

THE SORCERESS

BY
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THE SORCERESS

CHAPTER I.

IT was the most exciting event which had ever occurred in the family, and everything was affected by it.

Imagine to yourselves such a young family, all in the very heyday of life, parents and children alike. It is true that Mrs. Kingsward was something of an invalid, but nobody believed that her illness was anything very serious, only a reason why she should be taken abroad, to one place after another, to the great enjoyment of the girls, who were never so happy as when they were travelling and gaining, as they said, experience of life. She was not yet forty, while Charlie was twenty-one and Bee nineteen, so that virtually they were all of the same age, so to speak, and enjoyed everything together—mamma by no means put aside into the ranks of the dowagers, but going everywhere and doing everything just like the rest, and as much admired as anyone.

To be sure she had not been able to walk about so much this time, and had not danced once, except a single turn with Charlie, which brought on a palpitation, so that she declared with a laugh that her dancing days were over. Her dancing days over! Considering how fond she had always been of dancing, the three young people laughed over this, and did not take the least alarm. Mamma had always been the ringleader in everything, even in the romps with the little ones at home. For you must not think that these three were all of the family by any means.

Bee and Betty were the eldest of I can't at this moment tell how many, who were safe in the big nursery at Kingswarden under the charge (very partial) of papa, and the strict and steady rule of

nurse, who was a personage of high authority in the house. Papa had but lately left “the elder ones,” as he called them, including his pretty wife—and had gone back to his work, which was that of an official at the Horse Guards, in some military department of which I don’t even know the name, for I doubt whether the Intelligence Department, which satisfies all the necessities of description, had been invented in those days.

Colonel Kingsward was a distinguished officer, and the occasion of great *éclat* to the little group when he showed himself at their head, drawing round him a sort of cloud of foreign officers wherever he went, which Bee and Betty appreciated largely, and to which Mrs. Kingsward herself did not object; for they all liked the clank of spurs, as was natural, and the endless ranks of partners, attendants in the gardens, and general escort and retinue thus provided. It was not, however, among these officers, red, blue, green, and white—of all the colours in the rainbow—that Bee had found her fate. For I need scarcely say it was a proposal which had turned everything upside down and filled the little party with excitement.

A proposal! The first in the family! Mamma’s head was as much turned by it as Bee’s. She lay on the sofa in her white dressing gown, so flushed with happiness and amusement and excitement, that you would have supposed it was she who was to be the bride.

And then it was so satisfactory a thing all round. If ever Mrs. Kingsward had held anyone at arm’s length in her life it was a certain captain of Dragoons who had clanked about everywhere after her daughters and herself for three weeks past. The moment they had appeared anywhere, even at the springs, where she went

to drink her morning glass of disagreeable warm water, at the concert in the afternoon, in “the rooms” at night, not to speak of every picnic and riding party, this tall figure would jump up like a jack-in-a-box. And there was no doubt that the girls were rather pleased than otherwise to see him jump up. He was six foot two at least, with a moustache nearly a yard long, curling in a tawny and powerful twist over his upper lip. He had half-a-dozen medals on his breast; his uniform was a compound of white and silver, with a helmet that literally blazed in the sun, and his spurs clanked louder than any other spurs in the gardens. The only thing that was wanting to him was a very little thing—a thing that an uninstructed English person might not have thought of at all—but which was a painful thing in his own troubled consciousness, and in that of the regiment, and even was doubtful to the English friends who had picked up, as was natural, all the prejudices of the class into which their own position brought them.

Poor Captain Kreutzner, I blush to say it, had no “Von” to his name. Nobody could deny that he was a distinguished officer, the hope of the army in his branch of the service; but when Mrs. Kingsward thought how the Colonel would look if he heard his daughter announced as Madame Kreutzner *tout court* in a London drawing-room, her heart sank within her, and a cold perspiration came out upon her forehead. “And I don’t believe Bee would care,” she cried, turning to her son for sympathy.

Charlie was so well brought up a young man that he cared very much, and gave his mother all the weight of his support. His office it was to beguile Captain Kreutzner as to the movements of the party, to keep off that bold dragoon as much as was possible; when, lo! all their precautions were rendered unnecessary by the arrival

of the real man from quite another quarter, at once, and in a moment cutting the Captain out!

