

been invited there with some ulterior motive.

The thought was a curious one, and it troubled me not only that evening, but far into the silent night, as I lay awake striving to form some theory, but ever in vain.

Of one thing alone I felt absolutely assured. I am quick to distinguish the smallest signs, and I had not failed to become impressed by the truth I had read in her eyes that night.

She was not sincere. She was plotting against me.

I knew it, and regretted that I had accepted her invitation.

CHAPTER XXIV.
FACE TO FACE.

The days passed merrily until the end of September. There was never a dull moment, for Sir Henry's wife was one of those born hostesses who always gauged accurately the tastes of her guests, and was constantly making arrangements for their pleasure.

All the ladies—save one young widow—and several of the men had brought their cycles, and many were the enjoyable spins we had in the vicinity. The fashion of cycling nowadays relieves a hostess of much responsibility, for on fine days guests can always amuse themselves providing that the roads are good. I obtained a very decent machine from Bath, and at Beryl's side accompanied the others on excursions into Bath or Chippenham, or on longer journeys to Malnesbury, Stroud, and Trowbridge. In her well cut cycling skirt, cotton blouse, and straw hat, her wealth of hair dressed tightly by her maid, and her narrow waist girdled by a belt of grey chamois leather, she looked smart and lithe as a rule, there is not much poetry in the cycling skirt, for it is generally made in such a manner as to hang baggy at the sides, become disturbed by every puff of wind and to give the wearer the greatest amount of unnecessary annoyance. The French "culottes" are practical, if not altogether in accordance with our British view of feminine dress, and that they impart to a woman a considerable chic when in the saddle cannot be denied. Yet there is nothing more graceful, nor more becoming to a woman, than the English cycling skirt when cut by an artist in that form.

Sometimes alone, but often accompanied by our hostess, Sir Henry, or some of the guests, we explored all the roads in the vicinity. My love constituted herself my guide, showing me the Three Shire Stones, the spot where the counties of Gloucester, Somerset and Wilts join, the old Abbey of Laocock, the ancient moat and ruins at Kington Langley, the Lord's Barn at Frogwell, the Roman tumuli at Blue Vein, and other objects of interest in the neighbourhood.

She herself often suggested the rides, for she was a cycling enthusiast, and always declared how much healthier she had been since she took to the wheel. I, of course, was nothing loth to be her cavalier, for it gave me an opportunity for long and interesting chats with her, nay, to bask in the sunshine of her smiles when, as we often did, we sat and rested at some rural spot where the quiet was only broken by the rippling of a brook or the rustle of the leaves overhead.

After my hard, laborious life in London, these bright hours spent in the fresh air by day and in dancing and other gaieties at night, were indeed a welcome change. But it was not of that I reflected. My every thought was of her.

A score of times during the week that had passed since my arrival at Atworth I had been on the point of declaring my love for her, and relating to her all I knew. Yet I hesitated. By so doing I might arouse her indignation. I had spied upon her. I was endeavouring to learn her secret.

Thus from day to day I lingered at her side, played tennis, walked in the park, danced after dinner and played billiards in the hour before we parted for the night, with eyes only for her, thoughts only for her, my life hers alone. Perhaps I neglected the other guests. I think I must have done. Yet well aware how quickly gossip arises among a house party, I was always careful to remain sufficiently distant towards her to avoid any suspicion of flirtation. With woman's natural instinct she sometimes exerted her coquetry over me when we were alone, and by that I felt assured that she was by no means averse to my companionship.

Often I gave going Chetwode a passing thought. I hated the prig, and thanked the Fates that he was not there. Sometimes his name was mentioned by one or other of the guests, and always in a manner that showed how her engagement to him was accepted by all her friends. Thus any mention of him caused me a sharp twinge.

