

THE RECTOR'S SECRET.

OR - - - LOVE CONQUERS ALL.

A STUDY FROM LIFE.

BY J. R. ABARBANILL.

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

"I could tell you that, as an American, there is no being beyond your reach, that being a sovereign of a free republic you have the right to aspire to the hand of any lady, no matter how lofty born. But this fine theory, unfortunately, does not hold good in practice. Love does not level rank and then her mother the countess—"

"An," interrupted Harold, despairingly. "It is her scorn I fear, not Ethel. I believe, I fancy—please do not rob me of the fond delusion—that Ethel would be willing to become my wife if her mother would consent. But the countess is so proud, so bound up in her aristocracy, so thoroughly English, that she would look with horror upon an alliance of her daughter with any one beneath her own rank, and especially with an American."

"And why more especially with the latter?"

"I have heard—Ethel herself has told me so—she hates Americans. She fairly flies from their presence. All the deep-rooted prejudice to our country which, after all, you will find hidden in the British breast, seem to be incarnated and typified in her."

"Yet she engaged you to paint her daughter's portrait."

"It was not she. It was Ethel herself who came to seek my services. She had heard of my skill; and she wanted to have her portrait painted, as a surprise to her mamma, for her seventeenth birthday. Her maid alone accompanied her to the sittings. The picture now hangs in their London drawing-room."

"I did not inscribe my name on it. Had I done so, the countess would have recognized the American artist, and would, perhaps, have had it destroyed. Alas, Walter, I can never hope for her consent."

"And Ethel would not marry you without it?"

"I am a gentleman," replied Harold, with quiet dignity. "I would not ask her to do so."

"Then, my dear friend, I am afraid that your case is, indeed, hopeless."

"Alas, I agree with you, Walter," sighed Harold; "and that is why I have wished ending an existence which had become wretched to me. The thought that I have a rival, and apparently a successful one, has restrained that wish. I do not want to die until I have killed him. If I cannot become Ethel's husband, no one shall. You are no lover. You cannot understand the sentiment which animates me."

Our hero no lover! Walter smiled rather melancholy, as he was thus shut out from what some writers have termed the fool's paradise, but he merely said:

"What reasons have you for assuming that the Marquis de Montjoie is your rival?"

"This, and this, and this," hotly replied Harold, taking slips cut out of the Parisian papers from his pocket, and spreading them before Walter's eyes.

The slips were all of the same tenor and, with more or less detail, spoke of the engagement of the Marquis de Montjoie to the beautiful and accomplished Miss De Vere, daughter of Lady Buford, as an event which was soon to set all Belgravia in a flutter.

"Does not this argue a fickle-heartedness on the part of your innamorata?" asked Walter, after he had perused the paragraph.

"Who knows how her consent has been obtained?" impetuously demanded the artist. "Who knows whether her consent has been obtained? Who knows but that these very paragraphs are but part of a miserable scheme to compromise her reputation, and then force her into a union which she loathes?"

"I should say the marquis could be made to answer those questions."

"Exactly, my friend. By a challenge. If true, I fight him for the reasons I have already expressed; if false, I defend her fair fame. In either case, you see, I fight."

He hastily wrote out a challenge and handed it to Walter. Then he rang the bell for the concierge.

"Conduct monsieur to the apartments of Marquis de Montjoie," he ordered, as that functionary appeared.

For once the loquacious janitress had nothing to say, but motioning to Walter to follow her, led him downstairs to the first floor. A valet in powder and gold took Walter's card, and soon returned with the information that his master was ready to receive him.

Our hero was led into the magnificently furnished *salon*, and no sooner did he behold the marquis than he mentally ejaculated:

"I know this man!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE MARQUIS DE MONTJOIE.

It was hard to tell whether the Marquis de Montjoie was thirty or forty years of age. His black, luxuriant hair looked very suspiciously like a wig; his face had a made-up appearance, like an actress before the footlights; his mustache seemed to be even of a recent date.

