

A LOST WIFE.

BY MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON.

[CONTINUED.]

Mrs. Featherstone thus assured, mentioned half a dozen persons, all of them men, whom, I imagine, she considered in the light of "dearest darlings," but none of her surmises were apparently correct.

"What do you say to Pet?" cried Mrs. Leith, triumphantly.

"What, dear old Pet? How charming! Why, he will be coming over with the Holt party to-morrow night. How delightful!"

"Yes; I had no idea he knew them at all. Mrs. Lowndes mentioned it in her letter quite at the end, where it's all crossed. I did not read it till just now."

"But, my dear Anna, we must positively get him away from there. He will be falling in love with Lady Margaret, or some such horror; besides, he would be much jollier with us."

"Can't you write and ask him to stop when he comes to-morrow night? Send over a man with a letter."

"Yes; of course I can. Come, and let us write a note to him."

The two friends sat down together at a distant writing-table, with their heads together; and, to judge from the laughter which went on, I should imagine the note of invitation concocted between them must have been a highly humorous production.

Presently the bell was rung, and orders given that a groom should ride over at once to Lord Holt's with the letter.

Now, I could not help feeling exceedingly curious as to this unknown being, whose vicinity aroused such rapturous expressions on the part of the two friends, and who rejoiced in the so endearing a cognomen as that of "Pet."

"Pet" was, I gathered from the above conversation, undoubtedly a male being, and presumably a full-grown man, although, had I not known the tastes and peculiarities of my friends, I might easily have imagined, from so caressing a name, that the possessor of it was some well-bred pug or Skye terrier, or, at the most, some captivating child.

But from the allusions to "Lady Margaret," whose incipient rivalry was to be thus timely crushed, it appeared to me that, beyond all doubt, "Pet" had obtained the years of discretion. Probably he was one of those little duo decimo editions of manhood whom women are so universally fond of, who, by their diminutiveness and their saucy speeches, win their way to greater privileges and freedoms than are generally accorded to their larger brethren; who sit at ladies' feet holding their skeins of silk, or playing with the charms on their chatelaines, enjoying the good things thus freely granted to them wonderfully, and exciting the envy of bigger and less-favored men.

"Pet" was evidently a man after this fashion, his soubriquet spoke for itself. He was, I supposed, small, dandy, and curly-haired, with tiny, patent leather encased feet, and hands that took "ladies' size" in gloves. As such he would have, beyond being a physiological study, no sort of attraction for myself.

Nevertheless, I had a certain amount of feminine curiosity about him.

I gathered later on in the day when the messenger had returned from his errand to Chadley Castle, that "Pet," whoever he was, had accepted Mrs. Featherstone's invitation; that he was to come over with Lord Holt's party to the ball, stay that night at Eddington, and go out shooting with the gentlemen of our party the next day.

The eventful day arrived at length. My dress—simple as it was, and relieved only from its dead whiteness by bunches of delicate ferns and rich-colored exotic blossoms which I believe Charley Flower had ransacked all the hot-houses and tortured the minds of all the gardeners to pro-

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cure for me—was nevertheless, I felt, a success. I looked my best.

Nevertheless, as the hour approached for the arrival of the guests, I felt unaccountably nervous, and creeping down into the big, empty ball-room, I ensconced myself shyly in the deep recess of one of the windows whence I could see and hardly be seen myself.

From my sheltered corner I watched the country squires and dames with their beavies of awkward or graceful daughters, and their, for the most part, ungainly hobbledehoys as they filed into the room. Some of them I knew slightly, but most of them were strangers; for although we had lived for years at the Slooperton Cottage, that humble abode and its inhabitants had not been much given either to dispense or to receive hospitality, and we were as little known to most of the county magnates as though we had dwelt in Whitechapel.

The room was filling rapidly, when, with a little flutter of expectation at the doorway suitable to the importance of the guests, the party from Chadley Castle was announced.

I bent forward eagerly in my corner to watch their entrance as Mrs. Featherstone, resplendent in ruby satin and diamonds, swept forward to receive them with gracious emprossment; and even Mr. Curtis left off an interesting mineralogical discussion with an ancient scientist, whom he had button-holed into a corner, to attend to his duties as host.

First comes Lord Holt himself, a mild-faced little man, with a deprecating, apologetic air, as though he would perpetually be saying: "Don't be alarmed, good folk; although I am the biggest man in the county, I really don't want to frighten you. I assure you I am most gentle in my habits, and not even a child among you need stand in fear of me."

