

The Stolen Singer

By Martha Bellinger

"I can endure the climate, thank you; but I can't endure to see your life endangered on that silly chair, my dear Mr. Van Camp. There—thank you." And when he was seated in a solid mahogany, he was rewarded with Madame Reynier's confidential chat. They had returned to their New York apartment in the midst of the summer season, she said, "for professional advice." She and her niece liked the city and never minded the heat. Melanie, her aunt explained, had been enabled to see several old friends, and for her own part, she liked home at any time of the year better than the most comfortable of hotels.

"This is quite like home," she added, "even though we are really exiles." Aleck ventured to hope that the "professional advice" had not meant serious trouble of any sort.

"A slight indisposition only."

"And are you much better now?" Aleck inquired solicitously.

"Oh, it wasn't I; it was Melanie," Madame smiled. "I became my own physician many years ago, and now I never see a doctor except when we ask one to dine. But youth has no such advantage." Madame fairly beamed with benevolence while explaining one of her pet idiosyncrasies. Before Aleck could make any headway in gleaning information concerning her own and Melanie's movements, as he was shamefully trying to do, Lloyd-Jones had persuaded Miss Reynier to sing.

"Some of those quaint old things, please," he was saying; and Aleck wondered if he never would hang himself with his own rope. But Lloyd-Jones' cheerful voice went on:

"Some of those Hungarian things are jolly and funny, even though you can't understand the words. Makes you want to dance or sing yourself." Aleck groaned, but Melanie began to sing, with Jones hovering around the piano. By the time Melanie had sung everybody's favorites, excluding Aleck's, Mr. Chamberlain rose to depart. He was an Englishman, a serious, heavy gentleman, very loyal to old friends and very slow in making new ones. He made an engagement to dine with Aleck on the following evening, and, as he went out, threw back to the remaining gentlemen an offer of seats in his machine.

"I ought to go," said Jones; "but if Van Camp will stay, I will. That is," he added with belated punctiliousness, "if the ladies will permit?"

"Thank you, Chamberlain, I'm walking," drawled Aleck; then turning to the company with his cheerful grin he stated quite impersonally: "I was thinking of staying long enough to put one question—er, a matter of some little importance—to Miss Reynier. When she gives me the desired information, I shall go."

"Me, too," chirped Mr. Lloyd-Jones. "I came expressly to talk over that plan of building up friendly adjoining estates out in Idaho; sort of private shooting and hunting park, you know. And I haven't had a minute to say a word." Jones suddenly began to feel himself aggrieved. As the door closed after Chamberlain, Melanie motioned them back to their seats.

"It's not so very late," she said easily. "Come back and make yourselves comfortable, and I'll listen to both of you," she said with a demure little devil in her eye. "I haven't seen you for ages, and I don't know when the good moment will come again." She included the two men in a friendly smile, waved a hand toward the waiting chairs, and adjusted a light shawl over the shoulders of Madame Reynier.

But Aleck by this time had the bit in his teeth and would not be coaxed. His ordinarily cool eye rested wrathfully on the broad shoulders of Mr. Lloyd-Jones, who was lighting a cigarette, and he turned abruptly to Miss Reynier. His voice was as serious as if parliament, at least, had been hanging on his words.

"May I call tomorrow, Miss Reynier, at about twelve?"

"Oh, I say," put in Jones, "all of you come to luncheon with me at the Little Gray Fox—will you? Capital place and all sorts of nice people. Do come. About one."

Van Camp could have slain him.

"I think my proposition a prior one," he remarked with dogged precision; "but, of course, Miss Reynier must decide." He recovered his temper enough to add, quite pleasantly, considering the circumstances, "Unless Madame Reynier will take my part?" turning to the older woman.

"Oh, no, not fair," shouted Jones. "Madame Reynier's always on my side. Aren't you, Madame?"

Madame Reynier smiled inscrutably. "I'm always on the side of virtue in distress," she said.

"That's me, then, isn't it? The way you're abusing me, Mademoiselle, listening here to Van Camp all the evening!"

But Melanie, tired, perhaps, of being patiently tactful, settled the mat-

ter. "I can't go to luncheon with anybody tomorrow," she protested. "I've had a touch of that arch-enemy, indigestion, you see; and I can't do anything but my prescribed exercises, nor drink anything but distilled water—"

"Nor eat anything but food! We know," cried the irrepressible Jones. "But the Little Gray Fox has a special diet for just such cases as yours. Do come!"

