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MILLER**

LANCASTER'S CHOICE

Alex. McVeigh Miller
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Mrs. Alex. McVeigh Miller

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CHAPTER I

Old Lady Lancaster had twenty thousand pounds a year of her own. She had brought that much dower when she came to her husband, the late Lord Lancaster, and now, when he was dead, and she a childless widow, she was like the Martha of Holy Writ—she was troubled over many things.

The possession of great wealth usually entails trouble, it is said, and Lady Lancaster's case was no exception to the rule. The greatest anxiety she had was that she could not decide what she would do with her fortune when she died. She was eighty years old, and although she did not want to die, she knew that she would have to do so some day, and she wanted to make her will before that grewsome event.

The title and estates of Lancaster had descended to the late lord's nephew, young Clive Lancaster. It was but a barren honor, after all, for there was no money to support the dignity of the position. The deceased incumbent had been a spendthrift, and so had his father before him. They had dissipated all the property that was not strictly entailed with the title, and the present heir had little to live on except his pay as a captain in the army,

where he still remained after his accession to the title, while at his express wish and desire Lady Lancaster still reigned lady paramount at his ancestral home, and kept up its wonted dignity and state. She said she should leave all her money to Captain Lancaster if he married to please her. If not—and she shook her gray head ominously, not to say viciously, at this point, and remained silent.

Lancaster Park was one of the loveliest places in Devonshire, as Devonshire is one of the loveliest counties in England. It seemed almost a pity that the young lord could not afford to marry and bring home a beautiful bride to grace his stately home. No one doubted but that when the time came he would espouse the bride his aunt selected for him. It would be folly, it would be madness, if he refused. No one supposed that the handsome young soldier could be capable of such rashness. He did not dream of anything but obedience himself. He only hoped that it would be a very pretty girl whom his aunt chose for him, and also that the matrimonial hour was yet in the dim distance. He was only five-and-twenty, and he did not care to surrender his bachelor freedom yet. He was amazed and confounded, therefore, when in a year after his uncle's death Lady Lancaster sent him one of her characteristic letters—short and to the point:

"My dear Clive"—she wrote—"try and get leave to come down to Lancaster Park for a month or so this fall. I have invited a lot of people for that time, among them the girl I have chosen for you. Do not fail me. Delays are dangerous."

It was rather a command than a request, and the last words sounded like a threat. The young lord-captain was taken by storm. His heart sunk to the bottom of his tall cavalry boots. He did not want to be married off-hand like that. He secretly rebelled against a forced surrender of his soldierly freedom, even though he gained twenty thousand pounds a year in exchange for it. He took counsel with his chum, young Harry De Vere, who was a soldier, too.

"I'm ower young to marry yet," he said. "How shall I outwit the old lady's designs upon me?"

"Come over to America with me," said Lieutenant De Vere. "I have leave of absence for six months. You can get it, too, by the asking. I am going over to the States to spend my holiday. I should be delighted to have you for a companion."

The idea took hold of Captain Lancaster's imagination immediately.

"I will go with you," he said. "I have always intended to make the tour of the United States, and if I do not go before I am married, it is not likely I shall do so afterward. I will write to my aunt to postpone her matrimonial designs a little while longer."

He wrote to Lady Lancaster that he was very sorry indeed to disappoint her, but that he had made a most positive engagement to go over to the States next month with his friend Harry De Vere, and now the young fellow would not let him off, but as soon as they returned he should be at her ladyship's command, etc., etc.

Lady Lancaster was profoundly annoyed and chagrined at her

nephew's letter. She did not want to postpone the consummation of her favorite scheme. But she wisely concluded to bear with the inevitable this time. She wrote to the truant lord that she would excuse him this once, but that he must be ready to fall in with her plans next time, or it might be worse for him. Her fortune was not likely to go a-begging for an owner.

CHAPTER II

Captain Lancaster got leave and went off in triumph with Lieutenant De Vere to the United States. When he had put the ocean between himself and his match-making relative, he breathed more freely.

"I can count on one year more of single blessedness now, I hope," he said. "I do not suppose my aunt will try to have me married off by a cablegram or a telephone while I am absent."

De Vere laughed at his friend's self-congratulations.

"I never saw any one so unwilling to accept a fortune before," he said.

"It is not the fortune I object to—it is the incumbrance I must take with it," replied Captain Lancaster.

"Should a wife be regarded as an incumbrance?" inquired the other, with a smile.

"That would depend upon whether she were one's own choice or somebody else's. I can not imagine old Lady Lancaster selecting an ideal wife for me."

"All the same you will accept the one she provides for you. It would be madness indeed to refuse," said his friend.

"Well, well, we will not discuss it. May the evil day be yet far off," responded Lancaster, fervently.

Woe unto him if her ladyship, far away under English skies, could have heard his regrets, or have known that he had taken

his trip solely to stave off the evil day of his marriage, as he so considered it. She was vexed over it. While she deemed it an accident, she would have been furiously angry could she have known it to have been design. At home she was eating her heart out with impatience and vexation, and eagerly counting the weeks and months as they rolled away, thinking that each one brought her nearer to his return and to the accomplishment of her cherished scheme.

The months glided by, and at length the winter was past and spring was at hand. It was April—that tender, timid month, with its violets and daisies. Lady Lancaster's heart beat more lightly. She had had a recent letter from the traveler. He wrote that he would be at home by the first of June. She began to lay her plans accordingly. She would have a merry party at the Park to welcome him home, and he should make up his mind then. There was no time for delay.

She sent for the housekeeper to come to her immediately. She wanted to make all her arrangements at once, and she could do nothing without consulting Mrs. West, the model housekeeper who had ruled at Lancaster Park for sixteen years. My lady grew impatient while she sat in her great velvet arm-chair and waited for the woman's coming. Her small black eyes snapped crossly, she wriggled her lean, bent body in its stiff brocade, and the bony little hands, with the great jeweled rings hanging loosely upon them, grasped the jeweled serpent-head that topped her walking-cane with nervous energy as she gasped out, angrily: "Why don't

the woman come? How dare she keep me waiting?"

The door opened softly and Mrs. West entered just in time to catch the impatient exclamation—a very lady-like person indeed, in noiseless black silk, and a neat lace cap that surrounded a face only half as old as that of the lady of Lancaster Park.

"I am very sorry that I kept you waiting, my lady," she said, quietly.

Then Lady Lancaster looked up and saw an open letter in the housekeeper's hand, and the signs of inward disturbance on her usually unruffled countenance.

"You know that I hate to be kept waiting, West," she said, "and you are usually very prompt. But I see that something has happened this time, so I am ready to excuse your tardiness. What is it?"

"You are right, Lady Lancaster. Something *has* happened," said Mrs. West. She sunk down quietly, as she spoke, into the chair that her mistress indicated by a nod of her grim, unlovely head. "I have had a letter with bad news in. I shall be obliged to quit your service."

