

Crowned With One Crest

By Gertrude Atherton

People were beginning to wonder if an American, having captured a title and worn it for five years, would renounce it for mere good looks and brains; in other words, if Lady Carnath, formerly Miss Edith Ingoldsby, of Washington, and still earlier—before her father had found leisure to crown a triumphant financial career with the patriotic labours of a United States Senator—of Boone, Iowa, would marry Butler Hedworth, M.P., a gentleman of some fortune and irreproachable lineage who had already made himself known on the floor of the House, but was not so much as heir-presumptive to a title. So many American maidens had placidly stood by while their mammas ‘arranged’ a marriage between their gold-banked selves and the impecunious scion of an historical house, that the English, when forced to admit them well-bred, found solace in the belief that these disgustingly rich and handsome girls were without heart.

Nevertheless, Lady Carnath, who had worn her weeds but a year, permitted Butler Hedworth to pay her attentions so pronounced that her world was mildly betting on his possible acceptance as husband or lover. It was argued that during the life of Lord Carnath his wife’s demeanour had been above comment, but a cynic remarked that women had all sorts of odd ideals; and was widely quoted.

Edith Ingoldsby had bought her Earl and paid a high price for him; nevertheless she had liked him better than any man but one that she had ever known, and they had been the best of friends. When she met him she was in the agonies of her only passion, and had clutched the first opportunity to bury alive the love that was destroying her beauty and her interest in life.

The passion had lingered for a time, then gone the way of all passions unfed by a monotonous environment and too much leisure. She found it very interesting to be an English countess. For a while she had the impression of playing a part in a modern historical drama; but before long she realised, with true American adaptability, that her new life was but the living chapters of a book whose earlier parts had been serial instalments of retiring memory. Her great wealth, her beauty, her piquant dashing thoroughbred manner, her husband’s popularity and title, created for her a position that would have closed any wound not irritated by domestic unhappiness; and this canker was not in her rose. When Carnath died she mourned him sincerely, but not too profoundly to anticipate pleurably the end of the weeded year. When she met Hedworth she was as free of fancy and of heart as if she had but stepped from a convent.

‘Yes, I was in love once—’ she admitted to him one evening as they sat alone. She blushed as she tripped at the word ‘before.’ Hedworth had made no declaration as yet; they were still playing with electricity, and content with sparks. ‘At least, I thought I was. All girls have their love freaks. I had had several—when I was in my teens. This seemed more serious, the *grandè* passion—because there was an obstacle: he was married. If he had been free, if there had been no barrier between myself and what I wanted, I think it would have been quite different. You see, I had had my own way so long that the situation, combined, of course, with the man himself—who was very magnetic—fascinated me; and I let myself go, to see what it would be like to long for something I could not have. I suppose it was my imagination that was at work, principally; but I ended by believing myself frantically in love with him.’

Hedworth stood up as she paused, and leaned against the mantel, looking down at her. They were in her boudoir, a yellow satin room that looked like a large jewel casket. Lady Carnath’s

long slender round figure betrayed its perfections in a gown of black chiffon; on her white neck and arms and in her black hair were many diamonds; she had dressed for the opera, then given the evening to Hedworth. Her dark face was delicately modelled; the mouth and chin were very firm, but the lips were full and red. The eyes in repose were a trifle languid, in animation mutable and brilliant. The brows were finely pencilled, and the soft dark hair, brushed back from a low forehead, added to the general distinction of her appearance. Hedworth studied her face as he had studied it many times.

‘Well?’ he asked. He had an abrupt voice, suggestive of temper, and the haughty bearing which is the chief attraction of Englishmen for American women. His face was as well chiselled as the average of his kind, but lacked the national repose. The eyes were very clever, the features mobile the tenacity and strength of his nature were indicated in the lower part of his face and in the powerful yet supple build of the man.

‘Well, what?’

‘What sort of a man was this Johnny?’

‘Oh, I am not very good at describing people—quite different from you—much lighter—’

‘I don’t care what he looked like. A man only looks to a woman who is in love with him as she imagines he looks. Was he in love with you?’

‘Yes, of course he was.’

‘Did he tell you so?’

The delicate red in Lady Carnath’s dark cheek deepened. ‘Yes. He did.’

‘Did you tell him that you loved him?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did he do?’

‘I don’t know that you have any right to be so curious.’

