

A LOST WIFE

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A NOVEL.

BY MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON,

Author of "Worth Winning," Etc.

(CONTINUED).

"In his absence, Miss Clifford, I bring you a message from him. I have no doubt that my visit is unwelcome, and I assure you it is a most painful one to myself; but I have never yet been known to shrink from a duty, however unpleasant."

"Pray deliver your message, Mrs. Featherstone," I interrupted, impatiently, "and spare me a description of your own sensations."

Mrs. Featherstone bowed. "My message," she said, with a scarcely-concealed triumph of manner, "is that under the circumstances of your extraordinary visit to London, it will be quite impossible for my brother to fulfil the matrimonial engagement which existed previously between yourself and him."

"Under what circumstances, pray?" I cried, flushing up hotly and angrily—a display of weakness of which my adversary was not slow to take advantage.

"Pray calm yourself, Miss Clifford. Temper and angry denials, are alike misplaced and useless in this case. The facts, unfortunately, are but too certain, and tell too strongly against you."

"I am at a loss to understand you," I said, falteringly, and feeling suddenly sick at heart; for I remembered how Mark had said that Clara Featherstone had a venomous tongue, and would do me an injury if she could.

"I will explain myself, then," she said, glibly, and with a growing satisfaction in voice and manner—"I will explain my meaning beyond a possibility of your mistaking it. I saw you, Miss Clifford, coming out of a low-looking inn near the Strand, at an early hour in the morning, in the company of Captain Thistleby, a man of profligate and dissipated reputation."

"Indeed? I imagined him to be a great friend of your own, Mrs. Featherstone," I interrupted, quickly, for, like a watchful adversary, I was not slow to take advantage of the

weak points of my enemy's method of attack.

Mrs. Featherstone waved off my remark with disdain.

"There are many men, Miss Clifford, with whom a lady may claim acquaintance in society, but with whom, nevertheless, she would be very sorry to be seen walking about the streets of London alone! But that has nothing to do with the point. Suffice it to say that you were alone with Captain Thistleby; that I saw you get into a cab, and drive off—I should be sorry to say where—and that I then turned back and made inquiries at the wretched-looking inn out of which you had come. I found that, as I had but too much reason to suspect, you had been closeted with a gentleman for some hours in a private sitting-room. I need not tell you how shocked and horrified my whole moral nature was at such a fearful revelation of wickedness! My duty, however painful it might be to perform, was now plain to me. I took the evening train to Narborough, and laid the whole case before my unhappy brother. I am thankful to say that, under Heaven, I have been the instrument of saving him from cherishing a viper in his bosom. When, at my entreaties, he consented to make inquiries, and found that you had been missing from home the night before the morning I had seen you in town, he was forced to acknowledge with me, that nothing was wanting in the complete chain of evidence which proved your utter condemnation. He has only stayed to follow your poor father to the grave, as a mark of respect for his long friendship and esteem for him, and he left Eddington last night, and does not mean to return to it for a long time. I think I have said quite enough upon this subject, Miss Clifford."

"Quite enough—too much indeed, Mrs. Featherstone," I answered. "I have heard you to the end without interruption, and I may say that, although my conduct can be perfectly well accounted for, I disdain to make any explanations of it to you. I should, however, wish you to know that I have had no intention of marrying your brother for some time back; that on going up to London somewhat suddenly, I left a letter for my poor father telling him of my intention—that I went to join Mrs. Thistleby, in Paris, and should have been under her protection now, had not my father's sad death recalled me; and, finally, that I sent for Mr. Curtis to-day in order to tell him that I wish to break off my engagement with him."

"That is easily said," said my enemy, scoffingly. "As if any one would believe all that when you are left without a penny!"

"You need not add insult to injury, Mrs. Featherstone."

"I shall wish you good-morning, Miss Clifford," she answered, rising, to my no small relief. "And I may also add another wish for your benefit; that you may be given the grace of repentance!"

And then my temper forsook me utterly. I turned upon her, white and trembling, and absolutely furious.