"Quit my service!" echoed Lady Lancaster, wildly. Her voice rose almost to a shriek, it was so full of dismay and anger.

"That was what I said, my lady," reiterated the housekeeper, deprecatingly.

Lady Lancaster regarded her in incredulous dismay a moment, then she burst out, sharply:

"But I say you shall do no such thing; I can not spare you, I

can not get on without you at all—that is, not without six months' warning to supply your place."

"A month is the usual time, Lady Lancaster," said the housekeeper, mildly; and then, as the old lady regarded her in speechless dismay, she added, quickly: "But I am sorry that I can not even give you a month's warning to supply my place, for I am obliged to leave you right away. I have a long journey to take. I must cross the ocean."

"Cross the ocean! Now, did I ever! Are you crazy, West?" demanded the old lady, wrathfully.

"I knew you would think so," said Mrs. West. "But if you will be kind enough to let me explain the circumstances, you mightn't think so hardly of me, Lady Lancaster."

"No circumstances could excuse your going off in this way," flashed Lady Lancaster. "There is Lord Lancaster coming home by the first of June, and of course I must invite a party to meet him; and there are the rooms, and—and—everything to be seen to. No one knows my ways and my wishes like you who have been at Lancaster Park so many years. Now, what am I to do?"

She lifted her wrinkled hands helplessly.

"There will have to be a new housekeeper found, of course," hazarded Mrs. West, timidly.

"Oh, yes; an ignorant creature who knows nothing, and who will have everything wrong, of course, just when I want all to be at its best," groaned the wizened old aristocrat. "I call this downright ungrateful in you, West, this going off just as we had

got used to each other's ways."

Mrs. West suppressed a struggling smile around the corners of her lips, and, rising up, stood respectfully before her hard mistress.

"My lady, I'm sorry you think so hard of me. Indeed, I would not leave you but for good cause," she said. "I had hoped and expected to spend all my days at Lancaster Park, but my duty calls me elsewhere. I assure you it is as hard for me as for you. Think how hard it is for me, a poor lone woman, to have to cross the ocean—at my time of life, too! And then to have to take a child to raise and spend all my earnings on—a child that's no kin to me, either, you understand, my lady!"

CHAPTER III

Lady Lancaster settled her gold-bowed spectacles on her long Roman nose, and fixed a keen, penetrating stare on the troubled face of her housekeeper.

"Whose child is it, and what is it all about, anyhow?" she sputtered, vaguely.

"It's my brother-in-law's child, and he's dead away off in New York somewhere, and the child's left to me—his penniless, friendless orphan child, left to me by the dead; and how could I refuse the charge, my lady?" inquired Mrs. West, reproachfully. "I should think the dead would come from his grave, away off yonder in America, to haunt me if I didn't do his bidding," cried she, glancing behind her with something like a shudder of superstitious fear.

"I didn't know you were simpleton enough to believe in ghosts, West," sniffed my lady, contemptuously. "And I didn't know you ever had a brother-in-law, either. Where has he been all these years?"

"If you will read this letter, Lady Lancaster, you will find out in fewer words than I can tell you," said Mrs. West, respectfully presenting her letter, which all this time she had been holding open in her hand.

My lady took the black-edged sheet into the grasp of her thin, bony hand, and ran her keen eyes down the written page.

"Dear Sister-in-Law"—it ran—"I know you've wondered many a time since I caught the gold fever and ran away to California, twenty years ago, what's become of the willful lad that you and John couldn't manage; although you tried so hard and so faithfully. I always meant to write to you some day, but I put it off from time to time in my hard, busy life, until now it's almost too late, and I seem to be writing to you from the borders of that other world where I've somehow heard my brother John went before me, and where I'm hastening now. For I'm dying, sister-in-law, and I'm quite sure that I shall be dead before this comes to your hand. Well, I've had ups and downs in this life, sister Lucy—good luck and ill luck—and now I'm dying I have one great care upon my mind. I'm leaving my little girl, my pretty Leonora—named so for her mother, who died when her baby was born—all alone in the cold, hard world. She is friendless, for we've led such a roving life once she was born that we have made no friends to aid us now in our extremity. Dear sister-in-law, you were always a good woman. You tried to do your duty by the wayward orphan boy who has so poorly repaid your care. Will you be kinder still? Will you come to America and take my child for your own? Will you give her a mother's love and care? Remember, she is friendless and forsaken in the world, without a living relative. What would become of her if you refused my dying prayer? I inclose a card with our New York address upon it. She will wait there after I am dead until you come for her. I feel sure that you will come; you will not disregard my dying wish and request. Forgive me all my ingratitude and

thoughtlessness, sister Lucy, and be a mother to my darling little Leo when I am no more.

"Your dying brother,

"Richard West."

The letter rustled in Lady Lancaster's nervous grasp. She looked up thoughtfully at the patient, waiting woman.

"I could not refuse such a prayer as that, could I, my lady?" she asked, wistfully. "You see, he was my husband's only brother—poor, handsome, willful Dick. His parents were both dead, and he had only me and John, my husband. He was restless and ambitious. He ran away and left a letter that he should go to California and seek his fortune. From that day to this, never a word has been heard of Dick. And now he's dead—not so old, either; only in the prime of life—and he's left me his little girl. She will be a trouble, I know. I must give up my quiet, peaceful home here and make a new home for the child somewhere. But I can not refuse. I dare not, for John's and Dick's sake. I must go to America and get the child. I can not do less than he asked me. He was always restless, poor Dick. He could not stay in his grave if I refused his dying prayer."

CHAPTER IV

Lady Lancaster, filled with chagrin and despair, sat gazing on the floor in silence. The thought of losing this trusty, capable woman, who had belonged to the staff of Lancaster Park so long, was most annoying to her. It had come upon her with all the suddenness of a calamity. She viewed it as nothing less.

She was an old woman, and she disliked exceedingly to have new faces around her. Under Mrs. West's efficient *régime* the affairs of the house had gone on with the precision and regularity of clock-work. It would take a new woman years to attain to her proficiency. She had grown to regard the good housekeeper almost as her own property—a piece of her personal goods and chattels. She could not help being angry at the thought of losing her.

"It is too bad," she blurted out, indignantly. "Why do folks go and die like that, and leave their wretched brats on other people's hands."

A faint color crept into Mrs. West's comely face at the scornful words.

"My lady, it's the will of God," she said, in her quiet, deprecating way.

"I don't believe God has anything to do with it," cried the old lady, violently. "If He did, He would prevent poor folks from marrying, in the first place."

And then as she saw how patiently the woman endured these taunts, she had the grace to be ashamed of herself.

"Well, there, there; I dare say you don't care to hear your folks spoken of in that way," she said, in a milder tone. "But then Richard West was no kin to you, anyway—only your husband's brother!"

Mrs. West could not forbear a pertinent little retort.

