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MISS TINSEL.

By HENRY SEDLEY

CHAPTER II. MISS TINSEL.

It was in a magnificent theatre that Chest-r Harding first saw her—a theatre grand in size and tasteful in decoration. It had only lately been opened, and was one of the lions of the Golden City. Harding went there to while away an idle hour, and in order, perhaps, that he might see all there was to be seen before leaving San Francisco. His visit was one of mere chance, and no trifle had seemed lighter in all his California life than his straying that night into the Cosmopolitan theatre.

And yet perhaps it was the turning point in his existence. Others who were there from Bullion Flat said afterward that from that night Harding was transformed. A blaze of chandeliers, with golden fretwork skirting the galleries and rich dark velvet framing the boxes, could hardly surprise him. Nor was there much to astonish—whatever there might be to admire—in the rows of handsomely dressed women who gave brilliancy to the audience. Neither could the drama itself, which the manager was pleased to style "a grand legendary fairy spectacle," move Harding seriously from his equilibrium. All these splendours, together with the resonant orchestra, the dazzling scenery, rich in Dutch metal and gold foil, the sanguinary and crested laron, the villain of the play, the resplendent youth, his hero, the demons, who went through traps, vampire and other—one blood red demon with a long nose being especially conspicuous—the fairies, who brought order out of chaos—of whom the "Queen of the Fairy Bower" was the large limbed and voluptuous principal—the "Amazonian Phalanx," who went through unheard-of maneuvers with massive tin battle axes and spears—all these failed, it must be owned, to startle Mr. Harding from his propriety. He had seen such things, or things very like them, before. And yet he was taken off his feet, to use the metaphor, and swept away captive by a very torrent of emotion excited by Miss Tinsel.

She was only a corymb; that is, she was but one among the minor subordinates of the ballet. Her advent was accomplished as one of the "Sprites of the Silver Shower." She had to come clausozing down the stage, and she never raised her eyelids—before most demurely cast down—until she was close upon the footlights. But when those eyelids did go up it was—well, as Judge Carboy afterward used to say, it was just like sunrise over the mountains at Boone's Bar! A girl with a mass of bright hair, almost red it looked by daylight, and large gray eyes that looked as black as soot by the gas, but took on more tender hues by day—a girl with a figure that was simply perfection, and yet one who with all her archness seemed to have no vanity. She had many dainty white skirts, one above another like an artichoke, of fluffy and diaphanous texture, and although these, it cannot be denied, were perilously short, somehow Miss Tinsel did not look in the least immodest.

All the men from Bullion Flat knew it was Miss Tinsel, since the "Queen of the Fairy Bower" addressed this charming figure more than once as "Zephyr-ind," and a reference to the play bill thereupon at once established her identity.

What strange magnetism there was about this girl Harding, and indeed all who looked at her, found it hard to define. Perhaps, apart from her lovely eyes and hair and her exquisite figure, it was because she always seemed to be drawing away that she proved so fascinating. Even when she advanced straight toward you she seemed forever to retreat. By what subtle and skillful instinct of coquetry Miss Tinsel was enabled to convey this impression cannot here be explained.

That she did convey it was universally admitted. It appeared, however, on inquiry, that her dramatic powers were of the slightest. Her beauty and charm were such that the manager would gladly have put her forward could he have seen his way to do so. But her success had been so moderate, when the experiment was tried, in one or two of the "walking ladies" of farces, that it was thought wisest to let her be seen as much and heard as little as possible.

When Harding last saw her that night she was going up to Paradise on foot, the other pointing vaguely at nothing behind, the intoxicating eyes turned up with a charming simulation of pious joy, and the cherry lips curled into a smile that showed plenty of pearls below. She vanished from his gaze in a glory of red fire, amid the blare of gongs and trumpets, while the "Blood Red Demon" went down to the bad place under the stage through a trap, and the "Queen of the Fairy Bower," with felleitous compensation, ascended to the heaven of the skies.

After this tremendous catastrophe Harding went to his hotel and reflected. That a Timon like himself—a miser—yet instead of the first water—should fall in love at first sight with a ballet girl certainly furnished matter for reflection. But reflection did not prevent Timon from seeking an interview with his unconscious enslaver the next day. Even cold and sour natures may become under some incentives enthusiastic and ingenious.

Harding found out where Miss Tinsel lived, learned that she usually came from rehearsal at about 2, called consequently at 3, and coolly sent in his name, telling the servant that the young lady would know who he was. As he hoped, the device got him admittance. The girl supposed he was some one from the theatre whose name she had not caught or had forgotten.

It was a very plain and humble room, almost as bare and forbidding perhaps as the inside of Harding's tent on the knoll, and yet how glorified was the place with the purple atmosphere of romance!

Miss Tinsel was as simply equipped as her room; a gown of dark stuff, with a bit of color at the throat, and that was all. Harding saw that she was not quite so perfect physically as he had thought, and this, strange as it may seem, instantly increased his passion for her. Nothing could make her figure other than beautiful, or impair the luster of her eyes; but the fair creature had a little range of freckles across her delicate nose and cheeks, and her hair by day appeared, as has been said before, nearly red. Her natural smile, on the other hand, as distinguished from her stage smile, which was merely intoxicating, was almost heavenly; and it was not made less so by an occasional look that was grave almost to sadness. "Down," he was standing stock still and silent in the middle of the



He was standing stock still and silent.

room. "You come from the theatre, don't you?"

