

Serial Story.

THE DISTRESSES OF DAPHNE.

By W. E. NORRIS

(Author of "My Friend Jim," "Major and Minor," etc.)

CHAPTER XVII. COMPLICATION.

"My dear child," said Mrs Hamilton, laughing with the tears in her eyes, "you needn't look so penitent about it; he has only himself to thank, and I have only him to blame. Oh, don't tell me that he couldn't have made you fall in love with him, if he had had the heart of a mouse. Of course he could! He is well off, he is still young, he has all the domestic virtues, his family is a most respectable one, and he is decidedly good-looking—honestly, now, wouldn't you say that he had more than the average share of good looks?"

"Oh, yes," answered Daphne, smiling down upon her mother, who had subsided into a low chair after Jack's exit had been followed by that of Mrs Bingham; "if it comes to that, Captain Clough is better looking than—many other people."

"I quite agree with you, my dear. And can it be pretended that a man like that hasn't it in his power to make any girl in the world fall in love with him?"

"Perhaps he would have to begin by being in love with the girl."

"The exasperating part of it is that he is in love! No, but really and truly in love; though I don't wonder at your doubting it. Well, I give him up; I wash my hands of him; I have played my last card!"

"You know, mother dear," Daphne resumed, after a short pause, "it wouldn't, and couldn't, have made any difference if he had been ever so devoted a lover."

"I am not so absolutely certain of that," sighed Mrs Hamilton; "still, of course, I know what I know. And I am beginning—I may as well confess it—to see that there can be only one end to all this."

"Ah, there you are wrong, mother! I don't ask, I don't even wish, to be allowed to marry Otto; I only want it to be understood that I shall never marry anybody else."

"That is so absurd!"

"I don't think it is."

"You would if you knew all. That is, you would think me absurd for objecting to your marrying him. But I am going to withdraw my objections; I feel that I must. They are not, in point of fact, as strong or as conclusive as I imagined that they were."

"Oh, don't say that!" exclaimed Daphne; "you make me feel such a wretch! It is tiresome of me—I fully realise how tiresome it must be—to proclaim that I intend to remain single; but I can't help it, and you are not to suppose, please, that I consider myself a martyr. Feeling as you do, and as it is quite natural that you should, you can't really think that your objections are a bit less conclusive now than they have been all along; so I mustn't allow you to withdraw them."

Mrs Hamilton moved uneasily in her chair. To reveal the fact that the supposed victim of the Stelvio Pass was alive and well would be to introduce all manner of fresh complications into a situation already complicated enough; yet it seemed scarcely honest to keep silence upon the subject. She ended by exclaiming irritably:

"Surely it is sufficient for me to say that I no longer object! Must I go down on my knees and beg you to do what you are dying to do?"

"I am not dying to marry Otto," Daphne declared. "If I were to marry him against your wishes, because it would be against them, whatever you may choose to say—I should never be happy; nor, I think, would he. The greatest kindness you can show me, mother, is not to tempt me any more. You and he do tempt me a little; I won't deny it. Only I know very well all the same that I should lay up future remorse for myself and sorrow for you by taking you at your word; therefore, I am not going to take you at your word. Let us say no more about it."

For that evening, at all events, they

said no more about it; and if they both slept badly, what else could they expect? Self-sacrifice is perhaps the least immediately remunerative of all virtues, for nobody can practise it without a discouraging and only too well-founded suspicion that it is most unlikely to be appreciated. Mrs Hamilton was, upon the whole, less to be pitied than her daughter, inasmuch as she foresaw a more or less satisfactory termination to the affair. Otto von Kahlenburg was not, to be sure, the son-in-law whom she would have chosen, had she been at liberty to choose; yet she was conscious of a personal liking for the young fellow, and she did not doubt that he would contrive to vanquish Daphne's lingering scruples. As for the forger of Old Burlington-street, he was at once a blessing and a bore—negligible, for the rest, in both capacities, seeing that he was precluded from stepping forward into the light.

