JOHN ARTHUR'S WARD;

OR THEDETETIVE'S DAUGHTER.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"A Woman's rime," "The Missing Diamond," Etc., Etc.

Then they fell to settling the preliminaries of a siege upon the heart of Miss Arthur, together with other little trifles that occurred as they talked. They had both thrown off their air of hostility, and were seated opposite each other, conversing quite comfortably, when the door swung open, and Miss Arthur stood before them; Miss Arthur, in the full glory of snowy cashmere, with cherry satin facings; Miss Arthur, with curls waving, and in all her war-paint.

The two plotters arose, and saluted her with much empressement.

Miss Arthur advanced a step and stood beside the high-backed chair, one hand still resting upon the door. Percy came toward her with outstretched hands.

"Ah-h-h!" screeched the spinster, "what was that?"

Turning quickly she encountered nothing more formidable than her French maid, who had evidently hurried to the spot, for she breathed rapidly, and said, in an anxious manner:

"Pardon, mademoiselle, it is I—did mademoiselle ring? I thought so."

"You stepped on my dress, girl," said Miss Arthur, sharply. "No, I did not ring, perhaps Mrs. Arthur did."

"I did ring Ellen," lied Cora, sweetly, wondering what lucky providence sent the girl to the door just then. "I rang for you, as Mr. Percy here, in whom I have discovered a Long Branch acquaintance, would hardly treat me civilly, so impatient has he been to see Miss Arthur."

Miss Arthur looked somewhat appeased. "You may go, Celine," she said, with her most stately air.

Thus she sailed forward to meet Mr. Percy.

Celine departed, smiling an odd little smile. She went to her own room and sitting down upon the bedside, meditated. Presently she arose, and walking over to her mirror, gazed at her reflected image, and shaking her head at it, murmured:

"What a nice little maid you are, Celine Leroque—and how these people will love you by and by! You now hold in your hands the thread that will unravel this mixture of mystery, and when the reckoning comes, it will not be you that falls."

Thoughtfully she paced the little apartment. By and by she threw herself upon the bed and closed her eyes, still thinking. If she could only know just how these two had separated—Edward Percy and Cora Arthur, and what part Lucian Davlin had played in that separation drama. Did Cora know Lucian ten years ago—did Percy know him for his rival? Suddenly the girl sprang up, and smiting her two palms together, exclaimed:

"If these two men were rivals, then we may yet find a reason why Lucian Davlin should attempt the life of Edward Percy!"

And now what should she do?

Claire Keith's bright face rose before her as she asked herself the question. Claire must be warned and saved; but how? The girl's brow darkened.

"She will scorn the man," she muttered, between pale lips, "and then she will learn to value that other. She will grieve for a time perhaps, but not for long, then—then she will become his wife, while I—What right has she to all the blessings?"

The girl stood motionless, with hands tightly clasped. The conflict lasted but a moment when, in a firm, clear voice she continued:

"It would be base not to save her from this wretch—and save her I will; and I will restore to Olive Girard her husband; is that not payment enough for all they have done for me? But he, Clarence, my hero—why must I yield him up, without a struggle? She does not love him; she never will love him if I say the word; she is as generous as—as I am base, I think. No, it is not base to love him, to try to win him. And why not? I must think, think, think."

All that day and night the girl pondered deeply. In the morning she arose weary, unrefreshed.

"I will save Claire Keith from the suffering that befell me," she said. "But she shall not have all the good things of this life, and I none."

CHAPTER XV.—CORA AND THE FRENCH MAID MEASURE SWORDS.

During the day, Miss Arthur communicated to her maid the fact that Mr. Percy would remain in Bellair for the present. He was going away for a day on business; then he would return and take up his abode at the Bellair inn.

"Would monsieur be absent to-morrow?"

"Yes."

Then, as mademoiselle would not especially need her, would she graciously give her the day? Her sister had just returned from Paris, and would very soon leave the city en route for Washington. Her sister was in the service of Mrs. General Delonne—of course mademoiselle had heard of Madame Delonne; knew her, perhaps. Celine much desired to see this sister, and expected to get some valuable hints from her regarding the very latest French coiffeurs, etc., etc. In short, could mademoiselle spare her to-morrow, just for one little day?

Mademoiselle, after due deliberation, perhaps in consideration of the new coiffeurs, graciously consented. This matter was settled while the dinner toilet of the lady was in progress; and Celine spared no pains to make her mistress satisfied with herself and all about her.

