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THE BEAUTIFUL COQUETTE.

By Laura Jean Libbey.

cannot be that most detestable of all creatures—a coquette.

Still no answer. Aurelia tried to speak but could not.

"If you have been making a fool of me all this time, you might, at least, have the civility to tell me so," he says, in a voice so sternly cold that remorse, coyness, and all other feelings merge into womanish fear.

"I never forgot the look of the dark, handsome face, looking into hers with passionate love; that look conquered her—she forgot Gerald Romaine—forgot everything save the intense desire to bring back the tender light of love to the face before her.

"Don't blame me until I deserve it," she murmured, with a faint smile; she finishes the sentence on his breast, but so low that only her lover hears it.

Somebody has said that perfect happiness never lasts more than two seconds in this world; at the end of that time his doubts return. He puts her a little way from him and looks at her steadily.

"I beg you to tell me the truth, Aurelia!" he cried; "do you like me or do you not?"

"Yes, I like you," she answered in a very low voice.

"Like" is such a comprehensive word," he says, with a slight, impatient contraction of his straight brows; "you like the old farmer whom you have lived with, you like his good wife and the people about you, but such liking as that I would fling from me; I must be first or nowhere. Am I first?"

"No," she replied with a little forced laugh.

His countenance fell, his face turned a shade paler.

"I am not?" he questioned, in a constrained voice, "who is, then, my sister, Margaret," she answered.

"Darling!" cried Randolph, looking immensely relieved, "how you frightened me! I thought there was another Richmond in the field. I believe you did it on purpose to torture me. Well, after her, am I first?"

For a moment it almost seemed to Aurelia that her heart stopped beating. Was it the thought of Gerald? She could not tell what sudden impulse came over her, to pause in this, the brink of fate—what sudden, curious foreboding—what voice seemed to cry out to her: "Stop!" but one glance from those dark, impassionate eyes caused her to forget all else but the lover present, so she answered:

"Yes."

And, standing there listening to those low-breathed words of love, Aurelia realized that she loved this handsome, dark-eyed lover with a love such as Gerald Romaine could never have awakened in her heart.

"Darling!" cried Randolph, passing his arm round her half-shrinking, half-yielding form. "Can you possibly be fond of me?—assure me again that you are. The last woman who kissed me as you are doing, she kissed me back again, as you do not do. I looked into her eyes, and they seemed truth itself, and all the while she was lying to me; my very touch, every caress must have been hateful to her. Tell me that you love me with all your heart, I am sure."

Shivering, she drew back from his embrace.

"Have you, then, loved some one else?"

"I must tell you frankly that this episode embittered my life. I came near hating all the race of women because of the one I had found false.

"I shall live again all my early dreams of love and a golden future in my thoughts of you, darling," he adds, laughingly, yet looking very tender, withal into Aurelia's face; and he puts an arm of resolute possession, bolder than ever round old Romaine's had been, and glancing up her slender figure; and glancing up at him, the girl realizes that this is no pulling milk-and-water tenderness of a love-sick, passionate lover, but that it is the strong, passionate love of a world-worn, world-tainted, half world-weary man.

And after that swift glance her white eyelids droop quickly over her dark eyes with a maiden's shyness under the new-known fire of a lover's gaze, and once again the memory of Gerald Romaine stings her heart.

"Let us go back to the house," she says with a shiver, attempting to break away from the clasp of the strong arm that held her.

"Why are you in such a hurry to leave me, precious?" he asks, with eager reproach in his voice. "If these moments were as sweet to you as they are to me you would be in no hurry to end them."

"We shall be missed from the ballroom," she latters, desperately. He laughs gaily, declaring she would do well if she returned to the ballroom an hour later, and that he was very magnanimous in permitting her to return at all.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was not until Aurelia was alone in her room that night that she looked the matter clearly in the face and realized what she had done.

"Was there ever a perdidement," she asked herself dubiously, "engaged to two lovers at one and the same time?"

There was no question as to which she liked best, she told herself; she never knew what the throbs of love meant until she looked into the dark eyes of Randolph Clavering, and read his meaning there.

There was only one way out of it, she decided, and that was to write to Gerald, and tell him that she had tried very hard to be true to him, but that it was a failure, that she had found so much else that she liked ever so much better, and beg him to consider their betrothal off, for she could not marry him now.

"I may just as well write my letter to Gerald, now," she thought, "for there is no such thing as sleep for me to-night."

Aurelia spent three hours in trying to compose a letter to Gerald Romaine, and in the end finished by tearing it up in annoyance. "I can't write it out to him," she cried; "anything written sounds so harsh, so abrupt, so formal. He is such a foolish fellow he might just as well, and then it would all come out, and I had been engaged to him, and I wouldn't have that happen for the whole world."

"No, I must tell him myself, very gradually and gently, but not now, oh, not now, for he would come here, and—oh—then I should lose Randolph Clavering's love, and I couldn't bear that."

She could not tell Gerald just yet, and she must write him, to keep him from coming on to Clavering; so that night, instead of a letter, she wrote a dismissal to Gerald, she wrote simply the few words:

"Dear Gerald,—I'm thinking of you all the time, but be sure not to come here.

"Yours in the greatest haste, "AURELIA."

"There," she murmured, impatiently flinging the letter from her, "that's the only way I know of to avert the catastrophe," and, thinking in a disparaging way of Gerald and his love, Aurelia undresses and creeps into bed.

The sun is high in the heavens when she awakes the next morning. Her first thought is of Randolph Clavering; she wondered if he would speak to his father and mother to-day about what had happened last night. She wondered, too, what Miss Erskine would say when she came to know about it.

Aurelia would not have felt very much flattered could she have heard the conversation that was taking place in the library on this very subject at that moment between Randolph Clavering and his parents.