"And Captain Lancaster is only your husband's nephew, my lady, yet you take a great interest in him," she said.

Lady Lancaster gave her a keen little glance. "Humph! West has some spirit in her," she said to herself; then, aloud, she replied:

"I can assure you the only interest I take in him is because he is my Lord Lancaster; and as he holds the title my late husband held, I should like for him to have money enough to support it properly. But if he does not marry to please me, you shall see how little I care for the young popinjay."

Mrs. West made no reply, and her mistress continued, after a moment's thought:

"Must you really take the child, do you think, West?"

"I couldn't think of refusing poor Dick's dying request," was the answer.

"Shall you make your home in America?" continued the lady.

"Oh, no, no; I should come back to dear old England. I couldn't consent to pass my last days in a strange country."

Lady Lancaster was silent a moment. Her eyes were very

thoughtful; her thin lips worked nervously. Mrs. West waited patiently, her plump hands folded together over the letter that had brought her such strange, unwelcome news. "Where are you going to live when the child comes?" Lady Lancaster snapped, almost rudely.

"I don't know yet, my lady. I have made no plans. I only received my letter a little while ago."

"You don't want *my* advice, I presume?"—more snappishly than ever.

"I should be very glad of it," Mrs. West replied, respectfully.

"Why didn't you ask it, then?"

"I didn't dare."

"Didn't dare, eh? Am I an ogress? Should I have eaten you if you had asked my advice?" demanded the irascible old lady, shortly.

"Oh, no, Lady Lancaster; but I shouldn't have presumed to trouble you so far," Mrs. West replied, in her quiet way that was so strange a contrast to the other's irritability.

"Very well. I've presumed to lay a plan for you," replied the grim old lady.

"A plan for me!" Mrs. West echoed, vaguely.

"Yes. You shall not go away from Lancaster Park. You shall have the child here."

"Here!" cried the housekeeper, doubtful if she were in her proper senses.

"Why, do you echo my words so stupidly, West?"

"I beg your pardon. I was doubtful if I understood your words rightly. I thought you disliked children," Mrs. West answered, confusedly.

"I did, and *do*," tartly. "But, for all that, I had sooner have Dick West's child here than for you to leave me. You could keep her in your own rooms, couldn't you? I needn't be bothered with her society?"

"Certainly," faltered Mrs. West, in a tremor of joy. She was very glad that she was not to leave Lancaster Park, where she had dwelt in peace and comfort for sixteen years—ever since her faithful, hard-working John had died and left her a lone widow with only fifteen pounds between her and the world. She had thought herself a very fortunate woman when she secured this place, and her heart bounded with joy at the thought that she was to stay on in peace, in spite of the incumbrance of her brother-in-law's orphan child.

"Oh, Lady Lancaster, I don't know how to thank you!" she cried. "I shall be very glad not to go away from the Park. I will keep Leonora very close, indeed I will, if you allow me to bring her here."

"Well, she shall be brought here. Of course I rely on you to keep her out of my way. I dislike the ways of children," said the hard old lady, who had never had any children herself, and who was an old maid at heart. "That is all I ask of you. Don't have her around under my feet, and I shall never remember that she is here."

"Thanks, my lady. And when am I to go and fetch my niece?" inquired the housekeeper, timidly.

"You're not to fetch her at all. I thought I had told you that already," tartly.

Mrs. West's eyes grew large and round with dismay.

"Indeed, I thought you said I should have her here," she exclaimed.

"So I did; I said she should be brought here, but I didn't say you should go to New York and fetch her home!"

"But Dick wished me to go," perplexedly; "and how is she to come if I do not go?"

"She may come with Lord Lancaster the first of June. I dare say he can go and get her all right."

"But it seems as if I ought to go myself. Besides, Lord Lancaster mightn't like it, indeed," whimpered poor Mrs. West.

"Fiddlesticks! I do not care whether he likes it or not," declared the octogenarian, snapping her fingers. "He shall do as I bid him. Aren't you willing to trust the brat with him?"

"Oh, yes, my lady," declared the housekeeper, with a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER V

"I'll be shot!" ejaculated Captain Lancaster, in a voice of the liveliest exasperation.

"Oh, no; what have you done?" exclaimed his chum, lifting his handsome head from his lounge amid a cloud of curling, blue cigar-smoke.

"Nothing; I never did anything in my life," in an injured tone, "and I am fain to ask why I am so bitterly persecuted."

"Persecuted?" inquired De Vere, languidly.

"Oh, yes, you can afford to be cool. You are the legal heir to ten thousand a year. You are not at the beck and call of a relative who gives you the most troublesome commissions to execute without so much as saying 'by your leave,'" growled Lancaster.

The young lieutenant laughed lazily.

"You have had a letter from my lady?" he said.

"Yes. Look here, De Vere, I wonder if she thinks I belong to her wholly? Must one be a white slave for the sake of coming into twenty thousand a year?"

"It is worth lots of toadying," declared De Vere, emphatically.

"I used to like Aunt Lydia—rather—before my uncle died," said Lancaster, reflectively. "She was always tart and waspish. I didn't care for it when I didn't have to bear the brunt of it. She rather amused me then, but now I get out of patience with her whims and exactions."

"What is it she wants now?" asked Harry De Vere, lazily.

"It is something I have to carry home to her from New York. By Jove! I have a great mind to refuse. Anything in reason I would willingly undertake; but, ah, really, this is too bad!" groaned the victim, dropping his head back among the cushions of his chair.

It was a handsome head, crowned with short, crisp masses of fair hair, and he was a blue-eyed young giant with the perfect features of an Antinous, and a smile that dazzled one when it played around the full red lips half veiled by the drooping ends of the long, fair mustache. He had an indolent air that was not unbecoming to him, but rather taking than otherwise. He did not look like a man who would overexert himself for anything, and yet the air might have been cultivated and not natural.

"I did not know that there was anything on this side of the 'herring-pond' her ladyship would deign to accept," said De Vere.

"There isn't. She has a horror of everything American."

"Then why—what?" inquired the other, perplexedly, and Captain Lancaster's moody brow cleared a moment, and he laughed merrily at his friend's amazed air.

"Give it up, Harry. You couldn't guess in a month," he said.

"I give it up," resignedly.

"It's a female," said Lancaster, lifting his head to note the effect on his inferior officer.

It was startling. The hands that were clasped behind the lieutenant's head relaxed suddenly, and he sat bolt upright on his

sofa, his brown eyes distended to their greatest size, his whole air indicative of the greatest astonishment.

"By George! You don't say so?" he ejaculated.

Lancaster relaxed from his perturbation to laugh at his startled hearer. "It's astonishing what an effect the mere mention of the female sex has upon you, De Vere," he observed.

"Well, you did take my breath away. I confess myself astonished. Who is the female, Lancaster? Not," catching his breath excitedly, "the chosen fair?—the fatal she who is to out-captain the captain himself, and lead him captive to the hymeneal altar?"

