

THE STORY OF A SOCIETY GIRL

IN WHICH BARON DE BERENZIG, AGGRESSIVELY LAYING SIEGE TO THE HEROINE, DRAMATICALLY COMES OUT IN HIS TRUE COLORS.

THE night of the baron's declaration was one of the rare occasions when I looked forward impatiently to an interview with my mother. I felt it was sure to be illuminating, if not a revelation. All through the evening—after that terrible moment in the automobile—I had assiduously avoided baron de Berenzig, not alone because I couldn't bear the thought of being with him, but to contradict whatever stories Perry Willing's ready tongue would not fail to circulate. I knew he had been a witness of the scene in the motor and was in mortal fear of his misinterpretation of it.

"Mother," I managed to whisper, as we were being helped into our wraps, "don't ask the baron to come with us."

She raised her eyebrows, adjusting an expression of mild surprise.

"If you do," I added, desperately, "I'll refuse to ride with him. I'll ask Nella to take me home."

"And make a scene?" inquired my mother, contemptuously. "You've hardly come to so sorry a pass, my dear."

I turned away, miserably conscious that she was right; that I should never have the courage to fling myself thus openly before the Juggernaut of Gossip. But I might have been happier braving the wheels of the monster then and there than to subject myself, as I did, to all that followed.

Baron de Berenzig joined us, as a matter of course, as we stepped from the little electric elevator, and at once bent over my mother's hand, expressing his pleasure that her slight indisposition of the early evening had not prevented her attendance. It seemed to me he must have had an opportunity to do that before the moment of departure, but from my mother's greeting they appeared not to have met before.

I shrank from his touch as he helped me into the motor, yet my mother made a place for him beside her with an "Of course you're coming with us," and smiled invitingly.

He stepped in and I turned, staring out into the night, my lips set hard to control the tears that threatened to deluge me. When we reached home I went straight to my room and gave them their way, determined at least that my mother should not know of my weakness. I had not spoken a word on the way and had felt the wrath gathering under her cool brow at my hasty "good night" as baron de Berenzig helped me from the motor. I knew I must meet her on her own ground, and of one thing I was firmly convinced, my rage was quite equal to hers.

My sympathetic little maid helped me into a dressing gown, patting my shoulder meanwhile and pleading that she be allowed to bathe my head in eau de cologne. But I told her she need not wait up for me—I was quite prepared to spend the remainder of the hours until breakfast in my mother's boudoir.

I received no answer to my knock, and when I entered found the room vacant, though the logs flaming under the marble mantel and the big chair pulled close to the table indicated that an occupant was expected.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

I had intended entering the field of battle with my mother's own weapons at hand—coolness and exquisite sarcasm. But as I paced up and down while the clock ticked away long moments that seemed drawn out expressly to tantalize me, I reviewed her part in the affair, and by the time the swish of her gown announced her coming I was keyed up to my natural inclination to go straight to the point with neither stratagem nor subterfuge.

I faced her with eyes blazing the wrath I had been strangling all evening.

"If any one had told me," I cried, "that you would deliberately plot to subject me to the insults of a scoundrel I should have branded the statement a lie. It seems a role too impossible even for the most unnatural mother to play."

My mother's brow remained unwrinkled, but her eyes narrowed. She settled into a chair and drew a scarf about her shoulders. "I am not 'playing a role' as you seem inclined to do on every possible occasion," she answered, calmly. "I neither revel in tragedies, nor am I at home acting the fool. I leave both of these for my daughter."

I sat down on the very edge of the divan, leaning forward. "Well, she has finished playing the fool," I flung out, "once and for all. That's what I've come to tell you. I refuse to be either a puppet or a pawn in whatever game you and baron de Berenzig seem to have planned."

"So now it's a game. Really, my dear child," my mother shrugged, "your metaphors of the street are confusing, not to say disagreeable. Suppose we deal in facts instead of figures."

