

A LOST WIFE

A NOVEL.

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

(CONTINUED).

"Think Freda!" turning to me, "five francs! It cost me £3 to have it mended in London, and it is the handsomest lace flounce I possess! Did you go to the old curiosity shop at Lyons, Mark, last time you came through?"

"No; I had not time. Do you remember, Bella, the first time we went there, and how angry poor old Jem was with us for wasting our money on that 'trashy tin plate' as he called my beautiful Limoges enamel?"

And so on, and so on, through half a dozen more reminiscences of their foreign travels together.

I began to feel very much out of it. Decidedly I had wasted my Spanish lace and my indignation together upon this utterly impassive man, who simply appeared to ignore my existence.

I yawned and began looking about at the pictures on the walls, with all of which I was perfectly familiar, in a futile attempt to create an independent line of amusement for myself.

I began to think I need not have announced my engaged position with so much precipitation. Captain Thistleby did not seem inclined to pry me even the ordinary civilities of society. Perhaps, I mused, he does not care for tall girls, with reddish hair and gray eyes. Perhaps he prefers piquante little blondes, like Bella, with pink cheeks and round blue baby eyes. Perhaps—and here he looks up and catches me staring at him, which sends my own eyes back to my apricot jelly and the color hotly up into my tell-tale cheeks.

After dinner it is much the same thing. I go to the piano at Bella's desire, and she further requests her brother-in-law to come and turn my music over.

He excuses himself. "I am very stupid at that sort of work," he says, without a sign of rising from the comfortable armchair in which he has ensconced himself. "I should be sure to make a mess of it. I think Miss Clifford would rather be without me."

I think so too; but as it would not be civil to say so, I merely remark that I never require anybody to turn over the pages of my music.

"What will you sing, Freda?" asked Bella. "What sort of songs do you like, Mark?"

"I don't think songs are much in my line," answers this extremely disagreeable man. "You know I was never sentimental, and I don't understand music. Young ladies' songs—engaged young ladies' songs—are all very sweet—roses, Cupids, true-lover's knots, etc.—are they not, Miss Clifford?"

"Not all," I answered, feeling vicious; and straightway I sat down and began to sing that well-known quaint old English ditty:

"Once I loved a maiden fair,
But she did deceive me."

I put into it all the vigor of which I was capable, and the bitter animus which I concentrated into the last line of the song surprised even myself.

"Now I do abhor thee."

I sang almost murderously. I was surprised to hear a low laugh behind me, and to find that Captain Thistleby was standing by the piano.

I felt myself properly snubbed, and took refuge behind my novel, leaving to Bella the sole entertainment of her guest for the rest of the evening.

"So you did beautify yourself, Miss Freda," said Bella, as we stood, flat candlestick in hand, at our bedroom doors. "I could hardly hold my tongue. I was so amazed when you came in. I nearly told Mark about the blue gauze then and there, only I was so afraid of your anger."

"I am very glad you did not."

"You made yourself look extremely captivating, Freda."

"I assure you I had not the least wish; that is to say, I put it on with quite another motive—for quite a different reason from what you suppose," I stammered, somewhat confusedly.

"Oh, I daresay! Well, how do you like him?"

"Who—Captain Thistleby? Not at all."

"Not like him!" cried Bella, in genuine amazement, staring blankly at me.

"I think him—well, never mind what I think of him, after all. I have not spoken above a dozen words to him, recollect."

"No; that is true. Ah, well, you will like him better to-morrow."

I doubted it; but by a strong effort of self-control refrained from saying so, and we bade each other good-night.

The next morning, on coming down rather later than usual, I was surprised to find Bella arrayed in her bonnet and cloak, with her gloves, and traveling-bag on the table beside her, eating toast and poached eggs with breathless haste, whilst Captain Thistleby was pouring out her tea, and otherwise waiting upon her.

"Why, Bella!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, my darling child! What will you say to me? I am obliged to go up to town for the day—your last day, too! I am so dreadfully sorry."

For one minute I was almost inclined to accuse her of inventing this scheme on purpose to leave me alone with her brother-in-law; but her pretty face was full of concern as she held out a letter for me to read. It was from her lawyer. I glanced hurriedly through it, without much understanding it; but this much I did see, that there was some solicitor who was to be met by me in town and some paper which she must sign, after having conferred with him, in order to effect a pending sale of some of her property, of which I had heard her speak. There was evidently no foul play about it.

"Make haste, Bella, or we shall be too late," said Captain Thistleby; and at his words I perceived, with a gasp of relief, that he was going up with her. Indeed, when I came to think of it, what else should he do?

"I am so distressed, Freda, dear! Your very last day and all! What will you do to amuse yourself?"

"Oh, I shall do very well. I have my sketch of the boat-house to finish; I shall go and do that after breakfast; it's a lovely day, I shall not be at all dull. Don't make yourself unhappy about me, dear."

