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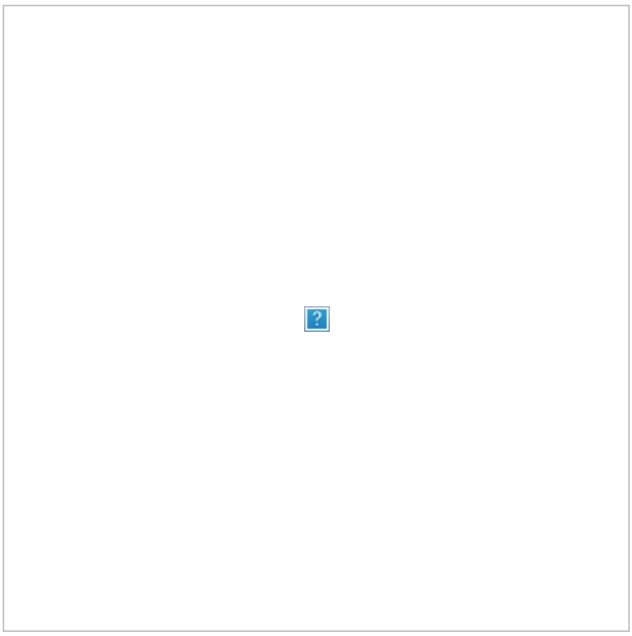

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BY

CHARLES GARVICE

AUTHOR OF

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A WOMAN’S SOUL.

CHAPTER I.

BEHIND THE FOOTLIGHTS.

“Good-night! Good-night! Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say good-night till it be morrow!”

The speaker was a young girl, who stood in the middle of the room, her hands clasped, her head bent forward, her eyes fixed in a dreamy rapture, and the remark was addressed to—no one.

She paused, sighed a little—not from impatience, but with a wistful dissatisfaction—and absently moved to the window, through which the last rays of the June sun were flickering redly.

She stood there for a moment or two, then began to pace the room with a lithe, undulating grace. It was a pity that she was alone, because such beauty and grace were wasted on the desert air of the rather grim and dingy room. It was a pity that Sir John Everett Millais, or Mr. Edwin Long, or some other of the great portrait painters were not present to transfer her beauty of face and form, for it was a loveliness of no common order.

Many a poet’s pen had attempted to describe Doris Marlowe, but it may safely be said that not one had succeeded; and not even a great portrait painter could have depicted the mobility of her clear, oval face, and its dark eyes and sensitive lips—eyes and lips so full of expression that people were sometimes almost convinced that she had spoken before she had uttered a word.

This evening, and at this moment, her face was all alive, as it were, with expression, as she put up her hand to smooth back the thick tresses of dark brown hair—so dark that it was almost black—and, stopping suddenly before a pier glass which stood at the end of the room, repeated [Pg 6] the familiar lines:

“Good-night! Good-night! Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say good-night till it be morrow!”

“Ah, no! No, no, no!” she exclaimed, stamping her foot and drawing her brows together at the reflection in the glass. “That is not it, nor anything like it. I shall never get it! Never! Nev——”

The door opened behind her, and she turned her wistful, dissatisfied, restless face over her shoulder toward the comer. It was an old man, bent almost double, with a thin and haggard face, from which gleamed a pair of dark eyes so brilliant and peering that they made the rest of the face look almost lifeless. He looked at her keenly, as he paused as if for breath, and, still looking at her, went to the table and laid a long roll of paper upon it; then he sank into a chair, and, leaning on his stick, said, in a hollow voice:

“Well?”

“But it isn’t well, Jeffrey. It’s bad, as bad as could be!” and the mobile lips allowed a quick, impatient laugh to escape, then compressed themselves as if annoyed at their levity. “I cannot do it! I cannot! I have tried it a hundred times, a thousand times! And it sounds more like—oh, it sounds more like a servant-maid saying, ‘Good-night, good-night, call me at seven to-morrow!’ than Juliet’s immortal adieu!”

“Does it?” said the old man, calmly.

“Yes, it does; very much!” she retorted, half laughing again. “Oh, Jeffrey, I can’t do it, and that is the simple truth! Tell them I cannot do it, and—and beg me off.”

The old man stretched out his hand slowly, and taking the paper from the table, as slowly unfastened it and displayed it at full length.

It was a playbill, printed in the usual style, in red and blue ink—

Theatre Royal, Barton.
“Romeo and Juliet.”
Miss Doris Marlowe as Juliet.

The girl looked at it, a faint color coming into her face; then she raised her eyes to the glittering ones above the placard and shook her head.

“Miss Doris Marlowe will murder Juliet!” she said; “that is what it will be, Jeffrey—simple [Pg 7] murder. You must prevent the perpetration of so hideous a crime!”

“Too late!” he said in his hollow voice; “the bills are already out. The play is advertised in the papers; they were booking at the theatre when I left. You must play it. What is the matter?”

“The matter——” she began, then stopped abruptly, as if in despair. “I don’t know what is the matter. I only feel as if—oh, as if I were any one but Juliet. Why didn’t you let me go on playing little comedy parts, Jeffrey? I could do those after a fashion—but Juliet! I ought to be flattered,” and she looked at the bill, “but I am very frightened!” and she laughed again.

“Frightened!” he said, his thick white brows coming together. “Why should you be frightened? Have I not told you you could do it, and do I not know? Am I ever wrong?”

“No, no,” she hastened to reply. “You are always right, and it is I who am always wrong. And indeed, Jeffrey, dear, I will try! I will try for your sake!” and she glided across to his chair and laid her hand—a long, white hand, soft and slim as a child’s—upon his shoulder with tender docility.

“Try for your own,” he said, not unkindly, but gravely. “Try for art’s sake, and yet—yes, try for

mine! You know how I have set my dream on your success—you know that it is the dream, the aim of my life! Ever since you were a child and sat upon my knee looking up into my face with your great eyes, I have looked forward to the day when the world should acknowledge that Jeffrey Flint could make a great actor though he failed himself!"

The dark eyes glittered still more keenly as he spoke, and the hand that held the playbill tightened.

"You will succeed if you set your heart on it," he said more calmly. "You have done well up to now; I haven't praised you: that is not my way; but—but—I am satisfied. Up to now you have got on in regular strides—to-morrow night is the great leap! The great chance that seldom comes more than once in a life. Take it, Doris, take it!"

"Yes, Jeffrey," she said, softly; but he heard the sigh she tried to stifle and looked up. [Pg 8]

"Well?" he said grimly. "You would say——"

She moved away from him and leaned against the table, her hands clasped loosely.

"I was going to say that it seems to me as if all the trying in the world would not make me a Shakespeare's Juliet! The lines are beautiful, and I know them—oh, yes, I know them, but——" she paused, then went on dreamily: "Do you think any young girl, any one so young as I am, could play it properly, Jeffrey?"

"Juliet was fourteen," he said, grimly.

Doris smiled.

"That's a mistake, I think, Jeffrey; she was eighteen, most people say! Oh, she was young enough; yes, but—but then you see she had met Romeo."

The old man looked at her attentively, then his keen gaze dropped to the floor.

"Is it necessary for an actor to have actually died before he can perfectly represent a death scene?" he asked.

She laughed, and a faint blush rose to her face.

"Perhaps dying isn't so important as falling in love, Jeffrey; but it seems to me that one must have loved—and lost—before one can play Juliet, and I've done neither."

He made no response to this piece of speculation; but after some minutes' silence he said:

"Do some of it, Doris."

She started slightly, as if he had awakened her from a dream, and recited some of the lines.

The old man watched her, and listened anxiously at first, then with rapt attention, as, losing herself in the part, she grew more emphatic and spontaneous; but suddenly she stopped.

"It will not do, Jeffrey, will it?" she said, quickly. "There—there is no heart in it, is there? Don't tell me it's all right!" she pleaded. "I always like the truth from you—at least!"

"And you get it," he said, grimly. "No, it is not all right. You look——" he stopped—"and your voice is musical and thrilling, but—there is something wanting yet. Do not give it up—it will all [Pg 9] come right. To-morrow with the lights and the people—there will be a full house, crammed—the feeling you want will come, and I shall be satisfied."

He rose and rolled up the paper.

"I have to go back to the theatre."

"I'll come with you," she said, quickly.

"No," he said; "you are better alone. Take your book and go out into the fields. This room is not large enough—" and he passed out.

She understood him and, after a moment or two of reflection, got her hat, murmuring as she ran down the stairs—

"Dear old Jeffrey, I must do it for his sake."

Doris Marlowe, as she passed down the quiet street, was as unlike the popular idea of an actress as it is possible to imagine. It is too generally supposed by the great public that an actress must necessarily be "loud" in word, dress and voice, that she must be affected on and off the stage, and that her behavior is as objectionable as her manner and attire. If the usual run of actresses are of this fashion, Doris was a singular exception to this rule. Her voice was soft and low, and as refined in its tones as the daughter of an earl; her manner was as quiet as any well-bred lady's could be, and in her plain white dress and straw hat she looked as much like a schoolgirl as anything else, especially as she had a copy of "Romeo and Juliet" in her hand, which might have been mistaken for a French grammar.

There was in fact nothing "loud" about her; indeed, when off the stage she was rather silent and shy, and the color was as apt to come into her pale white cheeks as into those of the schoolgirl she resembled. It was only from the quiet play of the dark thick brows, and the ever changing expression of the eloquent eyes, that the keenest observer would ever have detected that Doris Marlowe was something different from the ordinary young lady whom one meets—and forgets—every day.

She passed up the street, her book held lightly in her hand, her eyes fixed dreamily on the roseate sky, and watching the din and bustle of the big manufacturing town which climbed up the [Pg 10]

hill in front of her, turned aside, and, making her way up a leafy lane, reached the fields which are as green as if Barton and its score of factory chimneys were a hundred miles away.

There was not only green grass, but clumps of trees and a running brook, and Doris, casting herself, after the fashion of her sex, on the bank by the stream, opened the book and began to study.

But after a few minutes, during which she kept her eyes upon the page with knitted brows, her thoughts began to wander, and, letting the book slip to the ground, she leaned against the trunk of a tree, and, clasping her hands around her knees, gave herself up to maiden meditation, fancy-free.

And it was of herself—of all people in the world!—she was thinking. She was looking back, recalling her past life, and marveling over it with a pleasant little wonder.

And yet there was nothing very marvelous in it after all.

Ever since she could remember she and Jeffrey—"dear old Jeffrey!"—had been alone. Ever since she could remember he had seemed to her as bent and white-haired and old as he was now, and she knew no more of him, or how it happened that he had stood to her in place of mother and father, and kith and kin, than she knew now.

Of her real father and her mother she had always been totally ignorant. As a child she had accepted Jeffrey as a fact, without questioning, and when, in later years, she had put some questions about her parents to him, she had equally accepted the answer.

"Ask me nothing, Doris. Your mother was an angel; your father——" Then he had stopped and left her; and, from that day to this, Doris had not repeated the question.

They had lived, she remembered, in complete solitude. Of Jeffrey's early life she knew nothing for certain, excepting that he had been an actor; that he had been—and was—a gentleman; and that he had received a good education.

She had no other tutor than he, and she could have had no better. With a skill and patience which sprang from his love for her, he had taught her as few girls are taught. As a child, she would [Pg 11] speak and write with wonderful fluency, and at the age most girls are struggling with five-finger exercises, she could play a sonata of Beethoven's with a touch and brilliance which a professional might have envied.

Her strange guardian's patience was untiring. He ransacked the stores of his memory on her behalf, he spent hours explaining the inner meaning of some line from Shakespeare—in showing her how to render a difficult piece of music.

And when, one day, when her beautiful girlhood was rich with the promise of a still more beautiful womanhood, she had looked up at him laughingly, and said:

"Why do you take all this trouble with me, Jeffrey? What shall I do with all these things you have taught me?" he had startled her by turning to her with flashing eyes, and saying, with grim earnestness:

"I have taken all this trouble, as you call it, for this reason—because I love you, and because I mean you to be a great actress!"

She accepted his dictum without a word, or a thought of questioning it. She knew, then, why he had taught her to love the great poet—why he had made her, and still made her, recite whole plays of Shakespeare—why he spent hours in showing her how such and such a speech should be delivered. And she was grateful—as grateful as if he had been rich and surrounded her with luxury, instead of being poor and sharing with her the shabby rooms and simple fare which were the best he could afford.

It was a gray and sober life, enlivened only by frequent visits to the theatre. They had lived in France and Germany as well as in England, and he had taken her to see the first players in each country.

"Remember," he would say, when they had returned from seeing some famous actress, "remember how she spoke that line, that is how it should be delivered," or, "Did you notice how Madame So-and-so went off in the second scene? Then don't go and do likewise!" and Doris's trained intellect had stored up the hints for future use.

It was a life of hard work, and some girls would have become dull and listless, but Doris was [Pg 12] light-hearted; her laugh was always ringing in the dingy lodgings as if they were palaces and she was happy and content.

Then had come the time of her first appearance on the stage. It is the fashion nowadays for an actor to begin at the top of the ladder—and, alas, how often he works downward! Jeffrey chose that the beautiful girl whom he had trained so carefully should begin at the bottom.

"Learn to walk the stage, and deliver a simple message: that is difficult enough at first, easy as it seems," he had said; and Doris put on cotton frocks and white caps, and played servant maids for a time. From them she rose to young lady parts—always easy, unpretentious ones, and always in the country theatres.

"When we take London it shall be by storm," he said.

And so she went from one country town to another, and the young actress grew more familiar with her art each month, and the critics began to notice her, and to praise not only her beauty but her talent.

And all this time, Doris, even in the gayest surroundings of her daily life, remained unsophisticated and natural. Jeffrey watched over her as jealously as a father could have done.

He could not prevent people admiring her, but he kept the love letter, the neat little cases of jewelry from her, and Doris—Doris Marlowe the actress—was as ignorant and unconscious of the wickedness of the world as the daughter of a country rector.

And as ignorant and innocent of love, save the love she had for the strange, grim being who had lavished so much on her.

She had read of love in books, had acted it on the stage, but it was as one who speaks a language he does not understand, and who marvels at the effect his words have upon his initiated hearers.

Once a young actor, who had played lovers' parts with her during a season, had managed to speak with her alone—it was during the "wait" between acts—and in faltering accents had tried to tell her that he had dared to fall in love with the beautiful being so jealously guarded by the dragon. Doris had listened for a moment or two, with her lovely eyes wide open, with puzzled astonishment, then she said: [Pg 13]

"Oh, please, don't go on! I thought it was a part of the play," and a smile flashed over her face.

The young fellow grew black, and as he passed her to go on the stage, muttered, "Heartless!"

But Doris was not heartless. She had smiled because her heart lay too deep for him to touch, because, like the Sleeping Beauty, it was waiting for the coming prince who should wake it into life and love, and the young actor was not that prince.

Doris sat thinking of the past, quite lost, until the striking of a church clock recalled her to the fact that a certain young lady was to play Juliet to-morrow, and that the aforesaid young lady had come out into the field to study it!

She took up the book with a sigh.

"I wish I could see some one play it," she thought; and then there flashed into her mind the memory of one night Jeffrey had taken her to Drury Lane to see a famous actress in the part; but they did not see her after all, for during the first act there had been one of those slight but unmistakable movements in the audience which announces the entrance of some one of importance.

Doris looked round, with the rest, and saw some persons come into a box on the grand tier. Among them was an old gentleman, tall and thin, with a remarkably distinguished presence. He wore a blue ribbon across his waistcoat, but Doris had been attracted more by his face even than by the ribbon.

It was a handsome face, but there was something in it, a certain cold and pitiless hauteur, that seemed to strike a chill almost to Doris' heart. As he stood in front of the box, and looked around the house with an expression of contempt that was just too indolent to be sheer hatred, she met the hard, merciless eyes and shuddered.

"Who is he, Jeffrey?" she asked, in a whisper, and touching his arm with a hand that trembled a little.

Jeffrey's rapt face had been fixed on the stage, but he turned and looked at the distinguished personage, and Doris remembered now the sudden pallor of his face, from which his glittering eyes had flashed like two spots of red fire set in white ashes. [Pg 14]

The look vanished in a moment and he made no reply, and a few minutes afterward had said:

"It is too hot—let us go."

Doris recalled the incident now, and wished they had stopped and seen the great actress; especially as Jeffrey had always afterward avoided "Romeo and Juliet," as if the play had some painful association.

"I shall have to draw on Shakespeare alone for inspiration," she thought, looking at the brook. "But, ah! if only some one could only teach me to say that 'Good-night, good-night!' properly."

She was repeating the words in a dozen different tones, and shrugging her shoulders discontentedly over each, when suddenly there came another sound upon her ears beside that of her voice and the brook.

It was a dull thud, thud, on the meadow in front of her, and as it came nearer a voice broke out in a kind of accompaniment, a voice singing not unmusically:

"The Maids of Merry England, the Merry, Merry Maids of England!"

There was a hedge on the other side of the brook, and Doris raised herself on her elbow and looked over.

What she saw was a young man galloping across the meadow at a breakneck speed, which the horse seemed to enjoy as much as his rider.

Doris had never seen any one ride like that, and she was too absorbed in the general spectacle to notice that the young man was singularly handsome, and that he made, as he sat slightly in the saddle, with the sunset rays turning the yellow of his mustache and hair to pure gold, a picture which Murillo might have painted and christened "Youth and Health."

She watched for a moment or two; then, thinking herself safe from observation behind her hedge, sank down again, and took up her book.

But the thud, thud, and the “Maids of Merry England” came nearer and nearer. Then they stopped together, and a voice, speaking this time, said:

“Hallo, old girl!—over with you!”

The next moment Doris saw horse and rider in the air, almost above her head, and the next the horse was on its knees, with its nose on the ground, and the rider lay stretched at her feet, as if a hand from the blue sky had hurled him from his seat. [Pg 15]

CHAPTER II.

OVER THE FENCE.

It had all happened so suddenly that Doris sat for a moment staring at the motionless figure. Then the color forsook her face, and she sprang up with a cry, and looked round for help. There was not a moving thing in sight excepting the horse, who had picked himself up and was calmly, not to say contemptuously, grazing a few yards off.

Doris, trembling a little, knelt down and bent over the young man. His eyes were closed, and his face was white, and there was a thin streak of red trickling down his forehead.

A spasm ran through her heart as she looked, for the sudden dread had flashed across her mind that—he was dead.

“Oh, what shall I do?” she cried, and she sprang to her feet, aroused by the impulse to run for assistance; but the white, still face seemed to utter a voiceless appeal to her not to leave him, and she hesitated. No!—she would not leave him.

She whipped out her handkerchief, and, running to the brook, dashed it into the water; then, kneeling down beside him, bathed his forehead, shuddering a little as she saw that the thin streak of red came again as fast as she washed it away.

Presently she fancied that she saw a faint tremor upon the pale lips, and in her eagerness and anxiety she sank down upon the grass and drew his head upon her knee, and with faltering hands unfastened his collar. She did it in pure ignorance, but it happened to be exactly the right thing to do, and after a moment or two the young fellow shivered slightly, and, to Doris’ unspeakable relief, opened his eyes. There was no sense in them for a spell, during which Doris noticed, in the way one notices trivial things in moments of deep anxiety, that they were handsome eyes, of a [Pg 16] dark brown; and that the rest of the face was worthy of the eyes; and there flashed through her mind the half-formed thought that it would have been a pity for one so young and so good-looking to have died. Then a faint intelligence came into his upturned gaze, and he looked up into her great pitying eyes with a strange look of bewilderment which gradually grew into a wondering admiration that brought a dash of color to Doris’ face.

“Where am I?” he said at last, and the voice that had sung “The Maids of Merry England” sounded strangely thin and feeble; “am I—dead?”

It was a queer question. Did he think that it was an angel bending over him? A faint smile broke over Doris’ anxious face, and one sprang up to his to meet it.

“I remember,” he said, without taking his eyes from her face; “Poll pitched me over the hedge.”

He tried to laugh and raise his head, but the laugh died away with suspicious abruptness and his head sunk back.

“I—I beg your pardon!” he said. “I must have come an awful cropper; I—I feel as if I couldn’t move!” and he made another effort.

“Oh, no, no,” said Doris anxiously; “do not try—yet. Oh, I am afraid you are very much hurt! Let me——” she wiped his forehead again. “If there were only some one else to help,” she exclaimed in a piteous voice.

“Don’t—don’t—please don’t you trouble about it,” he said, pleadingly. “I shall be all right directly. It’s ridiculous—” he added faintly, but endeavoring to laugh again. “I feel as if I’d got rusty hinges at the back of my neck.”

His eyes closed for a moment, for, notwithstanding the laugh and his would-be light tone, he was in considerable pain; then he opened them again and let them rest upon her face.

“You’re awfully good to me!” he said, slowly. “I feel ashamed—” he stopped, and a deep blush rose through the tan of his face, for he had suddenly realized that his head was in her lap, a fact of which Doris was perfectly unconscious. “Awfully good!” he repeated.

“Oh, don’t talk!” she said, earnestly. “You—you are not able! Oh! if there was something I could [Pg 17] do! Water! I will get you some to drink,” and she put his head gently from her and rose.

He smothered a sigh.

“There’s—there’s a flask in my saddle-pocket, if I could only get at it,” he said.

“I’ll get it,” she said, swiftly.

“No, no,” he said, quickly. “The—the horse, I mean might—”

But she was off like the wind, and quite regardless of danger. The horse raised his head and looked at her, and apparently seemed to take in the gravity of the situation, for it stood quite still while she searched the saddle.

“It is not here!” she said, in a voice of distress.

“No, by Jove, I recollect! I left it at home,” he faltered. “I’m so sorry! Don’t—please—don’t trouble!” and he raised himself on his elbow.

She flew from the horse to the brook, then stopped short for a moment as she remembered that she had nothing to hold water. He watched her and understood.

“Never mind,” he said.

“But there must be some way!” she cried, distressfully.

“If—if you’ll bring some in your hands,” he suggested, the color coming into his face.

She stopped and made a cup of her two palms, and turned to him carefully, fearful of spilling a drop.

The young fellow hesitated, and first glanced up at her face, unseen by her, then bent his head.

When he raised it there was a strange look in his eyes, and he drew a long breath. Doris dropped her hands with a sudden swiftness.

Reverently, gratefully as his lips had touched her hands, their touch had sent a strange thrill through her.

“I—I am afraid you did not get much,” she said, and her voice faltered, though she strove to keep it firm and steady.

“Yes, yes!” he said. “Thank you very much. I am better—all right now!” and to prove it he sat up and looked round him.

But his eyes returned to her face almost instantly, as if loth to leave it. [Pg 18]

“I never was so sorry in all my life,” he said. “To think that I should have given you all this trouble! And—and frightened you, too!” he added, for she had sunk down upon the bank and was trembling a little as she wiped her hands.

“No, no, I am not frightened,” she said. “But it—it was so sudden.”

He looked round and bit his lip.

“Great Heavens!” he exclaimed, remorsefully, “I—I might have fallen on to you!”

A faint smile played upon her lips for an instant.

“You nearly did so as it was,” she said.

He drew a long breath, and his eyes sought her face penitently.

“It was abominably careless of me,” he said in a low voice. “But I had no idea that there was any one here; I didn’t think of looking over the hedge.”

“It is a very high one,” she said, and her lips quivered with a little shudder, as she recalled the moment in which she saw him fall.

He glanced at it carelessly.

“Polly would have done it if it hadn’t been for the brook! I’d forgotten that there might be a drop this side, and——” He stopped short, his eyes fixed upon her dress, upon which were two or three red spots staining its whiteness. He put his hand to his head. “Your dress!” he said. “Look there! I’ve spoiled it!”

She looked down at the stains—they were still wet—and felt for her handkerchief. It was lying on the grass.

“Will you let me?” he said pleadingly, and he took out his own handkerchief and tried to wipe out the spots.

“Never mind,” she said. “It does not matter.”

“And your hat and book!” He picked them up and glanced at the latter. “‘Romeo and Juliet!’ You were reading! What a nuisance I have made of myself. I shall never forgive myself nor forget your kindness! If you hadn’t been here——” he stopped.

She seemed to be scarcely listening to him.

He sat down, almost at her feet, and fastened his collar, his eyes resting on her face. He had seen many beautiful women, this young man, but he thought, as he looked at her, that he had never seen any one so perfectly lovely. [Pg 19]

With a vague feeling of wonder he noticed that her hair was dark, almost black, and yet her eyes were blue. They were hidden now between the long, dark lashes, and yet he knew they were blue, for he remembered noticing it in the first moments of wandering consciousness.

Was it this strange contrast, the blue eyes and black hair, that made her so lovely? Or was it the shape of the thin, delicate red lips? He tried to answer the mental question, but his brain seemed in a whirl.

It was not the effects of his fall, but the witchery of her presence.

She was so perfectly still, her face set in quiet gravity, that he feared to speak or move, lest he should disturb her. Then, suddenly, she looked up with a little start.

“I must go,” she said, almost to herself.

“Oh, no!” he pleaded. “Wait and rest for a little while!”

She turned her face toward him with a smile, but her eyes were half veiled by the long lashes.

“It is you that should rest,” she said.

“Oh! I’m all right,” he said. “But you have had a fright, and are—are upset, and no wonder. I’m afraid you’ll never forgive me,” he added, remorsefully.

“Forgive?” she repeated, as if she had not understood.

“Yes,” he said, “I’m afraid, if ever we meet again, that you will think of me as—as the clumsy fellow who nearly rode over you, and—and gave you all this trouble!”

“No,” she said, simply, “there is nothing to forgive.”

She raised her eyes to his face for a moment as she spoke. He was still bareheaded, and his hat lay a shapeless mass in the brook, and the water had formed the yellow hair into short, crisp curls on his white forehead, and in his dark eyes lingered the look which they had worn when he had first returned to consciousness—a look of hungering, reverent admiration.

She took up her hat and put it on slowly. A spell seemed to have fallen on her. She thought it was the reaction after the excitement.

“I must go,” she said. “But you? Shall I send some one to help you?” [Pg 20]

He rose, reluctantly, and laughed softly.

“To help me!” he said. “But I am all right; I never felt better. It’s not my first tumble by many; and, besides, I’ve not far to go. But you will let me see you home? I”—he faltered—“I should like to tell your people, and thank them——”

“No, no,” she said, her eyes following the direction which he had taken when he said that he had not far to go.

“I am staying at the Towers,” he said, responding to her look. “You know the Towers?”

She shook her head.

“I am staying with my uncle. My name is Neville—Cecil Neville——” he stopped as if he expected or wished that she would tell him hers, but Doris remained silent.

“That’s my uncle’s horse, and I hope I haven’t lamed her!” he laughed.

“Oh, no! Poor thing!” said Doris, pityingly. “It wasn’t her fault!”

“No, it was all mine,” he said. “And I may not go home with you? Will you let me call and thank you—properly—to-morrow?”

She raised her eyes with a fleeting glance.

“It is not necessary,” she said.

His face fell. She lingered a moment, then she turned away.

“Good-afternoon.”

He glanced up at the sky.

“Good-night!” he said, slowly. “Good-night!” in so low a voice that it seemed almost a whisper.

She walked through the clump of trees for a hundred yards perhaps, then stopped with a start.

In the spell that had fallen upon her, she had forgotten her book. She looked round and saw that he was standing where she had left him. She waited, and presently he moved, and going to the brook, knelt down and bathed his face and head. Then he went toward the horse, and calling it to him, got into the saddle. Not till he had got some distance did she venture to return.

Her book was there, and beside it the handkerchief with which he had tried to remove the stains from her dress; they were there still! [Pg 21]

She took it up and looked at it dreamily; the whole incident seemed almost a dream! and saw in a corner, worked in red silk, the initials C. N., and above them a coronet.

She was about to drop the handkerchief where she had found it, but instead she thrust it out of sight in the bosom of her dress.

Then with a smile she opened the book.

By a strange coincidence it opened at the page upon which appeared the words that had proved such a stumbling-block to her, and half unconsciously she murmured:

“Good-night, good-night!”

What was it that made her start and brought the warm blood to her face?

Only this, that now for the first time the words seemed to possess their real meaning. She had learned how to speak them!

“Good-night! Good-night! Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say good-night till it be morrow!”

She ought to have been glad; why then did she utter a little cry almost of dismay, and cover her face with her hands?

CHAPTER III.

"IF I SHOULD FAIL."

Doris sped homeward, but, fast as she walked, her thoughts seemed to outrun her. Had she fallen asleep by the brook and dreamed it all? She could almost have persuaded herself that she had, but for the handkerchief hidden in the bosom of her dress.

"Cecil Neville!" She repeated the name twenty times, and each time it sounded more pleasant and musical. There was no need to call up the remembrance of his face, for that floated before her mental vision as she hurried on with downcast, dreamy eyes.

"Am I out of my senses?" she exclaimed, at last, trying to rid herself of the spell by a light laugh. [Pg 22] "Any one would think I was playing the part of a sentimental young lady in a three-act comedy. It was rather like a play; but it's generally the hero who saves the life of the principal lady. I didn't save his life, though he says I did. How he said it! Why can't one speak like that on the stage, now? Cecil Neville!"

She took out the handkerchief and looked at it.

"And this is a coronet. What is he, I wonder? A duke, or an earl, or what? And what does it matter to me what he is?" she asked herself in the next breath. "I may never see him again, and if I did we should meet as strangers. Dukes or earls have nothing in common with actresses. I wish I could forget all about him. But I can't—I can't," she murmured, almost piteously. "Oh, I wish I had stayed at home, and yet I don't, either," she added, slowly. "If I had not been there, perhaps he would not have come to, and might be lying there now!" she shuddered. "How brave and strong he looked riding at the hedge; it was a mad thing to do! And yet he made light of it! Ah, it is nice to be a man—and such a man! Cecil Neville! I wish he had not told me his name! I cannot get it out of my head. And he lives with his uncle at the Towers. Perhaps Jeffrey knows who the uncle is. I must tell him," she sighed. Somehow she felt a strong reluctance to speak of the afternoon's adventure; but she had never had any secrets from Jeffrey, and she added with another sigh: "Yes, I must tell him. He will be angry—no, he is never angry, but he will be—what? sorry. And yet I could not help it. It was not I who rode at the hedge, and—I wonder what he thought of me when he came to?" A burning blush rose to her face, and she stopped still to contemplate the new phase of the question. "I—I had his head upon my lap! Oh, what could he have thought? That I was forward and impertinent, and yet, no, he did not look as if he did, and—and he thanked me and asked me to forgive him—how many times! Cecil Neville. There"—and she laughed impatiently—"that is the last time I will think of his name—or him!"

With this prudent resolve she hurried on, and burst into the little room out of breath, to find [Pg 23] Jeffrey seated at the table and waiting for his supper.

He looked up with his keen glance, and nodded.

"I am so sorry I've kept you waiting, Jeffrey," she said, humbly, as she threw her hat on the sofa and went to the table.

"No matter," he said; "you have been walking up and down in the fields studying, I know," and he nodded. "It is just the hour, the mystic gloaming, when the brain quickens and ideas are born."

"Yes," she said, her long lashes covering her eyes. "I have been in the fields, and, Jeffrey, I've had an adventure!"

"Cows?" he said, absently. "There is nothing like the open air for such work as you have in hand. Rachel, the greatest actress of her time, or any other, did most of her work in the open air——"

"It wasn't cows," she broke in, trying to speak in a matter-of-fact voice; "it was a horse," and she laughed a little nervously.

"My kingdom for a horse," he quoted, failing to see the unusual color in her face, and not observing that she was making a mere pretense of eating, just breaking a piece of toast with her fingers and sipping her coffee. "And are you more satisfied now? I have only just come from the theatre; the booking is the heaviest they have had for years. I have persuaded the manager to increase the orchestra! Have you seen your dress? It has come, and I had it sent up to your room."

"I did not go up; I will try it on directly."

He pushed his chair back, and began walking up and down the room, his hands crossed behind his bent back, his head drooping, his glittering eyes fixed on the floor.

Doris knew that it was hopeless to attempt to speak of anything but the play, but she made another effort, for conscience sake.

"Do you know who lives in that large place on the hill, Jeffrey, the—the Towers, it is called?"

He shook his head with distinct indifference.

"No; some marquis or other. What does it matter?" he added, impatiently.

"Well, I saw the nephew of the marquis—if he is a marquis—this afternoon. He fell off his horse [Pg 24] ——"

"Yes!" he said, with profound indifference. "I remember a manager who put horses on in the first scene of 'Romeo and Juliet.' It was effective—but unnecessary. By the way, take care how you arrange your train in the ballroom scene; leave Romeo room to get near you without having to

draw it on one side; it attracts attention from the action of the play at a most important moment. A detail; but it is the details that, massed together, make or mar the whole."

She made yet another effort.

"I was going to tell you about the accident, Jeffrey."

He started, and, stopping in his walk, confronted her with alarm in his face.

"What accident? I have only just left the theatre; it was all right then! Oh, you allude to the man who tumbled off his horse? Never mind; put it out of your head; don't think of anything but your part. Have you finished your supper?"

"Yes," she said, with a sigh and a smile; it was, indeed, utterly useless to make any further attempt.

"Well, then, let us go over the balcony scene," and he snatched up the book and turned to the page with nervous fingers.

Doris rose and opened her lips; then, with a sudden blush, that was as quickly followed by a strange pallor, she went to him and gently took the book from his hand.

"Not to-night, not again, Jeffrey," she said, with a nervousness that was strange in her. "I—I could not! Don't be angry, but"—she looked from side to side with a strangely troubled air—"I—I don't think I could do it to-night! Don't ask me!"

He nodded once or twice, looking at her meditatively.

"I think I understand," he said, as if to himself. "You are afraid of getting hackneyed? Perhaps you are right. Yes, you are right," he added, quietly; "there is such a thing as over-training. Yes, I know what you mean. Better let it rest for to-night, after the rehearsal this morning and the study this afternoon."

Doris turned her head away with a guilty sense of having deceived him.

"It is not that," she faltered, "but——" She stopped, and going to him suddenly, hid her face on his shoulder. "Oh, Jeffrey, if I should fail to-morrow!" [Pg 25]

He patted her arm soothingly.

"There's no such word for us, Doris," he said, with grim confidence. "Don't speak of failing. Fail! What, after all these years!"—his voice grew hoarse. "Why, child, what is the matter with you to-night?" he broke off in alarm, for he could feel that she was crying softly, and crying was by no means one of Doris' customary habits.

She raised her head, and hastily wiping her eyes, laughed.

"What is the matter with me, Jeffrey? I wish I knew. Perhaps it's the excitement! There, I'm all right now," and she slid away from him.

The old man seized her arm, and looked into her face intently.

"Doris!" he said, in a husky voice; "you—you are not unhappy?"

"Unhappy!" and she laughed again. "Why should I be unhappy? Perhaps I cried because I'm too happy! Grief and joy are next of kin, you know. And oughtn't I to be filled with joy, I, the Doris Marlowe, who is to play Juliet to-morrow night?"

His hand dropped from her arm, but he was only half-satisfied.

"If I thought——" he muttered. "Doris, you are all the world to me! Before Heaven I have had no thought but for you since"—he stopped abruptly—"since you became my care; day and night, early and late, I have worked to one end—to make you great and famous and happy! If I thought ——" he wiped the perspiration from his brow, and looked at her almost wildly.

"I know, I know! Dear, dear old Jeffrey!" she murmured, soothing him with touch and voice. "No, I don't know, but I can guess all you have been to me, all you have done for me. And I am happy, very, very happy! And I will be great and famous if you wish it! You shall see!" she said, nodding, and smiling through the tears that veiled her lovely eyes. "Wait till to-morrow night. There, it is you who are excited now! And now I'm going to try my dress on. We must look the Juliet if we cannot act her," and she stooped and kissed his forehead and ran from the room. [Pg 26]

The old man stood where she had left him, his hands working behind his back, his brows knotted into thick cords, his eyes fixed on the ground.

Doubt, almost remorse, were depicted on his countenance with an intensity almost terrible. He sank into a chair, and, covering his face with his hands, seemed lost in a dream. Presently the door opened, and Doris, like a vision of loveliness, stood in her white satin dress before him.

She held the long train in one hand, and in the other a candle above her head, and stood with a grave smile upon her beautiful face, waiting. He looked up, then with a sudden cry threw out his arms.

"Lucy, Lucy, I did it for the best, for the best!"

"Jeffrey!" exclaimed Doris, "Jeffrey!" and she hastened toward him in alarm; but the sound of her voice had recalled him to himself, and, passing his hand across his forehead he rose and looked at her.

"Yes, yes!" he said, still in a half-dazed manner. "Yes, it will do. Doris, you are very beautiful."

She colored and shook her head.

“What a wicked thing to say, you flatterer! But, Jeffrey, why did you call me Lucy?” she asked, bending over him, her brows drawn together anxiously.

“Did I?” he replied, evasively. “I—I must have been dreaming. There—ask me no more questions. The dress is perfect. Perfect!” he repeated, emphatically, but looking at her face and not the dress. “Walk across the room.” She did so. “Now, stand as I showed you. So! Yes, yes,” he murmured with a sigh of satisfaction; “perfect! You look the part, Doris; not one of them could look it better—no! And to-morrow”—he stopped and regarded her with an earnestness that was almost fierce. “Child, if you fail to-morrow, you will kill me! Go now; go to bed and rest. Go!” he repeated, still looking at her, but waving her away with his hand as if she recalled some memory too painful to be borne; and Doris, stooping and kissing him, went up to her own room again. There she stood before the glass and looked at herself with a scrutiny that she had never used before.

Jeffrey had called her beautiful. Was she really beautiful? Did others think her so?—did he? She took up the handkerchief and looked at it dreamily; then, still in her Juliet dress, she joined her hands together as she had done when she had made a cup for him; and as she did so, the warm blood rushed to her face, for she could almost fancy that even now she could feel the touch of his lips and the golden moustache upon the soft, pink palms. [Pg 27]

Rest! If to lie awake until the clock struck midnight, and then to fall asleep and dream that she was still bending over the handsome face, all pale but for the thin streak of red; to hear in her sleep the strong, musical voice murmuring, “Will you forgive me?” was rest—then Doris was resting, indeed!

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE TOWERS.

Cecil Viscount Neville rode off at a gallop at first, but presently he pulled the horse up into a walk, for he wanted to think. Something had happened besides his tumble that afternoon to "shake the soul of him," as Tasso says. The blood was coursing through his veins at racing pace, and his heart was beating violently with a new and strange emotion. It seemed to him that he had been in fairyland.

Just as Doris had taken out the handkerchief and looked at it to convince herself that she had not been dreaming, so he put his hand to the cut on his forehead to help him to realize that imagination had not been playing pranks with him.

He had seen beautiful women; in the language of his world he had had some half-a-dozen of them at least "pitched at his head;" but this one——

He stopped the horse, and recalled her face as it had looked down upon him when he came back to consciousness.

"I thought I was dead and that she was an angel!" he murmured, his face flushing. "There never were eyes like hers! And her voice! And I don't know her name even! And I may never see her again! I must, I must! And I might have ridden over that beautiful creature—she might have been lying there instead of me!" he shuddered. "I ought to have killed myself, clumsy, awkward idiot! But she forgave me, yes, she forgave me!" and he tried to recall, and succeeded in recalling, every word she had spoken. "I wonder who she is?" he asked himself for the hundredth time. "Why didn't I ask her her name? No, I remember I could not! I—I never felt like that before, never! I felt actually afraid of her! I've half a mind to ride back—would she be angry, I wonder? I didn't thank her enough. Why, I behaved like a fool! She must have thought me one! I'll ride back and beg her to tell me who she is. I must know!" and he was about to turn the horse when the clock of the Towers solemnly chimed the hour. [Pg 28]

He started and looked at his watch.

"Dinner time," he murmured, "and it's a mortal sin to be five minutes late! No matter, I must go back," and he swung round. Then he pulled up again. "No; she will not like it! It—it will seem as if I were forcing myself on her, and after all her goodness to me! But not to know her name even!" and, with something between a sigh and a groan, he put the horse into a gallop and rode toward home.

Fortunately for the horse, she had struck her knees upon the bank, and was uninjured, for Lord Cecil had—with unusual indifference—quite forgotten her, and it was not until he had ridden into the courtyard of the Towers, and met the surprised stare of the groom who came forward, that he remembered the animal.

"I've had a tumble," he said. "It was my fault, not Polly's! Give her an extra feed and wipe down," he added, as he patted her. "She isn't hurt, I'm glad to say."

"But you are, my lord, I'm afraid!" said the groom.

"Not a bit," said Lord Cecil, with a smile, and he hurried across the courtyard, and up the stone steps to the terrace.

The long walk, laid in Carrara marble, and running the whole length of the house, was perfectly empty, and everything was suspiciously quiet.

"They've begun dinner," said Lord Cecil, with a shrug of his shoulders. "That's unpleasant! I don't know my uncle very intimately, but I have a shrewd suspicion that he is the sort of man to cut up rough! Well, no, I don't suppose he would be rough if I burned the place down, but he'd be unpleasantly smooth." [Pg 29]

He hurried along, past a long line of windows, screened by their curtains, and then past one through which the light came in innumerable streaks of color—it was the stained oriel window—and at last reached the great hall.

A groom of the chambers, attired in a dark purple livery that looked almost like a court suit, came forward with something like solemn gravity.

"I'm late, eh?" said Lord Cecil, and his clear, young voice, musical as it was, sounded large and loud in the solemn, subdued air of the place.

"Dinner has been served twenty-two minutes, my lord," was the grave reply.

"Oh! hang the two minutes," said Lord Cecil, "I shan't be long." And he bounded up the stairs, apparently to the amazement of the official and a couple of stately footmen, who looked after him with surprise. It took him some two or three minutes to reach his room. The Towers was a huge place, but which, huge as it was, the marquis only dwelt in for a month or two once in three or four years—he had so many other and huger places—and Lord Cecil found his valet waiting for him.

"Look sharp, Parkins," he said, slipping off his coat. "I'm awfully late. Has the marquis inquired for me?"

"No, my lord," said Parkins, as he set about his ministration with quiet celerity. "Mr. Scobie, the butler, did mention that his lordship never waited for any one."

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Lord Cecil. “It’s bad enough to spoil one’s own dinner without ruining other people’s. All right? What are you fumbling at?”

“I was trying to hide the cut on your forehead, my lord.”

“Oh! never mind that,” said Lord Cecil, impatiently, and he hurried down.

The groom came forward with stately step, and led the way to the dining-room, and opened the door slowly, as if it were the entrance to the court.

It was a magnificent room, so large that it had been found necessary to curtail its dimensions with screens and curtains, the last of crimson plush with heavy bullion fringe. The table was loaded with a splendid service of plate, and at the head of it sat the Most Honorable the Marquis of Stoyle, Earl of Braithwaite and Denbigh, of Scotland, Baron Barranough of Ireland, Knight of the Garter of England, etc. [Pg 30]

He rose with majestic courtesy as Lord Cecil entered, and the light from the delicately-shaded lamp, falling full upon his face and figure, made a picture of them calculated to strike the least observant of mortals.

He was an old man—seventy-two, the “Peerage” says, and that cannot lie, as somebody remarks—but he was as straight as an arrow, and save for two lines running from the corners of his finely-shaped nose, and a few wrinkles at the ends of his gray, piercing eyes, the face was as smooth as Lord Cecil’s own; smooth and almost as pale as ivory; every feature as cleanly cut as if it were carved in; smooth and cold as ice; and yet, with all its icelike impassability, a vague, indefinite something, not marked enough for an expression, which always riveted a stranger’s gaze, and made him uncomfortable. It was not exactly contempt, or hauteur, or dislike, but a commingling of all three, which imparted to the face a quality hard to define but easy to feel. It should be added, to complete the picture, that his white hair, worn rather long, was brushed straight back from his white forehead, and that the hands were snowy in color and of quite feminine shape and texture.

This imposing figure stood upright until Lord Cecil had taken his seat, the hard, steellike eyes regarding him with an impassive, icelike courtesy, then sank into its seat again.

It was not until he had done so that Lord Cecil was startled by seeing that a third person was present, for he had been unable to remove his eyes from the marquis’ while they were on his face. Now he saw that between him and the marquis sat a lady; and Lord Cecil, as his senses woke to the fact of her presence, was guilty of an astonished stare.

It is not given to every one to meet in one day the two most beautiful women he had ever seen, but this was Lord Cecil’s fate. The lady was young, with a fair and perfectly-tinted face, with dark-brown eyes, and hair that shone like raw silk under the mellow light that fell from the candelabra above. [Pg 31]

Her presence was so unexpected that Lord Cecil might be pardoned for expressing in his gaze something of the surprise he felt.

The sound of the marquis’ voice, low and yet clear, like the sound of a treble-bell, recalled him to himself and his manners.

“This is Lord Cecil Neville, Lady Grace,” he said, and he just moved his snowy hand. “Cecil, I think I told you that I expected Lady Grace?”

Lord Cecil bowed, and the lady inclined her head with a smile.

“As we are strangers, and Lord Neville has probably never heard of me, marquis, perhaps you had better add that I am Lord Peyton’s daughter.”

The marquis bowed.

“Of course I have heard of you, Lady Grace,” said Lord Cecil.

The dark-brown eyes opposite him grew rather keen as they rested on his face, but for a moment only, then she smiled again.

“If I had known that you were here——” He stopped and laughed. “Well, I was going to say that I’d have been home earlier, but the fact is I met with a slight accident and was detained.”

The dark eyes seemed to flash over him, then fixed themselves upon the cut on his forehead.

“You were not hurt, I hope?” she said. “I see you have a cut on your brow.”

“No,” he said. “It is nothing.”

“How did it happen?” asked Lady Grace. The marquis had not condescended to make any inquiry; indeed, for any sign or interest he might have been stone deaf.

“Got pitched over a hedge,” he said.

“By a man?” she asked, raising her brows.

He laughed.

“No, by a horse. By the way, sir,” he said, turning to the marquis, “I am glad to say that the horse is not injured.” [Pg 32]

“No?” said the marquis, with slow indifference. “Perhaps that is as well; horses are valuable,” and the tone more than the words seemed to add—“and men—especially Lord Cecil Neville—are not.”

Lord Cecil glanced at him quickly, but the pale face was set and impassive, as if innocent of any intent to insult.

After this cheerful remark the conversation rather naturally languished. Lord Cecil was hungry, and devoted his attention to his plate; the servants moved to and fro waiting with subdued and watchful assiduity; the marquis ate his dinner with slow, wearied glance, his eyes fixed on the great, golden epergne in the centre of the table, as profoundly silent as if he never meant to utter another word. Now and again Lady Grace raised her eyes and scanned the handsome face opposite her, and Lord Cecil would have returned the compliment, but while he ate his dinner he was thinking of that other face with the dark hair and blue eyes, which had bent over him by the brook, recalling the sweet voice, which still rang in his ears like distant music.

He started when the low, soft voice of Lady Grace said:

“Have you been at the Towers long, Lord Cecil?”

It was rather an awkward question, for this was his first visit to any house of the marquis, his uncle, for ten years.

“Two days,” he replied, simply.

Lady Grace’s eyes grew keen, and she glanced from the young man to the old one.

“I have just been trying to tell the marquis how intensely I admire the place,” she said.

The marquis inclined his head to her in courtly acknowledgment, but without a word.

“It is the prettiest—no, the grandest—old place I have ever seen. I am quite surprised to hear that the marquis seldom visits it. The view from the terrace is simply magnificent. The country round about must be very beautiful.”

“I think it is,” said Lord Cecil; the marquis made no sign. “I haven’t seen much of it.”

“I shall expect you to act as guide to what you have seen,” she said, with a smile that seemed to flash like a beam of light from her white face. [Pg 33]

“I shall be most happy,” he responded.

“I think the country is at its best in the spring, and I am always glad to get a little while, a short breathing time, before the London season commences. Let me see, you are in the Two Hundred and Fifteenth, aren’t you, Captain Neville?”

“I was,” said Lord Cecil, with a momentary embarrassment, and a glance at the marble-like face at the head of the table. “I have retired.”

“What a pity!” she said, and her eyes seemed to take in, at a glance, his broad chest and stalwart limbs.

“Do you extend your sympathy to the army or to Lord Cecil?” asked the marquis, in a voice too smooth for the sneer which his question conveyed.

Lord Cecil’s eyes flashed, and his color rose, but he contained himself and smiled.

“Oh, for both, of course. Surely the commander-in-chief cannot afford to lose a good officer, and Lord Cecil must be sorry to leave the army.”

“No,” murmured the marquis. “I do not suppose the commander-in-chief can afford to lose a good officer. Lord Cecil must have been a great loss,” and his icy glance rested for a moment, without a spark of expression, upon the handsome face which had flushed again under his cruel taunt.

“The loss was all on my side, Lady Grace,” he managed to say, with a smile; “at any rate, the duke bears up wonderfully well.”

Once more the marquis had succeeded in freezing the conversation, and Lady Grace, after toying with a strawberry, rose to leave the table. And as Lord Cecil opened the door for her, she put up her fan, and in a remarkably low voice murmured:

“You will not stay long?”

“I certainly sha’n’t,” he replied, emphatically, and in an equally low voice: but, low as it was, the marquis appeared to have heard it.

“I shall not detain you long,” he said. “You drink, of course?” and he touched the decanter.

The tone, and not the words, again seemed to convey an insult, and Lord Cecil shook his head, feeling as if he would rather have perished of thirst than drank a glass of the wine thus offered. [Pg 34]

“No?” said the marquis, and he managed to make even this single word offensive. “I thought it was the present custom with young men.”

“No, sir,” said Lord Cecil; “we have changed the fashion.”

The marquis inclined his head as if the retort were a compliment.

“Ah, the present age has no vices, I presume. Is it because they have no strength for them?”

“I don’t know,” said Lord Cecil, almost coldly.

The marquis filled a glass with the rare and costly wine, and as he sipped it, allowed his eyes to stray over the rim to his nephew’s face.

“I think I told you Lady Grace was expected?” he said.

“I think not, sir,” said Lord Cecil.

“Ah, it escaped me. Her father is an old—friend of mine.” The pause conveyed the sneer which lay in almost every sentence he uttered, and was expressed by tone or word. “He did me a great service, and I owe him a debt of gratitude.”

Lord Cecil looked up inquiringly. The marquis dipped his white fingers in the finger-glass, and added, smoothly:

“He ran off with a girl to whom I was going to be married. This is her daughter, and I am naturally—attached to her.”

The idea of the marquis being attached to any human being on the face of the earth almost raised a smile on Lord Cecil’s face. He might have laughed outright; the marquis would have made no sign. He sipped his wine slowly, then he said:

“She is what the people call a beautiful girl?”

This was put as a question, and Lord Cecil hastened to reply:

“She is very beautiful, sir.”

“If you say so!” said the marquis, with an inclination of the head, which brought the color to Lord Cecil’s face, and caused him to mutter:

“I can’t stand this much longer.”

“I beg your pardon?” said the marquis, blandly.

