

Beaton's Bargain.

BY MRS. ALEXANDER.

SYNOPSIS.

Mrs. Winton, Lady Mary Hay, Leslie Beaton and Jack Maxwell are members of London's smart society set. Beaton is Mrs. Winton's brother, and being poor resolves to answer an advertisement that promises to get him a rich wife. Lady Mary is a widow whom Beaton admires. Mrs. Winton and Maxwell were lovers before the former married. Beaton, with company with Maitland is introduced to the heiress—Edith Vivian—by the latter's guardian.

CHAPTER V. (Continued.)

"If you please," returned Edith, eager to be left alone; nor was she disturbed for a long time.

Then Mrs. Winton broke in upon her, on the way from her dressing-room to the carriage and a solemn dinner-party. She rarely took her young protégée out with her in the evening, save to the theatre or a concert.

"Is your head better, dear?" she asked, kindly, but to Edith's anxious ear there was unusual gravity, almost sadness, in her tone.

"Oh, yes! certainly better."

"I have brought you the new Cornhill, if you are able to read. Try and eat some dinner or supper, and get to bed early; I hope to find you quite well to-morrow morning. Good-night, dear."

A gentle kiss, accompanied by a sigh, and Mrs. Winton was gone.

Edith seldom saw her hostess in the morning before she went to the studio, where she worked steadily in spite of the distractions which surrounded her, and where, perhaps, she was happiest. His uneasiness and fearful looking forward to the meeting that awaited her was prolonged, after a disturbed night, through the hours that preceded luncheon.

Beaton had disappeared; only the well-dressed, self-possessed young person who dignified to be her attendant came to escort her back. This was no small relief.

At luncheon there was only Mrs. Winton, who received her kindly, but with a subdued and pensive air. "You must have communicated your headache to me, Edith," she said, after they had exchanged greetings. "I feel quite good for nothing; I shall not be at home to anyone, and at five we will take a drive far from the madding crowd." There are a few people coming to dinner, and I must brace myself for my duties.

"It will be very pleasant," said Edith, scarcely daring to look up, yet thankful to find that Mrs. Winton was not cross.

Luncheon was soon dispatched; Edith could hardly eat a morsel.

"It is a farce your sitting down to table," said her hostess. "You are looking pale, too, dear. You must really see Dr. Tweddell. He is the great man for nerves now, and your nerves are all wrong, I am sure."

"I think I do feel nervous," faltered Edith.

"Come with me; we will repose ourselves in my room, and have a nice long talk."

Edith followed her as if to execution. Mrs. Winton's private room was a delightful apartment on the second floor, with a large corner window commanding the gardens in the rear, and a glimpse of Hyde Park; simply though most comfortably furnished, and adorned with a few good pictures, a statuette or two, and abundant flowers in choice

china bowls and vases. It was deliciously cool and fresh; the roar of the street came to them softened into a mellow undertone, deepening the sense of restfulness by the suggestion of the noise and struggle without.

"It is certainly delightful to be quiet sometimes," said Mrs. Winton, sinking into a chair beside the open window, and pointing to one opposite, where the light would fall upon Edith, who obediently took the seat indicated. "I know you have a great deal to tell me, a great deal you ought to tell me," began Mrs. Winton, slowly fanning herself with a large Japanese fan; "but it is difficult to begin, so I am going to help you. My brother has told me that you refused him, and I am awfully sorry about it all."

"So am I," said Edith, coloring, and pressing her hands tightly together, her usual tranquil composure melting away under Mrs. Winton's searching eyes. "I have been dreadfully distressed, and so afraid you would be angry with me."

"Angry with you! Why should I be angry? Grieved and disappointed, I own, but not angry! In such a serious matter you have the right to do what you think best. But I am, of course, very, very sorry for poor Leslie. You seemed to like him, you know, and perhaps unconsciously misled him."

But, Mrs. Winton, dear Mrs. Winton," imploringly. "I did, I do like him; only I never dreamed he would think of marrying me! I am sure you did not."

"I did not think it, because I knew some weeks ago that he ardently desired to make you his wife."

"And you were not vexed? you did not think him foolish?" cried Edith, in increasing astonishment.

