

Sworn Foes.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER I.

'Do you really mean that I am not to go, Blanch? I thought you were only joking.' 'No, really, dear, it's a time-honored custom. No invitation is ever sent to unengaged girls. I don't know how it originated, but it's quite an established custom. I meant to have told you in my letter.'

Oh, it's no matter. I shall manage to enjoy myself, somehow.'

'Still, it seems so inhospitable to go off to a dance and leave you to entertain yourself. I don't mind confessing that I should not have been in such a great hurry to say 'Yes' to Jack, but for the sake of getting an invitation. You see, the Glencarty ball is said to be the jolliest of all the year, though it is only adding injury to insult to tell you that.'

'Well, I was thinking so. But you must not worry about me, really. I am not 'out' yet much less engaged to be married; and I did not expect to be invited to balls and things. Your dance on the twentieth will be wild dissipation for me. I must show you the dress I have brought; Aunt Anna sent to Madame Dubois for it. That was to worry Aunt Rachel, who above all things, dreads my growing 'worldly.' She wanted me to wear a white cashmere frock which has done service for Sunday best all the summer. Aunt Anna is a duck. Come up and see the dress now, will you?'

'Won't I?'

The two girls—formerly school chums—were together for the long vacation, which Mara Sullivan had been invited to spend at the Forrest, Sir Spencer Claverton's estate in Northumberland.

Blanch Claverton had left college at Easter, having reached her eighteenth birthday; but Mara, who was not yet sixteen, though she looked as old as her friend, was still in educational bondage.

The ball-dress was a work of art from the dressmaker's point of view.

Blanch went into ecstasies over it.

'It's a thousand pities you should not go to the Castle ball when you have such a gem of a frock as that to wear!' she exclaimed.

'Does seem a pity, doesn't it?' Mara knitted her brows and thought a moment; then, with more than a gleam of wickedness in her truly Irish eyes, she said: 'Say, Blanch, can't you fit me with a temporary fiancee for the occasion? I should love to go, and that's a fact.'

'I'll ask Jack. What a splendid idea, Mara! Why didn't it occur to me? I'll tell Jack to find you somebody nice, and then I'll write and ask Lady Glencarty for invitations for you and your young man.'

'Don't let him be too nice, or he won't fancy being tied to me even for one evening. I am not exactly a beauty, you know.' She wheeled round to the long glass and inspected herself critically. 'Black hair, no complexion, no figure, and far too tall; that's me to a T,' Blanch.

'You forget your eyes and your talent for using them. Why, I caught my sober-minded pater flitting with you only an hour ago, and he privately confided to me that you were a 'fetching little witch,' and, had you been half-a-dozen years older, he should be tempted to supply me with a step-mother.'

Mara laughed a regular schoolgirl, whole-hearted laugh.

'You tell Sir Spencer, with my compliments, that there might be two words to that bargain, though I don't think I'd say 'No' more than once. He's just lovable, I consider; and he doesn't look much off thirty.'

'He's nearly fifty, I can assure you. I should not blame him for marrying again. You see, Nora and Agnes took to themselves husbands directly they left college, and here am I following suit, and, when I am gone, he'll be all alone, poor dear.'

'Does Sir Spencer get an invitation to the Castle?'

'Oh, yes. Widows and widowers admitted; it is only bread and butter misses and callow youths—I quote Lady Glencarty—who are excluded.'

'She would call me a bread and butter miss, I suppose?'

'Until she had talked to you for five minutes. Not longer, I'm thinking.'

Mara laughed again.

Her training had been carried on in a rather unusual fashion.

Both parents died during her infancy leaving her to the joint guardianship of a sister of each, who differed on all points concerning the child's treatment.

Until she went to school, she spent six months of the year with her father's sister, Mrs. Peyton, and the other six with her mother's sister, Mrs. Porce.

The former, Aunt Anna, was Irish to the backbone where she was not Parisian. Her heart was Irish, her dresses Parisian; her accent Irish, her ideas of life Parisian.

Mrs. Porce, Aunt Rachel, was her direct opposite; prim to a degree, strict to a fault narrow-minded and prejudiced, condemning all sorts of amusements, and living a life of unnatural self repression, which made her equally unhappy, unhealthy, and unpleasant.

Mara owed to Aunt Anna, her escape from the uncongenial atmosphere of Mrs. Porce's house for nearly five months out of the six, to be spent at school; but Mrs. Porce had something to say to the choosing of the school.

Still, it was better than Ash cottage, Aunt Rachel's residence.

Acted upon alternately by such differing influences, it was no wonder if Mara Sullivan grew up a curious mixture of good

and evil.