In his embarrassment Lord Cecil seized the decanter, and poured out a glass of wine, and the ghost of a smile crossed the marquis’ face. [Pg 35]

“It is rather singular that Lady Grace should have mentioned the army,” he said. “It reminded me that I wanted to speak to you on the subject. First let me thank you for complying with my desire.”

Lord Cecil smiled, but rather grimly.

“I don’t think I could have done otherwise, sir,” he said.

“Ah! true—yes. I think, if I remember rightly, that I made the continuance of your allowance subject to your resigning. No doubt you thought the condition rather arbitrary. Permit me to explain it. I could not afford it.”

Lord Cecil stared in an unfeigned astonishment, which appeared to give the marquis immense satisfaction.

“I generally avoid business matters,” he said, slowly, and as smoothly as ever; “I leave them to my steward and lawyer. But I think we had better speak of them—it is a good opportunity! It will surprise you to hear, no doubt, that I am a poor man!”

Lord Cecil certainly looked surprised. The marquis smiled.

“Y—es,” he said, slowly, as if he enjoyed making the statement. “It appears that I have spent rather more than double my income for say fifty years since, and I imagine that my father and grandfather must have done the same; at least that is the only way in which I can account for the fact that the whole of the free estates are mortgaged up to the neck. Up to the neck,” he added, as if it were a line of especially beautiful poetry.

Lord Cecil sat silent and attentive.

“The land that couldn’t be mortgaged will, of course, come to you,” continued the marquis, and his tone conveyed his infinite regret; “but even the income from that will be drawn upon to pay the interest on the others. Consequently,” with bland and icy politeness, “you will probably be the poorest peer of the realm.”

Lord Cecil remained silent, his eyes fixed gravely on the pale, set face, which bore not the faintest indication of regret.

“It is an uncomfortable position! I cannot imagine a more deplorable one, can you?” [Pg 36]

Lord Cecil nodded.

“I—I don’t think I have realized it yet, sir,” he replied.

“Ah!” said the marquis. “But you will. I haven’t felt it because, you see, I have been able to raise money for myself! That is unfortunate for you, of course, but I imagine you would have done the same in my place.”

Lord Cecil did not reply. The heartlessness of the speech simply staggered him.

The marquis waited, as if to give him time to digest this charmingly candid statement, then remarked, in as casual a voice as if he were commenting on the weather:

“Lady Grace’s grandfather made his money and his title out of beer. She will be immensely rich, I believe, and will not require the small sum—though it will be my all—which I shall leave her.”

He paused and looked at his white hands, then in an utterly wearied voice, as if he had exhausted all the interest in the subject, said:

“I am glad you think her so charming! Pray, do not let me keep you from her any longer!” and he rose and stood like a statue.

Lord Cecil pushed his chair back and rose, his handsome face rather pale, his eyes flashing.

“Do I understand, sir—do you want me to understand that you wish me to——” He hesitated a moment, then brought it out, bluntly—“to marry Lady Grace?”

The marquis surveyed him from under half-closed eyelids, as if he were some insignificant object at a distance.

“Certainly not!” he said, smoothly. “I was merely making an attempt, I fear a vain attempt, to amuse you by giving you some information. It is”—the words dropped with icy, contemptuous indifference from his scarcely moving lips—“a matter of profound indifference to me whether you marry Lady Grace—or one of the maids in the kitchen!”

A fierce retort trembled on the tip of Lord Cecil’s tongue, but he closed his lips tightly, and, returning the courtly bow which the marquis at this moment accorded him, with a short inclination of the head, left the room. The marquis gently sank back into his chair with the placid and serene air of a man who has spent a remarkably pleasant quarter of an hour. [Pg 37]

Outside, in the hall, Lord Cecil pulled himself up and drew a long breath, as a man does who has kept a tight hold upon himself for about as long as he can manage; then he paced up and down the full length of the hall—much to the concealed amazement of the groom and the footmen, one of whom stood ready to open the drawing-room door for him—and, at last, remembering that Lady Grace was waiting for him, greatly relieved the footman’s feelings by entering the room.

Lady Grace was reclining, almost completely lying, on a couch near the fire. At a little distance sat a middle-aged lady, bent over some kind of needlework. It was a distant connection of the marquis, who acted as a kind of housekeeper, and who was more like a shadow than a living, breathing woman. Beyond his first greeting when he had arrived, Lord Cecil had not succeeded in exchanging a word with her. As he entered now she just raised her head like an automaton, and let it fall again over her work. Lady Grace looked across at him with a smile, and he went and leaned against the mantel-piece of carved marble and mosaic, and she let her eyes scan his face in silence for a moment, then she said, with a smile:

“Have you been enjoying yourself, Lord Cecil?”

“Oh, very much!” he said.

She laughed a low, soft laugh.

“Shall I tell you what you are thinking?” she said.

He looked at her inquiringly.

“You were wondering what train you could catch to-morrow morning.”

He started.

“Right the first time!” he acknowledged, with a short laugh.

She moved her fan—it was a large one of fancy blue feathers—which in juxtaposition with her face made its fairness seem dazzling.

“Well, don’t,” she said, “for my sake.”

“For your sake?” he said, half-absently.

“Yes. Don’t you see that you would leave me alone? You would not be so cruel! And after two days only.”

“It seems about two years,” he said, grimly.

She laughed softly, her eyes still fixed on his face, as if it were a book whose pages she was reading. [Pg 38]

“How charming the marquis is, isn’t he?”

“Charming!” he assented, with a volume of bitterness in the word.

“You must be so glad to be here with him, and it is the first time for ten years!”

“And the last for another ten,” he said, under his breath, but she heard him.

“Don’t say that. After all, he is not so bad when you know him.”

“There are some people one doesn’t want to know, Lady Grace.”

“And then we must make allowances,” she said. “Why do they call him Wicked Lord Stoyle?” she asked him, not abruptly, but in the same soft voice that most people found acted upon them like a caress.

“I don’t know. For good and fully sufficient reasons I’ve no doubt,” he replied.

“Do you think he has murdered anybody, now?” she inquired, with a smile.

“I don’t know. Perhaps. I daresay. At any rate, I’m quite sure a great many people must have longed to murder him.”

“Oh, fie!” she said, touching him with the edge of her fan; “and your uncle, too! I wonder what he has done?”

“I was just wondering what he hasn’t done,” said Lord Cecil, grimly.

She laughed.

“You amuse me, Lord Cecil.”

“I’m awfully glad,” he said. “I didn’t think it was in me to amuse any one to-night.”

“You have had rather a bad quarter of an hour—yes?” she said, softly. “What a happy woman the marquis’ wife must have been.”

Lord Cecil started.

“I didn’t know——” he said, inquiringly.

She laughed, and the fan moved to and fro in rhythmic curves.

“No? Oh, yes, there was a marchioness once. Years and years ago. I believe he killed her—with kindness.”

“Poor woman!” he said, under his breath.

“Yes. But that’s the mystery. No one knows, you see, and never will know. Everybody knows about his ruining his cousin, Lord Denbigh, at cards; he committed suicide, and so the marquis inherited the Denbigh title; and about his shooting old Lady Dalrymple’s son—they say that the marquis fired before the word was given; and about his running away with that foolish Lady Penelope—she died in a garret at Dieppe; but nobody knows about the marchioness. How shocked you look!” [Pg 39]

“Do I?” he said. “I didn’t think I was capable of it. But surely that isn’t all he has done?” he said, with great sarcasm.

“Oh, no; these are trifles which I happened to remember hearing about. They are only trifles.”

“That is all,” he said.

They were silent for a moment or two; then she said, in the same voice, too low and soft to reach the old lady sitting at the other end of the room:

“And now shall I tell you what you are thinking about, Lord Cecil?”

“Don’t! I’m afraid!” he cried.

She laughed.

“You are wondering why I am here?”

His eyes replied in the affirmative for him.

“Because——But, wait! I am more clever even than you suppose! Shall I tell you what the marquis has been saying to you in the drawing-room; and why do you look so grim and gloomy?”

He did not answer.

She let her eyes rest upon his face with a serene and languid expression of amusement.

“Well, then, he has been advising you to marry me.”

Lord Cecil was almost guilty of a start.

He could not speak. The color rose to his face, and his eyes dropped from hers to the diamond pendant that glistened on the white neck.

She laughed softly, and the diamonds seemed to laugh with her, as they scintillated in the subdued light.

“Am I right? You need not answer—your face is eloquent enough! And now I will tell you why I came here—I came to see you.”

He tried to speak, but she held up her fan to command him to silence. [Pg 40]

“You see, I know the marquis and his charming ways better than you do. I knew that he wished us to meet, that we might—how shall I put it?—respect each other. Well, Lord Cecil, I have seen you, and you have seen me. But”—she rose with slow and graceful ease and took up the train of her dress—“but you are not obliged to marry me, and I”—she laughed softly up at his handsome face—“I am certainly not obliged to marry you. And now, in reward for my candor—I have been candid, haven’t I?—you will not leave me alone in this castle of Giant Despair?”

She did not wait for his answer, but with a soft “good-night” and a smiling nod, glided from the room.

With the smile still on her face, Lady Grace went slowly up the great staircase to the magnificent apartments which had been prepared for her. The smile was still on her face while her maid brushed the long tresses of silky hair that fell like a shower of gold over the white shoulders, and even when she was alone she smiled still as she leaned forward and looked at her face in the glass.

“Yes,” she murmured, falling back and half-closing her eyes. “He is worth winning. There is only one thing I fear.” She paused, with a faint sigh. “I am afraid that I shall love him too well!”

Lord Cecil stood with his back to the fire for twenty minutes after Lady Grace had left him. To say that he was amazed would be only inadequately to describe the state of his feelings. At last, as if he were making an effort to cast off the bewilderment which had fallen upon him, he wished the old lady good-night, and went, not to his room, but out on to the terrace, for he felt a kind of craving for the open air, in which he might rid himself of the effects produced by his insight into his uncle’s character and the extraordinary candor of Lady Grace.

He drew a long breath as he leaned over the balustrade, and his brain cleared somewhat.

“If Lady Grace is reading my thoughts at this present moment,” he murmured, “she’ll know I’m thinking of that train still! Yes, I’ll be off the first thing to-morrow morning!”

And with this firm resolution he turned to go back to the house. As he did so, something white fluttered past him, blown by the faint night breeze. [Pg 41]

He stooped and picked it up, and absently glanced at it by the light from the window. It was a small hand-bill, having on it in red letters:

Theatre Royal, Barton.
“Romeo and Juliet.”

“Romeo and Juliet!” It was that she had been reading by the brook. Instantly her lovely face rose before him, and dispelled all memory of the events of the night. He stood, looking down at the paper dreamily, wistfully,—seeing, not it, but the dark hair and blue eyes of the girl who had bent over him, whose hands his lips had touched.

“No!” he said, with a sharp sigh; “no, I can’t go, for she is somewhere here, and I must find her!”

CHAPTER V.

AN IDEAL JULIET.

The hour was approaching. Doris, still in her hat and jacket, sat in the tiny apartment behind the stage which served as her dressing-room. She was paler than usual, and her eyes looked of a deeper and darker blue than usual; but she was calm, with a calm which Jeffrey could not attain to.

With his hands folded behind him, his head bent upon his breast—his favorite attitude—he paced up and down the narrow limits of the room, like a tiger in its cage, waiting for his supper.

“Will the house be full, Jeffrey?” asked Doris, presently.

“Yes,” he replied. “The pit and gallery are full now; they were waiting at the doors as early as six o’clock. They are not fools, these Barton people. In some places you would be sure of playing ‘Romeo and Juliet’ to empty benches, but not here. It is a flourishing place, and they are intelligent and educated. They have a theatre they may be proud of, and they are proud of it. In [Pg 42] some towns the theatre is a neglected barn, and when that is so, you may take it that the people are uncultivated and barbaric. Yes—you will have a fair and patient hearing; I knew that when I chose Barton for the scene of your great trial. In London there are so many new Juliets that the critics and the audience have got incredulous and suspicious—they have seen so many failures that they go prepared for disappointment; here, it will be different. They love Shakespeare, they know you, they will hope for the best, and you will not disappoint them,” and his eyes glittered down upon her.

Doris smiled.

“Perhaps they will hiss me off the stage!” she said, but she did not say it very fearfully.

He shook his head, and went on in his monotonous pacing; and presently a familiar sound struck his ear.

“The curtain is up on the farce,” he said. “You had better begin to dress. Is there anything I can do—anything I can suggest—anything you would like to ask me?” he inquired, with his long, thin fingers on the handle of the door.

Doris shook her head.

“No, Jeffrey, dear; I don’t know of anything, unless you would get into my skin, and play Juliet instead of me.”

“You are not nervous?” he asked.

“Not a bit,” she answered; “and that is strange, isn’t it? No, I feel as calm and easy as if I were going to play a waiting-maid’s part; but I shall be all on the quiver when I am standing at the wings, ready to go on.”

He nodded, as if he understood, and went out, sending her dresser to her.

Doris dressed quietly and slowly. Jeffrey had impressed upon her the importance of avoiding all hurry just before her appearance, and she had finished, and was sitting before the glass, not looking at herself, but musing, as it seemed, when he came in again.

“Dressed? That is right! The house is crammed! The manager says it is the best house he has had since Mr. Irving was here. The boxes look like London boxes, people in evening dress, and ladies with flowers.”

He stood in front of her, and scanned her dress and get-up keenly. [Pg 43]

The dress was of white satin, made quite plainly, with a long train, its only ornament a row of pearls, which were not stage jewels, but real, and of great value, and a present from Jeffrey himself. Her dark hair, looking black by the light, fell round her exquisitely-shaped face like a frame, and, caught up by a white ribbon behind, swept in curving tresses to her shoulders. The faint touch of rouge—every actress must rouge, whether she likes it or not—gave the intense blue eyes an added depth and brilliance, which the long dark lashes veiled now and again, but to rise and render the brilliance and color more marked by their temporary concealment.

It was not his way to praise her beauty, but as he turned away he muttered something that sounded like approval.

“Did you see any one you know, in front, Jeffrey?” she asked.

“No,” he said, almost impatiently. “I know no one! I suppose all the people in the boxes are county people, I do not know! I only care for the pit and gallery; it is from them you must get your verdict, the boxes and stalls will follow suit.”

“Poor county people!” she said, with a smile, but absently.

“Of what are you thinking—the third scene?” he asked.

Doris started, and the natural color forced its way through the powder and rouge. She was not thinking of Romeo and Juliet at all, but of the handsome face that lay in her lap yesterday afternoon, of the young fellow whose name was Cecil Neville.

“I—I don’t know,” she said, faltering a little. “I think I was dreaming, Jeffrey.”

“Then you must wake up,” he retorted firmly, but not unkindly. “I heard the curtain go down on

the farce. Will you have a glass of wine?”

She shook her head, and looked at him with smiling surprise.

“And you, who are always preaching against it!” she said.

“I know,” he admitted; “but to-night——” [Pg 44]

The manager knocked at the door. He was a keen business man, just and not ungenerous, and he nodded and smiled at the beautiful vision admiringly and encouragingly.

“Beautiful house, Miss Marlowe,” he said, “and in the very best of tempers; a child might play with them to-night.”

“Ah, it is only a child who is going to play to them, Mr. Brown!” said Doris.

He laughed approvingly.

“By George, that’s good! I must remember that. How do you feel?”

“Frightened out of my life!” said Doris. “Do not be surprised if I forget my part, and am hissed off!” but her smile belied her words.

“If you are I’ll close the theatre and take to—market gardening!” retorted the manager.

“Let her alone! I do not want her to talk!” growled Jeffrey, and Mr. Brown, shrugging his shoulders and making a grimace behind the bent back, glanced at his watch and hurried off, saying—

“Ten minutes, Miss Marlowe!”

“Ten minutes!” said Doris, dreamily. “Leave me now, Jeffrey, dear.”

He laid his hand on her shoulder and looked down at her with a world of wistful tenderness and pride and loving anxiety.

“Do your best, Doris!” he said.

“I will, for your sake, Jeffrey!” she responded, touching his hand caressingly.

“No, for your art’s,” he said, gravely. “I shall be at the wings.”

Now that she was left alone, Doris tried to concentrate her thoughts upon the coming ordeal; but she could not. Each time she tried to picture herself upon the stage and speaking the lines set down for Juliet, the voice of Cecil Neville rang in her ears, and with a low cry, almost of alarm, she put her hands to her head.

“Ah, that’s stage fright!” said the dresser. “I know what it is, miss; I’ve had it myself, in my old acting days. But it will pass off directly you face the house, depend upon it. Don’t you be afraid [Pg 45] and nervous; for, Miss Marlowe, I’ve heard that the very first actors feel like that, some of them every night, too!”

Doris laughed softly.

“Do they, Mrs. Parkhouse?” she said. “Then there is hope for me. There is the overture over. Not many minutes now; the curtain is up!”

She bent her head upon her hands and forced herself to think of the scene that was at that moment being played, to think of the good-looking young fellow—a great Barton favorite—who was playing Romeo; but marvel of marvels, instead of his face, which she knew so well, there rose before her, as Romeo, the face over which she had bent yesterday.

“Ah, it is no use, no use!” she cried, springing up.

“Oh, don’t say that, miss!” said Mrs. Parkhouse, who had been watching her with respectful anxiety. “I’m sure—we’re all of us sure and certain that it will be a success. It will all go right directly you get on to the stage.”

“Do you think so?” said Doris, with a curious smile. “I hope so—ah, I hope so; if not——”

“Juliet!” shouted the call boy; and leaving her sentence unfinished, Doris caught up her train and went to the wings.

The Barton Theatre was a properly conducted one, and none but those who had business there were permitted behind the scenes; but Doris had to pass through a small crowd of actors and supernumeraries and carpenters, and she felt rather than saw the curious glances bent upon her.

But instantly Jeffrey was by her side.

“It has gone well, so far,” he said. “Mr. Brown was right; the house is in good humor, notwithstanding the heat and that it is packed. You played well, Mr. Garland,” he said to the Romeo, who came striding up and bowed to Doris.

“Did I? Thanks. Not nearly so well as I shall do when I have Juliet to play to. May I, without offense, say that you are looking your part most beautifully, Miss Marlowe?”

Doris inclined her head with a smile.

“Romeo should pay compliments, Mr. Garland, and that is a very pretty one. But I want to do [Pg 46] more than look my part!”

“Don’t be afraid,” said the young fellow, gallantly and seriously. “I haven’t the slightest fear of the result. It will be a big hit; I have said so all along.”

“And you should know!” said Doris. “I wish I felt as sure.”

“Your cue!” said Jeffrey in a solemn voice, as he touched her arm warningly.

She started slightly, then with the light, careless gait of a light-hearted, careless girl, who has no forecast of the doom hanging over her, she went upon the stage.

A greater part of the audience knew her, but they were astonished by the sight of her beauty, rendered more beautiful by the exquisite dress, and they led the thunder of welcome which the strangers, who saw her for the first time, followed as heartily.

Doris had been taught by Jeffrey that to stop the business of the scene to acknowledge applause was a cardinal sin, and commenced at once, and the crowded house fell into instant silence, in which her sweet, clear voice rang like a silver bell.

A round of applause marked the close of the scene, but there was not much enthusiasm in it.

She had looked a very typical Juliet, had played her part well, but there was nothing extraordinary in her acting.

“That’s right, Miss Marlowe!” said Romeo, as she passed him at the wing. “Saving yourself up! Reserve force, and all that! Quite right! You’ll let yourself go in the later scenes!”

“Well?” she said to Jeffrey, as he threw a silk shawl over her and drew her into a corner out of the draughts.

“It is for you to answer that,” he said, quietly. “It was well done; quietly and with self-possession.”

“I see!” she said, growing pale. “I have failed!”

“No!” he almost shouted; then, in a low voice that quavered: “It is not your best scene. It ought to be cut out. It is sometimes. You have nothing to fear. Did you see the house?”

She shook her head.

“No, I did not look.” [Pg 47]

He nodded approvingly.

“That’s right. Take no notice of them! Don’t look beyond the footlights, and—and—the next scene is a trying one—but I don’t want to make you nervous!”

“You will not make me nervous,” she said, almost sadly. “I wish that I could feel it more than I do ——”

She turned away, and her lips quivered.

The ballroom was set, crowds of supers were hurrying on to the stage; the orchestra was playing the familiar music; the audience were applauding the really handsome scene. Then her time came, and she went on, and the house listened and watched with rapt attention. When she went off, there was a distinct round of applause, but still not enthusiastic; the fire was wanting yet!

There were two London critics in the stalls, and they exchanged glances and comments.

“Awfully pretty girl!” said one.

“And a lady. Plays well, too,” responded the other.

“Ye-es,” assented the first. “Not at all badly, but, somehow, doesn’t she strike you as being out of the part, so to speak? Seems as if she were going through it in a dream! But she’s as beautiful as a dream, too!”

The balcony scene came on—the scene in which a Juliet, who is a Juliet, can display her powers to the best advantage. In this scene are opportunities for the display of love and tenderness, maidenly fear and modesty, and womanly passion, which no other play can afford.

Jeffrey, pacing to and fro behind the wings, with fingers lacing and unlacing themselves, was devoured by anxiety, mitigated by hope.

“Now or never!” he muttered. “This is the scene! Oh! Doris, Doris! Now you raise my heart to the seventh heaven, or break it!—break it!”

“Awfully pretty scene, Miss Marlowe,” said Romeo, as they stood together for a moment or two; “you’ll let yourself go now, I expect!”

“Shall I?” she said, dreamily, almost absently. “I don’t know.”

He looked at her curiously.

“Yes, I think I’d put all I know into this,” he said, gently and respectfully. “It’s a big scene for both of us.” [Pg 48]

“Yes,” she said, in a low voice. Then she glided past him and took her place on the balcony.

The scene began, the audience was as silent as the grave, as Romeo entered and made his well-known speech.

Then Doris moved forward to the edge of the balcony, and into the glare of limelight that poured down upon her.

And then a strange thing occurred. As she sighed, that well-known sigh, she raised her eyes and all unconsciously looked toward the house.

It was almost darkened; but a single light had been left in the chandelier, and it fell upon the handsome face of a young man sitting in the centre box. He was leaning forward, his eyes fixed upon her face, a strange intent expression in them. His face was pale, his hands clasped tightly on the velvet lining of the box-edge, his whole expression that of one surprised, amazed, bewildered and fascinated.

She saw the face for a moment only, but she recognized it.

It was the one over which she had bent on the preceding day; it was Cecil Neville's!

The color rose to her face, and her hands, clasped tightly on the balcony edge, trembled. Then she went pale again, and her eyes were raised to the moon.

Then she spoke, and again, marvel of marvels! the very tones of her voice seemed altered. There was no longer any trace of the cold abstraction which had marred the preceding scenes.

Melting, ravishing, they fell upon the audience like drops of dew upon sun-baked travelers.

A thrill seemed to run through the house. Romeo, experienced actor as he was, felt the change, the difference, and actually almost faltered.

Then they took up the scene. No need to dwell upon it; every one knows it; there is no other like it in the whole range of English literature.

Like notes of music, sounding the full depths of a girl's pure passion, her words dropped from her perfect lips. Her face was like a poem of Dante Gabriel Rosetti's; pale, passion-pale, yet eloquent. [Pg 49] Every gesture—as she swept the dark, silky hair from her forehead with an impatient movement; as she bent forward in the keen hope of touching Romeo's hand; as she kissed her fingers to him; as she pressed her throbbing heart, full to o'erbrimming with love—every gesture was noted and dwelt upon by the enraptured audience, and when the scene closed, a wild and unanimous burst of applause rolled like thunder from pit to boxes, from boxes to pit!

They clapped, they stamped, they cheered. It almost seemed as if a crowd of rational beings had taken leave of their senses. In plain truth, she had witched the hearts out of them, and they were fascinated.

Romeo stood, for the first time in his experience, at a loss what to do, till there rose from the pit a cry, "Juliet, Juliet!" Then he went to the wings and, breathless, grabbed at her hand.

"Come on!" he said, excitedly.

But Jeffrey held her fast by the arm. He was pale and trembling, but his voice was stern and grim.

"No!" he said. "Not yet! This is nothing. Let them wait till the last scene; then—then, if they want her, she shall go, but not till then!"

The two London critics in the stalls exchanged glances.

"Wonderful bit of acting," said one. "Really wonderful for so young a girl!"

"Yes," assented the second; then he added thoughtfully, "I wonder what made her wake up. It came quite suddenly, did you notice?"

There was one person in the theatre, one out of the whole crowd, however, who neither clapped nor cheered, but sat perfectly silent. It was Lord Cecil Neville. He sat, breathing slowly and heavily, like one under a spell, his eyes fixed on the spot where she had stood, all his senses in thrall.

CHAPTER VI.

[Pg 50]

A BUNCH OF VIOLETS.

He had spent the greater part of the day looking for her, his disappointment growing hour by hour as he grew convinced that he should not find her; that he had lost her forever. If he had only known her name, he could have inquired in the town; but he could scarcely go about asking people if they had happened to see the loveliest girl on earth, with dark hair and wonderful blue eyes; besides, there was, to him, something almost sacred in his meeting with her, and he shrank from putting commonplace questions about her.

By luncheon time he was, I am sorry to say, in anything but a good temper. Fortunately the marquis rarely put in an appearance at that meal, or, in all probability, there would have occurred an open quarrel between him and his nephew, and Lord Cecil would have fled the house. Lady Grace, too, did not appear; she had gone to pay a visit to a friend in the neighborhood, and Lord Cecil, therefore, ate his cutlet and drank his Chateau Margaux in solitude.

He was not at all sorry for this, for, to tell the truth, Lady Grace's candor, though extremely original, had very much embarrassed him, and Lord Cecil was too little used to embarrassment to find it agreeable. She was very beautiful, very charming, and he admired her very much, but still he felt her absence a relief; he was free to muse over the unknown, who had eluded his search all the morning.

Suddenly, as he finished his last glass of claret, he remembered the play-bill he had picked up on the terrace, and it occurred to him that here was the means of escaping dinner at the Towers; for this night, at all events, he could get away from the marquis' sneers and sarcasm.

"I shall not be home to dinner," he said to the stately butler. "I think I'll go to the theatre."

"Yes, my lord," responded the butler, displaying not a sign of the disgust which the announcement caused him. To think that any one—a viscount, especially—should prefer going to [Pg 51] the play to dining!

"What sort of a theatre is it?" asked Lord Cecil, carelessly, and for the sake of talking.

"Very good, my lord, I believe," was the solemn reply. "I've heard that it's almost as good as a London theatre, and that there is an excellent company there. They play 'Romeo and Juliet' to-night. That is," he made haste to add, "I heard some of the under-servants talking about it; I never go to the theatre myself, my lord. I will send a small dinner, of three or four courses, at an early hour in the breakfast room, for you, my lord."

"All right," said Lord Cecil, carelessly. "That will give you a lot of trouble, will it not? I can get a chop or something at the hotel in the town, can't I?"

"Oh, no, my lord; it will be no trouble," the butler made haste to reply; "the marquis would be much annoyed if your lordship were to be inconvenienced."

Lord Cecil nodded; he could scarcely suppress a smile at the butler's crediting the marquis with such hospitable sentiments.

"All right," he said, again; "I'll have it at half-past six."

"Yes, my lord," assented the butler, with a faint sigh; it seemed to him a dreadful sacrifice; and Lord Cecil soon afterward took up his hat and went out.

He made his way to the meadows, and stood looking down on the brook and at the spot where Polly had landed him so nearly upon his head; and at the bank where the fair unknown, whose face and voice haunted him perpetually, had sat, and a vague hope dwelt in his breast that she might, perhaps, revisit the scene as he was doing.

But an hour passed and she did not come, and he strode off, moodily, full of disappointment and half angry with himself.

"I am a fool!" he thought. "She has forgotten me by this time. Why should she come back here? If I were to meet her, what could I say to her? She'd very likely think me an impertinent snob if I did more than lift my hat. I couldn't very well tell her that I have scarcely thought of anything but her since we parted yesterday and to say anything less to her would seem to me to be saying [Pg 52] nothing at all!"

Thus musing, he went into the town, his stalwart figure, with its military carriage, his handsome, patrician face, and his Poole-made clothes, which he wore as if they had grown on him, causing no little sensation amongst the inhabitants.

But though he stared into the shop windows and looked at every girl who came in sight, he did not see the girl of whom he was thinking; and it was nearly seven before he came back to the "small dinner of three or four courses" which the considerate butler had served for him in the breakfast room.

He was half inclined to give up the idea of the theatre, and if it had not been for his dread of the marquis' society he would have done so. As it was, he ate his dinner slowly, and enjoyed it, although he was in love; and then, and not till then, he fully made up his mind to go.

"I'll have a brougham round in ten minutes, my lord," said the butler, but Lord Cecil declined it.

"I'd rather walk," he said. "I like a stroll after dinner."

The butler—more in sorrow than in anger—asked what time he should send the carriage, but Lord Cecil declined a conveyance for any part of the evening.

"I'll walk back," he said; "I rather like a stroll after the theatre," and the butler, with a sigh of resignation, gave him up as a bad job.

As he walked along the lanes, fragrant with the breath of spring, a thought—a hope—flashed through his mind that he might, perhaps, see the girl in the theatre. He never asked himself what his object in seeking her might be; men seldom ask themselves such questions. Lord Cecil was not an altogether bad character. He was not a modern Lovelace in pursuit of his prey, by any means. He was not, in fact, a Lovelace at all. He had lived in a fast set—had been the star and centre of the crack regiment in which he had held a commission—had gone through the ordeal of London life as completely as most young men of title; but he had come out of it, if he could be said to have come out of it, not altogether unscathed, but not very badly burned or smirched. [Pg 53]

The Nevilles had always been wild, and Lord Cecil had not been any tamer than his ancestors; but in all his wildness he had drawn the line. For women in general—for the sex, as a whole—he possessed a respect which had sometimes amused his less scrupulous companions.

He had overspent his allowance; lost large sums at baccarat and kindred games, turned night into day, risked his money and his neck at steeplechases, and generally, as his friends put it, played Old Harry, but no woman had, as yet, any indictment against him. He could truthfully declare, with the Frenchman, on his deathbed: "No woman can come to my grave and say that for want of heart I broke hers."

To women he was always frank and gentle, and the women of his set adored him. If he had broken no hearts in the sterner sense of the word, he had all unwittingly caused many to ache, and many a belle of the London season had "given herself away" to Cissy Neville, as his intimate friends called him.

And now the marquis had intimated that he must marry Lady Grace. Lord Cecil thought of last night's after-dinner conversation as he strolled along, tried to think of it gravely and seriously, but somehow he could not; all his thoughts flew, whether he would or would not, to the dark-haired, blue-eyed girl he had so nearly ridden over in the meadows. After all, he was not obliged to marry Lady Grace. The marquis could not compel him, and as for the money—— He shrugged his shoulders, and, having reached the theatre, put the subject from him.

It must be confessed that he followed the box-keeper to the private box he had taken with rather doubtful anticipations.

"Romeo and Juliet" in a country theatre is not always an entrancing spectacle, and Lord Cecil only wondered how long he should stand it. He was rather surprised at the air of elegance perceptible, and still more surprised at the crowded state of the house, and he congratulated himself, as he looked round at the well-dressed and aristocratic audience, that he had come in evening dress, for he had at one time thought of retaining his morning clothes. [Pg 54]

He settled himself in his box—he had arrived during the *entr'acte*—and looked at the programme.

"Juliet—Doris Marlowe."

The name struck him at once as a pretty one, and he did not trouble to read the rest of the cast. Then the curtain drew up on the balcony scene, and, leaning forward carelessly, he looked at the stage and saw, there in the balcony—the girl for whom he had been seeking, the girl with the dark hair and blue eyes!

For a moment he thought he was dreaming, and the color rushed to his face. Then he looked again, "all his soul in his eyes," and saw that he was not dreaming, but that it was in solemn truth she, herself.

If he had had any doubts her voice would have dispelled them. He would have remembered and recognized those musical tones if he had heard them fifty years hence instead of as many hours.

He was amazed, bewildered, engrossed, but not too engrossed to be aware that the "Juliet" he looked upon, Miss Doris Marlowe, was a great actress.

If she moved the rest of the vast audience, imagine how she moved him who had been thinking of her and longing to see her!

His heart beat wildly, the color came and went in his face; he was lost to everything but that bright, celestial, and yet purely human, being on the stage, then rendering the exquisite lines of her part; and it was not until he caught one or two curious glances directed at him that he drew back a little and tried to look simply interested like the rest.

The drop scene went down on the act, and he, to use his own phrase, "pulled himself together."

He got up and went out into the lobby, and made his way to the refreshment bar; and when he had obtained his brandy and soda he lingered over it and got in conversation with the attendant.

"This Miss Doris Marlowe is a great success?" he said, trying to speak indifferently.

"Oh, yes, she is, indeed," said the girl, with a long sigh; she had dreamed of being an actress herself, poor thing; "I just stole out and looked in at the last act. A success?—I should think so! I call it magnificent. I never saw anything like it; did you, sir?" [Pg 55]

"No, never," responded Lord Cecil. "She is a London actress, I suppose? And yet I don't remember seeing her in London," he added.

“No, I don’t think she’s ever played in London, but always in the provinces. This is the first time she’s ever done anything like this. She’s played here in small parts; this is her first appearance in Shakespeare.”

“Who is she?” he asked, endeavoring to make his question commonplace, yet feeling that he was hanging on her reply.

The girl paused in the wiping of a glass and looked puzzled.

“Who is she? I don’t know, sir. I question whether anybody knows rightly, excepting Mr. Jeffrey.”

“Mr. Jeffrey? Who’s he?” asked Lord Cecil, with a sharp pang. Could this man be her husband?

“Oh, the old gentleman who goes about with her. He ain’t her father, but a kind of guardian. He was an actor once. It was he, so they say, who taught her to act. Anyhow, she treats him just like a father.”

Lord Cecil drew a breath of relief.

“They are always together; they go from theatre to theatre. He is a very extraordinary old gentleman, and very trying at rehearsals, so I’ve heard the actors say; but he knows all about it, quite as well as the stage manager.”

At this moment the two London critics came up for a drink, and one of them bowed to Lord Cecil.

“Quite an eventful evening, my lord,” he said, with the easy respect of a fellow-Londoner.

“Yes,” said Lord Cecil. “It is a great success, I suppose. Do you know who Miss Doris Marlowe is?”

The critic shrugged his shoulders.

“Haven’t the least idea. Quite a *stella incognita*, but she will not be so after to-night. We shall see her in Drury Lane before many months are passed.”

“Who was that?” his friend, the other critic, asked.

“Lord Cecil Neville,” was the reply. “The heir to the Marquisate of Stoyle. A splendid fellow, and, strange to say, not a bit spoiled, though all the women make a dead set at him.” [Pg 56]

“The Marquis of Stoyle,” said the other thoughtfully. “That old villain? And this is his nephew. He is immensely good-looking.”

“Oh, a splendid fellow. Did you ever hear that story about him——?” and they moved away.

Lord Cecil drank half his soda and brandy, and then went back to his box.

Meanwhile, a thrill of excitement seemed to run through those engaged behind the scenes. A theatre is rendered famous by its actors, and it seemed that the Theatre Royal, Barton, was going to be made celebrated as the place of the first appearance of a great actress.

“If she can only carry us through to the end!” muttered Jeffrey, as he paced to and fro, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes flashing fire.

“Oh, she’ll do it!” said the manager, who happened to hear him. “Don’t you be afraid, Mr. Jeffrey; that young lady is a genius! I knew it from the first. She will carry it through to the very last. And about the engagement now? You make your own terms, and I’ll agree to them. You’ll find me straight and honest——”

But Jeffrey paced on. He was an old theatrical hand, and he knew, full well, that a Juliet may score in the balcony scene and yet fail in the later and more important ones.

But there did not seem much fear of failure with Doris.

Off the stage, and in her dressing room, she was quiet and subdued, but the moment she got on the boards her eyes flew to the centre box, and she seemed to draw inspiration from the handsome face that leaned forward in rapt, almost devout, attention.

The play proceeded. The great scene, in which Romeo takes leave of Juliet, his newly-made wife, went with a rush. The audience cheered until it was hoarse. Thrice the young actress was called to the front, and everybody who had brought a bouquet flung it at her feet.

Jeffrey, pale and statuesque, implored Doris to be calm.

“It is not all over yet!” he said, warningly. “There is the last scene. Remember what I taught you! It is the last scene in which a Juliet, who is a Juliet, declares herself! Do not let their applause [Pg 57] make you forget what is due to your art! I would rather that they remained mute and silent, Doris.”

And for answer she simply smiled. She did not tell him that while she could see a certain face in the centre box all would be well.

The pause before the last scene arrived. The whole house was talking in excited whispers. To the Barton folk, ardent theatre-goers as they were, nothing like this had befallen them. A twitter of excitement ran through the house, and amongst the crowd that thronged the lobbies Lord Cecil walked about, as excited as the rest.

Suddenly, as if he had been stricken by an idea, he turned up the collar of his coat and made his way through the press to the streets, and looked about him eagerly.

Some women selling oranges came hurrying up to him, and amongst them a woman with a basket of violets.

He bought the whole contents of her basket, and bade her tie them together; then, with the flowers in his hand, he went back to the theatre; but, instead of going to his box, he made his way to the stalls and stood close to the orchestra.

The last scene came on. Again it is unnecessary to describe it; the grim and solemn vault, the beautiful figure of the girl in the death throes, the terrible agony of Romeo, were all here, rendered real and lifelike by the genius of the actors.

Spellbound, the house watched and listened in profound silence. Listened to the passionate, despairing plaint of Romeo, and the deeper agony of Juliet, who awakes to find her lover dead.

Never, perhaps, since the play was played, was actress more touching, more tear-compelling than Doris Marlowe that night at the Theatre Royal, Barton; and as her last words died away in solemn silence, a great sob seemed to rise from the crowded house.

Then the sob gave place to a thunder of applause. Once more the sober audience seemed possessed by a spirit of delirium; men sprang to their feet and waved their hats, women rose and [Pg 58] waved their handkerchiefs with which they had wiped away their tears; and cries of “Juliet! Juliet!” resounded through the theatre.

A pause, and presently Romeo appeared, leading Juliet by the hand.

The audience stormed and cheered as one man, and those who had not already thrown their bouquets to her threw them now.

She was pale to the lips, and the blue eyes looked almost black as she bent them on the cheering crowd, and like a queen bowed beneath the tribute of their devotion, she bent her girlish head low.

She had nearly crossed the stage, had reached the spot exactly opposite that on which Lord Cecil stood. Then, and not till then, he raised his bunch of violets and tossed them at her feet.

She paused a moment in her triumphant progress, for it was nothing less, then stooped and picked up the rough-and-ready bouquet; Romeo’s arms were quite full.

For an instant her eyes rested on Lord Cecil’s face, then, as if with an involuntary movement, she raised the bunch of violets to her lips and passed off, the side wings engulfing her.

Three times more they called her, as if they could not let her go from their sight, and thrice she came before them, and, modestly, girlishly, bowed her acknowledgments.

Then—tired, hot and thirsty—the crowd began to disperse.

Lord Cecil Neville alone remained on the spot from which he had thrown his bouquet. He could scarcely believe that it was over, until the attendants began to cover up the seats with their calico wrappings, and, taking the hint, he made his way out.

The groups of people he passed through were talking about her triumph. He caught a word here and there, and, all unconsciously, found himself at the stage door. At least, he thought, he should get a glimpse of her as she drove away from the theatre.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes the greatest excitement prevailed. There had never been a Juliet like her, they were declaring; and they prophesied a success in London which should even eclipse [Pg 59] that of Barton!

And Doris, looking pale, stood smiling dreamily through it all. Even while Jeffrey paced to and fro in her dressing-room, too excited for speech, she remained calm and serene, wrapt in a kind of spiritual veil.

Managers, actors, thronged round her with congratulations; even the old dresser, declared, with tears, that “nothing had been seen like it.”

At last, the porter announced that Miss Marlowe’s fly was waiting, and Jeffrey took her away from the excited crowd.

“Draw your cloak well round your throat,” he said, as anxiously as if she were so fragile that a breath of wind would sweep her away. “Give me those violets to hold for you,” he said.

She drew her hand back, almost with a gesture of dread, and a dash of color came flying into her pale face.

“No, no—I can manage, thanks,” she said, quickly. “How sweet they smell, do they not?” and she held them up to him for a second.

“Yes,” he said, absently. “Were they thrown with the rest?”

“Yes,” she said, in a low voice.

“Some one of the poor people in the pit, I daresay,” he said; “a graceful and spontaneous tribute, worth, I was going to say, all the rest of them, beautiful and costly though some of the bouquets are. But I daresay you don’t agree with me?” and he smiled.

“But I do,” she said, averting her eyes. “Yes, I think them worth all the rest!”

They had traversed the long passage by this time, and reached the fly. Jeffrey put her in carefully, and was himself following, when he stopped suddenly, frowning and biting his lips.

“Doris,” he said, “you leave all to me? You leave all to my judgment, as hitherto? You are a famous woman now, or will be to-morrow, and may like to be independent. Would you rather wait till to-morrow and make your own arrangements with the manager, or shall I, as of old——”

“Jeffrey!” she broke in, with a reproachful look in her eyes. [Pg 60]

“Very well,” he said. “Brown has made me a very large offer for a month. I put him off just now, but I think I will go back and accept for you. I shall not be many minutes.”

Doris leaned back, and, closing her eyes, pressed the violets against her cheek. She could see the handsome face all aglow with excitement and admiration as he raised his right arm and flung the flowers; she could see it at that moment, and the mental vision shut out all the rest of that eventful night.

Suddenly she heard her name spoken beside the carriage window, and, leaning forward, she saw, in real earnest, the face which had been her inspiration. It was Lord Cecil Neville’s.

“Miss Marlowe,” he said, learning forward and speaking quietly, pleadingly. “Don’t be angry! Pray forgive me! I—I could not pass on without saying a word—one word of thanks.”

“Thanks?” she murmured.

Her eyes were lifted for a moment to his ardent face, then dropped to the violets and rested there.

“Yes. I was in the theatre,” he said. “You did not see me, of course, but I was there, and—I can’t tell you how we all felt, how we all feel. It was superb; it was—but there, I can only thank you.”

“You have done that already,” she said, with a smile, as she raised the violets.

Lord Cecil Neville blushed. I am afraid it would be rather difficult to get credit for this statement in certain quarters in London.

“I couldn’t get any better ones,” he said, apologetically.

“No,” she said; “I think you could not! Yes, I saw you in the theatre,” she added, as if she had been thinking of his first sentence. “Were—were you surprised, or did you know?” and she glanced at him with a half curious smile.

“Surprised!” he said. “I could scarcely believe my senses! I had no idea, until I saw you on the stage, that you, who were so good to me yesterday, were a great actress.” [Pg 61]

“I am not,” she said, in a low voice. “I am only a very little one. To-night I succeeded, another night I might fail——” a faint shadow came on her face, as he looked puzzled; then she smiled, as she broke off, to add: “I have something of yours——”

“Yes, my heart!” was his mental comment, but he said aloud: “Of mine?”

“Yes,” she said. “A handkerchief, I haven’t it here,” and she smiled again; then, suddenly, her face grew crimson, for she remembered that she had left it in the bosom of her dress. “I—I will send it to you if you tell me where.”

“Let me call for it,” he said, eagerly.

Doris’ brows came together, and she shook her head gently. She knew that Jeffrey’s welcome to a stranger would be a rough one.

“I will send it,” she said. “I think I know—the Towers, you said, did you not?”

A sudden inspiration seized him, and, bending forward, he said, in a low voice:

“If you should walk in the fields to-morrow morning—you may, you know!—lay it on the bank where you sat yesterday. Will you do this, Miss Marlowe? I will fetch it in the afternoon.”

The beautiful eyes dwelt upon his face with a deep gravity for a moment, as if she were wondering what his object could be in making the request; then she said, gently:

“Yes, why should I not?” as she held out her hand; “good-night.”

“Thanks, thanks!” he said, in his deep, musical voice. “Good-night! You should be happy to-night, for you have made so many people miserably so! I shall dream of Juliet all night!”

She let her hand rest in his for a moment, then drew it away and he was gone.

But at that moment it chanced that a handsomely-appointed carriage came round the bend of the road, and a lady, with softly-shimmering hair and darkly-brilliant eyes, who was leaning back in a corner of it, suddenly caught sight of the fly and the stalwart figure standing beside it. [Pg 62]

She bent forward eagerly, and her keen eyes took in, as the carriage rolled past, not only the expression of Cecil Neville’s face, but the face of the girl in the fly.

For an instant the warm blood rushed to Lady Grace’s face; then, as she sank back again into her corner, she laughed, a laugh of cold, insolent contempt.

“Some actress or shop-girl,” she murmured. Then her expression changed, and she bit her lip thoughtfully. “And yet he looked terribly in earnest!” she added. “Shall I take him up?” and her hand went out to the check-string; then she let it fall, and the carriage go on its way. “No; I think I’ll keep my little discovery to myself—it may be useful—and let you walk home, Lord Cecil!”

CHAPTER VII.

A RARE DIAMOND.

When Doris came down from her room the next morning, it did not seem as if the tremendous excitement of the preceding night had left any baleful effects. In her soft-white dress, she still looked more like a schoolgirl home for the holidays than the tragedienne who had, a few hours ago, moved a vast audience to tears and wild enthusiasm.

She came into the room singing, just as the birds sang under the eaves by her window, and laughed lightly as she saw Jeffrey bending earnestly over a copy of the local daily paper.

“Well, have I got a tremendous slating, Jeffrey?” she said, almost carelessly.

“Slating!” he replied. “If anything, it is too laudatory; read it!” and he held it out to her.

“After breakfast; I am so hungry,” she said, contentedly. “Read it to me, Jeffrey; all the nicest paragraphs,” and she laughed again.

He glanced at Doris under his heavy brows.

“At any rate, your success has not made you vain, Doris,” he said with grim approval.

“If it should make any one vain, it should you—not me, dear,” she said, quietly. “It was you made last night’s Juliet, good or bad.” [Pg 63]

“Very well,” he said; “I’ll be vain for both of us. Yes, it is a wonderfully good *critique*, and I think the news of your success will reach London, too. There were a couple of critics from London in the stalls; I didn’t tell you last night, in case it should make you nervous.”

She looked at him thoughtfully.

“I don’t think it would have made much difference,” she said. “I seemed to forget everybody and everything——”

“After the second act,” he put in.

She blushed to her temples.

“There was a distinct change, then; I noticed it, and I have been puzzling my brain to account for it. Perhaps you can explain it.”

She shook her head, and kept her eyes on her plate.

“No? Strange. But such inspirations are not uncommon with genius; and yours is genius, Doris.”

“Don’t frighten me, Jeffrey,” she said, with a faint smile.

“I have agreed with Brown, the manager,” he went on, “that you should play Juliet for a week, and after that some other of the big characters for a month, and he is to pay you ten pounds a week.”

Doris looked up, surprised. Ten pounds per week is a large sum for merely provincial actresses.

He smiled grimly.

“You think it a great deal? In a day or two you will get offers from London of twenty, thirty, forty pounds. But I am in no hurry. I have not been in a hurry all through. I want you to feel your feet, to feel secure in all the big parts here in the provinces before you appear in London. Then your success will be assured whatever you may undertake.”

“You think of everything, Jeffrey,” she said, gratefully.

“I have nothing else to think of, nothing else to tell you!” he responded, quietly, almost pathetically. “I have set my heart upon you being a great actress and”—he paused—“I think it would break, if you failed. But there is no need to speak of failure after last night.” [Pg 64]

He got up as he spoke and folded the newspaper.

“I’m going down to the theatre,” he said; he was never quite contented away from it. “You’d better look over your part this morning. Take it into the open air as you did the other day; it seems to succeed.”

“Very well,” she said, obediently.

He put on his hat and the thick inverness he wore in all weathers, and went away, and Doris sat looking dreamily before her.

Then, suddenly, she got up. She would take his advice and go into the meadows—for the meadows meant the open air to her—and as she was going she would take Cecil Neville’s handkerchief and place it on the bank as he had requested.

She put on her hat and jacket, and, possibly for the convenience of carrying, thrust the handkerchief in the bosom of her dress, where it lay hidden all the preceding day, and started.

It was a glorious morning, with only a feather of cloud here and there in the sky, and the birds sang as if winter were an unknown season in England.

With her stage copy of “Romeo and Juliet” under her arm, Doris Marlowe, the simple child of nature, the famous actress, made her way to the meadows.

The Barton folks have something else to do than wander in their meadows, and Doris did not

meet a soul; the great elms, which threw their shadows over the brook, were as solitary as if they had been planted in Eden. But lonely as the spot was, Doris peopled it with memories; and she stood by the brook and recalled the vision of the powerful figure on the great horse, as it appeared before her the moment prior to its being hurled at her feet.

“How strange that he should have been at the theatre last night!” she thought. “How curious it must have seemed to him, seeing me there as Juliet! I wonder whether he was sorry or glad!”

She could not answer the question to her satisfaction, but she stood motionless for a moment or two, recalling the words he had spoken as he stood beside the fly last night.

Then she took the handkerchief from her bosom, and, folding it with careful neatness, placed it on the bank where she had sat. [Pg 65]

“It is not likely that any one will come here before he comes to fetch it this afternoon,” she said.

Almost before the words were out of her lips a stalwart form leaped the hedge, and stood before her.

Doris started and her face flushed; then, pale and composed, she lifted her eyes to his.

“Well, now!” he said, in humble apology, “I seem fated to startle you, Miss Marlowe. I had no idea you were here——” he stopped, awed to silence by her silence.

“You said you would come for it in the afternoon,” she remarked, almost coldly.

He colored.

“Yes, I know; but I could not come this afternoon, and I thought——” he stopped, and raised his frank eyes to her face, pleadingly.

“You thought?” she said very gravely, her brows drawn together slightly.

“Well,” he said, as if with an effort, “I will tell the truth! I thought that if I came this morning I might meet you. It was just a chance. Are you angry?”

She was silent a moment. Was she angry? She felt that she ought to be; and had a suspicion that he had, so to speak, entrapped her into a meeting with him; and she honestly tried to be angry.

“It does not matter,” she said, at last, very coldly. “There is your handkerchief.”

He picked it up, and thrust it in his pocket.

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” he said, gratefully. She turned to go, with a slight inclination of her head, but he went on, speaking hurriedly and so earnestly, that she paused, her head half turned over her shoulder, her eyes cast down; an attitude so full of grace that it almost drove what he was going to say out of his head. “I don’t deserve that you should have brought it.”

“I don’t think you do,” she assented, a faint smile curving her lips at his ingenuousness.

“I daresay you think it strange that I didn’t ask you to send it to the Towers?” he went on. “You know you would not let me call at your place for it,” he added, apologetically. [Pg 66]

“Why did you not let me send it?” she asked, with faint curiosity.