"Heavens! Then I don't want to go there!" groaned Aleck.

Melanie gave Jones her hand, half in thanks and half in farewell. "No, thank you, not tomorrow, but sometime soon; perhaps Thursday. Will that do?" she smiled. Then, as Jones was discontentedly lounging about the door, she did a pretty thing. Turning from the door, she stood with face averted from everybody except Van Camp, and for an instant her eyes met his in a friendly, half-humorous but wholly non-committal glance. His eyes held hers in a look that was like an embrace.

"I will see you soon," she said quietly.

Van Camp said good-night to Jones at the corner, after they had walked together in silence for half a block.

"Good-night, Van Camp," said Jones; then he added cordially: "By the way, I'm going back next week in my private car to watch the opening of the Liza Lu, and I'd be mighty glad if you'd go along. Anything else to do?"

"Thanks—extremely; but I'm going on a cruise."

As Aleck entered the piously exclusive hall of the club his good nature came to his aid. He wondered whether he hadn't scored something, after all.

CHAPTER V.

Melanie's Dreams.

Midnight and the relaxation of slumber could subtract nothing from the high-browed dignity of the club officials, and the message that was waiting for Mr. Van Camp was delivered in the most correct manner. "Mr. Hambleton sends word to Mr. Van Camp that he has gone away on the Jeanne D'Arc. Mr. Hambleton may not be back for some time, and requests Mr. Van Camp to look after the Sea Gull."

"Very well, thank you," replied Aleck, rather absent-mindedly. He was unable to see, immediately, just what change in his own plans this sudden turn of Jim's would cause; and he was for the moment too deeply preoccupied with his own personal affairs to speculate much about it. His thoughts went back to the events of the evening, recalled the picture of his Diana and her teasing ways, and dwelt especially upon the honest, friendly, wholly bewitching look that had flown to him at the end of the evening. Absurd as his own attempt at a declaration had been, he somehow felt that he himself was not absurd in Melanie's eyes, though he was far from certain whether she was inclined to marry him.

Aleck, on his part, had not come to his decision suddenly or impulsively; nor, having arrived there, was he to be turned from it easily. True as it was that he sincerely and affectionately desired Madame Reynier for a wife, yet on the whole he was a very cool Romeo. He was manly, but he was calculating; he was honorably disposed toward matrimony, but he was not reborn with love. And so, in the sober bedroom of the club, he quickly fell into the good sleep induced by fatigue and healthy nerves.

Morning brought counsel and a disposition to renew operations. A note was dispatched to his Diana by a private messenger, and the boy was bidden to wait for an answer. It came presently:

"Come at twelve, if you wish."

"MELANIE REYNIER."

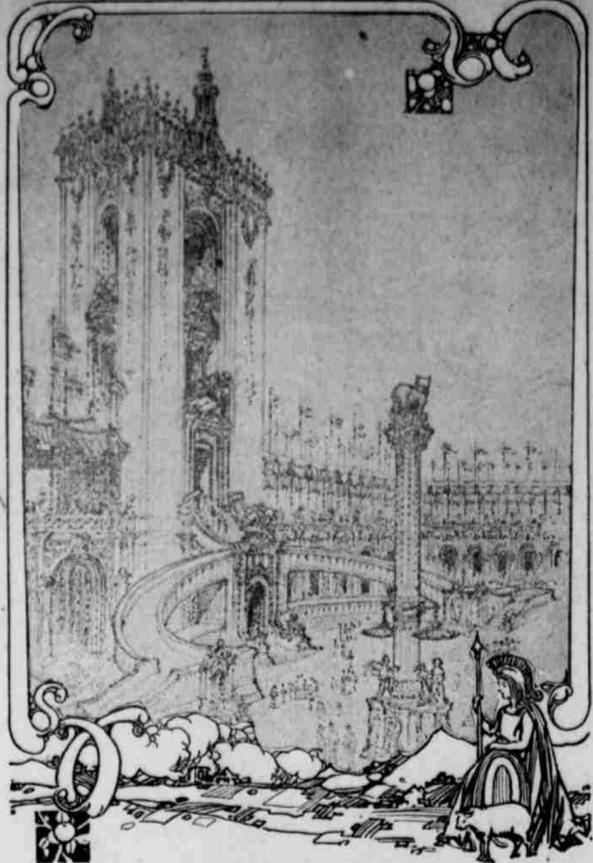
Aleck smiled with satisfaction. Here was a wise venture going through happily, he hoped. He was pleased that she had named the very hour he had asked for the night before. That was like her good, frank way of meeting a situation, and it augured well for the unknown emergencies of their future life. He had little patience with timidity and traditional coyness in women, and great admiration for an open and fearless spirit. Melanie's note almost set his heart thumping.

