

Complete Story.

A DUAL DECEPTION.

By CHARLES LAVELL.

CHAPTER I.

It was evident to Mrs Scannen, as she peered through her Venetians at No. 21 across the road, that young Mr Heyde-Paulker had come home this afternoon in a shocking temper, and that gossipy old lady felt, or imagined she felt, a thrill of pity for his wife, as the gentleman whom she eyed with such interest closed his gate with a crash, and proceeded up the garden path. Now, if Mr Scannen (poor man!) had ever come home like that

Mr Charles Augustus Heyde-Paulker closed the door noisily, and thumped his walking-stick into the rack, whilst the same unnecessary vigour accompanied the opening of the sitting-room door. He was a good-looking, sprucely dressed young man of about seven-and-twenty, and his features wore an expression of vexation and trouble, which had not escaped the sharp eyes of his inquisitive neighbour.

The sitting-room was in partial darkness, contrasting strongly with the sunlit atmosphere he had just left, and this state of things seemed to, if anything, add to his displeasure. "Well, Hetty, how are you this afternoon?" he said, with a ring of indifference in his tones, addressing a rather pretty girl, who lay upon a sofa drawn under the carefully shaded window.

"How noisy you are, Charley! No one would think, to hear you come in, that I am as ill as I can be," she said, fretfully, pressing a white hand to her brow. "I am certainly no better, and I think you might be a little quieter in your movements."

"Sorry, dear, but I fancy you'd make a noise if you had dropped a cool hundred over 'Doras,' as I have to-day. I'm sick and tired of the whole business, and if this state of things continues it means ruin—blue ruin," and he dropped into an easy-chair, and with cruel indifference to his wife's helplessness flicked his boots with one of her favourite antimacassars.

She lay with closed eyes, oblivious of the sacrifice, only remarking in a weak voice, "You really ought to be more cautious."

A look of intense disgust overspread her husband's face, and he rose from his chair.

"Cautious—rot!" he remarked, emphatically; then with a pointed allusion to the wrapper Hetty was wearing, "aren't you going to dress for dinner?"

"No, Charlie, I don't want any dinner; I couldn't eat any," she answered, in a voice broken with tears, "and besides, Lizzie left me at a moment's notice this afternoon, and I—I couldn't—didn't feel able to prepare dinner myself."

"And isn't there any?" demanded her spouse, in tones betokening gathering indignation.

"No, dear, there isn't. How could I get it?" and the invalid turned a pair of swimming eyes upon her lord and master, whose losses had apparently not included his appetite. For the first time in two years of married life Mr Heyde-Paulker gave way to anger.

"Then it's a great pity you can't," he replied, with heat, as he prepared to leave the room. "And it's another great pity that you don't spend less of your time upon that sofa, full of imaginary ailments, and a little more in looking after your household affairs. No wonder Lizzie cleared out. Women who can't control servants properly shouldn't marry!" and with this parting thrust the sage quitted his wife's presence, even more noisily than he had entered it, leaving her bathed in tears. A moment later he was striding down the garden path with the intention of dining at his club, providing for Mrs Scannen fresh grounds for wonderment.

"He's a perfect wretch, dear, and if I were you, I'd never speak to him again," commented Miss Laura Man-

ners, a bosom friend of our suffering heroine's, upon the conclusion of the recital of woe, as she poured herself out another cup of tea. Hetty listened to her remarks with tear-filled eyes.

"And what will you do without a girl?" exclaimed Laura, in accents of sympathetic despair.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Mrs Heyde-Paulker, helplessly, the mere thought of her servantless condition making her feel worse.

"I don't believe he cares a bit. He's gone off to his club, and if I starved he wouldn't mind at all."

"Well, dear, he is a wretch, and you ought to teach him a lesson—you really ought."

"But what can I do, Laura? He never takes me seriously, even when he is all right; he only laughs at me when I want him to be serious, and what can you do with a man who tickles you every time you put on a straight face; at least, he used to."

Her friend sighed enviously. "But do you really think he is growing indifferent?" she asked.

"I'm only too afraid it is so," replied Hetty, sadly. "He won't believe I am unwell, and says it is all fancy on my part, and he seems to get quite angry with me for not being well and strong."

"Then you'll have to cure him, dear, and I think I see a way to do it. There's nothing like a shock for cases of this kind, and I have a plan. Listen to this, dear." In a few moments the versatile Laura unfolded her scheme, which she calculated would bring the "wretch" to his knees.

