

# A HASTY JUDGMENT.

By MRS HUNGERFORD.

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**A**FTER all, Digby, you are more forgiving than I thought you,' says Major Carlton, coming up to where Digby Vere is standing beside a heavy velvet portiere that hides a recess beyond. A waltz has just begun and Vere has the expression of one who is looking among the dancers for some one particular person.

'How so?' says he, smiling. He is a specially good-looking young man of about twenty-nine, and the smart Lancer uniform he is wearing seems to suit him.

'Why, I've just heard from Waring that you have been Miss Gascoigne's devoted slave for the past three weeks.'

'Slave—well, as for that—I confess, however that I—like her.'

'I will serve,' says Carlton, laughing. 'And so you have forgotten the past then? You have condoned her sin and all those dark threats of vengeance you used to breathe in India are so much—vapor. I thought you were never going to forgive her scandalous treatment of your cousin, Sir Charles?'

'What do you mean?' exclaims Vere, wheeling round to look at him more intently. 'What are you talking about? The woman who wrecked Charles Vere's life was called Florence Grant.'

'And is now called Florence Gascoigne.'

Vere bursts out laughing—there is terrible relief in the laughter.

'My dear fellow, you have got in a muddle of some sort. Miss Gascoigne is Miss Gascoigne, she is not married.'

'I know she isn't. But she has changed her name for all that. Only a year ago she was still Florence Grant, but a distant relation died, leaving her all her money on consideration that she changed her name to Gascoigne. See?'

There is a dead silence for a full minute, then—

'There must be many Gascoignes,' said Vere in a low tone. His eyes search Carlton's as though imploring him to support him in this opinion. Carlton is shocked at the change in his face.

'Look here, Vere. I'm awfully sorry. I'd have cut my tongue out if I had only known. But, stammering, 'I had no idea you were so hard hit—and besides, lots of girls do that sort of thing, you know—fling a rattle over, and—'

At this moment there is a slight rustle behind the velvet curtain, as though someone has entered the little room behind and seated himself or herself upon a lounge. Both men, however, are too agitated to notice it.

'But not with the cold brutality that was practiced by Miss Gascoigne,' says Vere, in a stern, hard tone. 'Miss Grant rather! If what you say is true, no wonder she was glad of the chance of putting that name behind her. It is useless any one's defending her, Carlton, because I had the whole story from his own lips a month before he died. She deliberately led him on until he was half mad with love for her, and then, a richer man appearing, she calmly, without a kindly word, flung him over. She broke his heart. He said so.'

There is another sound behind the curtain now, as though a fan has fallen with a little crash to the floor.

'By Jove!' said Carlton, who is now wishing himself well out of it, 'he didn't look like a fellow whose heart would be easily broken; he seemed to get a good deal of good out of that little flirtation with the Colonel's wife up in the hills. I, awkwardly, 'I shouldn't think so much about it if I were you, Digby. If you fancy her as much as you say, I'd just put that old story in my pocket and go in and win, if she would have me!'

'Never!' said Vere, with a sudden violence, suppressed indeed, but perhaps the more terrible for that. 'I—I—to cast a thought on a heartless coquette like that! I swore in India that I would seek her out and upbraid her with her conduct to Charles; try to wring a passing pang from her cold heart; but now Carlton, I confess that is beyond me. She was dear to me—I never knew how dear until this moment when I—know I shall never willingly look upon her face again. It is all over, that dead dream! Her face may be like heaven but her soul—her soul must be like hell! Though it cost me all the happiness of my life I shall cast her out of my heart.'

'You will give her an opportunity to explain it. Since it has gone thus far with you—for your own sake, dear boy—do give her a chance of saying how it was.'

'No. A woman like that! Do you think she has not words at her command wherewith to twist and turn her phrases and show herself the injured innocent? I refuse to listen to her exculpation. I refuse to listen to one word that she could say. There, let us forget all this,' turning a ghastly face to Carlton, but conjuring up a smile all the same. 'What about these races? You are riding?'

'No; but I hear that you have the choice of two mounts. I'm glad you are going to have nothing to do with Younge's Firewater—a dangerous brute. Waring is mad for you to ride his mate, and he says you have almost promised.'

'Tell Waring, if you see him again to-night, that I have changed my mind, however. I shall ride Firewater for Younge.'

'Oh, I say, Vere, I wouldn't if I were you. A beast like that has killed his man already. I—'

'I shall ride him,' says Vere, impatiently. 'He'll win if I can only manage him. And besides—what does it matter?'

'It would matter a lot to the regiment if anything happened to you, old boy,' says the Major, almost affectionately. 'There's Waring over there. I'll go and talk to him. He may persuade you.'

Carlton is hardly gone when the velvet portiere behind Vere is swept aside by an imperious hand, and a girl, tall, graceful, beautiful, with flashing eyes and a face as white as death, confronts him.

my soul is not like hell—when you have seen me as I am, the injured, not the injurer—then—' she pauses, a great light flashes over her face, 'then I shall refuse to listen to you!'

She takes a step forward.

'Your cousin, Sir Charles Vere, asked me to marry him two years ago. I was very young then—a mere child. I did not like him, but they—my people—persuaded me to accept him. I was portionless, and a title always counts. As I said, I was a child; we were engaged. He came often to see us in the beginning of our engagement, as often as is usual, but toward the close of it he came nearly every day, sometimes twice a day. I wondered at this, because his manner was in nowise different to me—it was kind—but I thought it was a little less loverlike than before. Still he came every day, and sometimes twice and three times a day. Several times it occurred to me as odd that he called at the house when he must have known I was driving in the park with my married sister. I—' she pauses, and a quick breath parts her lips, 'have another sister, a little girl, and she at that time had a governess, a young lady, as young as myself. She was pretty—far, far prettier than I was! One day, coming back much earlier from my drive with Gertrude than was usual with me, I went straight to the schoolroom to see Mimi, my little sister. I did not find her there; but I found your cousin—Sir Charles, and Miss—'

No, I shall not mention her name. There was a screen half across one corner of the room, and they sat hidden behind it. Only half hidden. They had not been very careful, you see, as they thought I was quite sure not to return till six o'clock. They did not see me. They were on the sofa, and both were looking into each others eyes. He was sitting beside her.

'I said nothing. I went away. He was dining with us that evening, but I said I had a bad headache and did not come down.'

'The next day my sister's governess was gone. They



They were on the sofa, and were looking into each others eyes.