“Well, I’ll tell you,” he said. “Won’t you sit down and rest? It’s warm this morning, and you have walked far, perhaps.”

She hesitated a moment, then sat down, almost on the spot she had sat the preceding day, and Cecil Neville could not help a wild wish rushing to his heart that he was once again lying at her feet!

He sat down on the bank, as near to her as he dared, and leaned on his elbow toward her.

“You see, I’m only a visitor at the Towers. The marquis—that’s my uncle, you know——”

“I don’t know,” she said, with a faint smile, her eyes fixed dreamily on her book.

“Of course not,” he assented. “Well, we don’t get on together. He is—not to put too fine a point on it—about as disagreeable a person as you’d find in two days’ walk! We never have got on together. They say that a man always hates the fellow who is to come after him, unless it happens to be his own son; and I suppose that’s the reason the marquis hates me——”

“Because you are to be the next marquis?” she said.

He nodded coolly, and tilted his hat so that it screened his eyes from the sun, and permitted him to feast upon her beautiful face more completely.

“Yes, that is about it; but I’ll give the marquis the credit of hating everybody all round, himself into the bargain, I dare say; but I fancy he reserves a special line of detestation for his own relatives. Ah, you are smiling,” he broke off, with the short laugh that sounded so good and frank. “You are wondering what this has to do with my disliking you to send the handkerchief!”

Doris smiled again in assent.

“Well, you see, I thought it might come into the marquis’s possession, or that he’d hear of it through Lady Grace——”

She turned her eyes upon his, not curiously, but with graceful questioning.

“That’s a lady—Lord Peyton’s daughter—who is stopping there,” he explained, “and they might ask questions, and—and bother me about it!” [Pg 67]

“Well?” she said, quietly.

He looked down half hesitatingly, then met her eyes, which seemed in their fixed regard to reach to his soul.

“Well—I’ve said that I’ll tell you the whole truth, and I will; and the fact is I didn’t want to be asked questions about the—the accident yesterday. I—yes, I’ll speak out, though I should offend you—I wanted to keep it to myself!”

“To keep it to yourself?” she repeated.

A flush came to his tanned face, and his eyes were raised for a moment.

“Yes. When a man gets a good thing—Suppose—” he broke off—“a fellow found a big nugget, or a rare diamond, or anything of that sort, he would like to keep it to himself, you know!”

She smiled again.

“Do you want me to take that as a compliment?” she said. “Am I the big nugget, the rare diamond which you discovered?”

He flushed more deeply, and looked at her pleadingly.

“I’m such an idiot that I can’t express myself,” he said, apologetically. “I meant that the whole thing, your—your kindness and goodness to me was so precious that I didn’t want a lot of people talking about it. I wanted to keep it to myself, as something especially belonging to me, something too precious to discuss with others. I’m afraid I can’t make you understand.”

“You do yourself an injustice,” she said. “You express yourself very well!”

“Now, you are laughing at me,” he said.

“As you would laugh at me, Lord Neville, if I believed what you said!” she retorted, not sharply, but with a sweet gravity that was indescribable.

“I said I would tell you the truth, and I’ve told nothing but the truth,” he said, earnestly. “I dare say it seems strange to you that I should have this feeling about our meeting yesterday. I dare say you forgot all about it half-an-hour afterward! Why should you remember it, you who have so much to think of?”

Doris turned her face away, lest her eyes should betray her, and tell him how much, how constantly she had thought of him! [Pg 68]

“You,” he went on, “who are so clever and gifted, a great actress, with no end of people round you——”

She looked at him with a pensive smile.

“But you are wrong, quite wrong,” she said. “I am not a great actress. Last night was my first success, if success it was——”

“There is no ‘if’ about it!” he said, with fervent enthusiasm. “It was a tremendous success! Why, I heard people declare that there had been nothing like it since Kate Terry’s Juliet! And I—though I’m not of much account—I was never so much carried out of myself. Why, to tell you how great and grand you were, I actually forgot that you were the young lady who was so good to me yesterday, and only thought of you as Shakespeare’s Juliet; and I felt quite ashamed that I had ever given so much trouble to so great a personage.”

His warm, ardent praise touched her, and her lips quivered.

“Juliet was only a simple girl, after all,” she said. “If she had chanced to have been placed in my position yesterday she would have done the same.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “I’m not clever, like you,” and he pushed his hat off his brows with a deprecatory gesture. “But I know you must have something else to think of than the fellow who was such an idiot as to jump a hedge before he saw what was on the other side; and, of course, you must have no end of—of people round you!”

“But I have not! You are quite wrong,” she said, with her sweet, thoughtful smile. “I live with an old friend, who has been like a father to me! I haven’t any father or mother, and I see no one, except at the theatre, and then only in the way of business,” and she laughed.

He listened as if every word she dropped from her sweetly-curved lips were a pearl.

“How strange it sounds! You so clever and beau——so great an actress.”

“Yes,” she said dreamily; “I suppose it does sound strange! Everybody thinks that an actress must be the gayest of the gay; surrounded by light-hearted people turning night into day, and living on champagne and roast chicken.” She smiled. “Jeffrey and I know scarcely any one, and I do not think I have tasted champagne, excepting once, when one of the managers had a benefit; and we go straight to bed directly we get home from the theatre; and, oh, it is quite different to what people imagine.” [Pg 69]

He drew forward a little, so that the hand upon which he leaned touched the edge of her cotton dress.

“And—and you didn’t quite forget our strange meeting?”

“I am not in the habit of seeing gentlemen flung from their horses at my feet, Lord Neville,” she said, but she turned her face from him.

“And I,” he said. “Why, I have not been able to get it out of my head! I thought of you every minute; and I tried not to, because——”

“Because?” she said. “Pray go on!” and she smiled.

“Well,” he said, modestly, “because it seemed like presumption. And then I went to the theatre, and——” he stopped. “For a moment or two I couldn’t believe that it was really you on the stage there. And when the people in the theatre began to shout out your name, it woke me from a kind of dream.”

She smiled in silence; then she made a movement threatening her departure.

“Ah, wait a little while!” he pleaded. “It is delightful here in the sunshine. Don’t go for a minute or two. I wish——” he stopped.

“What is it you wish?” she asked, regarding him with smiling eyes that drooped under his ardent ones.

“Well,” he said, “I wish that you would let me go home with you and see Mr. Jeffrey——”

“Jeffrey Flint,” she said. She shook her head. “He sees no one, makes no acquaintances. He—he is very reserved.”

Speaking of him reminded her of the fact that he would strongly disapprove of her interview with this strange young gentleman. She rose.

“I must go now,” she said. “I have not asked whether you were hurt by your fall, Lord Neville, but I hope you were not.”

“Must you go?” he said, ignoring the rest of her sentence as of no account. “We seem to have [Pg 70] been talking only a few minutes! And there was such a lot that I wanted to say! I wanted to tell you all that I thought when I saw you last night; but I couldn’t if I had the chance, because I am a perfect idiot when it comes to expressing myself. But I do think it was wonderful! Are you going to play to-night? But of course you are.”

“Yes,” she said, absently, “I play to-night. I play every night!”

“I shall be there,” he said, as if it were a matter of course.

She looked at him thoughtfully.

“Of course I shall!” he said. “Why, last night I seemed to have a kind of interest in it which the other people in the theatre hadn’t. Yes. As if—as if—I knew you intimately, you know. Of course, I shall be there! And I shall bring a big bouquet. What flowers do you like best?”

She almost started, as if she had not been listening to him; as a matter of fact, she had been listening to the deep, measured voice rather than the words.

“Flowers?—oh—violets,” she said, unthinkingly.

“Why!” he exclaimed. “That is what I threw you last night! Of course, you didn’t know. You can’t see beyond the footlights, can you? I’ve heard you can’t. Violets! I’ll get some. I shall take a seat in the stall to-night. I shall see and hear you better there.”

“I should have thought you had seen and heard me enough already,” she said with a smile.

“No, but I haven’t!” he responded, eagerly. “I couldn’t see you or hear you too much if I looked at you and listened to you all day!”

Her face grew crimson, but she turned her head toward him with a smile on her face.

“For flattery, pure and simple, I don’t think you could surpass that, Lord Neville.”

“Flattery!” he exclaimed, as if hurt. “It is no flattery, it is the honest truth. And, Miss Marlowe, I do not ask you to believe—” he saw her start and lift her head as if listening, and looking up to ascertain the cause, saw that her eyes were fixed upon some spot behind him, and he heard the [Pg 71] sound of footsteps.

“I must go,” she said, as if suddenly awakened to a sense of the situation.

“Ah, no,” he breathed; then he leaned toward her with half-timid eagerness. “Will you come to-morrow?”

The footsteps came nearer.

“I promise—nothing,” said Doris, her brows coming together, and with a half glance at his earnest face she glided away from him.

Lord Neville rose and looked after her with the expression which encompassed the desire to follow her; but in that moment a hand fell lightly upon his shoulder, and a voice exclaimed:

“What, Cissy!”

Lord Neville swung round.

“Hallo, Spenser!” he said. “Why, what on earth brought you here?”

CHAPTER VIII.

SPENSER CHURCHILL.

The new comer was a man apparently of middle age; I say apparently, because opinions on that subject were extremely conflicting. Some persons regarded Spenser Churchill as quite a young man, others declared that he had reached the meridian of life, and there were some who were inclined to think that he was, if anything, on the verge of old age. His appearance was singular. He was of medium height, with a figure that was either naturally youthful, or admirably preserved. He was fair almost to effeminacy, and he wore his hair long and brushed back from his face; and he was close shaven. But it was not the length of the hair that lent him his singularity, but the expression of his face and his manner.

If he was not the most amiable of men, his countenance belied him. There was always a smile, soft and bland, and good-tempered in his eyes, on his lips, and as the Irishman said, "all over him." The smile, in conjunction with the fair face and long hair, gave him as confiding and [Pg 72] benevolent an expression that the world had long ago come to the conclusion that Spenser Churchill was the epitome of all the virtues.

Most women were fond of confiding in him; most men—not all—trusted him; he was regarded by crossing-sweepers, waiters and beggars generally as their natural prey, and so effective was his smile, that even when he did not bestow his alms, he always received a blessing from the disappointed ones.

Whenever his name was mentioned, some one was sure to say:

"Oh, Spenser Churchill! Yes! Awfully good-natured fellow, you know. No end of a good soul. Share his last crust with you. Kind of cherub with legs, don't you know."

But, if strict inquiry had been made—which it never was—it would have been difficult to bring forward evidence to prove the benevolent Spenser had ever shared anything with anybody, or that he had ever been liberal with anything, excepting always the smile and his soft persuasive voice.

Of his past history, and, indeed, his present mode of life, the persons who were always ready to praise him knew very little—or nothing, and yet he was always spoken of as one of the best known men in society.

You met him everywhere; at the first reception of the season, at the meeting of the Four-in-Hand Club, at the smoking-room of the "Midnight," sauntering in the foyer at the opera, seated in the stalls of the fashionable theatres, in county houses of the most exclusive kinds, on the shady side of Pall Mall, in the picture galleries, at the big concerts, at dinner parties. His neat figure always most carefully dressed, his countenance always serene and placid, as if the world were the most charming of all possible places, and had been specially created for Spenser Churchill; and with the benedictory smile always shining.

He was rich, it was supposed; he was a bachelor, it was thought; he was connected with half the peerage, so it was stated; and that was all concerning his private life that any one knew. But, if little was known about him, Spenser Churchill knew a great deal about other people; some said, [Pg 73] too much.

Lord Neville's surprise at seeing him was quite uncalled for, because Spenser Churchill was in the habit of "turning up" at the most unlikely places, and at the most unlikely times; and whatever surprise you might feel at seeing him, he never expressed any at meeting you.

Now, as Lord Neville stared at him, he blandly and placidly smiled, as if he had parted from Neville only a quarter-of-an-hour ago, and held out his hand as if he were bestowing a bishopric by the action.

"Why, the last time I saw you was at Nice!" said Lord Neville, with a laugh, "and here you are at Barton! What on earth brings you here? Don't make the usual answer about the two-twenty-five train and your legs——"

"I wasn't thinking of doing so," said Spenser Churchill, softly. "What a charming spot!" and he looked round with a soft rapture beaming on his face. "Charming! So rural! That brook—those trees—the clear, spring sky—the songs of the birds—didn't I hear human voices, by the way?" he asked; and it is to be noticed that he didn't break off to put the question abruptly, but allowed it to form portions of his softly-gliding sentence, as if it were the most innocent and careless of queries, and he let his eyes fall with a gentle, beaming interrogation on the handsome face.

Lord Neville looked aside for a moment. Cherubimic as Spenser Churchill was, Lord Neville did not quite care to answer the question.

"I daresay," he said; "but you haven't answered me yet, Spenser. What brings you here?"

"A deeply-rooted love of the country, my dear Cissy; from a child I have reveled in—er—the green meadows and the purling brook. I always fly from town at every opportunity. And you?"

"I am staying at Barton," said Cecil Neville, rather shortly.

Spenser Churchill raised his pale eyebrows with a faint surprise.

"With the marquis—with the uncle?" he said, softly.

"Exactly. You are surprised; so was I when I got the invitation." [Pg 74]

“No, really? Ah, I am so glad! It is so nice to see relations living together in harmony——”

“But we don’t live in harmony!” broke in Neville, in his impetuous fashion. “We have only met once or twice and have nearly quarreled on each occasion.”

“Oh, come, I don’t think the dear marquis could quarrel with you, his nephew.”

“No, you’re right,” said Neville, with a rather grim laugh. “The dear marquis doesn’t quarrel, he’s too highly polished to do anything so vulgar; he only carries on until one is driven half mad by the longing to pitch him out of the window——”

“My dear Neville! Always the same wild recklessness. Pitch the marquis out of the window!” and Spenser Churchill laughed—a kind of dove-like coo. “Now, that is strange! I always find the marquis so delightfully charming——”

“But so you do everybody,” retorted Lord Neville, laughing.

“Well, most people are, aren’t they?” said Spenser Churchill, blandly.

“I don’t know,” replied Lord Neville. “I’m afraid I must be getting back. I’m due at lunch.” He pulled out his watch, but instead of looking at it, glanced in the direction Doris had taken.

“Looking for any one?” inquired Spenser, softly.

Lord Neville started rather impatiently.

“No,” he said, “oh, no. Where are you staying? I’ll look you up——”

“I’ll come with you,” said Spenser. “The walk will be delightful, and I am glad to see you.”

“All right, come on then,” said Lord Neville, and the two started in the direction of the Towers.

Spenser Churchill did most of the talking—it was almost like singing, so soft and bland and unobtrusive was the voice; Lord Neville listening rather absently, and making answers rather wide of the mark at times—for he was thinking of Doris—and when they reached the entrance to the avenue he stopped.

“I’m sorry I can’t take upon myself to ask you in to lunch, Spenser,” he said, with a laugh; “but [Pg 75] my uncle might—and probably would—consider it a liberty, and have you, possibly both of us, chucked out; and, though I shouldn’t mind it, you mightn’t like it, you know.”

“I really think I’ll take the risk” said Spenser. “The marquis and I are such old friends, that I—yes, I’ll chance being expelled.”

“All right,” assented Lord Neville, as before. “Come on, then; and don’t blame me if the consequences are as I suggested.”

“No, I won’t blame you,” said Spenser Churchill.

They made their way to the hall, and the groom of the chambers and the footmen received them as if they were royal visitors.

Lord Neville said:

“Tell the marquis that Mr. Spenser Churchill has arrived, please.”

The groom did not look surprised, but merely bowed as he departed.

The drawing-room was empty, and the two men stood talking for a minute; then the groom came and led Mr. Spenser Churchill to wash his hands, and Lord Neville went up to his room. As he came down the luncheon bell rang, and he led Spenser Churchill into the dining-room.

The marquis was already seated, and Lord Neville was about to explain Spenser’s presence, when he saw the marquis give a start, and as he rose and extended his hand, Neville fancied that he noticed a peculiar twitch of the thin, colorless lips.

“Ah! Spenser,” said his lordship, and he spoke, Lord Neville thought, with something less than his usual cold and biting hauteur, “this is a surprise! Pray be seated,” and he himself sank into his chair, with no trace of the mental disturbance in his face or manner, if there had, indeed, been any.

“Yes, it is a surprise,” said Spenser Churchill, softly, taking his seat, and unfolding his napkin, as if he had been lunching at the same table for months past; “I was so fortunate as to meet our dear Neville in the—er—fields, I may say, where he was roaming in happy and poetic solitude, [Pg 76] and he was kind enough to assure me of a welcome if I came on with him.”

“His assurance was—on this occasion—justified,” said the marquis, with a cold glance at the young man.

Spenser Churchill smiled, as if the taunting and exasperating speech were one of the most amiable.

“Thanks,” he murmured; “and you are well, I hope, marquis?”

“I am never ill,” replied his lordship, as if he were quite incapable of such vulgarity.

“Ah, no, that is always so delightful of you!” said Spenser. “Our dear Neville enjoys the famous Stoyle constitution also; he is never ill, are you, Neville?”

“No,” said Neville, grimly, and without lifting his eyes from his plate.

“I have always been given to understand that the possession of rude health is the privilege of the fool,” remarked the marquis. “Of course, we are the exceptions from the rule.”

“Exactly,” murmured Spenser again, as if this were the most charming of compliments. “Some of us, alas, have become convinced that we have hearts and livers!”

“Not all of us—so far as the hearts are concerned,” said Neville, curtly.

The marquis almost smiled; to goad any one into a retort made him as nearly happy as it was possible for him to be.

“Where are you staying? You will come on here, of course?” he said.

“I am staying at the hotel at Barton. I think they call it the ‘Royal.’ It would be quite too charming if it did not smell so strongly of stale tobacco and coffee. Thanks, yes, I shall be very glad.”

The marquis looked at the butler, the look meaning: “Send for Mr. Spenser Churchill’s luggage.” The butler glided from the room.

“You find us quite a merry party,” said the marquis. “We have another visitor besides Neville——”

“Who can scarcely be counted a visitor,” murmured Spenser.

“Really, that is scarcely fair,” said the marquis, blandly. “Neville has his faults, but he is not quite the nonentity you would represent him.” [Pg 77]

Neville raised his head, stung to a retort, when the door opposite him opened and Lady Grace entered.

She was charming, perfectly dressed, looking like a vision of one of Lippo Lippi’s angels.

“I’m afraid I’m late——” she began, lightly, then her eyes fell upon Spenser’s smiling face, and her own paled. For a second she stood still and put out her hand as if seeking something to support her, then her face resumed its usual serenity, and with a smile she came forward.

“Mr. Spenser Churchill! Really! What a nice surprise!”

“How good, how kind of you to say so!” he sang, as he bent over her hand.

“I am always good and kind; I can’t help it. Well, Lord Neville, how have you been amusing yourself?” she went on, as he rose and arranged her chair for her.

“Under melancholy boughs in the woods, musing in moody meditation, mentally morbid!” said Spenser Churchill. “I found him beside a purling brook, composing sonnets, Lady Grace.”

“Or dreaming of last night’s Juliet?” she said, smiling.

He looked up quickly, but her eyes seemed full of unconsciousness and innocence.

“You did go to the theatre last night, didn’t you?” she asked. “They told me so.”

“Yes, I went,” he replied.

“And it was ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ wasn’t it?”

He nodded.

She made a little grimace.

“Fancy ‘Romeo and Juliet’ at a country theatre, Mr. Churchill!—the Romeo striding about, all gasps and sighs, the Juliet fat, fair and forty! Poor Lord Neville!” and her silvery laugh rang softly through the room.

Lord Neville knew it would be the better, wiser course to smile and shrug his shoulders, but he could not.

“It was quite the reverse,” he said, and his voice sounded short and almost grim. “The play was well cast, and admirably staged. The Romeo didn’t gasp or strut, and the Juliet——” he stopped, feeling that his voice had grown more enthusiastic, and was betraying his. “Oh! she played very well,” he said. [Pg 78]

“Indeed! Really!” exclaimed Lady Grace. “Oughtn’t we to patronize the local talent, marquis?”

He raised his cold eyes to her lovely face.

“I am too old to commit mental suicide,” he said; “take Neville’s recommendation, and go, if you like, and be sorry for it.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“After all, I don’t think I could venture on it; it would be—forgive me, Lord Neville—too awful. And so you have come to Barton, Mr. Churchill. And from whence, pray?”

They talked together in this light, careless, half-indifferent *blasé* manner which is now—Heaven help us!—the fashion; and Lord Neville finished his lunch in silence.

“I promise nothing!” rang in his ears; “I promise nothing!” It was a strange answer. Most girls would have said: “Yes,” or glanced at him, so to speak, indignantly; but, “I promise nothing!” she had said, in her sweet, grave, penetrating voice. Would she come? And if she did, how much the happier would it be? What on earth had come to him, that he should be unable to think of anything but this lovely, bewitching girl, so beautiful in face and great in genius?

He woke with a start as the marquis rose, and bowed to Lady Grace, who was quitting the room.

“Come with me and smoke a cigar,” said Lord Neville to Spenser Churchill.

“Mr. Churchill will do nothing of the kind,” exclaimed Lady Grace, stopping and looking over her shoulder, not at his smiling face, but at the opposite wall. “How inconsiderate you are, Lord

Neville; you forget that I am dying to hear all the latest news."

"I thought you'd heard it all," he said, with a smile.

"Not half!" she retorted. "I shall be on the terrace, Mr. Churchill."

He bowed and smiled; then he turned to the marquis.

"There used to be a very fine old port, marquis," he said.

The marquis glanced at the butler, who went out, and returned presently, carefully carrying a [Pg 79] bottle in a wicker frame, and Mr. Spenser Churchill sipped the famous wine with angelic enjoyment.

"There is nothing like port," he murmured. "Nothing. Yes, marquis, you look the picture of health. Ah, my dear Neville, depend upon it, that the moralists are right after all, and that, if one would enjoy life at its fullest, the thing is to be good!" and he smiled beamingly at the marquis, who had, for a generation, been called: "Wicked Lord Stoyle."

Lord Neville glanced at the pale, cold face of his uncle, expecting some cutting retort, but the marquis only smiled.

"You were always a moralist, Churchill," he said. "But your advice comes rather late for Neville, who has, I'm afraid, made acquaintance with the prodigal's husks pretty often."

"And now comes back to find the fatted calf killed for him," sang Mr. Spenser Churchill, sweetly.

The marquis rose.

"Don't let me interfere with your port," he said.

Neville looked after him.

"I think I can stand about another day of this," he said, quietly.

"After that you would really not be able to resist the temptation to throw him out of the window, eh? Fie, fie, my dear Neville!" murmured Spenser Churchill, with a smile. "Shall we go and join Lady Grace? She won't object to a cigarette, I suppose?"

"I don't know; I never asked her," he said. "I'll go and get some cigars," and he sprang up and left the room.

Spenser Churchill's bland smile followed him for a moment or two, then the expression of his face wholly changed. His lips seemed to grow rigid, his soft, sleepy eyes acute, his very cheeks, usually so soft and rotund, hard and angular; and he sat with his glass held firmly in his hand, peering thoughtfully at the tablecloth.

Then he rose, and, carefully examining the bottle, poured the remains of it into his glass, and drank it slowly and appreciatively, and then stepped through the open window on to the terrace.

A slim and graceful figure leaned against the balustrade. It was Lady Grace; her hands, clasped [Pg 80] together, were pressed hard against the stone coping, as if they were trying to force their way through it, and the face she turned towards him was pale and anxious, the face of one waiting for the verdict; of one expecting the dread fiat of a judge.

With a benign smile, more marked than ever, perhaps intensified by the famous port, he slowly approached her.

"What an exquisite view," he said, softly, and extending his hands as if he were pronouncing a benediction on the scenery; "now that nature is in her spring-time. How refreshing, how inspiring, how vernal! I cannot express to you, Lady Grace, how deeply this beauteous prospect moves me! One must have a hard and unimpressionable heart, indeed, who is not moved by such a landscape as this; so soft, so—er—green——"

Her clasped hands grew together more tightly.

"Why have you come here?" she said, suddenly, in a strained voice.

He raised his pale eyebrows.

"Here—on the terrace, do you mean, Lady Grace?" he said, in a voice of an innocent, unsophisticated child; "surely you forget. You, yourself, asked me!"

"Why have you come here?" she repeated.

Without changing his expression or his attitude of bland, serene enjoyment, he murmured:

"I came because I thought you wanted me—and you do!"

CHAPTER IX.

A SECRET COMPACT.

“I came because I thought you wanted me, and you do,” said Spenser Churchill, softly.

Lady Grace looked at him, with an expression of dislike and fear—actual fear. It displayed itself in every line of the fair, perfectly-formed face, in the expansion of her clear eyes, in the tight—almost painful—compression of her slim, white hands.

“Why do you think so?” she demanded, in a low voice. [Pg 81]

He smiled, until it seemed as if he meant it for his only reply, then he said, in a dulcet voice:

“A little bird whispered——”

She made a movement of impatience.

“Is there anything you do not know? Is there anything one does or says that does not reach you?”

He shrugged his shoulders, not cynically, but still with the amused gesture with which one meets the petulance of a spoiled child.

“I believe there is no secret in any of the lives of the men and women who call you friend—friend!—that you have not become possessed of. How is a mystery!”

“It is a question of sympathy, my dear Lady Grace,” he said. “Nature bestowed upon me a large and sympathetic heart——”

Again she made a movement of impatience.

“Spare yourself the trouble of trying to delude me!” she said, in a kind of quiet despair. “There are many who fully believe you to be what your face, and voice, and manner, and reputation make you appear, but I am not one of them—I think I have known you from the first.”

“You have such keen penetration,” he murmured, as if she had paid him a delicate compliment.

“I see you without your mask—that mask which presents the appearance of a smiling, benevolent goodwill! You cannot impose upon me, Spenser Churchill!”

“Do me the credit of admitting, dear lady, that I never tried,” he said, softly.

“No,” she said; “it would have been useless. Others you may deceive; me you cannot. Therefore, I ask you plainly, why you came here? Of course, I know that you were aware I was here!”

“Oh, yes, I was aware of it,” he admitted; “but think, dear Lady Grace, such knowledge does not prove much astuteness on my part. Lady Grace Peyton’s movements are one of the social events which are duly reported——”

“None of the papers said that I was at Barton Towers,” she said, sharply; “you got your information from some other source!”

“What does it matter?” he remarked, soothingly.

“No,” she said; “it does not matter, excepting that it proves what I say, that there is nothing you do not know. And now, once more, why have you come? I put a plain question. I expect a plain answer.” [Pg 82]

“If we always got what we expected!” he murmured, mockingly.

She colored and bit her lip.

“You do not mean to answer? It was from no love for or goodwill to me. I know you do not—like me, Spenser Churchill!”

He looked quite shocked, and whispered:

“My dear Lady Grace, you hurt me; you do, indeed! There is no one in the charming circle to which you belong whom I more ardently admire and respect! Oh, really, you wound me! Not like you!”—he held out his soft, plump hands reproachfully—“Lady Grace Peyton possesses the whole of my esteem; and if I could do her a service——”

“You would do it!” she broke in, abruptly, with a bitter, scornful laugh.

He sighed and looked up at the sky with an injured air of patience and long suffering.

“How little you know me! How cruelly you wrong me! Alas! it is always thus! One’s best effort on behalf of others is always met with scorn and incredulity——”

“There is the marquis,” she said, as if she had been thinking deeply and had not heard his pathetic appeal. “What do you know about him? How have you got him in your power?”

“Got the marquis in my power! My dear Lady Grace——”

“Pshaw!” she said. “Do you think I am blind that I cannot see how different he treats you to others? Is there any other man who would come to Barton Towers, and be received as you have been? Is there any other man who would dare to brave him—yes, and taunt him—as you have done to-day? You know something about him—you have some hold upon him. I don’t ask what it is—oh, no,” she added, quietly, as he smiled, “for I know that you would not tell me or would palm off some smooth falsehood——”

“Oh, Lady Grace, Lady Grace!” he answered, plaintively; but there was a flicker of self-jubilation [Pg 83]

and satisfaction on his smiling face.

“It is so, or why should he, who is civil to no one else, be civil to you? You know why I am here?” she said, abruptly, as if to throw him off his guard. But the ruse failed utterly; he turned his smiling face to her, suavely.

“I can guess,” he said, softly.

Her face flushed, then grew hard and defiant.

“Of course you can! Guess? You know! I am here because I was ‘commanded’ by the marquis; I am here because his mightiness pleases to wish that I should——”

He glanced over his shoulder warningly.

“Is it wise to speak so loudly, my lady?”

She made a gesture of impatient self-scorn.

“What does it matter? Why should I care who knows it? I am here that I may learn to regard myself as the future wife of the future marquis! And you know it.”

He looked at her quietly, with a frank, benevolent regard—-just the look one bestows on an irritable child.

“And is that so distasteful?” he asked. Her face crimsoned, and her eyes drooped, and his smile grew broader. “Not distasteful, I should say,” he murmured; “quite the reverse. Lady Grace, let me return you a compliment. You praised me for my power of acting; yours is a great deal higher! You wanted me to believe that the marquis’ idea was repugnant, whereas——” he chuckled, smoothly.

Her face had grown crimson again, and she turned it from him for a moment, then faced him again.

“Well!” she said, “and if I do wish it, what then? Is it so unnatural? Are there many better matches, many better men than Cecil Neville?”

“Few, if any!” he assented, blandly. “He is young, handsome, popular, brave, and—a future marquis!” She picked at the moss in the crevice of the stone coping. “A very good match, indeed, and Lady Grace is worthy of such a partner, truly!”

“And you mean to do your best or your worst for the match?” he said, swiftly.

He took out a cigarette.

“May I?” he asked, then lit it, and leaning on the railing, surveyed the beautiful scene as if he were quite absorbed in peaceful contemplation, and had quite forgotten his companion and the [Pg 84] subject of their conversation. Then he turned his head, and smiled at her. “No,” he said, slowly and softly, “I mean to do all I can to further the idea.”

She started slightly, and her lips parted in a faint sigh.

“You do! You—you mean to help me! and why?”

He was silent again, smoking with placid, serene enjoyment for a moment or two, then he replied:

“If I were to answer that I am prompted solely by a desire for your happiness——”

She made a movement of impatience.

“You see!” he said, reproachfully. “You would not believe me; so, what is the use? Suppose that we do not go into my motives. Let us, if it please you, decide that they are utterly selfish and bad, abandoned and wicked ones—will that do? Very well! After all, what do my motives matter? If I can help you, and I think I can, do not seek to go beyond the mere solid fact of my assistance. Leave the reasons alone. They can’t matter much, can they?” and he looked into her eyes with the bland and innocent gaze of a child.

She moved restlessly.

“If I could trust you!” she said, uneasily.

“I thought I had already proved myself worthy of confidence,” he said, simply; but there must have been some hidden significance in his words, for they brought the blood to Lady Grace’s face, and then left it pale and white to the lips.

“I—I——” she faltered.

“Oh, do not say anything of the past,” he murmured, soothingly. “Let us think of the present. We will speak plainly. It is the dear marquis’ wish that you should marry Lord Cecil Neville; you being gratified by his choice and willing to fall in with his views, an old and tried friend offering his services to you do not hesitate to avail yourself of them: I am the old and tried friend.”

The last words were more softly and cooingly spoken than any that had preceded them, but Lady Grace started up and looked at him suspiciously; he, however, met her scrutiny with his bland and innocent smile.

“If I really thought you would help me,” she said, doubtfully.

“You may think so, for I will,” he answered. “As I said, never mind my motives—they concern only [Pg 85] myself. And how goes the business? Has our dear friend Cecil—eh?”

She frowned slightly as if the question touched her self-love and vanity.

“Our dear friend does not at present seem much smitten by your humble servant’s charms,” she said, with a short laugh, which only barely hid her vexation.

He smiled and nodded.

“Our young friend is rather spoiled, you see. One cannot be the favored of the gods in the matter of youth, and strength, and features, without paying the usual penalty. Cecil is the most popular man in London. Believe me, there are twenty young ladies—I could give you their names”—and his lips curled—“who are, if not dying, living in love of him.”

“I know,” she said, with hardly restrained impatience. “Of course, there has been a dead-set at him. That is very natural, is it not? But—but I don’t think——”

“That the sultan has shown any partiality, that he has not yet thrown the handkerchief,” he finished for her. “No,” thoughtfully; “I don’t think he has. His lordship has, indeed, been so very impartial, not to say invulnerable, that I have sometimes wondered whether there was not some young lady hidden away, eh?” and he looked at her questioningly.

She started, and colored.

“Then there is?” he said at once.

“I—I don’t know,” she replied, musingly. “There may be. Last night I dined away from the Towers, at the Thurltons, you know?”

“I know,” he murmured, pleasantly. “Thurlton’s grandfather was transported for forgery; his wife’s sister ran away with young Lengard, I remember.”

“Of course, you know all about them, every shameful secret in the family for generations back?” she said, with a sigh.

He laughed.

“I have such a dreadfully good memory, dear lady. Well, you dined there——”

“Yes; and coming home I passed down the High street, and saw Lord Cecil. He was standing at the door of a fly, opposite the theatre, talking to a lady, a girl.” [Pg 86]

He nodded, and puffed at his cigarette placidly, with half-closed eyes, looking, indeed, almost asleep; but his next question proved that he was very much awake.

“Was she pretty, Lady Grace?”

“I only saw her for a moment. Yes,” she admitted, reluctantly.

“You did not know her?”

She shook her head.

“No. She was not one of the daughters of any of the county people; besides, it was a fly. It was opposite the side entrance——”

“She was an actress,” he interrupted, quietly.

“How do you know?”

“My dear lady! It is so simple! The fly was the only one there, or you would not have seen her so plainly; it was at the side entrance; she was unknown to you. Oh, plainly it was an actress. And it was she who was with Lord Cecil this morning.”

“Then you have seen her?” she exclaimed, eagerly.

He shook his head.

“No,” he said, “only heard her. I met our dear Cecil in the woods. As I approached, I heard two voices, though he, of course, denied it. One was a woman’s, and, though I am not in the habit of laying wagers with ladies—for they never pay when they lose—I would bet something considerable that the voice belonged to the young lady whom you saw talking to Lord Cecil outside the theatre last night!”

She bit her lip, and the look came into her eyes which indicates the first approach of the green-eyed monster—jealousy.

“Some worthless actress, painted and powdered. Some woman old enough to be his mother, though made up as a girl——”

He shook his head and laughed with serene enjoyment.

“No, no; such an experienced bird as Lord Cecil is not to be caught with such chaff, my dear lady! Depend upon it, this girl is young and pretty.”

She twisted her handkerchief in her hands, then smiled contemptuously.

“It must be the Juliet of last night!” she said. [Pg 87]

“Perhaps.”

“Well”—she drew a long breath—“I think I am a match for a common actress, though she be young and pretty!” and she raised her head and turned to him defiantly.

He looked at her with the calm eyes of a *connoisseur*.

“Yes, I should think so,” he said, blandly. “Certainly, I should think so. A match for half-a-dozen of

them. Forgive me if I say that I don't think there is a more beautiful woman in England than Lady Grace Peyton, or a more charming one!"

She took no notice of the compliment; to her ears there rang a tone of mockery behind the smooth phrases.

"What—what is to be done? What do you advise?" she asked, after a moment's pause, and with an affected indifference which made him smile.

He puffed a thin line of smoke from his sleek lips and watched it with half-closed eyes.

"Nothing," he said.

"Nothing?" she repeated.

"No," he said. "Nothing, so far as you are concerned. Just go on being beautiful and charming—as you cannot help being—and leave it to me to do the rest. If this is not a serious business, if his lordship is really only scratched, why——" He laughed lazily. "If, on the contrary, he is badly hit, and means business, means to make her the future Marchioness of Stoyle, why we must deal with the young lady herself."

"Deal with her?" she asked, with an eager interest she did not attempt to conceal.

He nodded at the scenery.

"Yes. There are two ways of going to work, each suited to the subject we are speaking on. Money and moral suasion. It may be money in this case; if so——"

"I am rich," she said, in a quiet undertone. "If the creature requires to be bought; if——"

"You will do it? Exactly. But the moral suasion?"

"I will leave to you, who have so much of it," she said, with a half-sneer.

He laughed softly.

"So they all say, dear lady, but, alas! I am so tender-hearted that I can never bring myself to use it! I am all heart, all heart!" and he laid his hand on the spot in which the organ is situated, and beamed at her. Then, without moving a muscle, he went on: "And so, dear Lady Grace, we had the poor children to an evening party, and gave them tea and buns, and I am sure you would have been melted to tears at the sight of their overbrimming happiness." [Pg 88]

Lady Grace looked round in astonishment, and saw that Lord Cecil had stepped from one of the windows. Spenser Churchill's quick ear had heard him, and hence the swift change in the topic of conversation.

"Mr. Churchill begging again, Lady Grace?" said Lord Cecil. "Beware of him; he never comes near you without an attempt on your purse. What's it for now, Spenser; the 'Indigent Washerwomen,' or the 'Chimney Sweeps' Orphans?' He's chairman or secretary of half-a-dozen charities—aren't you, Spenser?—and he won't let you rest until you've put yourself down for lady patroness for half of 'em!" and he laughed the short, frank laugh which was so refreshing a contrast to Spenser Churchill's oily one, that Lady Grace felt as if it washed the other away.

"It's the 'Indigent Basketmakers' Children,' my dear Cecil," said Spenser Churchill, smoothly. "Dear Lady Grace has consented to become one of our lady patronesses, have you not, Lady Grace?"

"Oh, yes," she said, indifferently; "and now having hooked me, I'll leave you to go for Lord Cecil," and with a nod and a smile to the latter, she turned and entered the house.

Spenser Churchill looked after her with a rapt gaze of benevolent admiration.

"What a beautiful young creature!" he murmured softly; "and as good as she is beautiful!"

"Eh?" said Cecil, seating himself on the balcony, lighting an immense cigar, and offering his case to Spenser Churchill, who shrank back and put up his hands with a gesture of alarm.

"I never smoke anything so—er—huge and strong. But is she not as good as she is beautiful, now?"

"She is beautiful enough, certainly," said Lord Cecil, carelessly; "as to her goodness, why, yes, I suppose she is good enough. All women are good, especially pretty ones." [Pg 89]

"I—see," murmured Churchill, with his head on one side; "you'd say that—er—there was a faint sign of, shall we say, temper in dear Lady Grace? Well, perhaps—but—oh, really you must be mistaken, my dear Cecil; so charming a creature!"

"Why, I didn't accuse her of temper!" said Lord Cecil, with some astonishment and an amused laugh; "it was you yourself!"

"No, really? Did I? I'm sure I had no such intention. But I see you think—eh?—perhaps a little inclined to jealousy? Well, there may be a touch of that in her composition, now you speak of it."

Lord Cecil stared at him with a half-amused smile.

"Terrible thing, jealousy, Cecil! My poor father—I don't think you knew him?"

Lord Cecil shook his head, as he thought, "And no one else that I ever heard of!"

"My poor dear father," continued Spenser Churchill, with a plaintive air of reflection, "had warned me against that peculiar temperament. 'Never, my dear Spenser,' he would say, 'never marry a jealous-natured woman. You had better throw yourself into the first horsepond!'"

“And you never have done either?” said Lord Cecil, knocking the ash off his cigar.

“N—o,” said Spenser Churchill; “and do you really think that dear Lady Grace has a jealous disposition? Now, really, Cecil, I think you must be mistaken——”

“Confound it!” said Lord Cecil, “I never said anything of the kind! Don’t put words I never used into my mouth, please, Churchill!”

“Didn’t you? Then how did I get the idea, I wonder?” responded the other, looking gravely troubled. “Surely not from Lady Grace herself? Oh! no—no!” and he looked extremely pained. “I should very much regret giving you a wrong impression of my opinion of that charming young creature, my dear Cecil! Most charming! Ah! what a wife she will make! You don’t agree with me —no? Well, perhaps—er—yes, I understand you. Beauty, however charming it may be, is not the [Pg 90] best possession a woman can boast. No! after all, perhaps, as you think, a young, unsophisticated girl, unaccustomed to the intoxication of constant admiration, would prove a more valuable companion for one’s life. These London belles are—er—like the well-known Oriental fruit, more beautiful to the eye than the touch, and——”

Lord Cecil broke into a laugh.

“What on earth are you driving at?” he demanded.

“I driving at!” exclaimed Spenser Churchill, opening his eyes with an innocent stare. “What do you mean, my dear Cecil? What on earth do you mean?”

Lord Cecil clasped his hands round his knees, and looked at the round, smooth face and extended eyes with faint amusement.

“You’d make an excellent Chinese puzzle, Churchill,” he said. “If what you mean is to warn me against marrying Lady Grace——”

“My dear Cecil,” broke in the soft voice, pitched in a tone of strained horror.

“You can spare yourself the trouble, for I haven’t the least intention of doing so—at present.”

Spenser Churchill’s thick eyelids quivered almost imperceptibly; but beyond this faint sign, no other trace of any emotion was visible at this frank announcement.

“Really?” he said; “I thought—— But, my dear Cecil, don’t you consider her a most beautiful and charming woman? and—er—come now, after all, you would find it difficult to discover a more suitable partner, eh?”

Lord Cecil frowned.

“Let us change the subject,” he said, curtly.

“Well, perhaps you’re right, after all,” said the other, with bland promptitude. “Yes, no doubt, you are right! That sort of woman is better in a picture, eh? Yes, we’ll change the subject! What time do you dine here?”

“Eight,” said Lord Cecil. “I don’t dine at home to-night—at the Towers,” he corrected himself. “I have an engagement.”

“Really? I am so sorry! Can’t you put it off—for my sake? Write and tell the people that you are too good-natured to dine out when an old friend turns up.”

“I’m not going to dine out,” said Lord Cecil, absently.

“No; really? Now, where can you be going?” [Pg 91]

“I think the marquis was inquiring for you,” said Lord Neville curtly; “I’ll tell him you are here,” and dropping from his perch, he sauntered into the house.

Spenser Churchill leaned over the balcony and smiled.

“Going to the theatre again!” he murmured, “Yes; I haven’t been to a country theatre for some time; I really think I should like to go and see what it is like!”

CHAPTER X.

FOR HIM ALONE.

Doris went home, her heart throbbing with an emotion which was half pain, half joy.

Lord Cecil Neville had asked her to meet him to-morrow. “I promise nothing!” she had said, and when she said it she fully meant that she would not come; and yet, now, as she walked hurriedly to the lodgings, she knew that when the morrow arrived, she would feel drawn to the spot as the steel is drawn to the magnet.

But if she had promised nothing, he had promised. He had said that he would be at the theatre that night, and she remembered how her heart had leaped at his words; even now they rang sweetly in her ears.

Heaven only knows with what delight she dwelt upon the thought that he would be present, listening to her as she spoke the passion-laden words of Juliet.

All this was joy, but the pain came on. Alas, that all our joy should be attended so closely by that grim companion.

> “Love’s feet are softly shod with pain.”

says the poet.

For the first time in her young life she had a secret from Jeffrey. It had been difficult to tell him yesterday of her acquaintance with Lord Cecil Neville; she felt now that it would be impossible to tell him, for she knew that she could not recount the incidents of their meeting without letting him know how interested she had become in this young nobleman, whose head had rested on her knee, and whose face haunted her night and day.

And she knew that once she had told Jeffrey, he would forbid her even to see or speak to Lord Neville again. And this seemed too dreadful for her to bear. [Pg 92]

Yes, it had come to this: that the great actress, with the heart and purity of a child, had become so interested, so fascinated—if that is the right word—with this stranger, that the thought of not seeing him again, or hearing his voice, was intolerable.

Her steps grew less hurried as she neared home, and her thoughts had crystalized into this shape.

“After all, where is the harm? He is good and kind, and I have so few friends—no one, excepting dear old Jeffrey!—that I cannot afford to lose him. Besides, I shall act better if I know that he is in the theatre. I don’t know why that is, but it is so. And Jeffrey ought to be glad of that. Oh, if I could only tell him! But I cannot!”

Once during the day she did make the effort; she began to talk about the fields and the beautiful on-coming of spring, but Jeffrey would not listen. He was full of the business of the theatre, full of expected offers from the great London managers, and paid no attention to what she was saying, merely remarking that, after all, the open air was the place to study in.

To study in! Yes, she knew that! It was in the open air that she had first seen Lord Neville, and learned the way to speak Juliet’s “Good-night!”

She did not leave the house again that day, but spent it studying her part. There were one or two points that she had missed, so Jeffrey said, and she went over them again and again.

And how do you think she mastered them? By imagining that Lord Neville was the Romeo, and it was for love of him she suffered and died!

“It was wrong?” Yes, but life is full of wrong, and it is not until youth is passed; and experience is gained, that we learn to distinguish the wrong from the right.

The night came, and with it the fly to carry them to the theatre.

There was an immense crowd collected outside the pit and gallery doors, and the manager met them with the glad tidings that all the reserved seats were taken.

“An immense success, my dear Miss Marlowe. You have hit them hard!” he said, smiling and nodding. [Pg 93]

That he had only spoken truly was patent from the welcome which she received when she made her first appearance. A roar went up and shook the very chandelier, as the slim, graceful, girlish figure entered from the wings.

As is usual, I believe, with actors, for some minutes she could not see beyond the footlights; but presently she began to distinguish faces in the hazy glow, and she saw the handsome, tanned face she had expected—and longed for!

He had come then, as he had promised!

He was in the box he had occupied on the preceding night; leaning forward, his hands clasped on the velvet edge, his eyes following her every movement.

She lost all consciousness of the rest of the audience, and played only to those rapt, attentive eyes.

Every word she uttered she spoke to him, every glance of the blue eyes—which grew violet when

she was agitated—though bent upon the Romeo on the stage, was meant for the one face in the vast audience.

She played, if anything, better than she had played last night, and the manager came to her to tell her so.

“Better and better, Miss Marlowe!” he said, bowing and smiling. “If you go on like this——”

“The house is crammed,” said Jeffrey, who was standing near the wings with a shawl to throw over Doris’s shoulders, for like that of most country theatres, the Barton one was rich in draughts.

“Yes,” said the manager, “and a first-class audience. Did you notice those two side boxes?”

Jeffrey looked.

“They have both got the curtains drawn,” he said.

The manager laughed.

“Yes. They have been drawn like that since the first scene. I expect that a London manager is behind each, eh, Miss Marlowe? Ah, I shan’t be able to keep you long!”

Doris smiled absently and passed on to her dressing-room.

But in the next act she happened to look up at the right-hand box, and she saw that the curtains had been drawn aside. [Pg 94]

She glanced at it with the pre-occupied look of an actor, and saw that the only occupant of the box was a young and very beautiful girl, with dark, flashing eyes, and bright, golden hair.

The other box remained screened, and the occupant invisible.

The play proceeded, and then came the shower of bouquets.

Now, Barton is not a floral town by any means, so that the bouquets which fell at the feet of the girlish Juliet must have been procured at some pains and trouble. The Romeo filled his arms with them, and one only remained lying on the stage.

It was a magnificent bouquet of white and purple violets, and as it fell, Doris, looking up, saw the handsome face of Lord Neville close to the stage in the orchestra stalls.

She stooped and raised the bouquet and glanced at him, but this time she did not lift the flowers to her lips.

As she passed off, the manager touched her arm.

“I’ve found out who it is that’s got the box on the prompt side,” he said; “it’s Lady Grace Peyton, the great London beauty. She’s staying at Barton Towers, the Marquis of Stoyle’s place, you know.”

“At Barton Towers!” said Doris. Then she went to the side of the proscenium and looked at the box in which Lady Grace’s face was just visible. “How beautiful she is!” she murmured.

“Yes, I should think so!” said the manager. “Why, she’s the professional beauty of the season; it’s an honor to have her in the theatre! And who else do you think is here?” he added, exultingly.

“I don’t know,” said Doris, moving away.

“Why, Lord Cecil Neville, the marquis’ nephew, and he was here last night! What do you think of that? It isn’t only the pit and gallery that have gone mad over you, Miss Marlowe, but the gentry, too! Just as I said last night! Lord Cecil Neville; I daresay you haven’t heard of him, but he’s the best-known man in London. I wish I knew who was in the other box, but I can’t find out.” [Pg 95]

“Perhaps it’s the marquis himself,” said Doris, with an absent smile.

“Oh! no!” said the manager; “he’d be with Lord Neville or Lady Grace! No, it’s not the marquis!”

She went and dressed for the last and great scene, and when she came out found Jeffrey pacing up and down.

“Better than last night, Doris,” he said nodding, and glancing at her under his thick frowning brows. “You have made all the points to-night; that’s right! Keep cool! Don’t let your head be turned by the applause, and the bouquets. What! Violets again to-night? Very kind, very characteristic! Let me hold them for you,” and he held out his hand for the bouquet, which, unthinkingly, she had brought out with her.

She extended them to him, when, her eyes dwelling on them, she saw a mark of white among the purple blossoms.

Then she gave them to him, saying hurriedly, “Take care of them: they smell so sweet,” and went and took her place at the wing, crushing the piece of paper into the bosom of her dress.

She had to wait some few minutes, and with a quickly throbbing heart she took out the paper and glanced at it.

A scribble in pencil ran across it:

> Will you meet me in the fields to-morrow? I must speak to you.
>
> Cecil Neville.

That was all. She replaced the paper in her bosom, where it seemed to burn like a living thing

and went on the stage.

If her performance in this scene on the preceding night was good, this, to-night, was much in advance of it. Her voice seemed to thrill the vast audience, and, with her face, moved them to tears.

But Doris was conscious of only one spectator and auditor, the one who leaned forward in the centre box, with the rapt attention of a devotee at a shrine.

The curtain fell amidst a thunder of applause, and, pale and quivering, she was led on by the Romeo to receive the enthusiastic expression of approbation and delight.

"Wonderful, Miss Marlowe!" said the Romeo. "Miles ahead of last night, and that was good enough." [Pg 96]

She was about to acknowledge the frank and generous compliment, when she felt her arm seized, and saw Jeffrey standing beside her.

His face was white and drawn, the sunken eyes blazing with passion.

"Doris! Doris!" he gasped.

"Jeffrey!" she said, half frightened. "What is the matter?"

"Look, look!" he panted hoarsely, and he drew the edge of the curtain back and pointed to a box on the right-hand side.

Doris looked and saw a fair, pleasant-looking man standing in the front of the box. He was watching the dispersing audience with a gentle smile, and his fat white hand was softly smoothing his long, fair hair from his forehead. He looked benevolent enough to be a bishop, and Doris stared from him to the white ashen face of Jeffrey.

"What is it, dear Jeffrey?" she asked.

"Look! look!" he repeated hoarsely. "There stands your greatest enemy, save one! Your greatest enemy in the world! Look at him, Doris! Look at him and remember him!"

She turned her eyes to the box.

"That fair gentleman with the long hair, do you mean, Jeffrey?"

"Yes, that is him! Curse him! Curse him!" he muttered. Then suddenly he seemed to recover himself.

