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Her Mother's Secret

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HER
MOTHER'S SECRET
A NOVEL

By
MRS. E. D. E. N. SOUTHWORTH

AUTHOR OF
"A Leap in the Dark," "A Beautiful Fiend," "Fair Play,"
"Em," "Em's Husband," "David Lindsay," Etc.



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Her Mother's Secret

3

HER MOTHER'S SECRET

CHAPTER I

THE MISTRESS OF MONDREER

"Mother! Oh, mother! it will break my heart!" wailed Odalite, sinking at the lady's feet, and dropping her head into her hands, face downward to the carpet.

The lady gently raised her child, took her in her arms and tenderly caressed her, murmuring, softly:

"No, my own! hearts never break, or one heart, I know, must have broken long ago. Besides," she added, in a firmer tone, "honor must be saved, though hearts be sacrificed."

"'Honor,' mother dear? I do not understand. I do not see what honor has to do with it. Or if it has, I should think that honor would be better saved by my keeping faith with Le than by breaking with him! Oh, mother! mother! it will kill me!" moaned Odalite.

"My child, my dear girl, hear me! Listen to reason! Leonidas Force has no claim to be remembered by you. You have never been engaged to him. You were but a little girl of thirteen when he went to sea on his first voyage, three years ago, and you have not seen him since. What possible claim can he have upon you, since no betrothal exists between you?" gently questioned the lady, tenderly running her fair fingers through the dark tresses of the young head that leaned upon her bosom. 4

"Oh, mother," replied the girl, with a heavy sigh, "I know that there was no formal betrothal between Le and myself—but—but—we all knew, you and father and Le and I—all knew—and always knew that we two belonged to each other and would always belong to each other all our lives. Le and I never thought of any other fate."

"Idle, childish fancies, my poor little girl! too trivial to cause you these tears. Wipe them away, and look clearly at the higher destiny,

more worthy of your birth and beauty," murmured the lady, pressing her ripe, red lips upon the pale brow of her darling.

"Oh, mother, I do not *want* a higher destiny! I do not want *any* destiny apart from Le. And these are *not* childish fancies, and *not* trivial to me! Oh, think, mother, Le and I were playmates as far back in my life as I can remember. We loved each other better than we loved any one else in the whole world. You and father used to laugh at us and pretend to be jealous; but we saw that you were pleased all the time; for you both intended us for each other, and we knew it, too, for father used to say when he saw how inseparable we two were: 'So much the better; I hope their hearts will not be estranged when they grow up!' And our hearts have never become estranged from each other!"

"Oh, yes, dearest, I know that there was some speculative talk when you were children of uniting you and Leonidas, so that the name of Force might not die out from Mondreer. But I never really approved of marrying cousins, Odalite, merely to keep the family name on the family estate."

"But, mother, darling, Le and I never thought of the family name and estate; we only thought of one another. And, besides, we are such very, very distant cousins—only fourth or fifth, I think—that that objection could never be raised. Oh, mother! dear mother! do not compel me to break with Le! I cannot! I cannot! Oh, indeed, I cannot!" she cried, burying her face in the lady's bosom.

Elfrida Force caressed her daughter in silence.

Presently Odalite lifted her head and pleaded:

"He is coming home so soon now, and so full of hope! He expects to be here by Christmas; and he expects—oh, yes, I know by his last letter that he expects to—to—to—" The girl's eyes fell under the compassionate yet scrutinizing gaze of her mother, and her voice faltered into silence.

"To marry you early in the new year, I suppose you mean, dear."

"Yes, mother."

"He did not say so."

"No, mother, dear, he did not say so, in so many words, but from the whole tone of his letter he evidently meant so. Father thought he did, and even tried to tease me about the New Year's wedding—asking me how many hundreds I should need to buy my wedding clothes."

"What was it he said in his letter that leads you to suppose he has any such expectations? I confess that I saw nothing of such an intention when I read the letter."

"Only this, mother, but it was very significant. He wrote that now he had inherited Greenbushes and all his Aunt Laura's money, he was rich enough to resign from the navy, and he need not go to sea any more, nor ever part with me again; but that he could stay home, repair and refurnish the house, improve the land, and farm it on all the new principles, and make the place a paradise for us to live in. He wrote, mother, dear, as of certain fixed facts."