"How long had Mr. Percy been in the little parlor, Celine, before I came down?" questioned the lady.

She was still a trifle dissatisfied at having found her lover so cosily tete-a-tete with her fascinating sister-in-law.

"Oh, a very short time, my lady—I mean mademoiselle."

"And how did he meet Mrs. Arthur?" anxiously.

"Madame was just entering from the terrace; they met in the hall," glibly.

"And did they meet like old friends, Celine?"

"Oh, no! mademoiselle; quite formally. At first I fancied he was really displeased at meeting her—but of course mademoiselle knew the reason for that," slyly.

"Hush, you foolish girl," said the flattered spinster; "it's all right, of course." And she relapsed into reverie.

Miss Arthur had exhausted her patience waiting for her tardy admirer, and, finding her own apartments dull, had come down to the parlor, thus interrupting the interview, to the disgust of more than one of those interested.

Mr. Percy had many questions yet to propound to his newly-found wife as he called her, and she, knowing him so well, felt a trifle more uneasy than was comfortable, wondering what use, if any, he intended to make of the small amount of power he still possessed over her. She must hold another interview with him and that soon. Meantime, she left him to the tender mercies of the happy spinster. It was late in the evening when she at last found a convenient opportunity, and crossed the hall in the direction of Miss Arthur's dressing-room. She was about to open the door and enter, when her movement was anticipated by Celine, who appeared upon the threshold in hat and shawl.

Mrs. Arthur seemed not at all abashed, but pushing the girl back into the room, stepped in herself and closed the door. "You were going out, Celine?" smiling sweetly.

"Yes, madame," respectfully.

"May I ask where?"

"Certainly, madame. I have leave to go and see my sister to-morrow. I am going to telegraph her that she may expect me. Can I serve madame?"

Madame pondered a moment.

"Celine," she said, abruptly. "Why did you pretend to answer a ring this morning, when your mistress came down to the little parlor?"

"I trust madame was not offended," deprecatingly.

"No, no," impatiently; "but I want to understand you."

"Madame shall. Madame must know that my mistress is not always smooth in temper?"

"Yes," laughing wickedly.

"This morning she bade me admit the gentleman, tell him she was in the grounds, and then come to her. He came, and almost immediately saw you, madame, walking on the terrace."

"Stop. How did he act when he saw me, Celine?"

The girl looked at her in apparent hesitation. "Madame will not be angry with me?"

"No, no."

"He looked almost frightened, and took off his hat, as if about to go."

Cora uttered a low, triumphant, "Ah, did he?"

"Then he called me back as I was leaving the room to summon my mistress, and asked me who you were. I told him. He looked relieved, said he had mistaken you for an old acquaintance, and bade me ask you to come to him, and say nothing to Miss Arthur until he desired it."

"I see; but why did you follow her, when she came down? Did she know we were there?"

"No, madame."

"Then why—"

"Pardon," with a sidelong glance at her face, "but madame is beautiful, and my mistress is jealous. I thought you might wish me to do as I did, and I desire to serve you, madame."

Cora eyed her keenly. "But why serve me, Celine?"

"Madame has ever been gracious to Celine," said the girl, lowering her eyes. "Even a servant appreciates kindness—my mistress never considers that."

Cora's thoughts flew fast. If she could trust the girl, she might make her very useful. She had sought this interview to question her concerning the adventure of the morning and now might she not be of still more service?"

A few more sharply-put questions were asked and answered with corresponding shrewdness. Then Celine detailed, in her own way, her interview with her mistress on the subject of Mr. Percy's visit.

Cora was at last fully satisfied that, for some reason, Miss Arthur had aroused a feeling of antagonism in the breast of her maid. She resolved to profit by this state of affairs. Accordingly, a few moments later, Celine Leroque flitted out from the house the bearer of two important messages.

One, in writing, was a telegram to be sent to Lucian Davlin.

The other was a verbal message to be delivered, in some way, to Mr. Percy before he quitted the grounds of Oakley.

Pausing at a safe distance from the house, Celine produced from her pocket some waxen matches. She lighted one, having looked cautiously about her, and spreading open the telegram to Mr. Davlin, read these words:

"Come down to-morrow without fail. It is important."

