

The Storyteller

SEALED ORDERS.

CHAPTER I.

BESS COURAGE was standing at her door. Her golden hair was flying, a little wild, round her face, she gathered her black skirts with one hand behind her, and with the other began flinging crumbs to the peacocks.

Up the avenue came a rattle and trip of horses; the peacocks fled shrieking down the great white steps, and the lady's skirts were half hidden in a gay whirl of feathers. She laughed to herself, and then looked with a little dread at the carriage roof piled with trunks.

'How do you do, Polly?'

The visitor was a stout woman, elderly, and of the kind who pry. She hopped up the steps with the bold air of a near relation.

'It was kind of you to ask me Aunt Elizabeth,' she said. She never allowed poor Bess to forget that she was her aunt by marriage.

Bess put up her hands to her flying golden hair and smiled. The visitor followed her to look to where a lean man was tramping up, dragged down by the weight of a huge portmanteau.

'It can't be Joseph,' she cried and frowned.

'Oh,' said Bess, quickly, 'I thought you would amuse each other.'

It was her duty to ask these relatives once a year, and she thought to take them both at a gulp. But the arrivals glared at each other with eyes full of deadly hate, as the man approached, injured and dusty.

'Why are you walking?' cried the hostess, shocked.

He put down his portmanteau with an affected sigh.

'It's nothing, my aunt. Simply the lack of Mammon.'

Bess was accustomed to trusts like that made by her late husband's people. The general had been arbitrary in his testamentary dispositions.

'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'The carriage had to go to the other station for Mrs. Cox, but I said a cab—'

'The porter was very pressing that I should take a cab,' said Joseph, with the air of having outwitted an interested party; 'but I caught up my bag and slipped through the upper gate. I can't afford—'

'You would not have had to pay for it,' said Bess. 'I ordered the cab to bring you.'

'Oh!' in a rueful gasp.

Bess turned toward the hall.

'Come in and have tea before you go up to dress,' she said, with a perplexed smile. Poor things, they hated her, as she knew, but it was awkward to find that they should also hate each other. They followed her in, walking far apart.

'Anybody dining with you to-night?' asked Mrs. Cox, casually, as she stirred her tea.

'I've asked Dalcarrés.'

The enemies' eyes were lit with a sudden gleam.

John Gordon of Dalcarrés was standing tall and shy, among the dim lights of the drawing-room. It was empty, but there was a slight quiver in the curtains shutting in the little writing den beyond. He heard a strange sound, like robbing, behind the glimmering Indian reeds. He had begun to march forward, and then he had stopped, afraid.

He was a big man, with strong arms and a little stoop in the shoulders—not a writing stoop, but the kind that often comes with leaning over a horse, as a long man will. There was no mistaking John Gordon's seat in the saddle.

He took a long stride at last—eager, unsteady—across all the gay litter of this woman's room; but his step had been heard already; the woman inside had lifted her head with a start. He reached her in an instant, parting the jingling reeds.

'Why were you crying?' he said, abruptly.

'It was nothing,' said Bess. 'I—I'm rather tired.'

She looked straight at him, with a little defiant smile, but her lip was quivering back to tears. John Gordon took both her hands determinedly in his; his ears were startled yet with that sound of bitter crying.

'Look here,' he said. 'What is the matter? Trust me. I'm an old friend, Mrs. Courage—I'm an old friend. Perhaps—'

He broke off abruptly, waiting. Her cheeks grew scarlet, and she could not any longer look him straight in the face; she turned away her rumpled golden head as she felt his strong fingers tight on hers.

'Oh,' she said, 'I don't mind. I'm just a coward. I've got those two in the house, and they hate me so. They would like me to die; they are always watching, watching. I remember—I heard—how eager they were once when I was ill.'

'Why?' asked Dalcarrés. He remembered. There had been stories of their impatience. He had ridden 10 miles each evening, and waited in the snow to catch the doctor. Had she heard that too?

'Because of that awful money. Oh, how I hate it!'

A curious line came round John Gordon's mouth, as if—. But he held her hands fast and listened.

'I saw them look at each other,' she said, 'and their faces were simply murderous. If they can look like that at each other because one of them might—get it—oh! how must they look at me? It frightens me. I see them wish poison into the cup I drink, and if I should hear them at night creeping—creeping!—'

The little hands tightly clasped in his were shaking. Was this the Bess Courage whose pluck was famous, the richest woman in the county, and the most unattainable?

'Laugh at me,' she said wistfully. 'Oh! laugh at me, but remember I'm a most poor woman and a stranger, and—and I'm all alone.'

