DENTON JOURNAL.

1845. A Family Newspaper:—Devoted to Local and General Intelligence, Agriculture and Advertising.—Independent on all Subjects.—Subscription, One Dollar per Annum, in Advance. 1890.

VOL. 44. DENTON, MARYLAND: SATURDAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 6, 1890. NO. 51.

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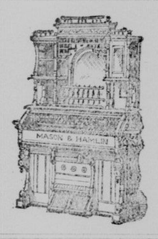

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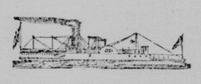

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THE DOUBLE CROSS

BY ARDENNES JONES-FOSTER.

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CHAPTER I.

"How charming you have grown!"

Cesca is my name—Cesca Melin. I was born at Westeras, Sweden, not far from Stockholm, in 186—. My father, Grefve Carl Melin, was an officer of high rank in the king's army. My mother, Grefvinna Carlotta Bertha, descended from one of the oldest families about Waxholm.

Before I had arrived at the importance of 16 years my parents died.

Olef Olsen, the only son of a barrister, was fiance to me. He begged me to stop longer at Westeras; but I had come into possession of the 100,000 kronor left to me by my father in his will, and being seized by a sudden desire to see the world and all that is in it I uttered a cry of delight upon the morning of the 31 of June, 188—, when I received a letter from America postmarked New York, which upon opening I found had been jointly written by my great-great-uncle Ivan Trolsky and his wife Vera, who had gone from Cronstadt, in Russia, to the states two years previous.

I had frequently been a visitor at their house at Cronstadt, my uncle and aunt both being natives of Stockholm. And being readers of the Swedish newspapers, Ivan and Vera had come upon the announcement of my succession to my father's fortune—a fact which seemed to highly impress them, for they congratulated me upon it, at the same time extending a pressing invitation to pay them an early visit, underscoring the assurance that I would be most affectionately welcomed.

Of course I read this letter to Olef, who, now that my parents were gone, found no person sufficiently interested in me to interpose caste objections to our suit of wooing.

From the very outset Olef seriously opposed my uncle and aunt's invitation. It was but quite natural that he should, inasmuch as we were betrothed, and the dear, good lad wanted to possess me wholly in person.

But in spite of Olef's protests my spirit bent itself to my mind's selfishness, and early in August I departed from Scandinavia by one of the Swedish line of steamships, arriving in New York upon the 28th day of the month, and was most profusely welcomed by Ivan and Vera.

"How charming you have grown!" exclaimed my aunt, after the salutations had ended.

"But not half as charming as her dot," cautiously whispered Ivan.

"Silence, idiot! The girl will hear you!" protested Vera, angrily. "Dear niece," she continued anew, suddenly turning to me, "you won't mind Ivan's and my little tete-a-tete now and then, will you? We are both so deeply interested in your welfare, you know, that we find it hard enough to do for you. To our great disadvantage we are far from being rich in worldly goods, and we fear that however great may be our attention it will not compare with your surroundings at home."

"My dear aunt and uncle," I replied, "it is not in the quantity of our efforts, but in the quality, that the heart finds richest enjoyment." And although I noticed that Ivan winced as I made the remark I paid no further attention to it at the time, but begging my aunt to show me to my apartment I bade Ivan good night and we left him.

Arrived at my room I kissed Vera, and as she went away I bolted my door, threw myself, exhausted, in my traveling gown upon the bed, buried my face in my pillow, and in spite of myself, overcome by Olef's absence and my great distance from home, now that the stimulating excitement of my voyage was ended, I burst into tears, while between my sobs my sorrowing heart again and again repeated Ivan's strange words, "Not half as charming as her dot!"

Was I positively ugly, then? I began to rummage the past. What if my dowry had been Olef's sole motive for winning my hand after all? Was it his main reason for wishing me to stop in Sweden? Am I ugly? I repeated. To which Truth gave me but one answer. My mirror had never turned from me with disdain. What, then, did Ivan mean?