‘Of course you need not answer if you don’t wish. Did he kiss you?’

‘Yes, he did, if you want to know. We had a tremendous scene. I went into high tragics, and, I suppose, bored the poor man dreadfully.’

‘He was much more matter-of-fact, I suppose?’

‘Yes—he was.’

‘Where did this scene take place?’

‘In the drawing-room one afternoon when he had walked home with me from a tea.’

‘What happened the next time you met him?’

‘I never saw him again—that is, alone.’

Hedworth’s face and tone changed suddenly. Both softened. ‘Why not?’

She raised her head from the back of the sofa and lifted her chin defiantly. ‘I did not dare—if you will know. Carnath came along shortly after, and I took him as soon as he offered himself. Why do you look so pleased? The one was as bad as the other, only in the course I took there was no scandal.’

‘Which is the point. Scandal and snubs and vulgar insinuation in print and out of it would have demoralised you. How do you feel toward this man now? If he were free and came for you, would you marry him?’

She shook her head, and looked up at him, smiling and blushing again. ‘He is no more to me than one of the book-heroes I used to fancy myself in love with.’

‘Why didn’t he get a divorce and marry you? I thought any one could get a divorce in the States.’

‘You English people know so much about the United States! You are willing to believe

anything and to know nothing. I really think you feel that your dignity would be compromised if you knew as much about America as we know about Europe. Your attitude is like that of old people to a new invention which is too remarkable for their powers of appreciation, so they take refuge in disdain.'

He smiled, as he always did when her patriotism flamed. 'You haven't answered my question.'

'What?—oh, divorce. If a man has a good wife, no matter how uncongenial, he can't get rid of her unless he is a brute; and I didn't happen to like that sort of man.'

'Like? I thought you said just now that you loved him.'

'I don't think now that I did. I explained that a while ago.'

'Why have you changed your mind?'

'I never knew a man to ask so many questions.'

But before he left her he knew.

Edith anticipated pleurably the sensation her engagement would make, but did not announce it at once. She had a certain feminine secretiveness which made her doubly enjoy a happiness undiluted by publicity; moreover, some further deference was due to Carnath. She was very happy, the more so as she had believed until a short while ago that her strong temperamental possibilities were vaulted in her nature's little churchyard. 'Our hearts after first love are like our dead,' she thought; 'they sleep until the hour of resurrection.' Hedworth dominated her, had taken her love rather than asked for it, and, although he was jealous and exacting, she was haunted by the traditions of man's mutability, and studied her resources as it had never occurred to her to study them before. She found that the outer envelopes of her personality could be made to shift with kaleidoscopic brilliancy, and except when Hedworth needed repose—she had much tact—she treated him to these many moods in turn. It is possible that she added to her fascination, but, having won him without effort, she might have rested on her laurels. He was deeply in love with her, and worried himself with presentiments of what might happen before she would consent to name the wedding day. Both being children of worldly wisdom, however, they harlequined their misgivings and were happy when together.

Fortunately for both, she was heavy-laden with femininity, and was content to give all, and receive the little that man in the nature of his life and inherited particles has to offer. She was satisfied to be adored, desired, mentally appreciated. If his ego was always paramount, his spiritual demands so imperious that he appropriated the full measure of sympathy and comprehension that Nature has let loose for man and woman, not caring to know anything of her beyond the fact that she was the one woman in the world in whom he saw no fault, she was satisfied to have it so. She was a clever woman, but not too clever; and their chances of happiness were good.

And then a strange thing happened to her.

Hedworth was called to Switzerland by his mother, who fell ill. His parting with Edith occupied several hours, and during the three or four days following, his affianced protested that she was inconsolable. But his letters were frequent and characteristic, and she began to enjoy the new phase of their intercourse: the excitement of waiting for the post, the delight which the first glimpse of the envelope on her breakfast tray gave her, the novelty of receiving a fragment of him daily, which her imagination could expand into his hourly life and thoughts. The season was over, and she had little else to do. She expected him back at any moment, and preferred to await his arrival in town.