There was one thing Mrs. Kingsward could never be sufficiently thankful for in the light of after events, and that was, that it was Colonel Kingsward himself who introduced Mr. Aubrey Leigh to the family. He was a young man who was travelling for the good of his health, or rather for the good of his mind, poor fellow, as might be seen at a glance. He was still in deep mourning when he presented himself at the hotel, and his countenance was as serious as his hatband. Nevertheless, he had not been long among them before Bee taught him how to smile, even to laugh, though at first with many hesitations and rapid resuming of a still deeper tinge of gravity, as if asking pardon of some beloved object for whom he would not permit even himself to suppose that he had ceased to mourn. This way he had of falling into sudden gravity continued with him even when it was evident that every decorum required from him that he should cease to mourn. Perhaps it was one of the things that most attracted Bee, who had a touch of the sentimental in her character, as all young ladies had in those days, when Mrs. Hemans and L. E. L. were the favourite poets whom young ladies were expected to read. Well brought up girls were not permitted, I need not say, to read Byron. Shelley was a name of fear, and the poems of Mr. Thomas Campbell, not to say Mr. Thomas Moore (carefully selected) were likely to promote that quality.

The pale young man, with his black coat, his hatband, his look of melancholy, drove out the image of the Captain at once from Bee's mind. She had perhaps had enough of captains, fine uniforms, spurs, and all. They had become what modern levity calls a drug in the market. They made *Fenster* parade all day long

under her windows; they thronged upon her steps in the gardens; they tore the flounces from her tarlatan into pieces at the balls. It was something far more original to sit out in the moonlight and look at the moon with a sorrowful young hero, who gradually woke up into life under her hand. Poor, poor boy!—so young and so melancholy!—who had gone through so much!—who was really so handsome when the veil of grief began to blow away!—who had such a pretty name!

Bee was only nineteen. She had mocked and charmed and laughed at a whole generation of young officers, thinking of nothing but picnics and dinner parties and balls. She wanted something new upon which to try her little hand—and now it was thrown, just when she felt the need, in her way. She had turned a young fool's head several times, so that the operation had lost its charm. But to bring a sad man back to life, to drive away sorrow, to teach him to hold up his head again, to learn how sweet it was to live and smile, and ride and run about this beautiful world, and wake every day to a new pleasure—that was something she felt worthy of a woman's powers. And she did it with such effect that Mr. Aubrey Leigh went on improving for three weeks more, and finally ended up with that proposal which was to the Kingsward family in general the most amusing, the most exciting, the most delightful incident in the world.

And yet, of course, it was attended with a certain amount of anxiety which in her—temporarily—invalid state was not very good for mamma. Everybody insisted on all occasions that it was a most temporary state, and that by the end of the summer she would be all right—the palpitations quite calmed down, the flush—which made her so pretty—a little subdued, and herself as strong as ever. But in the meantime this delightful romantic incident, which

certainly acted upon her like a glass of champagne, raising her spirits, brought her some care as well. Her first interview was of course with Bee, and took place in the privacy of her chamber, where she cross-examined her daughter as much as was compatible with the relations between them— which indeed were rather those of companions and comrades than of mother and daughter.

“Now, Bee, my dear child,” she said, “remember you have always been a little rover, and Mr. Leigh is so quiet. Do you think you really, really, can devote yourself to him, and never think of another man all your life?”

“Mamma,” said Bee, “if you were not such a dear I should think you were very insulting. Another man! Why, where should I find another man in the world that was fit to tie Aubrey’s shoe?”

“Well,” said Mrs. Kingsward, dubiously; but she added, after a moment, “You know, darling, that’s not quite the question. If you did find in the after ages a man that perhaps was—fit to tie Mr. Leigh’s shoe?”

“Why in all this world, *petite mère*, will you go on calling him Mr. Leigh?”

“Well, well,” said Mrs. Kingsward; “but I don’t feel,” she said again, after a moment’s hesitation, “that I ought to go so far as to call him Aubrey until we have heard from papa.”

“What could papa find to object to?” said Bee. “Why, it was he who introduced him to us! We should not have known Aubrey, and I should never have been the happiest girl in the world, if it had not been for papa. Dear papa! I know what he’ll say: ‘I can’t understand, my dear, why you should hesitate for a moment. Of

course, you don't suppose I should have introduced Mr. Leigh to my family without first ascertaining, &c., &c.' That, of course, is what papa will say."

