

THE RECTOR'S SECRET.

— OR —

LOVE CONQUERS ALL.

A STUDY FROM LIFE.

BY J. R. ABARBANELL.

CHAPTER X.—Continued.

"I don't believe it, I don't believe it," energetically affirmed the lover, "or, if so, her consent was gained under duress, by compulsion. It must have been her mother's doings. Do you know Walter, I begin already to hate her whom I propose to make my future mother-in-law. From what I have seen and heard of her she must be a woman of iron will and marble heart."

Again a sigh of disappointment escaped Walter's lips, but he covered it with a laugh, as he said:

"You would make a charitable son-in-law, indeed."

"Ah, I would crush her proud British spirit, I would compel her to honor and respect the American nation collectively and me individually. But we are making no progress. What is our first step to take toward unmasking this marquis?"

"To telegraph to the superintendent of police in New York. After this fellow's decamping from the city, his description and a requisition were duly filed in the superintendent's office, for use as soon as his whereabouts was ascertained. I will have them cabled to Scotland Yard, London, and we must cross the channel tonight in the same boat with him."

"If he sees us he may smell a rat."

"True. We must go disguised."

"We'll be amateur detectives," laughed Harold.

"I declare it like one of Gaboriau's romances. Well, I am ready. What is my share of the work?"

"To procure the disguises."

"Nothing easier. I have a friend a costumer, who has often lent me attires for my models. He will supply me in the strictest confidence. What shall they be?"

"Let me see," mused Walter. "I have it. What do you say to a couple of English tourists, returning from a trip through the Holy Land?"

"Excellent, my boy, perfectly excellent," cried Harold, capering around his friend in the most extraordinary manner in the world.

"Here, hold on, Harold! What's the matter, anyway? Have you got a fit?" ejaculated Walter, in some alarm.

"I've got an idea," gasped the other.

"Glorious! Kill two birds with one stone. My prospective mother-in-law—must call her that, can't help it—intensely religious of course. Delighted to receive distinguished tourists from the Holy Land. Lord so and so, the earl of this and that! Do you catch the point, Walt, my boy, do you catch the point?"

"You mean we will be received in the house?"

"Mean it! I'm sure of it. And, once inside, the citadel victory is ours. I shall go at once for the costumes."

"And, while you're about it, drop into the newspaper offices. As you are somewhat of a bohemian yourself, you must have acquaintances there. Find out, if you can, who wrote the articles which have caused you so much heartache. As for me, I will interview the chief of police and cable to New York."

"Where shall we meet to put on our disguises? It wouldn't be safe to do so here."

"No. What is the address of your friend the costumer?"

Harold gave it to him.

"We will meet there and compare notes; then, having transformed ourselves into sprigs of the English nobility, will proceed to the depot to ride to Calais on the same train as our friend the marquis."

"Then let us start off at once."

Harold put on street attire, and the two young men left the studio and softly descended the stairs, so as not to attract the attention of the adventurer.

To the concierge they stated that they were going to take a stroll on the boulevards, and once out of the house they repaired, Walter to proceed to the office of the chief of police, and Harold to visit the bureaux of the newspapers, with the editors of which he was on terms of social acquaintance.

At about ten o'clock they met at the costumer's.

"Well?" asked Harold.

"I had an interview with the chef. He has had the marquis under police surveillance for some time. He was happy to receive a confirmation of his suspicions from me. He readily entered into my plan, and added the weight of his authority to the cable I sent to New York. So that is arranged. How have you succeeded?"

"I have the copy of all the different notices which were inserted in the papers."

"Ah!"

"They are all in the same handwriting."

"I thought so."

"Now if we had only a specimen of his penmanship?"

Walter bethought himself of the address the marquis had written for him that evening.

He drew it out of his pocket, at the same time that Harold took out the copy he had collected.

It did not need much of a comparison to convince the friends that the handwriting was the same.

"Oh! the rogue, the villain!" exclaimed Harold, indignantly.