"Here is the fly—come along!" cried Captain Thistleby.

Bella hugged me as if she were going to South America, jumped into the fly, followed by her brother-in-law, and they drove off.

Left to my own devices, I leisurely finished my breakfast, and then, taking my shady straw hat and my drawing materials, I sauntered down through the garden on to the beach.

There was a flight of stone steps from the terrace leading to the shore, and in the triangular bit of shadow which they cast upon the beach I installed myself with my back against the garden wall.

An old boat-house lower down formed the principal object of my sketch; behind were red cliffs, and long lines of white sands and dark rocks stretching out to the blue sea beyond. The picture, if somewhat tame, was nevertheless a well-arranged bit of English coast scenery, and afforded full scope for an artist's fancy.

To-day it is at its best. The distance is all hazy gold, the sky is flecked with soft white clouds, the sea is gently ruffled into a hundred varied lights and shades, and the boat-house stands out in richest sepia against the delicate tints of the background.

It was deliciously peaceful, and

I have not done you justice. You evidently understand the passion of hatred perfectly, Miss Clifford," he said with a mocking bow.

quiet, and I began to enjoy myself exceedingly. The only sounds that broke the silence were the monotonous swish of the little waves upon the shore and the occasional cry of a seabird sailing by on big white wings.

I had been working steadily at my sketch for about twenty minutes, when I was suddenly startled by some one coming down the steps behind me.

It was Captain Thistleby.

"Well, I have seen Bella off," he said, cheerily; "such a shave it was! I thought she would have missed the train—it was actually moving—she had no time to take her ticket."

"But I thought you were going too!" I exclaimed, with, I fear, a very uncomplimentary dismay in my voice and face.

"What, up to London in August with such a day as this at Seacliff? No, thank you, not I! But I am sorry to disappoint you, Miss Clifford," he added, looking very much amused.

I muttered some unintelligible disclaimer, and went on with my sketch.

"Do you mind my finishing my cigar here?"

"Oh, not at all," with elaborate politeness. "I am quite used to smoke."

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"What, does the idol of your dreams indulge in tobacco?"

"Who?" I exclaimed, bewildered.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you did not tell me his name. The gentleman to whom you are engaged to be married."

A vision of George Curtis—stout, middle-aged gray-whiskered—snuff-box, gold-rimmed spectacles, and all—flashed across my mind's eye, and the idea of his being called the "idol of my dreams" was so intensely comic that I burst out laughing.

"Good heavens, how ludicrous!" I cried. "Mr. Curtis is his name, and if you had seen him— But I wasn't thinking of him, I was thinking of my father."

"Oh!" and my companion puffed away at his cigar in silence.

He had thrown himself on his back on the beach beside me, but a little lower down, so that I could not see his face; his arms were thrown up under his head, and he had tilted his hat over his nose, to shade his eyes. He seemed to me to have every intention of going to sleep. I devoutly hoped he would.

"Yes," he said, presently, removing the cigar from his mouth and contemplating its smouldering end with close attention, "yes, our friend Bella thought you would be very dull alone, so she has left me the charming task of entertaining you until eight o'clock this evening."

"I am exceedingly sorry you should have thought it necessary to stop here on my account," I said, coldly.

He laughed slightly, but answered not.

"I am never dull, I assure you; and I am quite able to entertain myself."

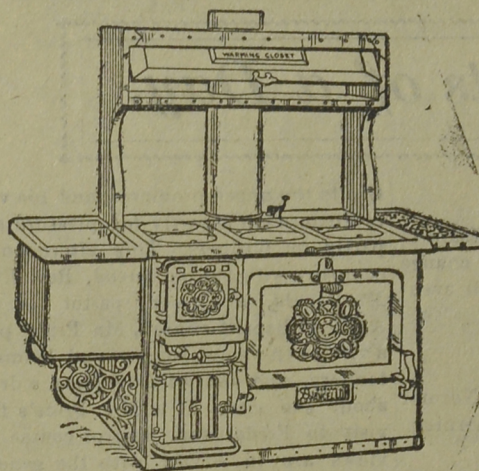
Still no answer. I was more nettled by his silence than by his words. Nothing aggravates a woman so horribly as an antagonist who won't speak. I wanted to fight, and my enemy would not even exert himself to take up his weapons. A few minutes ensued, and then I burst forth aggressively:

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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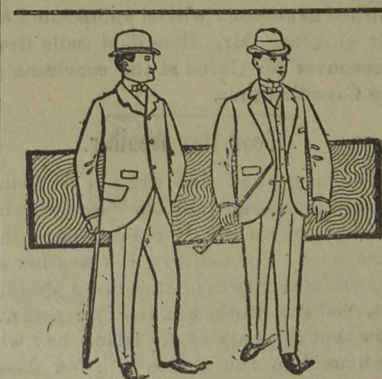
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