

The Card Dealer

A Story With a Most Unexpected Ending

By ALICE and CLAUDE ASKEW

SHE thought it would be amusing—something to talk about afterwards—and also she was a girl always ready for any wild jest, even to that of personating an absence fortune-teller at a bazaar, and saving the situation.

"For everybody is counting on that woman with her cards," so Lady Moresby, who had been responsible for getting up the bazaar, declared with a shake of her head; "and if someone isn't in the little red and yellow tent ready to decide silly people I am sure the whole affair will be a failure."

So she had said to her godchild, Joyce Meredith, with a shrug of her beringed and carefully manicured hands. And then suddenly a bright idea had struck Lady Moresby.

"Why shouldn't you dress up and play the part, Joyce?" she had exclaimed, with some animation. "You pretend to tell fortunes yourself, you know. You could disguise your voice, dear, and wear a little velvet mask, and who could recognise you? Joyce darling, you must really be an angel and help me out of an awkward hole. I can't imagine why I ever wanted to get up a wretched bazaar, and most of all for primitive blacks, who, I dare say, won't be a bit pleased with the mission-ry sent out to them."

Lady Moresby clasped her hands as she ended her long speech, and looked at Joyce hesitatingly.

"You really might, darling," she added—"you really might."

Joyce smiled, and her black eyes twinkled. She was exceedingly fond of her plump, good-natured godmother, and the idea of playing the part of fortune-teller at this local bazaar tempted her.

Lady Moresby lived in the Manor house of a sleepy, old-fashioned Sussex village, and the bazaar was to be held in the Manor house grounds. It was an invitation one, and would only be attended by the county families; and Joyce, who often came down to stay with her godmother, knew enough of the history and position of Lady Moresby's friends and acquaintances to feel pretty

certain that she would make a successful hit as a fortune-teller. Also, she was learned in the meaning of the cards, and had once or twice made curiously successful divinations; but Joyce laughed at her own powers as a witch, though sometimes she had been a little startled when certain wild predictions had fulfilled themselves.

"Don't worry, Lady Moresby!" she now cried cheerfully, an arch smile lighting up her piquante, pretty little face. "I'll be a gypsy for the occasion. Dress me up in picturesque garments, shroud me with a mask, and I'll scare the people pretty well out of their wits. But you must promise never, never to let out the truth, or to give me away afterwards."

"Of course, I wouldn't!" exclaimed Lady Moresby with conviction. "Why, people might think I had been getting their money out of them by fraud. For, of course, you are not the real thing, Joyce, dear."

She smiled at her goddaughter complacently, and Joyce smiled and twinkled back.

And so it came to pass, through the sudden decision of Madame Curtini, the well-known Bond-street clairvoyant, that it would not be worth her while to go down to Sussex after all, even for the comfortable fee Lady Moresby had promised, that Joyce—dressed in the conventional gypsy costume, specially hired for the occasion, and wearing the daintiest of little black velvet masks—stood in the doorway of the red and yellow tent, a captivating and charming little figure, the daintiest and most enticing of witches. In fact, Joyce looked so charming that Lady Moresby, who would have made a good business woman, promptly decided to double the fortune-teller's charges.

"For I am sure the men, at any rate, will want to hear all you have got to tell them," she smiled. "You make a perfectly bewitching gypsy."

"I believe I do," answered Joyce. "Even though I have to wear a silly little mask!"

She laughed as she spoke, fully aware of the charms of her neat, round little

figure, slight ankles, and slim feet. Also her chin looked round and dimpled under the velvet mask, and she wore her really beautiful black hair flowing loose over her shoulders, simply confined by a little cap of glittering sequins.

She wished for the second, as she surveyed her image in the glass, that someone could be there to see her, someone whom she had not seen for many a weary week, a man she had met in London that season, a man she wanted to meet again.

People kept trooping up, and Joyce had her hands full. She soon had to say that she couldn't allow anyone more than a ten-minute's fortune—that was when they began to stand in a long queue outside the tent, just like "pitties" at a theatre.

Joyce thoroughly enjoyed herself. She spend out the cards for the people she knew so intimately, and with those whose history she was so well acquainted, and told their fortunes with a rare discretion, astonishing and startling some of the good folk nearly out of their wits by her intimate knowledge of their affairs.

It was a glorious opportunity for mischief-making, but Joyce was too good-natured a little person to play the part of a malicious fay. Instead, she gave wise and sensible advice, and was instrumental at least in one case in patching up a quarrel which had existed for years between two neighbours.

In matters of the heart she was especially discreet and guarded. It was the gypsy's characterisation and knowledge of the past which was so wonderful, people told themselves afterwards. She was a little vague about the future, they thought, though liberal in her promises of happy years, days free from disease, fortune, and legacies.

All at once, just as Joyce was getting a little tired, the faintest degree weary, the blood rushed to her cheeks under her little mask, and her heart began to beat and flutter painfully.

She had caught sight of the man of whom she had been thinking as she stood before the mirror that morning—the man she had wanted to see so badly.

He had come over in a motor, so she learnt from overhearing what he said to a friend as he joined the ranks of those waiting to have their fortunes told, come over with his hostess and her household party from quite a distant part of the county, and, having come, found the bazaar beastly slow, and thought he would have his fortune told just to pass away the time.

Joyce shivered and trembled. She had not realised till this moment how much she cared, and she felt sick and giddy.

She hurried matters shamefully for the next 20 minutes, hardly allowing her clients five minutes each, and her remarks were short and jerky. She swept up the cards with nervous, impatient fingers, and talked wild nonsense. The people who had been told how wonderful the gypsy girl was, left the tent with disapproval and disappointment writ large on their faces, some of them coming to the conclusion that she must be played out, others calling her a silly little impostor.

Then he came in, and Joyce's heart gave a wild leap, and her voice when she asked him to sit down and cut the cards was just a little unsteady.

The man sat down. He was tall and broad-shouldered, the sort of healthy, clean-living man any girl might have fallen in love with. Also, he had plenty of money and his full share of brains, but it was not for that that Joyce loved him—it was just for his big, strong self.

"I expect you are rather tired, aren't you?" he said kindly, noticing the trembling of the little fortune-teller's hands and the quivering of the red mouth under the black mask.

Joyce shook her head. She was horribly afraid that her voice might betray her. She had disguised it well enough with other people, but could she disguise it with him?

"Will you cut the cards three times, and shuffle them?" she asked in a low tone; "and cut with your left hand, please."

She did not know what she was going to say when he had cut them, only somehow she felt it would be impossible to make up stories to him, or talk of things she knew. She must tell him the real meaning of the cards, the candid truth—that is, if she had sense enough to remember what the cards meant.

He cut the ten of hearts, the ace of hearts, and the spade queen. Joyce's heart beat rapidly, for she always called herself queen of spades in cards, because of her dark hair and eyes.

"There's your wish," she said, "facing you. A change of residence, and a dark woman—a girl. Are you fond of her?"

She asked the question timidly, wondering at herself for her daring, but somehow the words had to come.

"A dark girl," answered the man slowly, knitting his brows a little. "I am awfully good friends with a dark girl; she is a dear little person, and I saw a lot of her in town last season. But she wouldn't be concerned with my wish. We are simply friends—good friends."

Joyce's heart grew quite cold for the moment, and then it began to ache—to ache to ache. She felt very weary, and would have given worlds to be able to cry. But she cut the cards and began



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