Not so his wife. Lady Holt is clad in importance and a Parisian gown, of both of which she is equally conscious, and which strike envy into the heart of every female beholder. Even Mrs. Featherstone appears to be subdued, and to tremble before her. To the world at large, Lady Holt appears to be saying, "Fall down and worship, oh, ye lesser mortals! and consider yourselves lucky that you are not blinded by the dazzling glory that surrounds so great a personage as myself."

Lady Margaret follows in the wake of her parents, and is a paler and plainer edition of her mother, whom she much resembles. After her follow two couples whose names I have not caught, and whose appearance does not interest me.

"And now for 'Pet'!" I say to myself, bending forward.

The doorway darkens with a tall, broad-shouldered figure. I catch a glimpse of a close-cropped head, a long, tawny moustache, and deep hazel eyes that are not looking my way, and in another moment Mark Thistleby and Mrs. Featherstone are shaking hands heartily like old friends who are rejoiced to meet each other again.

CHAPTER X.

Ah! my tell-tale heart, will it never stop beating.

I shrink back into my corner and hope that no one will see me.

So this is their "Pet," of whom they talked with such familiar intimacy! What evil chance of fate has thrown him again across my path? Is it chance? or has he come to find me out? Ah! no; if he is here by design it is not for me—I dare not flatter myself that it can be for me; it is to worship at Mrs. Featherstone's shrine—it is for her that he is here! Already he is bending down towards her with that caressing manner which I remember all too well, and gazing with eager eyes into the bold, handsome face that does not shrink from his ardent looks.

And she is handsome!—horribly, terribly handsome! I never recognized it so plainly before. It is for her he is here; he does not even

know that I am in the room; he has not even seen me, nor even once looked round to seek me; he is utterly and wholly absorbed in his delight at meeting Clara Featherstone.

Suddenly a flash of memory carries me back to a stormy evening not a month ago. I hear the splash of the waves around me; I feel the gentle pressure of a sheltering arm that is round me, and the warm grasp of a hand in which mine is clasped; and then, oh! crowning humiliation! I seem to feel again the swift touch of his moustache upon my cheek. Remembering it, I shrink still further into my corner, crimsoning hotly with anger and with shame.

And then, the music of the first quadrille strikes up, the people standing in front of me make way, and I hear George Curtis saying: "Where is she?" and he leads up Lord Holt, and introduces me to him.

"I hope you will not mind dancing a square dance with an old man for once, my dear young lady," he says, graciously, and conveys me off on his arm, amid the wondering gaze of the bystanders, towards the top of the room.

On the way he pauses for a minute, and introduces me to his wife and daughter, who both shake hands with me, and several other people speak to me kindly. I begin to perceive that as the future mistress of Eddington I am a person of some importance, and that most of the county people are curious to inspect me.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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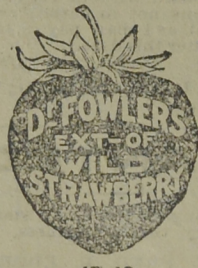
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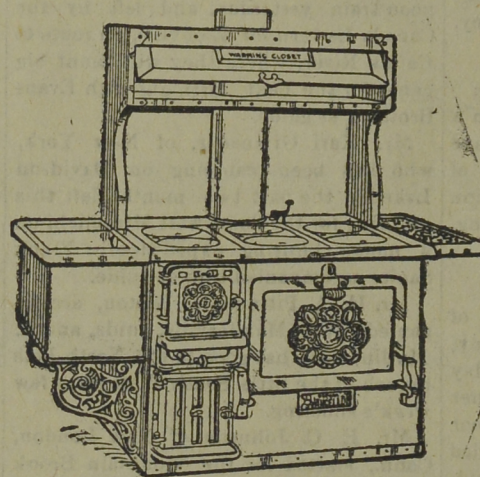
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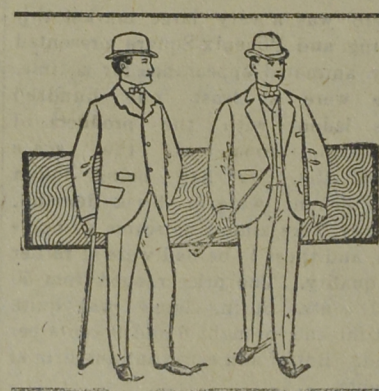
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