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## THE BEAUTIFUL COQUETTE.

By Laura Jean Libbey.

"I am not what I have dreamed of was like."

"You will find when you are my age that dreams and realities are widely different," he said, grimly. "I will simply state, to save time in argument, that I have conclusive proofs—I always carry them about me. Here is your mother's picture."

He said, touching a miniature locket he wore attached to his vest-chain.

The golden lid flew back, and the face that looked up from the ivory was so like Aurelia's own, that the mirror had shown her over and over again, that she fairly held her breath.

Beneath the face was the name Aurelia and the year 18—, which showed that the portrait must have been taken some score of years or more ago.

"One by one the girl examined the proofs he offered. Yes, beyond a doubt this man was her father, otherwise they would never have been in his possession.

"Now for a resume of the past," he said grimly.

"To begin with, and to state facts as briefly as possible, I will say I married your mother for her beauty, and she married me for—position.

"There was one secret of my past life that I had thought to keep from her. Two years before I married your mother I met and loved another—a sure-hearted virgin maid, whom I wooed and won and made my wife. To my lovely Margaret I gave all the love there was in my fickle heart to ever give. When my parents heard of my marriage to my simple-minded Margaret, they used every means to separate us, and—alas! how shall I own it—they influenced me, at last to desert her. My Margaret faded like a lily; she loved me too well to exist without me, she wrote me. I would have returned to her, for there was a still more urgent reason that I should do so. Margaret wrote me in the letter about our little daughter, but my relentless parents held me back. Margaret pined away, and they laid her beneath the daisies on the green sloping hillside that we had roamed over so often in those happy days when Margaret was my bride.

"My parents put the child—little Margaret—in the humble family of an old nurse. No one knew of my marriage, and the affair was hushed up. They soon picked out another bride for me, and as her beauty infatuated me, I married her, thinking to keep the story of the past a secret—a secret from her forever.

"A year later you were born, and all the love of the mother was withdrawn from me and centred in you, her child, for whom she had great hopes. The chief ambition of her life was to live to see the day that you should reign as heiress of the house of Lancaster. This suddenly brought me to my senses. You could never reign as that I well knew, because of Margaret's babe. But I dreaded breaking the news to her. I knew her fiery temper so well, and this intelligence would fairly take the heart from her body.

"One day I was stricken ill almost unto death; in that hour I knew I must make restitution of her rights to Margaret's babe. Then the whole truth came out; I sent for baby Margaret, the heiress of the house of Lancaster.

"My wife said Aurelia, my young wife, raved like a veritable maniac; I have read in the traditions of the house of Lancaster that upon the dark-eyed daughters a curse rests—heavy and deep; and the curse had fallen on my little Aurelia, whom I would have saved with my life.

"While I lay ill unto death, she made me promise that the world should never know that the child was not the heiress of Lancaster until the day that you were of age. I think," he continued reflectively, "that she must have had the thought in her mind that Margaret's babe would never live to claim her inheritance, when I told her how frail you were both mother and child, and then you, her idolized little Aurelia, would be heiress to all the broad domains of the Lancasters.

"From the hour I gave my wife that solemn promise, ill as I was, I noticed a sudden change in her. Night and day she seemed to be brooding over something she had on her mind. I found out what it was all too soon.

"On the day that I rose from my sick-bed, they broke the intelligence to me that Aurelia had fled, taking with her her little child, and—Margaret's babe.

"From that day to this I have searched for her, never finding trace of her until to-night. Now I ask this: Where is your mother, and where is Margaret, my child?"

"My mother is beyond all reach of your anger or revenge," said the girl slowly. "She is dead! I can take you to her grave."

"And my little Margaret?" he asked hoarsely. "My Margaret's child, who is now the heiress of Lancaster Manor?"

"You might as well search for a grain of sand on the seashore—a blade of waving grass on the hill side, as to look for Margaret."

"Is she dead, too?" he asked hoarsely.

"And quick as thought Aurelia answered:

"A sigh broke from her father's lips. It never occurred to him to doubt her.

"Then, in that case, you, Aurelia, are the heiress to Lancaster Manor, one of the finest estates in England," he said. "But tell me the story of your life, from first to last. How you came to be living in luxury like this?"

She gave him the story in detail truthfully enough, until she came to the episode of Margaret's departure from the farm. She gave her father to understand that Margaret had died at this period, and that the money Dr. Thorpe had so strangely bequeathed, had been left to herself, instead of Margaret.

"Ours has been a strange, eventful experience, child," he said, when she had concluded; "but henceforth you shall know no more sorrow, your path will be one of roses."

### CHAPTER XLII.

A guilty flush swept over Aurelia's face, leaving it as white as her dress.

He noticed it.

