

A LOST WIFE

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A NOVEL.
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BY MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON,
Author of "Worth Winning," Etc.

(CONTINUED).

"And you came to tell me this?" I cried, placing both my hands heartily into his; "just to tell me you are sorry for me? How good of you, Mr. Flower! Do you know yours is the first disinterested sympathy in my troubles anybody has given me yet?" and the tears so long driven back into my heart welled up suddenly into my eyes.

"Well, I mustn't let you think I am quite disinterested, either, Miss Clifford," said my visitor, somewhat hesitatingly. "The fact is, that— that, Miss Clifford—oh, Freda!"— suddenly lifting his eyes in honest earnestness to my face—"surely you must know that I love you!"

"Oh, I am so sorry!" I murmured. "Why should you be sorry?" he cried, eagerly—having once broken the ice, Charley apparently found no difficulty in proceeding—"Why are you sorry, if I can make you happy? I have heard that your engagement with Mr. Curtis is at an end—and no wonder, for you never loved him. I know—and now you are free, and you are also in trouble, and have no one belonging to you, and I am pretty well off, Freda, and can afford to give you a comfortable home. I would leave the army; and I know I could make you happy, if you will let me try—"

"Stop, stop! not so fast!" I cried, interrupting the category of his hopes and intentions; "wait one minute, Mr. Flower. If you know that my engagement with Mr. Curtis is broken off, you do not perhaps know that there is a dreadful slander about me that—"

"Oh! yes, I do," he interrupted, quickly; "don't say anything more about that. I have had a letter from Mrs. Featherstone, telling me the whole story at great length."

"She wrote to you?" I exclaimed, in horror-struck tones.

"Yes—the she-fiend!" and Charley Flower ground his teeth and his fists together, as though he would like to murder her.

"And in the face of her letter you are here asking me to marry you, Mr. Flower?"

"Do you suppose I believe one word of what that woman says? It's all a tissue of lies from beginning to end. You don't suppose a woman like that could make me believe any harm of you, do you? And it is just because of her spiteful letter that I have come to you now, so soon, without waiting any longer after your poor father's death; just because I see how lonely and friendless you must be, darling, to be at the mercy of that woman's evil tongue, and how much you need some one to silence all such calumny against you, and to fight your battles for you."

"Oh! Charley, how good you are! How I wish I could love you as you deserve!" And then I burst into a flood of tears.

In a minute the young fellow was kneeling by my side, stroking my hands and my hair, and soothing me by every fond and loving word.

But I pushed him back firmly but gently.

"No, no, Charley," I said through my tears, "I must not let you waste any more love upon me, my poor boy. I don't know how I can ever thank you and bless you for all your goodness and your love to me. If I had not loved any one else I must have loved you—out of sheer gratitude. But alas! I can give you back nothing but tears and blessings—for I have no love to give you—it has all been given away long ago."

He rose from his kneeling position at my side, and walked two or three times the length of the room and back before he answered me, and then he stopped suddenly in front of me with a very white face.

"Will you tell me the truth about this, Freda?" he asked, gently.

I nodded.

"It is Mark Thistleby—the man who was at Eddington the night of the ball—whom you love, is it not?"

"Yes," I answered softly under my breath; whilst a hot blush covered my downcast face, at the thought of how much shame and how little pride there could be for me now in the avowal of my love.

There was a little pause, and then Charley spoke again; this time coldly and sternly:

"Tell me the truth, then—has he behaved badly to you? Has he treated you like a blackguard? for by heaven if he has—"

"Oh, no, not a thousand times, no!" I cried, looking up at him suddenly, as he stood before me, an angry picture of avenging young

love. "What can make you think such a thing? He has been everything that is good to me always. He is the noblest of men; but—but, alas! we can never be happy. He is no way to blame; but—"

And my voice faltered.

"Hush, my darling; say no more. Do you suppose I want to cross-question you, or to wring your secrets from you? It is enough that I know that no one has behaved badly to my darling."

And then he suddenly bent over me and took me in his arms.

"I will not bother you any longer," he said somewhat brokenly, "though I love you very dearly. I will never trouble you again, only give me one kiss, before I go, from your sweet lips!"

Dear, noble-hearted Charley Flower! I think that even Mark would have forgiven me that I granted him his last request; that I put up my arms suddenly round his neck, and gazed into the honest blue eyes that were dimmed with tears, and put up my face for his parting kiss.

"Good-bye," he said, huskily, turning away suddenly to the door. "If ever you want a friend, Freda, do not forget that you have one in me—and God bless you."

Before I could answer he was gone, and with him seemed to go at once all the sunshine and the light which his unexpected entrance had brought into my lonely and desolate life.

And yet I was happier for that visit—happier to think that one more honest heart in this desolate world loved me, and was true to me, than I had known of.

Poor Charley Flower! It was not so very long afterwards that he was drowned in a dreadful collision between two ships in the Channel—bravely devoting his own life to saving those of the perishing women and children about him. When I read of his noble death in the papers—a hero in his last hours—I wept tears of heartfelt sorrow over his sad yet glorious end, and felt proud to think that such a man had once loved Freda Clifford.

CHAPTER XXI.