To Walter it seemed as if he were wearing a mask, and looking behind that mask he recognized in him a New Orleans adventurer, who a year before had, in one way or another, victimized a large number of prominent merchants in New York. Some of the victims had brought their cases to Walter, others had employed other lawyers. Before our hero could commence his proceedings, the airy, glib-tongued swindler had been arrested on some minor claim, given bail in a small amount, and promptly jumped his bail, leaving the country and his bewailing bondsmen and creditors behind him. Walter had seen him several times at the police courts, and his identity was strongly impressed on his mind, though he himself had kept in the background, so as not to awaken the rascal's suspicions. Thus it was that while he recognized him immediately, the confidence man had no idea as to who he was.

So here he was now in Paris, continuing his customary career, in the role of a marquis, a part which his perfect knowledge of the French language and manners enabled him to assume beyond detection. The thousands, which his too-confiding dupes had parted with, afforded him the means of living in a style suitable to his pseudo rank. His dress was faultless and his deportment that of a thorough Parisian, slightly *blasé* nobleman.

It was evident to Walter that the adventurer's present scheme was no less than to marry Ethel De Vere, and thus link himself to the highest of English nobility and the splendid revenues of a large estate. However, with the knowledge he possessed, our hero had no fear of the ultimate result. That he disguised all this knowledge need hardly be stated.

"I have not the honor of monsieur's acquaintance," said the marquis, in his suave, polite manner, glancing at Walter and then at the card. "Pardon me; is monsieur an Englishman or an American? If so, I should be in despair if monsieur does not understand French, for unfortunately my education in English has been sadly neglected."

"Cutting rogue," thought Walter; then answered aloud:

"I understand you perfectly well, monsieur, and am able to converse with you in your own language, if you will pardon my accent."

"I am enchanted to hear it," said the nobleman, with a bow and his hand on his breast. "Will monsieur take a seat?"

He handed a chair to his visitor, and sitting down on one himself, waited for the other to state the object of his coming.

"I am here in behalf of a dear friend of mine," began Walter, "who has made me the bearer of a missive to you. If you will please peruse, we will at once come to a perfect understanding."

He handed the challenge to the marquis, who, after affixing to his nose the *pince nez*, without which he would not be a Frenchman at all, slowly and calmly perused it.

"This is a challenge to a duel," he then said, carelessly twirling his glasses in one hand, while he held the missive in the other. "I have not the honor of the acquaintance of the gentleman who signs this extraordinary document. Am I right in assuming that he is the painter whose sign is at the door? I have complained to madame, the concierge, about it. It really makes the building—excuse me—look like a shop."

Walter felt like strangling him for his cool insolence.

He, however, choked down his rage and said:

"If monsieur will mention a gentleman I shall be happy to prepare with him the preliminaries—"

"Am I not permitted to know the cause of this martial proceeding?" interrupted the marquis. "The challenge does not state it. In what way have I offended your friend?"

"You must know then, monsieur," replied Walter, "that Harold Henshaw is in love with Miss Ethel De Vere, and that he has reason to believe that his passion is returned. How far his love affair has progressed, I do not know, but it has sufficiently far to make him regard the aspiration of others to her hand as a mortal offense to himself."

"Indeed," exclaimed the marquis, slowly rising to his feet, while his small black eyes began to sparkle maliciously.

"He further believes," continued Walter, also rising, "that you are adopting unworthy means to compromise the lady's reputation, that you are inserting, or having inserted, in the papers, articles con-

cerning your relations to her which are not true—"

"Indeed," repeated the adventurer, his black eyes glowing still more maliciously.

"He regards these facts as sufficient to oblige you to meet him on the field of honor, or, in case of refusal, to stigmatize you as a coward and defamer."

The words rogue and swindler were on our hero's tongue, and he had to bite it not to add them to his list of epithets.

"*Ma foi*," exclaimed the marquis, as a hectic flush of rage appeared on his hollow cheeks. "Is not the shoe on the wrong foot? I am introduced to Madame the Countess Buford, and by her to her beautiful and accomplished daughter. I am received as one of the family, and the intimacy established here in Paris is continued in London. I pay my addresses to Miss De Vere, ask her hand in marriage of her mother, and am on the point of crossing the channel to receive her favorable response; and because of all this, I am to be called to account by any lack-a-daisical painter, who may perchance have drawn her portrait and sighed out his heart to her image. It is not true that Miss De Vere has any romantic attachment for him. If I thought so, it is I who would challenge him."

