

Her Great Love;

Or, A Struggle For a Heart

CHAPTER XV.—(Continued).

"Where is your mistress?" he asked in her language.

"In the dressing-room," replied the woman, shooting a glance at the departing Trevor.

Morgan Thorpe went up the narrow stairs—the houses in Cardigan Terrace are small, not to say poky—and knocked at the door. A low, clear voice, with a singular metallic ring in it, said "Come in," and he entered.

The room was richly but garishly furnished, the air was thick with perfume—there was an odor of cheap scent all over the house, by the way; and the hangings of rose pink were soiled and stained.

At a muslin-covered dressing-table sat a lady. She was in a dressing peignoir—also rather soiled—over which a mass of black hair hung like a torrent. She was small but pretty, more than pretty, for she had ever looked at her face without being more or less fascinated. The features were small and exquisitely chiselled. Her eyes were black as sloes, and remarkably expressive. They could be sharp and brilliant, and they could be soft and languorous, just as their owner chose. Her face was pale, of that ivory whiteness which sometimes goes with black hair.

She was beautifully formed, and very graceful, with hands and feet like a fairy. In short, she was a beautiful little woman, with the face and the charm of a siren, and with about as much heart.

She turned the corners of her dark eyes upon her brother for a second, then went on with her occupation, which was the application of poudre de riz to her beautiful face; and she did it with the delicate touch of a skilled and born artist.

"Well?" she said, as she looked down at her with a smile; and there was a world of significance in the word.

"A new friend is coming to dinner, my dear Laura," he said.

She looked at him in the glass.

"Who is it?"

"A friend of Trevor," he said. "A young fellow by the name of Deane. Quite a boy—a charming boy."

She made a slight contemptuous moue.

"Ah, do not despise the day of small things, my charming sister!" he said, lightly.

"I hate boys!" she said. "And a friend of Trevor—sulky, and sullen, and awkward as himself, I suppose?"

"On the contrary, a handsome, nicely mannered, and, as I have said, quite charming boy."

"He will be a change, at any rate," she said. "I am getting wearied of that bear."

"Take care you do not let the bear see it!" he said, warningly. "We have not got all the bear's skin yet, my dear Laura." She smiled.

"And is this boy coming only because you have taken a fancy to him?" she asked, as she drew a thin, exquisitely thin, line under her eyes. "What—who is he?"

"Cramming for Sandhurst," he said. She smiled contemptuously.

"I know the kind. An allowance of a hundred a year, and promised his dear good mother down at the parsonage that he wouldn't play the bear, I know."

"I don't know what his allowance may be," he said. "But I fancy he will be worth a little attention, my dear Laura."

He took up a newspaper which lay—on a fan and a lady's cigarette-case—on the couch. "See here!" He read aloud:

"The Great Electric Storage Company, Ltd.
Capital, \$500,000.
Directors:
Lord Borrowmore, Impecunus Castle.
Theodore Mershon, Esq., The Firs, Leafmore."

"Peter Deane, Esq., Woodhines, Leafmore."

"See? A son of the man who is in the swim with Theodore Mershon ought to be worth a little attention. You are looking sweet to-night, my dear Laura. What are you going to wear? That soft yellow dress with the—er—low neck? Right! He's a nice boy. A nice, frank boy. The sort of boy to fall in love with."

He pointed to the glass, in which the fascinating face was reflected, and, with a soft laugh, left the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

Bobby dressed himself with more than his usual care that evening; spoiled half a dozen ties before he could get one to set to his satisfaction, and brushed his short but wavy hair until it shone like raw silk. It was his first invitation to dinner since he had been in London, and he was quite in a small state of excitement about it.

Punctually at seven-thirty he presented himself at 31 Cardigan Terrace, and was shown by the French maid into a small drawing-room. It was the usual London drawing-room; there were a good many colors in it, and it looked rather gay to Bobby after the rather shabby one at home; but the costume was rather dirty, and there was an odor of scent and cigarettes which rather surprised him.

The door opened and Mr. Morgan Thorpe entered. He looked very handsome in evening dress, and he welcomed Bobby most cordially.

"Delighted to see you, my dear Deane," he said, with his winning smile. "Trevor is not here yet; but my sister will be down presently. Did I tell you that she is a widow? Poor girl! She lost her husband soon after her marriage. It was not altogether a happy union; but I must not bore you with our family history; suffice it, that Time has healed her wound and restored something of her old happiness. I think you will like her, my dear Deane. She is a dear girl—for she is only a girl still—and a great comfort and joy to my life."

At this moment the door opened and the great comfort and joy of Mr. Morgan Thorpe's life entered. She certainly did look only a girl, and Bobby was startled not only by her youth but by her beauty. There was something about her which literally took the boy's breath away.

At that moment her face wore a pensive expression, the dark eyes were soft and sad, the red lips half apart. The beautiful dress of yellow accentuated the clear whiteness of her skin and the black hair and brows. She held a black fan in one hand and a bunch of white flowers in the other. Altogether she was a vision of grace and loveliness calculated to move a more experienced man than Bobby to wonder and admiration.

