

A LOST WIFE

A NOVEL.

BY MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON,

Author of "Worth Winning," Etc.

(CONTINUED.)

"Yes, yes," dear, I will see to all that," I answered, soothingly, thinking it wisest to humor her.

She relapsed into a long silence. I hoped she was going to sleep. But at last she started suddenly up in bed.

"Freda, Freda!"

I ran hastily to her side.

"Get me my keys, quick. They are there on the table."

I thought it best to obey her. She selected a small, gilt key, and pointed to her dressing-case.

"Unlock it quickly. Take up that little tray, there, that one in the right-hand corner. Do you see a little packet in silver paper? There it is. Give it me directly. It is my wedding ring. Of course, I must have it on! Fancy how angry he would be if he found me again without it! How glad I am that I thought of it."

She put the ring eagerly, and with trembling hand, on to her finger. Then kissed it fervently several times, and laid down again quietly in the bed.

I did not know whether I might not have done wrong in giving it to her. I felt pretty sure that Miss Barbara would not have done so. But still I believed that on the whole, if I could only succeed in keeping her quiet in bed, I could not be acting very unwisely.

The result proved that I was right. After getting her ring, Ellinor never spoke again all night. I do not believe that she slept, but at all events she was perfectly calm and free from excitement.

Meanwhile I sat by her bedside with an ever-increasing anxiety of mind. It began to dawn upon me that Ellinor was not so mad as her sister supposed. Weak in mind she undoubtedly was; the life of utter seclusion and absence of occupation which she had led for so many years was sufficient in itself to have made her so, but that she was actually mad, or had ever been so, I began to doubt entirely.

There was nothing in this last attack, severe as it had been, to denote a deranged intellect. It spoke rather of a diseased heart. And then her whole account of what had happened, and what she had seen, had been so clear, and so succinctly and impressively related by her, that it bore the marks of its perfect veracity upon the very face of it.

I did not believe now that Ellinor had been under the influence of any delusion. She had seen a man, not as we had all supposed, outside the windows, but inside the house!

And that brought upon me by degrees a dreadful but overpowering conviction.

Some man or other had assuredly occasionally concealed himself within the house. He had not been there for some time I believed—not for a month; but he was here now, undoubtedly. It was Elizabeth who had admitted him, and who concealed him; and it was in the lumber-room that he was hidden; and the man was Ellinor's husband!

What was I to do with this awful conviction which now broke in upon me with unanswerable certainty? What would this man do? Why had he hidden himself from us? If he wanted Ellinor, why did he not come boldly forward and claim her? Had he been waiting all this while for the opportunity of Miss Barbara's absence, of which no doubt Elizabeth had apprised him, to do so? and good heavens! what was I to do if he were to come forward and insist upon carrying her off with him to-morrow?

These questions filled me with horror and dismay.

I was not surprised when Vickers came in in the morning that she uttered an exclamation of dismay at my appearance.

"Oh! miss, you do look ill!" she cried. "Can I get you anything?"

"Get me a cup of tea, Vickers, please, and then you may take my place for half-an-hour whilst I lie down on the sofa," I whispered back.

"Do go into your own room, miss, and go to bed for a few hours. I can easily call you if Miss Ellinor should be worse."

"No," I answered firmly; "I shall not let Miss Ellinor out of my sight until her sister comes back. I shall not leave her room for one instant."

I lay down on the couch at the foot of the bed and rested, though I could not sleep, for about half-an-hour. I was distracted by my own thoughts and fears. What was I to do if Ellinor reminded me of my promise, and insisted upon getting up

and going downstairs? How was I to keep her in bed without causing her an amount of agitation which would be most injurious to her?

This question soon answered itself in an unexpected way.

Poor Ellinor was seized with a fresh attack of illness more terrible and more severe even than the first. She became first insensible and then delirious.

Vickers and I had enough to do for many hours in attending upon her. I had no time to think of anything else.

The mystery of the man who might be even now in the house was a subject which I had no leisure to inquire into; for the present it must remain unsolved.

When Ellinor recovered slightly from this second attack, she was too utterly prostrated to be able even to move, far less speak. I believed myself that she must be dying, she lay so perfectly still and motionless.

At six o'clock in the evening, to my unspeakable relief and thankfulness, Miss Barbara came home.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Not that day, nor for many days afterwards, not indeed until all our uncertainties and anxieties were set at rest forever, did I impart to Miss Barbara the full extent of my fears and fancies.

It would have been but cruelty to add to her misery by doing so. In answer to her hurried questions,

when she first returned, I merely told her briefly that Ellinor had been frightened, and fancied she had seen some one in the passage, and I was careful to make light of the cause of her sister's illness, as the actual anxiety over her condition was already almost as much as she was able to endure.

For Ellinor was frightfully ill after that, so ill that a doctor from York was sent for, who gave but little hopes of her recovery. He came and shook his head, and looked solemn, wrote a few prescriptions, took his guineas, and then went his way, leaving us to a blank despair than we had felt before his arrival.