One evening she was sitting in her bedroom thinking of him. The night was hot and the windows were open. It was very late. She had been staring down upon the dark mass of tree-tops in the Park, recapitulating, phase by phase, the growth of her feeling for Hedworth. Suddenly it occurred to her that it bore a strong racial resemblance to her first passion, and, being too intelligent to have escaped the habit of analysis, she dug up the old love and dissected it. It had been better preserved than she would have thought, for it did not offend her sense; and she gave an hour to the office. She went back to her first moment of conscious interest in the hero of her tragedy, galvanised the thrill she had felt when he entered her presence, her restlessness and doubt and jealousy when he was away, or appeared to neglect her; the recognition that she was in the hard grasp of a passion in which she had had little faith; the sweetness and terror of it, the keen delight in the sense of danger. There had been weeks of companionship before he had defined their position; it occurred to her now that he had managed her with the skill and coolness of a man who understood women and could keep his head, even while quickened with all that he inspired. She also recalled, her lips curling into a cynical grin, that she had felt the same promptings for spiritual abandonment, of high desire to help this man where he was weak, to restore some of his lost ideals, or to replace them with better; to root out the weeds which she recognised in his nature, and to coax the choked bulbs of those fairer flowers which may have been there before he and the world knew each other too well. Then she re-lived the days and nights of torment when she had walked the floor wringing her hands, barely eating and sleeping. She recalled that she had even beaten the walls and flung herself against them.

The procession was startlingly familiar and fresh of lineament; even the moments of rapture, whose memory is soonest to fade, and the fitful solace she had found, in those last days, imagining what might have been.

She got up and walked about the room, half amused, half appalled. 'What does it mean?' she thought. 'Is it that there is an impalpable entity in this world for me, and that part of it is in one man and part in another? Is the man who has the larger share the one I really love? Is that the explanation of loving a second time? It certainly is very like—ridiculously like.'

She turned her thoughts to Hedworth, but they swung aside and pointed straight to the other man. She half-expected to see his ghost framed in the dark window, he seemed so close. She found herself living the past again and again, instinct with its sensations. He had had much in his life to cark and harrow, and the old sympathy and tenderness vibrated aloud, and little out of tune. She wondered what had become of him, what he was doing at the moment. She did not believe that he had loved any woman since; he had nearly exhausted his capacity for loving when he met her.

And at the same time she was distinctly conscious that if the two men stood before her, she should spring to Hedworth. Nevertheless, when she conjured his image, the shadowy figure of the other man stood behind, looking over Hedworth's shoulder, with the half-cynical smile which had only left his mouth when he had told her, with white face whose muscles were free of his will for the moment, that he loved her.

'Is it the old love that is demanding its rights, not the man?' she thought. 'Is it true, then, that all we women want is love, and that it is as welcome in one attractive frame as another? That it is not Hedworth I love, but what he gives me? Now that I even suspect this, can I be happy? Will that ghost always look over his shoulder?'

She was a woman of sound practical sense, and had no intention of risking her happiness by falling a victim to her imagination. She pressed the electric button, and wrote a letter to her former lover—a friendly letter, without sentimental allusion, asking for news of him. The sight

of the handwriting that once had thrilled her, as well as the nature of his reply, would at least bring her to some sort of mental climax. Moreover, he might be dead. It might be spiritual influence that had handled her imagination. She was not a superstitious woman; she was merely wise enough to know that she knew nothing, and that it was folly to disbelieve anything.

Hedworth did not return for three weeks. During that time it seemed to her that her brain was an amphitheatre in which the two men were constantly wrestling. She never saw one without the other. When Hedworth mastered for the moment, she was reminded that he was merely playing a familiar tune on her soul-keys. She felt for the man who had first touched those keys a persistent tenderness, and during the last days watched restlessly for his letter. But she felt no desire whatever to see him again. For Hedworth she longed increasingly.

Hedworth returned. The other man vanished.

She announced the engagement. They had been invited to the same houses for the autumn. Necessarily they saw little of each other, and planned to meet in the less frequented rooms and in the woods. At first they enjoyed this new experience; but when they found themselves in a large party that seemed to pervade every corner of the house and grounds at once, and two days had passed without an interview of five minutes' duration, Hedworth walked up to her—she was alone for the moment—and said:

'Four weeks from to-day we marry.

She gave a little gasp, but made no protest.

'I have had enough of dawdling and sentimentalising. We will marry at your place in Sussex on the 2nd of October.'

'Very well,' she said.