"Come away!" he said brokenly. "Don't pay any attention to what I have said. It—it is nothing!" and he let the edge of the curtain fall.

CHAPTER XI.

LOVE'S SUBTLE SPELL.

At any other time Doris would have been alarmed at Jeffrey's sudden outburst of rage, occasioned by the sight of the amiable-looking stranger in the box, but she could think of nothing but the little white note lying hidden in the bunch of violets which Lord Cecil Neville had thrown to her. [Pg 97]

It was the first note she had received in that way, and she felt guilty and unhappy.

If she had only told Jeffrey on the first of her acquaintance with Lord Neville! She would have taken the note to him, if she had done so; but she felt that to place it in his hands now would be to call forth one of his fierce outbursts of rage, in which it was quite possible he might seek Lord Neville and force a quarrel on him.

What should she do? The question haunted her all the way home. Should she write and tell Lord Neville that she could not meet him, and request him not to write to her again? This seemed the easiest thing to do, but she shrank from it for two reasons: One, because Jeffrey had often warned her against writing to strangers, and the other, because it seemed so stern a rebuke for so slight an offense.

For, after all, his sin was not so great. He had asked permission to call upon her, asked it respectfully and with all the deference of a gentleman addressing a lady his equal in position, and she had refused to grant him the permission. If he wanted to see her, what else could he do than write and ask her to meet him?

Once she nearly summoned up courage to tell Jeffrey everything, but, as she looked up at him as he leaned back in the corner of the fly, with bent head and folded arms, she saw so stern and moody an expression on his face that her courage failed her; he was just in the humor to consider the note an insult, and seek to avenge it.

And somehow Doris could not regard it in this way. As she read the words, she seemed to hear Lord Neville's deep, musical voice pronouncing them, pleadingly, respectfully, with reverence rather than insult.

Doris was a great actress, but she was as ignorant of the world outside the theatre as a child; she had only her instinct to guide her, and that seemed to say that it was impossible Lord Neville could have meant to insult her!

But the result of all her thinking was this: That her acquaintance with him must cease. She must have no friends save those of the theatre; least of all, a young nobleman who tossed her bouquets of violets, and begged her to meet him in the meadows! [Pg 98]

Jeffrey's mood clung to him during the remainder of the night. As a rule, after their supper, which was an exceedingly simple one, he grew cheerful and talkative; but to-night he sat with bent head and frowning brows, apparently brooding over the past.

Once or twice she saw him look up at her with a half-troubled glance; then, as his eyes met hers, he compressed his lips and sighed; and after a while he said suddenly:

"You are happy, Doris?"

She started slightly and the color rushed to her face. It almost seemed as if he knew something was troubling her.

"Happy, Jeffrey? Yes," she said, and she went and sat at his feet and folded her hands on his knee.

He looked down into her beautiful face—not into her eyes, for they were downcast.

"Yes," he said, moodily and absently, as if he were communing with his own thoughts rather than addressing her, "yes, you are happy; how could it be otherwise? All that I have wished for has come to pass. You are a great actress, you will be famous. The world will be at your feet—even as you are now at mine! It will hang upon your voice, watch with breathless interest your face, pour its gold into your lap. Great, famous; you are—you must be—happy!"

"Yes, Jeffrey," she said, "and I owe it all to you."

"To me?" he said. "Yes. But if you do, it is a debt that I myself owed. To you, to her——"

"To her?" she murmured, wonderingly.

"To Lucy, to your mother," he said, still absently.

"To my mother?" said Doris, with bated breath.

He was silent for a moment, then he seemed as if awakening from a dream.

"Doris," he said, gravely, and with visible emotion, "there is something I must tell you. I ought to have told you before this; but I put it off. I would put it off now—" his lips quivered—"for I hate the thought of it. But to-night my conscience has been roused. That man—" he stopped, and his teeth clicked. "Doris!" he exclaimed, with a catch in his breath. "Tell me, have I not been as a father to you? Could any father have striven more hardly for his daughter's good? Could any father have loved you better, and lived for you more solely and entirely than I have done?" [Pg 99]

"No, Jeffrey, none!" she said, in a low voice, and laying her soft, white hand upon his rugged and gnarled one soothingly.

“I call Heaven to witness that I have only had one thought, your welfare. When you lay, a little child, in my arms, I devoted my life to you. Every hour of the day I have thought of you, and planned out your future. It was not my own happiness I sought, not my own ambition, but yours—yours! I have lived and striven for one end—your success, and your happiness! And I have won! You are a great actress, Doris, and it is I—I!—who have taught and trained and made you what you are!”

“Yes, Jeffrey,” she murmured, “I know it! and I am grateful—grateful!”

“But are you happy? Are you happy, child?” he demanded, and his voice sounded almost stern in its intensity.

The color came and went in her face.

“How could I be otherwise, Jeffrey?” she said. “Yes, I am happy!”

He drew a long breath, as of relief, but went on—

“Compare your lot with others. I don’t mean the poor and commonplace; but those others, the rich, the well-born, the titled. Would you have been happier, for instance, if you had been—let me say—the daughter of a nobleman——”

She smiled at the question, earnestly as it was put.

“I don’t know any daughters of noblemen, Jeffrey,” she said; “but I don’t think I would exchange places with any of them.”

He nodded, and laid his hand upon her head.

“No, no,” he said, moodily.

“No,” she said, with a faint laugh. “I would not exchange places with the highest lady in the land! To be able to move a theatre full of people to tears or laughter, that is better than being an earl’s [Pg 100] daughter, is it not, Jeffrey?”

He started.

“Yes, yes,” he said, eagerly; “that is what I wanted you to feel! Any one can be an earl’s daughter, but few!—how few!—the Doris Marlowe who wrought an audience to enthusiasm to-night?”

She smiled up at him.

“And what is this that you are going to tell me, Jeffrey?”

He started, and his hand fell from her head.

“I—I—” he said, uncertainly, “I don’t think I’ll tell you to-night, Doris; it will keep. I’m not certain that it would make you happier; I’m half inclined to think that it would only make you miserable. No!—I won’t tell you. Go to bed, and forget——” He stopped.

“Forget that pleasant-looking gentleman in the box, Jeffrey?” she said, with a smile.

His face darkened, and the hand that rested on the table clenched tightly.

“You saw him!—you saw him!” he said, with suppressed fury. “Remember him, Doris! He is a villain!—a scoundrel! He is your, and my, greatest enemy——”

“That smiling, fair-haired gentleman?” she said.

“One may smile, and smile, and then be a villain, Doris,” he said, quoting “Hamlet.”

“And you won’t tell me who he is and all about him, Jeffrey?”

“Not to-night,” he said, knitting his brows. “Go now, Doris. Some other time——”

She touched his forehead with her lips, and stole away from him quietly, and went upstairs.

She slept little that night. The roar of the crowded theatre seemed to force its way into the white little room, and with it mingled Jeffrey’s strange words hinting at some fraud, and the words of Lord Cecil Neville’s note.

The morning broke clear and bright, and she came down, looking rather pale and grave.

Jeffrey ate his breakfast almost in silence, and there was no trace of last night’s emotions on his broad brow. As was usual with him, he went down to the theatre directly after breakfast, and Doris was left alone.

The time had now arrived in which she must decide what she must do respecting Lord Neville’s [Pg 101] note.

She opened her writing-case, and, after sitting before it for half-an-hour, wrote an answer in which she declined a meeting with him; and it gave her satisfaction for a few minutes, at the end of which she—tore it up!

No answer she could pen—and she tried hard—seemed satisfactory. Some were too familiar, others too stiff and haughty.

“I shall have to see him!” she murmured, at last, as if in despair—“for the last time!” A thrill of regret ran through her at the words; they sounded so sad and significant.

Trying to frame some form of words in which she could speak to him, she made her way to the meadows, and as she went the beauty of the spring morning seemed to take to itself a new and strange loveliness, and, notwithstanding her difficult task, the thought that she was going to

meet him again filled her with a vague, indescribable sensation that half-pleased, half-troubled her.

All the place was silent save for the singing of the birds and the babbling of the brook, and as she seated herself on the mossy bank she looked round, as one views a place rendered familiar and pleasant by associations.

Wherever she went, whatever happened to her in the future, she thought, she should always remember Barton meadows, the clump of elms, the silver brook, and—ah, yes!—the handsome face lying so still and white in her lap.

As she was recalling the scene, dwelling on it with a singular commingling of pleasure and pain, she heard the beat of a horse's hoofs, just as she had heard it the first morning; and Lord Neville came flying over the hedge, a little further from her this time, and still upon his horse, and not upon his head.

He pulled the animal up almost on its haunches, and, slipping from the saddle, hurried toward her.

In the second that she raised her eyes, she took in, as if by a species of mental photography, the handsome face with its clear and now eager eyes, the graceful figure, in its suit of gray cords that [Pg 102] seemed to be part and parcel of the wearer, and the air—distinguished, patrician, it is so difficult to describe it, which is the birthright of the gentleman—the air which the parvenu, though he count his gold by the million, cannot purchase.

"You have come!" he said, raising his hat. "I am so glad, so grateful, Miss Marlowe."

"You would not be, Lord Neville, if you knew how sorry I am to be here," she said, and her wonderful eyes met his ardent gaze steadily and with a gravity that lent a subtle and altogether new charm to her face.

His face fell.

"Sorry?" he said, regretfully.

"Yes," she said; "very, very sorry. Lord Neville, you should not have written me that note; it was wrong."

"Let me tell you," he said, eagerly, pleadingly; "I feared you would say this——"

"I did not intend to come," she said, as if he had not spoken. "I meant to pass the note by unanswered. But it seemed—well, yes, unkind. And I tried to write, but——" her brows came together, "I could not please myself. It is so hard to write such a letter for the first time in one's life, and at last I decided to meet you, that I might tell you how wrong you were, and that your note showed me—ah! so plainly—that we must not meet again—that, in short, Lord Neville, our acquaintance must cease!"

She actually half rose, as if she were about to leave him then and there; but he put out his hand pleadingly, without daring to touch her, and implored her to wait.

"Don't go—for a moment, only a moment!" he pleaded. "Let me speak in my defense. Do listen to me! I only ask you to listen to me!"

She sank down again slowly, reluctantly, as it seemed, and he threw himself beside her, bending forward, his eyes fixed upon her face, all alight with the ardent desire to turn aside her anger, to melt her coldness.

"Why did you write that note?" she said.

"Why—I was mad!" he said. "Stop—I was mad; I wrote it while I was in the theatre. It was wrong, I know, of course; but I'm not sorry that I wrote it!"

She turned her eyes with surprise and reproach upon him. [Pg 103]

"No, I'm not sorry!" he said, almost defiantly. "I wrote it during the *entr'acte*; I'd been watching you and listening to you until—well, until I had lost myself, I suppose. Anyhow, I got the piece of paper and wrote on it, and put it among the violets, all in a moment, as it were. I felt that I must see you again—wait, ah, wait and hear me out!" for she had made a movement that seemed to threaten her departure. "I don't know how long I may be here; I may go at any moment—from Barton, I mean; and then, as I thought that I might not see you again for weeks, for months, perhaps——" he stopped, not because he had no words, but for breath, and to regain his composure. "I knew you would be angry, but—what was I to do? You had forbidden me—well, you hadn't given me permission to call on you——"

She caught her under-lip in her teeth; he was using the argument in his defense which she had used for him in the morning.

—"And I thought I would write it. Miss Marlowe, you shall blame me for sending that note to you, for asking you to meet me here. It was wrong, impertinent, whatever you like to call it, but I had a distinct object——"

She did not start, but looked at him for a moment with faint surprise, then looked at the brook.

"I wanted to tell you something," he said, not so smoothly or glowing now, but with a sudden gravity in his voice, an intensity in the expression of his eyes that ought to have warned her; but it did not, for she looked at him with calm surprise.

"It will sound sudden to you, sudden and abrupt, I daresay," he said. "I—I can't help it! It seems

sudden to me, and yet sometimes I feel as if I had known you for years—all my life. Miss Marlowe, when a man finds that the face and the voice of a girl are haunting him day and night, that he cannot drive them out of his head for half a minute, when he is only happy when he is near her and altogether wretched when he is away from her, there is only one explanation: He is in love with that girl. I am in love with you!”

The blood rushed to Doris’s face, then left it white to the lips. [Pg 104]

She drew her eyes away from his slowly and sat mute and motionless.

“I love you!” he said, bending a little nearer to her, the words fraught with the intensity—and the truth—of a man’s passion. “I love you with all my heart and soul!” He drew a long breath. “That is why I wrote to you, that is what I had to say to you—wait a moment, I know what you are going to say—perhaps you are going to laugh. For Heaven’s sake, don’t, for this is a serious business for me!”

She made a slight gesture of negation.

“No, forgive me; I was wrong! You would not laugh! But I know what you will say—that I have only seen you a few times, that I have only spoken to you on two occasions. Well, I know. Do you think I haven’t told myself all that? I have, a hundred times; but it doesn’t alter the fact. I do love you. I know that, and that’s about all I know of it.” His deep, musical voice was tremulous for a moment, but he mastered it. “And I don’t wonder at it! Where is the man with half-a-heart in his bosom who wouldn’t love you! I have never seen any one so beautiful—half so beautiful!”

She moved her hand as if to silence him, but he went on.

“And I’ve sat for hours, fascinated—feeling my heart drawn out of me by your face, your voice! Why, look how you move the rest of the people at the theatre, and think what it must mean to me, who loved you the very first time I saw you! Ah, Miss Marlowe—Doris—let me call you Doris for once!—if I could only tell you how dearly and truly and passionately I love you! But I can’t. I know it’s no use. Who am I that you should feel anything but amusement——”

“Do not say that,” she said, in a low voice, almost inaudible, indeed.

“You are as beautiful as an angel, and as clever—why, you are famous already, and I”—he laughed with self-scorn—“I’m just an ordinary fool of a fellow. Of course, there is no hope for me, and yet somehow I felt that I must tell you. You won’t laugh, I know. You’ll tell me that I’m very [Pg 105] foolish, and that we mustn’t meet again—and—and all that”—he rose, but sank down again, and touched her arm reverently—“and you’ll send me away and—and—perhaps forget all about me in a week or two. While I—well—” he pushed the short, crisp hair from his brow with an impatient gesture—“well, I shall get over it in time. No!” he said, simply, passionately, “I shall never forget you. If I live to be a hundred I shall never forget the other day when I opened my eyes and saw you bending over me, or those next two nights when I looked at you in the theatre! I shall never forget, nor cease to love you! I know it as surely as I stand here!”

He rose and thrust his hands in his pockets, and looked down at her, his handsome face set hard, his eyes dwelling upon her with the hungry look of the man who loves and yet does not hope.

“And now, I’ve told you,” he said, with a short breath, “and now I suppose it’s ‘good-by, Lord Neville, I hope you will be happy and——’” His voice broke, and he knelt beside her and caught her hand. “Miss Marlowe! Doris! If—if there is the slightest chance for me! If there is the least bit of hope in the world, give it to me! I’m—I’m like a man pleading for his life! For his life? For more than that—his happiness——” He stopped sudden, smitten silent, for the hand that was free had gone up to her face and covered her eyes, and she was trembling.

She had heard love made to her on the stage, and it had meant—just her “cue,” no more; this was the first time the accents of a real, genuine passion had ever smote upon her ear, and its tones thrilled to her heart.

She trembled with joy, with fear, with doubt, with the almost irrepressible longing to hide her burning face upon his breast, and give words to the cry that rang in her heart, “I love you! I love you!”

“Doris!” he said; “Doris!” and there was truth in his voice. “For Heaven’s sake, don’t cry! I’m not worth it; I am not, indeed! Are you crying? Don’t! I’ll—I’ll go——”

She put out her hand and laid it gently on his arm as gently as a butterfly alights upon a flower.

He caught it and drew nearer to her.

“Doris! Is it possible? Do you—may I hope? Doris! Oh, my darling, my darling!” and his strong [Pg 106] arms wound round her, and his kisses fell like hot rain upon her hair and eyelids.

For a moment she surrendered herself to the storm of passion, as a tree bends before the whirlwind; then she put her hands palm-wise upon his breast, and gently kept him from her.

“Oh, wait, wait!” she murmured. “I don’t know——”

“Don’t know! Don’t know whether you love me, you mean?” he said, kneeling beside her, and gazing hungrily in her face, ready to swoop down upon her with renewed caresses.

“Yes,” she said, and her voice came in a whisper. “It is all so—so sudden! I don’t know——”

“My darling!” he whispered. “Let me ask you! I know what love means, for I learned it from my love for you. Look at me, Doris!”

She raised her eyes—they seemed weighted with lead—and let them rest upon his ardent,

glowing face.

“Let me ask you,” he said, “would you like me to be unhappy? Would you like me to leave you, to go away from you, not for an hour, or a day, but forever?”

A faint shudder shook her, and the hands touching his breast half-closed on him.

“Would you be happy if I were miles away, and there were no chance of ever seeing me again? Doris, answer me; shall I go? Will you say ‘good-by?’”

He drew back from her in a feint of leaving her, and her small, soft hands closed upon him.

“No, no!”

He asked for no more. With a cry of joy he drew her to him and kissed her, all unrebuked this time.

“My darling!—my beautiful!” he murmured. “Oh, Doris, is it true—can it be true? Tell me, dearest; I can’t believe it otherwise. Tell me, do you love me just a little?” and he looked into her downcast eyes as if he would read her soul.

She put her hand upon his arm and raised her eyes to his slowly, and let them rest there.

“Yes!” she said, as if the effort cost her much; “I do love you!”

A linnet, perched upon a branch of the tree above them, burst into song; a lamb, that had been regarding them curiously, drew near and bleated; the brook babbled over the stones; all nature in its happy springtide seemed to take up the harmony of these two souls bound in Love’s subtle spell, and to find voice; but they were silent. [Pg 107]

At last he spoke.

“It is like a dream!” he said, removing his eyes from her face for a moment and looking round like a man awaking from sleep. “Like a dream! Tell me once more, Doris; just once more!”

“Is it so difficult to believe? Well, then—I love you!” she murmured, and a smile—the first fruit of love—beamed from her eyes.

“Difficult to believe!” he said; “well, I should think so! Great Heaven! what on earth do you see in me to love?”

“Quite enough,” she said, the smile growing sunnier, as she looked at his handsome face and ardent eyes.

“It’s wonderful!” he said. “Just look at the difference between us: you, so beautiful, so clever, such a genius; oh, I know! Why, you will be famous—are famous already, I daresay—and I!” he laughed with self-scorn. “It is wonderful!” and he drew her hand to his lips and kissed it.

“Isn’t it?” she said, slowly, with loving mockery.

“Yes, it is,” he asseverated. “Simply wonderful! And to think that you belong to me! You, you, you!” and his eyes flashed upon her lovely, bewitching face. “By Jove, I shall wake up presently, and find that it really is only a dream.”

She started, and would have withdrawn her hand if it had not been so tightly clasped in his.

“It is only a dream,” she murmured.

“Only a dream?” he repeated.

“Yes,” she said. “A—a—very pleasant dream——”

“Thank you!”

“But a dream still, Lord Neville——”

“My name is Cecil, I’d have you to know!”

“Lord Cecil——”

“Cecil, without the ‘lord,’ if you please.”

“It is only a dream! We must wake now! I—and you—have forgotten!”

“Forgotten what, dearest?” he said. [Pg 108]

“Forgotten who you are, and what I am.”

“You are an angel!” he remarked, seating himself beside her, and stealing his arm round her waist.

“I am an actress, and you are a viscount,” she said.

“I believe I am,” he said, smilingly. “But, all the same, you are an angel! Every moment I expect to see you spread your wings, and fly from me.”

“So I shall directly,” she said, with a smile that was half-sorrowful. “I am an actress—one of the people! One who has no status, no standing in the world; and you are a nobleman! You will be a marquis some day, will you not?”

“I daresay,” he assented, carelessly, trying to decide whether she was more beautiful, grave or smiling.

“There is a gulf between you and me, Lord Neville!”

“Cecil, if you please!”

“A gulf——”

“Which love can stride across,” he said. “That is, if you are going to draw up a list of comparisons! As if there could be any comparison between Doris Marlowe, the great actress, and Cecil Neville, the stupid dragoon!”

“And future marquis!” she said. “Ah, I know! Yes, there’s a gulf!”

“Look here, Doris,” he said, taking her hand, which she had withdrawn, and kissing each finger separately; “don’t talk nonsense. I’m a future marquis. All right. I don’t deny it.”

“You cannot.”

“Just so—I cannot. But I’m not a marquis at present. I’m simply Cecil Neville! I’m not even a dragoon, for—confound him!—the marquis made me retire! I’m simply nothing, while you—you!” he emphasized the pronoun by raising the edge of her dress and kissing it, “you are a great and famous actress——”

“And outside the pale of society,” she said, with sudden wisdom.

“Society!” he exclaimed, “what do I care for that? I never cared very much for it; at this moment I care less. You are society enough for me!”

No woman could have been otherwise than touched by his devotion; she allowed him to retain her hand.

“If you only knew what a sacrifice you are making, my darling!” he said, smilingly. “Why, [Pg 109] presently you will appear in London, and will find the world at your feet; and they will all be in love with you, peasants—only there are no peasants in London—and peers! I daresay you would have an offer from a duke! Think of that! And you have pledged your troth to a simple viscount!”

“I am satisfied,” she said, with a smile.

“And precious little you have to be satisfied with!” he said, “for I am a poor kind of viscount. I am entirely at the mercy of the great marquis—the Marquis of Stoyle! He forced me to leave the army, where I had a chance, and he keeps me on starvation allowance. Oh! you had better have waited and hooked your duke, Doris!”

She laughed softly, but the laugh was rather a grave one.

“What will the marquis say?” she asked, looking at him, with her brows drawn, her lovely eyes half-curious.

Lord Neville smiled.

“He will be sure to say something disagreeable; he always does.”

“But tell me,” she insisted, gently. “Or shall I tell you?”

“You couldn’t,” he said. “That beautiful face of yours couldn’t manage to look like the marquis’ hard, stony one, and certainly your voice that is just like music——”

“Shall I get up and curtsey?” she put in, with a faint smile.

“You needn’t; it’s no compliment. No, you couldn’t harden your voice to anything approaching the marquis’ steely, icy tones.”

“No?” she said, absently; then suddenly she sat upright, and her face grew set and cold, and her eyes hardened with a disdainful hauteur. “So, Cecil!” she said, and her voice was stern and cuttingly scornful, “so you have made up your mind to marry—what is it?—a dairymaid—no, pardon me!—an actress! An actress, a social pariah, a person one pays one’s money to see upon the stage, to make us laugh for an hour or two, but with whom one would rather not be seen walking in the public streets; and you propose to marry this—this girl? Well, do so, but remember that in marrying her you cut yourself off from me and the world to which you belong, and that [Pg 110] you sink into the mud from which she sprang, and are utterly ruined, a social suicide!”

Lord Neville sat and stared at her.

It was not the words, dramatic though they were, which amazed him, but the face, the voice.

“Why, Doris,” he said, at last, “you have seen, you know the marquis?”

She shook her head as her countenance resumed its own girlish freshness and beauty.

“No,” she said, gently. “I have never seen him.”

“No? Well, of all the extraordinary likenesses! It was my esteemed uncle the marquis—making an allowance for the difference in age and the rest—to a point!”

“You forget that I am an actress,” she said, with a little sigh. “It was easy enough, as easy to guess what he—what any one in his position would say to his nephew and heir when he told him what he proposed doing! It is something like what he would say, is it not?”

“It was a wonderful imitation of the marquis’ expression and way of talking—wonderful, darling! —but I don’t think he would have said so much. But there, what difference can it make what he says or thinks, eh, Doris?” he broke off.

“But will it make no difference?” she asked, leaning forward, her hands clasped on her knees, her eyes fixed dreamily on the ground. “I know there must be a sacrifice—let me know how great a one. What difference will it make?” and she looked at him.

Lord Neville frowned slightly as he thought of the speech his uncle had addressed to him after

dinner on his first night at the Towers, and she saw the frown and sighed.

“The sacrifice would be greater even than I thought,” she said. “Is it not so? I—yes, I am so ignorant of the world. I know nothing about it, excepting what I have learned from books and plays——”

“Don’t say another word!” he broke in, almost grimly in his earnestness. “Every word you say makes me ashamed! Do you think I set anything in the scales against your love? The marquis may say and do what he pleases; he may curse or bless me, and it won’t make any difference! All the [Pg 111] same—I mention it for your sake, and not my own, you seem so afraid, my darling; he can’t rob me of the title, and if he could I would surrender it rather than lose you. Lose you!” he exclaimed, with his short laugh. “Look here, Doris, I’d rather be your husband, and—and sweep a crossing, than marry another woman and be the future King of England! That sounds rather high and lofty, doesn’t it? But I’m rather bad at expressing myself, and it’s as near as I can get to my meaning!”

“It is near enough,” she said, with a smile, her heart giving a little leap at his ardent, manly avowal.

“And that’s enough of the marquis,” he said. “We’ve forgotten quite as important a person, it seems to me. Your guardian, Doris!”

She started slightly.

“Jeffrey!” she murmured. “Ah, yes!”

“Yes,” said Lord Neville. “Now, I value his goodwill quite as much as I do my uncle’s, and I don’t feel at all sure that I shall get it. You see, with all deference to you, sweetheart——”

Sweetheart! She whispered the word to herself and glowed over it.

“I’m not, in all points, the very best kind of young man for a husband, and your guardian is very likely to remark it. What if he should refuse his consent?”

Her face grew faintly troubled.

“Jeffrey refuse!” she said, almost to herself. “N—o. Not if——”

“Not if you wished for it very much?” he said, divining her meaning. “I see! And I’m not surprised. I can’t imagine any man stony-hearted enough to refuse you anything, even such an unwise thing as this! Look here, Doris, I’ll go back home with you and see him.”

The trouble on her face grew more marked.

“I hate suspense and delay, and, well, I want to feel sure, quite sure, that you are my very own! You don’t mind my going home with you and telling him straight out, do you?”

She was silent a moment, then she looked at him, hesitatingly.

“No, do not. I——” She stopped. “I think I would rather see him first. I—I could tell him. Ah, do [Pg 112] you not see how suddenly it would come upon him? How unprepared——”

He nodded.

“You haven’t told him anything about me?”

The color rose to her face.

“No,” she said, and her eyes were downcast. “No, I have not told him; he would be so surprised and——I will see him first and tell him.”

“All right,” he said. “Then, to-morrow?”

“Yes, to-morrow,” she said, with a little sigh of relief. “I wish I could tell you all he has been to me, how tender and loving—father, mother, brother! Ah, I have had no one else but him in the world, and he has devoted all his life to me!”

“I will never forget that,” said Lord Neville, gravely, “and I will try and thank him to-morrow! Yes, I can understand how hard it will seem to him to have to lose you. But, Doris, he need not do that. He has stood in a father’s place to you; I shall not oust him from it, or separate you from him. There is room in that big heart of yours for both of us, isn’t there?”

She turned to him as if moved by an irresistible impulse, and held out her hands, and her eyes were full of tears.

“If I had not loved you until this moment, I should now,” she said, in a low voice.

Of course, he captured the little quivering hands, and they sat in silence for a minute or two. Then suddenly she started.

“The time!” she exclaimed. “I had forgotten! There is a rehearsal,” and she sprang to her feet. “No, no!” pressing her fingers on his shoulder. “You must not come—not an inch of the way. I—I want to be alone to think—to think!” She stopped, with a little, dazed air, and smiled down at him.

“Oh, if you are tired of me——” he said, with a loving mockery. “To-morrow, Doris, in the morning?”

“Yes, to-morrow—ah, what a long time!” she whispered, almost inaudibly. “Let me think. If I cannot come—there may be a rehearsal——”

He looked disappointed—man like.

“I shall be here,” he said, “and I’ll wait all day if you like.” [Pg 113]

She laughed softly, her eyes dwelling upon him lovingly.

“Without your lunch or your dinner? That would be too much. No; if you come and I am not here, leave some message for me,” she looked round; “write me a word, and put it under this big stone by the tree there.”

“All right,” he said. “But you will come, if not in the morning, in the afternoon—sometime! Remember, I am to see your guardian to-morrow!”

“Yes,” she said. “But do you remember, too, that I am not my own master, Lord Neville—that I belong to the public.”

“Indeed, Miss Marlowe?” he said, retorting the formality upon her. “I was under the impression that you belonged to me!”

“Ah, yes,” she murmured, with sweet surrender, as he held her in his arms.

“We’ve forgotten one part of the ceremony,” he said. “People when they are engaged give each other a ring. I wasn’t conceited enough to think that you’d listen to me, or I would have brought one.”

“Have mine,” she said. Then, suddenly, she disengaged her hand, and held it up, and swiftly drew from her finger a quaint old silver ring. “See,” she said, the color stealing into her face. “Will you have that?”

“Will I?” he said, taking it, hand and all.

“What a small hand you have,” she said, laughing softly. “It is too large for your little finger; you had better give it back to me.”

“It will be a bad day for me when I do,” he said, grimly, “for I shall be limp and cold.”

“Or faithless,” she said, with a smile.

Then, before he could retort, she touched his lips with hers, murmured his name, and was gone.

He watched her until the slight, girlish figure had vanished, then went slowly to his horse, mounted, and rode slowly away.

A minute or so afterward a lady and gentleman came out from among the trees. The gentleman was Spenser Churchill, the lady—Lady Grace.

He wore his usual bland, benevolent smile, intensified, if anything, as he looked after the [Pg 114] disappearing horseman, but Lady Grace was white almost to pallor, and stood biting her under lip, and breathing heavily.

“What a charming pastoral!” he said, with his smooth, oily laugh; “Adam and Eve, or Edwin and Angelina, in Goldsmith’s poem—you know it, dear Lady Grace?—were never more poetical or touching! Really, one cannot help feeling grateful to the happy chance which enabled me to be a witness of so moving and charming a scene.”

“Chance!” she said, and her voice sounded thick and forced. “You knew that they would be here when you asked me to come!” and she shot a glance of scorn and hate at him.

“I, my dear lady! Now, how was that possible? Do you think our enamored Cecil would confide his appointments to me? And not having the inestimable privilege of knowing the lady——”

“She is the actress—the girl we saw last night!” she muttered, between her teeth; “an actress—a painted——”

“Was she painted? Yes, I daresay! I am, alas! rather near-sighted,” he said, smiling as he recalled the youthful bloom of Doris’ sweet face. “Ah! yes, I daresay! But perhaps our dear Cecil is near-sighted, too! At any rate, he seems very—ah—very far gone, does he not?”

“He is mad!” she almost hissed.

“You think, then, that he—ah—means this quite seriously? You know so much more of the world than I, dear lady!—you think he would marry this interesting young creature?”

A light of hateful hope—such a light as shamed her womanhood—flashed for a moment in Lady Grace’s eyes; then as it died out she said, moodily, scornfully:

“Oh, yes, he is mad enough for that! Oh, yes, he would—even—marry her!”

“In-deed! Really! How charming! So romantic!” pursued Spenser Churchill. “The future Marchioness of Stoyle an actress, a provincial actress! Clever, oh, certainly, and beautiful—ahem!—well, with her paint and powder, of course; but provincial, quite! And the future marchioness! Let me see, when was the marquisate created?”

His smooth, suave speech almost frenzied her. [Pg 115]

“Why do you exasperate me?” she exclaimed, between her teeth, and turning upon him. “Why have you brought me here? To laugh at me, to mock me with this—this scandalous scene? You know he will marry her, unless——”

“Unless?” he said, softly. “Unless an accident happens. And accidents do happen—alas!—so often in this unsatisfactory, disappointing world.”

She watched his face eagerly, with a faint glimmer of hope on her face, which was still pale and eloquent of the fierce jealousy which racked and tore her.

“What do you mean?” she demanded, half-angrily, half-pleadingly.

He smiled unctuously.

“‘’Twixt the cup and the lip.’ The old, old adage, dear Lady Grace. These young people, in the full flush of their mutual passion——”

She bit her lip till two red spots showed where the white, even teeth had pressed.

“Doubtless think that their path to happiness is quite plain and smooth. Alas! I fear they will find that the road is stony and difficult. It is a pity, a thousand pities! It is so sweet to see two hearts that beat as one——”

“Cease!” she said, as if she could endure his soft, mocking voice no longer. “What will you do? What can you do? He is mad and—and headstrong. How can you prevent——” She stopped suddenly, and, stooping, picked up something from the grass.

“Ah!” he said. “Treasure-trove! What is it? A broken sixpence? No! A ring—the ring!”

She held it almost at arm’s length, as if it were some noxious reptile, then with a gesture of scorn and hate, she raised her hand as if to throw the ring from her; but instantly he seized her arm, and his soft, fat hand slid down until it had reached and secured the ring.

“Dear me, dear me!” he murmured, as he held it up. “How sorry he will be, how——” He stopped suddenly, and his eyes seemed riveted to the ring; then, as he became aware of Lady Grace’s fixed gaze, the benevolent smile returned to his face. “Actually lost it a few minutes after she had given it to him! Now, some superstitious persons would call that a bad omen. Are you superstitious, dear Lady Grace?” [Pg 116]

“Give it to me; let me throw it——” she said, with malignant intensity.

He held it out of her reach, surveying her with smiling scrutiny.

“No, really you must not. Poor Cecil——” He stopped suddenly, and the expression of his face changed. His quick ears had caught the sound of a horse’s hoofs.

Touching her arm, he signed to her to follow him, and slid back behind the trees. She followed him, and, looking over her shoulder, saw Lord Cecil galloping toward them.

He cleared the hedge, and, dropping from the horse, walked quickly to the spot where they had stood, and commenced to search in the grass with anxious eagerness. He went down on his knees, and examined every inch of the spot where Doris and he had sat, groped along the bank where they had stood, and hunted every likely spot.

They could see his anxious face, hear his half-muttered ejaculations of disappointment, and Spenser Churchill, with the ring in his hand, smiled sweetly.

CHAPTER XII.

TO WED AN ACTRESS.

The ring was nowhere to be seen! Full of pain and remorse, Lord Cecil was obliged to admit to himself that it was gone beyond recovery; he might search for a week, a month, and not find it, for it might have dropped off his finger and fallen at any spot between the tree and the brook.

“My darling’s ring!” he murmured aloud, so that the two listeners could hear him where they stood concealed; “my darling’s ring! I would give all the Stoyle jewels to get it back!”

Then he mounted slowly, and with many a backward glance, as if he hoped that even at the last moment he might get a glimpse of it shining among the grass, he rode off.

Then the thought of his happiness rose as a tide and swept away his distress; he had lost the ring, but Doris—beautiful, sweet Doris—was still his! [Pg 117]

It seemed too wonderful, too good to be true, and he recalled every word she had spoken, every glance of her love-lit eyes, that he might impress them on his memory.

The air seemed full of her; the birds seemed to sing her name: “Doris, Doris Marlowe;” all the earth, clad in its bright spring colors, was smiling a reflection of the delirious joy that burnt like a flame in his heart.

She was so beautiful! He tried to think of some of the girls that he had known, that he might compare them with her; but they all seemed insipid and colorless beside the intense, spiritual loveliness of Doris, with her deep, melting eyes, and grave, clear brows. And she was not only beautiful, but a genius. Every word she spoke was lifted out of the region of commonplace by her marvelous voice, with its innumerable changes of expression. The touch of her small, smooth hand lingered about him; yet, the shy kiss of the warm lips burned upon his brow.

What had he done to deserve so great, so overwhelming a happiness? And as he asked himself the question Cecil Neville’s face grew grave, and a pang shot through his heart, a pang of remorse—and of shame—for some of the follies of his past life.

Doris was worthy of the best and noblest man in England, and he——! He set his teeth and breathed hard. He had laughed at love, had smiled almost contemptuously at passion, and now he felt that this was the only thing worth living for, and that rather than lose his darling he would ride his mare at the stone wall before him and break his neck.

Then he thought of the marquis and his own position. What would the marquis say? He laughed grimly as he pictured the scene before him. He could imagine the marquis’ cold, haughty face turning to ice and steel as he listened, and the cutting, smiling voice bidding him to marry his actress and go to the devil.

He was entirely dependent on the marquis; was in debt as heavily as even the heir to such a title and estates could be. What would the marquis do when he, Lord Cecil, told him that he could not marry Lady Grace, because he was going to marry—an actress? [Pg 118]

“I wish to Heaven I were anything but what I am,” he said to himself, with a sigh. “If I were only capable of earning my own living, a barrister, or a doctor, or an artist, or something, I could make a home for my darling then, but I am simply a useless, worthless being, who happens, unfortunately, to be the next-of-kin to the Marquis of Stoyle!”

What should he do, if the marquis turned him adrift? His allowance would cease, his creditors would become pressing—he would be ruined; and he would have to wait until the marquis died before he could make Doris his wife.

The thought was gall and wormwood. Much as he disliked his uncle, Cecil Neville was not the man to wish for his death. The marquis might live forever, if only Cecil could marry his darling.

“If he only had a heart in his bosom, instead of a flint, and could see her!” he thought, as he rode on; “or if I were only a barrister or an artist, or anything that earns money enough to make my darling my wife!”

He was in no hurry to reach the Towers; it was far pleasanter to be alone, to think over his happiness, and he made a wide circuit, bringing Polly into the stable-yard just before the dressing-bell rang.

And, after all his thinking, this was the result: That he must try somehow to win the marquis’ consent to the marriage.

He had intended going to the theatre; to feast his eyes and ears upon his beautiful love, but—with a pang—he resolved to dine and spend the evening at the Towers, and after dinner he would tell the marquis. Perhaps the old port would soften the old man’s heart! Anyhow, he would tell him.

As he passed through the hall he almost ran against Spenser Churchill, who was coming out of the marquis’ apartments.

“Ah, my dear Cecil!” he murmured, with a benevolent smile, “just got back? What a lovely evening! Have you enjoyed your ride? Did you notice the sunset? Quite a Leader! You know those beautiful pictures Leader paints, all crimson and mauve?” [Pg 119]

Lord Cecil nodded and strode up the stairs to his rooms.

When he came down into the drawing-room, Lady Grace was seated at the piano, playing softly, and she glanced up at him with a smile.

“What have you been doing with yourself all day, Lord Neville?” she asked.

“Oh, I’ve just been loafing about,” he said, carelessly; “and you?”

“I am ashamed to say that I haven’t been outside the grounds,” she replied. “Mr. Churchill and I have been botanizing in the gardens. I told him that we really ought to do something in the way of exploring the neighborhood, but I could not induce him to go outside the gates. Are you going to the theatre to-night?” she asked, innocently.

He started and bent over the music.

“Not to-night,” he said.

“I didn’t know,” she said. “I myself should like to go and see that girl play Juliet again; it was wonderful.”

“Yes,” he said in his curt way.

“Yes, she played it so remarkably well. But I’m afraid a second night would spoil the impression, wouldn’t it?”

“I daresay,” he said.

Then the bell rang, and he gave her his arm and took her into dinner.

All through the elaborate meal she seemed in the best and brightest of spirits, and her sallies of well-bred merriment called a smile even to the face of the marquis.

Lord Cecil noticed that he was less bitter than usual, and that he refrained from making the sneering and contemptuous remarks with which he usually adorned the conversation.

Spenser Churchill, too, appeared in his most benevolent and amiable mood, and grew quite pathetic as he talked of his pet charity for distressed chimney sweeps.

The dessert came, and then Lady Grace took up her fan and left the room, and Spenser Churchill, after a single glass of claret, rose, and saying: “Don’t let me disturb you two; I am going to ask Lady Grace for some music,” glided out of the room. [Pg 120]

The moment had arrived for Lord Cecil’s announcement, and as he filled his glass, his face grew set and grave.

The marquis, instead of rising, seemed to linger over his wine, and leaned back in his chair with a thoughtful air. Once he glanced at Lord Cecil curiously.

“Have you heard the news from Ireland, Cecil?” he said.

Lord Cecil started, and set down his glass.

“No, sir. I have not seen the papers.”

“I was not alluding to the papers,” said the marquis, with a trace of his cold sneer. “I rarely read them; there is plenty of fiction in the library. But I have heard from my agent in Connemara. The country is very unsettled.”

“Yes?” said Lord Cecil absently; he had his own ideas about Ireland, and they would probably have much astonished the marquis, who was a Tory of the old and thorough-going sort. But Lord Cecil was not thinking of Ireland, but of Doris Marlowe.

“I imagine you know that I—I suppose I ought to say ‘we’—have a great deal of property there?”

Lord Cecil nodded.

“I suppose so, sir.”

“Yes,” said the marquis, glancing at him from the corners of his cold, keen eyes. “You don’t take much interest in the matter—at present. But you will be marquis very soon, and then——” he laughed. “I don’t envy you your Irish property!”

“I am in no hurry to possess it, sir,” said Lord Cecil.

“I daresay not.”

“But I think the people have some reason for what they are doing.”

“No doubt,” assented the marquis, drily. “You view the business from the patriotic side.”

“I sympathize with the people,” said Lord Neville, firmly.

The marquis poured out a glass of wine and smiled coldly.

“Yes—you are young,” he said. “But I’ll admit the thing wants looking into, and I’m too old to undertake the inspection.” [Pg 121]

Lord Neville raised his head. He did not want to talk about Ireland, but about Doris Marlowe. And now, he thought, was the time. The old port stood beside them, the door was closed. Lady Grace and Spenser Churchill were in the drawing-room.

He looked at the cold, haughty face and plunged at his task.

“I’m afraid I can’t go into the Irish question to-night, sir,” he said.

“Indeed?” said the marquis, leaning back.

“No,” said Lord Cecil, quietly; “I have a personal matter I wish to speak to you about.”

The marquis eyed him calmly and patiently.

“Personal matters claim first attention. What is it? Is it money?”

“I want your consent to my marriage,” said Lord Cecil.

If he had expected the marquis to express surprise by word or gesture he was disappointed.

“Your marriage?” he said, quietly. “You intend taking my advice, I see. You are wise; Lady Grace is desirable in every way. I’d marry her myself, if I were younger.”

Lord Cecil colored, but he did not flinch.

“I am sorry, sir,” he said.

“That I am not younger?” put in the marquis, with a sardonic smile.

“Well, yes, I’m sorry for that, if youth would make you any happier, my lord,” said Lord Neville, and he spoke sincerely. The marquis eyed him keenly. “But it is not Lady Grace, sir. I think her a most beautiful and charming lady, of whom I am quite and entirely unworthy.”

“For once I agree with you,” was the caustic comment.

Lord Neville inclined his head.

“But there is another reason why I cannot venture to ask Lady Grace to be my wife. I do not love her.”

The marquis smiled.

“I thought it was out of fashion to be in love with your wife; forgive me, I have been outside the world so long. Pray go on.” [Pg 122]

“And I love another lady.”

“Indeed!” came the cold response. There was no surprise, scarcely a trace even of displeasure, but the keen eyes glittered like those of an eagle as they rested on his handsome, manly face. “Don’t you think it would have saved both of us some trouble and many words if you had mentioned this rather important fact when we were discussing the question the other night?”

Lord Neville smiled faintly.

“I did not know it myself,” he replied; “I had not met the young lady.”

“Ah, love at first sight!” said the marquis. “Interesting, but rather imprudent. You have known her, and loved her, and want to marry her, all in—how many days is it?”

Lord Neville colored.

“I seem to have known her for years,” he said, almost to himself.

“And may I ask—I don’t desire to appear inquisitive—who this young lady is? I didn’t know that you had visited any of the people here. Do I know her?”

“I think not, sir,” said Lord Neville. “Her name is Doris Marlowe.”

“Doris Marlowe,” repeated the marquis; “a pretty name. No, I don’t know it. There is no county family hereabouts, that I remember, of the name of Marlowe.”

“She is not a member of a county family; she is an actress,” said Lord Neville.

He looked up steadily, expecting to see the cold, haughty face break into an expression of rage, fury, scorn; but there was not the least emotion displayed on the thin, curled lips and glittering eyes.

“An actress; really! Dear me! This is very—entertaining! I was under the impression that only callow schoolboys ever fell in love with actresses. I should have thought—pray forgive me—that you were too old, if not too sensible, to be guilty of such a *gaucherie*.”

Lord Neville pressed his foot down upon the Turkey carpet, and sat himself squarely in his chair, in his effort to command his temper. He had resolved that nothing the marquis should say should rouse him to anger or to retaliation. [Pg 123]

“An actress! I don’t think the Stoyles have ever had an actress in the family; and some of us have gone pretty low down for our wives, too!”

Lord Neville bit his lip.

“If you knew Miss Marlowe, sir, I think you would scarcely consider that I was condescending in asking her to marry me.”

The marquis stared at him as if he were some curious specimen, worthy of calm and careful consideration.

“I will take your word for that! At any rate, I won’t venture to contradict you; but you must permit me to express my satisfaction that Fate has spared me to that extent! I have no desire to add an actress to my list of acquaintances.”

Lord Neville inclined his head.

“This is exactly what I expected you to say, sir,” he said, quietly; “but I considered it my duty to tell you, and to ask your consent, as I should have asked my father’s, had he been living.”

“Thanks; you are very considerate,” said the marquis, with a fine sneer; “and do not mind me! Pray unbosom yourself! Treat me as if I were your father, and dilate upon the lady’s charms. Of course she is beautiful.”

“She is very beautiful,” said Lord Neville, quietly.

—“And clever! Quite a genius, in fact, and equally, of course, pure and innocent as the driven snow.”

The words—the tone—almost maddened Lord Cecil. His face crimsoned, then went pale, and his eyes burnt fiercely as they met the keen, sardonic gaze.

“She is clever! She is a genius! Yes!” he said, controlling himself by a great effort. “She will be, or would have been famous. As to her innocence and purity, she has been brought up and carefully guarded by a man, against whom and herself the tongue of scandal has not dared even to hint a word.”

“In—deed! You are singularly fortunate!” came the scornful response.

Lord Neville sprang to his feet, a half audible oath wrung from him in his torture; but the marquis waved his thin, white, clawlike hand.

“Pray sit down. We had better endeavor to discuss this matter quietly. If she is an actress, that is [Pg 124] no reason why you should treat me to dramatic attitudes. Pray be calm! I have no doubt you believe all you say, I am quite convinced of it. We’ll agree that she is everything that is beautiful and innocent and talented, and that you are very much in love with her——” and he laughed, such a laugh of taunting scorn and contempt as might have been echoed in Tophet.

Lord Neville sank into his chair again.

“And you propose to marry her?” said the marquis, after sipping his wine. “To marry her! Now that surprises me! How fashions alter! In my day that is the last thing we should have done.”

Lord Neville’s face darkened.

“Even in your day, my lord, all men were not scoundrels,” he said, grimly.

“No,” said the marquis, delighted at having driven him to retort. “No; there were some fools—even in my day!”

“You shall call me what you please, sir.”

“My dear fellow, what else can I call you? Even you will not expect me to applaud such a step as you propose taking. You are a Neville, you will be the Marquis of Stoyle, a peer of the three kingdoms: you will get, or you would have got, the Garter; and you propose to marry—an actress! An actress! If there is any man in England who would not call you a fool, I should like to see him; I should like to see him very much, indeed. Why, my dear fellow, depend upon it, no one thinks you more decidedly a fool than the girl herself.”

“By Heaven, if you only knew her!” broke from Lord Neville’s parched lips.

The marquis laughed.

“Thanks, again. But you’ll excuse me, I trust! An actress! Come, I’m not a betting man—now, but I will wager you a hundred pounds to five that before two months after you have been married you will admit to me that I was right and that you were a very great fool, indeed!”

“I take you, sir,” said Lord Neville, grimly, and he drew out his pocketbook and carefully jotted down the bet. The old man’s eyes shone with a swift approval; it was a touch worthy of himself. [Pg 125]

“And I’ll make you another that in the same period the girl herself will be as sorry that she married you.”

“I don’t take that,” said Lord Neville, coldly. “For, considering the blood that runs in my veins, any woman’s chance of happiness as my wife is a small one.”

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ACCEPTED OFFER.

The effect of this retort upon the marquis was fearful! His face, pale at all times, went livid, his eyes gleamed like ardent coals, his teeth came together with a click, and he drooped as if he had been struck; then in a moment or two he recovered himself and made an elaborate bow.

“Fairly hit,” he said, and his voice was very low and sharp. “Very well done, indeed. But you forgot when you taunted me with the unhappiness of my own married life, that you were admitting that I spoke with experience.”

Lord Neville flushed.

“By Heaven, sir,” he said, quietly, “you drove me too hard. I know little or nothing of your married life—I scarcely thought of it when I spoke——”

The marquis waved his hand.

“Don’t spoil it by an apology,” he said, quietly. “You struck home and should be satisfied. My marriage was almost as great a mistake as yours will be. Almost, not quite. It ruined my life; if by a little trouble I could have saved you from a like experience, I should have been glad to have done so; but I am not prepared to take much trouble. We will, therefore, if you please, consider that you have made up your mind to marry this girl from the gutter—don’t look so fierce; a girl who is of no family is from the gutter—the pavement!—that you have made up your mind to become the laughing-stock of all your friends, old and young; to chain yourself to a woman who will, while she lives, be pointed and stared at as ‘the actress,’ that you are contented to leave the society to which your birth and position entitle you, and sink into grim solitude or the companionship of people of her class. We will take all this for granted. And now, what do you expect me to do, if I may ask?” [Pg 126]

“To request me to leave this house, to discontinue my allowance, and to cut me from henceforth,” said Lord Neville, promptly but calmly.

The marquis smiled.

“Y—es,” he said, nodding, “that is my duty forcibly and concisely. This is what I ought to do; but all my life I have never done what I ought to have done, and have always done what I ought not. You are welcome to remain at the Towers as long as you please.”

Lord Neville looked at him with faint surprise, and the marquis sipped his wine slowly.

“I shall double your allowance, and, as to cutting you, that would be inconvenient and troublesome, not to say vulgar. Of course I shall keep to my resolve respecting the property, that will go to Lady Grace as I said.”

Lord Neville’s face flushed.

“She is welcome to it—quite welcome to it,” he said at once; “I am glad that it should be so. I—I think you have acted very generously to me, and I thank you, sir.”

The marquis inclined his head, a faint smile hovering about his thin lips.

“You might be able to marry upon your allowance doubled, as I propose,” he said. “You would not be very rich, but it might do.”

“It will be quite sufficient,” said Lord Neville, as yet unrecovered from his surprise.

“I shall not live very long, I hope—though, by the way, I should like to live long enough to win that five pounds of you”—Lord Neville smiled—“and then you will have the estates, such as they are.”

“I ask you to believe me, that I am in no hurry. I do not wish, and never have wished for your death,” and his face flushed.

The marquis waved his hand.

“Thanks, very much! But to return: I presume that you have not the slightest doubt of the stability of your feelings? You are sure that you won’t change your mind—your heart, I should have said?”