She adored Aunt Anna and detested Aunt Rachel.

Anything of which the latter disapproved Mara would make a point of doing.

And yet her capacity for good was very great.

Where she loved she could be led by a silken thread.

Mrs. Peyton found her obedient, affectionate, and altogether charming; while Mrs. Porce declared that mules were not in it for obstinacy when compared with her niece, Mara Sullivan.

Such was the girl who had so taken Blanch Claverton's fancy at school that she preferred her for a friend and chum to other girls who were nearer her own age.

When the two went downstairs—after inspecting the ball dress and all the other details of the 'rig-out' for the dance on the twentieth, which was to be given in celebration of Blanch's engagement to Captain Eversley—that well-set-up young guardsman was just entering the hall with another man.

'Stranger to me!' murmured Blanch, sotto voce, as she went forward to greet her fiance, who introduced his companion as Desmond St. Clair, a fellow guardsman.

'St. Clair's come up for the shooting,' announced Captain Jack, inspecting his boots with inward satisfaction, and wishing Blanch's friend was a year or two older—he had been told her age—and a shade or two prettier, in order that she might so far attract his fastidious friend that the two could pair off together, and leave him to enjoy his sweetheart's society undisturbed.

For Viscount Eversley's place was empty of visitors save this one, and it would plainly be Jack's duty to always take him along whithersoever he went himself.

After one glance at St. Clair's indolently indifferent face, Mara decided that any pains she might take to amuse him would be wasted; so she took a seat in the background, and fell to amusing herself instead by studying his features.

Forehead square, with a thick lock of auburn brown hair falling over it—most unmilitary like, so said Mara to herself; brows slightly arched, and darker than the hair; eyes doubtful as to color, and only half open; nose good, but indicative of too much pride; mouth also good, and in no way hidden by the moustache, which matched the eyebrows in shade and was waxed at the ends; chin rather too long for beauty, but very strong-looking; prevailing expression fatigue, mental and physical, beyond words to describe; when he spoke, it was almost a drawl; when he raised his tall form and started to walk, it was nothing more than a crawl.

'Used up!' was Mara's comment. 'I hate that sort.'

As the thought passed through her brain Captain St. Clair languidly raised his eyes and looked at her.

'Kodak ready? My position all right?'

'What do you mean?' she asked, opening her pretty eyes to their widest extent and seeing now that his were a curious mixture of green and blue.

He sighed gently.

'Thought, perhaps, you went in for photography, and wanted me for a subject.'

'Oh, dear, no! I was only studying you from habit. Human nature is my hobby.'

'Indeed?'

He lapsed into silence, and Mara, with a mental pat on the back for having refused to pander to his vanity by owning that his face interested her, gave her attention to a speech of Captain Eversley's referring to himself.

'Beastly shame that she shouldn't be asked. Who is there likely now? They all seem engaged round this way except the new curate. I know for a fact he is not, because he proposed to Molly Dawson last evening and was refused. But I suppose he wouldn't dance?'

'He wouldn't do it he did!' chimed in Mara. 'I can't bear curates! I would rather give up all thought of going than to

appear as a curate's fiancee.' Eversley laughed at her vehemence. 'St. Clair's looking mystified. He is new to these parts, so I must enlighten him.'

Captain St. Clair listened languidly and commented laconically.

'Novel to say the least of it. Does Miss Sullivan want to go?'

'She has a gem of a dress which is really too good only to be seen at our little dance,' exclaimed Blanch. 'So Captain Eversley is to supply her with a 'fellower' for the occasion.'

Once more the heavy lids were raised, and those green blue eyes rested on Mara's face.

'How would I do?'

'You! Do you ever go to balls?'

'Sometimes; why not?'

'I should have thought they were quite beyond you; but, perhaps, you only go to look on. Now my young man must dance—and dance well.'

The arch of the auburn-brown brows became more accentuated.

He had expected his suggestion to be caught at gratefully.

Was this little school-girl in earnest? Very much in earnest, to judge by the pucker in her forehead as she added, anxiously—

'You don't dance, do you?'

'I can,' he murmured, softly.

Getting out of his chair inch by inch, or so it seemed, so slow was the process, he continued, addressing Blanch, but with his eyes still on Mara's—

'Play a waltz, Miss Claverton, please; your friend eyes me doubtfully.'

Blanch laughed, and, going to the piano started 'Woman's Love.'

A moment later, Mara was being guided down the room by one of the best waltzers in Europe.

She, herself, was a born dancer, and the perfection of this man's 'action' came home to her very quickly.

She drew a deep breath of unexpected delight, but said no word until the music stopped, and St. Clair with it.