I rose and began pacing the room again. "Suppose we do," I agreed, stopping before my mother's chair. "Well, then, I know that you purposely invited the baron to join us this evening, that your headache was a ruse to leave us alone, and that in spite of the hazardous position in which he might have placed us both last winter you have made yourself a party to his designs, whatever they may be."

"Do you mean to say—a look of real astonishment sped across my mother's face. "Didn't he tell you he had divorced his wife?"

"Quite so! And that now there was no encumbrance in the way of marrying me. He ought to be living in Utah—it would be more convenient for him. As if I were a thing, a creature of neither brains, soul nor backbone!"

"Which is just what you are proving yourself to be," my mother roused herself. "Any one who shows herself as incapacitated as you did tonight—as you are doing now—must not be left alone to make an idiot and laughingstock of herself. Last year you would have welcomed the chance to marry baron de Berenzig."

"And this year," I interrupted hotly, "there is no human being more distasteful to me."

"Simply because he pays you the compliment of divorcing his wife. Really, I don't know what you want. You're not worthy of him."

"I'll tell you this," I blazed forth, "I don't want a trickster with an adjustable cloak of morals nor a male thing in the latest cut of trousers. And I don't intend to have either or a combination of both thrust upon me. For months I've been trying to adapt myself to a code of honor that seems to be principally a lack of it. I've done my best to be untrue to myself and to everybody else—and I've been miserable. There may be something radically wrong—or radi-



"MOST BEAUTIFUL ONE!" HE BREATHED INTO MY EAR.

cally right—with me. But I shan't give myself to a marriage of convenience or inconvenience, nor will I submit to persecution at the hands of a reprobate, even though my own mother's point of view permits her to constitute herself his chief ally."

PROMISE TO THE BARON

"Which is precisely her intention!" My mother's eyes were steel against the flint of mine, and I knew by the sparks flashing from them that it was to be war between us, with no hope of arbitration. "I shall do everything in my power to further this affair—as I promised baron de Berenzig this afternoon. It is the best thing in the world that could happen to you—any one with a suggestion of sense would realize it. We shall see who is the stronger. There will be more than one story of an engagement, and I don't mind informing you that many of them will emanate from me. You may deny them if you wish—you know very well that will be fuel to the flame. You will be flung constantly together, and I haven't a doubt he can prove himself quite as fascinating now that he is free as he was a year ago when he had a wife of whom you knew nothing. Really, in spite of the 'perverted principles' with which you see fit to credit me I fail to understand or appreciate all this vulgar fuss."

"What you evidently fail to understand," was my final shot, for I felt that tears were imminent, "is that I've a sense of justice that can rebel and a heart that doesn't seem to have been left out of my makeup. What I can't understand," I added, turning in the doorway, "is why children are brought into the world if parents have no other plan than to make them suffer."

My mother rose with a bored air of dismissal. "It is rather too late for a talk on either sociology or psychology. Tomorrow if you choose."

"Tomorrow—I shall be quite prepared to stand alone," I burst out. "It seems the only course left to me."

Nevertheless, in spite of my defiance, I was desperately afraid of the power my mother held. I knew she would have her plan of warfare completely mapped out, and couldn't help but realize that I should experience some difficulty attempting to cope with it. I was ready, however, to use extreme measures if necessary to circumvent her. The battle between the new recruit and an old campaigner was bound to be unequal, but I studied some of her methods of the past and arranged my moves accordingly. First of all, I apparently ceased all actual combat and waited patiently until the beat of the drum should call me to arms.

I heard its rattle the night of a dinner party to a select few given by my mother, when I was flung upon baron de Berenzig's arm with the obvious intention of being kept there all evening. For three long hours I was inwardly at white heat and outwardly cool, while the baron seized his opportunity to bend over me with an intimate little air of tenderness that caused an expectant murmur to float about the table. I did not fail to notice that my mother's guests were all of the type calculated to carry news with remarkable rapidity and was by no means unprepared for the stealthy arm that slid through mine directly the signal was given that relieved me for a time of my Nemesis.