But not quite; and no one understood the cool nature of that organ better than Melanie herself. The ladies in the apartment at the Archangel had lingered at their breakfast, the austerity of which had been mitigated by a center decoration of orchids and fern, fresh-touched with dew; or so Madame Reynier had described them to Melanie, as she brought them to her with the card of Mr. Lloyd-Jones. Miss Reynier smiled faintly, admired the blossoms and turned away.

The ladies usually spoke French with each other, though occasionally Madame Reynier dropped into the harsher speech of her native country. On this morning she did this, telling Melanie for the tenth time in as many days, that in her opinion they ought to be going home. Madame considered this her duty, and felt no real responsibility after the statement was made. Nevertheless, she was glad to find Melanie disposed to discuss the matter a little further.

"Do you wish to go home, Auntie, or is it that you think I ought to go?"

"I don't wish to go without you, child, you know that; and I am very comfortable here. But his Highness, your cousin, is very impatient; I see that in every letter from Krolvets. You offended him deeply by putting off your marriage to Count Lorenzo, and every day now deepens his indignation against you. I don't like to discuss these things, Melanie, but I sus-



EAST COURT, PANAMA-PACIFIC INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION.

THE great East Court at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition is designed for magnificence surpassing the famous Durbar of India. It will constitute a suitable setting for oriental or modern drama upon a colossal scale. From a huge staircase or from the tops of its encircling walls the visitor to this "Court of Joyousness" will be enabled to witness the pageants that will be a feature of the exposition. The main tower of the court will contain a great pipe organ, with echo organs in the smaller towers; within the center of the court will be a basin containing groupings of classic statuary, dancing figures, fauns, satyrs and nymphs. Electric searchlights will play upon fountains at night. Tropical shrubs and flowers will contrast with the sterner effect of the colonnades, statuary and facades of the court. In its architecture the East Court, which will be among the main group of exhibit palaces, will resemble the oriental phase of the Spanish-Moorish architecture.

pect that your action deprives him of a very necessary revenue; and I understand, better than you do, to what lengths your cousin is capable of going when he is displeased. You are, by the law of your country, his ward until you marry. Would it not be better to submit to him in friendship, rather than to incur his enmity? After all, he is your next of kin, the head of your family, and a very powerful man. If we are going home at all, we ought to go now."

"But suppose we should decide not to go home at all?"

"You will have to go some time, dear child. You are all alone, except for me, and in the nature of things you can't have me always. Now that you are young, you think it an easy thing to break away from the ties of blood and birth; but believe me, it isn't easy. You, with your nature, could never do it. The call of the land is strong, and the time will come when you will long to go home, long to go back to the land where your father led his soldiers, and where your mother was admired and loved."

Madame Reynier paused and watched her niece, who, with eyes cast down, was toying with her spoon. Suddenly a crimson flush rose and spread over Melanie's cheeks and forehead and neck, and when she looked up into Madame Reynier's face, she was gazing through unshed tears. She rose quickly, came round to the older woman's chair and kissed her cheek affectionately.

"Dear Auntie, you are very good to me, and patient, too. It's all true, I suppose; but the prospect of home and Count Lorenzo together—ah, well!" she smiled reassuringly and again caressed Madame Reynier's gaunt old face. "I'll think it all over, Auntie dear."

Madame Reynier followed Melanie into her sitting-room, bringing the precious orchids in her two hands, fearful lest the fragile vase should fall. Melanie regarded them a moment, and then said she thought they would do better in the drawing-room.

"I sometimes think the little garden pink quite as pretty as an orchid."

"They aren't so much in Mr. Lloyd-Jones' style as these," replied Madame Reynier. She had a faculty of commenting pleasantly without the least hint of criticism. This remark delighted Melanie.

"No; I should never picture Mr. Lloyd-Jones as a garden pink. But then, Auntie, you remember how eloquent he was about the hills and the stars. That speech did not at all indicate a hothouse nature."

"Nevertheless, I think his sentiments have been cultivated, like his orchids."

"Not a bad achievement," said Melanie.