When she had finished, Hetty said, slowly:

"Well, Laura, I think I will try it, especially I don't quite like the idea, especially as Charley has lost so much money on 'Doras'—I think that is what he called them—although I'm sure the change is what I want. But if he won't give me the money to go away with, how then?"

"You must make him. Tell him you absolutely must go away, unless he wants to see you die in the house," said Laura, mendaciously. "I feel sure he'll give in—and then!"

"Very well," replied Hetty, doubtfully, as she reached for her smelling-salts, "I will try it. At all events," she added, sadly, "I shall really know whether he still cares for me or not."

CHAPTER II.

"Phew! Didn't think she'd take it like that," muttered Charlie, as he put on a cigar outside the house and proceeded to the station on the morning following the events just chronicled. He was fresh from a terrific encounter with Hetty on matters financial generally, and sea-side trips in particular, his refusal to accede to her wishes having raised a whirlwind of reproach about his ears and his own expenses.

"Hello! old man, you do look blue. What's the matter?" and Will Harbour boisterously slapped our hero on the back when the two met after lunch in the smoke-room of the Junior Amphora. In a few moments Charlie had poured into his friend's sympathetic ear an account of what had taken place before he had left home that morning.

"Nice state of affairs, isn't it," he asked, plaintively, as he puffed smoke rings ceilingwards.

"You're right, old man. But why don't you let her go? asked his volatile friend.

"Well, it's like this, old chap: I'm horribly short of cash just now. I've dropped a pot of money lately, and, under the circumstances, £20 is a lot of money to spend on a mere fad, because that's all it is. She wants a month's holiday at an expensive sea-side resort just because she knows I haven't got the £20 to do it with," and Charlie looked appealingly at his friend for corroboration of his views.

"But is her health really bad?" queried the astute stockbroker.

"Had? No!" replied the other, decisively; "but she has got an idea that it is, and for weeks now she has done nothing all day but sit on a sofa and drive the girls we get frantic. The truth is, Will," said Charlie, in a melancholy undertone, "I believe she is quite tired of 'yours truly.' She is not a quarter as fond of me as she used to be, and does nothing but lie about and sigh, and answer in monosyllables. Lovely place to go home to, I can assure you."

"Look here, Charlie," said his friend, decidedly, "if you take that tone I don't know where you'll end. You must let her go away. It may do her good."

"Awful rot, Will," exclaimed the disconsolate husband; "far better spend the money on a separation. She only wants to get away from me—that's all."

For a few moments Will sat deep in thought, a faint smile hovering around his lips, and Charlie gazed moodily at the smoke wreaths rising from his cigar. Then Will spoke:

"Look here, old chap, suppose—"

For a moment the fun-loving young stockbroker was convulsed with silent laughter, and the melancholy features of his friend took on a severe form.

"Look here, Will, I don't like being laughed at," he said in an annoyed tone.

Forcefully smothering his mirth, Will rose, and taking a sheet of the club notepaper from a stand, he wrote upon it "I O U £20," and pushed it towards Charlie.

"Sign that with my name," he said, and mechanically Charlie added the words. "W. H. Harbour." Carefully taking it from him, Will folded it up, and tucked the slip into his pocket-book, abstracting at the same time two £10 notes, which he pushed across the table to his amazed friend, who sat watching him open-mouthed.

"Now, old chap, d'ye know you've committed a forgery?" asked Will, in a gleeful whisper.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Mr Heyde-Paulker, in a shocked voice, as he glared at the two bank notes. "Here, hand that IOU over. What's the joke?"

Then Will unfolded a scheme, the gist of which was to sound the depths of Hetty's affection for the man she had sworn to cherish and obey, and after arranging to meet that evening over the nefarious plan the two parted for the afternoon in an atmosphere of chuckling good humour.

"There, Charlie, what do you think of that for a diplomatic note?" and Will thrust a letter over his mahogany to his married chum.

As Charlie read it through an expression of doubt crept over his features and he gingerly handed it back to the irrepressible Will.

"Not bad, but, I say, don't you think it is going a bit too far? It would frighten her into fits, and I don't want to upset her too much."

"Pooh!" answered the bachelor. "Not a bit of it. You leave it to me. I know how to manage a job of this sort. It'll do her a world of good."

"But are you sure it won't upset her too much?" queried the still doubting one.