During those warm clear August days spent with my love I became somehow more confident in her Ladyship's actions. Hers was a complex nature, but I could not fail to notice her extreme friendliness towards me, and more than once it struck me that she contrived to bring Beryl and myself together on every possible occasion. She told me off as Beryl's escort to dinner, to church, or elsewhere in a manner quite natural, and at the same time exerted herself to make me comfortable in every respect. Had she not herself once told me in a hysterical moment that she was longing for love? What, I wondered, could be her object in placing me always in Beryl's company? The motive puzzled me.

Little time, however, was afforded for rumination, save in the privacy of one's room at night. The round of gaiety was unceasing, and, as one guest left, another arrived, so that we always had some fresh diversion and merriment. It was open house to all. We men were told that no formalities would be permitted. The tantalus was ever open, the glass ready, the soda in the ice, and the cigars of various brands placed invitingly in the smoking-room. Hence everyone made himself thoroughly at home, and helped himself at any hour to whatever he pleased.

The phantasmagoria of life is very curious. Only a fortnight before I was a penniless medico, feeling pulses and examining tongues in order to earn a shilling or two to keep the wolf from the door, yet within eight days I had entered into the possession of a thousand pounds, and was moreover the guest of one of the smartest hostesses in England.

I had been at Atworth about a fortnight, and had written twice to Hofer, but received no response. He was a sorry correspondent, I knew; for when he wrote it was a painful effort with a quill.

Bob Raymond had written me one of those flippancy notes quite characteristic of him, but to this I had not replied, for I could not rid myself of the belief that he had somehow played me false.

One evening, while sitting in the hall with my hostess in the quiet hour that precedes the dressing-bell, she of her own accord began to chat about the curious phenomena at Gloucester Square.

"I have told my husband nothing," she said. "I do hope your friend will discover the cause before we return to town."

"If he does not, then it would be best to keep the door locked," I said. "At present the affair is still unexplained."

"Fortunately Beryl is quite as well as ever—thanks to you and to him."

"It was a happy thought of yours to call me," I said. Hofer was the only man in London who could give her life, and if ever the mystery is solved it is he who will solve it."

I noticed that she was unusually pale, whether on account of the heat, or from mental-agitation I could not determine. The day had been a blazing one—so hot indeed that no one had been out before tea. At that moment everyone had gone forth except ourselves, and as she sat in a cane rocking-chair, swinging herself lazily to and fro, she looked little more than a girl, her cream serge tennis dress imparting to her quite a juvenile appearance.

"I hope you are not bored here, Doctor," she said presently, after we had been talking some time.

"Bored?" I laughed. "Why one has not a moment in which to be bored. This is the first half-hour of repose I've had since I arrived here."

She looked at me strangely, and with a curious smile said—

"Because you are always so taken up with Beryl."

"With Beryl!" I echoed, starting quickly. "I really didn't know that!" I hastened to protest.

"Ah, no," she laughed. "To excuse yourself is useless. The truth is quite patent to me, if not to the others."

"The truth of what?" I inquired, with affected ignorance.

"The truth that you love her."

I laughed aloud, scouting the idea. I did not intend to show my hand for I was never certain of her tactics.

"My dear Doctor," she said pleasantly, "you may deny it if you like, but I have my eyes open, and I know that in your heart you love her."

"Then you know my feelings better than myself," I responded, inwardly angry that I should have acted in such a manner as to cause her to notice my fascination.

"One's actions often betray one's heart. Yours have done," she replied. "But I would warn you that love with Beryl is a dangerous game."

"Dangerous? I don't understand you."

"I mean that you must not love her. It is impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"For one simple and very good reason," she responded. Then looking straight in my face, she added, "Could you, Doctor, keep a secret if I told you one?"

"I think I could. It would not be the first I've kept."

"Well, it is for the sake of your own happiness that I tell you this," she said. "You will promise never to breathe a word to her if I tell you."

"I promise, of course."

She hesitated, with her dark eyes fixed upon mine. Then she said in a low voice:

"Beryl is already married."

"To whom?" I asked, so calmly that I think I surprised her.

"To whom I cannot tell you."