"This is our friend Mr. Deane," said Mr. Morgan Thorpe. "My sister, Mrs. Dalton, Deane."

She laid down her fan and gave her small hand to Bobby, with a smile which showed her white even teeth to perfection, and said she was glad to see him. Commonplace words enough, but they sounded wonderful to Bobby, for the gods, when they are in a good humor, are wont to be lavish of their gifts, and they had bestowed upon this woman not only grace of form and a beautiful face, but a soft and musical voice which she could play

on as a skilled musician plays upon his favorite instrument.

"You will find our menage very small, I have no doubt, my dear Deane," said Mr. Morgan Thorpe. "We have taken this house furnished; and though it is not all that we could desire, it is large enough for two, and my sister and I possess contented minds; though I must confess we do find the house rather small after our palazzo in Florence. It was lent to us by our dear friend the prince."

He did not say which prince; but Bobby was duly impressed.

"Ours has been rather a wandering life," continued Mr. Morgan Thorpe, "and though we have many friends abroad we have very few in London."

"Mr. Deane will be a host in himself, I am sure," said Laura, very sweetly and with a slight foreign accent, which made her voice seem still more charming to Bobby, who blushed with pleasure.

Then Trevor came in. He did not look very much better-tempered than when Bobby had parted from him. He gave the two men a nod and a scowl, and going straight up to Laura, handed her a bouquet.

"Got them coming along," he said; "thought you'd like to have them."

She took the flowers and thanked him with a smile, and he sat down beside her and talked in an undertone. The French maid announced dinner.

"Deane, will you take in my sister?" said Mr. Morgan Thorpe.

Trevor had already offered his arm, and he let it fall to his side and scowled at Bobby as he bore Laura off.

The dining-room was small, but it looked very cozy. The table was an oval, and lighted by a hanging lamp, carefully shaded, which threw a soft rose-colored light upon Laura's exquisite face. The plate was electro—but Bobby did not know this—the glass was good; there was a plateau of beautifully arranged flowers in the centre of the table. Champagne stood in ice on the sideboard. The dinner was a good one, and the French woman waited with the nicest dexterity of her nation. The champagne flowed freely, and Trevor allowed the maid to fill his glass pretty frequently.

He sat opposite Bobby and took little or no part in the conversation, but eat the well-arranged and dainty meal with a kind of sullen appreciation. Morgan Thorpe kept the talk going, and managed to get a good deal of information about his personal affairs from Bobby. Laura spoke now and again, and once or twice addressed herself directly to Bobby. She told him of her life on the Continent; of her loneliness here in London; and she looked so pensive and sad and breathed such a soft little sigh, that Bobby's heart thrilled with pity—for what he didn't know. When she was speaking to Bobby, Trevor watched them from under his lowered lids; and every now and then he glowered at Laura as if he resented her addressing any one but himself.

"Mr. Thorpe grew still more cheerful and amusing as the dinner progressed and the champagne circulated, and Bobby thought the meal the most delightful he had ever eaten."

Presently Mrs. Dalton rose and gathered her fan and flowers together and smiled sweetly on the men, her smile resting longest on Bobby.

"Do not leave me in my loneliness too long," she said; and Bobby would have liked to have gone with her there and then.

Mr. Morgan Thorpe got some port and some cigarettes. Bobby felt somehow that he'd had enough wine and declined the port, but Morgan Thorpe insisted, and filled his glass.

"Good wine, though I say it, my dear Deane. It came from the cellars of my dear old grandfather, the earl." He didn't say which earl. "It is the only thing I am likely to have from him, alas!"

Something like a sneer passed over Trevor's thick lips as he filled his burgundy glass with "the earl's" port. As he drank, and he filled his glass several times, a faint flush rose to the pallor of his cheeks, and his eyes began to glow with a sullen fire; but he did not talk, and eat twisting his glass about, his eyes shifting from one man's face to the other.

With the port and cigarettes, Mr. Morgan Thorpe became a still more delightful companion. He seemed to Bobby, to have been everywhere, and to know everything. He was full of reminiscences and anecdotes. It was, "I'll tell you a thing that happened to me when I was traveling in Hungary with the Duke of Seltzberg," or "a remarkable thing occurred to me when I was staying with the prince at the Marquis of Goodwin's shooting-box in Ayrshire." And he told all these fabulous stories so modestly and with such an air of truth, that Bobby could not but believe him.

The sound of a piano floated out to them from the drawing-room, and as if it were a signal—which it was—Morgan Thorpe said, with a wistful glance at the decanter:

"We ought to join my sister. Will you take some more wine, my dear fellows?"

Bobby shook his head, but Thorpe filled Trevor's glass again, and Trevor tossed the wine off as if it were water.

They went into the drawing-room. Laura looked over her shoulder at Bobby with a smile, and Bobby, as if drawn to it, made straight for the piano. She had a wonderful touch, and played like an artist. Bobby had never heard such music. She played Chopin; a soft and sensuous nocturne which filled the small, perfumed room with an exquisite melody.

