

# THE GREAT MONTAMOR CASE

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ALICE I. VENTIL

## SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

"JIM" GILBERT and his friend, Charles Daunce, become estranged over the affections of Nettie Grey, a pretty Australian girl, the daughter of a sheep rancher. Gilbert is erroneously reported to have been killed in a mine accident. Daunce then marries Nettie and sells her to the best bidder in England. When Gilbert returns and learns of this, the men fight a duel at "Sixteen Acres" which ends in a draw.

Afterward there appears in England a young man, known variously as Charles Daunce and "Mr. Roberts," who is accepted as Robert Halliday, the late of Lord Montamor, and takes the title and estate. This displaces Ronald Halliday, a nephew.

When Robert went away, he was engaged to his cousin, Gwendolen Halliday, a very beautiful young woman. But with time the relations between the two changed. Gwendolen was won by Ronald, who had loved her from the first, but who was not so successful in his courtship as she had expected. Since his fortunes are so materially affected, Ronald tries to induce Gwendolen to break the engagement. But Gwendolen, who had never professed anything but a true friendship for him and only allowed him to win her after a long courtship, she decides that, after all, she loves him as much as ever, and will bear to see him married to another woman. And while Ronald declares that the claimant to the fortune is the rightful Lord Montamor, she insists that he is an impostor and determines to decide the matter, in her own mind, at a garden party which she knows he will attend, and at which she can obtain by references to incidents in their lives, and particularly to a certain document which both had signed and which had the date of the marriage, of which each had a key. The claimant's failure to recall any memory of these things, and the fact that in her belief, she tells him that he is a living lie, and that she will lock him in a room.

Detectives then inform Gwendolen that a Mrs. Daunce and "a girl in black" live near Epsom. She goes to see Mrs. Daunce and makes up her mind to see the girl in black. To further trace the movements of the returned heir, Gwendolen visits Nettie Grey, a gipsy, and is stunned to see upon her hand a ring she had given Robert.

Gwendolen has proved to her own satisfaction that the returned heir is not Charles Daunce, and she announces to Ronald that if he should prove to be Robert, they must part; whereupon Ronald agrees to join with her in a contest for the title and estate.



(CONTINUED FROM LAST SUNDAY)

## CHAPTER XXIII

### Galling Bonds

STRANGELY enough, when her beloved, the betrothed husband whose marriage with her at the rural parish church had been roughly interrupted by the woman of whom he said: "I married my cousin, Gwendolen—she is my wife, Nettie was relieved, conscious, rather than overwhelmed."

In these crises of life, memory is as vividly awakened as all the other mental faculties. Nettie remembered that for fifteen long years her Robert had been dead to his old surroundings and every human soul they envied. She recollected that no long a desertion of any wife would go far to break the tie in the case of any man. She reasoned in a flash, that if she could only get to the man who had been dead to his old surroundings and every human soul they envied.

"But, supposing you did marry her, dearest, you deserted her," if she chooses, she can set you free—at least, I understood the marriage laws freed a woman from a husband who had deserted her only a few years, and you, why it was almost a lifetime you spent as a bachelor, after you forgot what you had done."

"Yes, that it true enough," groaned Lord Montamor; "but how can any poor wretch of a man cope with a woman bent on revenge for her supposed wrongs?"

"Well, if she revenges herself in your case she will be, as Annie said the other day, speaking of Cook, 'cutting her nose off to punish her face.' Did you not say that she was engaged to marry your cousin, Captain Halliday, who was always to marry him after she has accused you of betraying her husband—at least, without divorcing you, which she can easily do if she likes?"

"My God!" There was no profanity in the cry uttered by the unhappy man, as he turned toward Nettie; it was one of utter, touching thankfulness.

"Oh!" he faltered, snatching her hands and holding them tightly to his breast, "my darling, my comforter, that you should have seen this way out—that you should be the Portia to release a poor doomed creature from this awful fate! For if I lost you, my Nettie, I could not live—I should die in despair."

"Nonsense! We must not even say that horrid word," said Nettie, nestling closely to him, for he had opened his arms and drawn her to his throbbing heart. "Despair, indeed! We must fight—fight in self-defense—fight this second battle to be able to live together in peace, for the first battle is at an end!"

He frowned. "The first—battle—at an end? What do you mean?" he slowly asked.

"What I say," she returned. "Your first battle was to establish your identity as Robert—Lord Montamor. If this lady had not denied you, if she had not persuaded Captain Halliday to eat his own words and to second her in asserting you were not Lord Montamor, you would be firmly settled in the house of Lords, as you told me you could not help wishing to be. Now you must fight a second battle to have your identity established, for your only enemy has turned and says you are."

In his perturbation, his misery after his interrupted wedding, and the shock of seeing documents with his own signature which proved that Gwendolen was actually his wife, he had forgotten that by her conduct she had virtually abandoned her own identity, therefore, that the case "Halliday vs. Daunce" was ended, Gwendolen's acknowledgment of him rendered it impossible for her to deny him.

"But what good would that be without you?" He clasped her close and kissed her passionately—lips, eyes, brow. And every kiss seemed to give her new life, fresh power and strength.

"It need not be without me, dearest love, my own," she murmured. "A greater happiness than she had felt since her father's death, she had never known in her soul; she fondly thought it was the precursor of a still greater earthly joy. She has only to be persuaded to ask that foolish marriage to be dissolved, and I am sure it will be done. I have always heard that the laws of England are just."