'Well?'

The voice was languid as ever; but there was assurance in the tone.

Mara glanced at him through her lashes with what Blanch called her 'wicked look.'

'You dance as well as I do—almost!'

He was struck dumb with astonishment. He had expected enthusiastic praise, girlish gush, fervent gratitude for his offer of enabling her to go to the Glencarty ball as his supposed fiancee.

Jack Eversley smothered a laugh.

Schoolgirl Blanch's friend might be; but there was nothing of the bread-and-butter miss about her, that was certain.

'You will condescend, then, to accept me as your betrothed husband for the evening of the Castle ball?'

Was it possible that a note of interest sounded in St. Clair's voice?

'I will; and thank ye kindly.'

Mara held out her hand in token of gratitude and goodwill, and the man's bewilderment increased at the sudden change in her.

CHAPTER II.

'Do you mean it as a fact that that girl is only fifteen years old?'

'She will not be sixteen until next month, Jack.'

'She looks older than you do. No one would think this is her first ball. The witch knows how to use her eyes—deuced fine eyes they are, too! But she may as well save herself the trouble of trying to enslave St. Clair; he is fireproof, if ever a man was. Besides, he hasn't a farthing; he's bound to marry money.'

'Mara hasn't much of that, certainly; only just enough to dress on. But she is not thinking of marriage, bless you! She practises those eyes of hers on all sorts and conditions of men. The masters at college, the man who cleaned the windows, the boy who did the boots, my respected parent, his reverence the vicar, all are fish that come to Mara's net. She only spares you from a sense of honor, because you are my property.'

'That shows she's a decent sort, anyway. How much taller does she mean to grow?'

'Isn't she a height? I can tell you she makes me feel small.'

The subject of these remarks was enjoying herself royally.

'I mean to dance every dance!' she said to St. Clair, when he asked for her programme. 'I have saved you all the



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waltzes I could. You are late, you know.'

'It was Eversley's fault, I assure you. That was all he considered necessary in the way of apology.'

His eyes looked her up and down approvingly.

Their was nothing in her appearance or manner to offend his fastidious taste—nothing to make him feel reluctant to carry out his compact for the evening.

Their first waltz together was a dream of delight for Mara.

She half closed her eyes, and gave her self up to the joy of it.

St. Clair studied her face critically as they moved in rhythmic grace to the measure of the music.

He appeared to be trying to make up his mind to something that was not altogether easy of accomplishment.

There was an unusually wide-awake look in his eyes, and a something closely resembling eagerness in every feature.

But it was all gone when the waltz was at an end, and they came to anchor near Lady Glencarty, who was talking vivaciously to a distinguished looking personage in a magnificent uniform, with broad chest profusely decorated with medals.

'You have enjoyed it?' murmured St. Clair, with what a woman had once called his 'saying' glance.

Child as she was, Mara Sullivan thrilled to her finger-tips.

'It was just heavenly!' she answered, softly.

Then both stood to hear what their hostess was saying.

'A novel idea, is it not, Sir Hereward? Married people only, and every man to dance with his own wife.'

'Excellent—for those whose wives are present. But what of the others, Lady Glencarty—myself, for instance?'

'Oh, you, as a temporary widower, shall be mated with a charming temporary widow! was the laughing response. 'Some of the married women have left their husbands behind, you know.'

'Very thoughtful of them—very considerate. And the dance is to be—what?'

'The "Washington Post".'

'Oh!' murmured Mara, despondingly; 'what a shame to shut us out!'

'Hush! Follow my lead!'

St. Clair's breath came quickly; his half-closed eyes dilated curiously.

He turned to the countess—

'Your own idea, Lady Glencarty?'

'Entirely; and I am very proud of it. You are a married man, I hope?'

Her ladyship tried hard to remember St. Clair's name; but amongst the many strangers who had been presented to her that night—thought by different house-parties—it was not surprising that she failed to identify this particular man.

'Oh, yes,' was the easy reply. 'This is my wife.'

Mara blushed at the cool audacity, but, mindful of his whispered command, did not deny the fact.

'A bride, I perceive.'

Lady Glencarty smiled archly at the blushing girl.

'Just started our honeymoon,' declared the guardesman. 'You have given us away, sweetheart, by that tall tale blush.'

'It's a foolish habit; I must get out of it,' stammered Mara, longing to laugh, her momentary confusion routed by the genuinely Irish spirit of mischief which now danced in her eyes.

'The sooner the better, or people will think you are ashamed of your husband.'

'Ashamed—of you?'

The look accompanying these words would have done credit to the most adoring of young wives.