Burfeited by them, lost in carious suspicions, I fell into a bothered sleep. Nor did I recover consciousness again until morning dawned, when my eyes were jarred open by a sound rapping at my door and a voice that softly asked:

"Are you awake, Cesca dear?"

"Yes, Aunt Vera."

"Breakfast is waiting for you, my dear," she replied in inviting tones. "Will you be down soon?"

"Right away, aunt," and I heard the echo of her footsteps as she descended the staircase.

"How fresh you look! You must have enjoyed a most quiet night of sleep," was Ivan's greeting, as I gained my place at the table.

I was ashamed to explain to them that I had not taken my clothes off during all of those hours: that my dreams had coined themselves into pages upon pages of horrors, and that, although I had hurriedly convinced myself by a brief glance in my glass that I did look comparatively fresh, I really could not quite make out why, after my whole night of misery, I should not present the appearance of a fright.

The breakfast was progressing when a ring came at the door and a telegraph messenger was admitted bearing a dispatch addressed to my aunt. Nervously she received it, raggedly tearing it open, as one unused to the receipt of messages.

"Anything to pay?" asked my uncle while Vera read over the dispatch.

"No, sir," replied the lad.

"There is no answer. You may go," my aunt added.

"Who is it from?" Ivan asked as the boy departed.

"Sara's mother."

"From Pittsburg?"

"Yes."

"What news?" he earnestly inquired, noticing his wife's dangerous whiteness.

"Sara is sick unto death!"

Vera nervously mused. "Poor cousin! I must go to her at once. How sad!" she exclaimed, turning to me. "And you, Cesca—I do so much dread to leave you. But Sara is so dear to me. I love her as a sister, and duty calls me to her. But let us hope that she will brave it, that I may soon hasten home. Your Uncle Ivan will do all in the world for you while I am away."

Before nightfall we had been to the railway station and seen Aunt Vera safely started upon her journey. The train sped out, the tears rushed into my eyes, and I felt myself buoyed homeward upon the wave of desertion. And once alone I felt a reluctance in accepting even the kind offices of Uncle Ivan, wishing, all the time, from the bottom of my crying heart that I might but cast one glance into Olef's fond eyes. Then, thought I, would the world have little of her own to claim, for my dear Olef was all the world to me!

CHAPTER II.

A week had gone by before Ivan received a letter from Vera. In this she told him that her Cousin Sara was improving.

But fancy our mutual discomfiture when, within the next three days, another letter came to Ivan, signed by Sara's mother, Esther, saying that Vera had suddenly been taken seriously ill with the same malady that had prostrated Sara—a type of fever which the attending physician pronounced very malignant; and so reduced in strength had Vera already become that fatal results were feared.

An immediate consultation followed and it was agreed that Ivan's duty lay in a quick visit to his wife, an obligation that I insisted was his first sacred debt. He quite readily agreed with me and by the next train he was bound for Pittsburg.

The weary hours dragged on. By the second morning's post I received a brief note from Uncle Ivan telling me that poor Vera was rapidly sinking; in fact, the family physician had given her up. Eminent medical counsel had been called in—but their deliberation only went to confirm the opinion of the family's medical adviser.

What was my surprise and joy, however, upon the third day after Ivan's departure when I received a letter postmarked Stockholm! I tore open the envelope as if expecting to disclose a gem of the rarest worth. And, believe me, I did; for I read there the name of my dear Olef! A name sweeter to me than all the wealth of nations. How I prized that letter! And to this day I cling to it as one of the choicest jewels in my diadem of maiden love!

"You have but just set out on your voyage," Olef ran on, "as I begin to write you. No doubt this will reach the New World quite as soon as you do, for I direct it 'via England.' But do not make light of my haste, my anxiety to commune with you, I beg. When you went away you took my heart with you. Oh, Cesca, why did we part? God grant that it may not be for long. Had I but the wings of a dove I would follow you. My soul mourns. Do not stop long away. Do not let the glamour of life's new phase lead you to forget me. Sleep in my heart as I sleep in your's. Let your faith wake with mine in the love jeweled morning of our meeting. * * * Ever your betrothed, Olef."