"I dare say you are right, Bee. It is quite what I expect, for, of course, a man with girls knows what it is, though for my part I confess I always thought it would be a soldier—Captain Kreutzner or Otto von——"

"Mamma!" cried Bee, almost violently, light flashing out of the blue eyes, which were so bright even on ordinary occasions as to dazzle the beholder—you may imagine what fire came out of them now—"as if I should ever have looked twice at one of those big, brainless, clinking and clanking Germans. (N.B.—Mr. Aubrey Leigh was not tall.) No! Though I may like foreigners well enough because it's amusing to talk their language and to feel that one has such an advantage in knowing German and all that—yet, when it comes to be a question of spending one's life, an Englishman for me!"

Thus, it will be seen, Bee forestalled the patriotic sentiments of a later generation by resolving, in spite of all temptations, to belong to other nations—to select an Englishman for her partner in life. It is doubtful, however, how far this virtuous resolution had existed in her mind before the advent of Aubrey Leigh.

"I am sure I am very glad, Bee," said her mother, "for I always had a dread that you would be snatched off somewhere to—Styria or Dalecarlia, or heaven knows where—(these were the first out-of-the-way names that came to Mrs. Kingsward's mind; but I don't know that they were altogether without reference or possibilities), where one would have had no chance of seeing you more than

once in two or three years. I am very thankful it is to be an Englishman—or at least I shall be,” she added, with a sigh of suspense, “as soon as I have heard from papa——”

“One would think, *Mütterchen*, that you were frightened for papa.”

“I shouldn’t like you ever to try and go against him, Bee!”

“Oh, no,” said Bee, lightly, “of course I shouldn’t think of going against him—is the inquisition over?—for I promised,” she said, with a laugh and a blush, “to walk down with Aubrey as far as the river. He likes that so much better than those noisy blazing gardens, with no shade except under those stuffy trees—and so do I.”

“Do you really, Bee? I thought you thought it was so nice sitting under the trees——”

“With all the *gnadige* Fraus knitting, and all the *wohlgeborne* Herrs smoking. No, indeed, I always hated it!” said Bee.

She jumped up from where she had been sitting on a stool by her mother’s sofa, and took her hat, which she had thrown down on the table. It was a broad, flexible, Leghorn hat, bought in Florence, with a broad blue ribbon—the colour of her eyes, as had often been said—floating in two long streamers behind. She had a sash of the same colour round the simple waist of her white frock. That is how girls were dressed in the early days of Victoria. These were the days of simplicity, and people liked it, seeing it was the fashion, as much as they liked crinolines and chignons when such ornamental arrangements “came in.” It does not become one period to boast itself over another, for fashion will still be lord—or lady—of all.

Mrs. Kingsward looked with real pleasure at her pretty daughter, thinking how well she looked. She wore very nearly the same costume herself, and she knew that it also looked very well on her. Bee's eyes were shining, blazing with brightness and happiness and love and fun and youth. She was not a creature of perfect features, or matchless beauty, as all the heroines were in the novels of her day, and she was conscious of a great many shortcomings from that high standard. She was not tall enough—which, perhaps, however, in view of the defective stature of Mr. Aubrey Leigh was not so great a disadvantage—and she was neither fair enough nor dark enough for a Minna or a Brenda, the definite and distinct blonde and brunette, which were the ideal of the time; and she was not at all aware that her irregularity, and her mingling of styles, and her possession of no style in particular, were her great charms. She was not a great beauty, but she was a very pretty girl with the additional attraction of those blue diamonds of eyes, the sparkle of which, when my young lady was angry or when she was excited in any more pleasurable way, was a sight to see.

“All that's very well, my dear,” said Mrs. Kingsward, “but you've never answered my question: and I hope you'll make quite, quite sure before it's all settled that you do like Aubrey Leigh above everybody in the world.”

“*A la bonne heure,*” said Bee; “you have called him Aubrey at last, without waiting to know what papa will say;” with which words she gave her mother a flying kiss, and was gone in a moment, thinking very little, it must be allowed, of what papa might say.

