



A Forced Lead.
ANNIE ELIOT TRUMBULL.
(Copyright, 1893, by the Author.)
HERE were only three people in the room beside the whist players—the old gentleman who sat in the corner of the room and was always reading, and Julia McCullough and young Stevens, who were in another corner, half shielded by the Japanese screen. Of the card players one was old Mr. McCullough, to whom whist was the business of life. A second was old Mrs. McCullough, who played excellently, but never could be utterly deaf to the claims of the outside world. The third was Mr. Richmond, a successful lawyer, something over fifty, with closely-cut iron gray hair, quick, keen eyes, a manner which very likely had been nervous, but was now only incisive, and an utterly absorbed attention to the matter in hand. People said Richmond had had a disappointment in love, which had kept him a bachelor and perhaps encouraged the habit of absorption—a fact which caused Julia McCullough and young Stevens to regard him with deep and respectful sympathy. The fourth player was old Mr. McCullough's partner, and just at present she gazed under such a cloud of disapproval that it would have been a relief to have escaped notice altogether. She was a silent, smooth, unassertive, unmarried woman, whose game Mr. McCullough had trained, trimmed and pruned, in season and out of season, until, as a matter of self-preservation, she learned to play better than he.

But it was owing to her that Mr. McCullough now figured in his chair and glared at a nine-spot as if each club on its surface were a weapon of assassination. It was but eight o'clock in the evening, and she was playing only till the stage came to take her to the train on which she was to leave—break up the game and leave. No wonder that Mr. McCullough was almost speechless with rage. No wonder that Mrs. McCullough fatally wandered, so that she mistook a knave for a king and pulled in her opponent's trick. Even Mr. Richmond, who scarcely knew how Miss Selwyn looked, so rarely he raised his eyes from the table, felt that her conduct was injurious.

"May I be permitted to inquire, Charlotte," asked Mr. McCullough, in an awful voice, "since when a knave has been advanced to the distinction of taking a king of the same suit?" "Gracious!" admitted Mrs. McCullough, pushing the cards to Miss Selwyn, who was so cowed by the universal disapproval that she received them as a free gift.

"Of course it is impossible to be even decently attentive in the midst of such willful disturbance," remarked Mr. McCullough.

"If it were not a case of illness"—began Miss Selwyn, apologetically.

"People have no business to be ill," snapped Mr. McCullough.

"Do you suppose Susan will be able to get there, too?" asked Mrs. McCullough.

"I hope so," returned Miss Selwyn.

"Come, come, Charlotte!" exclaimed Mr. McCullough; "for heaven's sake let us play while we can!"

Julia McCullough and young Stevens were talking in low tones behind the screen.

"Did you really pin it up?" asked Julia, with apprehensive pleasure.

"I really did," returned young Stevens, "in the hall. I knew how strained the situation would be to-night, and as it is my last evening I wanted it to be peaceful. They might have asked one of us to take a hand."

"I wouldn't have done it," said Julia, firmly.

"Yes, you would, you poor lamb, or I would have taken your place and lost my temper. I can get along with your uncle anywhere but at the whist table."

One of the hotel servants came to the door—the stage was leaving. Miss Selwyn rose, looking ready to cry. The cards had just been dealt.

"I am very sorry," she said.

"Sorry!" growled Mr. McCullough; "we may have to play with a dummy!"

"There isn't a soul in the house that can play," sighed Mrs. McCullough. Richmond rose to go with Miss Selwyn to the door.

He put her in the carriage and returned. Not a word had been spoken. He walked restlessly to a book-case and read the titles. The old man in the corner buried himself deeper in his pages; the young girl and her companion became more involved in winding worsted. Mrs. McCullough sorted her hand mechanically. Mr. McCullough drummed on the table and looked ready to burst with rage. It was as if nature were preparing for a cataclysm.

Suddenly they all, except the reader, looked up. A woman stood in the doorway—a fine-looking though not a young woman. Her gray hair rose straight from her handsome forehead; her clear complexion was a little flushed, but she spoke with perfect self-possession.

"I saw the notice pinned up in the hall," she said. "I am a good whist player. Would you like to have me make up the hand?"

Young Stevens rose with a side glance at Julia, who looked a little scared.