He had written other words. I preserve them. They are too sacred for public reading.

I at once answered this letter, telling Olef all that had happened, and went out to post it in time to catch the first steamer.

But I had no sooner returned to the house than a messenger brought me a dispatch. I opened it and read three words:

"Vera is dead!" (Signed). "IVAN."

CHAPTER III.

"What must happen to me now?" I mediated. "Here in this strange city am I, unattended, unprotected! My conscience will not permit me to stop here alone."

A week went on, with no further tidings from my uncle save one letter, in which he said that it had been decided to lay poor Vera at rest in Esther's family plot.

Within ten days Ivan came home. He was attired out of severest respect for his departed wife, and as I tried to console him during our conversation the tears rushed into his eyes and he cried as if his heart would break. Endeavor as I might my words seemed to afford him no soothing. Upon the following day and for a week longer he steadily refused to go to his business office, declaring that life had lost all attraction for him now that poor Vera had gone.

The season flew by. Olef's letters came and mine went. I had entered a musical college and arranged for a term of vocal instruction; and before I realized it May month was upon us. Nature had put on her warm, green robes. The flowers never smelled sweeter, the leaves never looked brighter—and but for the absence of the music of Olef's dear voice the warble of the bird notes would never have rung out in more delightful harmony.

I had already begun to look for another letter from Olef. I remarked to Ivan that it was quite time. And I also told him that upon receipt of that letter I should return to Stockholm, having informed Olef to that end.

What was my surprise when Ivan at once began to wean me from the notion of going home!

"Why, do you know," he exclaimed, "that I had fully made up my mind to ask you to write Olef to pay us a visit that he might be enabled to go back with you? I like Olef very much. He seems such a capital good fellow, and I am heartily glad that you have set your hearts one upon the other."

I thanked him for his kind regard, although not without blushing a bit, I must confess.

"And now," he resumed, "let me offer you a bit of advice. Olef is getting ready to enter the profession of law, is he not?"

"He has graduated and been admitted to the bar," I replied.

"Quite to my notion, then. If I am not mistaken your dot, left to you by your father, Grefve Melin, amounted to one hundred thousand kronor—about twenty-eight thousand dollars in American money."

"Yes," was my answer, as his words, "Not half as charming as her dot," uttered upon the night of my arrival, flew back to my memory, and still I could not connect their meaning with the present, because Ivan seemed so interested in Olef's and my future.

"Could your fortune be converted into ready money?" he bluntly asked.

"It is invested in securities which might be negotiated," I returned.

"Very good. Of course you want to double your fortune. It would be but quite natural that you should. Olef, being a barrister, can quite readily accomplish the preliminaries for you. If you will write to him and instruct him to fetch over—well, say, twenty thousand dollars of that money, I, through my brokerage office, can invest it for you in New York Stock Exchange listed securities that will yield you 100 per cent. profit. In fact, I know of such an opportunity today. Do as I advise you and I will make your fortune double itself and give Olef a permanent place as manager in my office. His legal learning will stand him in to great advantage and he will find twice the amount of profit in stocks that he would in the law."

Being only a woman of inexperience, I, of course, gave harbor to Ivan's advice. Twenty thousand invested would yield me an additional twenty thousand—besides giving Olef a start in life! How happy we could be upon our little fortune.

And so by the outgoing steamer I sent Olef a letter, instructing him to carry out Ivan's suggestion.

I must mention here that for a fortnight past I had experienced the strangest sensations—a feeling of langor stealing upon me and spells of morning dreariness. At times my limbs would seem stiff, almost dead. My back ached and I felt giddy. Twice I recall having stumbled over the floor when those dizzy waves swayed my head. I looked at my skin. It was growing parched, colorless, lifeless! I could not make it out. My exercise and habits were regular. My mode of living was perfect. I took plenty of baths, fresh air and good, wholesome food; and yet I grew weaker day by day, almost tottering at times. It seriously affected my vocal powers; four or five notes dropped out of my register, top and bottom. I consulted the old housekeeper about it. We called in Ivan. At first he suggested the advice of a doctor, but finally concluded that the cause might lie in the tin poisoning from certain imported fruits that I had been using—a Swedish brand of preserves of which no member of the family, except myself, had ever partaken.