Shortly after she went to Paris to confer with the talent that should enhance her loveliness, then paid Mrs. Hedworth a visit in Switzerland. Hedworth met her there, and his mother saw little of her guests. Edith returned to England alone. Hedworth was to follow at the end of the week, and spend the few remaining days of his bachelorhood at the house of a friend whose estate adjoined the one Lady Carnath had bought not long after her husband's death.

Several days after her return she was sitting at her dressing-table when a letter was handed her bearing the Washington postmark. Her maid was devising a new coiffure, and she was grumbling at the result. She glanced at the handwriting, pushed the letter aside, and commanded the maid to arrange her hair in the simple fashion that suited her best. After the woman had fixed the last pin, Edith critically examined her profile in the triple mirror; then thrust out a thin little foot to be divested of its mule and shod in a slipper that had arrived that morning from Paris: she expected people to tea. While the maid was on her knees Edith bethought herself of the letter and read it:—

DEAR LADY CARNATH—I have been in Canada all summer. No letters were forwarded. I find yours here at the Metropolitan. Thanks, I am well. Life is the same with me. I eat and drink and wither. But you are a memory to be thankful for, and I have never tried to forget you. I was glad to learn through Tower, whom I met in Montreal, that you were well and happy. I wish I may never hear otherwise.

Then followed several pages of news of her old friends.

'Poor fellow!' thought Edith with a sigh. 'But I doubt if any woman or any circumstances would ever make a man like that happy. There are those wretched people, and I am not half-

dressed!

Nevertheless, he again took his stand in her brain and elbowed Hedworth—whose concrete part was still detained in Switzerland. She did not answer the letter at once; it was not an easy letter to answer. But it haunted her; and finally she sat down at her desk and bit the end of her penholder.

She sat staring before her, the man in complete possession. And gradually the colour left her face. If this old love, which her mind and senses had corporealised, refused to abdicate, had she any right to marry Hedworth? Now that she had unlocked this ghost, might not she find it at her side whenever her husband was absent, reminding her that she was a sort of mental bigamist? Carnath had no part in her dilemma; she barely recalled his episode.

She was as positive as she had been when the past unrolled itself that she had no wish to see the first man again; that did he stand before her his power would vanish. He was a back number—a fatal position to occupy in the imagination of a vital and world-living woman.

‘Is it all that he awakened, made known to me, represented, that arises in resentment? Or is it that the soul only gives itself once, acknowledges only one mate? The mind and body, perhaps, obey the demand for companionship again. The soul in its loneliness endeavours to accompany these comrades, but finds itself linked to the mate of the past. Probably when a woman marries a man she does not love, the soul, having no demand made upon it, abstracts itself, sleeps. It is when a mate to whom it might wholly have given itself appears, that, in its isolation and desolation, it clamours for its wedded part.

Her teeth indented the nib of her pen-holder. ‘Was ever a woman in such a predicament before? So illusionary and yet so ridiculously actual! Shall I send Hedworth away and sit down with this phantom through life? I understand that some women get their happiness out of just that sort of thing. Then when I forget Hedworth would I forget *him*? Is passion needed to set the soul free? Until Hedworth made me feel awakened womanhood personified, I had not thought of this man for years, not even during the year of my mourning, when I was rather bored. What am I to do? I can’t fling my life away. I am not a morbid idiot. But I can’t marry one man if what I feel for him is simply the galvanising of a corpse. Hedworth ought to be taken ill and his life despaired of. That is the way things would work out in a novel.’

Her face grew whiter still. She had experienced another mental shock. For the first time she realised that no woman could suffer twice as she had suffered five years ago. That at least was all the other man’s. Her capacity for pain had been blunted, two-thirds exhausted. If Hedworth left her, died, she might regret him, long to have him back; but the ghost of that abandon of grief, that racking of every sense, that groping in an abyss while a voiceless something within her raved and shrieked, resolved itself into a finger of fire, which wrote Hedworth’s inferior position.

‘What shall I do? What shall I do?’ She dipped the pen into the ink and put it to the paper. At least, for the moment, she could write a friendly note to this man, convey tactful sympathy, little good as it would do him. The letter must be answered.

She heard a step on the gravel beneath her open window. She sprang to her feet, the blood rushing to her hair. She ran to the window and leaned out, smiling and trembling. Hedworth’s eyes flashed upward to hers. She was, it must be admitted, a product of that undulating and alluring plain we call ‘the world,’ not of those heights where the few who have scaled them live alone.