"He was very presumptuous, my dear little girl, for there is nothing certain in this world of changes," gravely commented the lady.

"But Le's heart has not changed, nor has mine." 6

"My poor darling," said Elfrida Force, smoothing her daughter's dark hair with a gentle hand, "my precious child! It grieves me to do so, but I must prepare you for what seems inevitable. You must forget all this youthful folly, and think of Leonidas Force only as a cousin. You do not really love him as a betrothed maiden should love her affianced husband. You only fancy that you do. In reality you know nothing of such a love as that. Le was brought up in the house with you. You have no brother. Le has no sister. You therefore love each other as brother and sister. By and by you both may discover—but not for each other—the higher, deeper, stronger love which unites the husband and the wife in a true marriage—such a love as I could wish might crown my darling's life with lasting joy—such a love as you might find in a union with Angus Anglesea, if you would but give him the opportunity of winning your heart."

"Madam!" exclaimed the girl, starting to her feet, and gathering her black brows over black eyes that blazed with indignation, "I hate Col. Anglesea! I hate him and I fear him! And I would rather

die this day and never behold the face of Le again, than listen to Col. Anglesea!"

"Odalite! Odalite, my child! You are talking to your mother. Come to my heart again, and calm your excitement," said the lady, holding out her arms.

And the young girl fell weeping upon the bosom of her mother.

The lady allowed some time to pass in which the girl's paroxysm of tears exhausted itself, and then caressing her gently, she began, in a soothing tone:

"My precious child, do you doubt your mother's love or truth?"

"Oh, no, no, no! How could you ask such a question of your own child, mother?" earnestly protested Odalite. 7

"Do you doubt that duty is to be held above all other considerations?"

"No! Oh, no!"

"Well, then, I have something to tell you, my darling, which will make you forget all selfish aims, and even also the wishes of your old playmate. Come with me to your own bedchamber, where we shall be most secure from interruption. I will tell you of a fatal episode in my own youth, when I was younger even than you are now. Oh, that I should have to tell such a tale to my daughter! But, Odalite, when you have heard it you will learn just what you have to do in order to save us all, and especially to save your noble, generous, honorable father from ruin and disgrace. And then, Odalite, when you have learned all, you shall do exactly as you please. Not one word of coercion, not another word of persuasion, will I utter. I will leave our fate in your hands, and you shall be absolutely free to act. Come with me now."

She took her daughter's arm, and they arose from the sofa.

For a moment they stood, quite accidentally, facing a tall mirror, between two windows on the opposite side of the room, and that mirror for the moment reflected two beautiful forms, of which it would be difficult to decide the one to bear off the palm for beauty.

The elder lady, Elfrida Force, was a tall, stately blonde, with a superbly rounded form, a rich complexion, and an affluence of golden brown hair, rippling all over her fine head, and gathered into a mass at the nape of her graceful neck. She wore an inexpensive, closely fitting dress of dark blue serge, whose very plainness set off the perfection of her figure and enhanced the brilliancy of her complexion, showing to the best advantage that splendid beauty, which at the age of thirty-five had reached its zenith. Just now, however, the vivid & brightness of her bloom had faded to a pale rose tint, and her lovely blue eyes seemed heavy with unshed tears.

Her young daughter, Odalite, equally beautiful in her way, was yet of an entirely opposite type. She was of medium height, and her form, though well rounded, was slender almost to fragility. Her head was small, and covered with rippling, jet black hair. Her eyes and eyebrows were black as jet; her features were delicate and regular; and her complexion was of a clear, ivory-white. She wore a crimson, merino dress, plainly made, closely fitting, and relieved only by narrow, white ruffles at throat and wrists.

Only for a moment they paused, and then they walked out of the room, and the pretty picture disappeared.

CHAPTER II

FAMILY MYSTERIES

Mondreer was one of the finest old places on the western shore of Maryland. The estate covered fifteen hundred acres of richly cultivated, heavily wooded and well-watered land, running back from the Chesapeake.

The manor house stood upon rising ground, facing the east, and commanding a fine sea view in front, while it was sheltered on the north and west by a heavy growth of trees.