"No, dear! Listen me, Edith. I suppose I seem to you too worldly and hard to appreciate simple original character? I am worldly. I have hard edges here and there, but where I take a liking I am steady, for I do not adopt any one on a mere whim. Now there is much in you that would be of infinite use to my brother. He took to you at once and that is an unusual thing for him. He has a most warm heart, though I acknowledge he has been far from steady, but that is past and gone now. I looked to his marriage, with you to complete his life and character. I am therefore woefully disappointed when my pretty little castle in the air crumbles at the touch of your cruel fingers."

Edith did not answer for a moment, she was so overwhelmed with a sense of her own guilt.

"You are too good, too indulgent to me," she said, at length, brokenly. "I scarcely believed Mr. Beaton could be in earnest. I do not think I could feel quite at home with him, and I fancied he was very fond of Lady Mary Hay, which seemed much more natural."

"Of Lady Mary?" echoed Mrs. Winton. "How very absurd! They are very old friends, and in a sense he is very fond of her; but when I tell you that he was rejoicing the day before yesterday at the prospect of her making a good marriage, you may imagine the kind of fondness he feels for her."

There was a pause.

"My greatest regret," began Edith again, "is to have disappointed you in any way. You have done so much for me, and I love you, indeed I do."

The color rose brightly in her cheeks, and her quiet, truthful eyes looked into Mrs. Winton's with such pathetic earnestness that she was touched, and she thought that real hearty love and belief were worth deserving, even from an obscure little country girl. But she repressed such sentimental weakness at once.

"I hope you care for me a little, Edith. I think I deserve it from you. But not so much as Leslie. Could you have seen him yesterday, I think you would have been sorry for him. He was so broken-hearted, and struggled so bravely to control himself! 'Whatever happens, Jean,' he said, 'do not worry Edith, do not in any way resent my disappointment.' You see, he knows how fond I am of him. He talks of joining a friend of his who is going to make an exploring expedition to Tartary, or Thibet, or Timbuctoo, but I earnestly hope he will not. Though his general health is good, he could not stand the hardships of such an undertaking. Indeed I do not believe that Leslie could have felt anything so intensely; he was as white as a sheet." Mrs. Winton fanned herself vehemently, as if much moved.

Edith's eyes grew larger and larger as she listened, her sense of evil she had wrought deepened, and her instinctive credulity vanished before the gravity of Mrs. Winton's looks and tones.

To doubt a syllable of what that incomparable personage asserted never crossed her mind, still it was most incomprehensible. Yet the image conjured up by Mrs. Winton's description affected her deeply. She trembled, and the tears rose to her eyes.

"I wish I had never come to be a trouble to you!" she sobbed. "What a return this is for all your goodness, and Mr. Beaton's goodness! I am very grateful to him for caring so much about me, but—"

"Oh, I suppose he could not help that,"



One of a healthy woman's principal charms is her vivacity of carriage—the dainty, springy steps with which she walks. The woman who suffers from weakness and disease of the distinctly feminine organism, who is troubled with back-aches, stitches in the sides, dragging down or burning sensations, sick headaches and the multitude of other ills that accompany these disorders, cannot have the dainty, bounding carriage of a healthy woman. She will show in every movement

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Interrupted Mrs. Winton with a sad smile. "I know that some little time ago he explained his intentions fully to your guardians and secured their full consent, so that no difficulty should occur in case he could win yours."

"What shall I do? what shall I do?" said Edith, unconsciously.

"Are you in earnest when you ask me what you shall do, Edith?" asked Mrs. Winton; "and will you believe that I am disinterested in the advice I offer?"

"Believe you! Of course I believe you thoroughly!"

"Then let matters stand as they are. Poor Leslie has run away to bury himself in solitude. I begged him to go down to Wintonford, for I know my old housekeeper will take care of him. You need not meet for some little time. Think well if you have done wisely in rejecting the warm heart so freely offered to you; think of the charming home your united means might create. With my brother you would do exactly as you liked; he has the happiest temper. Then my friendship and help in the little social minutiae of which you would be unavoidably ignorant counts for something. There I will not allow myself to speak more. I would not for worlds over-persuade you. But, for your own sake, do not throw my brother over without some consideration. Of course it is very likely he may not come near us again while you are here. But should he do so—"

She paused, and poor Edith, who felt as if some invisible net was closing around her, urged timidly:

"I suppose one ought to like the man they marry very much?"

"You should certainly not dislike him! But why do you not like Leslie? Do you love any one else?" with a sudden, almost questioning glance.

"How could I? Whom do I know to love?" asked Edith, timidly.