"Pshaw!" disgustedly, "how you run on! Of course it is nothing of the sort. Could one come out of New York that would please my august aunt?"

"Can any good come out of Nazareth?" quoted the lieutenant, lightly. "But I say, Lancaster, you have excited my curiosity to the highest pitch. Who is the female? Am I to be associated with you in the care of her?"

"I will hand over to you the whole charge, if you wish," said the captain, with the same disgusted air.

"*Cela dépend.* Is she young and fair? I have found New York girls rather fascinating, usually," said De Vere, recalling sundry flirtations by the light of a chandelier, with nobody very near.

"Young? yes—very young, I should say," growled the captain, sardonically. "But not to keep you any longer in suspense, listen to this portion of my dear aunt's epistle:

"There is a small commission I wish you to execute for me, Clive. My housekeeper's brother has died in New York and left her a little girl to take care of. I can not spare Mrs. West long enough for her to go after the child; and, in fact, I don't think it would be safe for her to go, anyhow. She is so simple, poor woman, she would be quite lost in the wilderness of New York, and might be devoured by the bulls and bears that I hear infest the place. So I want you to bring the child to England with you. I dare say she will not be much trouble. I inclose a card with her name and New York address. You are to go there and get little Leo and bring her to her aunt. Now, do not upon any account forget the child, Clive, for West would be ready to die of chagrin if you did not bring the little brat to her the first of June."

He paused and looked at his friend in comical anger.

"Did you ever hear of anything so deucedly cool in your life?" he said.

"No, I never did. It is most outrageous. What shall you do?"

"Advise me, please. Shall I rebel against my tormentor's mandate and refuse point-blank?"

"No, never. Rather meet the peril boldly and vanquish it. Walk boldly up to the cannon's mouth. In other words, accept the small commission."

"Small commission, indeed!" groaned the wretched victim. "What shall I do with a child—a girl-child, too—perhaps a baby?"

"That would be the best of all. You need have no trouble

then. Only provide a nurse, a sucking-bottle, and some cans of condensed milk, put them aboard with the baby, and all your trouble is over," suggested the lieutenant.

"Is it so easy as that? Well, perhaps it is a baby. She calls it a girl, a little child. Yes, I have no doubt it is a baby. Well, when we leave Boston we will go over to New York and see about the nurse and the bottles," sighed Lancaster.

CHAPTER VI

Captain Lancaster and his friend, having brought letters of introduction from England, were having rather a nice time in the cultured and æsthetic circles of Boston. They had made the grand tour of the States, lingering at the last in the beautiful city where they had made some very pleasant acquaintances, and where, as eligibles of the first water, they were fêted and courted in the most flattering manner by the fashionable people of the place. It is true that Lieutenant De Vere sometimes declared that he found New York more charming, but still he lingered, loath to go, and it was two weeks after the reception of Lady Lancaster's letter before they turned their faces toward the city that held the child that was to go to England with them—the baby, as they had quite decided in their own minds it must be.

There are a few people who, when they have a disagreeable task to perform, go bravely forward and get it over. There are a great many more who shirk such things and put them off till the last moment. Captain Lancaster belonged to the latter class. He was intensely afraid of disagreeables. He revolted exceedingly from the idea of "that squalling baby" he had to carry to England. He thought that Mrs. West should come after it herself. Yet Captain Lancaster was not a bad and selfish man, as one might have supposed from his reluctance to do this kindness. The whole gist of the matter lay in the fact that his aunt had so cavalierly

ordered him to do it. He chafed beneath the plainly visible fact that she meant to lead him by the nose as long as she lived, in virtue of the money she was going to leave him when she died.

So our hero mentally kicked against taking home the orphan child, and all unconsciously to himself directed a part of his vexation at his aunt against the little one. The mention of it was exceedingly distasteful to him, and when Lieutenant De Vere once or twice represented to him that he "ought to go and see about Leonora West before the last day," he invariably replied: "My dear friend, it is one of my rules never to do anything to-day that I can put off until to-morrow."

So it was actually the day before they sailed when Lancaster hunted up the address and went to look after his charge, his "small commission," as Lady Lancaster had blandly termed it. He went alone, for when De Vere offered to accompany him he shook his head and replied, decidedly, "No, I will not trouble you, for I can get over disagreeable things best alone."

So he went alone, and the address took him to a quiet, genteel boarding-house, in a quiet but highly respectable street. He rang the bell impatiently, and a smart female servant opened the door, smiling and bridling at the sight of the big, handsome young aristocrat.

"I have called to see about little Miss West. Is she here?" he inquired.

"Oh, Lor', yes sir!" she replied. "Please to walk into the parlor, and I'll take your card."

He handed her the small bit of pasteboard with his military title, "Captain Lancaster," simply engraved upon it, and said, abruptly:

"Send Miss West's nurse to me as soon as possible, please. I am in a hurry. We must sail for England to-morrow."

She gazed at him a little stupidly. "The nurse!" she echoed.

"Yes, the baby's nurse. Of course I must see her and make arrangements for our voyage," he replied; and the girl hastily retreated, and he caught the echo of a suppressed titter outside the door.

"American rudeness and freedom," he said to himself, disgustedly, as he walked up and down the limits of the pretty little parlor with its Brussels carpet, lace curtains, and open piano. "What did she see to giggle at, I wonder?"

And he glanced carelessly at his own elegant reflection in the long, swinging mirror, and felt complacently that there was nothing mirth-provoking there. From the top of his fair, handsome head to the toe of his shining boot all was elegant and irreproachable.

"Now, how long is that nurse going to make me wait? I hope, upon my soul, she won't bring that horrid young one in to display its perfections. I can well dispense with the pleasure," he said to himself, grimly, and he then turned hurriedly around at a sudden sound.

The door had opened softly, and a young girl, clad in deep, lusterless mourning apparel, had entered the parlor.

CHAPTER VII

Captain Lancaster was taken at a disadvantage. He was not at all a vain man. He did not half know how fine looking he was, and his hasty perusal of the mirror was directed rather to his dress than his face. But as he turned about hastily and met the half smile on the lips of the new-comer, he realized instantly that his attitude had favored strongly of masculine vanity, and a not unbecoming flush mounted to his good-looking, straight-featured face. He had a sneaking sense of shame in being caught posing, as it were, before the mirror by this extremely pretty girl.

She was more than pretty, this girl—she was rarely beautiful. She was of medium height and size, and her figure was symmetry itself, all its delicious curves and slender outlines defined at their best by the close-fitting black jersey waist she wore buttoned up to the graceful white throat that had a trick of holding itself high, as if innocently proud of the fair face that shone above it—the face that Captain Lancaster gazed at in wonder for a moment, and then in the most lively and decided disapprobation.