"What a miserable scheme to compel Ethel to become his wife to save her reputation. Ah! I knew she would be true to me."

"Hasty again, as usual," smilingly said Walter. "First we must find out whether it is not with her consent that he had these paragraphs inserted. Let us summon the costumer."

This conversation had taken place in the private room attached to the shop, to which the friends had desired to be shown and to be left alone.

"By the way," added our hero, "here are your cards. I had them written on a stand in a hotel."

He handed him a dozen neatly written visiting cards, on which were inscribed the name, "Harold Sinclair Lord Maxwell."

"Ha, ha," laughed the artist, as he received the cards. "And pray, where are my estates situated?"

"Oh, anywheres under the sun. Let us say Scotland for you, and Wales for me. I've chosen an outlandish enough name for myself."

"What is it?"

"Walter Llewellyn Lord Dinwiddie," replied our hero, presenting his cards.

"Oh, Lord! To think of two republican lads, sporting around in plumes borrowed from the British aristocracy! But I say, Walt; suppose I forget? What is it—Llewellyn Lord Fiddlesticks? There, I've mixed it up already, and address you by your real name?"

Walter might have answered that he had no real name, but he kept that fact to himself, and merely replied:

"I've thought of that. We're college chums as well as fellow tourists. We are so intimate that we address each other by our christian names. You notice, I have left those unchanged."

"You think of everything," admiringly exclaimed Harold. "But here's our costumer," he added, as a knock came at the door.

The shop-keeper entered the room, and without being informed of the object of their disguises, was given to understand what they wanted, and that it was to be loaned to them in strict confidence. Every Parisian loves a mystery, and he entered into the arrangements *con amore*. Being an artist in his way and having a plentiful assortment, in the course of an hour he transformed them into British youths of the ultra stripe—Dundreary whiskers and all included. As the saying is, their own mother would not have recognized them.

Highly elated with their success thus far, the young men sallied from the shop to proceed to the depot.

"Bai Jove," exclaimed Harold, assuming the regulation drawl and lisp. "You know, we'll meet the marquis on equal grounds. It's a case of diamond cut diamond, you know, you know!"

CHAPTER XI.

BUFORD HOUSE.

Anomalous as it may appear, the London season is at its height during the month of July. Parliament is generally still in session, and it is not until its adjournment that the great hegira to my lord's or lady's estates sets in. Rotten Row resounds with the tramping of many horses' feet, drawing elegant equipages, in which are seated brave men and fair ladies, the very flower of British aristocracy. Piccadilly and Pall Mall glitter with the brilliant uniforms of the Home Guard, while Belgravia transforms night into day in a constant round of balls, receptions, drawing-rooms and assemblies, which fill the gorgeously furnished and dazzlingly illuminated parlors of that ultra-fashionable neighborhood with a rustle and flutter of silks and satins, and a solemn array of black dress suits.

Lady Buford's drawing-rooms were the *crème de la crème*. To receive an invitation to her assemblies was a passport to any society short of royalty itself. She was so thoroughly English, and so proud of it, that nowhere else did the British lion roar so lustily, and all other animals, typical of other nations, cower so humbly as in her parlors. The American eagle was a bird of particular aversion to her, and so far from clapping its wings in her domicile, it did not dare to tap its beak at her door. It is true that envious persons looked into Burke's Peerage and could not, for the life of them, discover what she was before the Earl of Buford, by his marriage to her, made her a countess; but these envious persons had tried in vain to secure a place on her visiting list, and nobody cared what they said.

It was now upward of twenty years since her marriage and ten years since her husband's death. The earl was old enough to be her grandfather, people had said, when the ceremony was performed in St. George's chapel, and she had married him only for his rank and fortune; but they had lived very happily together, and dying, he bequeathed to her all his immense wealth and the care of their only child. It was after her period of mourning that she issued from the retirement in which she had lived since the day of her wedding, and became the brilliant leader of London society that she was. Offers of a second marriage were not wanting. Dukes, earls and lords, in general, were ready to place their coronets on her brow, but she rejected them with a quiet dignity and gentleness which converted them from lovers into fast friends. She had no other object in life, so she said, than to rear her daughter, whom she fairly idolized.