"It is immaterial to him, monsieur," said Walter, "whether you or he is the challenger, so long as you fight. I can assure you he is very much in earnest."

"If I am challenged, I have the choice of weapons. Does your friend know that I am the most skillful swordsman in France?"

"He knows that you are his rival. He will meet you on any terms."

"Very well, monsieur," said the adventurer, with supreme braggadocio. "I will let out a few ounces of his over-heated blood. It will cool his head. I will give you the name of a gentleman who will act as second for me, but I shall have to ask you to fix the date of the meeting for, say, a week from now. I leave Paris for London with the midnight train. The engagement ceremonies are to take place to-morrow. On my return I shall be happy to place myself at your disposal. Pardon me, monsieur, if I bring this interview to a close, as I must assist my valet with my luggage."

He wrote out the name and address of his second, handed it to Walter, and then slightly opened the door of the next room so that his visitor could see that the preparations for his departure were actually taking place.

"*Au revoir*, then, monsieur," said Walter, "until we meet again."

"Receive, monsieur, the assurance of my highest consideration."

With this polite formula, the marquis dismissed him, and Walter reascended the stairs to Harold's apartments.

That the fellow was a cheat and a humbug, our hero had not the slightest doubt, yet he settled to speak of his relations to the countess and the daughter with the greatest assurance. Could he have done so if Ethel were as steadfast in her affection for Harold as the latter had declared? Could matters have been brought to such a crisis, the engagement to take place on the very next day, without her free will and consent? Walter began to suspect either that she was very fickle-hearted or that his ardent friend had allowed his imagination too free a rein, and that however much in love he was with her, she probably had not the least idea of reciprocating it. In either case Harold would be only making himself ridiculous by a duel.

With these thoughts in his mind, he reached the studio, and entering found Harold kneeling in a very ecstasy of adoration before the painting which had been covered by the green baize. It was uncovered now, and in the artistically arranged light which fell on it, revealed the form and features of a young girl, which produced in Walter a shock something like that of an electric battery.

It was not that she was beautiful, for Blanche and his foster-sister, Mabel, were beautiful, too, but every lineament was his own, modified, etherialized by the difference of sex, nevertheless his own as completely as ever sister resembled her brother.

This involuntary ejaculation aroused Harold from his amatory reverie, and springing to his feet he exclaimed:

"Ha! Have you observed it? It was in my mind while we were speaking together. It is wonderful the resemblance which you bear her. Yes, it is she, my darling, my loved one! Her very image, as she lives and breathes. I painted it from memory, and it is perfect, far more perfect than the one I drew during her sittings. Is it not strange, this coincidence. The eyes, the hair, the nose, the expression of face, all that goes to make one's individuality, should be so alike, so exactly alike. It is a most wonderful freak of nature that you, a simple American born, should so closely resemble the daughter of an English countess!"

CHAPTER X.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

The words "freak of nature" recalled Walter to himself. What folly for him to suppose that there could be any relation between him and the daughter of a proud, haughty English countess who hated all Americans. With something like a sigh he dismissed a thought which had involuntarily arisen in his mind, as utterly absurd and improbable.

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"The resemblance is, indeed, extraordinary," he said, "but, as you say, it is very likely a mere freak of nature. Still, I am interested in her behalf, if for no other reason than because she looks like me. Even if she does not become your wife, it is my duty to prevent her from marrying an adventurer."

"An adventurer," cried Harold, dropping the green baize over the portrait.

"I have discovered that the marquis is no marquis."

"Ha!"

Walter briefly narrated all that had taken place between him and the pseudo nobleman, and the reasons of his suspicions as to his identity.

"My dear fellow," exclaimed Harold, highly elated, when the other had concluded, "you overwhelm me with delight. Then it is not even a question of a duel. A mere ordinary police affair. We summon the gens d'armes, you denounce him and—"

"Not so fast, not so fast," interrupted Walter, laughing. "Remember I have only my suspicions. My word is not sufficient. We must have an official description, a requisition from our government—"

"And in the meantime he crosses the channel and betrothes himself to my darling," interrupted Harold, with a groan.

"It is not so sure that your darling is your darling," suggested Walter. "He seemed to be quite sure of his position, and he could not very well be so without Miss De Vere's consent."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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