For she was much too pretty to be a nurse, he said to himself—too pretty and too young. She had an air of refinement quite above her position. She had an arch, pretty face, with beautiful blue-gray eyes that were almost black when the full white lids and dark lashes drooped over them. The dazzling fairness of her complexion was heightened by the unrelieved blackness of her

dress, and her pouting lips by contrast looked like rosebuds. Two long, thick braids of lovely chestnut-brown hair hung down her back, and some soft, fluffy rings of the same color waved over the low, broad forehead with its slender, dark brows. She was not only beautiful, she looked bright and intelligent, and the half smile that parted her red lips now made her wonderfully lovely.

But pretty as she was, she was aware that Captain Lancaster was regarding her with knit brows and a general air of entire disapprobation. Perhaps it was a novel experience. It seemed to amuse her. The dimples deepened around the sweet, arch mouth. She looked down at the card in her hand, and began to read it aloud in a soft, hesitating, inquiring voice: "Cap-tain Lancaster?"

"Yes," he replied, and was on the point of making his most elegant bow when he suddenly remembered that it was not at all necessary to be so ceremonious with the nurse of his housekeeper's niece. So he straightened himself up again and said, almost tartly:

"You are the baby's nurse, I presume?"

The long fringe of the girl's lashes lifted a moment, and she flashed a dazzling glance into his face.

"The—baby?" she inquired.

"Yes—the little Miss West—the child that is to get to England under my care. Aren't you her nurse?"

The young lady had put a very small, white hand up to her face and coughed very hard for a moment. She looked at him the

next moment, very red in the face from the exertion.

"I—ah, yes, certainly; I'm the nurse," she replied, demurely.

And then ensued a moment's silence, broken at last by the girl, who said, quietly and politely:

"Won't you be seated, Captain Lancaster?"

He dropped mechanically into a chair near him, but the pretty nurse-maid remained standing meekly in the center of the room, her small hands folded before her, a demure look on her fair face.

The caller cleared his throat and began, rather nervously:

"It isn't possible that you expected to go to England as that child's nurse?" he said.

"I had hoped to do so," answered the girl, with a sudden air of chagrin.

"But—ah—really, you know, you're too young, aren't you?" stammered Lancaster, feeling abashed, he knew not why, but maintaining a grave, judicial air.

"Too young? I should hope not. I was eighteen last week," lifting the small head with an air of great dignity.

He could hardly repress a smile, but he put his long, white hand hastily across his lips to hide it from those bright, keen eyes.

"And do you think you can really take good care of Miss West?" he said. "Remember, it is a long trip across the ocean."

She flashed him one of her swift, bright glances.

"Indeed?" she said. "But that does not matter at all, sir. I consider myself quite competent to take care of Miss West anywhere."

"Does she mean to be impertinent?" he thought; but a glance at the demure, downcast face reassured him. It was only the high self-confidence of ignorant, innocent youth.

"You must excuse me; I don't know how they do such things on this side of the water," he said, feeling mean within himself, yet not at all understanding why it was so. "But, you see, it is all different in England. There one chooses a woman of age and experience for a nurse. Now, I remember my own nurse was at least fifty years old."

"In-deed?" replied the girl, dropping him a demure little courtesy that somehow again filled him with an uneasy sense that, under all her pretty humility, she meant to be impertinent. His face felt hot and burning. He did not know how to pursue the conversation.

Seeing that he made her no answer, she looked up with a pretty, appealing air. "Do I understand that you object to taking me to England? that my youth counts against me?" she inquired.

"Oh, no, no; not at all, if you are sure you can take good care of the baby," he replied, hastily. "You see, the whole thing is a great bore and nuisance to me. I object most decidedly to being encumbered with that child, but, most unfortunately for me, I can't get out of it. So, if you can really be of any use, pray go along with it to England—Oh!"

The sudden exclamation was wrung from him by a glance at her face. The pretty actress had dropped her mask at hearing those swift, vehement words of his. A hot color glowed in her

face, two pearly tears started under her dark lashes. She put out her white hands before her as if to ward off a blow.

"Oh, Captain Lancaster, say no more!" she cried. "There has been some wretched mistake somewhere, and I have only been laughing at you these five minutes. I am nobody's nurse at all. There isn't any child nor any baby. It is a grown-up young lady. I am Leonora West."

Tableau!

CHAPTER VIII

"If only the earth would open and swallow me up!" sighed Lancaster to himself, miserably. It is not pleasant to be made fun of, and the most of people are too thin-skinned to relish a joke directed against themselves. Lancaster did not. His ridiculous mistake flashed over him instantly at the deprecatory words of the girl, and he scarcely knew whom to be most angry with—himself or Leonora West.

He stole a furtive glance at her, wishing in his heart that he could subdue the crimson flush that glowed on his face. He was glad that she was not looking at him. She had sunk into a chair and buried her face in her hands. Evidently she was not enjoying her saucy triumph much. Those last impatient words of his had cleverly turned the tables.

He glanced at the drooping figure in the arm-chair, and it flashed over him that De Vere would never be done laughing if he knew that he, Lord Lancaster, a cavalry officer, and a "swell party" altogether, had been made a target for the amusement of this lowly born girl. How dared she do it? and could he keep De Vere from finding out? he asked himself in the same breath.

And just then Leonora West lifted her wet eyes to his face, and said, with a sob in her throat:

"I am glad now that I didn't tell you the truth at first. If I had, I mightn't have found out, perhaps, that you thought me a bore

and a nuisance, and that you didn't want me to go to Europe with you."

Captain Lancaster winced. All she had said was quite true, yet he had not cared to have her know it. It is but seldom one cares to have people know one's real opinion of them.

"And—and"—she went on, resentfully, "you may be quite, quite sure, after this, that I will not go with you. You will have no trouble with me. My aunt might have come after me herself, I think. I was afraid, when I got her letter saying that you would come for me, that something would go wrong. Now I know it. To think that you should call me a baby!"

While she poured forth her grievances dolorously, Lancaster had been collecting his wool-gathering wits. What upon earth was he to do if she really refused to go with him? He pictured to himself old Lady Lancaster's fury. It was quite likely that, after such a contretemps, she would cut him off with a shilling.

"It will never do for her to stay in this mood. She shall go to England, *nolens volens*," he resolved.

"Richard" began to be "himself again." The ludicrous side of the case dawned upon him.

"I have made a tremendous *faux pas*, certainly, and now I must get out of it the best way I can," he thought, grimly.

Leonora's sharp little tongue had grown still now, and her face was again hidden in her hands. He went up to her and touched her black sleeve lightly.

"Oh, come now," he said; "if you go on like this I shall think

I made a very apposite mistake. Who but a baby would make such a declaration as yours in the face of the circumstances? Of course you are going to Europe with me!"

"I am not," she cried, with a mutinous pout of the rich red lips.