Now, it came to pass on the next afternoon that, while she was reconciling herself to coming events with the aid of a cup of tea, a visiting-card of unusually large dimensions was brought to her. The gentleman whose name it displayed amidst calligraphic flourishes wished, she was told, to know whether Mrs Hamilton was disengaged and would do him the favour to receive him. She replied in the affirmative, taking it for granted that "Graf von Kahlenburg—Lindenhansen" was the person with whom her thoughts happened at the moment to be engaged; so that she was somewhat startled when, there presently stalked into the room a tall, stalwart individual, white-moustached and white-whiskered, who bowed low and apologised in a strong Teutonic accent for his intrusion.

"Permit me," he said, "to account for myself and excuse myself by informing you that Otto von Kahlenburg is my nephew and my adopted son. Also that I have travelled all the way from Vienna for the purpose of soliciting this audience."

"Please sit down," answered Mrs Hamilton, instantly divining that an attack in force was about to be made upon her, and fixing bayonets, so to speak, in order to receive the same in a style due to herself. For, however little ambitious she might be of an alliance with the von Kahlenburg family, she had no notion of submitting tamely to impertinent accusations, and Jack Clough's hints respecting the arrogance of the Austrian nobility had prepared her for something of the kind.

The old gentleman (who was a spruce, pleasant-looking old gentleman and who evidently employed a good tailor) sat down and unfolded his case with engaging candour. He did not, he said, pretend to exercise absolute control over his nephew; although, as the head of a family which enjoyed a certain distinction in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he was socially, if not legally, entitled to make his voice heard in matters affecting the welfare of that family. Over his personal fortune and the greater part of his landed property he did hold complete authority, and could dispose of these by will in any manner that might seem best to him; so that if, for example, his nephew were to contract a marriage of which he was unable to approve, nothing would be more simple for him than to cancel the will under which his nephew would profit to a handsome extent at his death. Very well; then would Mrs Hamilton, as a woman of the world, kindly ask herself whether an alliance with an untitled English lady—doubtless charming, yet just as unquestionably an alien and a heretic—could be viewed with favour by the existing chief of the von Kahlenburgs? "My nephew has not distinguished from me his wish to make such an alliance; I know that he is now in England with the hope and intention of making it, in spite of

my disapproval, and his silence since he reached this country has caused me very great uneasiness. He left me, I should tell you, protesting that he had no definite plan, except to keep various shooting engagements, that he could not even say whether Miss Hamilton was in London or not, and that he had reason to doubt whether his suit would be entertained, supposing that he should find an occasion to—how do you say?—to push it forth. Therefore I have thought to myself, 'Good! I will not interfere with the chance of his failure or rejection.' But when I heard—oh, not from him, naturally, but through other channels—that he has been a frequent visitor at your house, it became imperative upon me to act without delay. Without delay, I take the straightforward course, I give orders to pack my portmanteau! I start direct for London, I throw myself, nudam, upon your good feeling! Dare I hope that I do not arrive too late?"

"I assure you," said Mrs Hamilton coldly, "that you cannot be more averse to the prospect which seems to alarm you so much than I am. At the same time, I do not admit that your nephew's marriage to my daughter, if such a thing were ever to take place, would be a misalliance on his part. We are not, it is true, related to the dual families which have the same surname as ours; still we are not low-born people, and—"

"Ah, my dear lady, you shock me!—you distress me! Pray, believe that I have never for one moment presumed even in thought, to use so insulting a term with reference to you. But consider, I beg of you, that you are English, while we are Austrians—that you are Protestants, while we are Catholics. Consider all the consequences which these distinctions entail."

"I have considered them, and other formidable objections as well. I can only repeat that I am not in the least ambitious of capturing your nephew. The less so because my late husband's relations with his father were of a painful nature to me. You will, no doubt, have forgotten them, although I very well recollect meeting you in Vienna many years ago, when Herr von Pardowitz was so kind as to introduce his younger brother to me at a ball."