"Very true! Moreover, it does not follow that because I think my brother the dearest fellow in the world he must be irresistible to every one. There I really think we have exhausted the subject, and you have made your eyes red. Go and bathe them, dear, and do not be unhappy; I shall always be your friend."

"Ah! do, do be my friend, I have so few," and Edith ventured to pass her arm through Mrs. Winton's and to press her brow against her shoulder, with more of a caress than she had ever dared before.

"Oh, rest tranquil, my dear girl. I am very loyal."

Edith hurried away, and Mrs. Winton, rising to fetch a French novel from the table, looked after with a slight sigh.

"She is a nice little thing, and I do hope, when I have done Leslie's love-making successfully for him, he will not neglect her too openly, and spend her money too freely; I will see that I do up safely at any rate!"

CHAPTER VI. MANEUVERING.

While Mrs. Winton fulfilled her diplomatic mission, Jack Maitland had been reasoning with himself against his own weakness in yielding to his strong inclination to prolong his stay within Mrs. Winton's charmed circle. He could in no way help Edith, he told himself, and each day they met only increased his miserable anxiety and indecision.

However keen her natural perception of truth and reality, so accomplished a man of the world as Beaton would end by convincing her that he was worthy all trust and affection. So he nursed as he was returning from an expedition to Hampton Court with his New Zealand friends, who had complained loudly that they never saw anything of him, that he had quite cut them, etc. etc.

"I must dine at the Winton's tonight," he thought when, having seen

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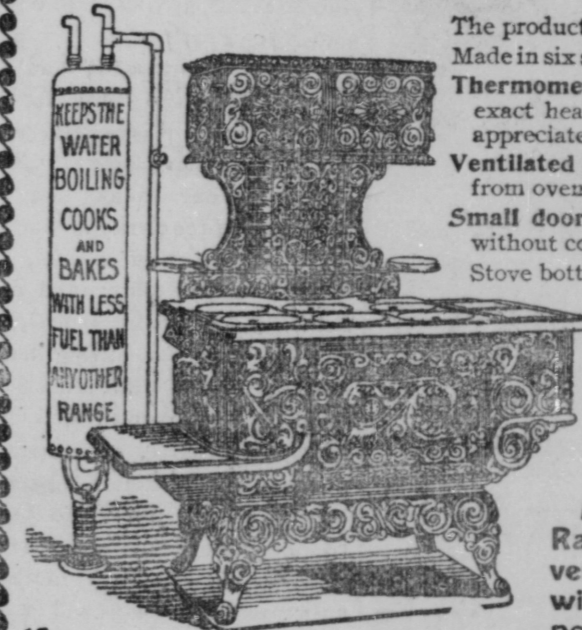
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his companions into a cab, he was walking slowly toward Waterloo Bridge, "but I will get away home on Saturday. I am making a fool of myself here."

On reaching his hotel, however, he found a letter which compelled even an earlier start. It was from Major Maitland informing him that his mother had taken a chill, and had been attacked with bronchitis; that although there was no very immediate danger, it would be well if he could return home at once. Maitland was startled, something in the tone of the communication alarmed him. Mrs. Maitland was a gentle, fragile woman. When her younger son was in disgrace with all the world she had clung to him, and written him, and scraped small gifts of money out of her very narrow house allowance to help him in his hour of need. This Jack never forgot. He loved his mother with all the strength of his steady heart. He knew that his father, although considered a model husband, was tranced and unsympathetic. He would no doubt bitterly lament his loss, were his wife to be taken from him, and canonize her in his memory but in the meantime he never entered into her thoughts or feelings, or considered the needs of her inner nature. Her daughters were married, and provided with cares of their own, and Jack well knew the loneliness of the patient little woman when he was not with her.

(To be Continued)

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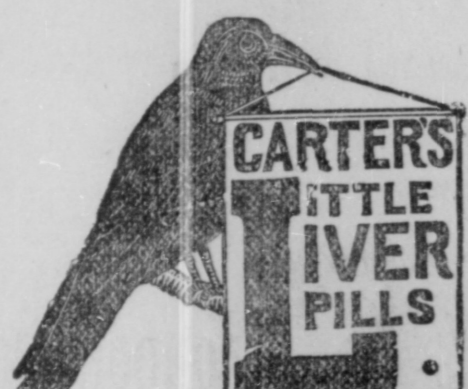
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