Mondreer had been in the possession of the Forces from the year 1634, when Aaron Force came over with the flower of the British Catholic gentry who, with Leonard Calvert, founded the province of Maryland.

They had prospered in every generation, and now owned more land and money than they had possessed when they first settled on the soil.

Although there was no entail of the manor, yet the 9 estate had, as a matter of custom, always come down through the eldest son of the family, though all the younger sons and daughters were almost equally well provided for.

Usually the Forces had married among their own people, according to the time-honored custom of the country. Indeed, they had invariably done so up to the present generation, when young Abel Force was master of Mondreer.

Great, therefore, was the consternation of the whole community when the heir of Mondreer, the handsomest, the wealthiest and the most accomplished among the young men of the county, if not of the whole State, instead of marrying some cousin or companion whom everybody knew all about, had, while on his travels abroad, forgotten all the venerable traditions of his native place, and "gone and wedded a stranger and foreigner" whom no one knew, or could find out anything about, except that she was as handsome as Juno, as haughty as Lucifer, and as poor as Lazarus.

However, as soon as it was ascertained that the newly married couple were quite established at Mondreer, the county people began to call on them—some from curiosity, some from etiquette, some from neighborly kindness, others because Mondreer was one of the pleasantest houses in the world to visit, and many from a mixture of several or of all these motives.

And every one who went to see the bride came back with such accounts of her grace, her beauty and her elegance that she became the standing theme of conversation at all the tea tables and bar rooms of the county.

They were certainly a very handsome couple. He was a tall, finely formed, stately man, with a Roman profile, brown complexion, dark eyes and jet-black hair and beard. She was a tall, elegant and graceful blonde, with Grecian features, a blooming complexion, dark blue eyes, and rich, sunny, golden-brown hair. 10

Theirs had evidently been a love match—a real, poetic, romantic, sentimental love match of the oldest-fashioned pattern.

He thought that he had found in her the very pearl, or rose, or star of womanhood—and so even thought many other men, when basking in her smiles, to be sure.

She thought that she had discovered in him the man of men.

In a word, they really adored one another. Each lived only for the other. Each would have suffered or died to save the other a single pang.

Even when, in time, children came to them, though they loved the little ones with more than usual parental affection, yet they loved them less than they loved each other.

Yet, with everything to make them blessed, it was cautiously whispered in the neighborhood that the household of Mondreer was not a happy one; that the beautiful mistress was subject to occasional periods of such profound depression—such intense gloom—as filled her husband's heart with alarm, and shadowed even her physician's mind with forebodings that these symptoms indicated the approach of that worst and most hopeless form of mental disease, melancholia.

Her devoted husband often proposed to take her, during the summer, to Saratoga or Newport; or, during the winter, to Washington or to Baltimore; he even urged her at all times to let him take her to Europe. But she firmly objected to leaving Mondreer, insisting that she was happier there than she could be anywhere else.

And, in truth, as years passed on, and children came, her melancholy seemed gradually to wear off, until in time it wholly disappeared.

Three children were born to them — all girls.

Odalite, the eldest, was thought to resemble both parents, having the Grecian profile and the fair complexion of her mother, and the black eyes and black hair of her father.

Wynnette, the second girl, was a perfect brunette, with a saucy snub nose, brown complexion, and black eyes and black hair.

Elfrida, or Elva, was all her mother — a faultless blonde — with fair complexion, blue eyes, and golden-brown hair.

Failing male heirs, Odalite, the eldest daughter of the house, would, not from any law of primogeniture, but merely by the custom of the country, be the heiress of the manor, though Wynnette and Elva would be very well endowed.

Very early in his married life, while his eldest daughter was still a babe in arms, and his younger ones were not yet in existence, Abel Force had been intrusted with the guardianship of a five-year-old boy — young Leonidas Force, the orphan son of his second cousin of the same name.

When several years had passed, and all hope of a male heir to send on the name with his old ancestral manor had faded away, it became the dearest wish of Abel Force's heart to unite his eldest daughter and his orphan cousin in marriage, so that Mondreer should not pass into another family.

With this object in view, he encouraged the affection that soon began to show itself between the boy and girl who were being brought up and educated in his home together.

He even sought to lead them to believe that they were destined for each other.