Count von Kahlenburg slapped his leg. "Is it possible! Yes, yes; it all comes back to me, and your name—but your name is not a very uncommon one in Great Britain, I believe?—should have suggested more to me than it did. That unfortunate Mr Hamilton, who was first robbed and then wounded in a duel by my rascally brother! Certainly you must have painful memories of my brother, and although he is dead—or rather because he is dead—I will admit to you that we all knew him to be a rascal. Otto, poor boy, is not a rascal, but your fear lest he should have inherited bad qualities is very pardonable—very pardonable indeed! I am even glad that you should be set against him by that fear."

The old gentleman was so obviously glad, and for such obvious reasons, that Mrs Hamilton could not refrain from saying: "I am not as unjust as you make me out; your nephew, I am sure, is an honest man, and I should not have allowed myself to be set against him on account of his parentage, which I did not discover until we

had been for some time acquainted with him. Not, that is, on account of his father having been what you have just called him. There were—other considerations which left me no choice but to break with your nephew as soon as I found out who he really was."

Count von Kahlenburg pursed up his lips and scrutinised her curiously. "So!—was that story true? Was it Mr Hamilton who knocked my brother over the edge of the road on the Stelvio Pass and left him there for dead? That was my brother's statement; but he was, to use plain language, such a liar that we attached little importance to it. Moreover, we could only feel thankful to anybody who had enabled us to represent that he was dead; for he was upon the point of being arrested on a charge of forgery, and he could not have escaped conviction. You did not know this?"

"I did not know it at the time, and until the day of his own death my poor husband, whose mind you did not think it necessary to relieve, thought that he had been guilty of manslaughter. Quite recently the truth has come to my ears."

"Now, that is most singular! I had supposed that I was the only person living in possession of a secret which I have not divulged even to my nephew. Who can your informant have been? However, it is a matter of small consequence now. My brother, whom we despatched to South America as soon as he was in a state to travel, succumbed to yellow fever there shortly after his arrival, and if I have allowed it to be assumed that he perished in Tyrol, that is not because I should have risked anything by proclaiming the facts of the case. The law cannot punish dead men."

"And you are quite sure that he is dead?"

"Absolutely sure; the proofs of his death and burial are in my possession. And if he were not," the old gentleman added, with a slight laugh, "he would not have omitted to present himself in our country long since, for, as my elder brother, he would have been entitled to claim the estates which I now enjoy."

"Well," remarked Mrs Hamilton, yielding to an irresistible temptation, "he was not dead a few days ago, anyhow."

"My dear lady! what impostor has been deceiving you?"

"You have only to call at 95, Old Burlington-street in order to ascertain by the evidence of your own senses. But you will not find an impostor there. I recognised Herr von Pardowitz the moment that I saw him, in spite of his white hair, and this at least I must say for him: He has shown more consideration for my feelings than you have. He had nothing in the world to gain by letting me know that he was alive. He only remembered what you seem to have forgotten—that the greater part of my life has been spent under a shadow which might have been removed, and he relieved his conscience at some risk—so he says—to his safety. Of course for your own sake you will not betray him. Otherwise I should not have told you this."

Count von Kahlenburg twirled his moustache meditatively, while for a moment his face grew rather long. But presently he recovered himself.

"Impossible," he exclaimed; "impossible. When I tell you that I have documents—stamped, official documents—which testify that my brother died on a certain date and that his interment took place twenty-four hours later."

"I don't know whether official documents are always to be relied upon or not," answered Mrs Hamilton. "There must be some official documents, I suppose, to show that your brother died in Tyrol. What I do know is that he was at the address which I have given you the other day, and there you will probably discover him if you will call and ask for Herr Weiss."

"I will lose no time in doing that,

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