearing there as soon as the waltzing commences again?"

"I suppose I must," she said, trying with her fan; "but you must make the story very brief."

"Then I have your promise."

"Yes, I will be there," she said, softly, and then at sight of his radiant face, repeated of her fickle heart.

"I must wait and steel my heart against him," she said to herself, resolutely, then watched him as he sat alone at the piano. Somebody had urged him to sing, and he had needed urging, for he did not like the song. Now that he was happy, however, he was willing to put aside his own wishes, and presently his exquisite tenor rang out in the chords—

"Sweet Charles is in her grave, Her winding sheet is dark with mola, And I am here in bright attire, A willing slave for gold, for gold, Alas, alas! for me!"

"All the sins in the decalogue," murmured Miss Hobbs to her self; "I wonder who his Charles was? I wonder if he broke her heart?"

"Do not suppose his conscience pricks him, if he has one," whispered a malicious voice in her ear. It was Miss Clips, who looked very severe in her eyes, impatiently, while the song went on—

"Oh, Charles, my true love, I know, Say, will you keep your gentle name, As white as drifted snow? Alas for you, alas for me!"

"What a horrible thing!" murmured Miss Hobbs, shivering, and she hardened her heart yet more against him.

Not long after the Nile-green dress, rustling in the midst of the soft lights, crowned by one of the loveliest faces ever seen, met the watcher who was waiting for her. She was deadly pale.

"You are not well," he began.

"Never mind me. It is the damp smell, the most earthy smell, so like a grave," she said, looking nervously round.

"Well, I wait for the story," she tried to smile. "Please begin."

"I will—but, Miss Hobbs, you are standing—let me—"

She put out one gloved hand impatiently.

"Never mind me," she said, hurriedly, "I am quite comfortable—the story!"

"Very well," he said, coldly; "once there was a beautiful girl, ah! how beautiful!"

"Why not say, beautiful as an angel?" she asked, with a faint laugh. "That's the stereotyped form. It begins 'lovely'!"

He looked at her, standing under the broad leaves of a century plant, holding her trained dress tightly from the floor. In the dim light she seemed like a spirit, and he caught his breath.

"The young girl was beloved," he went on, in an uneasy voice.

"Yes, of course; and the lover was all grace and gallantry, we will leave out the honor."

"He was a true man should be, Miss Hobbs, and she was—shall I say—no more to his attention."

"In the story, yes. Go on, if you please."

"There was a marplot in the shape of—"

"A little old woman," said Miss Hobbs; then she flushed and did not look up.

"Shall we call her Miss Clips?" he added, biting his lips.

"For want of a better name, yes," she made answer.

"Very well," he came a little nearer, she drew back. "This marplot tried to injure his cause in the eyes of this beautiful, adorable girl."

"So she did," said Miss Hobbs, and then tried to say it, and said nothing.

"Everybody else believed in him."

"Ah! but the letter, Mr. Templeton, the letter!" interrupted Miss Hobbs, and then drew back, trembling and frightened.

"What letter, Miss Hobbs? There is no letter in the story."

"Oh, but there is," she said, "and I have it. When you asked me to come here, I went to my room for it. It was put in my hands by—the marplot—and I confront you with the evidence—of your—"

"Before you go further, Miss Hobbs, please let me see the letter," said Mr. Templeton.

She gave it to him. He changed color, read it hurriedly, and with marks of much agitation. Then he hit his lip, and at last spoke, in a low voice.

"Miss Hobbs, what shall I say? Evidently this letter was procured in some underhand way—God knows how. It accuses somebody of a foul crime; if you will look," he went on, very much agitated, "you will find that this letter is dated three years ago."

"I see," said Miss Hobbs, drawing nearer, so that her cheek was very close to his lips.

"Also, from the city of New York."

"Yes, I notice that."

"Directed to a person in that city. I will soon convince you," and he read a line.

"I see," she said.

"In that year I was travelling in Eu-

rope with my uncle. I spent two years abroad."

"Then it is a forgery!" said Miss Hobbs, her face brightening.

"No; I am obliged to say the letter is no forgery." The color drained out of his cheeks, he glanced back and forth, from her to the letter in an indecisive manner, then closed his lips tightly.

"I am in honor bound," he said, very slowly, after a pause. "I can enlighten you no further."

"Then the letter was written to you, under the impression—"

"The letter was not written to me," he replied, in a quick voice.

"And yet it is no forgery?"

"Pardon me," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "The subject is too painful—I cannot—"

"What, then, am I to understand?" she asked.

"If I speak to your uncle—if I should show him the letter—"

"For heaven's sake, do not show it to him!" she cried, with a passionate vehemence in tiny fragments, with passionate sobs.

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