

A TRAGEDY OF APPEARANCES

PART I

"Love and lavender," said Alice Mumford, sitting on the edge of the table in the small lodgings at Seacombe, "went out with crinolines, my dear mother."

Mrs. Mumford lying back in her chair, smiled pensively at her only daughter.

"I think we are very much the same as we always were, dear. We only wear different clothes."

"That is the theory of the 'eternal feminine,' I suppose, but it is as old-fashioned as well the inequality of sexes. Perhaps we care for love, but we always take care to dispose of our love so that it goes with the money."

"Birth, Death and Love, Alice," she murmured, "are still the three greatest things in life."

Alice jumped lightly off the table, and kneeling down by the side of her mother, put her arms round her neck.

"You dear old thing! Here we are doing our best to keep up appearances on £150 a year in order that our neighbors may imagine that we have at least £1,000 so that I shall have a chance of marrying well. And you are talking in your nice staid way of love as if life was still a sealed Valentine."

Mrs. Mumford realized the truth of her daughter's remarks, though her nature rebelled against the sentiments they implied. Her latter life had not been cast exactly in pleasant places. She herself had married a well-to-do parents had married a man whose income and estate were beyond reproach. But these were the days before "The Marjory Wamans Property Act" and when Mr. Mumford died Mrs. Mumford suddenly awoke to the double realization that she was a widow and that her late husband had been a gambler and a spendthrift. All that was left to her was a small annuity of £150 for which a kindly disposed aunt long dead had been responsible.

She had come to Seacombe because that secluded seaside resort was visited solely by the moderate well-to-do classes who told neither do they spin. She wished her daughter if possible to marry a well-to-do husband, but this did not imply successful butchers or hatted grocers and she had purposely avoided the resorts of the nouveau riches.

No between them they were content to eat little and stint themselves in every possible way in order that the one commercial asset of the family as Alice loved to call herself might be dressed to the best advantage.

"And now mother," said Alice, rising to her feet "the most important business has to engage the attention of the firm this morning. Mr. John Forrester has appeared upon the scene. We have the advantage in his case of having known both him and his people for some considerable time. Although his parents are dead and he himself has been traveling abroad for the last five or six years, we know that from a family he is proud he is making him believe that we are staying here in order to oblige an old servant who has taken to the lodging house business. This is a reasonable fiction accounts admirably for our present position. He still believes that we are well off as in the days of old and he has not therefore avoided us because of our comparative penury. To-night I am to meet him at the hall at the Assembly Rooms. I do not suppose we shall finally conclude any business arrangements to-day, but we must propose during the next fortnight."

PART II

From Alice Mumford's standpoint the ball in the Assembly Rooms and the events immediately succeeding it were a decided success. To the moderate feminine intellect it would have been obvious the Forrester was falling rapidly in love. In the even course of life at Seacombe the men and the women had ample opportunity to meet every day and had Alice permitted it Forrester would have proposed on three or four separate occasions. But strange to say Alice did not permit it.

To the average male intelligence it would have seemed that her interests would have prompted her to allow her lover to lay his heart at her feet. But the way of a maid with a man is passing strange. Indeed it was because Alice had fallen in love with Forrester that she avoided allowing him any opportunity for avowing his affection. Somehow it seemed to her almost irreligious that she should permit him to do so after regarding him previously in the light of a mere money machine.

Unwittingly however, they were both playing a similar part.

Forrester was a man whose vices and virtues might possibly be described under one head, "Laziness." He had gone through life and incidentally, most of his money, with lazy good nature. He took the advice of his friends, seemingly because it was too much trouble to think for himself, and the advice in the majority of cases had been of such a nature as to benefit the pockets of his advisers rather than the moral and material position of Forrester himself. Consequently he had woken up one morning to find that a ruthless child of Jerusalem had foreclosed on the paternal estate and that merely a few thousands were left to him of his former income.

He was too lazy to alter his mode of life, and so, except to a few intimate friends he kept up appearances without any difficulty. But when the bank balance grew less and less it became apparent to him that something must

QUEST OF BARSDALE

of friends. Their office was a merry money, and though the office he charming Miss Alice Mumford he considered it the best piece of advice he had ever received in his life. He became hopelessly in love, and his embarrassment and the reasons of his applying for the hand of my woman were quite forgotten.

Again and again he tried to propose to the girl he loved, but though his light in her eyes informed him that his affection was not absolutely hopeless, yet she always put off his avowal with some subterfuge or other.

The climax of the situation was reached on the occasion of another ball at the Assembly Rooms. They were sitting together under the shadow of a palm, in a cozy corner, and by a violent effort Forrester had introduced the subject of matrimony into conversation.

"A successful marriage," said Alice, playing with her fan, "is like you to New York so unexpectedly, at my pains."

"Oh come, Miss Mumford," said Forrester, "even in these degenerate days love plays some part in marriage. It is not purely a matter of efficiency."

"When you talk of love in connection with marriage it always implies to me in a cot are and a divorce six months later in consequence."

"Yes I must confess that to me love is a cottage since it necessarily means that you cannot afford to live in a mansion of a decent-sized house but in a tiny, interesting I could not afford to live in."

"The old adage poverty at the front door—I love at the back door," retorted Alice.