"Felicitations," breathed Evelyn Taghern-Steward into my attentive ear. "I have been looking forward to this for aeons, my dear."

"I didn't know the cards had been out that long," I remarked, innocently. "Besides, it's just an ordinary, indifferent sort of a dinner party, with nothing exciting but bridge to happen afterward. I do hope you've brought a purse as generous as your heart."

Evelyn wrapped her long black train about her feet

as she sank into a chair and looked at me through her long, black—extraordinarily black—lashes. "Mechante!" she trilled, with an accent that must have caused her Parisian banker to capitulate completely. "You know what I mean. Is it to be in church or at home—and when? There's always such a disgusting lot of difficulty about arranging these foreign affairs."

"Foreign affairs do not in the least concern me," and I felt my eyes flash in spite of myself. "It seems to me you always pay more for them than they're worth and then you don't even get the interest on your money."

Evelyn's eyes gave a sidewise glint. "Oh, then the picturesque little tableau Perry witnessed, in a motor outside the Stevie Craigs, represented voluntary contribution on your part without any hope of returns?"

"What tableau?" I asked, with a play at puzzled indifference. "One meets them in every nook and corner."

"Quite right!" laughed Evelyn, and raised her liquor glass, twirling it meditatively until the insidious, oily green within glistened like her eyes. "And this one was in the extreme corner of a motor brougham, calculated to be well out of range of prying eyes. There were, I believe, a man and a girl!"

"What an extraordinary combination!" I ejaculated. "Of course, the girl was proposing to the man. Or, it's just possible he was proposing to her, and the prying eyes didn't trouble to wait and see whether he was accepted or not. Probably, according to their distorted point of view, the girl was in the man's arms before the motor came to a stop. I've known people to break up a home before there was even a sign of the walls caving in."

"Methinks," sighed Evelyn, moistening the tip of her tongue with the liqueur, "methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"She doth protest," I flashed, indignantly, forgetting that I had pledged myself to the strategies of war, "against being forced into a man's arms against her will!"

"She seemed willing enough to stay there," Evelyn addressed herself to the liqueur glass, "that night in the motor."

Ah—so I had been right! I had known that if Perry Willing caught only a glimpse of me during the moment the baron held my rebellious hand in his I should by the time the story had gone the final rounds be clasped in the baron's arms, and it wouldn't have surprised me in the least if he had been seen kissing me. Fortunately, it appeared that I had merely ended in his arms, with no further embellishments.

"I wish, my dear," I said, assuming a composure I was far from feeling, "you'd give me a verbal diagram of the juxtaposition. You see, knowing nothing of the affair and having apparently been one of the principal actors, it may be well for me to be posted on details."

THE COMPACT WITH CARLEY

"Ah?" The baron sent a tender smile in my direction. "A picture not meant for the eyes of the world, perhaps. I know of many such. Think of the numbers locked in churches and convents, hidden behind altars, sacrificed to religion and lost to those who could so well have enjoyed them."

"This one should have been destroyed before it was made," I could feel my voice shaking, "and I shall

do my best now to repair the neglect. It is not too late, I am sure."

And then I made the most idiotic, or I should say one of the most idiotic, moves of my limited career. I motioned to Carley Deane, who was coming toward us, and reminded him and myself of some old sporting prints I'd promised to show him, bought recently at auction by my brother Dick.

"They're in the library," I said, rising. "I know Evelyn, you'll pardon me and let Dr. de Berenzig take care of you for a while."

I flattered myself as I trailed out that the eyes of the entire room had seen me abruptly leave a moment after the baron joined us, but I forgot one thing, that I was leaving him alone with Evelyn Taghern-Steward, and that he was quite as clever as I, if not more so.

When we reached the library I sank into a huge armchair, my head flung back against its broad, warm expanse, and closed my eyes. "Carley," I managed to breathe, "don't talk to me for three whole minutes. If you do, I shall—cry."