There was an interval of silence, while the younger woman stood looking out of the window and Madame Reynier cut the leaves of a French journal. She did not read, however, and presently she broke the silence "I don't remember that Mr. Van Camp ever sent orchids to you."

"Mr. Van Camp never gave me any kind of flower. He thinks flowers are the most intimate of all gifts, and should only be exchanged between sweethearts. At least, I heard him expound some such theory years ago, when we first knew him."

Madame smiled—a significant smile, if any one had been looking. Nothing further was said until Melanie unexpectedly shot straight to the mark with:

"How do you think he would do, Auntie, in place of Count Lorenzo?"

Madame Reynier showed no surprise. "He is a sterling man; but your cousin would never consent to it."

"And if I should not consult my cousin?"

"My dear Melanie, that would entail many embarrassing consequences; and embarrassments are worse than crimes."

Melanie could laugh at that, and did. "I've already answered a note from Mr. Van Camp this morning, Auntie. No, don't worry," she playfully answered a sudden anxious look that came upon her aunt's countenance. "I've not said 'yes' to him. But he's coming to see me at twelve. If I don't give him a chance to say what he has to say, he'll take one anywhere. He's capable of proposing on the street-cars. Besides, I have something else to say to him."

"Well, my dear, you know best; certainly I think you know best," was Madame Reynier's last word.

Mr. Van Camp arrived on the stroke of twelve, an expression of happiness on his lean, quizzical face.

"I'm supposed to be starting on a cruise," he told Melanie, "but luck is with me. My cousin hasn't turned up—or rather he turned up only to disappear instantly. Otherwise he would have dragged me off to catch the first ebb-tide, with me hanging back like an anchor-chain."

"Is your cousin, then, such a tyrant?"

"Oh, yes; he's a masterful man, is Jimmy."

"And how did he 'disappear instantly'? It sounds mysterious."

"It is mysterious, but Jim can take care of himself; at least, I hope he can. The message said he had sailed on the Jeanne D'Arc, whatever that is, and that I was to look after our hired yacht, the Sea Gull."

Melanie looked up, startled. "The Jeanne D'Arc, was it?" she cried. "Are you sure? But, of course—there must be many boats by that name, are there not? But did he say nothing more—where he was going, and why he changed his plans?"

"No, not a word more than that. Why? Do you know of a boat named the Jeanne D'Arc?"

"Yes, very well; but it can't matter. It must be another vessel, surely. Meanwhile, what are you going to do without your companion?"

Aleck rose from the slender gilt chair where, as usual, he had perched himself, walked to the window and thrust his hands into his pockets for a contemplative moment, then he turned and came to a stand directly

before Melanie, looking down on her with his quizzical, honest eyes.

"That depends, Melanie," he said slowly, "upon whether you are going to marry me or not."

For a second or two Melanie's eyes refused to lift; but Aleck's firm-plant-ed figure, his steady gaze, above all, his dominating will, forced her to look up. There he was, smiling, strong, big, kindly. Melanie started to smile, but for the second time that morning her eyes unexpectedly filled with tears.

"I can't talk to you towering over me like that," she said at last softly, her smile winning against the tears.

Aleck did not move. "I don't want you to 'talk to me about it; all I want is for you to say 'yes.'"

"But I'm not going to say 'yes,' at least, I don't think I am. Do sit down."

Aleck started straight for the gilt chair.

"Oh, no; not that! You are four times too big for that chair. Besides, it's quite valuable; it's a Louis Quinze."

Aleck indulged in a vicious kick at the ridiculous thing, picked up an enormous leather-bottomed chair made apparently of lead, and placed it jauntily almost beside Miss Reynier's chair, but facing the other way.

"This is much better, thank you," he said. "Now tell me why you think you are not going to say 'yes' to me."

Melanie's mood of softness had not left her; but sitting there, face to face with this man, face to face with his seriousness, his masculine will and strength, she felt that she had something yet to struggle for, some deep personal right to be acknowledged. It was with a dignity, an aloofness, that was quite real, yet very sweet, that she met this American lover. He had her hand in his firm grasp, but he was waiting for her to speak. He was giving her the hearing that was, in his opinion, her right.

"In the first place," Melanie began, "you ought to know more about me—who I am, and all that sort of thing. I am, in one sense, not at all what I seem to be; and that, in the case of marriage, is a dangerous thing."