Forrester felt that the conversation was once more drifting away from the subject which he had so much at heart. He meant to propose that night and like most lazy men when he had been to a conclusion not all the king's horses, and all the king's men would move him from his purpose.

Before another minute was over he had discovered in himself a latent talent for eloquence. In short, he told Alice that he loved her and begged her to be his wife.

On Alice's effect of his avowal, so long expected and so long feared, had a curious effect.

She grew very pale and made no reply. Then the man looked up into Alice's face and wondered.

"Alice," he said somewhat huskily, "you do love me don't you?"

For answer the girl disengaged her hand from his.

"Before I answer your question," she said putting restraint upon her voice, "I must tell you something. When I first met you down here I met you with an object. My mother and I, as perhaps you are not aware, were left very badly off practically with only enough money to keep body and soul together. I did not take my heart into consideration at all. I tried to get into a position where you love me because you were wealthy."

She placed a slight emphasis on the word "wealth," which did not escape the surprised ears of Forrester.

"When I tell you that I am nothing more or less than a scheming woman, do you still ask me that question?"

She looked him straight in the face. He turned away his eyes a look almost of pain crossing his forehead.

To the girl it seemed as if the knowledge of her plot had killed his love and a great weariness weighed on her heart.

He did not speak for some seconds. Then at last he broke the silence, which was becoming almost too tense for both of them.

"Alice," he said in a shaken voice, "I, too, have a confession to make. I am not rich as you think. I have lost nearly all my money, with the exception of about £500 and I was advised by my friends to look about for a rich wife."

It was to be a modern commercial transaction in which the girl was to be my wife for I was to keep up appearances to the end. I met you and first sought your company because I thought you were rich, as I knew your father was. But I grew to love you almost in spite of myself though I can claim for myself nothing but your contempt still I should like you to know that you will always be to me the sweetest thing on God's earth."

With a little gasp, as of Miss Alice rose to her feet. She forced a laugh through her clenched lips—a bitter laugh that was not good to hear.

"So," she said, "we have been playing a little game of comedy—a comedy of keeping up appearances. You sought me for my money, you say I sought you for yours, and we neither of us have any."

She sank back suddenly on the seat, and putting her hands over her face, burst into tears. Forrester was deeply moved. So after all, this girl did not love him!

"Comedy," he exclaimed, "do you call it comedy to play with a man's soul like this? I call it the tragedy of appearances." Man-like, he suddenly forgot his own deception and the part he had played. "You have played with me, and I loved me, and made me believe you loved me."

For a second there was silence, save for the sobs of the girl. Then brokenly she spoke, "I did love you and I do love you, and shall love you always and for ever."

With a little cry of joy, Forrester took one of her hands and drew it away from her face.

"Alice," he said, "we have both been foolish. I can make enough money, I am sure, for both of us, though I have never yet tried in my life. And now I'll then"—he paused for a moment—"is love in a cottage so absolutely impossible after all? Let us try it?" And they did.—Ladbrooke Black, in Black and White.

There was something sadly familiar about the graceful sweep of the blue tailor-made gown ahead, and Ellsworth's heart quickened with his pace as he hurried forward to overtake the owner of it.

Rhythic farrow always had a blue tailor-made gown; he recollected this with the fastidiousness common to men who urge a delicate point of correctness in the harmony of a woman's dress.

The girl turned abruptly, a quick smile of welcome sweeping over her face.

"Tom Ellsworth, of all people in the world!" was her greeting.

"So good of you to recognize me," he returned, relieving her of a trifling bundle. "Five years bring many changes."

"Not between old friends," she amended archly. "But what brings you here?"

Ellsworth inclined his head. "In a measure, yes," he replied, his face clouding a little. "More definitely speaking, a nasty piece of business."

Ellsworth looked reflectively into her upturned blue eyes and after a moment added:

"The fact is—I am here in the pursuit of a scoundrel."

Edythe glanced at him in quick surprise then laughed.

"Imagine," she exclaimed, "a tragedy in real life! How interesting!"

He did not answer anything then, but merely stared at her vaguely, his face paling.

"It's on account of my little sister," he said briefly after a silence.

The girl turned toward him suddenly, with sympathetic eyes.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she apologized hastily. "I didn't dream of anything like that."

They walked on in silence up the crowded, sunlit avenue and presently turned into a cross street.

"I am taking you home to dinner," explained she the first to speak; "you have no other engagement?"

Ellsworth answered with a negative shake of his head.

"That is right I want you to meet my husband and—"

"Your husband? Impossible! Are you really married?"

"Why of course!" Does it seem so very absurd to you?"

"Oh no! Only you gave me some thing of a start. I hadn't heard; that's all."

Indeed! Then I shall have to forgive you. I suppose Jack is such a dear—you'll be sure to like him, every body does."

Ellsworth was not so certain of adding himself to this list, the memory of other days was still too fresh, but he crushed this thought and replied courteously. If a little mendaciously.

"Naturally good taste usually exhibits itself in the choice of a husband as in other things."

Edythe gave him a winning smile. He had touched her weak spot.

"And by the way," Ellsworth went on in another tone, "doubtless he can be of some assistance to me in locating my man."



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