It happened that his surmises tallied with the cause, for I did put aside the fruits, took certain remedies, including a powerful tonic, and within a few days my physical strength began to mend, my voice came back and the roses rushed to my cheeks once more, as if glad to meet old acquaintances, and I got on without the least hint of my former failing.

CHAPTER IV.

One night as we walked a shadow fell in front of us.

The Thingvalla, which was expected to arrive at the end of the following month, would have given Olef time to convert my securities and reach New York.

Just eighteen days after posting my letter I received a cablegram dated at Stockholm which told me that Olef's father had died, and that a visit to the States would be impossible. This cablegram bore Olef's signature, and as I read it my spirits fell beneath their load of sorrow. I refused all offers of consolation, and in spite of the fact that my musical examination was to occur the following Monday I resolved to return home at once.

"I hardly think that I would lose your opportunity to carry off first prize if I were in your place," urged Ivan. "Beside, Olef's detention can be but momentary."

I remarked that it was strange that I had not received my regular weekly letter from him. But Ivan soon turned my course of thoughts by saying that no doubt Olef's duties at home had crowded upon him so fast that he could find no time to write, and especially while watching at the bedside of a dying father. And this argument, together with the stimulating hope of winning the prize, won me over.

"Bide your time, Cesca," Ivan went on. "The next steamer may fetch good news."

I waited a week, and in the meantime my sorrow had been somewhat assuaged by my receipt of the first prize for vocal honors at the institute.

One morning Ivan handed me a letter postmarked Stockholm. It was in Olef's handwriting and yet it did not seem the same. I turned it over and over again, upside down and then held it between me and the light of the sun.

"Here is a double cross made with a pen upon the lid of the envelope. I wonder what he could have intended that to mean?" I asked, showing the cross to Ivan.

"He might have made it to reveal to you any attempt that should be made to open the letter," he suggested, looking at the mark.

I tore off the envelope and read:

"Do not let your heart split upon the rock of this, my final adieu. Brevity must be my parting message. Cease to hope. My heart is lost to you.

"You will ask why I have not kept my troth. I can but say that my father's will, opened after his death, has reversed my life, into which now shines the beam of a new love.

"I am to marry the daughter of Lieut. Bodine to-morrow. OLEF OLSEN."

My heart, torn with the anguish of my own sad life, I could only sob and weep over it. And then, as often a woman will do, I tried to lull my sorrow to sleep by the strains of melody. And as I played softly I followed the lines of that plaintive song, "Drifting Apart," that I remembered having read in "Broken Barriers":

Drifting apart! as the cruel shades
Of the years rise up to cast you and me.
Drifting apart!—two separate tides
Carry us out o'er the wide, wild sea!
Drifting apart! for another's love
Hath blinded you to the love I planned.
Drifting apart! for that alien love
Hath frozen your heart and chained your hand.
Drifting! Drifting and further astray!
My God! will we ever again one day
Meet in the passion of rice's blissful May,
And love, as we did, in the good old ways.

For the first time since my arrival in America—nearly one year now—my Uncle Ivan began to show me warm attention. And embittered, weighed down, galled by Olef's cruel letter, I had let myself drift into closer communion with Ivan, and—yes, I confess it—to avenge the past I had given him to understand that his ministry was not wholly rejected. He was not too old—thirty-seven, I seventeen.

From the moment of Vera's sad death Ivan had taken every precaution to throw about me the barriers of protection, in order that any possible attempts to criticise my abode at his house might be set at rest. He had engaged an elderly housekeeper, in addition to whom I had induced one of the young women from the Conservatoire to make her home with me.