John Gordon felt a sudden leap at his heart; he put out his strong right arm to fold round her and hold her safe—. And then there was a high cackle behind the reeds, and Mrs. Cox sidled in.

'Half in the dark, Aunt Elizabeth! Do you want your poor relation to break her neck?' Putting relation in the singular was a fine slap at the man who walked just behind.

'It's dinner, I think,' said the widowed girl, who held that mock title. She lifted her head bravely, as became a general's widow, and led the way formally with Dalcarrés. The other two had to walk side by side.

Involuntarily they looked at each other and then at the pair in front.

'Eh?' said Joseph.

'Humph!' said Mrs. Cox, significantly. 'Too cautious.' Then they glared at each other again like tigers.

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They were still sitting at dessert, a silent little company. Bess had been trying to talk and failed, and Dalcarrés was gazing at her with a slow eagerness that was not lost upon the two third parties. Now one of the servants brought in a telegram. The mistress of the house took it up listlessly as a thing of business; then she read it with a cry:

'Oh! it's Archie,' she said. 'It's Archie!'

They all started. Surprise had driven away all the wistful weariness of her manner; her eyes were shining, her cheeks were red.

'And who is Archie?' asked Joseph, quickly.

'My cousin—my soldier cousin,' said Bess. 'He has got leave—he is coming home—he has landed!'

Mrs. Cox looked at her thoughtfully.

'Let me see,' she said. 'Did I meet him at the—wedding?'

'No,' answered Bess, a bright scarlet heightening the young eagerness in her face. 'He sailed for India that morning.'

'Oh!'

'We were brought up together, you know,' said she, turning to Dalcarrés—the only one who had asked nothing—and I haven't seen him since. Polly—'

Mrs. Cox was attentive.

'You must stay on with me while he is here, to—to—'

'To play propriety,' said Mrs. Cox. 'Of course.'

'I shall be charmed,' said Joseph, calmly adding himself to the invitation. There was a certain breathlessness in both their voices.

John Gordon said good night soon, his horse was brought round, and he galloped away in the dark. Bess had thanked him for coming in a neighborly fashion to cheer them up, but her eyes were still dazed with that surprise.

Joseph having politely seen him to the door, returned to find that the other two had retired. He was about to take up his own candle, when he heard a rustle of skirts above—Mrs. Cox foraging for a novel to read in bed. She paused on the stairs, and then, believing the coast clear ventured. 'Oh!' She halted, caught in her thick red dressing gown, with her hair pinched up in pins all round her head—and the rest left behind her—and she glared at Joseph as one might at a serpent.

'I am exceedingly glad to see you,' he said.

There was a new civility in his tone, or else a horrid sarcasm. It arrested her in her flight.

'Why?' she asked.

'Because I think the time has come for us to form an alliance.'

She looked at him sharply, and then, suddenly, she sat down. They exchanged glances of intelligence, in their own eyes an odd mixture of triumph and apprehension.

'We both know the terms,' said Joseph, 'of our late uncle's will.'

'Everything to his widow,' answered Mrs. Cox, promptly, 'until she married.'

'Or if she died,' said Joseph, 'it would go to the next of kin.'

'Don't suggest,' gasped Mrs. Cox, looking guiltily round.

He laughed sardonically.

'I was not suggesting that she should die,' he said. 'I only suggest she should marry. By the terms of our uncle's will, if she marries again she is to lose everything—and the money is to come to an individual named in a sealed envelope in the hands of the lawyers. "Polly"—he paused meaningly—'do you remember how the lawyer looked in our direction when he came to that? That individual must be either you or I. He seemed to suspect as much.'

She nodded.

'I know that. We were his only living relatives, and I—I remember a speech he made to me just before he died—'

'I remember something he said to me; it was as good as a promise.'

Here there was a brief revival of greed and rivalry in their glances.

'We will sink that,' said Joseph, recovering himself. 'Say that our prospects are equal; hadn't we better—ah!—go shares.'

'What do you mean?' asked Mrs. Cox, suspiciously. Had she not often paused in her schemes, struck with horror lest she might be contriving his victory after all? She was sure, quite sure, that hers was the hidden name; but it might happen to be his.

'Supposing we married,' said Joseph. 'It would not signify which of us was the lucky person.'

It was an audacious proposal. Nevertheless it was plain they could fight better side by side, unhampered by a passionate endeavor to thwart each other.

Mrs. Cox thought an instant. Her broad face, rimmed with its hard ring of frizzing pins, might be unbeautiful; but it was business-like.

'Perhaps,' she said.

Then they plunged keenly into business.

'What about Dalcarrés?' inquired Joseph.

'Does he know?'

Mrs. Cox's laugh was quick and shrill.