"Who are you," I exclaimed, "who dare to talk to me of repentance? Go home, woman, and ask God, upon your knees, to forgive you. For if malice, and hatred, and evil-speaking, and slandering, and traducing your neighbor be sins, then do you most assuredly stand in need of repentance and forgiveness! You, that are rejoicing to yourself, because you think that you have encompassed the ruin of an unfortunate girl, whose only crime is that hitherto she has been successful and happy; go home and pray that you may never, in your turn, find yourself at the mercy of a hard-hearted and pitiless fellow-creature!"

And then Mrs. Featherstone passed out of the room, and answered me never a word as she went.

CHAPTER XX.

It was the day before my final departure from Sloperton. My aunt had already gone home, and the following morning I was to go up to her house in London, where she and Mr. Carr had offered me a shelter until I could find something to do.

"Something to do" meant in my case going out as a governess, or as a companion, or as a pupil teacher in a school—earning my living, in short, by any of the dismal and uninviting methods in which alone it has been decreed that a lady may do so and retain her claim to the name. I had secretly determined to go out as a housemaid, or as a charwoman, sooner than live long upon the bread of charity.



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Mr. and Mrs. Carr were rich and childless, but it had not occurred to the worthy couple to offer me a permanent home. Aunt Selina was a fair-weather friend; as long as fortune smiled upon her relatives she was filled with gushing and affectionate interest in them; but no sooner did the world turn its back upon them, and adversity and poverty come to them, than she drew in the strings of her heart and of her purse simultaneously, and wasted no more either of her substance or her feelings upon them.

She had made a great favor of offering me a temporary home, even; and had I anywhere else to go, I would not have accepted her offer. But to go to Bella was now forbidden to me. If I were to be with Bella, then Mark would know where I was, and so knowing, might find me out; and my one hope in life now was that I might never see nor hear of him again. I was determined to become lost forever to him. Our only safety was in absolute separation from each other. So, with many a pang, I tore up my dear Bella's loving and kind letters, and left them all unanswered. Once I left Sloperton, I knew that she would never be able to find me, for she knew neither my aunt's name nor address.

Well, the last day at Sloperton had come; there had been a sale of the furniture, and the proceeds had paid off all our little bills, and defrayed the expenses of my mourning and left me a few pounds to begin my new life with. The house was bare and dismantled; there were bills up in the windows; and my solitary box stood ready packed and strapped in the hall.

Old Sarah went about weeping, for she too was to depart on the morrow, and begin life afresh. I had dragged a kitchen-chair into the dining-room, and was sitting there miserably enough by the dying embers of the fire, pondering over the gloomy prospects of my future life, when a sharp knock at the door aroused me, and, to my amazement, young Charley Flower walked suddenly into the room.

"Mr. Flower!" I exclaimed, standing up in utter bewilderment at the sight of so unexpected a visitor, "what on earth brings you here?"

"Oh! pray forgive me, Miss Clifford, I couldn't help coming. I have only just heard of your loss, and that you are turned out of your home, and all; and oh!" looking suddenly away from me round the bare, carpetless, furnitureless room—"oh, I am so sorry for you!"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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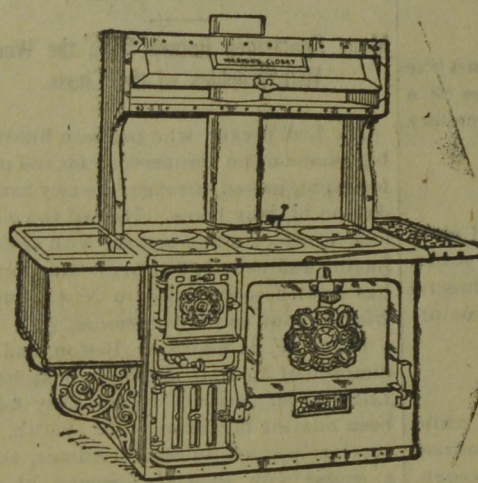
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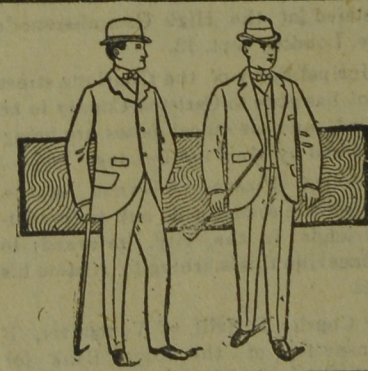
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