On the verge of forty-five, tall and majestic in appearance, slightly inclined to stoutness, she was remarkably well-preserved for her years. It was not an idle compliment, which was often addressed to her, that she looked like her daughter's elder sister, rather than her mother. This, however, referred to her youthful appearance only. Miss De Vere did not resemble her mother, either in form or in feature. She was more of a blonde, with rosy complexion; while her mother was darkly beautiful, with a dead white cast of countenance. Those who had known the earl in his lifetime affirmed, also, that his daughter did not resemble him either. People wondered whom she did take after.

At any rate, they took after her; for no sooner had the Hon. Miss De Vere made her debut in society than she was surrounded by a group of male admirers, each one of whom aspired to her hand and heart. She was far too young to think of love and marriage, and to avoid any complications, her mother took her for a tour on the continent.

In Italy they met the Marquis de Montjoie, and the adventurer, quickly scenting his prey, played his cards so well that he was soon on intimate terms of friendship with the mother, if not with the daughter. He took care to renew his acquaintance during their stay in Paris, and received a general invitation to visit them in London on their return home. We have heard his side of the story—what use he made of the invitation. Perhaps there is another side to it. We shall see.

Let the reader enter with us the palatial mansion in Belgravia. It is ten o'clock of the evening following the night in which Walter and Harold took their hasty trip across the channel. Cards for the drawing-room to be held that evening had been issued some weeks ago, and the parlors were already uncomfortably crowded, while carriages were continually dashing up and unloading new arrivals. In the conservatory, concealed amid the shrubbery of the rare exotics, a band of music was discoursing sweet strains of melody in a minor key, which did not interfere with the conversation of the promenaders in full dress, who sought a refuge from the heat of the parlors in the cool, umbrageous alleys of the conservatory.

The countess is necessarily detained in the drawing-room to receive her guests, but Ethel is promenading along the flower-boarded paths, leaning on the arm of no less a person than Harold Henshawe, alias Lord Maxwell. Walter has paid his respects to his friend's inamorata, and gone to engage the countess in an unctuous discourse on the religious influence of a trip to the Holy Land, thus leaving the way clear to Harold.

How did the two young men manage to gain an entrance into Buford House? By meeting British exclusiveness with Yankee impudence. They had driven to the house in a coach, with footmen and outriders, boldly presented their cards to the usher, and, being lords, had been duly announced.

Once in the parlors, their individuality was merged in the crowd, of which one half did not know the other, and, as Harold had stated, any reference to a religious subject was sufficient to gain the good graces of the countess, and to lull any suspicions which she might otherwise have entertained.

If it was the marquis' intention to be present at this reception, to which, no doubt, he had received an invitation, he had not yet put in an appearance. Very likely he wished to have all the éclat which surrounds a late arrival.

At the end of the conservatory there was a rustic bench, hid from the general view by a number of palm trees which grew before it. What more natural than that Harold, reaching it, should invite his fair escort to a seat, where he could enjoy the luxury of a private *à tête*.

"You have been in Paris, my lord?" asked Ethel, as she sat down, continuing the conversation in which they had been engaged.

"Yes," drawled Harold, bending over toward her from the back of the bench against which she was leaning. "My friend, lord—lord (confound it, I've forgotten his name.) Wait—always call him Walt for short, we've been so much together, you know—and I stopped there on our return from the Holy Land. Fact is, you know, we've just come from Paris!"

She had shown but a languid interest in his glowing description of Jerusalem

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and the surrounding country, though she had been there with her mother, but hearing that he had been in Paris, she at once became very animated.

"I have friends in Paris, she eagerly exclaimed.

"So I know. One especially—a very dear friend of yours."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

THE GULF.

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