"Why not? Surely it is no secret?"

"Yes, it is a secret. That is why I dare not tell you her husband's name."

"Is she actually the wife of young Chetwode?"

"Certainly not."

"But she is engaged to him," I observed.

"She is believed to be," my hostess announced. "But such is not really the case."

"And her husband? Where is he?"

It was strange that I should be asking such a question regarding my own whereabouts.

"In London, I think."

"Then is he quite content that his wife should pose as the affianced bride of young Chetwode? Such an arrangement is certainly rather strange."

"I know nothing of the why, and wherefore," she replied. "I only know that she is already married, and I warn you not to lose your heart to her."

"Well, what you have told me is curious, but I think—"

The remainder of the sentence died upon my lips, for at that moment Beryl herself burst gaily into the hall, dusty and flushed after cycling, exclaiming—

"We've had such an awfully jolly ride. But the others came along so slowly that Connie and I scooped home all the way from Monkton. How stifling it is to-night!" And she drew the pins from her hat, and sinking into a chair began fanning herself, while at the same moment her companion, Connie Knowles, a rather smart girl who was one of the party, also entered.

Hence our conversation was interrupted—a fact which for several reasons I much regretted. Yet from her words it seemed plain that she did not know that I was actually her cousin's husband. She knew Beryl's secret that she was married, but to whom she was unaware.

There is an old saying among the "contadinelli" of the Tuscan mountains, "Le donne dicono sempre il vero; ma non lo dicono tutto intero." Alas! that it is so true.

That same evening when after dressing I descended for dinner I found Beryl in the study scribbling a note which, having finished, she gave to the servant.

"Is he waiting?" she inquired.

"Yes, miss."

"Then give it to him—with this," and she handed the girl a shilling.

When, however, she noticed me standing in the doorway she seemed just a trifle confused. In this message I scented something suspicious; but affecting to take no notice, walked as her side down the corridor into the hall to await the others. She wore pale heliotrope that night, a handsome gown which bore the cut of a first-class "courtourier," with a pretty collar of seed-pearls. After dining we danced together, and in doing so I glanced down at her white heaving chest, for her corsage was a trifle

lower than others she had hitherto worn. I found that for which my eyes were searching, a tiny dark mark low down, and only just visible above the lace edging of the gown—the tattoo-mark which I had discovered on that fateful night—the mark of the three hearts entwined.

What, I wondered, did that indelible device denote. That it had some significance was certain. I had been waltzing with her for perhaps five minutes when suddenly I withdrew my hand from her waist, and halting, reeled and almost fell.

"Why, doctor," she cried, "what's the matter? How pale you are."

"Nothing," I gasped, endeavouring to assure her. "A little faintness, that is all. I'll go out into the night." And, unnoticed by the others, I staggered out upon the broad gravelled terrace which ran the whole length of the house.

She had walked beside me in alarm, and when we were alone suggested that she should obtain assistance.

"No," I said, "I shall be better in a moment."

"How do you feel?" she inquired, greatly concerned.

"As though I had become suddenly frozen," I answered. "It is the same sensation as when I entered that room at Gloucester Square."

"Impossible!" she cried in alarm.

"Yes," I said. "It is unaccountable, quite unaccountable."

The circumstance was absolutely beyond credence. I stood there for a few minutes leaning upon her arm, which she offered me, and slowly the curious sensation died away, until, a quarter of an hour afterwards, I found myself quite as vigorous as I had been before. Neither of us, however, danced again, but lighting a cigar I spent some time strolling with her up and down the terrace, enjoying the calm, warm starlit night.

We discussed my mysterious seizure a good deal, but could arrive at no conclusion.

After some hesitation I broached the subject which was very near my heart.

"I have heard nothing of late of Chetwode," I said. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," she responded. "His regiment has left Hounslow for York, you know."

"And he is in York?"

"I suppose so."

"Suppose? And yet you are to be his wife," I exclaimed.

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