“Quite certain,” replied Lord Neville, Doris’ face rising before him as he spoke. “My happiness is bound up in Miss Marlowe; I shall never cease to love her.” [Pg 127]

“Very good,” said the marquis. “Of course, you want to be married at once? Oh, I have no objection; it is a matter of perfect indifference to me, I assure you.”

“Then your kindness and liberality are all the more marked, sir,” said Lord Neville. “I wish I could convince you of my gratitude; it is sufficient to make me forget—almost—all the hard things you have said.”

“Ah,” said the marquis, “gratitude is a fine sentiment—very fine. But rather hollow and shadowy. If I were to ask you to do something, for instance, to prove this beautiful sentiment!” he sneered, as a finish to the sentence.

Lord Neville looked up.

“I wish you would!” he said. “I should like to prove my sincerity, sir.”

The marquis looked round the room with a smile of idle amusement.

“Really,” he said, “there is nothing I can think of asking you to do, excepting to pass the wine, and that does not entail much sacrifice.”

“I was not jesting, sir,” said Lord Neville, gravely. “My offer was made in all sincerity.”

“Really? Dear me, I wish I could think of something, Ah!” he stopped and looked at Lord Neville’s attentive face keenly, sarcastically. “What do you say if I ask you to go over to Ireland for me?”

Lord Neville’s face grew grave, and the marquis leaned back and laughed with grim satisfaction.

“You see! Gratitude’s a very fine thing—to talk about!”

Lord Neville flushed.

“You misunderstand my silence,” he said, quietly. “If you mean by going to Ireland for you, I’m to take side with the landlords”—stopped—“I could not join in the oppression of those poor people, my lord, even to prove my own sincerity.”

The marquis toyed with his fruit knife.

“Charmingly put, my dear Cecil; quite fit for a political platform. But you misunderstand me. I know nothing of the question, and care less; I hate and detest politics; they bore me, they always [Pg 128] did. All I want is this: I am told that my agent is a rogue, who has made himself rich by grinding down the tenants; I am also told that he is the most merciful and upright of men. I’m rather curious to know—well, scarcely curious, perhaps—which account is true. Will you go and find out? I don’t think you can call that oppressing the people.”

Lord Neville looked up with quiet eagerness.

“Certainly, I will go, sir,” he said.

The marquis inclined his head.

“Mind, I don’t care a brass farthing whether you go or refuse; I don’t care about anything; and it is very likely that after you are gone to-morrow morning I shall have ceased to remember what you have gone about.”

“To-morrow morning?” said Lord Neville, almost inaudibly. To-morrow morning! and his appointment with Doris, his interview with her guardian!

“Yes,” said the marquis, carelessly, but shooting a glance, half-scornful, half-amused, at the grave face. “If you go at all it must be at once! Some one should have started to-night! The man will collect the rents in a day or two; he should be stopped—or the other thing.”

“Yes,” said Lord Neville, absently.

Go without seeing Doris! Without gaining her guardian’s consent. His heart throbbed with a dull ache.

“Yes, of course you see that! The early train would enable you to catch the Irish mail at Sandstone Junction——Ah, I see,” and he laughed mockingly.

Lord Neville looked up inquiringly.

“You want to see Miss Barlow——”

“Marlowe,” said Lord Neville.

“Pardon. Marlowe. To tell her that the wicked uncle has proved less black than he is painted——”

Lord Neville smiled.

“Is that unnatural?”

“By no means; but permit me to suggest that you can write to her. I merely suggest it.”

Lord Neville rose with a quiet air of determination.

“What time does the early train start, sir?” he said.

The marquis shrugged his shoulders.

“Parkins will tell you,” he said, carelessly. “You mean to go, then?”

“Yes,” said Lord Cecil. [Pg 129]

The marquis laughed.

“Will you kindly give me that despatch box?” he said.

Lord Cecil brought it to him, and the marquis took out some papers.

“Here are the papers,” he said, languidly. “I haven’t read them all; you can bore yourself over them in the train. And will you favor me by accepting this toward the expenses,” and he laid a roll of uncounted notes on the table.

Cecil took them up and examined them.

“There is more than enough here,” he said, quietly.

“There is never more than enough money,” said the marquis. “If you think there is too much, you can distribute the surplus among the poor people with whom you sympathize.”

“Yes, I can do that—and will!”

“As you like. I will say ‘good-night;’ by the way, I should say ‘good-by,’ for you may be shot!” he added, as calmly as if he were saying, “It may rain.”

“I am not coward enough to be afraid of that, or fool enough to think it likely!” said Lord Cecil, as carelessly. “Good-night, sir,” and he held the door open for him.

As he did so the marquis raised his eyelids and shot a glance at the handsome face; then, with a bow and a cold smile, passed out.

Lord Cecil went up to his own room, and, lighting a cigar, paced up and down, thinking deeply.

It was marvelous that the marquis should have acted as he had done! Double his allowance! He would be able to marry at once, instead of waiting. Marry Doris at once! The blood beat in a tumult at his heart; then a dull weight seemed to fall upon him as he remembered his debts. But he thrust the incubus from him; something might be done respecting them, some arrangement made. At any rate, he would have an income large enough to marry on, and Doris——! He puffed at his cigar fiercely, and called up a vision of the lovely face, and tried to imagine the expression the deep, dark, melting orbs would wear when he told her. Then, as he reflected that he should not see her on the morrow, he sighed.

“It almost seems as if my darling had some presentiment that we should not meet,” he said to himself. “What will she say when she finds that I am not there and goes to the stone for the letter?” [Pg 130]

Then he sat down to the table to write it. It was not easy, for he wanted to say enough to cover ten pages; but at last he wrote a few lines only:

> My Darling:—While you are reading this I shall be on my way to Ireland—with my heart in Barton meadows. I can’t tell you in a letter all that has happened; only this, that, as he himself put it, the wicked marquis is not so bad as he is painted! Doris, when I come back, it will be to ask you to be my wife—not in a year or two, but soon, soon! I’m a bad hand at writing letters, and I could not, if I tried, tell you how I love you, or how I wish I were near you, to see and hear you, my beautiful angel! Ever yours,
>
> Cecil.
>
> P. S.—I owe my uncle something, for he has behaved with unusual kindness, and this journey to Ireland is the only way in which he will let me pay him. I will tell you all about it when I come back.

He sighed over the unsatisfactory epistle and closed it; then reopened the letter and caught up his pen to tell her of the loss of the ring and ask her to look for it; but he hesitated, and put the letter back in the envelope with the sentence unwritten. Then he put on his coat and walked to the meadows. The night was dark, and he had to light a match to enable him to find the stone beneath the trees, but he found it and concealed his letter, and then, after standing for a few moments and looking round him dreamily, casting up the vision of Doris, he turned and made his way back to the Towers.

The marquis had gone to his room, as was customary with him; his valet exchanged his master’s dress coat for a velvet dressing-gown, and the old man lay back in the chair looking at the fire with half-closed eyes.

The room was magnificently furnished, but in rather a subdued tone, which was rendered almost sombre by the heavy curtains that screened the window and a greater portion of the walls.

Against the deep purple of the hangings the clear, sharp-cut face with its distinct pallor looked almost like that of a dead man’s, and only the steel-like glitter of the eyes spoke of the vitality which lingered in the body, and burned in the spirit of the most honorable, the Marquis of Stoyle. [Pg 131]

Presently there came a soft tap at the door, and in response to the marquis’ “come in,” Spenser Churchill entered.

If anything his smooth, innocent face looked more benevolent and charitable than usual, and the smile he bent upon the hard, cold face upturned to him was like that of a man whose sole delight is in doing good to his fellowmen.

“Well?” he said—or rather purred.

The marquis waved his hand to a chair, and Spenser Churchill dropped softly into it, and leaned back, his eyes on the ceiling, his fat hands clasped on his knee.

“You were right, you spoke nothing but the truth; the fool is in earnest.”

“Dear Cecil,” purred Spenser Churchill.

“He is so much in love that he bore all the insults that I could heap upon him—no! I wrong him. He struck home once!” and he smiled a strange smile.

“And he means to marry her?”

“Yes,” said the marquis, with a cruel sneer; “he is even fool enough for that.”

“Dear Cecil!” murmured Spenser Churchill again. “How delightful, how refreshing it is, in this practical, stupid life, to find——”

“And he will marry her, unless this scheme of yours answers,” said the marquis, breaking in upon the smooth voice.

“And you doubled his income?”

“I did,” said the marquis.

“And he will go to Ireland? To-morrow?”

“He will, to-morrow,” said the marquis, watching the sleek, false face.

“Now, that’s very good of him,” murmured Spenser Churchill; “very good, most charming and nice. To go to Ireland on the very day he has arranged a meeting with that beautiful girl. Now ——”

“Is she so beautiful?” asked the marquis, who seemed to take the unctuous words as meaningless and not worth listening to. “I suppose she must be. He has seen many pretty women, many clever ones. What has caught him? What is she like?” [Pg 132]

Spenser Churchill shot a sidelong glance at him.

“The usual thing, my dear marquis,” he said, softly. “Just the usual thing! They make those face powders wonderfully well now—wonderfully!”

The marquis smiled grimly.

“The fool, to be caught by a painted vixen, old enough——I suppose she is old, eh?”

Spenser Churchill shrugged his shoulders.

“Ah, yes, of course! A young girl wouldn’t have had the tact to catch him so easily. And he has written to her, I suppose?”

“Yes,” said Spenser Churchill; “and gone to post his letter under the stone. The romance is simply charming! Charming!”

The marquis eyed the fire thoughtfully.

“I am almost inclined to let him marry her,” he said, in a low voice. “I should enjoy the misery that would follow! Yes, I’m half inclined——” and an evil light flashed from his eyes.

Spenser Churchill watched him behind the mask of a benevolent smile.

“Oh, no, no,” he murmured; “we really must not, we really must not let dear Cecil ruin himself. My dear marquis, we should not sleep; our consciences——”

The marquis broke in with a cold, sardonic laugh.

“Yes, you are right! After all, it will be more amusing to thwart him—if we can.”

“If we can,” echoed Spenser Churchill with a smile.

“Oh, I don’t doubt your ability,” said the marquis with a sneer; “the devil himself could not be a fitter person for such work. What do you mean to do?” he added, with a half-contemptuous, half-weary gesture.

“Have you a letter of dear Cecil’s?” said Spenser Churchill. “I really am half ashamed! It is only the conviction that I am acting for the dear fellow’s ultimate good that gives me courage——”

The marquis pointed to a cabinet.

“You will find some letters of his there,” he said.

“Thanks,” murmured Spenser Churchill, and he rose and opened the cabinet.

Then he selected two or three letters, and, smiling and nodding at the marquis as if they were conspiring to do some good deed in secret, he went to a davenport and wrote. [Pg 133]

After a few moments he came across the room, and with his head on one side, a benevolent smile on his innocent face, he dropped a letter on the marquis’ knee.

The marquis took it up and looked at it with a careless air, then started.

“Forgery must be very easy,” he said, with a sneer, “or you must have had a great deal of practice, Spenser.”

“You really think it is like—just a little like?” said Spenser Churchill, as if he had received high praise for a virtuous action. “Now, really, you think it is something of a resemblance?”

“It is so close a forgery that Cecil himself might almost be persuaded that it is his own.”

“No! Really! But read it, dear marquis! The handwriting is only of secondary importance; the style of the letter—eh? What do you say?”

The marquis read the note, and a smile of sardonic amusement lit up his pallid face.

“Now, please don’t flatter me, tell me your true opinion, marquis!” purred Spenser Churchill, leaning forward, and rubbing his hands together.

The marquis tossed the letter to him.

“It is a very good counterfeit,” he said.

Spenser Churchill laughed softly.

“I tried to imagine the way in which our dear Cecil would write, and you think I have succeeded? Poor Cecil, poor girl! What a hard world it is! Now, why can’t these interesting young things be permitted to be happy in their own charming, unsophisticated way? What a pity it is that one feels bound, in the cause of humanity and society, to—er—so to speak—put a spoke in their

wheel!” and he stood up and began buttoning his coat.

“You yourself are going to take that letter?” asked the marquis.

“Oh, yes!” purred Spenser Churchill. “We mustn’t confide our nice little plot to a servant.”

“You are taking a great deal of trouble; why?” said the marquis, eyeing him keenly.

Spenser Churchill’s eyes dropped, and a benevolent smile shone on his smooth face. [Pg 134]

“Simply out of regard and affection for you, marquis, and our dear Cecil, and the house of Stoyle, to which I am so much attached. Yes, I shall take the letter myself.”

“Ah!” said the marquis, slowly. Then he looked up. “I should recommend you to keep clear of Cecil,” he said, with a sneer. “He’s as strong as an ox and—a Neville. Seriously, Spenser, if he should get an inkling, and catch you, I fear you would come off badly. Unless you are tired of life, you had better keep out of his way.”

“No, I am not tired of life,” said Spenser Churchill. “But I shall take my pretty little letter myself. Adieu!” and he nodded, and smiled himself out of the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

A BROKEN TRYST.

Doris went home with her heart beating, every nerve throbbing with the thrill of a woman's first love; and it was not until she had her hand upon the door that she fully realized the task that lay before her.

She had to tell Jeffrey. To tell him that all his lifelong plans for her were shattered and cast to the winds; that, just at the moment of success, success won by hard, persistent work and untiring effort, on his part and hers, she, Doris Marlowe, who was to have been the actress of the day, was going to retire from the stage forever.

She scarcely realized it herself yet, and yet she knew that it must be. The future wife of the heir to the marquisate of Stoyle could not be permitted to remain an actress, to be gazed at by a nightly mob, to be cheered or hissed by a public audience. She sighed as the thought came home to her, not for herself, and the sacrifice of fame, but for Jeffrey. It would be hard for him to bear, very, very hard; but she did not doubt that he would give his consent. As she had said to Lord Neville, Jeffrey could not find it in his heart to refuse her anything she wanted very much, and she did want to marry this handsome young lover, whose simple touch had power to move her, very much indeed. [Pg 135]

She opened the door. Jeffrey was seated at a small table, covered with papers and old letters. He was bending over them with an air and attitude of deep abstraction, and he did not hear her light footfall as she crossed the room, and laid her small hand rather tremulously upon his stooping shoulders.

"Doris!" he exclaimed, looking up with a start, and covering the papers before him with both his thin, gnarled hands.

"Why, Jeffrey, dear, did I frighten you?" she said gently. "What are you doing? You look as if you were trying to write a play!"

He smiled constrainedly and began collecting the papers and letters in a nervous, hurried fashion.

"I—I have been busy," he said. "Old papers and—and letters. Where have you been, and what have you been doing?"

He did not look at her or he would have seen the color which suffused her face and noticed the suddenly downcast eyes.

"I have been to the meadows, Jeffrey. I—I want to tell you something."

"Yes," he said, tying the letters together in a bundle, and folding up a couple of yellow, time-stained papers. "What is it? What is the time? I—I have been sitting here so long that I've forgotten." He looked at his old-fashioned watch, and rising hastily, put the bundle of letters in a box that stood on the table. "It is time for the rehearsal; are you ready? I shall not be a moment."

"Yes, I am quite ready; but there is plenty of time, Jeffrey, and I want to tell you—have you forgotten those papers? Are you not going to lock them up with the others," and she pointed to them.

He snatched them up almost jealously.

"No, no," he said. "I keep them—here!" and he placed them with a nervous carefulness in a pocket within the breast of his waistcoat. "I—I meant to show you to-day, Doris. I have been going to show them to you for—" he sighed—"years. But I've put it off from day to day, from year to year. They belong to you, and you shall have them—to-morrow, say to-morrow." [Pg 136]

Doris started slightly. It was to-morrow that Lord Neville was coming to see Jeffrey; perhaps he would give them to Lord Neville!

"How well you look this morning," he said suddenly, his eyes resting for a moment upon her lovely face with their old keenness. "Those meadows, as you call them, must be wonderfully healthy. Where is my hat?"

She got it for him, and as she gave it to him she let her hand fall lightly upon his arm.

"And don't you want to hear what I have to tell you, Jeffrey?"

"Eh?" he said. "What is it? Nothing very important, I suppose? A new bonnet you've seen in the Barton milliner's? Well, you can buy it! You can buy all the bonnets in the window now, if you like!" and he chuckled grimly. "No more pinching and scraping—though we'll be careful still, eh, Doris? We'll be careful! Hard-earned money's too precious to be squandered. Buy your bonnet, Doris, by all means. Come along!" and he was across the room and out of the door before she could summon up courage to stop him.

She would tell him after rehearsal, she thought, with a sigh; but after rehearsal he came hurrying to her to tell her that he had arranged to go to the next town on important business for the manager.

"I shall be back to-night," he said, in his quick, stern voice; "in time to take you home, as usual," and he touched her forehead with his lips.

"You will be sure to be back to-night, Jeffrey?" she said, clinging to him for a moment.

“Yes, yes,” he said, hurriedly. “If anything should prevent me——” He put his hand to his breast thoughtfully, and his heavy brows knitted with a troubled expression; then he seemed to shake it off. “But I shall be back. If by any chance I should lose the train——”

“Jeffrey!”

“I said by any chance only, and it is not likely; but if I should I will come by the first in the morning. Mrs. Parkhouse, the dresser, will see you home if I am not here. Good-by, my child! Play your best to-night! I am working for you; stone by stone I am building up the edifice of your fame ——” He stopped, pressed her shoulder with his thin hand, and was gone. [Pg 137]

Doris felt a strange sense of loneliness fall upon her. It was the first time he had left her for so many hours that his absence oppressed her for a moment or two with a sense of helplessness. Then suddenly there flashed upon her the remembrance of Cecil and his love, and the oppression vanished. How could she be helpless while he was so near to love and protect her?

Was it strange that her feet should wander from the straight road home, to the brook in the meadows? Was it strange that she should linger on the spot made sacred to her by her love until the last moment, so that she left herself barely time to dress and reach the theatre?

“Perhaps I shall see him to-night,” she thought; “perhaps he will come to the cab and say one word, just one word!” And when she came on, her beautiful eyes wandered over the crowded house with an eagerness which she could scarcely conceal.

But he was not there: and he did not come during the whole evening. She felt that she should know if he were in the theatre, though she should not be able to see him, and she knew even before she left the stage door to go to the cab that she should not see him, and Jeffrey had not come back!

“You feel tired to-night, Miss Marlowe,” said Mrs. Parkhouse, as Doris leaned back in the cab, and drew her cloak round her. “Shall I come home and stay with you to-night? I dare say you feel lonely without Mr. Jeffrey.”

But Doris would not let her do that.

“I am tired,” she said, “and I feel rather lonely, but Mr. Jeffrey would laugh at me for being so nervous. No, you shall not stay.”

She sat up into the night looking at the stars from the window, which she threw open, for the air was balmy with the breath of the coming summer; and she tried to realize all that had happened to her, all that was going to happen to her.

It was not of the title and rank that were to be hers she thought, but of Cecil’s love, and she stretched her long white arms out toward Barton Towers with a yearning gesture, murmuring, “My love, my love!” [Pg 138]

The morning broke, not brightly and sunnily, but in fitful gleams glancing through shower clouds; and when she came downstairs she found a yellow telegram envelope beside her plate.

It was from Jeffrey, saying that the merest chance he had spoken of had occurred, and that he had been detained the night, but that he would catch the eleven o’clock train, and asking her to meet him.

Her face brightened as she read it. Yes, she would meet him, and as they walked through the woods from the station, she would tell him of her strange meeting with Lord Neville and all that had sprung from it, and then they both could go and meet Cecil by the brook.

She hurried through a mere pretense of a breakfast, and putting on her hat and jacket, set out.

The sky had cleared somewhat, and the sun, shining through the spaces of blue, touched the green leaves with a dazzling sheen.

As she went toward the meadows, her heart beating with an anticipatory joy, her mind was hard at work.

Perhaps, after all, Jeffrey would not so much mind her giving up the stage and the career for which he had so carefully prepared her. It was her happiness he had been seeking—only her happiness, and when he learned that it was bound up in her love for Cecil Neville, he would not refuse his consent or throw any obstacle in the way.

Looking at it in this hopeful fashion, she reached a spot where the footpath branched in two directions—one led to the brook, the other to the railway station.

She stopped and glanced at the path to the brook wistfully; perhaps Cecil was already waiting for her. Consulting her tiny watch—a present from Jeffrey—she saw that there was just time to go round by way of the brook, and, with a heightened color and eager eyes, she took the path that led thither.

“After all,” she murmured, when she reached the bank, and looked round upon the unbroken solitude; “I might have waited! He is not here! I dare say he has not finished his breakfast yet; and yet, if he knew that I was here——”

She sat down on the bank, and gazed dreamily about her. The brook babbling at her feet; the branches of the trees waving solemnly above her head; the very air seemed eloquent of the lover who had stolen her heart and absorbed her life, and she fell into a delicious reverie. Then, suddenly, her eyes fell upon the big round stone at the foot of the tree, and a smile broke over her face. [Pg 139]

“What a foolish, romantic girl he must have thought me,” she murmured; “as if he would let anything prevent him coming.”

As she spoke she rose, and, almost mechanically, knelt down and turned the stone over.

Then, with a start, she woke, for there lay a white envelope.

She took it up and gazed at it, turning it over and over, a dull, heavy disappointment weighing upon her, and examined the address, and the elaborate crest stamped on the back.

“Then it was not so romantic or foolish,” she murmured, sorrowfully. “He is not coming!”

She sank down upon the bank, and looked before her with a vacant air, the envelope still unopened. “Not coming! Not coming!” It was like the announcement of some terrible calamity.

Then, suddenly, hope sprang into her bosom.

“He has written to tell me why he cannot come,” she said to herself, and the color rushed back into her face. “Yes, that is it! He has been prevented—his uncle, the marquis! Something has prevented him, and he has just written to tell me when he can come, and when I shall see him.”

She tore the envelope open, and something fell upon the grass. She leaned forward and picked it up; it was the old pearl-silver ring she had given to him.

She looked at it, turning it over with a vague aching sense of disappointment and trouble.

“My ring!” she murmured, “my ring! Now, what does this mean?” then her face brightened. “Ah, yes, he has sent it to remind me of yesterday!”

Eagerly she opened the letter, and her lovely eyes seemed to devour it; but as she read they grew dim and hazy, and she swept her hand across them with an impatient gesture. [Pg 140]

“I—I can’t read!” she murmured piteously. “I can’t read it!” Her hands closed tightly on the thick, smooth sheet of notepaper, and she set her teeth hard. “I must be mad—yes, that is it! Let me wait a moment. Now!” and she bent forward, and, with knitted brows, read it out word by word, slowly, painfully, like a child reading a repugnant task.

> Dear Miss Marlowe—for I feel that I dare not call you by the name engraven on my heart, and yet I must, though it is for the last time! Dear, dear Doris! I am the most wretched and miserable of men! And yesterday I was the happiest! Doris, I have seen my uncle and told him all, and he has proved to me, beyond all question, that it is impossible for me to make you mine. I can’t tell you all that passed between us; I scarcely know what I am writing, but the dreadful fact remains that by making you my wife I should work you nothing but wretchedness and misery. Don’t ask me to tell you anything more; I cannot! Try and forget me, Doris! I am not, and never can be, worth a single thought of yours! I know what you will think, and the knowledge only adds to my misery. You will think that I value my worldly prosperity above your love; but I swear it is not so! I would willingly resign everything—rank, money, position—for your sake; but there are other reasons. Forgive and forget me, Doris, or if you still think of me, remember me as one who wishes himself dead! Good-by—and forever!
>
> Cecil Neville.
>
> I return your ring. I dare not keep it, having lost you!

Thrice she read it slowly, carefully, as if she were trying to learn it by heart; then she rose, and, white as the stones washed by the brook stood gazing at the broken and hastily scrawled lines.

“Good-by—and forever!” she murmured. “Good-by—and forever!”

A wild laugh forced itself from her lips, and she dropped down on the bank as if she had been felled by a blow.

CHAPTER XV.

[Pg 141]

A TERRIBLE THREAT.

Half an hour later Jeffrey was making his way along the footpath through the woods, his thin, bent figure throwing a fantastic shadow on the tree trunks, as he walked with his head projected and drooping, his eyes fixed on the ground. Every now and then he raised his head, looking about him as if he remembered that he had asked Doris to meet him; but he almost immediately again relapsed into his pre-occupied manner. Once he stopped and took the papers from the pocket in his breast and looked at them with a deep and thoughtful frown.

"Yes, to-day!" he murmured. "I will tell her to-day! Why should I be afraid? It will make no difference; she will be my child still; it will make no difference." He took off his hat and wiped his brow and sighed. "Yes, I'll tell her to-day. I—I'm not so strong as I was, and one can't tell what may happen. If I died before I'd told her——"

The muttered words stopped suddenly, and he looked up with a startled air which swiftly changed to one of fierce anger. A dapper, comfortably-rounded figure stood before him, with placidly smiling face and serenely benevolent air.

"Spenser Churchill!" exclaimed Jeffrey hoarsely, his hands closing with a gesture at once threatening and repressive.

"My dear Mr. Flint!" purred Spenser, his head on one side, his hand extended benignantly. "My dear Mr. Flint! What a delightful coincidence! After all, nothing is more true than the rather hackneyed assertion that the world is a small place."

Jeffrey, glaring at him fiercely, waved his hand.

"Pass on—pass on!" he panted; "I—I will have nothing to say to you!"

"Now really, my dear Jeffrey," murmured Spenser Churchill remonstratingly, "is it—I put it to you as a sensible man—is it really worth while to nourish these—er—unchristianlike resentments? [Pg 142] Look at me——" It was quite an unnecessary request, for the fierce, deeply-sunken eyes had never left the smooth, supple face. "Look at me, my dear Jeffrey. I, too, have had my trials; but—er—I sink them, I let them drop—I bury them, and I make it my principle to forget and forgive."

"Let me pass, you——!" panted Jeffrey, his whole frame shaking with an effort at self-control.

"To forget and forgive," repeated the other, as if the words were a sweet morsel he was turning over his tongue. "Believe me, dear Jeffrey, that is far, far the wiser plan."

"You think so?" said Jeffrey, hoarsely. "You can forget, Spenser Churchill; I cannot, for it was you who wronged, I who suffered! So you have forgotten, and you dared to think that I had done so? That you may see how well I remember, villain——No, stop!" for Spenser Churchill had backed a few steps, and glanced round, as if meditating a retreat. "Stop, Spenser Churchill, while I remind you why, when the devil sends you across my path, that it would be wiser for you to crawl on one side, lest I crush you, you smiling, fawning reptile! You forget! You forget the life you ruined! Look on me and remember! I was young, rich in health and hope, blessed with the love of an honest, tender-hearted girl, when that devil—your master—the Marquis of Stoyle, the beast for whom you jackalled, employed you to entice her from me. You succeeded, Spenser Churchill, and have forgotten her misery, and mine; all, save perhaps the sum your master flung you."

His hands were so near the delicate white throat opposite him that Spenser Churchill drew his head back sharply, and turned pale.

"My dear Jeffrey!" he murmured soothingly. "Now, come, come. Now, really, you know! If any one were listening—which I am thankful, for your sake, is not the case—they would gather from your—er—really extravagant language that I had, like the bad man in a play, contrived the ruin of the usual virtuous young lady, whereas I must, in justice to myself, remind you, my dear Jeffrey, that the young lady in question was only guilty of the remarkably bad taste of jilting you for the [Pg 143] Marquis of Stoyle, who, like an honorable gentleman, made her his lawful wife and sharer of his exalted rank."

"Yes," said Jeffrey, hoarsely. "Because, by no other means could he get her in his power! Made her his wife! Yes, that he might crush her the more easily! Enough, Spenser Churchill!"

"Pardon me! One word more! You appear to have forgotten that the lady, marchioness as she was, preferred to return to her first admirer——There, there!" he broke off, putting up his hand to ward off the threatened blow; "as you say, it is not worth talking about, and, as I say, it is as much wiser to forget. The poor lady is dead, and the child——"

"Is dead, too!" said Jeffrey.

"Is playing 'Juliet' at the Theatre Royal, Barton," put in Spenser Churchill, smoothly. "Miss Doris Marlowe, otherwise Lady Mary, daughter of the Most Honorable the Marquis of Stoyle——"

Jeffrey staggered, and sank trembling on a fallen tree, great drops of sweat trickling down his white, wrinkled face.

Spenser Churchill took out a cigarette and lit it, smiling blandly down upon the stricken figure.

"Upon my word, my dear Jeffrey," he said, pleasantly, "I am almost inclined to cry, 'Fie, for shame!' and to retort one of the ugly words which you so liberally applied to me. To afford shelter to the wife of the dear marquis is one thing, but to steal his child——"

“She—she died!” gasped Jeffrey, hoarsely.

“So it was stated, and so it was believed by all excepting the gentleman who has the honor to stand before you.” He laughed unctuously. “I had my suspicions from the first, and I found them justified when I saw Miss Doris Marlowe in her charming performance the other evening, and, on inquiry, found that she was the daughter of Mr. Jeffrey Flint!”

Jeffrey wiped the sweat from his forehead and opened his lips, but he seemed deprived of the power of speech.

“You must permit me,” continued the softly mocking voice, “to congratulate you upon the result of your excellent training. The young lady is a most talented actress—most charming! But, my dear Jeffrey, does it not occur to you sometimes that it is, to use the vulgar slang of the day, rather rough upon her? To deprive a young and helpless girl of her rank and position——” [Pg 144]

Jeffrey extended his trembling hands entreatingly.

“Stop—stop!” he panted. “I—I did it for the best—I did it for her good——”

Spenser Churchill laughed mockingly.

“Yes!” cried Jeffrey, rising with sudden despair. “For her good! You saw her—you saw how happy, how innocent she is! All her life has been happy and free from care. What would it have been if I had yielded her back to the man who broke her mother’s heart, the man who would have hated her for that mother’s sake? Man, man, don’t torture me with your devilish smile! I did it for the best!”

Spenser Churchill laughed again.

“Dear, dear!” he murmured, “how dreadfully easy it is to deceive oneself! Now, here are you, a most excellent man, I have no doubt, my dear Jeffrey, actually persuading yourself that in robbing another man of his only child and depriving her of her rights, you have been committing a noble and virtuous action! Now I am sorry to say that I don’t agree with you! I’ve no doubt you have become attached to the girl——”

Jeffrey put up his hand.

“Silence!” he said, hoarsely. “It is not for such as you to understand the love I bear her—my child, my child!”

“Pardon me, the Marquis of Stoyle’s child!” said the sneering voice.

Jeffrey raised his head and confronted the smiling, mocking face.

“Enough. You know my secret, and you alone——”

“Are you sure of that?” said Spenser Churchill, smoothly. “Are you sure that no one else shares it?”

Jeffrey made a gesture of assent.

“No one else. Not even she. To-day I had resolved to tell her.”

A flash came into the watchful eyes.

“To-day—ah, yes!”

“Yes,” said Jeffrey, with a deep sigh that was almost a groan, “I have brought myself to it at last, after much a struggle as you cannot understand. To-day she was to be told, was to take her future into her own hands; to choose—” his voice broke—“between one who has loved her like a father, and the man who drove her mother from his house and broke her heart!” [Pg 145]

“Hem—yes!” murmured Spenser Churchill; “and you flatter yourself she will remain with you, of course?”

“You do not know her,” was the tremulous reply. “You do not know her! My child, my child!”

Spenser Churchill watched him in silence from under his white, smooth lids.

“By the way, my dear Jeffrey,” he said softly, “did it ever strike you, that supposing Lady Mary decided to return to her father”—Jeffrey winced—“her father—that the marquis might refuse to acknowledge her?”

Jeffrey looked at him as if he scarcely understood.

“You see,” continued Spenser Churchill, resting his foot on the tree, and leaning forward with a subtle smile; “it is such an extraordinary story; the marquis might be inclined to remark that he would require some proofs! I need scarcely remind you that he is not the most credulous of men; in fact, that he is rather inclined to be suspicious.”

Jeffrey nodded grimly.

“I know him,” he said, almost as if to himself. “I have thought of that, and am prepared with proofs.” He put his hand to his breast pocket mechanically, and drew out the papers, and Spenser Churchill’s eyes darted to them with a swift eagerness. “If—if Doris chooses to—to go to him, and leave me, it will not be in his power to repudiate her! These,” and he touched the papers with his forefinger, and then put them in his pocket again; “these will establish her birth beyond dispute.”

“I am delighted to hear it. That is quite satisfactory, quite. And so, my dear Jeffrey, you expect the young lady to renounce her father, the marquis—her rank and title, and all that would become hers—think of it—and remain with you; all will go on as before, and the father and his

adopted child will be happy ever afterward, like the people in the fairy story?”

Jeffrey nodded, and the deep lines in his face grew lighter.

“Yes,” he said in a low voice again, as if he were communing with himself rather than answering the other man’s question; “yes, we shall take up our lives as before, my child, my Doris and I! She will be my Doris still, mine to love, and guard, and watch over! You saw her——” he went on with suppressed eagerness. “There was truth in what you said, though you meant it insultingly; she will be a great actress—great! And it is I who have taught her—I, who loved her mother! You taunted me, Spenser Churchill, with selfish aims in keeping from her the knowledge of her birth. It was unjust. ‘Hide my child from him always—always, Jeffrey!’ she said. They were her last words. Poor Lucy!” [Pg 146]

His head drooped, and he covered his eyes with his thin, gaunt hands for a moment; then, as if remembering the presence of the other man, turned to him.

“You are here still? Why are you waiting? Go your way, and let me go mine. You know my secret—it is no concern of yours. Forget it, as you forget the wrong you did me. Go!” and he pointed down the path.

Spenser Churchill smiled blandly.

“My dear Jeffrey, doesn’t it occur to you that perhaps this little secret of yours does concern me?”

The haggard eyes were raised to the smooth, mocking face.

“Doesn’t it occur to you that, though you don’t appear to have any conscience to speak of, that I may not be so hardened. Oh, fie, Jeffrey! You know, you really must know, what it is my duty to do!”

“Your duty?” repeated Jeffrey, in a low voice. “What do you mean?”

“Why, my dear sir, of course it is my duty to go to the marquis, and inform him of the existence of his child. Oh! and how sweet a duty,” he murmured, “to restore a long lost child to its father’s loving arms!”

Jeffrey sprang to his feet, and stood, breathing hard, his hand clinched tightly at his side.

Spenser Churchill looked at him with an air of gentle reproach.

“I cannot think how it is you haven’t seen that from the first, dear Jeffrey. You may be so lost to all sense of right as to conceal the fact of Lady Mary’s existence, but I—oh, my dear Jeffrey—I am a man of honor and must act as my conscience dictates. And how great a reward will be mine! To restore to a father the child he has mourned as dead! The dear marquis, I can picture his delight—” the smile grew sardonic for a moment—“his delight at recovering her, and his gratitude to you——” [Pg 147]

Jeffrey drew nearer.

“You—you will do this?” he panted, almost inaudibly.

“Yes,” said Spenser Churchill; then with a rapid change of voice, and laying his hand on the quivering shoulder of the man he was torturing, he added, “unless you come to my terms, my dear Jeffrey.”

“Your terms?” echoed Jeffrey, his face working, his hands clasping and unclasping each other.

Spenser Churchill nodded blandly.

“Y—es. I take an interest in this charming young lady; I knew her mother, you see——”

“Beware!” broke from Jeffrey’s parched lips. “Don’t—don’t try me too hard!”

“And I should like to have a hand in restoring her to her proper place, or permitting her to remain under your care.”

“You mean that her fate is to be in your hands?”

“Yes, exactly; and that it may do so most completely and satisfactorily, I think I will take charge of those interesting papers which you referred to, my dear Jeffrey.”

Jeffrey’s hand flew to his breast.

“The papers!” he articulated, hoarsely.

Spenser Churchill nodded.

“Yes. Don’t say you will not, my dear fellow, because if you do you will compel me to go straight to the marquis—who is at Barton Towers, by the way——”

“Barton Towers—the marquis—Doris!” muttered Jeffrey wildly and with a vacant stare.

“Yes, Doris, who will not be your Doris any longer, but will have to remain with her father, the marquis, whether she likes it or not——”

He had gone too far. With a spring, the tortured man was upon him, the long, thin fingers fastened tightly in the soft, white throat, the gaunt face was close upon the smooth, false one.

Spenser Churchill reeled, and went down on one knee. [Pg 148]

“Take your hands off!” he croaked, suffocatingly, as he struggled to release himself; but Jeffrey, though the older man of the two, seemed possessed of the strength of an athlete, and, after a

desperate struggle, Spenser Churchill lay on his back, with Jeffrey's knee on his chest, and Jeffrey's fingers still choking him.

"Are—are you going to murder me?" he managed to gasp out.

"I am going to kill you!" was the grim reply, a wild, fierce light burning in the hollow eyes. "One kills a snake, not murders it. I kill you as I would any other vermin!"

"Jeffrey—let me go! Let me go, and I swear to keep your secret. I swear—my honor——"

An awful smile lit up the face above him.

"Trust her happiness to your oath!" he said, hoarsely. "Trust her to your honor!" the hands tightened, the sky grew black, the trees danced a mad carnival in Spenser Churchill's eyes, and they were closing for the last time, when suddenly the steel-like fingers relaxed their hold; Jeffrey reeled back, and, throwing up his arms, screamed:

"Doris, Doris!" and fell across the man who, only a moment ago, was at his mercy.

Dazed, sick with terror, and half-suffocated, Spenser Churchill struggled to his feet and staggered to a tree. He leaned against it for a moment or two, panting and gasping, tugging at the collar of his shirt, and regaining his breath, and at last he looked shudderingly at the still form upon the ground.

Still shuddering, he went toward and knelt over it.

"Fainted!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "Another moment!" a shiver ran over his sleek, white face. "Another moment and I should have been lying like that. The madman!"

He spurned the body with his foot.

"Lie there and cool yourself!" he snarled, and was turning away, when suddenly he started and put his hand to his brow.

"The beast has driven my senses out of me! The papers! Of course! Ha, ha, Master Jeffrey!" and, kneeling down again, he hurriedly turned the still figure over, and, unbuttoning the waistcoat, snatched out the papers. [Pg 149]

As he did so, something—was it the nameless terror of death, to which mortal humanity is and ever will be thrall?—something made him wince and shrink back.

He stared for a moment or two at the white face, then, slowly, slowly, extended his hand, and trembling, laid it over the heart. The next instant he started back, and, white as the face beneath him, cried:

"Great Heaven! He's dead!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PART OF A HYPOCRITE.

“Doris!” The cry rang through the wood and reached the spot where Doris lay full length upon the bank like a crushed flower. For a moment she thought it was an invention of her disordered mind, then she seemed to recognize Jeffrey’s voice, and, thrusting the letter in her bosom, she sprang to her feet, and, with hurried steps, made her way, half-blindly, in the direction of the sound.

A few moments brought her to the open glade, and, with a cry of terror, she was on her knees beside the still form.

She had never before been in the presence of death, and for a time she thought that he had only fainted, and she raised his head and called upon him in accents of alarm and affection; then suddenly she heard a step behind her, and, looking round, saw the smooth, bland face of the man who had stood up in the box at the theatre, the man against whom Jeffrey had warned her.

She shrank back and clasped the dead man closer to her, as if to protect him.

“Has anything happened?” asked Spenser Churchill, with tender concern. “Dear me, I am afraid there has been an accident; the gentleman is ill?”

“Yes, yes!” panted Doris. “Help me! oh, help me!”

Spenser Churchill knelt down and examined the stern face with an anxious regard.

“Why, I know him!” he said, with an air of surprise. “It is Mr. Flint—Mr. Jeffrey Flint, is it not?” [Pg 150]

Doris made a gesture of assent without removing her eyes from the old man’s face.

“Yes. Is he—is he very ill?”

Spenser Churchill shook his head, solemnly.

“I am afraid—how did it happen, Miss Marlowe? It is Miss Marlowe, is it not?”

“I do not know,” sobbed Doris, heedless of the latter part of the question. “I—I was not here—I heard him call! Oh, Jeffrey, Jeffrey! dear Jeffrey! Is he——A doctor! oh, if I could get a doctor! Some one——”

“My dear young lady!” murmured Spenser Churchill, pityingly, “I am afraid—do not give way, bear up! In the midst of life——”

A cry rang through the wood, and a shudder shook her frame, then she looked up with a terrible calmness.

“You say that he is dead—is that it? Dead! Oh, Heaven, dead!”

Spenser Churchill shook his head.

“I fear—I very much fear——” he murmured, gravely, and he laid his hand upon the thin wrist. “And you do not know how it happened?” he asked again, his eyes scrutinizing her face with a quick keenness.

“No!” said Doris, hoarsely, and with a sob. “He was alone—I was coming to meet him—I heard him call my name, and—and I found him like this! Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?”

“Can you bear to be left alone for a little while?” said Spenser Churchill. “There is a cottage near here, on the outskirts of the wood. I will go and get some assistance. The poor fellow has died from a sudden attack of heart disease!”

“Oh, go, go!” panted Doris.

He went, after another searching glance at her white face; and she bent over the motionless form, almost as lifeless herself.

In a few minutes Spenser Churchill returned, with a couple of farm laborers carrying a hurdle, and the body was tenderly and reverently carried to the house, Doris walking beside it and still holding the cold, dead hand.

Hasty preparation had been made for the reception of the stricken man, and he was carried up to the best room. A messenger had been sent to Barton for the doctor, and in a short time he appeared and was received by Mr. Spenser Churchill, who awaited him at the gate. [Pg 151]

“Mr. Jeffrey Flint!” said the doctor, as Spenser Churchill, in sympathetic accents, gave an account of the case. “Yes, yes! Ah, yes, I know something of him; he consulted me a few days ago.”

Then he passed upstairs and into the room where the dead man lay upon the bed, with Doris kneeling beside him still holding his hand.

“My dear,” said the doctor, after a short examination, “this is no place for you. No one can do anything for him; your friend has gone to his last rest,” and he motioned to the woman of the cottage, who stood crying at the door.

Slowly, reluctantly, Doris permitted them to take her away, and the doctor after a few minutes went downstairs and rejoined Spenser Churchill.

“It is only too true, I see,” said that gentleman, sadly.

The doctor nodded gravely.

“Yes,” he said; “he has been dead some time. It is very sad, very! That poor young creature—Miss Marlowe, I believe?”

Spenser Churchill nodded again.

“I believe so,” he said.

“Poor girl, poor girl!” murmured the kind-hearted doctor, turning his face away. “So suddenly.”

“My heart bleeds for her!” said Spenser Churchill, wiping away something that may have been a tear. “So young and friendless——”

“Friendless?” said the doctor.

“Well, I am given to understand she has no father or mother,” he explained. “I should not have said friendless. I trust, I humbly trust, that, seeing I was on the spot, sent, so to speak, providentially, that she will permit me to be of some service to her, poor young thing.”

He took out his cardcase and handed a card.

The doctor glanced at it and bowed.

“Oh, Mr. Spenser Churchill? Your name is known to me, sir, of course; and I feel that I am justified in saying that this poor girl will indeed have a friend in you, if you are the Mr. Spenser Churchill, the well-known philanthropist.” [Pg 152]

Spenser Churchill cast down his eyes and sighed.

“I have no claim to so high a title, doctor,” he said, meekly, “though I trust I may say that I take a humble interest in any good work. Poor girl, poor girl! I fear there will have to be an inquest? That will be a terrible trial for her!” and he shot a glance under his lids at the doctor’s thoughtful face.

“Well,” he replied, hesitatingly, “I don’t know. I—I really think it may be avoided.”

“If it is not quite necessary,” said Spenser Churchill, softly. “It is a trying ordeal for the survivor at any time, but with this poor child, so young and sensitive——”

“Yes, yes,” assented the doctor. “I do not think it will be necessary. Mr. Flint consulted me the day before yesterday, and I warned him then that he must be careful to avoid all excitement; indeed, I told him as plainly as I dared that any sudden shock would be fatal.”

“Dear me! Poor fellow!” murmured Spenser Churchill.

“And I think, under the circumstances, that I can give a certificate, and so avoid an inquest.”

Spenser Churchill heaved a soft sigh of relief.

“I shall be glad if you will tell me all you know respecting the case, Mr. Churchill?”

“Certainly,” assented Spenser Churchill, with a sigh. “It is soon told. I was strolling through the woods in the direction of the town—I had left the Towers half-an-hour previously—when I heard a girl’s voice—poor Miss Marlowe’s, in fact—crying piteously. I hurried up, and found her kneeling beside him. That is all, excepting that I am quite sure he was dead when I reached the spot, and I think he had been dead some time.”

The doctor smiled.

“And you met no one, saw no one excepting Miss Marlowe?”

“No, no one; I heard and saw nothing but what I have told you,” replied Spenser Churchill, quietly.

“Hem! I don’t quite see. It would appear as if there had been a shock——”

“Is that absolutely necessary?” suggested Spenser Churchill, softly. “In heart disease death may result—I speak with deference—without any shock or excitement.” [Pg 153]

“Oh, quite so, quite so,” assented the doctor. “The deceased might have died at any moment—in his bed, or during his ordinary avocations. Oh, yes.”

“I am relieved to hear you say that,” said Spenser Churchill. “I am so anxious, on Miss Marlowe’s account, to avoid an inquest.”

“Quite so, quite so. There will be no necessity. Did you know the deceased?”

“I knew something of him some years ago,” replied Spenser Churchill; “but we have not met for a long period; indeed, it must be ten or fifteen years. I only knew him quite slightly, and had not seen him of late, even at a distance. It was quite a shock to me, recognizing him lying there on the grass, dead!”

“I dare say,” said the doctor, quite sympathetically. “And now, what is to be done?—I mean, with reference to this poor young girl.”

“If you will leave it to me,” murmured Spenser Churchill, meekly, “I will do all that lies in my power. She may have relations and friends. I will ascertain from her, and communicate with them. You may trust me to do all that I can to soften the terrible blow for the poor young creature.”

The doctor took his hand and wrung it.

“You are a good man, Mr. Churchill,” he said, “and Heaven will reward you! Pray count upon me if I can be of any assistance. I will go and make out the certificate.”

Spenser Churchill accompanied him to his gig, then lit a cigarette, and paced up and down for a few minutes, thinking intensely.

His voice and manner, while he had been talking with the simple-minded provincial doctor, had been completely under control—quiet, calm, and sadly sympathetic; but now that he was alone he felt that his hands were shaking, and that his face was white.

“My dear—Spenser—” he murmured. “Steady—steady!” and he held his hand out and regarded it clinically. “No shaking and trembling! Chance—or shall we say Providence—has placed a great [Pg 154] game in your hands, and you must play it properly if you mean to win, and you do mean to win! Great Heaven, what a narrow escape it was! Another minute, another half-minute, and you would have been removed from this terrestial sphere! And to think that he should have died just at the critical moment! It was a special interposition! Let me think—now, steady, my dear fellow, steady! Jeffrey dead—thank Heaven!—no one but myself knows the secret of this girl’s birth! The papers—” he took them from his pocket, and looked at them, and it may be stated, to his credit, that a shudder ran through him as he did so, for they still seemed warm by their contact with their dead owner, from whom he had stolen them—“yes, he was right. They are all here; proof incontestable, evidence that no one, not even the dear marquis, could refute! No one knows of their existence but myself! And she is alone and friendless, yes, friendless, for my letter has done its work, and Cecil Neville is too far off to undo it! We must keep you in Ireland, dear Cecil, we cannot have you back interfering in this business. No one knows that Doris Marlowe is the daughter of the Marquis of Stoyle, but me. Spenser, my dear fellow, you hold all the cards, play them carefully and properly, and——” he flung the stump of his cigarette into the hedge, and, smoothing his face into its usual bland expression, returned to the cottage.

The woman, the wife of the woodman, stood waiting for him.

“How is poor Miss Marlowe, Mrs. Jelf?” he said.

Mrs. Jelf dropped a curtsey.

“Ah, poor young thing, sir!” she said, wiping her eyes with her apron. “She’s lying down, sir, quite worn out and looking like a corpse herself! It don’t seem as if she had strength to speak or move! I was thinking, sir, that we’d better send for her friends——”

“Not at present, I think, Mrs. Jelf,” he said, gently. “I think she had better be left to herself for a while. I have promised the doctor to do all I can in my poor way——”

“Oh, sir, I know you’ve a kind heart,” murmured Mrs. Jelf.

“We must all do our simple best, Mrs. Jelf,” he replied, lifting up his eyes. “I happen to know [Pg 155] something of the poor fellow who lies upstairs, and, for the sake of old times, you understand, and for the sake of the poor young lady——”

“And she such a sweet young thing!” said Mrs. Jelf, beginning to cry again.

“I will do my best for her. I am now going to the town, and I think, Mrs. Jelf, it would be as well, if any one inquires for Miss Marlowe, if you told them that she is not well enough to see anybody. And if there should be any letters, perhaps you will give them to me; I will keep them until poor Miss Marlowe is strong enough to see them. At such times as these, in moments of such deep sorrow as this, Mrs. Jelf, the human heart must not be harassed by contact with the outer world.”

“No, indeed, sir,” assented Mrs. Jelf, quite touched by such sympathetic consideration. “I won’t let any one see her, and she shan’t be worried by anything. I’ll keep people from her, and I’ll give you any letters.”

“Thank you, I think it will be better,” said Spenser Churchill. “Perhaps you might tell Miss Marlowe that a friend—you need not mention my name; you might say the doctor—has gone to the theatre and will make all arrangements. All she has to do is to try and remain quiet. Rest, rest, my dear Mrs. Jelf, is the great soother for the—er—tortured breast,” and leaving this sublime piece of sentiment to do its work in honest Mrs. Jelf’s mind, he went off to Barton.

Ill news travels apace, and the tidings of Jeffrey’s sudden death had reached the theatre even before Spenser Churchill arrived there.

His manner with the manager was simply perfection.

“I came on at once, my dear sir,” he said, “because I felt that you should be the first to know of this—er—dreadful calamity. I am fully sensible of the responsible position you occupy, and that your relations as a manager with the public entitle you to every consideration. Of course, Miss Marlowe will not act for some time—if ever she acts again.”

“Of course, of course!” said the manager, rather blankly. “Poor Jeffrey! An admirable man, sir; admirable! Might have been a great actor himself, but contented himself with presenting an [Pg 156] ornament to the stage in his adopted daughter. A great genius Miss Marlowe, Mr. Churchill! Splendid! magnificent! A wonderful career before her! Of course, she can’t be expected to act at present, certainly not; but in time—ahem!—in time.”

“We shall see,” said Spenser Churchill. “In time, perhaps; but I cannot say. I am not authorized to speak for Miss Marlowe; but this I will say, that if she should resume her professional career, you —you will have the first claim upon her!” and he shook the manager’s hand in so emphatic and impressive a manner that the manager was quite touched.

Two hours afterward all Barton was placarded with the announcement that, in consequence of sudden domestic bereavement, Miss Doris Marlowe would not appear that evening, and that in place of “Romeo and Juliet,” would be performed the famous drama, “The Corsican Brothers.”