"So," uttered Miss Arthur's maid as, flinging away the match, she hurried on her way; "so he must be consulted; he must come down. In the absence of Percy, too. I wonder if he knows, this Percy, that Lucian Davlin at present personates the dutiful brother of his fair lost love." Such a sneer rested on the face of the French maid. "Well! Mr. Davlin must come, and, unfortunately, I can't be present at this interview. However, I shall be able to judge pretty accurately by their future movements what was its portent."

Edward Percy, as he chose to call himself, was not aware of the position held by Lucian Davlin in that household. Cora had seized an opportunity to murmur to Miss Arthur a soft warning.

"Ellen, dear!" she had said, "pray don't mention Lucian to Mr. Percy, unless you wish to shorten his stay with us. The fact is, the two had a slight misunderstanding while we were all at Long Branch, about a horse or something. Lucian was very much to blame, I think, but they parted bad friends. It is best never to interfere in men's quarrels, so I have not mentioned Lucian's name to him at all."

Cunning Cora! Her tact had made this explanation seem a quite probable one; and as Miss Arthur certainly had no desire to drive Mr. Percy from Oakley, she assured her "kind, thoughtful Cora" that she would be very guarded and never once mention Mr. Davlin's name in his enemy's presence.

Of this fact, of course, Celine was in total ignorance, as she proceeded on her way, which was not to the telegraph office; at least not yet.

Hurrying through Oakley wood in the opposite direction from the village she crossed the meadow and approached the cottage of Nurse Hagar. A light was dimly visible through the paper curtains, but no sound was heard within. The girl listened at the door a moment, and then tapped softly.

Presently slip-shod feet could be heard crossing the uncarpeted floor, and a key creaked in its lock, after which the door opened, a very little way, and the old woman's face peered cautiously out into the night. Then she hastily opened the door wide and admitted the visitor.

"Is it you, dearie?" she asked, rather unnecessarily, surveying her critically by the light of a flaring tallow candle.

"No, Aunt Hagar, it's not I," laughed the girl; "it's Miss Arthur's French maid that you see before you. And don't drop that tallow on her devoted head," lifting a deprecating hand.

"Umph! we seem in great spirits to-night," leading the way back to the fireplace, beside which stood her easy splint-bottomed chair.

"So we are," assented the girl "and why shouldn't we be, pray? Aren't we a very happy French maid, and a very skilful one and a very lucky one?"

"How should I know?" grumbled the old woman; "what do I know? I'm only old Hagar; don't mind explaining anything to me!"

"By which you mean, beware of your wrath if I don't explain things to you eh, auntie?"

Hagar mumbled something, not exactly intended to be a speech but simply a small growl, illustrative of her mood. Then, as if her dignity had been sufficiently asserted, she relaxed her grimness, and, looking down upon the girl and pushing her toward the big chair, said:

"But law! child, you look fagged out. Sit down, sit down, and don't mind an old woman's grumbling."

"Did I ever?" laughed the girl, sinking into the big chair as if indeed willing to rest. "But I can't sit here long, nursie; my day's work is not yet finished."

"Not yet? Oh, Madeline, my little nursling, give up those wild plans and plots; they will bring you no good."

"Won't they?" nodding significantly. "I think they will do me good, and you, too, Nurse Hagar; and before very long, too. Why, bless you, these precious plotters won't wait for me to bring them into the net; they are tumbling in headlong—all of them. They are helping me, with all their might, to bring about their own downfall, Hagar," and the girl leaned suddenly forward and looked closely into the old woman's face, "I want you to come back to Oakley."

Hagar started back as if struck by a knife. She was about to open her lip and set free a torrent of indignant protest, when the girl lifted her hand, interrupting her in the old characteristic way.

"Wait until I explain, auntie. I want you to go to Oakley to-morrow, at the hour when Mr. John Arthur is always supposed to be taking his after-dinner nap. Just after dinner I want you to see Madame Cora; manage it in your own way, but see her you must."

"I won't," broke in the old woman.

"You will," said the girl, quietly, "when I have told you why."

Drawing her chair close to that occupied by her companion she resumed in a low voice:

"Yesterday Miss Arthur sent me to the village to purchase some trifling articles for the adornment of her precious person. Returning through the woods I came upon Mr Davlin and his sister, conversing very earnestly, just at the lower end of the terrace. I arrived at the hedgerow still just in time to hear madame say, very emphatically, that something must be done immediately. They were going down the terrace steps when I passed them, pretending to be in a great hurry. As soon as their backs were toward me, I turned quickly, and without noise crossed the stile, followed them on the opposite side of the hedge, and listened."