We walked a good bit, Ivan and I. And by this time his affection had grown to fire. It was no mere assumption, that love of Ivan's. He was deeply in earnest. I am not the woman to read a man's heart amiss. The name of his wife, Vera, had faded into a mere memory now, and I received certain proofs that Ivan would have stripped his heart of all else in the world for me. "What were those proofs?" you ask. Oh, that is but for a woman to understand.

I must say that I returned the passion measure for measure. I had come to honor, respect and love Ivan. His image grew daily brighter and holier in my heart. And as we walked together, wrapped in one another's confidence, the very soul of joy lighted our pathway. Of course Irene, my companion, had noticed it. She seemed astonished at our mutual affection.

"Why, you are uncle and niece—blood relatives!" she exclaimed one day.

"Bless you, no; not blood relatives. Ivan is my uncle by marriage, and only great-great uncle at that, his wife having been great aunt to my mother."

One night and once again, as we walked beneath the heavy screen of the park trees, a shadow fell in front of us—the figure of a woman, it appeared to me—and as quickly did it flit away again. I remember having twice remarked it to Ivan. On the second occasion the shadow came just as we were replighting our troth and naming the day. I started, considerably frightened. Ivan calmed me.

"It was nothing," he remarked; "only a branch of that tall tree swinging across our path."

"But if it had been—if it could have understood—if it could have spoken—that shadow would have heard our pledges!"

"And you are ashamed of them, my darling?"

"No! oh, no, Ivan. Only I am a creature of such silly suspicions. My nation—my dear Swedish people—are somehow imbued more or less with a belief in 'eerie things,' as the Scots say. It may be a fault, but it was born in me. Even when I was a child my old nurse used to tell me tales of strange gnomes and hobgoblins, saying that they swarmed about us, and the lesson seems to have followed me. So do not chide me!"

His answer was that which he always gave when I pleaded for grace.

He kissed me.

The shadowy figure had faded into space.

As it was his custom to confide all of his little adventures to me, he found it quite in his turn of fancies one evening to relate a little incident that had that morning leaped into his life. It happened fully a fortnight after my receipt of Olef's letter. Ivan had returned home long after his usual hour.

"What kept you so long, Ivan?" I asked as he came down to dinner.

"A most peculiar circumstance, my darling Cesca," he answered. "I was passing along Broadway, near Canal street, to my office when a young man met me. He carried a traveler's bag in his hand and had evidently just arrived from a journey. As our eyes clashed he stopped suddenly, shocked, it seemed, by a momentary pang in his head—vertigo it looked like to me—threw up his hand, quickly passed his fingers over his brow, clutched at his throat as if he would tear open his collar to relieve a strangling sensation, and losing consciousness he reeled and fell. As he came to the ground I supported him, and with the aid of a passerby we carried him to a little shop in Canal street. But as he did not survive I had him conveyed to the hospital."

"But that did not keep you all day. Come, Ivan, confess now."

"Ah," he answered, "it took up three or four hours of my time, and as my office duties require a measured amount of attention each day I was obliged to stop there until I got through with my correspondence."

I accepted his explanation.

"But the man's name?" I added. "You did learn that?"

"How could I? He had not come to his senses when I left him."

"But he must have carried papers?"

"If he did they were locked in his bag."

"How old was he?"

"Perhaps five-and-twenty."

"American?"

"A foreigner, I fancy."

"A foreigner!" I cried. My head reeled. "What if it had been—but such nonsense! It could not have been Olef! You know Olef, of course! You were born next door to him, or he to you, rather."

"What put that thought into your little head?" he laughed. "Besides, this will dispel your presentment," and he handed me a letter addressed to him, received that morning, postmarked Stockholm. I read it.

Ivan Trolsky:

SIR—As I have failed to get an answer to my letter to Mlle. Cesca Melin, I have my fears that she might not have received it. I believe that she still remains in America. If you should see her kindly say that I made no effort to arrange her business affairs, and that her securities still remain with her solicitors. My bride and I start for a tour of Norway to-morrow. Please give my best wishes to Mlle. Melin, for whom I hope the richest of life's blessings. Most sincerely,

OLEF OLSEN.

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