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CHAPTER I.

"You were the woman?"

"Yes, it was I."

The man who spoke was flushed, appealing, eager; the woman beside him, although perfectly pale, showed no sign of emotion in her face. They were walking side by side on a broad grassy road or track which ran into the very heart of the woodlands. On either side the trees raised their mighty arms so high that little of the blue sky could be seen between their fluttering yellow leaves. Yet the sunshine filtered down upon the bracken, and the bramble bushes beneath the boughs and bars of light lay athwart the delicate shadows through which the man and woman trod. Olwen thought vaguely to herself that the play of light and shade symbolized the chances and changes of the life that she had led, but Maurice Harding, at her side, was far too busy with his own views and aspirations to be alive to symbols. He was a hard headed, skeptical man by nature, and Olwen Dare was a fanciful woman in her way.

They were both noticeable people in appearance. Harding was above the middle height; he had broad shoulders and a lithe, sinewy figure. His face was ugly—there was no denying the fact; the features were dark, rugged and stern, but the deeply set eyes were remarkable for their brilliance and the drooping mustache hid some irascible lines about the mouth. There were energy, decision, determination, in the face, but not much softness and certainly no weakness of any sort. One could well imagine that his fame as an explorer of a singularly daring nature had been well deserved.

Miss Dare was tall—for a woman—and she was also beautiful. The perfect proportion of her limbs gave her a grace of movement which had been the first cause of Harding's attraction toward her. She walked, he said, "like a savage queen," not like a modern, conventional young lady of society. This speech might have prejudiced society against Miss Dare—for Harding's criticisms were respected—had she not been already popular and rich. She might walk "like a savage queen" as much as she pleased and still be admired. As a matter of fact, her graceful walk and dignified carriage were truly admirable. For the rest she was rather pale, with a beautifully shaped oval face, dark waving hair and gray eyes with long curly lashes. She had the excellent gift of a sweet voice and a sweeter smile, and by dint of her many graces and beauties she had taken captive the heart of Maurice Harding and brought him a very slave to her feet. And now, when the decisive moment had come and he had poured out the story of his love, she calmly and coldly refused him and told him why.

They were walking in the park belonging to a country house where they were guests. People asked them together, as all the world expected daily to hear that they were engaged. It would surprise the world as much as it surprised Harding to know that she had refused him, for she had given him open and marked encouragement. And she was not a woman who dispensed her favors lightly. He had proposed, and in refusing him she had added a few pregnant sentences of explanation that caused him to utter the words already recorded:

"You were the woman?"

And she had answered, "Yes, it was I."

"But I did not know you. I had no idea," he stammered.

"That was where the injustice of the thing came in," said Olwen calmly. "You did not know me, you knew nothing about me except that I was a young girl, living in the country, poor, untaught, not a match, as you considered, for your friend and therefore to be branded as an adventuress. Oh, yes, I have seen the letter you wrote about me to Lionel Borrodaile and a more uncalled for attack upon a girl's character and reputation I never imagined to myself. If we were not in polite society and bound by the chains of convention, I should say"—

She stopped suddenly and seemed to consider. Harding, very white beneath his bronze, and biting his mustache furiously, turned to hear the end.

"Go on," he said harshly. "We are not 'polite society,' you and I. You may be as free from convention as I am, if you like. You would say what?"

"I should say," she proceeded calmly, "that you had lied."

"Do you know what you are saying? Do you know how you are insulting me?" he broke out, in a hoarse, suffocated voice.

"Perhaps you forget that you insulted me—once," she said, in passionless, level tones.

"Not purposely! Not knowingly! I was deceived. I swear it, Olwen! On my life and soul I swear that I was told of a very different woman and what I said of her was true enough, but it was never said of you."

"Excuse me, I saw the letter. All the things you said were spoken of Miss Durant. I was Miss Durant—I changed my name when money was left to me by my godmother. Lionel had been spending the summer in our village, you will remember, and I was a girl of 19 teaching in the village school. We knew each other—we loved each other a little—perhaps. He asked me to be his wife. You know why I was not."

"Good heavens! Who would have thought it! Borrodaile must have been a weak fool"—

"Do not abuse a man who is dead," said Olwen quietly. "You were his guardian. He naturally attached some value to your opinion. When you wrote to him, ordering him back to town and informing him that you knew—knew, mind you, that I was an unprincipled little adventuress and worse, a woman of evil reputation, in fact—it was natural that he should be startled."

"He showed you my letter? And you put up with such an insult?"

"The insults were in the letter. His showing it to me was a detail. He was in great trouble over it. I advised him at once to obey his guardian and go back to London"—

"And he went?"

"It is absurd for you to be indignant, Mr. Harding. You know that he went and why. You know that you threatened him with all sorts of pains and penalties if he did not return to London immediately. I seconded your efforts to the best of my ability. I told him to obey you and to come back when—or if—he obtained your consent. He never came back."

"And you blame me for that?"

"Well, naturally. You kept him in town, did you not?"

"You loved him—that boy?"

"I loved him as well as I knew how."

"And you have never forgiven the man who separated you?"

She hesitated before replying, but spoke at last in a clear and resolute tone.

"The separation was hard to bear. It did not break my heart, but it gave me much pain. He never wrote to explain why he had abandoned me, but I knew well enough that it was because of your advice—your opinion. And when I realized after weeks and months of suspense and misery that you had triumphed over me and got the poor boy under your thumb again then I said to myself"—

She paused again, but as he made an eager gesture she resumed her speech.

"I said to myself that if ever I met the man who had shown himself capable of such cruelty to an unoffending girl, who had tried to blacken her reputation in the eyes of the man she loved and shown neither mercy nor justice in his anxiety that his ward should marry a wealthy woman—if I met that man, I should be glad if in any way I could make him suffer. It was unlikely that I should ever meet him, but, you see, the unlikeliest things sometimes happen—and—now that I am a rich woman and Lionel Borrodaile is dead—we have met."

"Then am I to understand that you deliberately set yourself to attract me, with the intention of refusing me should I be so blind as to walk into your trap?"

She raised her eyebrows and glanced at him with a bitter smile.

"Can you wonder at it? Have I injured you more than you injured me? Yes, as soon as I knew who you were I set myself to make you like me. I hoped that you would fall in love with me and give me the opportunity of refusing the man who once told his ward that a marriage with me would mean social suicide."

Harding uttered a sound of mingled anger and despair, then walked on in silence for some minutes, his head hanging, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. When he spoke, it was in short, jerky sentences, which showed more clearly than elaborate periods could have done the keenness of his pain.

He came to a sudden stop and confronted her.

(To be Continued)

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