Here the speaker paused and looked up, but her auditor was gazing moodily into the fire, and never stirred nor spoke.

"Madame was saying," resumed the narrator, "that she was heartily weary of the part she was playing; that this monotony sickened her; that they had secured the victims, and fate had been kind enough to remove the only stumbling-block in their path, save the old man himself; that she considered my very sensible demise a direct answer to her pious prayers."

The old woman shuddered and cast a look of horror upon the speaker.

"They had evidently discussed this matter before, and partially settled their plan, only the man seemed to think it was too soon to begin to act. But madame declared that she should do worse if they did not commence operations at once, and finally she overruled him."

"Of course," savagely.

"Of course. Well, I now lost a little of their conversation, but I kept the thread of it. You see, I had to move very cautiously, and sometimes fall behind them a bit when the leafage became less thick."

Hagar nodded.

"Their plan was a beautiful one, and they have already set it in motion."

"Already?"

"Already; don't interrupt, please; I will tell you how in good time. First, then, madame is to fall ill—not desperately ill, but just ill enough to be interesting, and to alarm the old man. By the way, Mr Davlin left this morning for the city; that is one move. He is to remain in the city until after the illness of madame, who is to refuse to receive any of the village doctors. Finally, he is to be sent for, and admonished to bring with him their old family physician, who has but just returned from Europe. Well, they come, the brother and the family physician—do you follow me?"

"Yes, yes!" nodding eagerly.

"They come. And the doctor says madame is threatened with a malignant fever, and orders everybody out of the house. It is needless to say that Miss Arthur flies instantly; but le docteur, interviewing the half sick, fidgety old man, discovers that he, too, is threatened with the fever. Of course, he cannot leave then."

Old Hagar's eye were twinkling, and she was bending forward now in an eagerly attentive attitude. "No," she breathed, unconsciously.

"Well, the heroic brother will refuse to fly from the fever, and will implore the skilful man of medicine to remain and minister unto the sick. The good doctor stays. Of course, such of the servants as are at all likely to prove troublesome, through possessing a trifle more brains than is usually alloted to an idiot, will be kindly told that, rather than endanger their lives, the household will dispense with their valuable services. Then a nurse, perhaps two, will come down from the city, and the plotters have the game in their own hands."

Here the girl paused and leaned back in her chair as if her story was done.

"And then?" exclaimed Hagar.

"And then!" echoed her companion, bending forward and resting her hand upon the old woman's wrist; "and then madame will recover—but John Arthur will remain an invalid and a prisoner! It will be said in the village that the fever has affected his brain, and his unpopularity, arising from the fact that he has always shunned and scorned the village folk, will insure them against intrusive investigators. Auntie, they have hatched a pretty plot."

"But," objected Hagar, "they will have to stay at Oakley, if he is to be a prisoner. They won't dare leave him with keepers and—"

"True," the girl interrupted. "I don't know how they will manage the rest; but having settled this much, madame and her 'brother' paused at the end of the path. I saw her as she looked up into his face, and this is what she said: 'When he is once a prisoner, what could be more natural than that a crazy, sick old man should die some day? Then the man replied, 'Nothing'; and they both returned to the house, without another word."

For some moments silence reigned in Hagar's dwelling. The old woman seemed unable, or unwilling, to utter a word of comment upon the story to which she had been so attentive a listener.

Celine at length arose and said, as she began pacing to and fro before the old woman. "Well, have you anything to say to this?" "Yes," quietly.

"Then why don't you speak out. Are you horribly shocked?"

"No."

"No? Well, so much the better!"

Hagar arose, pushed back her chair, crossed the room, and, pulling back the curtain, looked out into the night. Then turning her inscrutable old face upon the girl, she said, quite calmly:

"Why should not others measure out to John Arthur the same bitter draught that he filled for your mother, years ago? Bah! it is only retribution!"

"True," said the girl, sternly. Then in a guarded tone: "And you would make no attempt to overturn their finely laid plans?"

"I? No!" fiercely. "You? I thought you wanted revenge."

"And so I do—and will have it."

"How, then?"

"Will you go to Madame Arthur?"

"What for?"