It was a sweet voice—sweet and low—too low, in truth, which was one of the reasons of its failure in the drama—one of those thrilling contralto voices, most magnetic and charming when heard by one alone or close by, but which lost their magnetism and charm if strained to fill the ears of a crowd.

"No—ye—that is, I was there last night. I saw you there," he replies stupidly.

"Last night? Oh, yes; but why do you want to see me today?"

"The first hard question to answer, so he felt occasion.

"Did you get a bouquet?"

"A perfect love—a beauty—it was thrown at my feet; but I gave it to her, of course."

"Give it to her?"

"Miss De Montague—don't you know—the 'Queen of the Fairy Bower?' She gets all the bouquets."

"Oh, she does, does she?"

"Certainly. She is the principal, you know. Her engagement calls for all the bouquets."

"Even when they are plainly intended for somebody else?"

"Ah, but they oughtn't to be intended for anybody else. If any one is so silly as to think somebody else ought to have a bouquet any one has to be punished. Then they forget him."

"Forget him?"

"Or his flowers. They always forfeit you in theatres—if you're late at rehearsal, you know, or if you keep the stage waiting. But then you needn't mind. Miss De Montague is a dear, good soul. She took the bouquet for the look of the thing, you know; that's business; but she gave me half the flowers when we got home."

"Does she live here, then?"

"Why, to be sure. You know we always go to the theatre together. Only for her I should be quite alone."

"And do you like this kind of thing?" he asks clumsily.

She bursts into a merry laugh. "Like it? Why, I get my living by it. We all have to live, you know, and I've no one to look out for me but myself and—"

She pauses suddenly, having caught his eye fixed upon her with a gaze of passionate admiration. This first calls up the look of gravity we have spoken of, and then brings the color sharply to her face. It also reminds her of the somewhat peculiar character of the interview. The instant after she resumes, as if continuing her sentence: "Did you come here to ask me that?"

"No," he replies bluntly. "I never thought of the question until the moment before I asked it."

"Please tell me, then," she proceeds, with gathering surprise, "what did you come for?"

He hesitates a moment, moved by the superstition or the honest feeling that he must tell her no word of untruth, and then quietly answers:

"I am not sure that I know."

"Not sure that you know?"

"No."

"Perhaps, then, you'll go away, and when you are gone—"

"Come back again!" hazards he.

"I didn't say that. You look and talk like a gentleman, and if, as I hope, you are one, you will know that I can't see strangers—people who have no business with me—and so you must excuse me."

She has risen and moves with some dignity toward the door.

"One moment," he interposes. "Forgive me, you may know for your part that it is impossible I should wish to offend."

"How should I? You come here to me a stranger, and refuse to say what for?"

"No; I did not refuse. I only said I was not sure that I knew why I came."

"Then you must be crazy!" she blurts out impulsively.

"Perhaps I am. I begin to think so."

"Then I wish you would go away!" she goes on with apprehension. "I'll tell you what, Mr. Bellario is here, and he's—oh, terribly strong!"

"Mr. Bellario?" he echoes.

"Yes; the 'Blood Red Demon,' you see. Didn't you see him go through the traps?"

Harding laughs, very much amused. "And you mean to threaten me with the 'Blood Red Demon,' do you?"

"Oh, no," she responds gently, but again edging toward the door, "not threaten, but—in a very conciliatory tone—"if you won't say what you come for and won't go away!"

"But I will," he says, gravely.

"Will which?"

"Will both; I will say what I came for and then I will go away."

"I don't mean to be rude, you know," she puts in, softening.

"Nor I. Now I will tell you. I came because I could not possibly stay away—because you drew me toward you with an irresistible force!"

"I'm sure I didn't," she protests indignantly.

"Unconsciously, of course. You may think me foolish—wild if you please. I can't help that. You will know better in time. I come to you saying not a wrong word, thinking not a wrong thought. There is nothing against me. At home I was a gentleman. I ask leave to visit you, respectfully as a friend, nothing more."

"But why?" she asks, bewildered.

"Because I admire you greatly, inexpressibly, and I must tell you so." She turns scarlet now. "But I shall never tell you this—not again—or anything else in words you do not choose to hear. All I ask is the leave now and then to see and to speak with you."

This was very embarrassing. Had he said he loved her, and at first sight, she would have turned him away. She would have distrusted both his sincerity and his motives. But he did not say this. On the contrary, he offered in explicit terms, it would seem, not to say it. She therefore naturally took refuge in generalities.

"But what you ask won't be possible. What would people say? This is a very bad, a scandalous country, I mean. What would Miss De Montague think, or Mr. Bellario?"

"What people will say or think hardly needs to be considered," said Harding steadily, "since in a week I shall have gone to my home in the mines. You won't be troubled with me long—twice more perhaps. Only once if you prefer it. All shall be exactly as you wish it. Is not that fair?"

Miss Tinsel was saved the present necessity for replying to a question or coping with a situation both of which she found extremely perplexing, since at this juncture the door opened and admitted the "Queen of the Fairy Bower" and the "Blood Red Demon," who had apparently been out for a morning walk. To Harding's surprise, the "Queen" was a motherly looking woman of forty-five and the "Demon" a weak eyed young man, with a pasty white face, and some fifteen years younger. Both were much over dressed, and both stared vigorously at Harding—the "Queen" with an air intended to represent fashionable railway, the "Demon" with haughty surprise. But the visitor avoided explanations that might have been embarrassing by bowing low to the company and passing from the room.

To be continued.

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