



SYNOPSIS.

Fran arrives at Hamilton, Gregory's home in Littleburg, but finds him absent conducting the choir at a camp meeting. She repairs thither in search of him, laughs during the service and is asked to leave. Abbott Ashton, superintendent of the school, escorts Fran from the tent. He tells her Gregory is a wealthy man, deeply interested in charity work, and a pillar of the church. Ashton becomes gravely interested in Fran and while taking leave of her, holds her hand and is seen by Sapphira Clinton, sister of Robert Clinton, chairman of the school board. Fran tells Gregory she wants a home with him. Grace Noir, Gregory's private secretary, takes a violent dislike to Fran and advises her to go away at once. Fran hints at a twenty-year-old secret, and Gregory in agitation asks Grace to leave the room. Fran relates the story of how Gregory married a young girl at Springfield while attending college and then deserted her. Fran is the child of that marriage. Gregory had married his present wife three years before the death of Fran's mother. Fran takes a liking to Mrs. Gregory. Gregory explains that Fran is the daughter of a very dear friend who is dead. Fran agrees to the story. Mrs. Gregory insists on her making her home with them and takes her to her arms. It is decided that Fran must go to school. Grace shows persistent interest in Gregory's story of his dead friend and hints that Fran may be an impostor. Fran declares that the secretary must go. Grace begins nagging tactics in an effort to drive Fran from the Gregory home, but Mrs. Gregory remains staunch in her friendship. Fran is ordered before Superintendent Ashton to be punished for insubordination in school. Chairman Clinton is present. The affair ends in Fran leaving the school in company of the two men to the amazement of the scandal-mongers of the town. Abbott, while taking a walk alone at midnight, finds Fran on a bridge telling her fortune by cards. She tells Abbott that she is the famous lion tamer, Fran Nonpareil. She tired of circus life and sought a home. Grace tells of seeing Fran come home after midnight with a man. She guesses part of the story and surprises the rest from Abbott.

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

"Oh," Grace exclaimed, disbelievably surprised. "I did not know that you play cards, Professor Ashton. Do you also attend the dances? Surely you haven't been dancing and playing cards very long?"

"Not for a great while," responded Abbott, with the obstinacy of a good conscience wrongfully accused.

"Only since Fran came, I am sure," she said, feeling him escaping. She looked at him with something like scorn, inspired by righteous indignation that such as he could be influenced by Fran. That look wrought havoc with the halo he had so long blinked at, as it swung above her head.

"Does that mean," he inquired, with a steady look, "that you imagine Fran has led me into bad habits?"

"I trust the habits are not fixed," rather contemptuously. "I hardly think you mean to desert the church, and lose your position at school, for the sake of—of that Fran?"

"I hardly think so, either," returned Abbott. "And now I'd better go to my school work."

"Fran is imprudent," said Mrs. Gregory, in distress, "but her heart is pure gold. I don't know what all this means, but when I have had a talk with her—"

"Don't go, Professor Ashton," interposed Grace, as he started up, "until you advise me. Shall I tell Mr. Gregory? Or shall I conceal it on the assurances that it will never happen again?"

Abbott seated himself with sudden persuasiveness. "Conceal it, Miss Grace, conceal it!" he urged.

"If you will frankly explain what happened—here before Mrs. Gregory, so she can have the real truth, we will never betray the secret. But if you cannot tell everything, I shall feel it

"I believe this concludes our bargain," said Abbott, rising.

Mrs. Gregory was calm. "Miss Grace, Fran told me long ago that she is eighteen years old; she came as a little girl, because she thought we would take her in more readily, if we believed her a mere child."

"Does Mr. Gregory know that?"

"I haven't told him; I don't know whether Fran has or not."

"You haven't told him?" Grace was speechless. "You knew it, and haven't told him? What ought I to do?"

"You ought to keep your promise," Abbott retorted hotly.

"Sitting on that bridge at midnight, alone, telling people's fortunes by cards."

Professor Ashton—

Mrs. Gregory! Grace exclaimed, with one of those flashes of inspiration peculiar to her sex, "that Fran is a show-girl!"