"Ah, now you reason. I will tell you."

Hurriedly she unfolded her plan; and after some differences of opinion, Dame Hagar agreed to play her part in the coming drama. Having finally arranged Hagars role to their mutual satisfaction, Celine hurriedly recounted her day's adventures, saying, by way of finale:

"So you see, nursie, I must hasten and send madame's message on its way. I shall depend upon you to tell me if Mr. Davlin comes to Bellair to-morrow, for I have a fancy that madame will manage, in some way, to prevent his coming to the house, as it was fully settled that he was not to appear at Oakley until summoned to his sister's sick-bed."

"I can easily learn if he appears at the Bellair station."

"Exactly; that is all I wish to know. Now I must go and waylay Mr. Percy. So good night, auntie, and cheer up; our time is coming fast."

"And trouble coming too; God help us."

The girl turned upon her swiftly, with flashing eyes. "Are you afraid? Do you want to give it up?"

"I am afraid for you. But give it up now; never!"

"Brave old nursie!"

The girl flung both arms about the old woman, and kissed her withered cheeks.

"Never fear for me; my star is rising. Don't forget your mission, auntie; good-night."

The "good-night" came back over her shoulder, as the girl was hurrying down the cottage steps, and Hagar closed the door behind her retreating figure.

CHAPTER XVI.—FACE TO FACE.

It is surprising to note how many pretexts a resolute, husband-hunting spinster can find for keeping a victim at her side, long after his soul has left her, and gone forth with yearning for a downy couch, a fragrant cheroot, or a fairer face.

Edward Percy could be agreeable, for a reasonable length of time, to a very ugly woman. But even he felt himself an injured man when, at a late hour, he said good-night for the eleventh time to his fair enslaver—literally an enslaver, he thought. As the door of Oakley manor actually and audibly closed behind him, he heaved a sigh of gratification, and strode rapidly down the winding avenue.

When the first group of trees had sheltered him from the view of the infatuated spinster, should she still be gazing after him, Mr. Percy paused, and standing in the shadow, produced a cigar, and was proceeding to light it, when a hand fell lightly upon his arm, and he turned with a confused idea that she had followed him, and was about to lead him back a prisoner. But the figure that he dimly saw was certainly not that of Miss Arthur.

"Pardon, monsieur! but I have a message for you."

"Ye gods!" ejaculated the aggrieved man.

Evidently the girl interpreted his thoughts, for she stifled a laugh as she said quickly: "Not from Miss Arthur, monsieur; but from madame."

"Oh, from madame," drawing a long breath. "Well, even madame will be a blessed relief; out with it, girl."

"Madame will be grateful, I am sure," said the girl, mockingly. "Madame desires a word with you—now, to-night. Will you follow me?"

"Where?"

"To madame; she will be in the terrace arbor directly."

"Oh, very well," replacing his cigar in his pocket; "lead on, then."

Celine flitted on before, until the arbor became dimly visible down the pathway. Then she paused, pointed it out to her companion and said: "Madame will soon join you there, sir. Now I must hasten to my mistress; I have kept her waiting too long."

With a low mischievous laugh she darted away in the direction of the house.

Percy turned and gazed after her; then followed a few paces and watched again, until she disappeared under a wide portico. Heaving a sigh of relief he turned back toward the arbor.

"I want no eavesdropping," he muttered; "and that minx might listen if she had time. She is no more a French maid than I am; she forgot her monsieur just now. But a sham maid is very appropriate for a sham maiden; now for Alice"; and he entered the arbor.

Had Mr. Percy been able to follow the retreating footsteps of the objectionable French maid, however, he might have found occasion to change his opinion of her lack of time for eavesdropping, and there was excellent opportunity for its practice about the shrubbery-surrounded arbor.

Meantime Ellen Arthur, having reluctantly bidden her "blonde demigod" a last good-night, sought her chamber, swelling with satisaction, and feeling somewhat hungry. Passing the door of her sister-in-law's room, she encountered Sarah, the romantic housemaid, who was just entering, bearing wine and a tiny glass. Glancing within, she econntered the gaze of Cora, who stood holding in her hand some black lace drapery.

"Horribly late, isn't it?" yawned that lady, nodding good-naturedly. "Set down the wine, Sarah, and then you may go. I'm so dismally slumbersome that if I keep you to help me, I shall fall asleep on your hands. Have some wine, Ellen?"