"It is an important thing, at least. But I do know who you are; I knew long ago. Since you never referred to the matter, of course I never did. You are the Princess Auguste Stephanie of Krolvets, cousin of the present Duke Stephen, called King of Krolvets. You are even in line for the throne, though there are two or three lives between. You have incurred the displeasure of Duke Stephen and are practically an exile from your country."

"A voluntary exile," Melanie corrected.

"Voluntary only in the sense that you prefer exile to absolute submission to the duke. There is no alternative, if you return."

Melanie was silent. Aleck lifted the hand which he held, touched it gently with his lips and laid it back beside its fellow on Melanie's lap. Then he rose and lifted both hands before her, half in fun and half in earnestness, as if he were a courtier doing reverence to his queen.

"See, your Highness, how ready I am to do you homage! Only smile on the most devoted of your servants."

Melanie could not resist his gentle gaiety. It was as if they were two children playing at a story. Aleck, in such a mood as this, was as much fun as a dancing bear, and in five minutes more he had won peals of laughter from Melanie. It was what he wanted—to brighten her spirits. So presently he came back to the big chair, though he did not again take her hand.

"I knew you were titled and important, Melanie, and at first I thought that sealed my case entirely. But you seemed to forget your state, seemed not to care so very much about it; and perhaps that made me think it was possible for us both to forget it, or at least to ignore it. I haven't a gold throne to give you; but you're the only woman I've ever wanted to marry, and I wasn't going to give up the chance until you said so."

"Do you know also that if I marry out of my rank and without the consent of Duke Stephen, I shall forfeit all my fortune?"

"Cut off without a cent!" Aleck laughed, but presently paused, embarrassed for the first time since he had begun his plea. "I, you know, haven't millions, but there's a decent income, even for two. And then I can always go to work and earn something," he smiled at her, "giving information to a thirsty world about the gilt-slit, as you call it. It would be fun, earning money for you; I'd like to do it."

Melanie smiled back at him, but left her chair and wandered uneasily about the room, as if turning a difficult matter over in her mind. Aleck stood by, watching. Presently she returned to her chair, pushed him gently back into his seat and dropped down beside him. Before she spoke, she touched her fingers lightly, almost lovingly, along the blue veins of his big hand lying on the arm of the chair. The hand turned, like a magnet spring, and imprisoned hers.

"No, dear friend, not yet," said Melanie, drawing away her hand, yet not very quickly, after all. "There is much yet to say to you, and I have been wondering how to say it, but I shall do it now. Like the heroes in the novels," she smiled again, "I am going to tell you the story of my life."

"Good!" said Aleck. "All ready for chapter one. But your maid wants you at the door."

"Go away, Sophie," said Melanie. "Serve luncheon to Madame Reynier alone. I shall wait; and you'll have

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Baptist Church

Baptist Sunday School, 9:30 a. m. C. E. Lightfoot, Superintendent. Prayer Meeting Wednesday, 7:30 p. m. Baptist Aid Society meets Monday after Second Sunday, every month. Mrs. A. R. Skillman, President. Preaching every Sunday at 11:00 a. m., and 7:30 p. m. Rev. E. O. Cottrell, Pastor. Choir practice every Wednesday night after prayer meeting.

Methodist Church

Methodist Sunday School, 9:30 a. m. Ira D. Behen, Superintendent. Preaching every Sunday at 11 a. m., and 7:30 p. m. Rev. J. H. Walker, Pastor. Prayer meeting Wednesday, 7:30 p. m. Epworth League, regular service Sunday, 4-5 p. m.; business meeting first Tuesday night each month. Miss Margaret Burn, President. Ladies' Aid society meets first Monday each month. Mrs. Forrest Lightfoot, President. Ladies' Missionary Society meets Second Sunday in every month. Mrs. Virgil Hubbard, President. Choir practice Friday night, 7:30 a. H. Murray, Director.

Presbyterian Church

Presbyterian Sunday School 9:45 a. m.—Central Street. Superintendent, Preaching every Third Sunday. Rev. Adair, Minister. Prayer meeting Tuesday, 7:30 p. m. Ladies' Aid Society meets Wednesday after Third Sunday every month. Mrs. Chas. Satterfield, President.

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First Sunday of each month, Mass, Sermon, and Benediction, 9:00 a. m., other three Sundays at 10:15 a. m. On week days Mass at 7:00 a. m. Catechetical instruction for the children on Saturdays at 5:30 a. m., and on Sundays at 9:30 a. m. and 2:30 p. m.

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