"Would you like some cards?" asked Morgan Thorpe in a casual way, when the nocturne was over. "Trevor, Deane, what do you say?"

"I don't care," said Trevor. "Yes, if you like."

"Those horrid cards!" said Laura, turning with raised brows and a little moue of disgust to Bobby. "I hope you're not fond of cards, Mr. Deane! I think they are so tiresome."

"I don't care a bit about them," said Bobby. Then, with a boyish desire to see a man of the world, he added: "Of course I play sometimes—whist and loo."

"Don't play to-night," she said in a low voice. "If you will not, I will sing to you; and you can talk while the others are playing. Mr. Trevor is devoted to cards."

Bobby flushed, and was speechless.

"Ah, well," said Mr. Morgan Thorpe, "if Deane doesn't care about it, you and I will have a hand at cards, Trevor."

He opened the card-table and got the cards, and the two men sat down and commenced to play.

"You said you would sing for me," said Bobby.

"And I will keep my promise," she said. She sang as perfectly as she played. Her voice was not strong—a loud voice would have been too much for the small room—but it was exquisitely sweet, and managed—well, as artistically as were her eyes, her smile, her complexion.

She sang an Arab hunting song, and Bobby could hear the thud of the hoofs upon the sand, could feel the breath of the sirocco upon his cheek.

"Sing something else," he said.

She nodded at him, smiled, and sang a Tuscan love song. It was so exquisite, so moving, that Bobby's young and unsophisticated heart beat nineteen to the dozen.

The champagne and the port, the air heavily laden with perfume, the fascination of this beautiful little creature, were mounting to his brain. He breathed hard.

"That was beautiful," he said. "What a lovely voice you have. I could listen to you all night."

"But I should be so tired!" she murmured, with a little plaintive smile. "Ah! but no! I love to sing for those who like to hear me, who love music; and I know you love it, Mr. Deane."

Under the spell of her voice, Bobby's head whirled. He could not speak. She rose from the piano.

"Let us see how they are going on," she said.

Light as a thistle-down she seemed to Bobby to float across the room. She went behind Trevor, and leaning her hand upon his shoulder, in a way that seemed to Bobby very friendly and girlish, said, gaily:

"Are you winning?"

Trevor looked up at her with an ardent look in his small eyes.

"Yes, at present," he said, nodding at a pile of money beside him.

"I am so glad!" she said. "It is not very sisterly, but I like Morgan to lose."

"He doesn't lose often," remarked Trevor, glumly.

She looked at his cards, and raised her hand to the left side of her head, and stroked the soft black hair. Morgan Thorpe glanced at her hesitatingly. She repeated the action.

"I'll go you double this hand, if you like," he said, carelessly.

She bent over Trevor so that the soft tendrils of her hair touched his red head.

"You've had bad luck, my dear boy," said Morgan Thorpe, pleasantly. "Ah, well, the beauty of cards is, that what you lose one day you win the next."

"Oh, is it?" said Trevor. "I don't find it so. I'm going."

He went up to Laura, and, drawing her aside, talked to her in a low voice. She listened with a pensive smile—the non-committal smile which a woman knows how to manage so well—then she glided away from him to Bobby.

"I hope you will come to see us often," she said in a low voice.

Bobby tried to murmur his thanks.

The French maid appeared with a spirit-stand. Bobby had some whisky, though he didn't want it; he also accepted a big cigar, though he didn't want that. His brain was in a whirl; his bright eyes were flashing; his heart was beating fast. Laura was standing beside him, smiling up at him with a friendly, almost a loving, smile.

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He looked up at her with a sudden flash, and answered at random:

"Oh, yes; if you like. There, I've lost!" he said; and he laughed discordantly as he pushed the stakes across the table.

A fresh hand was dealt, and Laura remained behind Trevor. Something must have been the matter with her hair that night, for her white hand went up to it and smoothed it very often, now on the right side, now on the left, as she bent over him. He played wildly; the flush on his face grew redder, his eyes glanced up at her beautiful face with a kind of suppressed and sullen passion. He lost the small heap of money beside him, and the pile at Morgan's elbow grew larger. Morgan Thorpe stroked his moustache. As if it were a signal—which it was—she went back to Bobby, who had been turning over a photograph album in which her portrait appeared frequently.

"And so you are going into the army?" she said. "How I envy you being a man!"

Thereupon, Bobby was led to talk of his prospects. She listened to him with her soft black eyes fixed on his face with an expression of sympathy and liking. She went to the piano again and sang to him several times; but between the songs she fitted across the room and leaned over Trevor, her hand upon his shoulder as before. And as before, her hand wandered to her hair.

Strange to say, whenever she stood behind him Trevor lost.

At last he rose with a discordant laugh and something like a muffled oath.

"I've lost all the coin I've got, Thorpe," he said. "Here's an I.O.U. for the rest."

He flicked the I.O.U. across the table.

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