Mr. Spenser Churchill was as good as his word. If he had been a near and dear relative of the bereaved girl, he could not more completely have taken the whole arrangements into his own hands. He saw to the funeral, examined the dead man’s papers and effects; even carried his thoughtful consideration so far as to ask Mrs. Jelf to order mourning for Miss Marlowe and herself. In fact he did all that was necessary on such mournful occasions—all except one thing. By a strange oversight, Mr. Spenser Churchill omitted to send notice of the death to the newspapers, so that there was nothing to tell Lord Cecil Neville, away in Ireland, that the girl he loved had suddenly been left alone in the world!

CHAPTER XVII.

A CHANCE FOR ESCAPE.

Alone in the world! Lying back in a chair by the open window of the woodman's cottage—for she could not bring herself to go back to the lodgings in Barton, where every inanimate object would remind her of the father-like friend she had lost—Doris kept repeating the ominous words to herself. Although a week had passed since the funeral she had not yet recovered from the terrible blow, and as she lay back with half-closed eyes and white, wan face she still looked "like one wandering in other worlds than this." [Pg 157]

The dead man had been so much to her. Mother, father, brother—indeed her only friend and companion—that the sense of helplessness which follows all bereavement was intensified in her case. She was indeed utterly alone; drifting on the stream of life like a rudderless vessel, to be blown hither and thither by the cruel caprice of every wind. Since the day of Jeffrey's death she had seen no one excepting the kind-hearted woman of the cottage, Mrs. Jelf; and had done nothing but commune in silence with the great sorrow that had fallen upon her.

In one day, in one hour, she had lost her lover and the man who had been as a father to her.

She tried to put all thought of Lord Cecil Neville away from her, and to think of Jeffrey alone; but with an agony of remorse she found that the loss of her lover seemed almost as great a grief as the death of poor Jeffrey.

All day long she dwelt upon the joy and happiness of those few short days while he had been hers; recalling every word he had spoken, every tone of the musical voice that seemed to have spoken of nothing but love—deep, true, passionate love to her. She remembered how many times he had kissed her, the fond endearing names by which he had called her; and now it was all over! So completely a thing of the past, and gone from her life, that it appeared more like a dream than a reality. Were it not for the aching void in her heart, and the letter—the cruel letter he had written, and that lay crushed and hidden against her bosom—she could almost have believed that no such person as Cecil Neville existed.

Where was he now? she wondered. Did he still think of her? or had he never really loved her?

"Who am I, that I should have won the love of such as he?" she asked herself over and over again. "No, he never loved me! He never loved me, while I——" Then she would cover her face with her hands, and wish that she could find relief in the unshed tears that seemed to scorch her heart. [Pg 158]

This morning, as she sat by the window, her hands folded listlessly in her lap, thinking and thinking till her head ached, and wishing that she lay in the quiet churchyard beside Jeffrey, Mrs. Jelf came into the room, and, speaking in the subdued voice which is perhaps the most irritating and trying to one in Doris' condition, said:

"How do you find yourself this morning, miss?"

"I am quite well," said Doris, rousing herself.

"I am glad to hear it, miss," responded Mrs. Jelf, gently arranging the pillow which she had insisted upon placing in the armchair. "Do you think you are well enough to see any one this morning?"

"To see any one?" said Doris, with a start, and a sudden thrill of the heart, for a wild, mad hope arose within her breast that it might be Cecil Neville.

"Yes, miss; you are not to unless you quite like, he says, but if you do feel strong enough——"

"He—who?" asked Doris.

"Mr. Spenser Churchill, the gentleman who has been so kind all through your great trouble, miss."

The color ebbed from Doris' face, and she sank back.

"Mr. Spenser Churchill," she said, vacantly, then a vague sense of dread fell upon her, and she recalled Jeffrey's warning.

"Yes, miss; the kindest-hearted gentleman as ever I knew. I'm sure, if he'd been your own father or brother, he couldn't have done more. Why, he's seen to everything, you know."

Doris thrilled with an indefinable alarm and remorse.

"Why—why did you not tell me? Why should he do all this?" she asked.

"Well, miss, because it's his nature, I suppose," replied Mrs. Jelf. "You see, he's what they call a—a philanthropish; always ready to do a kind action, and—lor', come to that, who wouldn't be glad to do anything for a sweet young creature like yourself, left so friendless and helpless? There he is now, just coming up the path. Now, you're not to see him unless you feel strong enough; he can wait, he says——"

"Will you please tell Mr. Churchill that I will see him," said Doris, and Mrs. Jelf, after another pat or two to the pillow, went out. [Pg 159]

Doris tried to brace herself to the coming interview. Her mind had been so clouded that she had not until this moment realized all that this strange gentleman—against whom poor Jeffrey had warned her as her greatest foe—had done for her, and she scarcely knew how to receive him.

The door opened and Spenser Churchill entered. He was dressed in black, and his face was

almost seraphic with its expression of reverent sympathy.

“Do not rise, my dear young lady,” he murmured softly. “Mrs. Jelf assured me that you felt equal to seeing me; indeed, wished me to do so, or I should not have intruded upon the sacred solitude of your grief.”

Notwithstanding the honeyed accents, the words seemed to sound artificial to Doris’ acute sense, and she turned her large dark eyes upon him with an unconscious scrutiny.

“I am quite well, and I did wish to see you, sir,” she said, “I wish to thank you for all you have done for me. I scarcely know yet the extent of your kindness”—her voice faltered—“I think I must have been ill, for I seem to have forgotten”—she put her hand to her brow for a moment, then with an effort recovered herself.

“What I have done, my dear Miss Marlowe, does not deserve a word of thanks. It has been a sad satisfaction to me to have been of some slight service to you.”

“But you have done everything,” persisted Doris, in a low voice—“everything! Why——?” she stopped abruptly, the question sounded a cold and ungrateful one.

But Mr. Spenser Churchill filled up the pause.

“You would—and not unnaturally—ask why I have taken upon myself to interfere in your affairs, my dear young lady?”

Doris made a slight gesture of dissent.

“Well, we will not say interfere,” he murmured, softly; “we will use the word ‘interested.’ The question is very easily answered. For one thing, I happened to be on the spot when your poor guardian—but we will not recall the sad scene,” he broke off, as Doris winced and her face grew paler. “And the second reason is that I was once a friend of poor Mr. Jeffrey’s.” [Pg 160]

“A friend?” Doris could not help saying.

He shot a sharp glance at her, unseen by her, and sighed.

“I understand your surprise,” he said, mournfully. “You will observe that I said that I was once a friend. Some time ago, I regret to say, a difference arose between us. I do not know whether you know the circumstances, whether he ever told you?”

Doris shook her head, and he emitted a suppressed and inaudible sigh of relief.

“Well, well, we will not speak of it; but this I will say, the quarrel, the misunderstanding, arose from no fault of his. The fault was mine, entirely mine, my dear young lady!”

It was a cunning speech, and produced the effect he had intended.

“Looking back to that time—when we parted, friends no longer—my heart is filled with remorse and sorrow! Ah, Miss Marlowe, if we would all of us reflect that life is short, and that death may come to prevent forever any reconciliation between parted friends, how often—ah, how often the rash and foolish quarrel would be averted;” and, apparently overcome by his emotion, he turned his head away and softly blew his nose. “But we will not go back over this sad quarrel,” he said. “I have come to see you this morning that I may see if I can be of any further use to you. I trust I may be. There are several things I find that I must speak to you about, much as I should wish to leave you undisturbed.”

“Will you please tell me everything I should know,” said Doris. “I am ashamed that I should have left everything so entirely.”

“No, no,” he murmured. “Such a terrible bereavement as yours, so sudden, is so overwhelming that no excuse is needed.” He took some papers from his pocket. “I will not trouble you more than I can avoid with business matters, my dear young lady, but there are a few things that I find I must speak to you about. First, I must ask you if there is any one, any friend you would rather I went to who would take this trouble off your shoulders?” [Pg 161]

Doris shook her head.

“No, there is no one,” she said, quietly enough and with a firm voice. “I have no friend in all the world.”

“Except—dare I say except my humble self?” he murmured. “My dear young lady, what little I have done afforded me a melancholy satisfaction. I have felt all through that by serving you in some slight measure, I have been making an attempt at some poor atonement for the error that separated my poor dead friend and myself. Will you allow me to call myself your friend?”

Doris turned to thank him, and he inclined his head gratefully.

“Well, then, I have taken upon myself to see to all the arrangements, and have ventured to act, just as if I were, say your father. It was necessary that I should look into poor Jeffrey’s affairs, and I have come to tell you the result. I am sorry to say, my dear young lady, that your guardian did not leave any wealth behind him. He died a poor man—perhaps this will not surprise you?”

“No,” said Doris, in a low voice; “we were always poor, I think. There was always enough——”

He nodded.

“Yes, yes, I understand. There is some money; it is not much, about a hundred pounds, I think.”

Doris listened with faint interest. If she had heard that she had been left without a penny, or heiress to a million, it would not have affected her in her present condition.

“Besides the money there were some papers—nothing of any consequence, however—letters and documents relating to business affairs, engagements at theatres, and so on.”

A faint flush came into Doris’ face, then left it absolutely colorless.

“Nothing more?” she said, with downcast eyes.

“Nothing more,” he said, gravely, watching her closely, though he seemed occupied in turning over the papers. “Did you expect——”

“I do not know,” she faltered; then she raised her large, sad eyes. “You know that I am not— [Pg 162]
Jeffrey’s daughter?”

He inclined his head.

“Yes, I know that; and I know what you expected—hoped, shall I say; that I should find something, some papers that would give us a clew to your parentage. Is that not so?”

Doris’ lips formed the “Yes.”

He sighed and shook his head.

“I regret there is no such clew. The secret of your birth, my dear young lady, is buried in my poor friend’s grave.”

Doris had leaned forward with a suppressed eagerness, and she sank back as her eyes filled with tears.

“I am sorry, sorry,” he murmured, “for I too had hoped that I might make some discovery. But there is not a single paper, not the slightest clew.”

“And yet”—said Doris, more to herself than to him—“there was something he—he was going to tell me, some papers; he had them with him the morning——” Her voice broke.

Spenser Churchill listened with the deepest sympathy glowing in his benevolent face.

“Dear, dear!” he murmured. “And he did not tell you? And these papers now? He had them with him, you say? They were not found. I myself did not examine——; but the doctor assured me there was nothing beyond a little money and so on. I fear—I very much fear—that our poor friend must have decided to allow the mystery to remain, and have destroyed the papers you speak of.”

Doris’ hands closed tightly.

“He knew best,” she said, with all a woman’s loving loyalty. “I—I am satisfied. He knew best,” and the tears came at last and rolled down the pale cheeks.

Spenser Churchill heaved a sigh.

“Nobly said, my dear young lady! Yes, doubtless he knew best. Rest assured that he kept the secret from you for good reasons. Yes, he knew best! Poor Jeffrey, poor Jeffrey!” He wiped his eyes. “And now shall I go—some other time——”

“No, no,” said Doris. “Tell me everything, please; I do not know what to do—I am so alone——” [Pg 163]

“Yes, yes,” he said. “About your future; forgive me if I mention such a subject; but I presume you will continue your profession——”

A shudder ran through Doris’ frame at the thought of again facing the crowded theatre.

“No, no!” she said, almost fiercely. “I shall never act again!”

As she answered, the scene of the first night of “Romeo and Juliet” rose before her, and she thrilled with the recollection of the inspiration which had come to her from her love for Cecil Neville. That inspiration had vanished forever now, and to act with a broken heart would, she knew, be impossible to her.

“I shall never go on the stage again,” she responded firmly.

Spenser Churchill put up his white hand to his lips to hide the smile of satisfaction her words called up on them.

“No?” he said, thoughtfully and significantly. “Yes, I understand! I quite understand, and I must say I think your decision is a wise one. It was different while your guardian was alive, to watch over you and protect you! You, great as your success has been, I think you are right in your resolve to leave the profession.”

“I shall never go back,” she said, quietly.

“Then, forgive me, may I ask what you intend doing?”

Doris let her eyes fall upon him almost vacantly for a moment. She had been lost in the memory of those few happy days and nights, and had almost forgotten his presence.

“What I intend doing? Oh, I don’t know! I have not thought,” she said, and her white hand went to her brow.

“I understand! I understand! and fully sympathize, my dear young lady, but, as your friend—you know you have allowed me to be your friend—it is my duty to ask you! This sum of money, alas, will soon take to itself wings, and——”

Doris roused herself.

“And I must still live, and eat, even after it is gone, you would say,” she said, not bitterly, but, ah, [Pg 164]

so wearily. “Yes, I know!”

“You could earn a large sum on the stage, of course,” he murmured.

She put out her hand as if to silence him.

“That is out of the question,” she said. “I suppose there are other ways of earning money?”

“There are,” he murmured, softly.

“I am young and strong,” she said. “Other women have to work. What do they do? Needlework ——”

She looked at her hands with a smile that was like the glint of her old light-hearted one.

He shook his head.

“That, too, is out of the question,” he said. “But there are still other ways. I believe—indeed, I have heard—that you are very accomplished, Miss Marlowe.”

“Am I?” said Doris, simply.

“I believe that you are a musician, and that you speak several languages——”

“Yes,” she said, as simply as before. “Ah, how much I owe to him! I understand it better now—now that it is too late to thank him,” and she turned her head away.

“A good musician and linguist need not take to her needle for her maintenance,” said Spenser Churchill. “I have, of course, foreseen that the question would arise, and I have—pray forgive me, my dear young lady—been making some inquiries on your behalf.” He drew out a pocketbook, and took a letter from it. “It happens that a friend of mine—Lady Despard—you may have heard of her; she is well known for her charitable work——”

Doris shook her head.

“I have never heard of her,” she said, trying to speak with some interest.

“A sweet creature! A widow, alas, though young! Very wealthy, moving in the best society—ahem!—and fond of traveling. She is just going abroad, and requires a companion. I think—I am sure—that you would like her, and that if you could bring yourself to accept the position, which is so much below your genius——”

“She is going abroad?” said Doris, with sudden eagerness. [Pg 165]

He inclined his head.

“Yes, to Italy. The change would do you good—is, indeed, absolutely necessary.”

Abroad, out of England, beyond the chance of meeting Cecil Neville! A faint hope, for the first time since Jeffrey’s death, rose in Doris’ heart.

“But you need not decide to-day. You shall think it over,” he said, taking up his hat. “By the way, if you should need me, will you send word—at any time, and the very moment you would like to see me—to Barton Towers? I am staying with my friend, the Marquis of Stoyle.”

Doris started, and the blood rose to her face.

“Barton Towers?” she murmured, mechanically.

“Yes,” he said, smoothly, as if he had not noticed her sudden agitation. “The marquis is an old friend of mine. So is his nephew and heir, Lord Cecil Neville. You may have heard of him?”

“Yes—I—have heard of him,” said Doris, in a low voice, which faltered, notwithstanding her efforts to keep it steady.

“Yes; a most charming young fellow,” he went on, with a smile, “but a terribly unsteady one. But, there, we must not be hard upon a young fellow in his position. Young men who are blessed with good looks and heirships to marquisates are apt to be unsteady; though I am glad to say that Lord Neville’s wild days are nearly over. He is in Ireland at present, but when he comes back he is to marry Lady Grace Peyton.”

Doris sat perfectly motionless, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes fixed on the lovely summer scene framed in the window; but the view was all blurred in her sight, and a sound as of rushing waves rang in her ears.

“To marry Lady Grace Peyton!” she echoed, dully, as if the words possessed no sense.

“Yes,” he purred. “It is a very old attachment. She is a most charming and beautiful creature, and I am not surprised that, notwithstanding his numerous flirtations, Lord Neville has remained constant. It will be a most suitable and advantageous match for both of them——My dear young [Pg 166] lady,” he broke off, for Doris had sunk back, white to the lips, and with closed eyes, “you are ill. Let me call Mrs. Jelf.”

But, with an almost superhuman effort, Doris fought down the terrible faintness, and, stretching out her hand, commandingly, said:

“No! It is nothing. The heat—stay, please!”

He stood, regarding her silently, watchfully, with an anxious, sympathetic expression on his smooth face.

“This lady”—she went on, speaking every word as if it cost her an effort—“this Lady Despard. Will you ask her to take me?”

“But, my dear Miss Marlowe! Had you not better consider——”

“I have considered,” she said, interrupting him. “If she thinks I can be of any service to her—if she is going away from England at once——”

“She is,” he said, softly.

“Well, then—tell her, please, that I am ready; that I will go with her!”

“I will do everything you wish, my dear young lady,” he murmured. “I fear I have wearied you! Leave it all to me,” and with a softly murmured “Heaven bless you!” he left her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FASHIONING THE WEB.

Two days later, Mrs. Jelf brought Doris a letter. The envelope bore an elaborate crest, stamped in crimson and gold, and as she opened it, a faint perfume emanated from it.

It was from Lady Despard, who wrote—in the delightfully-illegible hand, all points and angles, known as "the Italian"—that her dear friend, the well-known philanthropist, Mr. Spenser Churchill, had recommended Miss Marlowe to Lady Despard, and, placing the greatest reliance upon Mr. Churchill, her ladyship would be very pleased if Miss Marlowe would come to her at number twelve Chester Gardens, as soon as Miss Marlowe could find it convenient. Lady Despard added that she was certain, from all Mr. Churchill had said, she and Miss Marlowe would get on [Pg 167] together, and that she intended starting for Italy as soon as possible.

Doris read and re-read the elegant epistle, vainly striving, as we all do, to form some idea of the character of the unknown writer; then she sat down and wrote an answer, saying that she would come to Chester Gardens the following day.

Now that she had recovered from the lethargy which had closely followed her great trouble, she was filled with a restless desire to get away from Barton and its painful association. She at once set to work at the preparations for her journey, and it was not until she had packed up her things that it occurred to her that she could not go until she had bidden farewell to Mr. Spenser Churchill.

Doris' feeling toward that gentleman was a peculiar one. He had befriended her when she had been most in need of a friend; had shown an amount of consideration and delicacy to her, a stranger, which, when she pondered over it, amazed her; and she was grateful. But she had not forgotten the dead man's warning, and it still haunted her, although Spenser Churchill had so cleverly managed to allay her suspicions by his frank confession that, in the quarrel between him and Jeffrey, he had been in the wrong. And yet, though her suspicions were allayed, she was conscious of a strange feeling of disquietude while in his presence; a feeling that was neither quite dread nor doubt, but partook of both sentiments.

Still, he had been most kind, and her gratitude would not allow her to go without seeing him again.

After a good deal of reflection, she wrote a couple of lines to him, telling him that she had arranged to start on the morrow, and asking him to call and see her; and she sent it by a lad to the Towers.

An hour or two later Mr. Spenser Churchill arrived.

"I am glad, very glad, my dear young lady," he said, pressing the hand which she gave him, "that you have resolved to seek change of scene so promptly. You will find dear Lady Despard a most charming and amiable lady, who will prove a—er—valuable friend; and I hope, I may say I am sure, that you will be happy. You must let me have the pleasure of seeing you off by the train to- [Pg 168] morrow——"

Doris shook her head gently but firmly.

"I could not let you take so much trouble," she said. "I am leaving quite early in the morning, and ——"

He nodded.

"Well, well, I understand. That shall be as you wish. And is there anything I can do now? Your luggage——"

"It is all ready," said Doris. "I am quite prepared."

"Then nothing remains for me to do but to hand over to you the money I hold for you," he said, and he took out and counted some banknotes.

Doris colored.

"I have been thinking," she said, "that I would ask you to be so good as to take charge of some of it for me. It seems so large a sum—I have never been used to having large sums of money," her eyes filled as she spoke. "I am ashamed to cause you any further trouble, but if you will take charge of some of it for me, if you will give me twenty pounds, and keep the rest in case I should want it, I shall be very grateful: you will be adding to all your past kindness to me."

"Yes, yes, I see. I shall be very happy," he said, benevolently. "Twenty pounds; that will leave eighty. And when you want it you can write to me. Perhaps when you come to know Lady Despard you will like her to act as your banker. By the way, I don't think we said anything about the remuneration?"

"No," said Doris; "I did not think of it."

"You left it all to me. Quite right. Well, I hope you will think I have done the best I could. Lady Despard and I have agreed upon a hundred pounds a year."

"That is a great deal, I suppose," said Doris, simply. "It is more than enough, and once more I thank you."

"It is not more than enough, not half enough in return for so sweet and charming a companion, but, my dear young lady, we must be content," he said. "And now, is there anything else?"

Doris replied in the negative, then suddenly her face crimsoned.

"There is one thing more," she said in a low voice. "Can you tell me Lord Neville's address in Ireland?" [Pg 169]

Her voice faltered, but her clear pure eyes met his steadily. He showed not the faintest surprise, but seemed to think for a moment or two.

"I am sorry to say I cannot," he said. "Did you want to write to him?"

"Yes," she said. "I wish I could tell you——" her voice broke.

He raised his hand with a soft, deprecating smile.

"My dear young lady, tell me nothing more than you wish. I am—" he laid his hand upon his heart—"I beg you to believe that I am not curious. Why should you not write to Lord Neville, if you choose, or to any other person? I presume you know him?"

"Yes—I know him," she said, turning her head aside.

"Just so," he assented, smoothly. "And you wish to tell him where you are going? Is it not so?"

"No!" said Doris, suddenly, and turning pale. "I do not wish him to know—ah, I cannot tell you, you would not understand!"

"You shall tell me nothing," he said, waving his hand. "I am sorry I can't give you his address. But I will tell you what we can do!" he added as if an idea had occurred to him. "If you will write to him and intrust the letter to me, I will see that it is forwarded—indeed, I will get the address from the marquis and forward it to-night."

"Thank you," said Doris, in a low voice, and she went to the table.

Mr. Spenser Churchill, with true delicacy, slipped out, and had a few minutes' chat with Mrs. Jelf, who was reduced to tears at the prospect of losing her young charge.

When he came back, Doris was standing with a note in her hand.

"There it is," she said. "If"—she paused for a second, then went on firmly—"if Lord Neville should ask you where I am gone, will you promise not to tell him, please? No one knows but yourself, and—and I do not wish him to be told."

He inclined his head as he took the note, and with a great show of carefulness, put it in his pocketbook.

"My lips are sealed, my dear young lady. Whatever your reasons may be—and please understand that I do not seek to know them—your request shall be considered sacred by me. Lord Neville shall never learn your whereabouts from me!" and it is only fair to say, that for once, Mr. Spenser Churchill spoke the truth! [Pg 170]

A subdued and placid smile beamed on his benevolent countenance when, having taken leave of Doris, he made his way across the meadows to the Towers; and the smile grew more placid and self-complacent when, having reached his own rooms, he took the note from his pocket, and rang for a jug of hot water.

"Let it be quite hot, if you please," he said to the chamber-maid, and the girl brought it almost boiling.

Then he locked the door, and, holding the envelope over the steam until it had become ungummed, he drew out the note, and read it.

> "I was right, and you were wrong. It would have been better if we had never met, and I hope that we may never meet again. If we should do so, it must be as strangers. No one shall ever learn from me that we have ever been anything else.
>
> "Doris Marlowe."

He pondered over these few lines, word by word, for some minutes, then, with a satisfied nod, re-enclosed the note in its envelope, and neatly re-fastened it.

"I don't think any one, however sharp and critical his sight, would detect that her little note had been opened," he murmured. "The gum had scarcely dried. Yes, that will do very well! Admirably; in fact, there is no need for me to add a word. But all the same, my dear young lady, we will not send it to Cecil Neville just yet! No, no, it would be so sudden a shock. No, really, in common charity, we must give him some slight preparation."

Then he took from his pocket four letters, and, with a soft smile of enjoyment, read them over.

They were in Lord Cecil's anything but elegant handwriting, and were addressed to Miss Marlowe at the lodgings, and had kindly been taken charge of by Mr. Spenser Churchill.

"Youth, rash youth! How frantically he writes! Dear me, I am very glad Providence permitted me to keep them from the dear young thing's sight; they would have unsettled her so sadly! Quite eloquent they are! I had no idea Master Cecil had such a ready pen. I am afraid you are spending anything but a pleasant time over there waiting for the answers to these frantic epistles, the answer which will rather surprise you when you get it. What will you do when you find the bird has flown, I wonder? Be as mad as a March hare for a few days, and then——" He shrugged his shoulders, and with a laugh, struck a match and made a bonfire of the intercepted letters, and watched them until all that remained of their imploring eloquence was a little heap of ashes in the empty grate. [Pg 171]

In such excellent spirits was Mr. Spenser Churchill, so full of the peace which flows from the possession of a good conscience, that, as he entered the drawing-room a few minutes before dinner that evening, he hummed a few bars from the “Lost Chord,” that cheerful melody being the nearest approach to profane music which he permitted himself; and, going up to the sofa upon which Lady Grace was reclining, raised her white hand to his lips and kissed it with playfully solemn gallantry.

She snatched her hand away impatiently, and drawing her handkerchief over the spot his lips had touched, said:

“You appear conspicuously cheerful to-night. May one inquire the reason? Don’t trouble to tell me if you are not sure it will be interesting. I am quite bored enough already,” and she moved her fan with a weary gesture.

“Bored, dear lady!” he murmured, smoothing his long, yellow hair from his forehead. “Now, really! And I am never bored! But then I am always busy; I never permit my mind to be unoccupied. Surely one can always find some pleasant and congenial task to lighten the lengthy hours——”

She flashed a scornful look at him from her keen eyes.

“Please don’t treat me as if I were the audience at a charity meeting.”

“Alas!” he murmured softly. “Charity-meeting ladies do not wear such charming toilettes as this; would that they did!” and he beamed down admiringly at the magnificent evening dress. “What a pity it is that it should be wasted—no, I will not say that!—but it is a pity there are not younger [Pg 172] eyes to see and admire it than mine and the dear marquis’. Now, if Cecil were here—he has so keen an appreciation for all that is beautiful!”

She looked up at him sharply.

“What do you want to tell me about him?” she demanded quickly, a faint color coming into her face. “Is—is he coming back?”

“Is Cecil coming back, dear marquis?” he asked, turning as the door opened and the marquis entered.

The marquis stopped and looked from one to the other under his brows.

“You should know best. The person who sent him to Ireland probably knows when he can come back,” he said, with cold contempt.

“Now, now, really I must protest!” said Spenser Churchill, wagging his forefinger playfully. “I know nothing about it, nothing whatever. It was on your business he went, dear lord, not mine. No, come now, really!”

The marquis smiled grimly.

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “She”—and he indicated Lady Grace with a slight motion of his hand —“knows, or guesses, all about it. We neither of us have any desire to rob you of the credit of the plot, eh, Grace?”

She shrugged her snowy shoulders with an air of indifference, but she could not keep her eagerness from flashing in her eyes, which were fixed on Spenser Churchill’s smooth, smiling face.

“Well, if you ask my advice, I should say dear Cecil might as well come back; not quite directly, but say—yes—say, in a week.”

The marquis raised his eyebrows with haughty indifference.

“When you like! There is a letter from him to-night.” and he flung it on the table. “He seems to have unmasked the agent, and made himself quite popular with his dear friends, the great unwashed! I suppose”—with a sneer—“he will want to go into Parliament next, on the Radical side, no doubt.”

“Y—es,” murmured Spenser Churchill, as he read the letter; “I always said dear Cecil was clever.”

“Really?” said the marquis, in a tone of calm and indifferent surprise. “The problem with me has [Pg 173] always been whether he was a greater fool than he looked, or looked a greater fool than he is.”

Mr. Spenser Churchill chuckled oilily, but Lady Grace half rose, and shut her fan with a snap.

“He who buys Cecil for a fool will lose his money,” she said.

The marquis made her an elaborate bow, and Spenser Churchill clapped his fat hands softly.

“Good—very good, dear lady! I must remember that; I must, indeed! So truly witty.”

“So truly vulgar, you mean,” she said; “but I was following the marquis’ suit.”

The marquis made her another bow.

“This is quite refreshing,” he said, his thin upper lip curling scornfully. “And now that we have exchanged civilities, perhaps Churchill will tell us what is to happen. Is Cecil to come back and marry this pure and innocent ballet girl?”

“Actress, actress, dear marquis,” cooed Spenser Churchill, folding his hands, and smiling with his head on one side. “If you appeal to me, I am afraid I must be the bearer of bad news.”

“Bad news! He is married already?” exclaimed Lady Grace, rising and confronting him with white face and furious eyes.

Spenser Churchill chuckled at her alarm, then, with his head a little more on one side, murmured:

“No, no! I am sorry to say there is a little hitch—ahem—the fact is the engagement is broken off.”

“Broken off?” exclaimed Lady Grace, and her face crimsoned as she leaned forward, with scarcely repressed eagerness.

The marquis toyed with the diamond stud at his wrist, and maintained his accustomed air of cold and haughty indifference; but Spenser Churchill’s keen eyes detected a slight tremor of the thin, white fingers.

“Y—es! It is very sad, and my heart bleeds for poor Cecil——” Lady Grace tapped her hand with her fan with impatience, and seeing and recognizing it, he went on with still more exasperating slowness. “Only they who have suffered as he will and must suffer can sympathize with him. To [Pg 174] have one’s tenderest affections nipped in the bud, to find that one’s true and devoted love has been misplaced, and—er—betrayed; ah, how cruel and sharp a torture it is! Poor Cecil, poor Cecil!”

The fan snapped loudly, its delicate ivory leaves broken in the restless, impatient fingers.

“Can you not tell us what has occurred—the truth, without this—this sermon?” she exclaimed, almost fiercely.

“Yes, pray spare us, if you can, Spenser,” said the marquis, with a cold smile. “I gather from what you say, that this miserable business has come to an end. Is that so?”

“Yes! Is that so?” demanded Lady Grace.

Spenser Churchill heaved a deep sigh, but a faint smile of satisfaction lurked in his half-closed eyes.

“I regret to say that it is,” he said. “Poor Cecil’s affections have been wasted! The tenderest emotions of his heart betrayed! The young lady has—discarded him!”

The marquis raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders, but Lady Grace rose and laid her hand—with no gentle grasp—on Spenser Churchill’s arm.

“Is this true?” she asked, almost in a whisper.

“Yes,” he said; “I have his dismissal in my hand,” and he held up Doris’ note.

Lady Grace drew a long breath.

“You—you are very clever!” she said.

He looked at her with an affectation of surprise.

“I—I!” he murmured; “I know nothing about it! I happen to know the young lady slightly, and she, not knowing Lord Cecil’s address——”

“He must have written to her!” broke in Lady Grace.

“Has he, do you think?” responded Spenser Churchill, opening his eyes with a childlike innocence.

Lady Grace smiled.

“I see! I see! You intercepted the letters?”

“I beg your pardon! What did you say? Not knowing Lord Cecil’s address, Miss Marlowe committed this letter to my care. Now the question is, shall we send it on to him, or wait till he comes back? I think you said he would be back in a week, dear marquis?”

“You said so,” said the marquis, coldly. [Pg 175]

“Well, in that case, don’t you think it would be better to wait until he comes back? Letters do miscarry so, don’t they?”

The marquis smiled sardonically.

“I agree with Lady Grace,” he said. “You are a clever fellow, Spenser.”

“They do miscarry so often,” continued Spenser Churchill. “So I think, if you ask me, it will be better to keep it till he returns. That is my humble advice.”

The marquis nodded.

“And my humble advice is that you are not here when it is delivered,” he said, with a grim smile. “I have no doubt you have taken every precaution, but if Cecil should get an inkling——” He stopped, and smiled again significantly.

“Dear Cecil,” murmured Spenser Churchill; “I should so like to have stayed till he came back, and attempted to soothe and comfort him”—the marquis smiled more sardonically than before—“but,” continued Spenser Churchill, “I am sorry to say important business compels me to return to London to-morrow, so I must leave the letter in your charge. You will take every care of it? Poor Cecil! And you must be very kind and gentle with him, dear Lady Grace!”

“We will take every care of it, and Lady Grace will be very kind and gentle, no doubt,” retorted the marquis, with a sneer.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN STRANGE SURROUNDINGS.

Feeling as if the world were quite a new and different one, and she equally new and strange, Doris left Barton the following morning, Mrs. Jelf driving her to the station in a little pony-cart, and obviously weeping as the train left the station.

It was not a particularly long journey, and the time passed very quickly, as it seemed to Doris, for she was thinking all the time, dwelling on the past and considering what the future would be like, and when they reached Waterloo she was about to ask a porter for a cab, when a footman came [Pg 176] up to the carriage, and, touching his hat, inquired if she were Miss Marlowe.

“The carriage is quite close, miss,” he said, with evident respect, after a glance at the slim, graceful, black-clad figure and delicately refined face. “She’s a lady, anyhow,” was his mental comment.

The carriage was an admirably appointed one, the horses evidently as good as money could buy, and the get-up of the equipage quiet and reserved, corresponding with the dark liveries of the coachman and footman.

They went, at a smart, businesslike pace, through the crowded Strand, and, entering the sacred regions of the upper ten, pulled up at one of the largest houses in Chester Gardens.

Now, there is one advantage, at any rate, in being an actress: that nothing surprises you. No grandeur can overwhelm a person who has been nightly playing with kings and queens—perhaps enacted a queen herself; and though the first glimpse of the interior of Lady Despard’s town house was rather startling, Doris was capable of concealing her surprise. The house was new, and magnificently furnished after the latest art craze. The hall was intended to represent the outer court of a Turkish harem, with richly chased arches, marble passages, tropical ferns, and a plashing fountain. Brilliantly colored rugs made splashes of color on the cool marble, and here and there a huge but graceful vase lent variety to the decorations. It certainly rather reminded you of one of the divisions of a Turkish bath; but Lady Despard couldn’t help that.

As Doris passed through this oriental hall she heard the sound of an organ, and found that one stood in a dimly-lighted recess. A young man was playing, and he scarcely raised his eyes from the keys as he glanced at her.

“Miss Marlowe,” said the footman, opening a door on the left of the hall, and Doris entered a room as dimly lighted as the organ recess; so dark, in fact, that for a moment she could distinguish nothing; the next, however, she saw a lady rise from a low divan and approach her.

Doris could not make out her features, but she heard a very pleasant and musical voice say:

“How do you do, Miss Marlowe? I am so glad you have come. Will you sit down a little while, or [Pg 177] would you rather go to your own room first?”

Doris sat down, and Lady Despard drawing aside a curtain from before a stained-glass window, Doris saw that her ladyship was young and remarkably pretty; she was dressed in exquisite taste, and in colors which set off her delicate complexion and softly-languid eyes. Lady Despard scanned Doris’ face for a second or two, and her gaze grew more interested.

“It was very good of you to come to me, Miss Marlowe,” she said.

Of course Doris responded that it was more than good of Lady Despard to have her.

“Not at all; the favor—if there be any—is on your side,” said her ladyship. “I am simply bored to death and pining for a companion. I hope we shall get on together. Mr. Spenser Churchill was quite eloquent in your praise; and he certainly didn’t exaggerate in one respect”—and her ladyship let her eyes wander over the pale, lovely face meaningly—“and I am sure you look awfully lovable. By the way, what’s your name—I mean your Christian name?”

Doris told her.

“How pretty. You must let me call you by it. ‘Miss Marlowe’ sounds so stiff and formal, as if you were a governess, doesn’t it? Mr. Spenser Churchill says that you are dreadfully clever; I hope you aren’t.”

Doris smiled.

“I am afraid Mr. Churchill has prepared a disappointment for you, Lady Despard,” she said.

Her ladyship shook her head.

“I don’t think so. I only hope you won’t be disappointed in me. I am awfully stupid; but I’m always trying to learn,” she added, with a smile. “Do you know Mr. Churchill very well? Is he an old friend of yours?”

“No,” said Doris, gravely; “I have known him for a few days only. He was very kind to me; very kind, indeed.”

“I know. He always is,” said Lady Despard. “Such a benevolent man, isn’t he? I always say that he reminds me of one of the patriarchs, with his gentle smile, and long hair, and soft voice. Any one [Pg 178] would guess he was a philanthropist the moment they saw him, wouldn’t they?”

“I don’t know,” said Doris; “I have seen so few philanthropists.”

“No. Well, I suppose there aren’t many, are there? Oh, Mr. Spenser Churchill is a wonderfully

good man; he's so charitable, and all that. Why, I don't know how many societies he is connected with. I try and do all the good I can," she added, looking rather bored; "but my philanthropy is generally confined to subscribing five pounds; and there's not much in that, is there?"

Doris was tempted to say: "Exactly one hundred shillings," but, instead, remarked that if everybody gave five pounds poverty would be very much on the decrease.

"Yes," said her ladyship, as if the subject had exhausted itself and her, too. "How well you look in black!—oh, forgive me!" as Doris' lips quivered. "How thoughtless of me!—that is always my way—I never think until I've spoken! Of course, Mr. Churchill told me about your trouble. I'm so sorry. I've had trouble myself."

She glanced at a portrait which hung on the wall as she spoke, a portrait of a very elderly gentleman, who must have been extremely ugly, or very cruelly wronged by the artist.

"Your father?" said Doris, gently.

"No, that is the earl—my husband," said Lady Despard, not at all discomposed, though Doris' face went crimson. "You think he looks old? Well," reflectively, "he was old. He was just sixty-eight when we married. We were only married two years. He was very good to me," she went on, calmly eying the portrait as if it were that of a chance acquaintance, "extremely so—too much so, they all said, and I dare say they were right. He was immensely rich, and he left me everything he could. I'm afraid I'm wickedly rich," she added, almost plaintively; "at any rate, I know there is so much money and houses and that kind of thing as to be a nuisance."

A knock was heard at the door, and a footman entered.

"A person with the tapestry, my lady," he said. [Pg 179]

"Oh, very well!" said her ladyship, languidly. "I'll come and see it. Would you like to come, or are you too tired, dear?"

"I should like to come," said Doris.

They went into the hall, and a man displayed a length of ancient tapestry.

Lady Despard linked her arm in Doris', and looked at it for a moment or two with a very small amount of interest, then asked the price.

The man mentioned a sum that rather startled Doris, but her ladyship nodded carelessly.

"Shall I buy it?" she asked of Doris.

Doris could scarcely repress a smile.

"I—really I am no judge," she said. "I don't know whether it is worth the money or not."

Lady Despard laughed indolently.

"Oh, as to that, of course it isn't worth it," she said, with a candor which must have rather discomfited the man. "Nothing one buys ever is worth the money, you know; but one must go on buying things; there's nothing else to do. Yes, I'll have it," she added to the man, and drew Doris away.

"Now, I've kept you with your things on quite long enough," she said. "You shall go upstairs. I've got some people coming to tea—it's my afternoon—but you needn't come down unless you like; I dare say you'll be glad to rest."

Doris was about to accept the suggestion thankfully, but, remembering her new position, said:

"I am not tired; I shall come down, Lady Despard."

"Very well, then," said her ladyship, touching an electric bell. "Send Miss Marlowe's maid, please."

A quiet, pleasant-looking maid came to the door, and Doris followed her through the hall, and up a winding staircase of carved pine, and into a daintily-furnished room.

The maid brought her a cup of tea, and leaving Doris to rest for half-an-hour, returned to show her down to the drawing-room.

As they made their way to it, Doris heard the sound of a piano and the hum of voices, and, a footman opening the door, she saw that the room was full of people. [Pg 180]

She made her way, with some little difficulty, to Lady Despard, who was seated at a small table, evidently merely pretending to superintend a tea-service, for the footman was handing around cups supplied from something outside, and more capacious than the tiny kettle on the table, and her ladyship looked up and smiled a pleasant little welcome.

"You have come down, after all?" she said, making room on the settee beside her. "This is my new friend, Miss Marlowe, your grace," she added, addressing a stout and dignified-looking lady near her, the Duchess of Grantham.

Her grace surveyed Doris through a pair of gold eye-glasses, and inclined her head with ducal condescension, and Lady Despard introduced several other persons in the circle.

"We are going to Florence together," said Lady Despard, "though why Florence I haven't the slightest idea; it's a whim of my doctor's. I don't feel the slightest bit ill, but he says I am, and he ought to know, I suppose."

The room, which had seemed to Doris quite full when she entered, appeared to get still fuller.

People came, exchanged a few words with Lady Despard, took a cup of tea, strolled about and talked with one or the other, or listened to some one who sang or played, and then wandered out. Everybody appeared either languidly indifferent or horribly bored. Doris, as she leaned back, half-hidden by Lady Despard's elaborate tea-gown on one side and the voluminous folds of a plush curtain on the other, looked on at the crowd, and listened to the hum and buzz of voices, half in a dream.

Every now and then she heard some well-known name mentioned, and discovered that the people around her were not only persons of rank, but men and women famous in the world of music and letters.

Suddenly she heard a name spoken that made her heart leap, and caused her to shrink still further back.

"What has become of Cecil Neville?" asked the duchess.

Lady Despard shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm sure I don't know. Oh, yes, I do. I had forgotten. He has gone down to stay with his uncle, the Marquis of Stoyle, you know." [Pg 181]

"Poor Cecil," commiserated the duchess, with a faint smile. "How he must suffer!"

"I heard that he'd been obliged to leave England," remarked another lady in a subdued voice. "Up to his ears in debt, poor fellow!"

"Well, he has had a very long rope," said the duchess. "It is time he married and settled down."

"That is just what he is going to do," said Lady Despard, laughing. "I heard from Mr. Spenser Churchill—he is stopping at Barton Towers, you know—that Lord Cecil is engaged to Grace Peyton."

The duchess raised her eyebrows.

"At last! Well, it is a good match, and I'm sure she'll be happy."

"Oh, how severe!" said the other lady. "You mean that he won't be, your grace?"

"I mean that if I were a man I should think twice before——" She stopped, as if she had suddenly remembered the number and mixed character of her audience.

"Oh, she is a charming girl—and so very beautiful, you know," said Lady Despard.

"Yes, very," said her grace, dryly, and changed the subject.

Doris sat perfectly motionless, and very pale, fighting against the dizziness which assailed her.

"What is that the senor is playing?" asked the duchess presently.

"I haven't the slightest idea," replied Lady Despard, helplessly.

Doris rose.

"I will go and inquire," she said, feeling that she had better seize the opportunity of making herself useful.

Her grace looked after her.

"That's a very beautiful girl, my dear," she said, slowly.

"Isn't she!" responded Lady Despard. "I call her lovely—simply lovely. I'm awfully obliged to Mr. Spenser Churchill."

"Who is she?—where does she come from?"

"Oh, it's quite a long story!" said her ladyship, who was not so simple as to throw down Doris' history for her aristocratic friends to worry. "The poor child has just lost her father." [Pg 182]

"She will create a sensation," said the duchess, calmly and emphatically. "I don't think I ever saw a more lovely face, or a more graceful figure—excepting yours, my dear."

"Oh, you can leave mine out, too!" said Lady Despard, good-naturedly.

Meanwhile, Doris made her way through the crowd, and the duchess' prophecy was speedily fulfilled. Men and women, as they made room for the slight, girlish figure to pass, looked after her with a startled curiosity, and turned to each other, asking eager questions, some of which were pitched in a quite high enough key for Doris to hear. But, with the modest self-possession which her training had bestowed upon her, she reached the piano, learned the name of the piece, and returned to the duchess.

"It is Beethoven's sonata in G, your grace," she said in her low, musical voice.

"Thank you, my dear," said the duchess. "It was very good-natured of you to take so much trouble. Good-by, Lady Despard," and as she shook hands with her hostess she bestowed a smile and a nod on Doris.

Lady Despard laughed.

"My dear," she said, "you are going to be a success. It isn't often the duchess is so amiable."

Two hours later, Mr. Spenser Churchill, with a smile that seemed to cast a benediction on everything it lighted on, was slowly walking down the still warm pavement of Bentham street, Soho.

Bentham street, Soho, is by no means an aristocratic thoroughfare, and the eminent philanthropist had to meander in and out of a crowd of dirty children, who shouted and sprawled over the curb and pavement, much to their own delight and the peril of the foot passengers; but Mr. Churchill seemed quite familiar with the street and its humors, and, stopping at a house half-way down, knocked at the door as if he had done it before.

A young and overgrown girl shuffled along the passage, and answering an inquiry of Mr. Churchill's as to whether Mr. Perry Levant was in, nodded an affirmative, and requested Mr. Churchill to follow her. She knocked at a door on the first floor, and receiving a peculiarly clear-voiced "Come in," opened the door, and jerked her finger by way of invitation to Mr. Churchill to enter. [Pg 183]

Notwithstanding the neighborhood in which it was situated, and the dingy condition of the rest of the house, this room was comfortably furnished, and indicated the possession of some amount of taste by its occupant. There was a fair-sized table, with a large bowl of flowers in the center, some pictures rather good than bad, a Collard & Collard piano stood on one side of the small room, with a guitar leaning against it. Besides the pictures, there hung on the walls a pair of fencing foils and masks, and a set of boxing-gloves.

The room was full of the smoke which emanates from a good Havana, and the smoker was reclining in a comfortable chair, with his feet on another, and a glass of, apparently, soda and brandy by his elbow.

He was a young man, who if he possessed no other qualities, had been remarkably favored by the gods in one particular; he was perhaps as singularly handsome a specimen of the human race as it is possible to conceive. So finely cut and delicately molded was his face that it would have been considered effeminate but for the mustache which, like his hair and eyebrows, and the long lashes that swept the clear olive cheek, was a silky, lustrous black. It was a face which Van Dyke would have loved to paint, a face which, once seen, lingered in one's memory, and it wore an added charm, a certain devil-may-care, *debonnaire* expression which at once attracted attention and lent it impressiveness.

"Hallo, Spenser, is that you?" he exclaimed, with a laugh, as he rose and held out his hand, as white—though not so soft and fat—as the philanthropist's own. "An unexpected honor! Sit down! You don't mind the smoke, do you?" he asked, as Mr. Spenser Churchill coughed two or three "wow, wows" behind his handkerchief. "Rather thick, isn't it? The room's small, you see, and I've been smoking for—oh, Lord knows how long! Have anything? Brandy and soda, eh? All right!" and, going to the window, he leaned out, and called some instructions to an urchin below. [Pg 184]

"My dear Percy, isn't that—er—rather a public way of procuring refreshments?" said Mr. Churchill.

The young fellow laughed.

"Well, perhaps it is," he admitted. "But it saves trouble, and they're used to it! There are always some youngsters outside glad to earn a penny, and the 'Pig and Whistle' keeps a very good article, so they say! Have a cigar?" and he pushed a box toward him. "You'll find them all right, I think. And now, what brings you to the aristocratic regions of Soho?"

Mr. Spenser Churchill lit his cigar and took two or three preliminary puffs before answering, the young man leaning against the mantel-shelf in graceful abandon, and watching him with a faintly-amused curiosity; then the great philanthropist said, in his soft, dulcet voice:

"I have come to make your fortune, Percy!"

CHAPTER XX.

AN EXTRAORDINARY PROPOSAL.

“Oh you have come to make my fortune!” said Percy Levant. “Pardon me, but that sounds rather —funny!” and he regarded Mr. Spenser Churchill with a faint smile.

“Funny!” echoed the philanthropist, in an injured tone, “why ‘funny’? I trust I have always proved myself your friend and well-wisher, my dear Percy?”

The young man smiled again, and stroked his silky mustache with his white, long, artistic-looking hand.

“Yes—oh, yes! I didn’t mean to be offensive, but you must allow that people don’t generally go about making other people’s fortunes—that’s all. Pray proceed. I’m all impatience, and grateful by anticipation! Goodness knows my fortune needs making very badly!” and he glanced round the room, and down at his shabby velvet jacket, which hung over a chair, with a little grimace.

“Forgive me, my dear Percy, if I remark that the poverty which you lament may be as much your fault as your misfortune.”

“I dare say,” he assented, with good-tempered indolence; “you mean that there is not enough of the busy bee about me, Mr. Churchill?” [Pg 185]

The philanthropist shook his head gravely.

“I am afraid you have not been industrious, my dear Percy. Let us for a moment review your position.”

“Review it for half-an-hour if you like,” said the young fellow. “It won’t hurt me, and it will probably amuse you. Meanwhile, here’s something that won’t hurt you and will amuse both of us,” and he opened the door to the urchin who had brought the liquid refreshment. “Go ahead while I mix. Plenty of brandy in yours, eh?”

“Here you are, my dear Percy,” said Mr. Churchill, blandly, “in the possession of youth and health, and—shall I say—remarkable good looks——”

“Say what you like. You’ll excuse my not blushing.”

“And in addition to those great advantages, a wonderful talent for one of the fine arts. I believe, my dear Percy, that you are a musician of a high order——”

“Thanks again! Here’s your health!” interjected the young fellow. “Yes, I can ‘play a bit, and sing a bit, and jump Jim Crow.’ As to being a musician——” he shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

“You play and sing like an artist, my dear Percy, and most young fellows so highly endowed as you are would have made a name for themselves and a place in the world.”

“Instead of which, here I am in dingy Soho, with the last two quarters’ rent unpaid, and forced to borrow a five-pound note from my dear friend, Mr. Spenser Churchill,” he said, lightly.

The philanthropist shook his head.

“What good will a five-pound note do you, Percy?”

“Well, ten pounds would certainly do me more good. Are you going to make it ten?”

“I will make it much more than ten if you will listen to me and—er—promise to follow my advice. Just consider your position, as I say, my dear Percy. Have you no ambition? Surely you, with your great gifts and youth and good looks, must feel that this is not the place for you——”

“That I am wasting my sweetness on the desert air. Just so. I often feel it; but once having got lost in the desert, it’s rather difficult to find one’s way out, you see. Have I no ambition?” The black eyes flashed, and the clear olive tint of his complexion grew warm. “Of course I have! What do you take me for—a mule, a packhorse? Why, man, I never see a well-dressed man of my own age but I envy him his clothes; I never lean over the railings in the park and watch the fellows riding by but I envy them their horses and their acquaintance with the pretty girls—the daughters and wives of swell people; I never pass a good club but I feel that I’d give ten years of my life to be a member and one of the class to which it belongs. Do you think I live in this stifling den from choice? Do you think I dine on a sixpenny plate of meat, and drink porter, sit in the gallery of a theatre, and wear old clothes because I like doing it?” [Pg 186]

He drew himself up to his full height, and flashed down upon his observant listener for a second, then relapsed into his old lounging attitude, and laughed musically.

“Why do you come here with your Arabian Nights’ kind of speeches and stir me up! Bah, it’s too hot for such mental exercise,” and he sank into a chair and folded his hands behind his head. “No, Churchill, I am in the desert, and there I shall stick.”

“Unless some friendly guide extends a helping hand and leads you out,” said the philanthropist. “I can quite understand your feelings, my dear Percy, and I must say they are very natural ones. You are, without flattery, formed by nature to adorn a higher sphere than your present one. I don’t think any of the young fellows you envy could do greater credit to their wealth and position than you could do. Seriously, I think you were cut out for better things than teaching the piano to the daughters of the inhabitants of Soho and its neighborhood.”