"Yes, you are," he replied, coolly. "You have no business to get angry with me because I made a slight mistake about your age. And after all, I remember now that it was really De Vere's mistake, and not mine."

"Who is De Vere?" inquired Leonora, curiously, as she glanced up at him through her wet lashes, and showing the rims of her eyes very pink indeed from the resentful tears she had shed.

"De Vere is my friend and traveling-companion," he replied.

"And does he, too, consider me a bore and a nuisance?"

"Well," confidingly, "to tell you the truth, we both did—that is, you know, while we were laboring under the very natural mistake that you were a very small baby instead of—a grown-up one. But all that is altered now, of course, since I have met you, Miss West. We shall be only too happy to have you for our *compagnon du voyage*."

He was speaking to her quite as if she were his equal, and not the lowly born niece of the housekeeper at his ancestral home. It was impossible to keep that fact in his head. She was so fair, so refined, so well-bred, in spite of the little flashes of spirit indicative of a spoiled child.

She did not answer, and he continued, pleasantly:

"I am very sorry for the mistake on my part that caused you

so much annoyance. I desire to offer you every possible apology for it."

She looked up at him quickly. "Oh, I wasn't mad because you thought Leonora West was a baby," she said.

"Then why—because I thought you were a nurse?"

"Not that either. I was only amused at those mistakes of yours."

She paused a moment, then added, with a rising flush:

"It was for those other words you said."

"I do not blame you at all. I was a regular brute," said Lancaster, penitently. "Do say that you forgive me, I never should have said it if only I had known."

"Known what?" she inquired.

"That you were the baby I had to carry to England. I should have been only too happy to be of service to you. De Vere will be distracted with envy at my privilege. There, I have said several pretty things to you. Will you not forgive me now?"

"Yes, I will forgive you, but you do not deserve it," answered Leonora. "It was not kind to talk about me so, even if I had been an unconscious baby."

"It was not," he admitted. "But think a moment, Miss West. I am a bachelor, and I know nothing at all of babies. I have forgotten all the experiences of my own babyhood. I was wretched at the idea of having to convey one of those troublesome little problems across the ocean. I would as soon have been presented with a white elephant. I should have known

quite as much of one as the other. Can you find it in your heart to chide me for my reluctance?"

Leonora reflected, with her pretty brows drawn together.

"Well, perhaps you are right," she acknowledged, after a moment. "They are troublesome—babies, I mean—I think you called them problems. You were right there, too, for one does not know what to make of them, nor what they will do next, nor what they will become in the future."

"Then you can not blame me, can not be angry with me. And you will be ready to go with me to-morrow?"

"No, I think not. I am afraid, after all you have said, Captain Lancaster, that you really are vexed in your mind at the thought of taking me. I do not believe I ought to take advantage of your pretended readiness," she replied, sensitively, and with that perfect frankness that seemed to be one of her characteristics.

"And you refuse to go with me?" He gazed at her despairingly.

"I would rather not," decidedly.

He looked at the pretty face in some alarm. It had a very resolute air. Would she really carry out her threat of staying behind? He did not know much about American girls, but he had heard that they managed their own affairs rather more than their English sisters. This one looked exceedingly like the heroine of that familiar ballad:

"When she will, she will, depend on't,
And when she won't, she won't,

And there's an end on't."

She glanced up and saw him pulling at the ends of his mustache with an injured air, and a dark frown on his brow.

"Why do you look so mad? I should think you would be glad I'm not going."

"I am vexed. I wasn't aware that I looked mad. In England we put mad people into insane asylums," he replied, rather stiffly.

"Thank you. I understand. Old England is giving Young America a rhetorical hint. Why do you look so vexed, then, Captain Lancaster?"

"Because there will be no end of a row in Lancaster Park when I go there, because you have not come with me."

"Will there, really?"

"Yes; and my aunt, Lady Lancaster, who has promised to give me all her money when she dies, will cut me off with a shilling because I have disobeyed her orders and disappointed Mrs. West."

The blue-gray eyes opened to their widest extent.

"No!" she said.

"Yes, indeed," he replied.

"Then she must be a very hard woman," said Miss West, in a decided tone.

"She is," he replied, laconically.

"You are certain that she would not give you the money?" anxiously.

"Quite certain," he answered.

"And—have you none of your own?"

"Only my pay in the army," he admitted, laughing within himself at her naïve curiosity.

"Is that much?" she went on, gravely.

"Enough to keep me in boots and hats," he answered, with an owl-like gravity.

"And this Lady Lancaster—your aunt—does she give you the rest?" persevered Leonora.

He did not want to be rude, but he burst out laughing. She looked up into the bright blue eyes and reddened warmly.

"I dare say you think me curious and ill-bred," she said.

"Oh, no, no, not at all. I am intensely flattered by the interest you take in my affairs."

"It is only because I do not want to be the means of your losing that money, if you want it. Do you?"

"Indeed I do. Anybody would be glad to have twenty thousand a year," he replied.

"So much as that? Then, of course, I must not be the cause of your losing it," said Leonora, gravely.

"Then you will go with me?" he cried, with quite a load lifted from his mind by her unexpected concession.

"Ye-es. I suppose I shall have to go," she answered.

"A thousand thanks. I thought you would relent," he said. "And will you be ready to sail with me to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes, quite ready. My trunks have been packed several

weeks, and I have been only waiting for you to come," she answered, promptly.

And then she slipped her small hand into the folds of her dress and drew out a netted silk purse, through whose meshes he caught the glitter of gold pieces. She counted out a number of shining coins into his hand with quite a business-like air.

"That is the price of my ticket. Will you please buy it for me? I will have my luggage sent down all right," she said.

He took the money mechanically and rose, thinking this a dismissal. Then something that had been on his mind all the time rose to his lips.

"I want to ask a great favor of you, Miss West."

She looked at him with a slight air of wonder, and answered: "Yes."

"You will meet with my friend, Lieutenant De Vere, on board the steamer. He is a very nice youth indeed. He will be good friends with you directly."

"In-deed?" said Leonora, in a slow, inquiring voice that implied a distinct doubt on the subject.

"Yes, indeed. You need not look so incredulous. You will be sure to like him. The ladies all adore him."

She looked up at him with the dimples coming into roguish play around her mouth.

"And you wish to warn me not to fall a victim to his manifold perfections?" she said.

"Oh, dear, no, not at all. I never thought of such a thing. You

see, Miss West, my friend intensely enjoys a joke."

"Yes?" she gazed at him with an air of thorough mystification.

"He intensely enjoys a joke," repeated Lancaster. "I want you to promise me now, upon your honor, that you will not tell him how unmercifully you quizzed me awhile ago. He would never have done chaffing me if he knew, and he would tell the whole regiment once we landed in England."

"Would they tease you much?" inquired Leonora, highly interested.

"Unbearably," he replied.

"They shall not know, then," she answered, promptly. "I will not tell your friend about it."