"But—once more he frowned. Even in his anguish his charity forbade him dreaming of releasing to any woman to release him—especially a woman he had injured in the past. "But, my darling, who will suggest such a course to her—the most hard-hearted, strong, positive, aggressive females alive? I cannot, even if I would, disgrace myself by asking mercy from one who would owe affection, which I never for one instant gave."

"I will tell you who will," she quietly replied; "Captain Halliday. You have told me how good he was, how, although he is a stranger to you, he recognized you, he did it, without a second thought because he was true, honest, just. When he hears of us, he will help us, I am sure he will. How?"

"Persuading Miss Halliday to apply for a divorce."

"How can a man never really married—playing at wedding a woman in the Scottish fashion so lightly that even when his former wife returns he knows what he had done—be divorced? It is a farce!" he bitterly cried. "But stop, don't speak; I think if Ronald could make Gwendolen consent to my return, she might apply to have that absurdity annulled. But, oh, Nettie, I feel hopeless, helpless, as if we were doomed—all three of us."

He groaned and shuddered. That look which Nettie had learned to know so well during the time when her father was sick unto death, and Robert had lingered to wait for her when he ought to have been on his homeward journey to resume the title which devolved upon him at the death of Lord Montamor, deepened into a feature. She watched him as his eyes, upon his drawn and seemed to start out of his head, as his jaw fell, as he looked like one suddenly confronted with a horrible, unworldly doom.

"Robert," she said at last, in her alarm at that impossible stare. The low cry roused him. He shuddered, swung up, and as it were, brushed away some invisible, intangible presence from him.

"My God! I am haunted, Nettie, I am haunted!" he wildly cried, turning to her. "I see hateful, awful

"E" wanted on a charge of murder!"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### Deus ex Machina

RONALD HALLIDAY sat gloomily in his "study," as he called his breakfast room—half gunroom, half library. His unaltered breakfast was before him. He had not slept. He had no appetite for food, for last night he had been summoned by Gwendolen to hear the whole truth—how she had married Robert in a mutual fit of youthful passion while they were staying together in Scotland, and how at last her certainty that "the pretender" was Robert and no other had driven her to interrupt his marriage with "the squatter's daughter from Australia."

He recalled the interview—how, in his first bitterness, he had reproached her with a lingering affection for the lover of her youth, and how she had blazed with wrath. She had never looked handsomer, a grander creature, than when, facing him in scorn, she had said, "If he were to be killed if I did not acknowledge the wretched lie, I would not do it!" at the same time, when, in his passion of mingled anger and love, he would have embraced her, daring him to touch her. "If I were a man," she had disdainfully cried, "my wife, no matter how slight her matrimonial tie might be, would be as sacred to me as a vestal of old to the men of their time, or as a professor's daughter to a Catholic!"

And, like the man in scripture, he had "gone away sorrowful." The blow to find how complete Gwendolen considered their mutual alienation to be had dazed him, paralyzed his thinking powers for the actual moment. Only during the silent watches of the night, lying awake, an idea had come to him. Why should this slender, delicate of slender ties between Gwendolen and Robert, whose cerebral accident had led to complete oblivion of it, remain, when, in the court devoted to such matrimonial legalities, it would be a mere matter of form to set it aside?

"I believe she loves me," he was sorrowfully musing, as he almost unconsciously contemplated that idyllic breakfast table. "It is only her scrupulous indifference of what is proper and pure that in between us, I dimly felt, this was no disconsolate bridegroom, proud Gwendolen in divorce court 'Impossible!'"

Arriving at that mental cul-de-sac for perhaps the tenth or twelfth time, he was interrupted by the entrance of his man, with the news that Lord Montamor wished to see him on urgent business which would not wait.

When, in reply to his "bring him in," he, with hope leaping up in his heart, rose to welcome Lord Montamor, his spirits fell somewhat, seeing the baffled bridegroom so cheery and self-confident.

"Have you heard the news—how my mother has had a stroke? But she is getting better, thank God!" exclaimed Robert, as, in anticipation of future joys, he wrung his cousin's limp hand. Certainly, Ronald dimly felt, this was no disconsolate bridegroom, proud Gwendolen in divorce court 'Impossible!'"

"You have heard the news—how my mother has had a stroke? But she is getting better, thank God!" exclaimed Robert, as, in anticipation of future joys, he wrung his cousin's limp hand. Certainly, Ronald dimly felt, this was no disconsolate bridegroom, proud Gwendolen in divorce court 'Impossible!'"

"Oh, you know, then?" Robert's face fell. "That is just what I came about, old fellow. Do prove the old adage, 'Folly feeling makes us wondrous kind,' and persuade Gwendolen to listen to her better self and release me. I am perfectly certain she loves you as well as my little girl loves me, and when I say that I say something very strong indeed. Don't say you won't interfere till you have heard my version of the ridiculous affair. If I had only remembered it all before should not be here worrying you now. I met Gwendolen once as a child with her hair down her back. I remembered that, but thought our acquaintance with each other ended there. What I clean forgot was that some years later I was invited to stay together with her, at a shooting box in Scotland. We were the only young unmarried people, and I went with a few friends, and she, I think, created a spurious, spontaneous passion—youthful effervescence of a couple of youngsters with nothing to do—a young passion which came to a climax one day. She had given me a ring; had said, 'With this ring I thee wed, and that set me thinking of acquiring her—lovely girl, she was—by a Scotch marriage, for I was not irrevocably bound to her, and there was no getting out of it. I knew very well my father would not listen to our engagement for a moment. He was perfectly rabid on the subject of the marriage of cousins; indeed, he barred all relatives as candidates for mutual matrimony. I had that said feeling for her which a young fellow who has lived straight does have for, perhaps, the very first girl that comes his way. 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