The dear boy turned away sympathetically. For a time there was a blessed silence while I prayed for courage to face the cannon and carry on the fight as begun. I felt sure that my mother, too, had been given an embellished description of that moment in the motor and that it would prove an added weapon in her hands.

"Carley," I blurted at last, opening my eyes to see him in a far corner of the room, his face turned from me, busily lighting a cigarette, "you're known as a 'good fellow' and I've always tried to be one. Are you willing to take a 'sporting chance' for me? I've got to take a fighting one."

"My dear little girl," he said, flinging away the cigarette in his hand, and then proceeding to light another as he came toward me, "what's the mess? I've never seen you so upset."

"That's part of the sporting chance, Carley," I said, "you mustn't ask questions. You must just come into this thing blindly, as if—as if you were betting on a horse that wasn't a favorite."

"Then I can't bet on you," he laughed, "cause you are one."

"I want to play at being one—yours!" I exploded, taking my courage in both hands and holding it tight. "I want you to play at being my devoted—to save my life. It will be just for a few months and then only in company," I added, hastily.

"Where's the fun," Carley asked, "with a disappointed air, "if it's not to be all the time?"

ENTER THE BARON

"Please," I pleaded, "it's not a laughing matter. I'm serious—I must be—and I'm asking you to do this for me because I'm desperate. I've had to turn to some one and you seemed—"

Carley stretched out his wiry hand and caught mine in a tingling grip. "Done!" he exclaimed. "And don't let's talk any more about it. Let's act and I'll show you what a good sport I can be. Now, how about those prints?"

fore either of us had a chance to protest. I dropped into my chair again. It was just as well that my inevitable interview with the baron be over as soon as possible. He leaned back against the library table, studying me leisurely in that discomforting foreign way, that may be interpreted as meaning almost anything—or everything. When his eyes finally reached the rose in my hair he bent down closer, closer, and of a sudden caught up my hand that rested on the arm of the chair.

"Most beautiful one!" he breathed into my ear. I snatched away my hand.

"I do not care for a repetition of the scene in the motor, baron de Berenzig, whatever may be its advantage to you. You seem intent upon forcing me into a position."

"There is but one position it is my intention to have you assume, and you know what that is," he interrupted.

"The same in which you intended to place me last winter?" I flung at him.

"Quite the same, dear little lady, that of my—wife." He lingered tenderly on the word. "I wanted you for that, though you will not yet recognize it, from the first moment."

"Just a little bit more, in fact, than you wanted the wife with whom you were already burdened," I put in. "What an exquisite sense of responsibility! And may I ask whether you decided at once to push her gently to one side in my favor?"

"Helas," sighed the baron, "I am never practical. I did not think of anything, or of any one—but you—until the countess made me know my false position."

"Yours!" I exclaimed. "I don't suppose mine was of any consequence?"

"Your charming mother spoke only of my injustice to myself," she smiled, remorselessly, "when she and I considered the advisability of a divorce before I went away last spring."

"My mother and you!" I sat erect, intense, scarcely believing I could have heard aright. "Considered"—The enormity of my undertaking in pitting myself against a woman as resourceful as my mother flashed suddenly upon me. "Do you mean—do you dare to tell me that my mother knew of this disgraceful plan of yours?"

HIS TALE OF DEVOTION

"Dear lady of mine, would it not have been a far greater disgrace to remain the husband of another when it was you I loved, you I desired—more than life?"

He was behind my chair and had drawn my rigid figure against its back before I could resist. His fingers seared me like fire and I struggled to free myself. "Can you not understand what it is to love as I love you?" His head was bent over mine and his breath on my face stifled me. I wanted to shriek, to cry out for relief. "What does the world—what does life itself matter—when every thought, every breath, every burning fire of you?"

"Baron de Berenzig," I interrupted, half strangling myself to utter the words calmly, "I am not interested in a minute account of the processes of your emotions. Will you kindly release me?"