"Nor any one?" he entreated.

"Certainly not," she answered, soothingly, and involuntarily he caught her hand and pressed it a moment in his own, not displeased to see that she blushed as she drew it hastily away.

He went away, and when he looked at his watch outside the door he was honestly surprised.

"Two hours! I really do not know how the time went," he said to himself.

When he went back to his hotel he found De Vere in a state of surprise, too.

"You have been gone almost three hours," he said. "Did you find the baby?"

"Yes, I found it," he replied, carelessly.

"Was it well? Shall we have the pleasure of its company to-

morrow?" pursued the lieutenant.

"Yes, it was well, but it is a spoiled child. I am afraid we shall find it a source of trouble to us," replied Captain Lancaster, smiling to himself at the surprise and delight in store for De Vere to-morrow, when he should find that it was a beautiful young girl instead of a cross baby who was to be their *compagnon du voyage* to England.

CHAPTER IX

Lancaster electrified his friend next morning by informing him that he must get their traps aboard the steamer himself, as he would not have time to attend to his own affairs, having some commissions to execute for Miss West.

"The nursing-bottles and the cans of condensed milk, you know," he said, with a mischievous laugh, and De Vere stared.

"I should think the nurse would attend to that," he said.

"Nurses are forgetful, and I wish everything to be all right, you know," replied his friend; "so I shall see to everything myself."

"Well, you will have plenty of time to do so. We do not sail until four o'clock."

"Well, I shall have plenty to do in the meantime, so you need not wait for me, Harry. You may just go aboard at any time you like. I shall take a carriage and call for the baby on my way down."

"You are getting very kind all at once," De Vere said, carelessly.

"Yes, I mean to be. Having undertaken it, I mean to see the poor little thing safely through."

"Well, I wish you success," De Vere replied, as he lighted a fresh cigar and turned away.

The tickets and state-rooms had already been secured, and Lancaster hurried down-town, intent on securing all the comforts possible for his fair charge, who had suddenly grown very

interesting in his eyes. He bought a steamer-chair, some warm rugs, and a gayly colored Oriental wrap that was both pretty and comfortable. Then he provided himself with some nice novels and poems and books of travel. When he had provided everything he could think of that was conducive to a lady's comfort, he repaired to a florist's and selected an elegant and costly bouquet.

"I have noticed that ladies always like a bunch of flowers when they are traveling," he said to himself. "But what will De Vere say to such reckless extravagance on my part?"

He smiled to himself, thinking how the young lieutenant would chaff.

"Anyway, I shall have got the start of him," he thought. "He will be on the *qui vive* for a flirtation with Leonora West."

Then he looked at his watch and found that he had consumed so much time in making his purchases that he only had time to take a carriage and call for his charge. Having sent all his purchases to the steamer, and being encumbered with nothing but the flowers, he made all haste to execute his last and pleasantest task—accompanying Miss West to the steamer on which they were to embark.

"Drive fast," he said to the man on the box; and when they paused before the genteel boarding-house where he had made Miss West's acquaintance the day before, he jumped out with alacrity and ran up the steps.

The door was opened by the simpering maid of the day before

who had giggled at his ridiculous mistake. He could not help coloring at the remembrance as he met her recognizing smiles, a little tintured with surprise.

He assumed an air of coldness and hauteur, thinking to freeze her into propriety.

"I have called for Miss West to take her to the steamer. Will you please see if she is ready?"

"Oh, Lor', sir!" tittered the maid.

"I have called for Miss West," he repeated, more sternly. "Can you inform me if she is ready?"

The maid bridled resentfully at his impatient air.

"Why, lawk a mercy, she was ready ages ago, mister!" she said, tartly.

"Then ask her to come out, if you please. We have barely half an hour to go on board," he said, glancing hurriedly at his watch.

"I can't ask her. She is not here," was the answer.

"Not here? then where—" he began, but the pert maid interrupted him:

"Lor', sir, Miss West went down to the steamer two hours ago."

An audible titter accompanied the information.

Lancaster bounded down the steps without a word, sprung into his carriage, and slammed the door with a vim.

"Drive down to the steamer just as fast as you can, coachman!" he hallooed, sharply.

CHAPTER X

De Vere stared in wonder when his friend scrambled up the plank alone with his beautiful bouquet. He was not a minute too soon, for in an instant the gang-plank was hauled in, and they were outward bound on the dark-blue sea.

"Halloo!" shouted the lieutenant, sauntering up; "where's the precious babe?"

His air of unfeigned surprise was most exasperating to Lancaster in his disappointed mood. He was about to exclaim, "Hang the babe!" but recollected himself just in time to glance around at the passengers on deck. No, she was not there, the pretty American maid who was so gracefully independent. "Gone to her state-room, probably," he thought, with profound chagrin, and leaning over the railing, pitched his fragrant exotics impulsively into the sea.

"So much for my foolish gallantry to Mrs. West's niece," he said to himself, hotly.

Raising his eyes then, he met De Vere's stare of wonder.

"Have you gone clean daft, my dear captain?" inquired he.

"I don't know why you should think so," said Lancaster, nettled.

"From your looks, man. You come flying up the gang-way, breathless, and when I ask you a question you stare around distractedly, and run to the railing to pitch over one of the

sweetest bouquets I ever laid eyes on. Now, what am I to think of you, really?"

He laughed, and Lancaster, trampling his vexation under-foot, laughed too. He was vexed with himself that he had let Leonora West put him out so.

"I beg your pardon for my rudeness," he said. "I will explain. You see, I was so busy all day that I only had time at the last to jump into a carriage and call for Miss West. Then I was detained by an impertinent servant who, after ten minutes of stupid jargon, told me that my charge had gone down to the steamer two hours before. So then we had not a minute to spare, and of course I was flurried when I came aboard."

"But the bouquet?" suggested De Vere, curiously.

"Oh, I bought that for my charge," replied Lancaster, airily.

"Rank extravagance! And didn't you know more about the tastes of babies than that, my dear fellow? A rattle would have been a more appropriate and pleasing selection. You know what the poet says:

"Pleased with a rattle,
Tickled with a straw."

"Yes, I remembered that just as I came aboard, and I was so vexed at my foolish bouquet that I tossed it overboard," Lancaster replied, with the utmost coolness.

He sat down, lighted a weed, and leaning over the rail, watched

the deep, white furrows cut in the heaving sea by the bounding ship. His thoughts reverted provokingly to Leonora West.

"What is she doing? Will she come on deck this evening? Did she think I would not call for her, or did she come down first with malice prepense?" he asked himself, one question after another revolving busily through his brain.

Lieutenant De Vere's gay voice jarred suddenly on his musings:

"Tell you what, old fellow, you missed something by not coming aboard with me. I formed a charming acquaintance this afternoon."

"Eh, what?"—the captain roused himself with a start.

"I formed a charming acquaintance on board ship this afternoon. Prettiest girl in America—England, either, I should say."