Addressing Lady Glencarty, she continued—

'When is it to be—this dance? It is not on the programme.'

'No; I didn't want to set the spinster and bachelor mouths watering, so I kept it dark. It is to come off precisely at twelve o'clock.'

It will be very jolly!—Mara took St. Clair's arm. 'I see my next partner looking for me over yonder; take me to him, dear, and then go in search of your own.'

'You ought to go on the stage,' said St. Clair, as soon as they were out of hearing. 'It was capital, done, bluish and all.'

'That was genuine, at any rate! You took my breath away for the moment; but it was splendid of you to think of it, and I'm awfully grateful. I love the "Washington Post".'

'Don't be too grateful. I fear I considered my own interest more than yours.'

He looked at her as he spoke, but she could not fathom the expression of his eyes; which was, perhaps, as well.

'Don't tell Miss Claverton, or anybody, that we are supposed to be man and wife,' he said, carelessly, before leaving her.

'We will save it for a surprise when the married people's dance comes on.'

'All right! Mara laughed merrily, as she gave herself into the hands of a sandy haired youth of many freckles, who was her partner for the 'square' then forming.

'Wonder what she'll say when she knows?' soliloquised St. Clair, looking about him languidly for the feminine person on whose programme stood his initials against that particular dance. 'Will she turn and rend me; or will she be piteous? Or will she be rather pleased than otherwise? Half the women I know would be delighted; but this girl is different. Moreover, she is only a child. I am rather curious to see how she will take it.'

Twice more they waltzed together before midnight.

When releasing her for the third time, St. Clair asked, softly, with another of his 'saying' looks—

'Are you tired of your husband yet?'

'Not in the least. I should like to waltz until daylight with him.'

'That's well. I feared you might be cherishing a secret longing for a divorce.'

'I shall never do that—unless your dancing deteriorates. Hark! that's twelve o'clock striking. Oh! what a joke it will be to see Blanch's face when you and I stand up! Won't she and Captain Eversley envy us?'

'He will, at any rate.'

Suddenly the man's languid calm broke up; throwing back his head, he laughed quietly, but irresistibly, then as suddenly had himself in hand again.

'Forgive me, sweet wife! I could not help laughing. The humor of the position struck me forcibly just then. Come! Lady Glencarty is calling on all married persons to take the floor.'

Blushing again—from excitement this time, not confusion—Mara moved forward a tall slip of a girl, by St. Clair's side.

The dance had begun before Blanch Claverton caught sight of her friend.

She was standing, looking on wistfully, leaning on Jack Eversley's arm.

Her start made him glance at her.

'Look, Jack! I declare, if Mara isn't dancing—with Captain St. Clair, too! What a piece of audacity!'

'I should say there are a pair of them for that! Why didn't you and I claim to be married, Blanch?'

'Too many people here know to the contrary,' she replied. 'Those two are strangers to the neighborhood. It's like their impudence, though, and I feel too mad with envy to watch any longer. Come away somewhere and let us talk.'

Nothing loth, Eversley found a quiet nook behind some knights in armour in the great hall, where they could spoon to their hearts' content until the 'Washington Post' was at an end.

The consciousness that she and her partner were a pair of frauds added considerably to Mara's guilty enjoyment of hat dance.

The music got into her head as well as into her feet.

Her eyes flashed and sparkled, her lips were wreathed in smiles, her whole being reflected her wild happiness.

St. Clair watched her with a curious mixture of feelings, in which was some pity and a little regret.

In his opinion, as in Mara's, the dance came to an end all too soon.

Lady Glencarty addressed them on their way down to supper, which Mara declared to be a necessity after all that exercise.

'You are the two best dancers in the room. You must forgive me for having forgotten your name.'

'St. Clair,' prompted Desmond, readily.

'Thank you. You must be very proud of your young wife, Mr. St. Clair; her movements are perfectly graceful.'

'I assure you I am very proud—and something more than proud, Lady Glencarty.'

'I can quite believe it. Don't be ashamed of blushing Mrs. St. Clair. I can see it is early days with you yet.'

Responding to an impressive pressure of Mara's finger-tips on his arm, St. Clair passed on.

'I must have laughed out if she had said another word!' declared the girl. 'Mrs. St. Clair indeed! What would Aunt Rachel say? She thinks "no girl ought to think of a husband until she is twenty-five." Preserve us from duplicates of Aunt

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)



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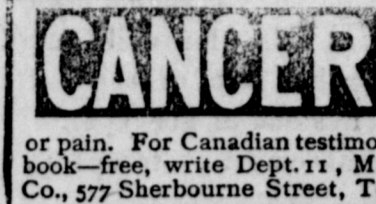
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