Russell Square, on a foggy winter's morning, is not a particularly cheering spot, yet there it was that I stood, looking out of the drawing-room window of one of the houses on the north side of the square, one day about two months after my father's death.

The square was filled with opaque yellow fog, through which the bare trees in the garden looked gaunt and weird; a fine drizzle was falling, and a few passers-by hurried along under umbrellas. I stood leaning against the window frame, with some open letters in my hand, and looked miserably and hopelessly out.

My Aunt Selina came bustling into the room, with her new black silk dress all crisp and fresh, and her cap-ribbons flying out behind her. She looked rosy and comfortably well-to-do. She stooped down and stirred the fire into a cheerful blaze.

"Any news, Freda?" she said to me; but before I could answer her, Uncle Carr, who was stone deaf, and never heard ordinary conversation interrupted her and claimed her attention. He was seated in a low arm-chair, drawn well up to the fire, and had been awaiting her reappearance from the lower regions impatiently.

"What have you ordered for dinner, Selina?" Next to eating his dinner, hearing about what he was going to eat, was Uncle Carr's chief solace during the twenty-four hours.

"Sole au gratin, mutton cutlets, oyster patties, and roast pheasants," shouted Aunt Selina.

"Eh?" and up went the ear trumpet. Aunt Selina repeated the menu down it.

"No soup?" inquired her husband in an aggrieved voice.

"Oh, yes; hare soup."

"Have you got the port for it, my dear? and what sauce for the cutlets?"

Being satisfied upon these two all-important points, Uncle Carr subsided into himself, nodding his head, and giving vent to low chucklings of pleasure at intervals—indicative, probably, of the delights of anticipation which he was experiencing.

Her husband's curiosity being appeased, Mrs. Carr turned again to me.

"Any news this morning, Freda?" she asked again. "I see you have some letters."

"No," I answered glancing down at the papers in my hand; "there is nothing new. The lady in Hampshire is suited with a governess, and the one in South Kensington has gone back to the music-teacher who taught her little girls last year."

Everything falls through!" I added, with a sigh.

Aunt Selina gave a grunt expressive of disapprobation.

"And to think that you might have been living on ten thousand a year now, if you had chosen!" she said, angrily, as she drew forth an enormous bundle of knitting—a counterpane for a bazaar—and settled herself down to it.

"And probably as miserable as I am now!" I answered, with a very sad smile.

"I've no patience with such sentimental rubbish!" exclaimed my aunt. "And pray what do you think of doing now?"

"Well," I said, doubtfully, "there's an advertisement in The Times for a bookkeeper in an hotel wanted."

"Impossible!" cried Aunt Selina; "pray remember that you have got relations, Freda. I am not going to allow you to disgrace your family. Why on earth don't you sit down and write to Mr. Curtis!"

"And ask him to take me back, aunt? No, thank you! I think that would be disgracing myself and my family far more than if I were to sweep a crossing."

"What nonsense you talk! You needn't put it in that way. If you were just to say to him that you could not get any occupation and were in want of money, he would write off by return post and propose to you again—see if he wouldn't. I am sure you had much better humble your pride a little than starve."

"I am not starving, aunt—thanks to you," I answered, smiling pleasantly; for when one is eating a person's bread, one feels bound to be as grateful as one can for the gift, however grudgingly it may be bestowed.

"You would be if it wasn't for me," is Aunt Selina's ungracious rejoinder.

I sighed and walked wearily across the room towards the door.

"Where are you off to now?" asked my aunt, looking up sharply from her work.

"I thought I would go out; I might go to that office again and hear of something new," I answered listlessly, as I left the room; Aunt Selina launching forth more invectives against my "ingratitude" and my "obstinacy" after me as I went.

In truth, I had no object in going out at all, unless it was to get out of reach of my aunt's revilings, and out of the sight of her well-furnished, warm-carpeted house, where I felt choked and stifled, as though I had no business there.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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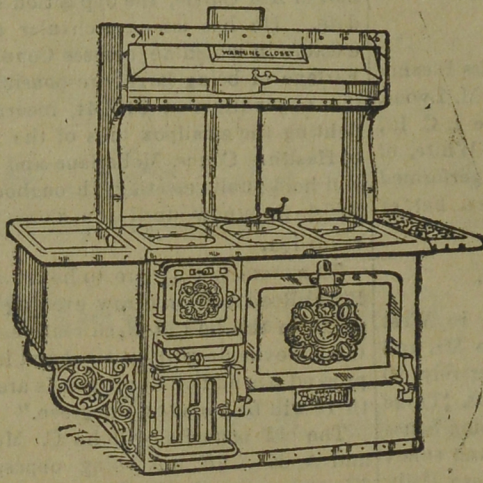
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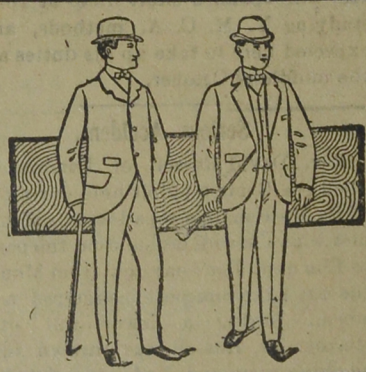
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