Mrs. Gregory rose, and spoke through her mother's ear-trumpet: "Shall we go home, now?"

"That Fran," repeated Grace, "is a show-girl! She is eighteen or nineteen years old, and she is a show-girl!"

"Wouldn't it be best for you to ask her?"

"Ask her? Her? No, I ask you!"

"Let me push the chair," said Abbott, stepping to Mrs. Gregory's side. He read in the troubled face that she had known this secret, also.

The secretary gazed at him with a far-away look, hardly conscious that she was beating retreat, so absorbed was she in this revelation. It would be necessary for some one to go to Springfield to make investigations. Grace had for ever alienated Abbott Ashton, but there was always Robert Clinton. He would obey her every wish; Robert Clinton should go. And when Robert had returned with a full history of Hamilton Gregory's school-days at Springfield, and those of Gregory's intimate friends, Fran, with the proofs of her conspiracy spread before her, should be driven forth, never again to darken the home of the philanthropist.

"I would rather wait," said Mrs. Gregory, "and talk to Fran. She will promise me anything. I trust you, Abbott; I know you would never lead my little girl into wrong-doing. Leave it all to me. I will have a good talk with Fran."

"And," said Abbott eagerly, "if we both solemnly promise—"

Grace bit her lip. His "we" condemned him.

"I don't ask you to hide the affair on my account," he said, holding up his hand. "I don't want Fran put in an

unjust light. She isn't to be judged like other people."

"Oh," murmured Grace, "then you think there is more than one standard of right? I don't. There's one God and one right. No, I cannot consent; what might satisfy Mrs. Gregory might not seem best to me. No, professor, if you feel that you cannot explain what I saw, last night, I shall feel obliged to tell Mr. Gregory as soon as the choir practice ends."

"Didn't Fran refuse to tell?" Abbott temporized.

"Yes," was the skillful response; "but her reticence must have been to save you, for the girl never seems ashamed of anything she does. I imagine she hated to get you into trouble."

"Miss Grace, you have heard Mrs. Gregory say that she trusts me—and she is Fran's guardian. I ask you to do the same."

"I must consider my conscience."

That answer closed all argument.

"You had better tell her," said Mrs. Gregory, "for she is determined to know."

"I was taking a walk to rest my mind," Abbott said slowly, proceeding as if he would have liked to fight his ground inch by inch, "and it was rather late. I was strolling about Littleburg. At last I found myself at the new bridge that leads to the camp-meeting grounds, when ahead of me, there was—I saw Fran. I was much surprised to find her out there, alone."

"I can understand that," said Grace quietly, "for I should have been surprised myself."

Mrs. Gregory turned upon Grace. "Let him go on!" she said with a flash that petrified the secretary.

"When I came up to the bridge, she was sitting there, with some cards—all alone. She had some superstition about trying fortunes on a new bridge at midnight, and that explains the lateness of the hour. So I persuaded her to come home, and that is all."

Mrs. Gregory breathed with relief. "What an odd little darling!" she murmured, smiling.

"What kind of fortune was she telling?" Grace asked.

"Whatever kind the new bridge would give her."

"Oh, then the cards stood for people, didn't they? And the card you dropped in the yard was your card, of course."

"Of course."

"And did Fran have a card to represent herself, perhaps?"

"I have told you the story," said Abbott, rising.

"That means she did. Then she wanted to know if you and she would . . . Mrs. Gregory, I have always felt that Fran has deceived us about her age! She is older than she pretends to be!"

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# FRAN

BY

JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### Alliance With Abbott.

For the most part, that was a silent walk to Hamilton Gregory's. Abbott Ashton pushed the wheel-chair, and it was only Mrs. Jefferson, ignorant of what had taken place, who commented on the bright moon, and the relief of rose-scented breezes after the musty auditorium of Walnut Street church.

"They were bent and determined on Fran going to choir practice," the old lady told Abbott, "so Lucy and I went along to encourage her, for they say she has a fine voice, and they want all the good singing they can have at Uncle Tobe Fuller's funeral. I despise big doings at funerals, but I expect to go, and as I can't hear the solos, nor the preacher working up feelings, all I'll have to do will be to sit and look at the coffin."