Mrs. Kingsward lay still for a little, and thought it all over after Bee was gone. She knew a little better than the others what her Colonel was, and that there were occasions on which he was not so easy to deal with as all the young ones supposed. She thought it all over from the moment that young Mr. Leigh had appeared on the scene. What a comfort it was to think that it was the Colonel himself who had introduced him! Of course, as Bee said, before presenting anyone to his wife and family, Colonel Kingsward would have ascertained, &c., &c. It was just how he would write no doubt. Still, a man may introduce another to his wife and family without being ready at once to accept him as a son-in-law. On the other hand, Colonel Kingsward knew well enough what is the possible penalty of such introductions. Young as Bee was, she had already attracted a good deal of attention, though this was the first time it had actually come to an offer. But Edward must surely have thought of that. She was, though it seemed so absurd, and though Bee had laughed at it, a little afraid of her husband. He had never had any occasion to be stern, yet he had it in him to be stern; and he would not hesitate to quench Bee's young romance if he thought it right. And, on the other hand, Bee, though she was such a little thing, such a child, so full of fun and nonsense, had a spirit which would not yield as her mother's did. Mrs. Kingsward drew another long fluttering sigh before she got up reluctantly in obedience to her maid, who came in with that other white gown, not unlike Bee's, over her arm, to dress her mistress. She would have liked to lie still a little longer, to have finished the book she was reading, to have thought over the situation—anything, indeed, to justify her in keeping still upon the couch and being lazy, as she called it. Poor little mother! She had not been lazy, nor had the chance of being lazy much in her life. She had not begun to guess why it was she liked it so much now.

CHAPTER II.

I HAVE now to explain how it was that Mr. Aubrey Leigh was so interesting and so melancholy, and thus awoke the friendship and compassion, and secured the ministrations of the Kingsward family. He was in deep mourning, for though he was only eight-and-twenty he was already a widower, and bereaved beside of his only child. Poor young man! He had married with every appearance of happiness and prosperity, but his wife had died at the end of the first year, leaving him with a baby on his inexperienced hands. He was a young man full of feeling, and, contrary to the advice of all his friends, he had shut himself up in his house in the country and dedicated himself to his child. Dedicated himself to a baby two months old!

There was nobody who did not condemn this unnecessary self-sacrifice. He should have gone away; he should have left the child in the hands of its excellent nurse, under the supervision of that charming person who had been such a devoted nurse to dear Mrs. Leigh, and whom the desolate young widower had not the courage to send away from his house. Her presence there was a double reason, people said, why he should have gone away. For though his sorrow and trouble was so great that nobody for a moment supposed that he had any idea of such a thing, yet the presence of a lady, and of a lady still called by courtesy a young lady, though older than himself, and who could not be treated like a servant in his house, was embarrassing and not very seemly, everybody said. Suggestions were made to her that she should go away, but then she answered that she had nowhere to go to, and that she had promised to dear Amy never to forsake her child. The country

ladies about who took an interest in the young man thought it was “just like” dear Amy, who had always been a rather silly young woman, to exact such a promise, but that Miss Lance would be quite justified in not keeping it, seeing the child had plenty of people to look after her—her grandmother within reach and her father dedicating himself to her.

Miss Lance, however, did not see her duty in the same way; indeed, after the poor little child died—and there was no doubt she had been invaluable during its illness, and devoted herself to it as she had done to its mother—she stayed on still at Leigh Court, though now at last poor Aubrey was persuaded to go away. The mind of the county was relieved beyond description when at last he departed on his travels. These good people did not at all want to get up any scandal in their midst. They did not very much blame Miss Lance for declining to give up a comfortable home. They only felt it was dreadfully awkward and that something should be done about it, though nobody knew what to do. He had left home nearly six months before he appeared at the Baths with that letter to Mrs. Kingsward in his pocket, and the change and the travel had done him good.

A young man of twenty-eight cannot go mourning all the days of his life for a baby of eight months old, and he had already begun to “get over” the death of his wife before the second event occurred. This troublous beginning of his life had left him very sad, with something of the feeling of a victim, far more badly treated than most in the beginning of his career. But this is not like real grief, which holds a man’s heart with a grip of steel. And he was in the stage when a man is ready to be consoled when Bee’s blue eyes first flashed upon him. The Kingswards had received him in these circumstances with more *abandon* than they would have done in

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