"No, thanks," said the spinster. "If you don't want Sarah, she may bring me up a nice lunch as soon as possible. I won't detain you any longer; good night."

And Miss Arthur, who had meditated entering and giving Cora the benefit of some of her maiden dreams and fancies, marched away, a trifle offended at the manner in which her sleepy sister-in-law had anticipated and warded off the interview. Cora's good-night floated after her as she sailed down the corridor. Then she heard the door closed and the bolt shot into the socket. A little later, the door opened noiselessly, and a female figure glided down the dark stairways out into the night, and toward the arbor.

"Celine shall undo my hair," Miss Arthur thought, "and I'll have her try that new set of braids and puffs, if it is late. I don't feel as if I could sleep."

But Celine was not dutifully waiting in her mistress' dressing-room.

Sarah appeared with the lunch, and offered her services, but was summarily dismissed, for Miss Arthur did not deem it wise to initiate the house servants into the fearful and wonderful mysteries of her toilet. Therefore, she lunched in solitude and disgust, but heartily, notwithstanding, having just put off her very elaborate, but rather uncomfortable evening dress and donned a silken gown, acting as her own maid.

Then she fidgeted herself into a most horrible temper, and sat deliberately down before the grate in a capacious dressing chair, determined to wait until the girl came, and deliver a most severe and stately reprimand, the exact words of which she had already determined upon.

The lady, sitting thus with her feet on the fender, her hands comfortably clasping the big arms of the dressing chair, and her head lolling rather ungracefully over its back, fell into slumber.

* * * * *

If Mrs. John Arthur had made a midnight appointment with Lucifer she would have fortified herself for the encounter by making a "stunning" toilet. It was one of her fixed principles—she had fixed principles—never to permit friend or foe of the male persuasion to gaze upon her charms when they would show at a disadvantage. So when she entered the arbor, which was suffused with a soft moonlight glow from a heavily-shaded lamp, for the arbor stood among dense shrubbery, and but for this lamp would have been in Egyptian darkness, she was indeed a personification of loveliness.

Ungracious as was his mood, Percy would not have been a beauty-adoring mortal if he had not paid involuntary tribute to the charms of the woman who was his bitterest foe. Gazing down upon her a moment, he said in his soft legato:

"I am almost angry at you for being so beautiful, after having taken yourself to other lovers, Ma belle."

The woman smiled triumphantly as she threw herself into an easy chair and said in her softest, sweetest tone: "And did you expect me to go mourning for you all these years, sir?"

"I don't think you were ever the woman to do that;" dropping lazily into a rustic seat near her. "May I smoke?"

Cora nodded.

"Are you sure we are quite safe here?" looking about him. "Somehow I am suspicious of that sharp French maid."

"Quite sure," nodding again. "Mr. Arthur was in bed before I came out; Miss Arthur was ordering up lunch to her room, and the French maid must needs be in attendance for an hour or more; and besides, I know she is not at all dangerous. None of the other servants ever have occasion to come here, and most of them are in bed by now.

"So your charming sister-in-law eats, does she? After parting from me, too; ugh!"

"Eats? I should think so," laughing softly; "in her own room, when her stays are not too tight."

"Spare me!"

He held up both hands in mock deprecation; then, dropping his bantering tone, said, as he puffed at his cigar:

"But now to business. You did not come out here in such bewitching toilette to tell me that my charmer eats?"

"Hardly," with a pretty shrug.

"For what, then?"

"To come to an understanding with you," coolly.

"As how?" in the same tone.

"As to our future standing with each other."

"I thought that was settled to-day?"

"Did you? I don't think it was settled."

"Well, what remains, fair Alice?"

"Will you drop that name?"

"For the present, yes; but with reluctance."

"Oh, certainly!" bitterly. "Now, what are we to be henceforth?"

"Friends, of course," knocking the ashes off his cigar.

"You and I may be allies; we can never be friends," she said, scornfully.

"Don't trouble yourself to be insulting, Mrs.—a—Arthur."

"Then don't make me remember how I have hated you!"

"Have you really hated me? How singular."

"Very!" sarcastically; then: "If you don't drop that disagreeable tone we shall quarrel. I wish to know what you want with Ellen Arthur."

"Shade of my grandmother! If you don't drop that disagreeable name, I shall expire. Haven't I had enough of her for one day? Alice, I know revenge is sweet, but spare me."