For many days Ellinor lay thus, upon the borderland of the Kingdom of Death, and none could tell whether she would not soon overstep the narrow line, and be lost to us forever. Every morning we said to each other: "She cannot live till night," and every night we marvelled that she was still with us. At last, although there was no sensible improvement, the bare fact of her being alive began to give us hopes. Perhaps it was the reviving influence of the warm, spring air, stealing in through the white curtains that shaded her open windows, perhaps it was the ceaseless assiduity of her sister's nursing, which flagged neither day nor night, or perhaps it was simply the elasticity of a naturally strong constitution. Be that as it may, Ellinor lived.

She came back to as it were from the edge of the grave—paler, weaker, thinner than of old, but still she did come back. And Miss Barbara and I, with tears in our eyes, kissed each other and thanked God with trembling joy that it was so.

The great man from York came again, said that she had had a miraculous escape, and that he had hardly expected that she would pull through. "But mind, Miss Fairbank," he added warningly, "you must consider her quite an invalid. The constitution is terribly undermined, the nervous system is shattered, the brain and heart are both sensibly weakened. I feel it my duty to warn you that extreme care will probably be necessary for many years. In your sister's condition another attack could hardly fail to prove fatal."

And then he wrote more prescriptions, and took more guineas, and departed.

During these weary days of nursing and watching I had forgotten all about Ellinor's mysterious husband, and the nervous terror I had once felt concerning the man, imaginary or otherwise, whom I had fancied to be concealed in the house, completely died away into insignificance, in the face of the more serious trouble which seemed to threaten the little household.

I had, however, noticed that the lumber-room door was unlocked as usual, and that Elizabeth appeared to be quite unembarrassed in her manner; and from these signs I concluded that there had been no further attempt to conceal any one within the house.

(The interior, however, he might be



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had apparently decided to let us alone in peace for the present. Perhaps, after all, the whole thing was but the phantasmagoria of my own overstrung nerves. It might easily be that Ellinor had seen no one, that the ghost had been a mere delusion, that Elizabeth had no further object in locking the lumber-room door than possibly to effect stolen meetings with some village lover. Yes, and this latter theory might even account for the broken sleeve-link dropped upon the stairs.

I persuaded myself that such must be the case. A man might have been within the house, and Ellinor might have seen him, and in her bewildered brain he might have seemed to her to resemble her lost lover; and all the time the man might in all probability be merely some rustic swain who had set his affections upon Elizabeth, the housemaid.

In any case that damsel was hardly a fit inmate for a respectable household—her previous experiences at the "Railway Inn" had not had, evidently, a good effect upon her moral character. I determined, as soon as Miss Barbara's mind should be somewhat relieved of the load of anxiety concerning Ellinor, that I would speak to her, and ask her to send Elizabeth away, but I did not like to worry her whilst her sister was so ill.

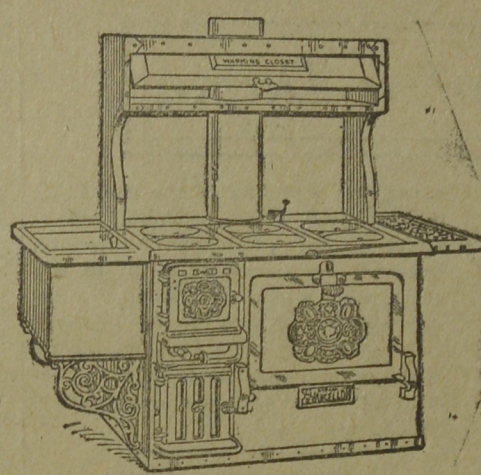
Slowly but surely Ellinor recovered, and it was a singular feature of her recovery that she never, with returning health and strength, made the slightest allusion to her encounter with the man she had called her husband. Either that meeting had never taken place; or she had utterly forgotten it. During her illness, Miss Barbara had withdrawn the wedding-ring from her finger; she had made no resistance at the time, and had not inquired for it afterwards. Her memory, indeed, with respect to many little things seemed to be considerably impaired; she had, for instance, forgotten the names of the servants, the time of the year, and many other equally unimportant trifles. I could easily understand how it was that, after the longer previous illness, Miss Barbara had been able to change their own surname from Fairfax to Fairbank without her being in any way aware of the alteration.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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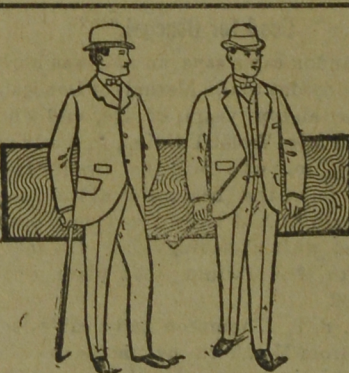
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