Father and son stood facing each other, and the faces of both were very red and very angry. They were having a decidedly heated discussion; Mrs. Clavering sat on a sofa near the window, her face buried in her lace handkerchief.

"Now mark me, Randolph," Mr. Clavering was saying, "if you take this step you will rue it all the days of your life; you have long since known that it was my earnest desire that you should marry Maud Erskine, my ward; take care how you dare thwart my wishes."

"With all due regard for your authority, I repeat that my mind is made up as to this affair," declared Randolph. "I shall marry Aurelia Lancaster."

"You mean it?" asks his father steadily.

"Decidedly!" answers Randolph, and there is no mistaking the meaning in the voice.

"The price of your folly be on your own rash head, then," cries the old gentleman furiously. "I have said that you will rue this step—mark my words!" and in his wrath, Mr. Clavering makes a terrible threat against his son, and strides abruptly from the room, banging the door after him.

"Well, mother," asks Randolph steadily, as he crosses the room, and flings himself down with careless abandon on the sofa beside her, "which side do you propose to cleave to?"

"Oh, Randolph, if you could, but she is induced to give Aurelia up," she sobbed, raising her wistful, tear-stained eyes to her son's dark, handsome face, and shivering as she saw it darken.

"This is the only matter in which I will not allow even you to dictate to me, mother," he said shortly. "Aurelia is all that is beautiful, that I grant you, dear," she replied, laying her hand on his arm, "but a simple country girl is no mate for you, Randolph. Oh, pause and reflect, before it is too late. Why can you not love Maud Erskine? Think of the position of when she becomes of age; and with such wealth—"

He interrupted her with an indolent wave of his white hand.

"That is rather a foolish line of argument, mother," he declared. "My future wife's prospects would be the last thing I should consider. Why should I? I am not marrying for money, but for love. I have wealth enough to gratify every desire of my wife."

Mrs. Clavering turned deadly pale, but Randolph was so intent upon his own thoughts that he did not notice it.

She arose quickly, and with a hurried excuse, quitted the library, her face still deadly pale.

A little later, Aurelia, going to the library, is startled to find Randolph there alone.

There is none there save themselves to see, and, lovelike, Randolph springs forward and clasps her to his heart, at once, and holds her there, despite her frantic struggles to escape that fervent embrace.

"Oh, darling," he whispers, "breathe, at least, that you are glad to be here with me, even though in truth you are not."

"But I am glad, Randolph," she cries, impulsively.

The clasp of his arms tighten. There is a pause, a little brief pause—such moments are all too sweet for words.

At length Randolph breaks the spell. With one hand he raises the dark, sparkling, piquant face, and looks down into those fathomless, dark, starry eyes.

"My darling," he whispers fondly, "I have broken the news of our engagement to my mother and father."

"Did you?" she inquires breathlessly. "Oh, Randolph, what did they say?" and she nestles closer in his embrace.

"Oh, nothing out of the way," he answers, with a careless shrug of his broad shoulders.

"But were they pleased, Randolph?" she persisted.

"Father was a little wrathful over it," he replied. "You know he had it all cut and dried, so to speak, that I should marry the woman of his choosing. He left me in a great huff, declaring he would cut me off without a dollar."

"And will not?" asks Aurelia, quickly, looking up open-eyed, parted-lipped—her grand castles in the air of great wealth, magnificent dresses, glittering diamonds, horses and carriages, falling earthward with a terrible crash. "Will he?" she repeats, breathlessly.

"Why do you ask?" said the young man, sharply.

"It would be so awful—to be—poor, Randolph," she says, shivering, and drawing a long breath.

"I would never have believed that a mercenary thought could have entered your brain," he replied, and his arms slackened their fond hold a little. "You need not be alarmed—he will not disinherit me, for the very excellent reason that he cannot."

But in her presence a cloud cannot rest long on his handsome face.

"I am going to take you out for a drive after breakfast, love," he says. "We must arrange at once for the all-important event which is to give you to me. There is no need of waiting; we may as well be married next week as a fortnight later. Let us forego a household of guests, a trousseau, and all those auxiliaries so dear, usually, to the feminine heart. With your consent, dear, we will be married at once, and go abroad, and then you shall have everything your heart craves that wealth can procure."

"It is so awfully sudden, Randolph," she said.

"Yes; but as the old adage says, 'delays are dangerous,'" he replied. "I have decided," he went on quickly, "that no time shall be lost in asking your legal guardian, Farmer Romaine, for you. I intend to take a run down there to-morrow. Wish me God speed, my darling."

A sharp cry fell from her lips, and with a suddenness that startled him she sprung from her arms. She dared not think what would happen if he went to Romaine Farm to ask her in marriage—to Romaine Farm where Gerald was. Perhaps it would end in a duel.

In her agitation she went up to him and flung her arms tightly about his neck.

"You must ask no one but myself for me, Randolph," she declared. "If you love me as you say you do, you will do what I wish."

"Do not doubt my love, precious," he said tenderly. "I could not love you any better if I tried. I love you with all my heart. Do you hear, Aurelia, darling? I love you with all my heart. What is it you wish me to do, dear?"

"To let the marriage take place without letting anyone at the farm know anything about it. Let some one write and tell them after—we are married and far away. That would be so romantic."

She gave him the most bewitching smile any man could receive, and as she raised her face to his, she looked so beautiful, so imploring, that he bent his head and kissed her, and after that kiss she was able to persuade him, even against his better judgment, whichever way she would. And that was the first link in the tragedy of three lives.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Aurelia's heart beat more tranquilly, now that the promise had been given her by Randolph Clavering that he would not go to Romaine Farm; and, now that this difficulty was bridged over, life, which was all rose-tinted with her, moved on smoothly enough.

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