"Pinned up in the hall?" repeated old Mr. McCullough doubtfully.

"Yes," she said distinctly, with a swift glance that took in all the occupants of the room; "the notice saying that there were three whist players in the east card room who wanted a fourth at a quarter past eight. Only good players need apply."

Richmond glanced at the young man with a certain severity, behind which

was a gleam of amusement, and came toward the card table.

"I—" began young Stevens; but it was old Mrs. McCullough who settled the matter.

"Well," she interrupted, "do come and sit down. I'm sure I don't know how you got here, but we're glad enough to see you. I'll play with Mr. McCullough because I am used to him. You can play with my partner."

"We're wasting a lot of precious time," said Mr. McCullough, and the handsome woman came forward from the doorway and picked up the cards that lay at her place.

Richmond seated himself opposite and for ten minutes not a word was spoken. She did play well—one of those intelligent, pliable games which show science, memory and comprehension. Richmond was delighted with her. If at a critical point he planned a brilliant stroke she caught his intention instantly and cooperated. He was not curious concerning her personally; he had barely looked at her; she was simply his skillful comrade. It was her deal, and as she picked up the cards she shuffled them once. Richmond's eyes were on her fingers and he started a little. She mixed the cards by an odd bit of manipulation. He had never seen but one other person do it. The next time he watched her; then he glanced from her fingers to her face in sudden, sharp inquiry. Her eyes were on his; they wore a look that might have been triumph. The game went on. The low tones of the young people were almost whispers.

"If you had that ace you were a long time playing it, Charlotte," said Mr. McCullough at the end of a hand.

"One doesn't win by being in a hurry," she answered easily.

"No," said the stranger, speaking for almost the first time, "one does not."

The words were simple, but to Richmond's ear they were emphatic. He looked at her with a certain air of suspense, and again she met his look. Another hand was played.

"You did it that time," said Richmond at the end of it, as he scored three tricks.

"Yes," said she, smiling. "I thought it was time I took matters into my own hands."

He turned a little pale and dealt the cards with his eyes on her face. The evening slipped on; the game was close and interesting.

"That play of yours was an unusual one," said Richmond, "but successful."

"Yes," she answered, slowly; "I broke all rules to do it. It was a forced lead, but there seemed nothing else to do."

There were bright red spots in her cheeks, and she held her handsome head very high as she spoke. He laid down his cards as if to stop playing; then—

"I saved the game," he said, concisely, as he picked them up again.

"I thought you had that queen, Charlotte," said Mr. McCullough, in ireful reproach, "from the way you played before."

"It is dangerous to draw inferences," said Richmond quickly, looking across the table.

"Not usually," she answered, lightly, "if one knows one's partner."

At ten o'clock Richmond, instead of taking up the hand she had just dealt him, put both his arms on the table

and leaned across it. Mrs. McCullough looked as if the skies would fall, and Mr. McCullough said: "Come! come!" Richmond heeded neither of them.

"Will you tell me why you played as you did?" he asked, with sudden sternness. His partner looked at him and her eyes fell for a moment. Then, with her first full composure, she answered:

"It has taken me a long time to return your lead; but I found, soon enough, that it was from what is my strongest suit as well."

"Come, come!" said Mr. McCullough; "a great deal of talk about a hand that is past and gone. Pick up your cards, man!"

Instead of doing so Richmond stood up. The young people stopped talking, and even the reading old man laid down his book.

"Is your name still Frances Edingham?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, rising too.

"Have you come back to me?"

"Yes," she said again.

"I have waited a long time," he went on.

"Yes." There was a pause.

"Will you come with me into the parlor across the hall and let me speak to you?"

She bowed, and tossing down her cards she passed out of the room and he followed her.

If Mrs. McCullough had ever allowed profanity in her presence she might have had to listen to it then. For several moments Mr. McCullough found nothing appropriate in his vocabulary.

"Are we never going to have a decent game of whist?" he thundered at last.

Little Mabel—"Mamma, don't you think I can teach Edie to talk?"

Mamma—"No, dear; what made you think you could?" Little Mabel—"Well, when I gave him his dinner he growled just like you say papa does when his meal doesn't please him."—Inter Ocean.

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