



THE MAD MISS MATURIN

Lord Stranleigh and the Beautiful American

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"Look!" she cried . . .
There was a crash, and before their eyes the town crumpled like a house of cards

WOULD you like to see the most beautiful woman in America?" asked Edward Trenton of his guest.

Lord Stranleigh drew a whiff or two from his cigar, and the suggestion of a smile played about his lips.

"Your question hints that I have not already met her," he said at last.

"Have you?"

"Of course."

"Where?"

"In every town I have visited."

"Oh, I daresay you have met pretty girls, but only one of them is the most beautiful in America."

Again Stranleigh smiled.

"My dear Trenton," he said at last, "on almost any other subject I should hesitate to venture an opinion that ran counter to your own, yet in this instance I think you wrong the great Republic. I am not good at statistics, but if you will tell me how many of your fellow countrymen are at this moment in love, I'll make a very accurate estimate regarding the number of most beautiful women in the United States."

"Like yourself, Stranleigh, I always defer to the man of experience. I am glad to have hit on one subject in which you are qualified to be my teacher."

"I like that! Edward Trenton depreciating his own conquests is a popular actor in a new role. But you evade the point. I was merely trying, somewhat awkwardly, to show that every woman is the most beautiful in the world to the man in love with her."

"Very well; I'll frame my question differently. Would you like to meet one of the most cultured of her sex?"

"Bless you, my boy, I'm afraid of her already. It is sufficiently embarrassing to meet a bright, alert man, but a clever woman —! Why, I become so painfully stupid that she thinks I'm putting it on."

"**T**HEN let me put the case before you in still another form. Would you like to meet the richest woman in Pennsylvania?"

"That, as a matter of course," said Stranleigh, interested.

Trenton regarded him with a shade of disapproval.

"I imagined wealth was the very last qualification a man in your position would care for in a woman, yet, hardly have I finished the sentence when you jump at the chance I offer."

"And why not? A lady, beautiful and talented, would strike me dumb, but if she is hideously rich

I may be certain of one thing; I shall not be asked to invest money in some hare-brained scheme."

"You are quite safe from that, or indeed, from any other danger, so far as Miss Maturin is concerned. Nevertheless, it is but just that you should understand the situation, so, if you scent danger of any kind, you may escape while there is yet time."

"Unobservant as I am," remarked Stranleigh, "certain signs have not escaped me. This delightful mansion is being prepared for a house party; I know the symptoms: I have several country places of my own. If, as I begin to suspect, I am in the way, just say the word, and I'll take myself off in all good humor, hoping to receive an invitation on some future occasion."

"Well, if that's your idea of American hospitality, you've got another guess coming. You're a patient man, Stranleigh, and may be interested in some of our family history. My father owned a good deal of land in Pennsylvania. He died a very wealthy man, and left his property conjointly to my sisters and myself. He knew we shouldn't quarrel over the division, and we haven't. My activity has been concentrated in coal mines and in the railways which they feed; and my inheritance has been doubled. I had meant to devote a good deal of attention to this estate, working along lines which my father suggested, but I have never been able to do so, living, as I have, in Philadelphia, absorbed in my own business."

"**M**Y sister has, in a measure, carried out my father's plans, aided and abetted by her friend, Miss Constance Maturin. My sister married a man as wealthy as herself; a dreamy, impractical, scholarly fellow who once represented his country as minister to Italy. My sister greatly enjoyed her Italian life, studying with enthusiasm the progress North Italy was making by utilizing the water-power coming from the Alps. In this study she was enthusiastically joined by Miss Maturin, the owner of forests, farms and factories further down the river which flows past this house."

"Miss Maturin's land adjoins our own, but she does not possess the unlimited power over it which my sister and I have over this estate. Her father,

and has constituted herself adviser-in-chief to my sister, who has spent a good deal of money on this estate in undertakings that, however profitable they may become in future, are unproductive at present. I'm not criticizing my sister at all, though her management has involved some serious actions for damages, which I have had the chagrin of losing on more occasions than one, besides being covered with injunctions, and things of that sort. But — are you bored?"

"On the contrary," said Stranleigh, "I'm deeply interested. These two ladies, as I take it, have been unsuccessful in law —"

"Completely so."

"And unsuccessful in the projects they have undertaken?"

"**F**ROM my point of view, yes. That is to say, they are sinking pots of money, and I don't see where any of it is coming back."

"Of what do these enterprises consist?"

"Do you know anything of the conservation controversy that has been going on in this country?"

"No; I'm woefully ignorant."

"My father had ideas about conservation long before the Government took it up, and it is on these ideas that my sister has been working. You preserve water in time of flood, to be used for power or irrigation throughout the year. Her first plan was to