"Mother," said Mrs. Gregory, "you are not cheerful tonight."

"No," the other responded, "I think it's from sitting so long by the Whited Sepulcher."

Mrs. Gregory spoke into the tram-

pet, with real distress—"Mother, mother! Abbott won't understand you; he doesn't know you are using a figure of speech."

"Yes," said the old lady, "number thirteen, if there's anything unlucky in figures."

Abbott effected diversion. "Mrs. Gregory, I'm glad Miss Noir agreed to say nothing about her discoveries, for the only harm in them is what people might imagine. I was pretty uneasy, at first, of course I knew that if she felt she ought to tell it, she would. I never knew anybody so conscientious."

There was a pause, then Mrs. Gregory responded, "She will not tell."

Abbott had seen them safely into the house, and had reached the gate on his departure, when Fran came running up. In pleased surprise he opened the gate for her, but she stopped in the outside shadow, and he paused within the yard.

"Fran!" he exclaimed with pleasure. "Is the practice ended?"

She made no response.

"Fran, what's the matter?"

Silence.

Abbott was both perplexed and hurt. "Remember what we said on the new bridge," he urged; "we're friends while we're together and after we part!"

"Somebody ought to burn that new bridge," said Fran, in a muffled tone; "it's no good making wishes come true."

"Why do you say that? Aren't we the best of friends?"

Fran collected herself, and spoke with cool distinctness: "I have a pretty hard fight, Mr. Ashton, and it's necessary to know who's on my side, and who isn't. I may not come out ahead; but I'm not going to lose out from taking a foe for a friend."

"Which you will kindly explain?"

"You are Grace Noir's friend—that explains it."

"I am your friend, too, Fran."

"My friend, too!" she echoed bitterly. "Oh, thanks—also!"

Abbott came through the gate, and tried to read her face. "Does the fact that I am her friend condemn me?"

"No—just classifies you. You couldn't be her friend if you were not a mirror in which she sees herself; her conscience is so sure, that she hasn't use for anything but a faithful reflector of her opinions."

"Her friends are mere puppets. It appears," Abbott said, smiling. "But that's rather to her credit, isn't it?"

Would you mind to explain your imagination of her character?"

His jesting tone made her impatient. "I don't think her character has ever had a chance to develop; she's too fixed on thinking herself what she isn't. Her opinion of what she ought to be is so sure, that she has never discovered what she really is. And you can't possibly hold a secret from her, if you're her friend; she takes it from you as one snatches a toy from a little child."

Abbott was still amused. "Has she emptied me of all she wants?"

"Yes. You have given her strong weapons against me, and you may be sure she'll use them to her advantage."

"Fran, step back into the light—let me see your face; are you in earnest? Your eyes are smoldering—Oh, Fran, those eyes! What weapons have I given her?"

Fran set her back against the fence, and looked at him darkly. "The secret of my age, and the secret of my past."

"I told her neither."

"As soon as you and Mrs. Gregory wheeled away Mrs. Jefferson," said Fran, "I went right down from the choir loft, and straight over to her. I looked her in the eye, and I asked what you had been telling about me. Why, you told her everything, even that I was trying to find out whether you and I would ever—would ever get married! I might as well say it, it came pat enough from her—and you told! Nobody else knew. And you dropped your King of Hearts over the fence—you told her that! And when we were standing there at the gate, you even tried—but no, I'll leave you and Miss Grace to discuss such subjects. Here we are at the same gate, but I guess there's not much danger, now!"

"Fran!" cried Abbott, with burning cheeks. "I didn't tell her, upon my honor I didn't. I had to admit dropping the card, to keep her from thinking you out here at midnight with a stranger. She saw us in the shadow, and guessed—that other. I didn't tell her anything about your age, I didn't mention the carnival company."

Fran's concentrated tones grew milder: "But Mrs. Gregory has known about the show all this time. She would die before she'd tell on me."

"I never told, Fran. I'm not going to say that again; but you shall believe me."

"Of course, Abbott. But it just proves what I said, about her emptying me of all she wants."

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