"Bother! I must talk about her, else how can we settle anything? Do you suppose I am going to allow that sweet girl to be deceived" This with mock indignation.

"Oh, no; certainly not! Well, if I must, I must. First, then—"

"First, what position do you intend to take towards me?"

"That depends upon yourself."

"On conditions?"

"On conditions."

"Name them."

"I am to be received as an honored guest whenever I shall choose to visit Oakley."

"Well."

"Next you are to do all in your power to further my suit with Miss—you know."

"That's an easy task."

"Lastly, you are to promise me not now or at any future time, to declare to any one aught you may know that might be to my disadvantage."

"That is to say, I am not to tell Ellen Arthur, or others, that you have two wives—"

"Softly; one, my dear, one Mrs Percy Jordan, number one, is dead; you alone are left. You see, Alice, my dear the thing is reversed. You have two husbands now, while I—"

"Will have two wives as soon as you can get them!"

"Just so."

"And what guarantee have I that you will not betray me to Mr. Arthur?"

"The very best in the world; mutual interest."

Cora pondered. "I don't see but that you are right," she said, at last "it certainly will not be to your interest to attempt to annoy me now, but how long is this truce to last?" looking at him keenly.

Percy smoked away in tranquil silence.

"Of course, I understand what you mean by a marriage with Miss Arthur," scornfully. "How long will it take you to squander her dollars? And after that, what will you do?"

"Question for question, fair cross-examiner; how long do you intend remaining so quietly here, the bond slave of this idiotic old man? And what will you do when this play is played out?"

"Because I ran away from a profligate young husband, who had decoyed me into an illegal marriage—illegal for me, but sufficiently binding to have put you in the penitentiary for a bi—"

"Don't say it, my dear; don't. It's an ugly word, and, after all, are we not both in the same boat?"

"No" angrily. "Do you think I have been so poorly schooled during these years that you can make me think now that you have any hold upon me? Bah! your case is but a flimsy one. When you deceived me into a marriage with you, you had already another wife. You hid me away in a suburban box of a cottage, fancying I would be content, like a bird in a gilded cage. You never dreamed that meek little I would follow you and find out from the woman's own lips that she had a prior claim upon you!"

"Candidly, I didn't credit you with so much pluck," said Percy coolly.

"No! and when I charged you with your perfidy, and wept and upbraided you, and then became pacified when you told me that every proof of your marriage with that other was in your control, you did not dream that I would feign submission until I had gained possession of the proofs of both your marriages, and then run away?"

"And succeed in baffling my search for ten long years," supplemented he, grandiloquently. "No, fair dame, I did not."

"Your search, indeed! It was not a very eager one."

"Well, in truth it was not. The fact is your beauty entrapped me into that very foolish marriage; but I was a trifle weary of blonde loveliness in tears, etc., so I didn't get out the entire police force, you see."

"And you wouldn't have found me if you had."

"Indeed! why not?"

"Because, if it will afford you any satisfaction to know at this late stage of the game, I sailed for Europe the very day I quitted your house."

"No!" opening his eyes in genuine astonishment. "Had it all cut and dried? Well, I like that! Why, little woman, if you had only developed one half the pluck latent in you, before you flitted, I would never have given you 'just cause,' etc., for leaving me.

To be Continued

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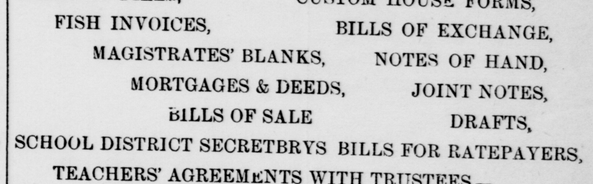

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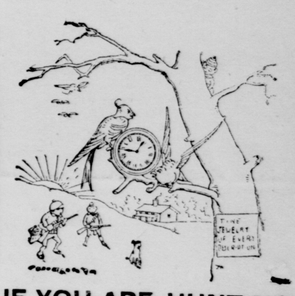

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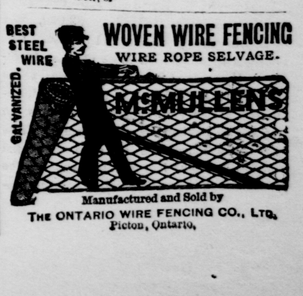
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