“No doubt. I was intended for the heldest son of a hearl,” said Percy, sarcastically, “but there happens to be a hitch somewhere.”

“And suppose I tell you that I can undo that hitch, that I can give you a helping hand to better and higher things; in short, to repeat myself, to make your fortune! Think of it, my dear Percy. Plenty of money, the entrance to good society, horses to ride, club doors thrown open to you, [Pg 187] choice wines, men of rank for friends, and a world ready to welcome with outstretched hands good-looking and accomplished Mr. Percy Levant!”

The young fellow regarded him with the same incredulous smile, but there was a light of subdued eagerness in his eyes, and a warmer color in his face.

“You ought to go into the house, Churchill,” he said. “I don’t mean the workhouse, but the House of Commons. I suppose you learn all this kind of thing at your charitable public meetings? I’ll come and hear you some of these days; they tell me you make uncommonly good speeches. Well, go on. How is this fortune of mine to be made, and—excuse my bluntness—why are you so anxious to make it?”

“A very natural question, my dear Percy, and, believe me, I am not at all annoyed by it. I intend to be perfectly frank and open-minded with you——”

Percy Levant smiled, and got another cigar.

“I beg your pardon, Churchill, but the idea of your being frank rather tickled me. The spasm has passed, however; proceed. Is it a new gold mine you are going to ask me to become a director of? Or have you invented a new washing machine, and want me to travel for it? What is it?”

“It has always seemed so strange to me,” resumed Mr. Spenser Churchill, ignoring the interruption, “that you have never turned your attention to matrimony.”

The young fellow stared at him, then laughed sarcastically.

“You think that the palatial dimensions of this room are too large for one individual; that I should be more comfortable if I shared my sixpenny plate of meat and thread-bare wardrobe with another? My dear Churchill, you might as well ask a limping, footsore tramp why he doesn’t turn his attention to riding in a carriage and pair! Matrimony! Good Lord! I am not quite out of my mind!”

“But your wife need not be poor, my dear Percy. She may be rich in this world’s goods——”

“Oh, yes, I didn’t think of that; and you suggest that there are hundreds of wealthy heiresses who are dying to become Mrs. Percy Levant; perishing with the desire to bestow their hands and [Pg 188] fortunes on the music teacher of Soho!”

“You would not be the first man who has married money,” said the philanthropist, smoothly. “But let me be more explicit, my dear Percy. By one of those strange chances, which are indeed providential, I happen to be acquainted with a young lady who would, in all respects, make you a most suitable wife.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” said Spenser Churchill, gravely, “the circumstances of the case are peculiar, not to say romantic. The fact is, I am that young lady’s guardian, not exactly such in a legally qualified sense, but by—er—an unfortunate accident; and, as her guardian, I am naturally desirous of promoting her present and future welfare. Ah, my dear Percy, how sacred a trust one undertakes when one accepts the care of a young and innocent girl!” and he looked up at the ceiling with a devout sigh.

Percy Levant smiled with mingled mockery and amusement.

“Very nice sentiments,” he said. “But go on. And this is the young lady you have in your eye for me, is it?”

The philanthropist nodded gravely.

“I confess it, my dear Percy. I have considered the question in all its numerous bearings, and I am convinced that I shall be promoting both her future welfare and yours by—er—bringing you together.”

Percy Levant stared at him.

“This grows serious,” he said. “And may I ask if this young lady is ‘rich in this world’s goods,’ as you so beautifully put it?”

“She is—or, rather, she will be,” replied Spenser Churchill, leaning forward, and speaking in a lower tone, and with his eyes fixed on the other man’s face with a keen, yet covert watchfulness. “I said that there were peculiar and romantic circumstances in the case, and one of them is this, that the young lady has no idea of the wealth which will some day be hers.”

“Oh!” said Percy, curtly, “she hasn’t, eh? Yes, that’s peculiar, certainly. I suppose there is no doubt about the golden future, eh?”

“It is as certain as that you and I are in this room.”

“And the romance—where does that come in?” [Pg 189]

“Her story is a singular one. Her name——” he stopped suddenly, and smiled blandly, “but perhaps I’d better reserve that for a while, my dear Percy.”

“Yes, you’d better,” rejoined the young man, sarcastically. “I might go in for the speculation on my own account, and throw you over! Churchill, for a saint, you are singularly suspicious!”

“Not suspicious, my dear Percy; say careful, perhaps cautious,” suggested the philanthropist, with an oily smile.

“All right; choose your own word! Go on.”

“The young lady’s career has been a singular one; she has been an actress.”

Percy whistled and stared.

“But she is a lady in every sense of the word,” continued Spenser Churchill, slowly and significantly. “She has left the stage, acting on my advice, and in consequence of the death of her only relative, and is living now with some dear friends of mine. With the exception of myself, she has no one to turn to for advice and assistance. I am her sole guardian, and—I may say—friend. She will, I am sure, be guided entirely by me, and that is why I am so anxious to provide for her future welfare.”

“By marrying her to a needy adventurer,” finished Percy Levant, with a smile.

“No; to one who, though deficient in the energy which achieves greatness by its own strength is, I am sure, a man of honor,” said Spencer Churchill, suavely.

Percy Levant stared at him with a curious smile.

“This is amusing and romantic with a vengeance,” he said. “And the young lady—of course she is as ugly as sin?”

Spenser Churchill was about to answer in the negative, and dilate upon Doris’ beauty, but he stopped himself and made a gesture of denial with his hands.

“By no means, my dear Percy. This, I will say, that she is refined, accomplished, amiable——”

“And quiet in single or double—especially double—harness?”

“In sporting parlance, my dear Percy, that exactly describes my charming ward.”

The young man took a turn up and down the room, and then, resuming his old attitude, looked down upon the smooth face of the tempter with a curious and half-troubled regard. [Pg 190]

“You don’t offer me a penny for my thoughts, Churchill, and so I’ll just make you a present of them. I am wondering—what—the—devil—you are going to gain in this business. Wait a moment. You come here and offer this young girl to me—is she young, by the way?”

Spenser Churchill nodded and smiled.

“To me—a penniless man, without position or anything else that makes a man eligible for a husband——”

“You forget your youth and good looks—your undoubted talents, dear Percy,” murmured the philanthropist.

“A most undesirable match in every way,” went on the other, taking no notice of this interpolation. “Why do you do it? Of course, you have some game——”

“My dear Percy!”

“Oh, nonsense. For Heaven’s sake, let us have no hypocrisy. You offer to sell this girl to me, with her fortune in the future—what is the price I am to pay for it?”

“If you insist upon putting it with such—may I say—barbaric directness——”

“Yes, I do. I want the thing plain and distinct. I don’t suppose it is for any love of me that you come, as you say, to ‘make my fortune!’”

“Not altogether; though I have always regarded you as a very dear friend, Percy.”

The young man made a movement of impatience.

“Yes, yes, I know! But you have some object in view; what is it? You don’t want me to believe that I am to give you nothing in return for a wealthy wife. What is it?”

Spenser Churchill drew a paper from his pocket.

“Really, it is marvelously like Faust and Mephistopheles, isn’t it?”

“If that’s a document I am to sign, it really is,” assented Percy, with a grim smile.

“Well, I shall want your signature, my dear Percy, but only in ordinary ink—only in ordinary ink.”

“What does it contain?” asked the young fellow. “One moment before you tell me. If it is anything detrimental—anything that would interfere with the happiness of this young girl, you can put your precious paper back in your pocket and light your pipe with it.” [Pg 191]

“Right, quite right; your caution does credit to your heart and honor, my dear Percy,” said Spenser Churchill. “I say nothing of the injustice you’ve done to me by your suspicion. I forgive you! In a word, this is a little bond by which you undertake three things. To marry the young lady when I shall request you, and not till then; to keep the marriage secret until I give you permission to disclose it, and on your wedding day to pay me ten thousand pounds, or give me a bond for that amount.”

“Is that all?” demanded Percy Levant, staring at him with knitted brows.

“Yes; and I don’t think the conditions over hard. Consider, my dear Percy; I don’t think you would have a chance of knowing who the young lady is without I tell you, you certainly haven’t of

marrying her without my assistance; as to the secrecy of the affair—why, that is not a great hardship; and for ten thousand pounds, believe me, my dear Percy, that it will be but a bagatelle to the man who shall marry my ward."

"She will be very rich then?"

"Very rich."

"How am I to know that this is not a trick of yours, my good Churchill?—that I may marry this *protégée* of yours, and wake up to find that it is 'beggar mated to beggar'?"

Spenser Churchill nodded a smiling approval.

"A very proper question, very proper. If you will look over this bond, you will see that the payment of the ten thousand pounds is contingent upon the young lady's becoming possessed of at least twenty thousand a year. Do me the favor of perusing it; it is very short and very simple."

"And very sweet," said Percy, and he rapidly ran over the paper. "I see you have left a blank where the young lady's name should go."

"Which I will fill in when you have signed."

"Ah! How long will you give me to consider this extraordinary proposal of yours?" [Pg 192]

"Exactly five minutes," said Spenser Churchill blandly; "and excuse me, my dear Percy, if I say that that is four minutes too long! My dear young friend, consider! A young, refined, accomplished lady, with a future fortune of at least twenty thousand a year—and you hesitate. Are you so fond of Soho, and this rather—excuse me—squalid life of yours? Think what a vista this opens before you? You are ambitious. I present you with a golden ladder by which you may climb to any height you please. What are your prospects now, save those of a lifelong drudgery with the workhouse at the end? You, whose gifts warrant your taking your place among the flower of the land——"

"Wait, wait!" interrupted Percy. "I can't think with your drivel buzzing in my ears! I want to think! Man alive, I can scarcely believe that this is sober earnest, and if it were not for the price you exact, I should find it impossible to do so; but now I see your game, or part of it——" he wandered to the piano as he spoke, and dropping into his music chair, abstractly let his hands stray over the keys.

"I think more easily to music," he murmured, dreamily.

Spenser Churchill watched him in silence for a few minutes, then he said:

"Time is up, my dear Percy. Is it to be 'Yes,' or 'No?'"

The young fellow rose from the piano; his face was pale, and his eyes glowing with a strange excitement.

"I cannot resist it!" he said, in a low voice, whose tremor belied his faint smile. "You are right—more right than you guessed—when you said I was ambitious. I am sick and weary of this life of squalid drudgery. I feel as if I would sell my soul—perhaps I am doing it!—to get out of it. Give me the paper and I'll sign it!"

Spenser Churchill spread it on the table, and Percy Levant snatched up a pen and wrote his name.

"There!" he said, pushing it from him, folding his arms, and looking down at Spenser Churchill with an almost defiant light in his dark eyes. "And now what next? I am all attention! Who and where is my future bride, and when shall I see her?" [Pg 193]

"Her name is Doris Marlowe," said Spenser Churchill, softly, writing the name in the blank left for the purpose as he spoke. "She is at present acting as companion to Lady Despard, and you shall see her in a day or two."

"Doris Marlowe!" repeated Percy Levant. "Doris Marlowe; it sounds pretty, 'but a rose by any other name,' etc.; and she is acting as companion to Lady Despard, is she? And has no suspicion of the wealth that will be hers? Churchill, are you sure that this is not a fiction born of your too fertile imagination?"

"You will see in a day or two," said Spenser Churchill.

"It is really genuine? And what is the plan to be adopted? You will, I suppose, introduce me as a prince traveling incog., a millionaire in embryo, a something brilliant enough to dazzle the eyes of the young lady and carry her fancy captive? Is this to be the line?"

The philanthropist shook his head with an indulgent smile.

"No, my dear Percy; I'm free to admit that that is the kind of thing most men would do; but I think that you and I are too wise, not to say too honorable, to adopt such a course of deception."

Percy Levant laughed sardonically.

"Pardon; I forgot that you were a man of high principle, and a light of Exeter Hall. Well, what will you do?"

"I shall tell the truth," said Spenser Churchill, with a virtuous uplifting of the eyes. "I shall introduce you to Lady Despard as a musical genius—you are a genius, you know, my dear Percy!—struggling against the difficulties and obstacles insuperable to poverty and—er—that kind of thing. Lady Despard is never so happy as when she is assisting struggling talent, and she will

receive any one whom I recommend; dear Lady Despard! The rest I leave to you. If you cannot find a way to Miss Marlowe's heart, then I will confess that I am very much mistaken in you."

"Thanks for your flattering opinion," said Percy, with a short bow. "I will do my best—or my worst, which is it? Meanwhile, touching that ten pounds!"

"You shall have it with pleasure," said Spenser Churchill, and he took a note from his purse and handed it to him with a benevolent smile. "Do not spend it——" [Pg 194]

"In riotous living! No, father patriarch, I won't; I will buy myself some decent clothes, and get my hair cut, for I've noticed that your Lady Despards take a great deal more interest in struggling genius when it is clean and neatly dressed."

Spenser Churchill nodded.

"You know the world, I see, my dear Percy. I think that is all we need say. We thoroughly understand each other——"

"I thoroughly understand you," returned the young fellow; "whether you understand me is quite another matter."

"I think I do, I think I do," murmured Spenser Churchill, blandly. "I think that you will do your best to win the game which will secure you a charming wife and future independence. Good-by, my dear Percy. Don't let the new suit of clothes be too resplendent; remember that you are a poor young man of genius."

"I'm not likely to forget the poverty," said Percy, slowly. "Good-by. Mind how you go downstairs; there are generally from twenty to thirty children asleep on them at this hour, and the parents, strange to say, have an unreasonable objection to having them smashed."

"I will take care," said the philanthropist, and, with a murmured benediction, he ambled out.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN ART PATRON.

"Dear me, how interesting!" said Lady Despard.

It was the third day after Doris' arrival, and they were sitting at breakfast in a small room, beautifully cool and shady, and furnished with an elaborate simplicity which, while it avoided all garish color, was fresh and bright. A great bowl of roses stood in the centre of the table, from which rose a long fountain of perfumed water. Curtains of the faintest blush-pink threw a warm tint upon her ladyship, who, in her morning gown of delicate chintz, looked like one of the [Pg 195] Dresden shepherdesses which stood on the mantel-shelf. Doris, in her white morning frock, with its deep black sash, was the only patch of decided color—if white can be called a color—in the room, but, beside Lady Despard's rather insipid prettiness, her fresh young loveliness looked like one of the roses in the bowl.

She looked up from the coffee cup she was filling from the great silver urn with a faint smile of curiosity. In three days she had learned all that there was to learn of Lady Despard's character, and had grown to like her. As for her ladyship, she had already taken to the beautiful girl and her quaint, graceful ways and soft, musical voice, and, twenty times in each of the days, had congratulated herself and blessed Mr. Spenser Churchill on having sent her such a treasure.

"Really very interesting!" she repeated, turning over the note she was reading, and regarding it with a pensive smile. "It is from our friend, Mr. Churchill, dear," she said; "one of his charming little letters. The good that man does in a quiet, unobtrusive way, is really astounding!"

"What has he been doing now?" asked Doris, quietly.

"Why, he has written asking me to help him in assisting a young friend of his who has had a great deal of trouble and all that. He is a great musician—that is, he ought to be great, you know—but he is poor and friendless, and Mr. Churchill wants me to take him by the hand. He says that I have such immense influence in the arts and musical world that I can do anything. Of course that's nonsense; that is only his nice way of putting it. But there's the note. Just read it out, dear."

Doris took the letter and read it. It was a charming little composition, as Lady Despard had said, and in the pleasantest way told the story of struggling genius, which only needed Lady Despard's patronage to rise to the heights of success and fame. Might he bring his young friend to see dear Lady Despard? Perhaps, if he might suggest, and her ladyship was disengaged, she would kindly ask them to dinner. He was quite sure she had only to know his dear young friend, Percy Levant, to feel an interest in him for his own sake, and the sake of the art of which dear Lady Despard [Pg 196] was so distinguished a patroness.

Charmingly worded as was the epistle, Doris, as she read it, felt a strange and vaguely indefinite want of faith in it; an incredulity for which she at once took herself to task, as she reminded herself that Mr. Churchill was only doing for the young man that which he had done for her.

"It is a nice letter," she said, handing it back. "Shall you ask him, Lady Despard?"

"Well, yes, dear; I think so," said her ladyship. "I don't know that I can do much for the young man; you see, we go to Florence in a week's time. I might give a concert; and so introduce him to the musical people; but I daresay Mr. Churchill has a plan ready—he is always so systematic. I wonder what the young man is like? Percy Levant is the name, isn't it? Sounds Greek, doesn't it? I hope he isn't a foreigner; they generally smell so of tobacco, and it's so dreadfully difficult to understand them; and they are not always presentable. There was a Signor Something-or-other, an artist they got me to patronize, and he used to swear dreadfully in Spanish, which no one understood, fortunately."

"Then it did not so much matter," said Doris.

"No," said her ladyship, pensively. "I forget what became of him; I think he got into debt, and went back to Spain. There is one of his pictures in the saloon. I hope this young man is presentable. These young geniuses are often so—so *gauche*, and wear such old clothes."

Doris could not help laughing at her ladyship's doubts and fears.

"But genius covers a multitude of sins, doesn't it?" she suggested, and Lady Despard brightened up.

"So it does; and, after all, if he should be a little rough why we can point out that all clever people are eccentric. Didn't Dr. Johnson eat sweet sauce with his fish, and use his knife when he ought to have used his fork?"

"I think he did," said Doris.

"Very well, then," said Lady Despard, as if that settled it. "Just write a line and tell Mr. Churchill to bring him to dinner to-night! I think"—doubtfully—"that we'd better not have anybody!" [Pg 197]

"In case this genius should eat with his knife," said Doris, with a laugh; and presently she rose and, going to a davenport, wrote the required note.

Lady Despard, with her head on one side, watched her with pensive admiration.

"How lovely you look in that pose, dear," she said. "You certainly have the loveliest profile! And how quickly and—and easily you write! It takes me no end of a time to get my sentences together,

and the spelling—I suppose you can spell like a dictionary?”

“Not quite so well,” said Doris, with a smile; “but fortunately, there aren’t many words of ten syllables required for this note,” and she handed it for Lady Despard’s inspection, but her ladyship extended both hands with a gesture of refusal.

“No, dear; I don’t want to see it, and won’t! I can trust to your taste and discretion, and shouldn’t think of being so rude and presuming as to read it! I’m sure it’s everything that’s nice!”

Doris laughed again.

“You are not very hard to please, Lady Despard,” she said, with a little flush.

“I should be, if I were not pleased with you, you little snake charmer,” responded her ladyship, leaning over her and gently pulling the tiny, shell-like ear. “And now let’s go for a drive! I want you to get some roses in those pale cheeks of yours. I think you are looking better already, do you know?”

“I should be very ungrateful if I were not,” said Doris. “But hadn’t I better tell the butler that these two gentlemen are coming to dinner?”

“I declare you think of everything!” exclaimed her ladyship. “You must have been wonderfully trained, Doris!”

A faint flush rose to the pale cheeks, and then left it all the paler for the swiftly passing color.

“Poor people learn to be thoughtful. The dear friend to whom I owe everything, Lady Despard, spent all his life in tender devotion to me!”

“There, I’ve made you nearly cry!” exclaimed her ladyship, putting her arm round her. “What an awkward idiot I am! But I’ll be more careful, dear; I will, indeed. And now go and put on that pretty bonnet of yours, and we’ll go and work havoc with the hearts of those foolish young men who hang on the rails in the park.” [Pg 198]

Doris gave the butler the necessary information. Although she had only been three days in the house, Lady Despard had almost handed over the management of it to her, and the servants had commenced to look to her for their orders. It was a strange change from her old life of dependence and excitement, but it was a change which Doris found very grateful; the quiet of the magnificently-appointed house gave her a sense of repose which she needed greatly, and but for the memory of her loss of Jeffrey, but for the dull, aching pain which smote her heart whenever she thought of the man who had stolen her heart in Barton meadows, and tossed it almost contemptuously back to her, she could have been happy.

All day long she strove to put the memory of Cecil Neville away from her, but it haunted her sleeping and waking, and a great dread assailed her that all her life she should strive for forgetfulness and find it not.

As they drove in the park she leaned back in the carriage, and—lost to all sense of the crowded drive and the long lines of pedestrians, nearly all of whom plucked off their hats to the well-known Lady Despard—let her mind wander back to Barton meadows. She did not observe that she attracted as much attention as pretty Lady Despard herself, and woke with a start when her ladyship, with an arch little laugh, said:

“I never got so much notice before! I wonder why it is. Can you guess, Doris?”

“I? No,” said Doris, innocently.

“Really no? Well, for a really pretty girl I think you are the most modest I have ever met, my dear.”

Doris laughed and drew farther back.

“There!” exclaimed her ladyship. “I’ve put my foot in it again! Never mind, dear, we’ll go home now; I’m tired of bowing; besides it’s scarcely fair to me to do all, when half ought to be your share.”

Long before the evening Lady Despard had forgotten about the invited guests; but Doris dressed early and arranged some flowers in the small dining-room in which the meal was to be served; and thinking that it would be required, arranged as well as she could the music which lay in a confused heap in the rare Chippendale canterbury. Presently Lady Despard came down, fresh from the hands of her maid, in a costume of Worth’s, with which she had been entirely satisfied until she saw Doris’ simple frock of black lace with a yellow rose nestling in its bosom for her only ornament. [Pg 199]

“How nice you look, dear!” she exclaimed, taking her by the shoulders and holding her at arms’ length. “Now I wonder why it is that you always seem just perfectly dressed. That neat little frock of yours is simply exquisite, while mine looks all furbelows and fuss. Where did you learn to dress like that?”

Doris could have answered, “At the best of all schools, the theatre;” but instead, she smilingly put the question by and praised the other’s handsome costume.

They were still talking when a footman announced Mr. Spenser Churchill and Mr. Percy Levant. Lady Despard gave a little start.

“Bless me!” she exclaimed, “I had forgotten them!” and she glided forward to receive them. Doris turned aside for a moment to pick up a flower which had fallen from a vase, then looking round, found Mr. Spenser Churchill waiting with extended hand.

“My dear Miss Marlowe!” he purred, pressing her hand and smiling down upon her with a perfect wealth of benevolence; “I’m so glad, so glad to see you again. Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Percy Levant. May I?”

He stepped on one side, and Doris, looking up, saw a tall, graceful young man, with a face almost perfectly handsome; and as she noticed the well-cut and carefully severe style of his evening dress, she felt surprised and amused. This aristocratic gentleman, with the face of a Greek god, must have startled Lady Despard, with her doubts and fears.

“Miss Doris Marlowe, Percy,” said Mr. Spenser Churchill, glancing at him sideways and with keen watchfulness.

Percy Levant did not start, but the quick flash of his eyes and a certain quiver of the delicately- [Pg 200]
formed lips, sufficiently indicated the surprise which fell to his share.

He had imagined a girl, plain almost to ugliness; not only plain, but shy and diffident, and—as he would have put it—bad form; a dark, colorless, governess kind of creature; and this vision of perfect grace and youthful loveliness startled him almost to bewilderment. He bowed low to hide the faint signs of his discomfiture, and Doris, just inclining her head, at once moved away.

Dinner was announced, and Lady Despard, talking in her languidly-glowing style, gave her arm to Spenser Churchill, leaving Percy to escort Doris.

The dinner was served on the oval table, and the little party—which would have seemed cold and formal in the larger apartment, with its huge table and splendid furniture—was made to appear pleasant and homelike. Spenser Churchill and Lady Despard did all the talking for some time, and Percy Levant only joined in occasionally; but his silence was perfectly self-possessed, and without a touch of the *gaucherie* or awkwardness and want of breeding Lady Despard had so much dreaded.

Every now and then he let his splendid eyes wander to the lovely face beside him, and each time the amazement overwhelmed him, although he sat apparently so calm. This exquisite creature had been sold to him by Spenser Churchill! This beautiful girl to be his wife! He caught himself once or twice looking round the room with a close scrutiny, as if to convince himself that he was awake and not dreaming. But he could not sit there silent all through the dinner, and at last he forced himself to address her.

It was only some trivial remark about the weather, but it seemed to him that his voice trembled with the emotion with which his heart literally throbbed.

Doris responded in her soft, quiet voice, and the sound of it somehow lulled the storm within him and gave him confidence. He found himself talking to her more freely, and each moment the spell her unexpected beauty and grace cast upon him grew stronger. To listen to a commonplace from Doris was delightful enough, but she could talk something better than commonplace; and Percy [Pg 201]
Levant, the adventurer, the man who “knew the world,” was again startled to find that Mr. Spenser Churchill’s ward was, young as she looked, well read in subjects of which most women were utterly and sublimely ignorant. And yet she talked so modestly, so diffidently that her knowledge was an added charm.

He started when Lady Despard, rising, said:

“The butler knows the claret you like, Mr. Churchill; I shall leave you to his tender mercies. Mr. Levant, we will have some tea for you when you come into the drawing-room, so don’t expect any to be sent in.”

He opened the door for them, and then sank into his chair, let his head fall upon his bosom, his lips tightly compressed.

Spenser Churchill filled his glass and remained silent until the butler had left the room, then he said, with a smile:

“Well, my dear Percy, what do you think of my dear young ward?”

Percy Levant raised his head and looked at him with a curious expression.

“Give me some wine,” he said; then, after he had drank a glass, he demanded, almost sternly: “Why did you not tell me?”

“Tell you what?” asked Mr. Spenser Churchill, with a chuckle. “I told you she was a charming young lady——”

“And you wished me to think that you lied in saying so,” retorted the other. “Why did you not tell me that she was as beautiful as—she is?”

Spenser Churchill chuckled again.

“My dear Percy, I thought that a little surprise would not come amiss. If I had told you that she was pretty——”

“Pretty!”

“Well, beautiful—lovely—you would not have believed me!”

“No, I should not,” he said, curtly. “Don’t say any more. I want to think! Great Heaven, she is like a dream! Stop! Don’t talk, I say; I’m not equal to any of your smooth platitudes at present. Let me be in peace!”

Mr. Spenser Churchill laughed softly. [Pg 202]

“Certainly, certainly, my dear Percy,” he said. “Yes, I can understand your astonishment. This claret is very fine——”

“No more!” said Percy, rising and taking a step or two across the room, with his arms behind him, his head bent upon his breast again. “Let us go to them.”

“I’m quite ready,” said Spenser Churchill, smiling with intense enjoyment.

They went into the drawing-room. Lady Despard was turning over the music, Doris was seated at the tea-table.

“I am trying to find something for you to play, Mr. Levant,” she said. “We are so eager to hear you play, Miss Marlowe and I.”

He bowed, and his glance caught Doris’; but she only smiled.

“Will you not play or sing?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” she said; “I should be afraid.”

“Of me? It is I who should fear, for I know from your conversation that I shall have a musician for a critic.”

“No,” she said, quietly; “I am not a musician. You will have some tea presently?” and she raised her eyes to his with the calm politeness of perfect self-possession and good breeding.

CHAPTER XXII.

TWO SONG BIRDS.

Percy Levant bowed and went to the piano, and Mr. Spenser Churchill walked across the drawing-room and took a seat immediately beside Doris.

“I hope you like my young friend?” he said, in his softest voice, and glancing affectionately toward him as he stood by the piano talking to Lady Despard.

“I have seen so little of him,” said Doris, “but he is very agreeable.”

“Yes. Ah, my poor Percy!” he sighed. “Poor boy! He has suffered so much—so much! There should be sympathy between you two, my dear young lady, for he has known what it is to lose his [Pg 203] dearest. I should move your heart if I were to tell you what sorrow and trouble have fallen to my poor young friend’s lot, and win your admiration and esteem for him if I recounted the many difficulties he has had to encounter. It has been a hard world for him, a hard life, poor fellow! I do so hope you and Lady Despard will like him.”

Doris remained silent, but the softly-spoken words had something of the effect their speaker intended, and she looked toward the young man with increased interest.

“I think, with the exception of myself, he has scarcely a friend in the wide world,” said Spenser Churchill, sipping his tea and sighing. “I am counting so much on your and Lady Despard’s sympathy, my dear Miss Marlowe! A word of encouragement from such kind hearts as yours will go far to console him for the cruel disappointments he has endured. Ah! he is going to sing, I see! Now you will see if I spoke too highly of his voice and abilities.”

Percy Levant was certainly going to sing, but he seemed somehow loth to begin. For a few minutes his fingers strayed over the keys irresolutely, then he struck a chord and commenced.

He had chosen not an elaborate specimen of the flowery school, but a simple Brittany ballad, and he sang it exquisitely. Doris, as she listened to the long-drawn notes that seemed to float on eider wings through the room, felt a singular sensation at her heart. It was as if this stranger had defined the trouble of her young life, and had put it into music! With tightly compressed lips she sat fighting back the tears that threatened to flood her eyes, her hands closely clasped in her lap, her eyes fixed on the ground, unconscious that Mr. Spenser Churchill’s eyes were covertly fixed on her with a keen watchfulness.

The last notes of the song died away, and Lady Despard’s soft, languid voice poured out her praise.

“Oh, but that is very, very beautiful, Mr. Levant; and you have a lovely voice! How kind of you to come and sing to us! And I am so grateful to Mr. Churchill for bringing you! You must sing again, must he not, Doris?”

He had risen and bowed to Lady Despard, but his dark eyes looked beyond her, and sought Doris’ [Pg 204] face.

Her lips trembled, but she forced a smile; taking it as a request, he returned to the piano and sang again.

Lady Despard was in raptures, but he prevented her asking for another song by going across to Doris.

“Lady Despard will not play; will you?” he said. “You are not afraid now?”

“Yes, more than afraid,” she said, with a smile.

“Will you sing with me? Here is a duet!” he said, quietly, his eyes downcast.

“Do, dear!” said Lady Despard. “Miss Marlowe sings like a professional, Mr. Levant.”

Doris rose reluctantly, and he led her to the piano.

Mr. Spenser went and sat beside Lady Despard, and began to talk to her in an earnest but softly persuasive tone. The two voices at the piano rose and fell in harmony, and seemed to act as an accompaniment to his.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” said Lady Despard. “Their singing together is simply delicious!”

“And if your ladyship assents to my proposal, they can sing together as often as you please!” he murmured, insinuatingly.

She laughed and nodded.

“That’s true! Oh, yes, just as you like. I’m sure he is most interesting, and such a perfect gentleman!”

“Ah! yes,” said Mr. Spenser Churchill; “I would not have brought him to you if he had been anything less. And it is settled, then?”

“Yes,” nodded her ladyship.

He rose at once and looked at his watch.

“I will make all arrangements,” he said, in a low voice. “Say nothing to him to-night.”

The two men said good-night, and Percy Levant found himself outside, his brain in a whirl, his heart beating wildly.

“Well, may one ask your highness what you think of my ward now?” said Spenser Churchill, softly.

Percy Levant thrust his hands in his pockets.

“Has she been ill, or is it trouble that makes her look like that?” he asked, in a grave, thoughtful tone.

“Trouble,” said Spenser Churchill. “Poor girl. Yes, she has been ill, too; but she is better, and the change will completely set her up, I hope.” [Pg 205]

“Change?”

“Yes,” he purred. “She and Lady Despard go to Italy next week,” and he smiled as he struck the blow and saw Percy wince.

“To Italy next week!” He turned upon him. “What are you scheming? What are you doing? Why did you take me to see her to-night, if——Do you think I am made of stone; that, like yourself, I’ve no heart! To Italy!”

“Yes,” murmured Spenser Churchill, “and I have arranged that you shall go with them——”

Percy Levant started again, and, stopping, confronted him with a pale, eager face.

“What?”

“Yes, exactly! You are to go with them as—what shall we say?—friendly cavalier, courier, what you will—anything will serve as an excuse. What do you say? Perhaps, after all, you regret your bargain! If so, say so, and I’ll release you.”

Percy Levant caught him by the shoulder and held him in a savage grip.

“You—you devil!” he said, fiercely, almost wildly. “You know that I cannot! If I had not seen her I might have had the strength; but now——”

He withdrew his hand, and, almost thrusting the other man away from him, strode on.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SAD HOME-COMING.

Lord Cecil Neville was a man of his word. He had pledged himself to remain in Ireland until the mission he had undertaken was completed, and he meant keeping his word, though his life depended on it. And it seemed to him that more than his life, his happiness, hung in the balance. He had written again and again to Doris, and had received no answer to any one of his letters. That they had reached her was evident from the fact that none were returned through the post to him. To all his passionate attempts for an explanation of her silence not one word came from her! [Pg 206]

Life had gone fairly smoothly for Viscount Neville up to this, and his hot, impetuous nature—inherited from his mother's side of the family—found it difficult to endure the suspense. Many men would have broken their word and returned posthaste to England and Barton, but a pledge was a solemn thing to Cecil Neville, and like a soldier on duty he stuck to his post.

It is not necessary to speak in detail of what he accomplished in Ireland, but this much may be said, that he found the people in the right and the agent in the wrong, and that that agent had a bad time of it! It may be added that Lord Neville succeeded in a few short weeks in winning more hearts among the marquis' tenants than all the Stoyles for centuries had been able to do, and that before many days had passed "the young lord," as he was called, was regarded as a friend and protector, and many a faltering voice called down a blessing on his head, and implored him to remain in "the old country." The Irish are a warm-hearted people, quick to resent an injury, but equally quick in their gratitude for a benefit; this handsome young nobleman who had relieved them from their oppressor, and done his best to better their hard lot, received his reward in the shape of an affectionate gratitude which he should remember and cherish all his life through.

The absentee landlord, the man who screws the last penny from the tenant, and spends it in Paris or London, has been the curse of the country; and it was because Lord Neville saw this, and owned it freely, that the people trusted him.

Often, when he had returned from a day's inspection of the estate, and had relieved the oppressed, he wondered what the marquis would say when he heard what his ambassador had done! Often when, tortured by an anxiety respecting Doris' silence, he spent the night pacing up and down his room, he vowed that when they were married they would come and live among these people, who had welcomed him so readily, and so gratefully recognized his efforts on their behalf.

But for the constant hard work, the incessant traveling, Lord Neville would have suffered more than he did; for, as the days wore on, and no news of Doris reached him, he began to imagine all sorts of terrible things. One night he dreamed that she was dead, and woke trembling and shaking, half-persuaded that he had heard her voice calling to him. [Pg 207]

All day her image haunted him, and he found himself pulling up his horse, and sitting staring vacantly before him, recalling her last words, her shy, passionate kiss; and then he would dash forward, and try and persuade himself that his letters had, in some way, miscarried, and that all would be well.

One morning his servant brought him a letter, and he seized it eagerly, but his face fell as he saw the Stoyle coat of arms on the envelope.

The letter was from the marquis. It was the first he had written, though Cecil had sent him a short report of his proceedings each week, and the contents caused him to spring from his chair. It said:

> My dear Cecil, I think you had better come back. It appears that your course of true love, like other persons, is not running smoothly.
>
> STOYLE.

That was all, but it was enough for Cecil. In less than an hour he was on his way to the station as fast as the car could carry him. He was fortunate enough to catch the mail, and, traveling day and night, arrived at Barton Towers just after dinner. The butler started and stared at the young viscount's haggard face and travel-stained clothes, and in his solemn fashion looked quite shocked.

"Where is the marquis?" demanded Lord Cecil.

"In his room, my lord. I'm sorry to say, dinner is over, but I can serve you——"

"Will you tell the marquis I have arrived, and ask him to see me, please?" said Lord Cecil, interrupting his stately periods. "I shall be ready in ten minutes."

He was scarcely longer, and still pale and wearied-looking, was conducted to the library.

The marquis was sitting in his easy-chair, wrapped in his velvet dressing-gown, and looked up with his usual cold smile, and a slight elevation of the eyebrow, denoted his recognition of Cecil's altered appearance. [Pg 208]

"How do you do?" he said, giving him the tips of his thin fingers. "I am afraid you have been rather hurried in your journey——"

"I came back without the loss of a moment," said Lord Cecil, gravely. "I should have come before, but I waited to complete the business, or until I heard from you——"

The marquis shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m afraid you have inconvenienced yourself on my account,” he said, coolly and indifferently. “There was no reason on earth why you should remain there a moment longer than you liked——”

Lord Cecil’s pale face flushed, and he made a movement of impatience, almost of indignation.

“You must have been bored to death—oh, no; I forgot—you take an interest in those people. Ah, yes. I got your letters—quite reports, weren’t they? I am ashamed to say I didn’t read them.”

Lord Cecil’s eyes flashed, but he restrained himself with an effort.

“My lord,” he said, grimly, more firmly and sternly than he had ever spoken in his life, “I will not trouble you with an account of my mission—for it was a mission, carelessly as you ignore it. I am too full of anxiety on another matter. Will you tell me the meaning of the note you sent me?”

The marquis stopped again and looked at him with a faint, puzzled confusion, as if he were trying to remember what it was he had written; then he nodded.

“Ah, yes; I remember. I sent you the note because I thought you would like to hear some information I received about Miss Barlow——”

“Miss Marlowe, do you mean?” said Lord Cecil, biting his lips. “What information——”

“Give me time, please,” said the marquis, arranging his dressing-gown. “Your impetuosity is rather trying.”

“Great heavens!” exclaimed Lord Cecil, clinching his hands; “why do you torture me like this? You forget—or do you not forget?—is it from sheer malice that you keep me in this suspense? You know, I see you know, that I have not heard from Miss Marlowe; that I fear some accident——” [Pg 209]

“I know nothing of your not having heard from her,” said the marquis, with perfect coolness; “and I care less. I wrote to you because I considered that I should do so, on a point of honor. You were absent on my business, and it was my duty to let you know what I had heard. I have always done my duty, and I did it in this case, though the writing of even a short note is irksome to me.”

“Well, my lord, well?” demanded Lord Cecil, and he paced to and fro, “what is it? Is she ill?—is she——” He could not force his lips to utter the word “dead.”

“Ill? Oh, no; I hope not. The fact is, I—I may say ‘No,’ for it is generally known, I imagine, that Miss Barlow—pardon, Miss Marlowe—has disappeared.”

Dreadful as the word sounded, Lord Cecil drew a breath of relief, and a smile, a very mirthless one, crossed his lips.

“Disappeared?” he said, almost contemptuously. “You mean she has left Barton? That accounts for her not having received my letters or answered them. Where has she gone?”

The marquis shrugged his shoulders.

“I had better tell you what I know; we are getting rather confused. It appears that Miss Marlowe’s guardian died suddenly; probably you know this?”

Lord Cecil uttered an exclamation of dismay and pity.

“No! I did not know it! I have not heard from her—from any one! My poor Doris! When—when did he die?”

“Some time ago—soon after you left, I believe; and here in Barton. I know nothing of the particulars.”

“And she did not write! Why not, why not?”

“For reasons best known to herself. My dear Cecil, I am reluctant to shake your faith in this young lady, but I am afraid I must.”

“What!” demanded Lord Cecil, scarcely understanding. “My faith in Doris! Go on, sir!”

“It would seem——Pray take a chair; your constant moving is harassing.”

Lord Cecil sank into a chair, impatiently.

“It would seem that the young lady was not very serious in her little love affair with you. I imagine that that kind of young person seldom is. How can it be expected of them? They are actresses by profession. I daresay she was practicing for a love scene when she was exchanging vows of perpetual faith with you. Pray don’t take my suggestion in bad part!” he put in, for Lord Cecil leaned forward with crimson face. “I am sorry you should have regarded the matter so seriously! It is a mistake—I speak with experience—a mistake to take any woman seriously; they are all daughters of Eve, and as unreliable as their first mother. Miss Marlowe is like the rest, that is all!” [Pg 210]

“Will you tell me, my lord, what it is you insinuate?” said Lord Cecil, in despair.

“I insinuate nothing! Why should I? I believe it is perfectly true, but you can ascertain for yourself, of course, that she has jilted you, and gone off with her first, and, pardon me if I add, her more suitable young man.”

Lord Cecil started up, his face pale and working, his eyes flashing.

“It—it is a lie!” he said, hoarsely.

The marquis regarded him with a mixture of curiosity and contempt, the kind of look with which

one might regard the movements of a strange animal.

“Yes, it may be! I don’t answer for the truth of the story, as I said.”

“Where has she gone? Who is this—this man? It is false! I will stake my existence upon her truth! It is a ridiculous lie!”

The marquis smiled.

“A large stake; too large for so paltry a prize as a woman’s faith!” he said, calmly. “I have heard that she has gone to Australia with a man named—named—excuse me, my memory is very faulty, but, fortunately, I jotted down the details. I had an idea that you would like to hear them.” He reached for an elegant-bound memorandum book as he spoke, and consulted it.

“Ah, yes, here it is! ‘Miss Marlowe sailed in the *Orion* on the fourteenth, in company with Mr. Garland, late of the Barton Theatre Royal; engagement at Melbourne.’ The *Orion*, the fourteenth! [Pg 211] I am glad it occurred to me to jot it down with the particulars.”

Lord Cecil stared at him as if he were in doubt whether he or the marquis was mad, and the marquis, closing the book, regarded him with a calm, set placidity.

Then Lord Cecil laughed. It was an unpleasant laugh to hear.

“Who told you this fable?” he demanded.

“I got it from Spenser Churchill!” said the marquis, promptly.

“Spenser Churchill! Spenser Churchill!” repeated Lord Cecil. “What had he to do with it?”

“Too much,” said the marquis. “Very much against my advice, he insisted—you know he is a professional philanthropist?”—with a sneer—“he insisted upon pleading your cause with the young lady. But it was of no avail; even so distinguished an individual could not persuade a woman to keep her faith.”

Lord Cecil strode up and down, his physical weariness and exhaustion playing their part in his mental disturbance.

“It is not true!” he asseverated, vehemently. “It is not true! Why should Spenser Churchill be mixed up in this matter? Why——”

“That is easily answered,” said the marquis. “It appears that he discovered that the young lady’s guardian was an old friend of his. I don’t know his name——” which was true. “I don’t know anything more than I’ve told you; and forgive me for saying so, that, seeing the reception my information has received at your hands, I’m very sorry I know so much! I hate and detest this kind of business. It was bad enough when I took a personal interest in it, but now——” he shrugged his shoulders. “It is a pity that the world could not have got on without women; we men would have been better and happier, believe me.”

“Where is Spenser Churchill?” demanded Lord Cecil, hoarsely.

“Heaven only knows!” said the marquis, shrugging his shoulders. “In London, possibly, or he may have gone out on a mission to the Jews, or the Turks, or the Sandwich Islanders. I neither know nor care, if I may say so. And now, hadn’t you better go and get something to eat? I fear we have [Pg 212] exhausted the subject,” and he leaned back and regarded the opposite wall with an expression which was intended to indicate that, whether they had exhausted the subject or not, the subject had entirely and completely exhausted him.

Lord Cecil regarded him sternly for a moment, as if he were about to speak, then, with a gesture of farewell, opened the door and went out. Scarcely had he done so than the curtains over a door behind the marquis’ chair fluttered violently, and Lady Grace glided out.

She was pale, and her under lip was caught in her white teeth, in her endeavor to appear calm and self-possessed.

“Has he gone?” she said.

“Oh, yes!” replied the marquis. “You heard our interesting and dramatic dialogue?”

She nodded.

“Do you think——” She paused and turned aside. “Do you think that he cared for her very much?”

His lordship smiled sardonically.

“I should say he was what is termed madly in love with her.”

Lady Grace moved a little away, out of reach of the cold, piercing eyes, and a quiver shot over her face.

“Has he left the house, do you think?” she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I should imagine so. I should fancy that wild horses would not hold him!”

“Where’s he going?”

The marquis smiled indifferently.

“I haven’t the least idea—to Australia, probably.”

She started.

“He would not be so mad!”

“If my opinion is worth anything, I think he is mad enough for anything! This girl must be extremely good-looking, Grace!”

She bit her lip till the blood came.

“Y—es, she is,” she assented, as if the admission cost her an agony. “Oh! yes. And he is going! I thought he would have stayed the night!”

“And I didn’t,” said the marquis, grimly. “He is a Stoyle, and its not our way to take the loss of our mistresses meekly.” [Pg 213]

“Did you give him the letter?” she asked.

The marquis uttered an exclamation.

“Phew!” he said, with a laugh. “I knew there was something I should forget. I told you and Churchill that you’d better play the game yourselves, and that I should bungle it. You see, I am so unused to intrigues of this description,” and the great intriguer of his generation smiled grimly.

“Give it to me,” said Lady Grace, as if struck by a sudden idea.

The marquis pointed to a cabinet.

“It’s there somewhere,” he said, indolently.

Lady Grace opened the door sharply.

“Take care, please,” he said, with a smothered yawn. “That cabinet is unique, and I have left it to you.”

She made an impatient gesture, caught up poor Doris’ letter, and glided from the room and up the corridor.

As she did so Lord Cecil came out of his room, followed by his valet, with a portmanteau in his hand, and wrap on his arm.

“Lady Grace!” said Lord Cecil.

“Why, where are you going?” she exclaimed. “I have only just heard of your return! You are not going again?”

“Yes,” he said, trying to speak lightly, and force a conventional smile; “I am as bad as a queen’s messenger.”

She laid her hand lightly on his arm.

“Something’s the matter,” she said, in a low voice. “What is it? Is it anything you can tell me—anything I can help you in?”

He shook his head as he signed to his man to go on.

“I have learned bad news, Lady Grace,” he said, as coolly as he could, but his voice shook as he added, “No, you cannot help me, and, I fear, no one can!”

She came closer to him, and laid her hand upon his arm, looking up at him with her magnificent eyes softened with womanly sympathy.

“I am so sorry! Can you not tell me what it is? Stay; where are you going?”

“To London,” he replied.

“To London!” She leaned over the balustrade, and looked at the great clock in the hall. “You have plenty of time. Stay one moment. Lord Cecil, do you remember the first night you came?” [Pg 214]

“Yes,” he said, gravely.

A faint flush rose to her face.

“And all I said to you? Do you think I should have spoken to you as I did unless—unless I had liked you?”

“I appreciated your candor, Lady Grace,” he said, in the same grave tone.

Her hand trembled on his arm.

“Well, then, I am going to be still more candid. I am going to ask you to try and fancy that you had asked me to be your wife and that I had refused.”

It was his turn to flush now, and his eyes dropped under her fixed, earnest gaze.

“Do you know why I say that? It is because you may not misunderstand me when I ask you—as I do now—to let me be your friend.”

“I am grateful, Lady Grace——” he began, in a low voice, but she stopped him.

“Wait. It is no idle, meaningless offer. I will be a real friend, Lord Cecil, if you will let me. I will prove that a woman and a man can be friends without being—lovers! Now, then, trust me, and show me that you trust me by telling me what this trouble is.”

Her eyes looked so honest, so eager, so trustworthy, that Cecil—his heart wrung with the misery of suspense and doubt, his brain heavy and bewildered by fatigue and harassing anxiety—fell into the net.

“I will trust you, Lady Grace,” he said, and there was a quiver in his voice which was no discredit

to his manliness. “In a word, I have lost the girl I love.”

“Lost her!” she said, with wide-open eyes. “Ah, yes! I know! Miss Marlowe, is it not?”

“Yes,” he said. “Do you know anything? For Heaven’s sake tell me everything——”

“I will,” she said. “But I have heard nothing more than this—that she has gone to Australia with—with a man to whom she was engaged before——”

“And you believe it?” he said, with grave reproach.

“No!” she said at once. “I do not believe a word of it!” [Pg 215]

He took her hand and pressed it, all unconsciously, so that the rings almost cut into her delicate fingers.

“How shall I thank you for saying that?” he exclaimed, in a low voice, which showed how deeply he was moved. “They are the first words of comfort, of encouragement! You do not believe it?”

“No, I am certain it is not true. She has left Barton, I know, but as to the rest—why, it is too absurd! Shall I tell you why I do not believe it? Because I have something for you which will explain all, I’ve no doubt,” and she held out the letter.

He almost snatched it from her.

“A letter! Why—where—when—how——” And he stared at her with eager impatience.

“It came while you were away, and I took it. Don’t be angry.”

“Angry! Has any one seen it but yourself?”

“No one!—no one! I kept it. Of course, I felt that its safety was of importance to you. I should have forwarded it to you, but I knew you were moving about, and I feared it might be lost.”

“I see, I see!” he said, and already hope was displaying itself in his face and voice.

“Yes, that will tell you where she is, and why she has gone, no doubt,” said Lady Grace; and with an affectation of delicate consideration she turned to the great oriel window, that he might read it undisturbed.

Suddenly he uttered a cry, and, looking round, she saw him leaning against the balustrade staring at the letter, which shook like an aspen leaf in his hands.

“Oh, what is it?” she breathed, and her face went almost as white as his own.

He looked up with a bewildered stare; then, with a working face, seemed to struggle for composure.

“You—I—we were both wrong!” he said, hoarsely; “she—she has gone!”

“Oh, no, no!” murmured Lady Grace; “don’t say that! Do not believe it! Oh, Lord Cecil!” and she laid both her hands upon his arms and looked up at him beseechingly, sympathizingly, as a sister might strive to soothe and encourage a brother. [Pg 216]

“Yes,” he said, almost inaudibly, and with a catch in his voice, “it is true—it is true! Great Heaven! and I loved—I trusted—I——” He turned his head aside for a second, then faced her, every muscle of his face quivering under the effort to appear unmoved. “Lady Grace, the letter proves the marquis’ estimate of women to be a true one, and mine—Heaven help me!—false! Read it. No, I cannot! It is the only letter she ever wrote me—it is sacred! The first and the last! Great Heaven, to think that she, she!——” and as he recalled the pure and innocent face, the truthful, trustful eyes that had looked up so devotedly, so passionately, with such an infinity of love into his, his voice broke and he could not utter another word.

“No, do not show me the letter!” she said. “It should be sacred to you. And I do not believe it yet. Where were you going, Cecil?”

Her omission of his formal title escaped him at the moment.

“To London,” he said. “But where”—and he made a despairing gesture—“it doesn’t matter. Nothing matters now!” and he forced a rueful smile.

“Yes, but it does matter,” she said. “There may be some mistake—there is, there must be! It is useless to ask you to remain here, I feel that. Go to London, Cecil, and go to the offices of the *Orion*. Go and see if her name is on the passenger list. I will stake my faith in the honor and truth of my sex that it is not!”

He seized her hand and pressed it again.

“How can I thank you?” he breathed. “Yes! Ah, what woman’s wit will do! I will go to the office!”

“And you will let me know? You will not forget—your friend!”

“I shall never forget all you have done, all you have been to me this day, Lady Grace,” he said, fervently; and with a grave solemnity that might well have become one of the old knightly Stoyles whose pictures looked down on them, he raised her hand to his lips.

A deep red suffused Lady Grace’s face, and she drew a quick, sharp breath.

“Go, then!” she said, her hand resting on his clingingly, “and come back with good news!” [Pg 217]

He nodded, and with the letter in his hand, ran down the stairs. Lady Grace leaned over the balustrade and looked at him, her heart beating wildly, her eyes flashing with suppressed excitement. She looked at that moment like one

Whose soul and brain with keen desire,
Burnt in a flame of all-consuming fire.