"The excitement of this interview is too much for you, my dear," he said, in alarm. "Let me get you a glass of wine—an ice—something. You are trembling, too."

"You may get me a glass of wine, papa, if you will," she said.

And leaving her there he hastened on his mission.

It was during his absence that Randolph Clavering and his young bride passed through the conservatory, and Aurelia heard the conversation between them related in a previous chapter.

When her father returned he found her standing, leaning heavily against one of the slender palm-trees, with an expression on her face that he never afterwards forgot.

"Are you going to claim me as your daughter, papa," she asked—"now-to-night?"

"I have been thinking over the matter," he returned slowly, "and have concluded that it would be unwise, for the reason that it would but revive the old scandal of my wife Aurelia's flight long years ago. I am traveling in this country under the name of Count Lorenzo. No, you can make your arrangements quietly, and at once to go to England. I will cross on the same steamer with you, and when you reach your native shores you must take your rightful place in the world at once. Do these arrangements meet with your approval?"

"Entirely," declared Aurelia, her eyes brightening.

"Next to love, revenge is sweet," some writer has said, and Aurelia found it extremely pleasant to imagine Randolph Clavering's surprise, and his chagrin in not having secured her, when he found her the petted, courted heiress of some great English estate.

Excitement was to Aurelia the wine of life.

She would find plenty of adoring lovers over there. Why, there would be lords, earls, perhaps even dukes, for her to choose from.

"How lucky it was that I claimed old Dr. Thorpe's money instead of turning it over to Margaret," she thought exultantly. "Fate had worked everything like a charm for me."

"How do you like the wealthy old count, my dear?" asked Mrs. Thornby, the hostess, of Aurelia, a little later. "I see"—she added archly—"he is monopolizing very much of your attention, much to the chagrin of your many other admirers."

Aurelia shook back her dark curls with a gay laugh, but was not communicative.

"The lion of the evening is not here," said Mrs. Thornby, "and it is so disappointing. So many young girls are here for the express purpose of meeting him."

"Some great foreigner, I presume?" smiled Aurelia.

"On the contrary, an American—and a very modest and unassuming young man, too, to be worth several millions of money," returned Mrs. Thornby. "I like him better than most young men society is filled up with. The young girl who gets him will get a bargain I assure you."

"Who is this paragon?" inquired Aurelia, languidly.

And the answer nearly took her breath away.

"Mr. Gerald Romaine," said Mrs. Thornby. "There must be some mistake," cried Aurelia. "I know a Gerald Romaine; but it cannot be the same one. He—the one I knew—was as poor as a church mouse."

"This Mr. Romaine is a wealthy mine owner of Brazil. I should not be surprised if it was the young man you know—heard that less than a year ago he went down there—a poor man, with a few patents—some articles he had invented—and by chance they happened to fill a public want. They were utilized in the mines and on the railroads, and in no time he found money rolling in to him by the thousands; he bought mines and quadrupled his money. Now he bids fair to be one of the richest men in America before he is five-and-thirty. The beauty of the whole affair is, as I said before, he is as plain and modest a young man as you ever met—his great good fortune has not spoiled him."

Aurelia had listened with breathless attention. Yes, of course it was Gerald, and no other.

It seemed most miraculous to her that the miserable old patents, as she had always called them, had turned to fabulous wealth in Gerald's hands. And to think that Gerald, whom all the world was now wanting, loved her—Gerald, with all his millions.

She resolved to seek him out at once. He had taken new value in her eyes; and, if she found that it was true—that he really had been successful, and was now worth great mines in Brazil, she told herself that she would marry him.

Of course he must have been to the farm in search of her, and how disappointed he must have been when he found her gone, and that he could find no trace of her.

"Good fortune is pouring in upon me," she thought. "I will marry Gerald and have his great wealth, and I will go to England, too, and claim the vast inheritance my mother intended that I should have."

Even in this moment the heartless girl did not say to herself: "I will give Margaret her rightful inheritance in England—give to her also the money Dr. Thorpe left to her, and be satisfied with Gerald's fabulous wealth, and Gerald's love."

Perhaps if she had not been so pitiless towards hapless Margaret Heaven might have shown her more mercy in the end.

As it was, her aim was grasp all, and leave Margaret nothing.

She had always supposed Margaret and herself to have been twins and of course, of the same parentage; it was a surprise to know that Margaret was older than she by two years, and above all, a great surprise to know that her mother was only an English peasant girl, as she phrased it.

Now, she told herself, she could really understand why she and Margaret were so different—as widely different as the gloriously brilliant stars in the sky and the simple field daisies—earth stars—that reared their timid heads from the dust of the roadside.

It came natural to Margaret, after all, to toil for her daily bread—she was in her natural sphere; while she herself, born of aristocratic parents, was a lady, and more fitted to rule over those vast English domains than timid, modest Margaret.

