

Helen Drops Her Handkerchief

Capital Short Story by Guy Courtenay Chapman, Which Readers Will Enjoy.

BY GUY COURTENAY CHAPMAN.

THE MOST interesting visitor at the Hoher Spitz Hotel, until Captain Adamant arrived there was the Hon. Helen Careening, only child of the late Lord Traquair and his American wife, Mariquita Vannorden, so that Helen inherited not only the traditional Traquair beauty, but her mother's fabulous millions.

Her rightful throne—her native haunt—was the innermost circle of London's best society, but she was famous for her whims, and one of them had caused her to leave Traquair House and the January hunting and betake herself at two days' notice to St. Spitz—which is not even a first-class winter sports resort! A place that nobody—who was anybody—had ever patronized before.

"If you had only chosen Davos or St. Moritz, where there might have been half a dozen people we knew!" moaned her chaperone plaintively.

Helen flashed a glance at Lady Balham from under incredibly long, black, silky lashes, that gave her blue eyes the softness and mystery of a summer night.

"That's the third time you've said so today, Cousin Jane," she replied softly, soft as purring, "and it's got to be the very last if you just don't want me to ring for Marie and have her pack you in a handbox and pose you back to England, labelled 'this side up with care!'"

She laughed, but Jane Balham sat up suddenly like a startled rabbit. She was altogether like a rabbit with her long, weak upper lip, and scared, brownless eyes, her gentle flurried ways, and the fleecy shawls in which she still huddled herself from habit, because she had always been cold in winter till Helen took her home to Traquair.

People called Miss Careening hard sometimes, but most of the happiness Jane's starved heart had ever known had come to her in these last three magical years, and she yearned over the beautiful wayward girl with a love that made her almost clever where Helen was concerned.

And it was "not like" Helen to speak in that soft, purring tone—"the voice she scratched with, as an Irishman had once called it—to poor, dependent Jane. So Jane Balham picked up her ears—and followed Helen's glance across the winter garden, where they sat at tea, to the little table by the staircase, where a man sat quite alone.

He had but just arrived and he was tall and broad shouldered, with a face as still as if it had been cut from bronze, out of which looked the steady eagle eyes of a racing motorist—or an aviator—or an explorer. Vaguely Jane felt him to be an interesting man; a man with the glamor of a great personality about him, and she turned to Helen to say so, but the words checked on her lips, for dim as was the lights in their corner under the palms she saw something new in Helen's face. Jane could not read the meaning of that intent look, but it silenced her.

Then, in a moment, Helen turned with her everyday smile.

"Finished? Let's go upstairs; the books I wired for came this afternoon."

Traversing the great room under fire of so many curious eyes was quite an ordeal to Lady Balham. She scurried across it, and fairly ran up the first flight of stairs; then noticed with dismay that Helen was no longer behind her. She looked over the balcony just in time to see the new man stoop to pick up Helen's handkerchief and Helen turn on the lowest step to receive it from him. Tall as she was, he was taller, and their eyes were just on a level as she stood there above him. She thanked him carelessly; then sudden recognition dawned in her eyes.

"Surely—it is Captain Adamant!" she said. "I heard you lecture at the Royal Geographical."

Her voice was low and sweet, her eyes smiled, she looked wonderful as she stood there in that roomful of ordinary mortals—a princess out of a fairy tale—the vision of a dream—exquisite, regal, supremely unconscious of the eyes that focussed her from every table.

And as Rex Adamant looked at her, though his expression did not alter, his face grew a little paler.

"I saw you on the platform with the duke," he said, "You are Miss Careening."

Helen's cheeks dimpled suddenly, mischievously. "I wasn't labelled!"

"But I asked your name," said the man, quite simply, and then—it was strange, in fact, Jane hardly believed her eyesight, a faint rose-flush crept into Helen's cheeks, her lashes drooped, and without another word she turned away. But Adamant stood and watched her out of sight, as careless of the crowded room as though he had been alone in one of the trackless West African forests he ruled over.

Jane, scurrying on guiltily to their private sitting room, felt unhappy for him; her soft heart always bled for Miss Careening's victims, and it seemed obvious that this man was destined to join their ranks. Somehow she felt he was too fine and simple and splendid a person to be played with and flirted with to while away a spoilt beauty's fortnight, and—it was a tribute to Rex Adamant, had he known it—she screwed her courage to the sticking point, and, timidly, stammering, said as much to Helen.

From the depths of the cushioned basket chair in which she lay curled up, both hands under her chin, and her violet eyes narrowed between their lashes, Helen watched her nervousness, heard her halting speeches, and when at last Jane came to the end, half expecting to be crushed with a frivolous sentence, Helen said quietly:

"You waste your pity this time, Cousin Jane. I didn't come here to play with Captain Adamant. I came to—" she broke off short, but her eyes glowed, and a little, tender smile crept about the corners of her lips, the smile of a woman who knows she has happiness in her gift—and does not intend to withhold it.

Jane Balham jumped right out of her seat; Helen laughed—a tinkling laugh that broke in the middle.

"Oh, Jane! Don't look at me with such saucer eyes!" she said. "Sit down again and tell me how pretty I am, and that you're quite sure I shall bring it off."

Jane sat down again. She was inclined to sneers from Miss Careening. Presently she recovered her powers of speech.

"Then you knew he would come here?" she accused. Helen nodded.

"Overheard the Duke tell Major Darwin—they both thought it such an odd choice for a man who spends his days around about the equator. I'd made up my mind about him at once, you know—when he lectured—and this seemed such a very convenient meeting place because, of course, he must never guess I came to find him." She laughed again, very softly and sweetly. "He would be so frightfully shocked, he would think it quite—unwomanly, I am sure he is terribly old-fashioned, men from the wilderness always are!" She leaned forward and patted Jane's hand. "You're such a comfort to me, Jane, so nice and silent and safe, such a mother-confessor."

Lady Balham squeezed the strong slim fingers. "I'm sure I hope you'll be very happy, dear. I thought he had a good face—"

Helen flashed a glance at her. "You make very sure!" she said.

Jane Balham only smiled, Helen stood up and went to stare critically at herself in the long mirror between the windows.

"I am really very beautiful," she said at last, as though the face in the glass were just a picture. "I used to find it quite a nuisance—so many stupid moths fluttering around, who would never take so for an answer, but now—I'm glad."

(To be Concluded Next Week.)

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