"Positive, certain," replied the other, tersely, as he placed the letter in envelope. "If this doesn't bring her to her senses my name's not Will Harbour. Comprenez?" and he grinned like a satyr. "You can arrange for her to go away to-morrow if you like. You can come and stop with me. And there you are, don't you know?"

"Charlie remained silent and Will went on: "Is that Miss Manners who is going away with her the one I used to be sweet on two years ago—Laura?"

Charlie assented.

"Hi! Nice girl, charming girl; can dance, by Jove! Haven't seen her for months. Wonder if she's forgotten me?" he soliloquised softly, and raising his eyes to put some further questions concerning her discovered that his friend had disappeared from the room.

CHAPTER III.

"Do you know, Laura, I can't help wondering what made Charlie give in like he did," said Hetty, a few days later, as she and her friend were slowly traversing the "front" at Bognor. "After carrying on like a pickpocket in the morning, at night he came home like a lamb

and gave me the money without a murmur. But I haven't forgiven him for his disgraceful behaviour."

"No, dear," agreed Laura, "and didn't you ask him where he got the money from?"

"Well, yes, I did." Hetty admitted, as she lay back in the bath-chair and raised her parasol; "but he seemed uncomfortable and evaded the question, so I thought it best to take what the gods provide, and here I am. Now dear, will you post the letter, and I hope it will bring him to his knees? Let us read it over first to see if it is all right," and so saying the two plotters halted by the pillar-box and read the epistle in question with considerable amusement. Then, to an accompaniment of rippling laughter, the letter fell into the box, and the two recommenced their "constitutional" along the Bognor "front."

"A letter for you, dear, from London," and Laura tossed a letter across the inviting breakfast-table to Hetty, who had just appeared, looking wonderfully improved with the change of scene and sea-air.

"Whoever can it be from? Not from Charlie," and woman-like she examined back, front, and postmark, in vainly conjecturing as to the sender. Then her thoughts strayed back to town. "Poor boy. To think that he is slaving away in that horrid city, while I am enjoying myself here," and she tore open the mysterious missive, the contents of which drove the healthy blood from her cheeks as she read as follows:

"298, The Grove,

Clapham, S.W.

"My Dear Mrs Heyde-Paulker,—I am sorry to be the bearer of evil tidings, but your husband has made me the unwilling medium through which to break some sad news. He has been charged by an old and valued friend with forgery, and prays that you will return to town at once."

"With sincere regrets for the unfortunate state of affairs occasioning this letter, which with a generosity that does him credit, he attributes to his own reckless expenditure,

"Believe me, yours very truly,

"W. H. HARBOUR.

"P.S.—Pending arrangements he is staying at my lodgings."

For a moment, Hetty gazed at the startling epistle with staring eyes and parted lips, then, as the flood-gates of her tears were opened, she cast it from her, and burst into a torrent of violent weeping.

"A letter for you, Charlie," and a missive thrown from the open door by Will fell upon that young man's pillow:

"13, The Marina, Bognor.

"Dear Mr Heyde-Paulker,—You may perhaps be sorry to hear that your poor dear wife, who was so seriously indisposed when she left town, has desired me to ask you, if you wish to gaze upon her once again, to come to Bognor immediately. Her case has, I am afraid, been aggravated by neglect and a broken heart."

"With sympathy, believe me,

"Yours very truly,

"LAURA MANNERS."

Charlie read the foregoing in horror-struck amazement as he leaned on his elbow, and for a moment his brain reeled with the shock. His letter had perhaps killed her; the shock of his senseless practical joke was the cause of this, and indirectly he was a murderer. With a groan he sprang out of bed and hastily dressed himself. "Heaven help me for being such a wretch," he muttered, as he slipped into his frock-coat and dashed down the stairs. "Read that, you scoundrel," he shouted, throwing the letter down before the startled Will, who was consuming ham voraciously. Mr Harbour suspended operations with a dropped jaw as he grasped the fact that Charlie was in a terrible state of mind, and hastily scanned the letter.

"Good heavens!" he said, as he pushed back his chair and rose from the table, "as heaven is a witness, old man, I never thought that—"

"You never thought," interrupted Charlie, with extreme bitterness, as he eyed the unhappy joker. "Will all your thinking give me back my wife now?"

Will made no answer; as Charlie, with a groan, turned his back upon him, and walked to the window. What