"I shall not (his grip on my shoulders tightened) until you hear me. Last winter you would have listened. You would have loved me as I desired. Your mother admitted to me your tears, your heart-break when you discovered I was already married—I remembered that first interview with my mother and the tears of chagrin I had shed with no thought of the baron as either man or lover, and rage at the injustice of it all again shocked me. "It was for that I went abroad," he went on, "for that I divorced the woman for whom I had long since ceased to care, who no longer understood or sympathized with me."

"Who is to be congratulated," I interpolated, "as the one gainer in the affair?"

But he continued, unheeding. "Do you suppose that now I mean to release you—to sacrifice my love?"

"You desecrate the name!" I cried. "If I were to consent to marry you now, providing you would waive the million or two of dowry necessary, I've no doubt, to repair that impractical bent you deplore, how would you receive me?"

"With arms open wide," he whispered, his lips almost touching my ear, "then closed to hold you tight, tight!"

"A prisoner against my will—as you, have me now—to be released when ransom had been paid?"

"You choose to laugh." He came around in front of me and I sighed with relief, shrugging my shoulders—rid them of the impress of his contact. "Quite so! We shall see then!"

I had looked up, intending to defy him, but mockery dropped from me as I found myself gazing into a face that had lost all ease of contour and with its sharp cheek bones and high bridged nose had taken on the look of a satyr.

"A year ago," he rushed on, "you were willing to accept my love and I was a married man. How do you think the world would look upon that? Do you think, perhaps, it would believe you were unaware of the fact? That is not the world—yours and mine. No, it will choose rather to accept the interpretation I mean to give it—that you knew I was not free, you accepted my devotion, permitted your name to be linked with mine, and that with me it was just an amusing game—a play. Brand yourself so, if you will, but I warn you the mark will burn deep and you shall suffer."

I started to my feet, though I felt like a dead thing, unable to stand upon them. "You couldn't!" I cried.

"I could not?" He peered into my face. "You know only your American love—flat, colorless as water. I shall show you what love means to my blood. Give your life to me, and in return you shall have happiness. No one but ourselves need ever know of the world on this side of the ocean. Yet if you refuse it is entirely possible that your friends may become aware of her existence. You will know what they will say." And then a delicate shrug, an uplift of the eyebrows and a smile that spoke volumes.

I sank back into my chair, shuddering. I knew how right he was, and my blood went icy at thought of what his suggestion meant. I might have been a rabbit caught in the coils of a boa constrictor—it didn't matter much whether the latter represented the world or the baron. I was bound, it seemed, to be crushed either way. Yet I struggled to laugh through the tears that drowned my voice, remembering my resolution to exhaust all the strategies of war before surrendering. I had known when I planned it all how terribly difficult it was going to be.

"If you really loved me, as you say—you do," I succeeded in gasping at last, "you would try to win me, not frighten me into accepting you. American girls are not like the foreign—they can not be subjugated by threats. Whatever my summing up of you and your deception last winter, I had at least judged you a gentleman, not a coward."

My thrust told. He came to my side and leaned over me, his voice softened somewhat. "Then you will give me the opportunity to try? It is all I ask—for the present."

Trembling—and fearful—I thought it best to submit to temporary arbitration. I met his eye, a poor effort at challenge in my own, yet even then the man repelled me.

"Providing you do not attempt to seize it too openly, as you have tonight," I warned. "I will not be coerced. I would—I would fight first to the last drop of blood in me."

I rose, though I had surreptitiously grasped the chair to steady myself, and, drawing up, measured him as he had me.

The baron's eyes shone. "It is so I love you best!" he exclaimed.

But I felt that in one moment more my poised would collapse on its weak foundation, and I decided revealing the fear that held me.

"I rather think," I suggested, "we have stayed away from the others quite long enough. Will you take me back to them?"

(Continued Next Sunday.)