It is true that such a plan very seldom succeeds, perhaps not more than once in a hundred times, since the boy and girl so trained will, through the very perversity of human nature, if from no other cause, fall in love with any other boy or girl whom he or she may happen to meet, rather than with each other. 12

But in the case of these two young ones, Leonidas and Odalite, the plan succeeded to perfection.

The two children were attracted to each other, grew very fond of each other, became inseparable companions—seemed to have but one life between them.

Even total strangers, who knew nothing whatever of the family arrangements in regard to these children, observing their devotion to each other, would say:

“This boy and girl were made for one another. It would be a sin ever to part them. They are a perfect pair.”

And Abel Force would smile and say nothing.

No one objected to his plan. But the faithful guardian, in justice to his ward, would not allow him to grow up with the demoralizing anticipation of marrying an heiress to live on her fortune.

After the boy had passed out of the hands of the family governess, and had taken a course in Charlotte Hall College, his guardian called on him to make choice of some profession.

Le unhesitatingly chose the navy.

So, after some considerable trouble and expense, Mr. Force succeeded in getting the youth sent to the Naval Academy at Annapolis.

It happened about the same time that Abel Force was elected as a State senator, and went with his family to spend the winter in the State capital. So the young people were not separated. The end of the legislative session was, also, so near the commencement of the long summer’s vacation of the Naval Academy, that Mr. Force, with his family, always remained over in the city for the exercises, at the close of which he took his ward with him to Mondreer.

This habit continued year after year, until Leonidas Force had completed his course at the academy, and had graduated with honors.

Then he accompanied his guardian and the family home for the last time, to spend a brief leave of absence before starting on his first long sea voyage.

Leonidas was now about eighteen years of age, and Odalite about thirteen.

During that short visit home the two young people became more inseparable companions than ever.

That they were destined for each other was well known to everybody, and so well understood by themselves that no formal word on the subject was spoken between them, or thought necessary to be spoken.

They seemed to know and feel that they belonged to each other forever and ever.

Only when the day of parting came—of parting “for three eternal years,” as they put it in their despair—Odalite cried as if her heart would break, and refused to be comforted; and Midshipman Leonidas Force, U. S. N., disgraced his uniform by crying a little for company. But then, “the bravest are the tenderest.”

This was just three years before the opening of our story.

After their separation the young pair corresponded as frequently as possible under the circumstances.

Their letters were not love letters, in the usual acceptation of that term. They were frank, outspoken, affectionate letters, such as might have passed between a brother and sister who loved one another faithfully, and knew no fonder ties; letters which Odalite read with delight to father and mother, governess and sisters.

All went on in this way for the first two years.

The third year was an eventful one in the destiny of the young pair.

Early in the spring of that year occurred the death of Miss Laura Notley, a very aged lady, great-aunt of young Leonidas Force, to

whom by will she left her large plantation, known as Greenbushes, appointing Mr. Abel Force trustee of the estate during the minority of the heir. 14

This rich inheritance constituted the young midshipman a much more eligible *parti* for the youthful heiress of Mondreer than he had previously been considered.

Even Mrs. Force acknowledged that she was satisfied as she had never quite been before this.

The two plantations of Mondreer and Greenbushes joined, both fronting on the bay, and together would form perhaps the richest estate in the commonwealth.

And now, when Leonidas should return from his voyage, he might resign from the navy, and, as he would by that time have reached his majority, he might marry Odalite, after which the young couple might take up their residence at Greenbushes and live there during the lifetime of their parents.

This would certainly be a most delightful arrangement for all parties.

Letters were promptly written to Leonidas, both by his guardian and by his sweetheart, informing him of his good fortune and congratulating him on his happy prospects.

Odalite, in her crazy letter, wrote:

“I am so wild with delight that I am dancing when I am not writing, and the reason why is this – that now you need never go to sea again, and we shall never, never, never part more this side of heaven!

“You will give up your profession, but you need not be idle. You must not be, father says. You must look after the plantation, which has been neglected during the dear old lady’s life; you must reclaim the worn-out soil; farm the land on scientific principles, with the aid of chemistry and machinery and things, and improve the stock by importing new what’s-er-names. Oh, you will have plenty to do to keep you from moldering away alive, if you look after your estate as father does after his.