A swift suspicion darted into Lancaster's mind.

"Ah, indeed?" he said. "What is the divinity's name?"

"I have not found out yet," confessed the lieutenant.

"Ah! then your boasted acquaintance did not progress very far," chaffingly.

"No; but I rely on time to develop it. We shall be on board steamer ten days together. I shall certainly find out my fair unknown in all that time," confidently.

Lancaster frowned slightly with that lurking suspicion yet in his mind.

"Oh, you needn't look so indifferent!" cried De Vere.

"You would have lost your head over her, too, old man. Such a face, such a voice, such an enchanting glance from the sweetest eyes ever seen!"

"And such a goddess deigned to speak to you?" sarcastically.

"Yes. Shall I tell you all about it? I'm dying to talk to some one about her!"

"Don't die, then. I would rather be bored with your story than have to carry your corpse home to the regiment."

"It was this way, then: I was *ennuyé* at the hotel, so I came on board early with my traps—as early as one o'clock. It was about two, I think, when she came—lady and gentleman with her."

"Oh!"

"Yes, and shawls—bags, books, bouquets—the three B's—*ad infinitum*. She had a dark veil over her face. Her friends bade her good-bye—lady kissed her with enthusiasm—then they gave her the shawls and three B's they had helped carry, and went away."

"Who went away?"

"The lady and gentleman went away. If you had been listening half-way to my story, Lancaster, you would have understood what I said."

"Don't be offended. I am giving you my strictest attention. Go on, please."

"She gathered all her things in her arms—she should have had a maid, really—and began to trip across the deck. Then the wind—bless its viewless fingers whirled off her veil and tossed it in the air."

"Fortunate!" muttered Lancaster.

"Yes, wasn't it?" cried De Vere, in a lively tone. "So I gave chase to the bit of gossamer and captured it just as it was sailing skyward. I carried it back to her, and lo! a face—well, wait until you see her, that's all."

"Is that the end of the story?" queried Lancaster, disappointed.

"Not yet. Well, it was the sweetest face in the world. A real pink and white; eyes that were gray, but looked black because the lashes were so long and shady. Pouting lips, waving bangs, just the loveliest shade of chestnut. Imagine what I felt when this lovely girl thanked me in a voice as sweet as a sugar-plum, and gave me her things to hold while she tied on her veil again."

"I hope you did not let her see how moonstruck you were on the instant."

"I don't know. I'm afraid she did," dubiously. "You see, I was so taken by surprise I had not my wits about me. I talked to her quite idiotically—told her I would not have restored the veil had I known she would hide that face with it again."

"And she?" asked Lancaster, with a restless movement.

"Oh, she colored and looked quite vexed a moment. Then she asked me, quite coolly, if my keeper was on board."

There was a minute's silence. Lancaster's broad shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

"So I begged a thousand pardons," De Vere continued, after a minute's thoughtful rumination, "and I found her a seat and brought the chamber-maid to take her things and show her her

state-room; so she could not choose but forgive me, and I talked to her a minute."

"And told her all about yourself in a breath," laughed the captain.

"No; I would have done it, but she did not stop long enough to hear me. I asked her if she was going to cross the 'big pond' all alone by herself, as Pat would say, and she laughed very much and said no; she was to have two chaperons. Then she asked me was I going, too. I said yes, and was fumbling for my card-case when the chamber-maid whisked her away from me. But to-morrow I shall—Oh, oh! Lancaster," in a suppressed tone of ecstasy, "there she is now!"

Lancaster dropped his cigar into the heaving waves and turned his head. He saw a lissom, graceful figure coming unsteadily across the heaving deck—Leonora West!

Leonora West, even more fair and bonny looking than yesterday, in a jersey waist and a black-kilted skirt just short enough to show the arched instep of an exquisite foot in a dainty buttoned boot. She carried her veil on her arm now, and wore a big black hat on her head, under which all her wealth of curling chestnut hair waved loosely to her perfect waist. The fair "innocent-arch" face looked as fresh as a rose and beamed with gentleness and good nature.

Captain Lancaster rose up deliberately, and disregarding his friend's amazement, went forward to meet her.

"Miss West, the deck is rather unsteady. Will you honor me

by taking my arm?" he said, bowing before her with elaborate politeness.

CHAPTER XI

Lieutenant De Vere gazed in the most unfeigned astonishment, not to say dismay, at the strange and unexpected sight of Captain Lancaster coolly leading the unknown beauty across the unsteady deck. As he said of himself when relating it afterward, he might have been "knocked down with a feather."

And when he saw that they were coming straight toward him, and that Lancaster had quite an air of proprietorship, and that the girl was looking up with an arch smile at him, he was more astonished than ever, he was almost stupefied with amazement. Did Lancaster know her, really? And why had he kept it to himself, selfish fellow?

And then he was overpoweringly conscious that they had come up to him. He struggled to his feet and came near falling back over the railing into the ocean, out of sheer wrath, for just then Captain Lancaster said, with just a touch of raillery in his tone:

"Miss West, permit me to present my friend, Lieutenant De Vere."

"Lancaster knew her all the while, and he has been chaffing me all this time," flashed angrily through De Vere's mind but he suppressed his rising chagrin and said, with his most elaborate bow:

"I am most happy to know your name, Miss West. I have been longing to know it ever since I met you this afternoon."

"What audacity!" thought Lancaster to himself, with a frown that only grew darker as the girl replied, gayly:

"And I am very glad to know that you are Captain Lancaster's friend. You will help to amuse me on the way over."

She sat down between them, Lancaster on one hand, De Vere on the other. The lieutenant looked across the bright, sparkling young face at his friend.

"Do you mean to tell me that this is *the* baby?" pointedly.

"Yes."

"But, how—" pausing helplessly.

Lancaster laughed, and Leonora joined her musical treble to his.

"You see, De Vere, there was a mistake all around," he said. "I found out yesterday that the baby existed only in our imaginations."

"You might have told me," De Vere muttered, reproachfully.

"I was reserving a pleasant surprise for you to-day," Lancaster rejoined.

Leonora turned her bright eyes up to his face.

"When did you come aboard?" she inquired, naïvely.

"At the last moment," he replied, rather coldly.

"You were detained?"

"Yes," dryly.

A sudden light broke over De Vere's mind. He laughed provokingly.

"Miss West, would you like to know what detained him?" he

inquired.

"Yes," she replied.

"He went up to Blank Street, to fetch you," laughing.

"No?"

"Yes, indeed. Ask him, if you doubt me."

She looked around at Lancaster. There was a flush on his face, a frown between his eyebrows.

"You did not, really, did you?" she asked, naïvely.

"I did," curtly.

"Don't tease him about it. He was furiously angry because you ran away and came by yourself," said De Vere. He was beginning to turn the tables on Lancaster now, and he enjoyed it immensely.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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