She could even smile patronizingly on Randolph Clavering and his bride now, as they passed her by.

Yes, she must see Gerald at once, she told herself. As for Gerald Romaine there was an excellent reason as to why he was not at the grand reception that evening.

On searching for Dr. Briscoe that morning, the lad in charge of his down-town office had directed him to the hospital, where he told him, he would be sure to find the doctor between the hours of ten and twelve a.m., and thither Gerald bent his steps.

"I am afraid I shall not be able to keep my appointment with you, Gerald," he said. "I have a case to-day that needs extra attention. I shall do everything in my power to save it. It is something to see a fair young girl die. If a woman ever bore the stamp of a saint or an angel on her face, this one does. As well as being a tinker at inventor, in the course of ten days, you used to be something of an artist, Gerald. And any man with an artist's eye could not help being struck with the heavenly beauty of this fair young girl. I use the word heavenly advisedly, because there is more of the saint in her face than the taint of earth."

"What seems to be the matter with the young girl?" asked Gerald, interested even in spite of the slight concern he took in women nowadays.

"One of the policemen found her ill and starving—ay, starving—in the park a few days since. She was brought here unconscious, and has been delirious ever since. We do not know the name of the girl."

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not know, he communicated with—  
in fact, nothing whatever about the poor, feeble creature.

"Starving and in a land of plenty!" cried Gerald, with deep emotion. "I will do everything in my power to find her. I will stand the expense, I will give my money to no better use than giving good to my fellow-creatures. I cried out to Heaven last night that money was useless—that it was useless—but I see that that was a mistake; rightly used, it is a blessing from God."

"Will you come in and see this young girl, Gerald?" asked Dr. Briscoe, much moved by his friend's impulsive generosity.

"No," returned Gerald, modestly. "I think not, my dear Briscoe."

CHAPTER XLIII.

"You are missing a sight of the prettiest face the sun ever shone on, Gerald, my boy—if you refuse to see this young girl," continued Dr. Briscoe, earnestly. "You are such a beauty worshiper, I wish I could induce you to change your mind."

"If you really wish me to see her so very much, why, I don't mind," returned Gerald, smiling.

Arm-in-arm the two friends passed down the long corridor together, and the doctor paused at length before Room 24, the door of which was ajar, and they both entered.

A nurse stood before the bed on which the patient lay, hiding this girl from view from the doorway.

They took one step forward, and at the sound, the face on the pillow was turned restlessly toward them.

One glance, then a terrible cry broke from Gerald Romaine's lips. "My God! am I mad—or dreaming? It is—Margaret!"

And in an instant he was kneeling before the white couch.

"Do you know her, Romaine?" exclaimed the doctor in wonder, looking sharply at Gerald's white, pained face.

"Yes," he answered simply, with something very like tears shining in his brave, honest eyes, and in a few brief sentences he disclosed Margaret's identity to Briscoe. I have every reason to believe that her sister, Aurelia, married a wealthy young man recently, he continued, slowly, "and therefore I cannot account for Margaret's being found sitting in the park suffering from hunger. My God, I can hardly realize it," and tender-hearted Gerald Romaine laid his head against the fair face on the pillow and wept like a child.

The blue eyes that had so often looked at him with love, now turned toward him in puzzled, mute wonder.

"Perhaps it would be best for my patient if I leave them alone together," the doctor thought; "Gerald may be able to arouse her from the dangerous lethargy into which she is gradually falling."

Beckoning the nurse to follow him, and signifying his intention of turning shortly, Dr. Briscoe quitted the apartment.

Gerald's grief was so great that he did not even notice their departure.

"Margaret," he whispered, earnestly, clasping the little, thin, white hand, wandering so restlessly to and fro on the counterpane, "do you not know me?"

But in the dreamy gaze of the blue eyes that met his there was no gleam of recognition.

She did not attempt to draw her hand from his clasp, but let it lie in his firm grasp, just as a little child might do.

How white and wan her face was, and he noticed, too, the deep lines of pain about her lips.

"Sweet, gentle Margaret, who has loved me so well; ah, how cruel to find her thus," Gerald moaned.

Her lips moved, and he bent his fair, handsome head nearer still to hear the words she uttered.

"It is so cold in the park," she signed, "oh, so cold and dreary, since the light of the sun has gone down. It is just about the time we used to light the lamps at the dear old farm. Am I—the miserable girl sitting in this park under the cold trees—an I the same girl who used to be so happy in those other days before she came and stole Gerald's love from me?"

Hearing Margaret go on in this strain was more than Gerald could well endure; every word was a bitter reproach to him, for his share in making her life so unhappy in the past.

He could not check the thoughts that fell so pathetically from her lips. He could only listen in sorrowful silence to her words.

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