Then, as the door closed behind her, and she heard the retreating sound of the dogcart, she drew herself upright, and, pressing her hand to her forehead, she thought intently.

“A wrong step now, a false move, and—and I lose him!” she murmured. “Oh, if I were there with him; if I could be sure that Spenser Churchill had got her out of the way! Ah!”

The ejaculation was forced from her lips by an idea worthy of a woman. Without waiting a moment she sprang up the staircase to her own room.

“Find the next train to this,” she said to her astonished maid. “Don’t stand staring! There may not be a moment to lose. Pack a bag—a small bag—and order a brougham. Say nothing to anybody but the groom of the chambers, and tell him to keep his tongue quiet—give him this!” She handed her a couple of sovereigns. “Wait! I want this to go to the telegraph office. Stay! No! I will take it myself as I go!”

“The office is closed, my lady,” said the maid, looking up from the portmanteau she had already commenced to pack.

Lady Grace’s face fell, then it cleared again.

“Of course! All offices are closed by this time; none will be open till to-morrow! No matter. Give me a telegraph form.”

She sat down and wrote quickly:

> He will be at the *Orion* packet office the first thing to-morrow. Act. Meet me at the square at ten.

Two hours later she was seated in the train following that which had borne Lord Cecil to London, and her telegram lay at the office to be forwarded to Mr. Spenser Churchill at eight the next morning. [Pg 218]

Lord Cecil reached his chambers in the gray of the summer morning, looking like a man who had received sentence of death, and yet hoped that by some chance a reprieve might save him.

Not until the train started had he remembered that the steam packet-office would not be open until ten o’clock, and, yielding to the respectful entreaties of his man, who was deeply attached to him, and saw with dismay the change which the last few days had made in him, Lord Cecil threw himself on the bed. But he found it impossible to rest there, and spent the long hours pacing up and down, vainly trying to draw encouragement from a remembrance of Lady Grace’s assertion of faith in Doris.

“She believed in her, and she does not know her; how much more should I trust in her, who do know her? And yet this letter!” and he took it out and read it for the hundredth time.

Long before ten he had a bath, drank a cup of coffee to appease his valet, and, dressing himself, went down in a cab to the office of the Australian Steamship Company.

He was there before the office opened, and had to wait for a quarter of an hour. While he was pacing up and down, smoking a cigar, with fierce impatience, a quietly-dressed man, in a brown pot hat, sauntered up, glanced at him casually, and passed by; then, as if he had remembered something, took out his watch, and returned at a quick pace, so quickly, indeed, that he almost ran against Lord Cecil, and offered profuse apologies.

A few minutes after ten a yawning boy wound up the iron shutters, and Lord Cecil went into the office.

“I want to know——” he commenced; but the boy, struggling with a yawn which threatened to bisect his face, said, languidly:

“Clerks not here yet; don’t know nothing myself.”

Lord Cecil inquired when they would be there, was told five minutes, ten, perhaps; lit another cigar; was informed by the intelligent lad that he mustn’t smoke in the office; flung the cigar away, and strode to the door, nearly knocking over the quiet-looking gentleman in the brown hat, who was looking in at the door inquiringly. [Pg 219]

Ten minutes—a quarter of an hour passed, and at last a clerk arrived; and Lord Cecil made for him as if he were going to demand his life.

“Can you tell me whether a lady of the name of Marlowe sailed by the *Orion*, for Melbourne?” he began, with suppressed eagerness.

The clerk eyed him with the charming impassibility and indifference which distinguishes some of his class, and read a letter which lay before him before answering.

“You will find her name in the passenger list if she did,” he said at last.

“Then, for Heaven’s sake, give me the passenger list!” said Lord Cecil, with suppressed fury. “I have been waiting——” He pulled himself up on the verge of an outbreak, and the clerk, with a great deal of dignity, got down a huge ledger and leisurely found the proper page. Then he proceeded to read off the names; there seemed a million of them to poor Cecil, who leaned against the counter, his eyes fixed on the book, his lips tightly compressed.

“Mr. and Mrs. Browne, Mr. and Miss Tompkins, Mr. Garland, Miss Doris Marlowe. Yes, she

sailed," said the clerk.

Lord Cecil gripped the counter hard, and stared in a dazed, blind way at the open page.

"Mr. Garland! Miss Doris Marlowe!" Great Heaven, then the marquis had spoken the truth, and she had jilted him; had left him for the other man—this actor. In a moment he recalled the young fellow, the handsome Romeo, who had played so well to her Juliet. And she had gone with him! She—Doris! Doris, the girl he loved; whose faith, and honor, and truth—-ah, and innocent purity of mind and soul—he would have sworn by.

The clerk stared at his white face and compressed lips curiously. It was not the first time anxious inquiries had been made respecting missing persons at the office, but no one had taken the information given as this handsome young gentleman took it. He seemed, as the clerk put it afterward, when recounting the incident to his fellow-clerks, "as if he were struck dumb, and deaf, and blind." [Pg 220]

"Is there anything else I can tell you, sir?" he asked.

Lord Cecil raised his head and regarded him vacantly.

"Anything else? No," he said, with a grim smile. "That will do, thanks. When will the *Orion* arrive?"

The man referred him to a calendar and told him.

"There or thereabouts," he said. "She's a fine vessel."

"Ah, so I've heard," said poor Cecil, not knowing what he was saying; and, wishing the clerk good-day, he made his way out.

At the door he paused and took off his hat in a confused kind of way, as a man does who has received news which is either too good or too bad to be realized all at once; and as he stood there, he felt a hand upon his shoulder. Looking round, he saw that it was the persistent personage in the brown hat.

"Lord Cecil, Viscount Neville, I believe?" he said, quietly and respectfully enough.

"Yes, I am Lord Neville," said Cecil. "What do you want?" he added, with weary surprise.

The man took a paper from his breast pocket.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, my lord," he said, "but I'm a sheriff's officer, and I have to arrest you on a debt warrant."

"Arrest me?" said Lord Cecil, not with the surprise the man doubtless expected. Lord Cecil would not have been surprised that morning if he had been arrested for murder. "I don't understand ——"

"If you'll step aside for a moment," said the man, very respectfully, indeed apologetically, "I will show you. These are the items," and he took some papers from a greasy pocketbook, and read them off.

Lord Cecil recognized them as some old debts, bills and I O U's, which he had almost forgotten.

"Yes, that is right, I expect," he said, gravely, and very wearily. "But I thought," he said, as the idea occurred to him, "that there was no arrest for debt now?"

The man smiled almost pityingly.

"Nor is there, my lord; it's called contempt of court now! You have been ordered to pay these sums by the court, and you haven't done it, therefore it's contempt, and they take you on that." [Pg 221]

"Ordered to pay them?" said Cecil. "When? I have heard nothing of it."

The man looked incredulous of so much innocence, for a moment, but, after a long and steady scrutiny of the pale, grave face, with its frank, honest eyes, he looked puzzled.

"Hem! I don't quite see. Ah, yes, I do! These processes have been served on your lawyers, no doubt, my lord. Haven't they let you know?"

"No," said Lord Cecil, quietly. "I have been away in Ireland. I've seen no letters——"

"It's plain enough, my lord," said the officer. "You ought to have had your letters forwarded. The court has been under the impression that you've neglected the order out of sheer contrariness, and so these creditors have got the warrant. Ah, my lord, no end of mischief comes of you swell gentlemen not opening your letters. I'm very sorry, but here's the warrant, and I'm bound to execute it."

Lord Cecil did not by any means fully comprehend the man's meaning even yet.

"What do you want me to do?" he said, gravely. "Ah, I see, you want to take me to prison!"

"Oh, no, no; my lord, certainly not," said the officer, respectfully. "If your lordship will settle the amounts; the banks are open, and close at hand. We might walk to your lordship's bank, and you could give me a check."

"Let me see the paper," said Lord Cecil; then his face flushed. "I have not one quarter of this in the bank," he said, quietly.

The man looked rather nonplussed.

"Well, I don't know what's to be done," he said, looking at the pavement with a frown. "Your

lordship has got friends—I'll go anywhere—to your lordship's rooms, while you communicate with them. Of course, I must have the money. Duty's duty. As a soldier, your lordship knows that."

Lord Cecil nodded.

"Come to my rooms," he said.

The man called a cab, and they got into it and were driven to Clarges street. [Pg 222]

To attempt to describe the valet's face when he saw the kind of person whom his master had brought back with him would be difficult, and quite impossible to picture it when Lord Cecil requested him to get this person breakfast.

"I will telegraph to my uncle, the Marquis of Stoyle, while you are eating it," he said; but the man looked up reproachfully.

"Will you send your man, my lord?" he said, significantly, and Lord Cecil started, for he realized that he was a prisoner. He sent the telegram, requesting the marquis to order his bankers to pay the sum to Lord Cecil's order; then went and stood by the window and looked out on the street; and in a few minutes he had forgotten the presence of the officer and all pertaining to him.

"Mr. Garland—Miss Marlowe," rang through his brain to the exclusion of anything else.

A couple of hours passed, and the return telegram arrived. It was short and emphatic:

> Sorry. Quite impossible.—Stoyle.

Lord Cecil read it, and, with a grim smile, tossed it across the table to the officer, who was enjoying himself with one of Cecil's choicest cigars and a glass of whisky and water. He looked aghast.

"Good gracious, my lord! What's to be done?"

"I don't know," said Lord Cecil, shrugging his shoulders, very much as the marquis might have done.

"But—look here, my lord, this is getting serious! Isn't there any other friend? Surely, your lordship must know ever so many friends as would only too gladly lend you the money! Think, my lord!" Lord Cecil shook his head. "I am afraid it is of no use thinking," he said; "I cannot pay the money, and——" He leaned against the window, and smiled. "But there is no hurry, I suppose? You can finish your drink."

Before the man could reply, a voice floated through the open window.

"Lord Cecil!"

He started, and looked out. A hansom cab was pulled up opposite his door, and Lady Grace was leaning out and looking up at him. [Pg 223]

"Lady Grace!" he cried, in amazement.

"Yes; it is I," she said. "Will you come down? I want to speak to you. I could not wait."

He made for the door, but the man rose.

"My lord! my lord!" he said, reproachfully.

Lord Cecil turned pale; then he laughed, and going to the window, said, grimly:

"Lady Grace, I cannot come down to you. Please go. I will see you—to-morrow."

She seemed to hesitate for a moment; then he saw her alight, and a moment or two afterward, she stood in the doorway of his room.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE HOUR OF NEED.

It need scarcely be remarked that it is not usual for young ladies unattended to pay gentlemen visits at their chambers. Scandal is only too ready to seize upon the slightest excuse for the exercise of its malignity, and the fact, if it were known, that Lady Grace Peyton had been seen in Cecil Neville's rooms would be quite sufficient to set evil tongues wagging.

All this flashed across Cecil Neville's mind as she stood in the doorway, a picture of queenly beauty which seemed to light up the room, and made the sheriff's officer stare with all his eyes.

Lord Cecil went forward, a slight flush on his face denoting his embarrassment.

"Lady Grace!" he said.

Then he stopped suddenly, remembering that it would be well not to mention her name before the man.

She bit her lip and looked from one to the other as she gave him her hand.

"I—I thought you were alone!" she said, in a low voice full of confusion and anxiety.

The officer rose and made a slight bow.

"I'll step outside, my lord," he said, respectfully, and he did so. [Pg 224]

"I—I did not know," faltered Lady Grace, looking after him. "Have I done anything very wrong in coming? I did not stop to think. I was so anxious that I thought I would come up to town——"

"Will you not sit down?" he said, gravely, and he placed a chair for her.

She sank into it, and looked up at him.

"What news is there? Have you heard of her? I can't tell you how anxious I am! Ah! I see by your face that something has happened! What is it?"

"Yes; I have had news," he said, in a low voice. "My uncle was right, and you and I were wrong, Lady Grace. Miss Marlowe"—his voice grew grim—"has sailed for Australia."

"Oh, no, no! But alone?" she breathed.

"No, not alone. She went with this Mr. Garland," he said, sternly.

She held out her hand to him.

"Oh, I am so sorry! What can I say, dear Lord Neville, to comfort you?"

He smiled wearily.

"Nothing, I am afraid. There is nothing to be said—or done; I have got to bear it, that is all! I am not the only man who has been—jilted." The cruel word left his lips like a note of steel. "Probably my lot is all too common. Yes, I have got to bear it!"

"There—there is no doubt about it?" she asked.

"None, whatever," he replied. "I have been down to the office and seen the list of passengers, and her name is among them, together with this man's."

"How bad, how heartless, she must be!" she murmured, indignantly.

He winced and looked aside; even in this, the first hour of his trouble, he could scarcely endure to hear Doris thus spoken of.

"I don't know," he said. "I can scarcely believe that she has done what she has; it seems more like a dream than sober reality. But I suppose every man in my case feels like that."

"If I could only do something for you!" she murmured, leaning forward, and looking up into his face with the sympathy which, coming from a woman, is so precious to a man, especially when the woman is young and beautiful. [Pg 225]

"Thanks, awfully," he said, trying to speak in a conventional tone to hide the acuteness of his suffering, "but, as I said, no one can do anything, except it is our old friend, Time. I shall 'get over it,'" and he smiled, as the Spartan may have smiled while the fox was gnawing at his bosom.

"You look very tired," she said, after a moment's pause. "What will you do with yourself to-day? Will you—don't think me obtrusive!—but will you come and drive with me—come, and do something? I am so afraid that you will sit here and mope." She glanced round, then started and looked up at him, as if with a sudden remembrance of the situation. "But I am forgetting! I—I ought not to be here, ought I? Lord Neville, you don't think ill of me for coming?" and the color rose to her face, and she dropped her eloquent eyes as if with a sudden shame.

"Think ill of you, Lady Grace!" he echoed, impetuously. "What, for coming to try and help a poor fellow with your sympathy? I can't tell you how grateful I am! It was a kind action, which not one woman out of a thousand would have done!"

"Ah!" she said, in a low voice; "that is it! One woman in a thousand! Tell me, Lord Cecil, and tell me the truth! I have been foolish and—and forward in coming here to you like this?"

If he had told to her the truth, Lord Cecil would certainly have been obliged to admit that she had been foolish; but what man in his position ever does make such an admission?

“I think you have done a very kind action, Lady Grace,” he said, gravely. “And—shame to him who thinks ill of it! Besides——” He hesitated.

She looked at him with an intelligent flash of her eyes.

“You were going to say that no one need know. You forget the cabman and the man outside.”

Lord Cecil bit his lip.

“At any rate, no one else need know,” he said. “The cabman does not know who you are——” [Pg 226]

“I engaged him from just outside our own house,” she said, in a voice of concern.

“Cabmen are discreet,” he said, to reassure her.

“But the man—who is he, Lord Neville?”

He wiped his moustache, and made a great business of it.

“Oh! a man I do business with,” he said; “nobody of any consequence. He does not know you, I’ll answer for it.”

She drew a long breath.

“Not until this moment have I realized what I have done,” she said, and he saw her lips tremble.

“Don’t be uneasy, Lady Grace,” he said, soothingly. “Let me discharge this cabman and call another——”

“Very well,” she said; then she added, tremulously; “but will you not come back with me?”

“Of course I will!” he assented, promptly, and he seized his hat. “I will come and see Lord Peyton ——”

“My father is away, yachting,” she said; “but come as far as the house, if you will.”

“Yes!” Then he stopped and turned crimson, and stared at her, the picture of a man embarrassed beyond measure.

“Oh, what is it now?” she exclaimed, almost clasping her hands.

“Nothing, nothing,” he hastened to reassure her, though his voice was anything but reassuring; “only that I have just remembered that I cannot leave the—the house just at present. The fact is, I have important business with this man, and—and—oh, Lady Grace, I am so sorry! Don’t misunderstand! I’d give all I’m worth”—he laughed bitterly, and corrected himself—“ten years of my life, to come with you, but——”

He turned away, and set down his hat almost savagely.

“I don’t understand,” she murmured, anxiously, and there seemed to him a touch of reproach in her voice, which maddened him. “But I will not ask you to explain. Good-by,” and she turned away without offering her hand.

He sprang forward; then pulled up, and with something between a groan and an oath, sank into a chair. [Pg 227]

She passed out, closing the door after her. On the bottom of the stairs she found the man sitting with his hands in his pockets, his hat on the back of his head; but he sprang up and removed his hat as she appeared. She made a slight gesture with her hand, and he followed her to the door; there she turned and, looking at him, calmly said:

“You are a sheriff’s officer?”

He looked rather surprised.

“Yes, I am, my lady,” he admitted. “I suppose his lordship told you?”

“No matter,” she said. “Do you know who I am?”

His eyes dropped before her steady gaze, and he looked rather uncertain how to answer.

“I see you do!” she said.

“Well, yes, my lady. You see, I get about a good deal,” he added, apologetically, “and anybody who is accustomed to seeing much of the upper ten, knows Lady Grace Peyton.”

She looked round as he spoke her name, and bit her lip.

“Yes, I am Lady Grace Peyton,” she said; “and I have come to see Lord Cecil Neville because he is in trouble. I am a very great friend of his.”

The man nodded appreciatively. He took her words as meaning that she was engaged to Lord Cecil.

“He is in great trouble, is he not?”

“Well, yes, he is,” he replied. “That is, he is in just a bit of a hole at present! It’s not much of a hole, but he seems as if he couldn’t get out of it.”

“You have arrested him for debt, have you not?”

“Well, yes I have,” he admitted, almost reluctantly. “I suppose he has told you, and it’s no use my denying it, my lady, especially if—begging your pardon for the liberty—you are going to help him; and I suppose you are?”

“Yes,” she said, quietly. “What is the amount?”

He handed her the paper.

“Is that all?”

“All I’m concerned with,” he replied, significantly.

“I will pay it,” she said, after a moment’s reflection. “Will you come with me to the bank?” [Pg 228]

He hesitated a moment, then put on his hat with a certain amount of emphasis.

“Yes, I will! It’s not usual, but I’d trust your ladyship to the utmost.”

“Walk down the street and beckon the cab to follow, please,” she said. “I do not wish Lord Neville to see us together. I do not wish him to know anything of what I have done. Can I trust you?”

“You can, my lady,” he said.

They drove in silence to the West End branch of the bank, which was only half-a-mile off, and Lady Grace drew a check for the amount and handed it to the officer, who took it with unfeigned pleasure.

“I can’t tell you now how glad I am you came, Lady Grace,” he said. “If ever I’ve had a disagreeable job, this one of Lord Neville’s was one. Most of ’em treat one like dirt, and give a lot of trouble into the bargain. I’ve met with rough usage sometimes, my lady; but Lord Neville, though he’s young and full of go, so to speak, has behaved like a gentleman, and treated me as if I had the feelings of a man. Yes, he’s a nobleman, every inch of him, and—I hope you won’t laugh, my lady!—but, I declare, if I’d had the money, I’d have lent it him myself rather than taken him off. There’s the receipt.”

She thought a moment, holding the paper in her hand; then she said:

“Take it to Lord Neville, and put an end to his anxiety; but, remember your promise, and do not tell him from whom you got the money.”

Then she lowered her veil, and left him.

He walked back to Clarges street—almost ran, indeed—and, opening the door in response to Lord Cecil’s gloomy “Come in,” entered, and pantingly surveyed him with a smile.

“Well?” said Lord Cecil, grimly. “You are agreeably surprised at finding me here still! Most jailbirds would have taken advantage of your absence and flown, would they not?”

“Yes, they would,” assented the man, emphatically. “But I spoke the truth when I said you were a real nobleman. And I didn’t hurry back because I was afraid. No!—I knew you’d wait! You are the [Pg 229] right sort, you are, my lord!”

“Thanks,” said Lord Cecil, curtly; “and where have you been?”

“Begging your pardon, my lord, that’s a secret; but I’ve been on business, and there it is!” and he laid the discharge on the table.

Lord Cecil took it up indifferently; then, when he had realized its purport, he started and flushed.

“Why!—what does this mean?” he demanded.

“It means that the claim is settled, and that you are a free man, my lord,” said the officer, warmly; “and if you’ll allow me to offer my respectful congratulations and a word of warning——”

“A word of warning?” said Lord Cecil, confusedly.

“Yes, my lord. This business—though it’s all right in a legal way—has had a curious feature or two about it. I mean that there’s been some underhand work going on: Jews, I expect. You see, though the amounts were owing to several persons originally, they’ve been bought up by some one—some one who’s got a grudge against you! Can you guess who it is?”

Lord Cecil shook his head.

“I know no one who has any grudge against me,” he said, still bewildered.

“Very well, my lord, all the more reason that you should keep your eyes open. At any rate, you’re clear of ’em now, and I wish you good-day. You won’t be sorry to see the back of me, I daresay.”

“Stop!” exclaimed Lord Cecil; and the man turned, with his hand on the door. “Some one has paid this money. Who was it?”

The man shook his head.

“A friend who wishes to remain unknown, my lord,” he said.

Lord Cecil stared at him.

“A friend who—nonsense, man! I must know! Who was it? The marquis?”

The man shook his head again.

“I’m pledged, my lord,” he said. “But it wasn’t the marquis—confound him!” he added, under his breath.

“Not the marquis? I know of no one else—stop!” His face went crimson. “The lady who was here”—he sprang forward and seized the man’s arm in a grip like that of a vice—“was it she?” [Pg 230]

“I’m pledged, my lord. I’ve given my word. I have, indeed!”

Lord Cecil dropped his arm.

“You have answered,” he said, in a low voice, and the officer, after a moment’s hesitation, nodded ruefully and went out.

Lord Cecil paced up and down the room with the discharge in his hand. The excitement of the last twenty-four hours, the suspense respecting Doris, the arrest, and now this sudden release, added to his physical exhaustion, told upon him fearfully.

That he owed his escape from the disgrace of imprisonment to Lady Grace he could not doubt. Doris, on whose truth he would have staked his life, had jilted him; his uncle, the marquis, had, in his hour of trouble, disdainfully deserted him and cast him aside and this woman, whom he had regarded as a perfect type of worldliness, had come to his aid and freed him.

She had done more than that, for she had risked her reputation in her desire to show him her sympathy with him. She had done that which only one woman in a thousand would have dared to do: come to his room alone and unprotected.

A man is never so tender as regards his heart as in the moment when he has been betrayed by one woman and succored by another; and Lord Cecil’s heart throbbed with a painful sense of admiration and gratitude toward this woman of the world, the girl whom he had always regarded as just a society beauty, who had, at such fearful risks to her own name, come to his side in his dark hour.

“May Heaven forget me if ever I forget it!” he said to himself, not once nor twice only. “What shall I say to her? What am I to do to show her how I feel about it? And where shall I get the money to repay her? I can’t let her be the loser; I must pay her; but how—but how?”

Meanwhile, Lady Grace had reached her house in Grosvenor Square, and, going to the drawing-room, found Mr. Spenser Churchill seated in an easy-chair, reading the last annual report of the Sweeps’ Orphan Home. [Pg 231]

“Well?” he said, looking up with a bland smile.

She sank into a chair, and began pulling off her gloves, her eyes downcast, her face pale and thoughtful.

“It is done,” she said.

“Ah!” he said, with a nod of satisfaction. “You have seen him, then?”

“Yes, I have seen him,” she said, in a low voice. “I was only just in time.”

He smiled with an air of complacency.

“Oh, I think I timed it carefully,” he said. “I knew he would be at the office the moment they opened it; I calculated that he would be arrested shortly after, and that he would go to his rooms and telegraph to the marquis, allowing a little over an hour—say two—for the answer, a refusal, as the dear marquis and I arranged; and there you are, you see!” and he laughed, softly.

“Yes,” she said; “you arranged it very well.”

“Ye—s! And the news at the office. Is he satisfied?”

“Yes, he is satisfied. He saw her name. It did not occur to him to ascertain if she had really sailed; if it had——” She paused, significantly.

The philanthropist laughed with unctuous enjoyment.

“But he didn’t, you see, my dear young lady. That is just the little risk one has to run; but, after all, it isn’t much risk. Why should he suspect that any one should go to the trouble and expense of booking a passage for Miss Marlowe? And you found him in bonds—just starting for prison?” And he rubbed his hands together with renewed enjoyment. “Poor Cecil! Really, it is very sad that one should be compelled to take such strong measures. And yet, after all, will not the lesson be a salutary one? Pride must have a fall, dear lady; pride must have a fall! And our dear Cecil”—his small eyes glinted maliciously for a moment—“was very, very proud! And you paid the money?”

She looked up with a little start.

“Yes, I paid the money. In fact, I have carried out your instructions to the letter.” [Pg 232]

“Yes, yes; you are a courageous girl, dear lady. It is not every one so well known as you who would so far brave the consequences as to go to a gentleman’s rooms——”

She looked at him, with a flash in her eyes and with a tight compression of the lips, but he pretended not to notice the warning signs.

“Our dear Cecil ought to be very grateful to you; very! And, if I know his generous nature—and I fancy I do—I think he must be. Oh, yes, he will never forget it—never! Why, bless me, if it were known—if, for instance, any acquaintance had seen you going or departing—what would not be said?” And he held up his fat hands.

She sprang to her feet, and stood with her hand pressed against the chair, her bosom heaving, her magnificent eyes fixed upon him with suppressed fury.

“A word, a hint, just a whisper, is enough nowadays for the scandal-loving world; and I can just fancy how delighted the society papers would be with such a dainty morsel as the incident of a visit to Lord C——l N——l from Lady G——e P——n. They never print the name in full; oh, no; but everybody understands——”

“Take care!” she breathed. “Do not drive me too far!”

“Oh, yes, yes; we must take care!” he assented, feigning to misunderstand her. “We must not breathe a word of it, of course; must flatly contradict it, if we hear a hint dropped. But there, dear Cecil would rather die than admit it!”

“Yes,” she said, between her teeth; “yes, you speak the truth there; he would rather die than harm should come to me—to any one—for his sake!”

“Y-e-s, he is so high-minded, isn’t he? And how does the dear fellow bear this blow? It isn’t pleasant to be jilted, is it? Is he resigned? I am curious now to hear how he takes it!”

“Go to him and ask him!” she said, with fine scorn. “Take care, Spenser Churchill! Up to the present your schemes have succeeded. You know best how far they will carry you. To me it seems [Pg 233] that you—and I are walking on a volcano. What if he should find this—this girl?”

“Miss Marlowe, do you mean?” he said. “My dear lady, you forget; she is in Australia!” he said.

“Is she in London?” she asked, in a lower voice, and looking away from him. “If so, and he finds her——” She stopped, significantly.

He smiled blandly.

“Let me beg of you not to be uneasy, dear lady,” he said, seriously. “The young lady in question left England nearly a week ago, and there is no chance of our friend Cecil meeting her until it is too late.”

“Too late?” she echoed, raising her eyes to his face.

“Yes,” he smiled. “Until he is married.”

She let her hand fall from the mantel shelf, and a warm crimson flooded her face, and he chuckled, unctuously.

“I am quite sure it is time dear Cecil ‘ranged himself,’ as the French say; it really is time he was married and settled down. Don’t you agree with me? Ah, I see it is too delicate a subject. Well, good-morning, dear lady. Accept my profound homage and admiration for your courage and generosity in our dear young friend’s behalf,” and with another chuckle he smiled himself out of the room.

CHAPTER XXV.

AS IN A DREAM.

"There is no place like Florence," said Lady Despard, in her soft, languorous voice. "One gets tired of London, and Paris, and Venice! I always fancy, when I'm there, that I'm living somewhere in Regent's Park, near the canal, you know; and, as for the country in England, you either get burned up by the heat or drowned by the rain. But Florence"—she paused, and sighed contentedly—"oh, it's always delicious!"

She was lying in a hammock, swung between two laburnums, on the lawn in front of the Villa Rimini, and she addressed Doris, who sat on the ground, with an open book in her lap, but with her eyes fixed dreamily on the exquisite view, which stretched out in an endless vista of grassy [Pg 234] plains, and violet-tinted hills, over which the full moon was shedding its silvery light.

The soft evening breeze came to the two women, laden with flowers, as with an offering; there were flowers everywhere; in the long beds, starring the velvety lawns; on the banks, which ran along the limits of the garden; in huge jardinieres, on the terraces and balconies; on the plains, which lay like embroidered cloths beneath them, and over the hills, to which they lent color and perfume.

It was a land of fairies, a land of beauty, in which every breath of wind that blew carried with it the memory of music and song, of laughter and joyfulness. In a word, it was Florence in the height of her loveliness, crowned as a bride for her bridegroom the summer, and rejoicing in her splendor.

The Villa Rimini, with its numerous windows twinkling with the recently-lit candles, was one of the most beautiful of the many palatial residences in the "City of Flowers." It had been a home of one of the ancient princes, and when Lady Despard had first seen, fancied and bought it, was nearly in ruins; but, with the immense wealth at her command, she had restored it, if not to quite its ancient splendor, at least to a semblance which came very near the original reality.

Marble corridors, vast saloons, with rare hangings and costly frescoes, statues which the Louvre would gladly have bidden for, antique fountains and priceless mosaics were all here as in the days when the princely owners were, indeed, a name and a power in the land.

And here she and Doris had been living a dreamy existence, a period of lotus-eating, for nearly a month.

There was the usual colony of English in Florence, of which the Villa Rimini was, by right of its splendor and the rank and wealth of Lady Despard, the center.

Her hospitality was limitless, and the Salon of the Princes, as the vast reception-room was called, was every afternoon the scene of a gathering which almost resembled a royal levee; while the widely-extending grounds were open to those fortunate individuals who had procured an introduction to the wealthy owner.

To the Villa Rimini came also the Florentine nobility; tall, grave-looking Italians, with their high- [Pg 235] bred voices and polished manners, men whom Doris always pictured as wearing the silken hose and brocaded tunics of their forefathers in the old Florentine days, when men wore shoes almost as pointed as the swords which were always ready to leap from their scabbards with—or without—the slightest provocation.

Amidst these surroundings, Lady Despard held what might, with little exaggeration, be termed a court; but it might be said, to her credit, the admiration, the adoration she received did not turn her head, probably because she recognized the obvious fact that she shared her throne with the quiet-looking, soft-voiced girl who had come to her as a companion, and whom she had grown to regard and love as a friend.

Once, when the reception was over and the two women were alone, as they were this evening, she looked at Doris, laughingly, and said:

"Well, dear, tired of all the adulation and worship, or are you looking forward to to-morrow's repetition? Seriously, my dear, I am beginning to be a little jealous; more than half the pretty speeches this afternoon were addressed to Miss Marlowe, and your bouquets were quite as numerous as mine. Beware of vanity, Doris!"

And Doris had looked up at her with the quiet smile, beneath which always lay an undercurrent of sadness, and shook her head, as she replied:

"The danger is all on your side, Lady Despard. You are the sun, I am merely the shadow. Some day some one will pluck the sun from its place, and the shadow will be desolate!"

But Lady Despard had laughed placidly.

"No, thank you, dear! I've been married once, and, as the boy said of the prickly pear, 'No more for me, thank you!' But yours is another case altogether, and I confess that I tremble every day lest you should come and tell me, with that mouselike little smile of yours, that one of these men is going to take you from me! Ah! what a pity it would be!—for we are so happy, you and I, dear! If girls could only know when they are well off! But they never do. It's only when they have [Pg 236] resigned their liberty and given all their heart for about a quarter of some selfish man's that they discover what a fraud matrimony is!"

And Doris had made no reply beyond the quiet, "mouselike smile," and a little sigh, which was too

low to reach her companion’s ear.

Not Lady Despard alone, but many another of the frequenters of the Villa Rimini, have wondered that this beautiful English girl should be so irresponsive to the admiration and attentions lavished upon her. Men of rank and position, for whom the matrons of society angled unceasingly, paid court to her, needing but a smile or word of encouragement to lay their titles at her feet; but the smile nor the word were never extended to them. As the Princess of Carthage, clad in the mystic veil, moved, like an unapproachable spirit, among the suitors at her father’s court, so Doris Marlowe lived, surrounded by a barrier of reserve which, vague and intangible as it was, served to keep the most ardent at arm’s length.

The past alone was to her reality; the present seemed like a dream; and often she sat beside Lady Despard, surrounded by a crowd of people laughing and talking, the voices died upon her ears, and she heard only the murmur of the brook in Barton meadows, mingling with the voice of the man who had won her heart and tossed it aside, shattered and broken forever.

Often she wondered whether he had married the Lady Grace—whose name, when first she had heard it on his lips, had sounded like a knell in her ears.

If stone walls do not a prison make, a crowd cannot destroy solitude, and Doris, in the midst of the brilliant throng which made the Villa Rimini its center, lived in a mental and spiritual solitude, on the threshold of which only two persons ever trod. One was Lady Despard, whom she loved, the other was—Percy Levant. She would have treated him as coldly as she did all the others, but it was impossible. He made it impossible by never giving her a chance of repulsing him. Since the evening he had come to Chester Gardens for the first time he had never paid her a single compliment, and from his lips alone she never received a single “pretty” speech. [Pg 237]

Although he slept at the inn, he had a luxurious suite of apartments in the villa, and they met at almost every meal, and frequently during the day, but his manner to Doris was one of studious courtesy toned by a reserve which matched her own.

By the rest he was regarded as the most charming of men. The women secretly—some of them openly—adored him for his good looks, which were remarkable even in that land of handsome faces, and for the exquisite voice, which was always at their service. The men voted him a “good fellow,” and were warm in his praises. The reception from which he was absent always seemed lacking in its accustomed brightness, and no dance or outdoor excursion was complete without Mr. Percy Levant.

Perhaps the air of mystery which surrounded him increased the interest he awakened. Nobody knew anything about him, except that he was in Florence to study music, and, in some vague, unexplained way, to collect materials for a magnificent and unique music-room which Lady Despard intended building in one of her houses, and at some unfixed time in the dim future.

Of himself, and his own affairs and past history, he was as silent as Doris was of hers; and people who were at first inclined to be curious accepted his want of a past and were content to take him for what he was—a light-hearted waif floating like a bubble on the surface of society.

To the superficial frequenters of the Villa Rimini he did not seem to have a care and scarcely an object in life, excepting it were to play and sing at all times and seasons, whenever Lady Despard requested him.

But Doris was something more than a superficial observer, and often when, in the early morning or in the delicious gloaming, she was wandering dreamily through the flower-scented grounds, she would come across him pacing moodily beneath the trees, or lying on a bank, with his head resting on his hands, and his handsome face darkened by an expression which would have [Pg 238] startled his many friends who thought they knew him quite intimately.

At such times he would spring up, dispelling his moodiness instantly, and resume his usual manner; but the impression he had made remained with Doris.

And, having seen him off his guard, as it were, she found herself, at odd times, thinking of him. He seemed as alone in the midst of the pleasure-seeking crowd as herself. From thinking of him in an indifferent, casual kind of way, she grew, all unconsciously, to entertain a vague sort of sympathy for him, which she would never have been capable of if he had lavished compliments upon her, as the rest did. She felt convinced that some shadow lay in his past, and that the ready jest and the fluent laugh only hid a wound which he was too proud to permit the world to gape at.

This was the first phase of their relation; the second began during the second week of their Florentine life. She became conscious that his presence at the villa contributed not only to the enjoyment of Lady Despard and the rest, but to hers!

In an indescribable way he seemed to know exactly what was wanted at any given moment, and to supply it, and his thoughtfulness, strangely enough, always appeared to save trouble to Doris.

From the first day of her coming to Lady Despard, she had undertaken the arrangement of the flowers in the various rooms, and she continued to do so in Florence as in London. The head gardener was accustomed to send up huge baskets of flowers each morning, which Doris would set out and arrange in the various vases and bowls. It was a long task, and one morning he had entered the salon and found her in the midst of it, looking rather pale and tired, for the room was hot and close with the almost overpowering perfume.

“That is a serious business,” he said, in his quiet fashion.

“Isn’t it?” she assented, with a smile.

He said nothing more, and passed out; but the next morning Doris found the flowers spread out on a table, under an awning, in a shady part of the terrace.

"Why, how thoughtful of the gardener!" she said to Lady Despard's maid, who stood near. [Pg 239]

"Oh, but it wasn't the gardener, miss," said the girl. "It was Mr. Percy who brought the table out here; he did it himself, and put the awning up."

"It was very kind of him," said Doris, and when he came in to breakfast she thanked him.

He bowed, slightly.

"It is cooler out there," he said, simply, and turned to speak to Lady Despard at once.

A few evenings afterward a discussion arose respecting a book that had suddenly leaped into popular favor.

"What do you think of it, Miss Marlowe?" inquired an old Italian nobleman, whose breast sparkled with orders.

"I haven't read it, count," said Doris.

Instantly there was an inquiry for the book, but it appeared that no one possessed a copy.

"Oh, you must read it! I'll send to London for a copy," said the count.

An hour afterward some one wanted a song from Percy Levant, but he was nowhere to be found, but presently one of the young men, of whom there were always more than a sufficient quantity at the villa, came in with a:

"I say, Lady Despard, if Mr. Levant doesn't mind, he'll lose that jolly voice of his! I've just met him in the hall, wet through; it's raining cats and dogs, you know! Can't make out where on earth he's been, don't you know!"

A little later, Percy Levant sauntered into the room, and Doris saw him laughing and talking with one and another on his way to the piano, and she thought the lad must have been mistaken; but, when all had gone, and she was going upstairs, he came to her, with something in his hand.

"There is the book they were talking about," he said. "I fancy it isn't worth the fuss they are making about it."

"Where did you get it?" said Doris.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I was lucky enough to find a copy in the town," he replied.

"Then it was for that you went out and got wet!" she exclaimed. "It was very kind, but—was it worth while, Mr. Levant?" [Pg 240]

"I thought so, and think so still, but I may be mistaken," he retorted, with his peculiar, half-cynical smile. "Good-night," and he moved away, as if the incident were done with.

Gradually she began to realize that in any difficulty he was always at her side. A big picnic was to be arranged, and Lady Despard, who had got accustomed to leaving everything to Doris, had done so on this occasion, and Doris was up early in the morning to give the necessary orders. She found that all the preparations had been made. Mr. Percy Levant had interviewed the major domo, and the thing was done.

When Doris thanked him, he smiled, and courteously cut her short.

"I don't deserve any thanks," he said. "You see, my Italian is not so good as yours, and I was anxious to practice it with the major domo, that's all. We are all moved by selfish motives, Miss Marlowe."

"Not all," said Doris. "Not Mr. Percy Levant."

He started slightly, and fixed his brilliant eyes on her for a second; then, with a laugh, said:

"Yes, even Mr. Percy Levant."

Twenty times a day she found him coming to her assistance, but always in the same way, always with the same unobtrusiveness, which was almost coldness, but which was very welcome to Doris, contrasted with the fervent, accentuated attention of the rest of the men.

This evening, as she sat beside the hammock, looking at the stars, which were beginning to peep out from the midst of the deep blue of the sky, and thinking of the past, she was conscious, in a half-troubled way, of recalling one of the innumerable services Percy Levant had rendered her, and she started when Lady Despard said, in her sleepy fashion:

"I wonder where Mr. Levant is? Has he gone to the hotel? I haven't seen him all the evening. How one misses him, doesn't one?"

"Yes," said Doris. "That is our tribute to his amiability."

Lady Despard laughed.

"He is quite the bright particular star of our group," she said. "Some of our fair Florentine friends are almost mad about him. I shouldn't wonder if he were caught and chained before we leave." [Pg 241]

"Yes?" said Doris.

Lady Despard leaned over the hammock and regarded her with a lazy smile.

“What a cold little ‘yes,’” she said. “I really believe you are the only woman here who doesn’t admire him.”

“But I do admire him,” said Doris, smiling in return. “I think he is the handsomest man I ever saw ——” She stopped and picked up the book, for unnoticed by Lady Despard he had come up and stood beside the hammock.

“May one inquire the subject of Miss Marlowe’s encomium?” he asked, and he looked from one to the other with his usual smile, but Doris, glancing up at him, saw, or fancied she saw, the shadow of the darkness which she, and she alone, had discovered his face could wear.

“Oh, no one you know,” said Lady Despard. “May one ask where you have been all this long while?”

“All this long while! A few hours! What a testimony to one’s worth!” he said, as lightly as before, but his eyes, as they rested on Doris’ pensive face, were grave and intent. “I have been wandering in the woods, listening to the birds.”

“While we have been dying to listen to you,” said Lady Despard, with mock reproach. “We have missed you terribly, haven’t we, Doris?”

“Miss Marlowe is halting between truth and politeness,” he said, as Doris remained silent. “I will spare her a reply.”

“We’ve had no music to speak of,” said Lady Despard. “Won’t you sing us something now? Shall we go into the house?”

“No, no,” he said, almost abruptly. “Who would exchange this”—and he waved his hand—“for four walls? What shall I sing to you? Let me think.”

He thought for a moment, then he began to sing.

Doris never heard his voice, even in the crowded saloon, without feeling a thrill run through her, but to-night, although he sang in so low a tone that it seemed scarcely more than a whisper, the melody stirred her to her depths, and brought the tears to her eyes. [Pg 242]

“That is beautiful,” said Lady Despard, with a little sigh. “We won’t spoil it by asking for another. Come, Doris, dear. Will you come in, Mr. Levant?”

“No, thanks,” he said, slowly. “I’ll say good-night now.”

He did not offer to shake hands, and the two ladies left him and went toward the house. As they were ascending the steps, Lady Despard stopped, and uttered an exclamation:

“Oh, my bracelet!”

“What is it? Have you lost it?” inquired Doris.

“Yes; I must have dropped it while I was in the hammock! I’ll go back——”

“No; I’ll go!” said Doris, and she ran back.

She had almost reached the spot where they had been sitting, when, with a start, she saw in the starlight, a man lying full length on the grass, with his face hidden on his arm. It was Percy Levant. He sprang up at the sound of her footsteps, and confronted her, and Doris saw that his face was pale and haggard, so different, indeed, to its usual bright and careless expression, that she felt a shock of distress and almost fear.

“Mr. Levant!” she said, falteringly; then she recovered herself. “I have come back for Lady Despard’s bracelet,” stooping down and looking about her, to give him time.

“It is here,” he said, picking it up.

“Thanks!” she said. “Good-night!”

“Wait! Will you wait a moment?” he asked, and his voice, usually so soft and musical, sounded hoarse and strained.

Doris stood, silent and downcast, and waited for him to go on.

CHAPTER XXVI.

[Pg 243]

NOT LOVE, BUT PITY.

Doris' own face grew a little paler as she looked at him, so haggard was his; and yet his pallor lent an added charm to his delicately-cut features and expressive, deeply-colored eyes bent upon her with a strange, intent look, as she sat on the edge of the hammock, and half trembling, for she knew not what reason, waited for him to speak. She was startled by the changed appearance of the man, who was usually self-possession itself. He stood for a moment in silence, leaning against one of the trees to which the hammock was slung, his arms folded, his head sunk on his breast, and a nightingale in a neighboring tree commenced to sing; all her life afterward Doris never heard a nightingale without recalling this night.

"Miss Marlowe," he said, at last, and he spoke in a voice so low that it seemed to harmonize with the voice of the bird. "If I were wise I should let you go, even now! But—I cannot, I cannot! Chance is too strong for me. It sent you back to find me—as you found me, and I must speak to you, and perhaps for the last time. I am leaving the villa—Italy. I go to England to-morrow."

Doris glanced up at him; a streak of light from one of the brilliant windows fell across his handsome face, and she saw that, with all his self-command, his lips trembled.

"I am sorry," she murmured, and a faint thrill of regret stirred her. She knew that he had been her friend, that with all his apparent coldness and reserve he had never lost an opportunity of quietly serving her. "I am afraid you have heard bad news."

"No," he said. "I have heard no bad news, for the best of reasons; there is no one to send me news of any kind, bad or good. I am a man without a friend in the world."

"Ah, no!" she said, almost inaudibly.

"I am not forgetting you, nor Lady Despard," he said. "But you—but Lady Despard, for whose kindness I am, and shall ever be, grateful—will she remember me after one week's absence, [Pg 244] excepting as that of the man whose voice helped to while away an idle half-hour, and amuse her friends? And why should she?" he added, not bitterly, but with a grave sadness that touched Doris deeply. "I am, as I have always been, alone in the world—a man of no account, a speck of dust dancing in the sunbeam one moment, the next, floating in the gutter. Don't think I say this to excite your pity. No! It is because I want you to remember what I am, how worthless and insignificant—just Percy Levant, 'the man who sings for Lady Despard!'"

He smiled with a bitter self-scorn which lent to his face an air of tragedy that fascinated Doris.

"And now you wonder, seeing that I am basking in the sunshine just at present, that I should wish to leave it, and sink into the mire again. I don't wish it. If I could I would remain at the Villa Rimini, to play the part of Lady Despard's singing man, till she grew weary, or the voice which renders me acceptable lost its novelty and became valueless. But I cannot stay. A power stronger than my will is driving me, and if you had not come back to seek for her ladyship's bracelet, I should have gone without a word of farewell to you, who are the cause of my flight."

Doris started and looked up at him.

"I?" she said, her brows drawn together with startled trouble.

"Yes, you, Miss Marlowe," he said, quietly, but with something in the music of his voice that thrilled Doris. "You will listen while I try and tell you? Heaven knows, I find it hard enough. Be patient with me—oh, be patient with me!" He held out his hand with a sudden gesture of entreaty, then let it fall to his side. "How poor, how friendless, how completely alone I am, you know; but I am base enough to be proud as well, and all my life I have been prouder of nothing more than my power to repay the world's scorn of my poverty and abjectness with my scorn for the world. I prided myself on the fact that I had no heart. For other men there might be happiness, a life shared with some one whom they loved, and who loved them in return; for me, the social outcast, the pariah, there could be no such thing as love, no hope that any woman [Pg 245] could be found to share my poverty and my hopelessness. So I went through the world, hardening my heart, and telling myself that at least I should be spared the madness which men call love."

He paused a moment, and looked at her downcast face, then went on:

"This was before I went to Chester Gardens. You don't remember that night, I dare say; I shall never forget it, for it was the night upon which I first saw you—first learned that all my pride was to melt at the sight of a woman's face, at the sound of a woman's voice. Miss Marlowe, if I had been a wise man, I would have taken my hat and gone out of your presence never to return; but the spell was wrought, and I consented to come here in the train of Lady Despard, as her jester—her singing man. I would have come in the capacity of her footman or bootboy, if there had been no other place for me, no other way of being near you——"

Doris looked up with a pale, startled face, and made a movement to depart, but he stretched out his hand again pleadingly.

"Ah! wait! Let me finish. I fought hard against the influence which had fallen on me—fought day by day, with all my strength; but against the spell you had, all unconsciously, woven around me, fighting was of as little avail as it would be to try and stem the incoming tide. The iron had entered my soul, and I knew all at once that my heart and life were bound up in one sentiment, my intense love for you!"

Doris rose tremblingly.

“I have said it now,” he continued. “My secret is out. I love you, Miss Marlowe—I, Lady Despard’s camp follower, the jester of the Villa Rimini, have dared to love its brightest ornament!”

And he laughed with mingled sadness and bitterness.

“I was mad, was I not? I ought to have selected her lady’s maid—any one of the maids about the place. But Miss Marlowe! The beautiful creature for whose smile lords and princes, men of fame and note, were willing to contend! Mad! Yes! But all love is madness, so they say, and—well, that is my only excuse. And now, before you send me away with one of those gentle smiles of yours, [Pg 246] let me tell you what I have to offer you. Myself—and nothing! I have nothing but my voice to depend upon. I lay it at your feet, knowing well that at a word from you other men would lay their coronets and their gold there.” He laughed again. “Not much to offer, Miss Marlowe; but it is my all, and my life goes with it! And yet, if you stooped to take it—well”—he drew a long breath and his magnificent eyes seemed to glow—“well, I think I could make a good fight of it! The world should hear of Percy Levant, and you should not be ashamed of the man whose hand you had stooped to take. Yes!”—he bent forward with outstretched hands. “With your love to encourage me, with you by my side to make the struggle worth while, I would win a name which at least might be not unworthy of you! Ah, think a moment!” he pleaded, his voice suddenly quivering in its intensity. “Think what your answer means to me! To any of these others it might matter a good deal, I grant, whether you said them ‘yes’ or ‘no;’ but they have so many other things to live for—rank, wealth, place in the world! But I! I have nothing but this wild mad love of mine, this deep love for you which seems part and parcel of my very being! Miss Marlowe—Doris—it is a beggar who pleads to you for the one chance which will lift him from a life which has never yet known happiness to one of hope and perfect joy! Think and—ah, I love you! I love you! Don’t send me away!” and he was on his knees beside her, his face upturned to hers with an expression which a man might wear who is indeed pleading for his life.

Doris looked down at him speechlessly. His passionate avowal, the wonderful music of every word, the handsome face and thrilling eyes affected her strangely; but she was more moved by the confession of his lowliness and loneliness than by aught else. She, too, was she not lowly enough and lonely enough, also? This, at least, made a bond between them.

She did not love him, but—she pitied him; and pity, with such a girl as Doris, is indeed, near akin to love.

What should she say to him? The thought of having to tell him that there was no hope for him smote her with a keen sense of pain! She dreaded seeing his face as she dealt the blow. She [Pg 247] herself had loved, you see, and could sympathize with him. Heaven! how hard it was that she should have to rob the friendless, solitary man of his one chance of happiness! She faltered and hesitated; and a light of hope—wild, almost maddening hope—burned in his eyes.

“Doris!” he breathed; “Doris!”

“Hush! hush!” she said. “Ah! why have you told me this? Why didn’t you go without telling me?”

“Forgive me!” he answered. “I was going. If you had not come back in the moment of my struggle, you would not have seen me again! And now I have told you! You hesitate!”

“I hesitate because——” she paused, and looked down at him with sweet, troubled gravity and tenderness, the tenderness of a woman who is about to deal a man who loves her the deadliest blow he can receive at her hands. “Because I cannot love you. I”—her voice broke, but she struggled with it and went on—“I care nothing for rank or wealth; they are nothing to me. I should say what I have said if you were a prince. I shall never marry any one, Mr. Levant!” She turned her head aside, but he saw the tears fill her eyes. “I am sorry, sorry, sorry!” she murmured. “There is no one I like better. I did not know, I never guessed that you wished—that you wished me to be your wife; but I knew that you were my friend, and I was proud that it should be so.”

“Your friend!” he breathed. “Only friend! Ah, Doris! many and many a night I have wandered here, watching the light in your window, and wondering whether by some miracle I should win you! Your friend! Well, I played my part well—I hid my heart’s secret while it was possible.”

“Yes,” she said, gently. “I never guessed it! And now we must part—I must lose my friend! But I am grateful—ah, so grateful. You speak as if I were so far above you! You forget that I also am alone, and lowlier than yourself, for I am a woman, while you are a man, with all the world before you.”

“No,” he said; “all the world lies behind me. Losing you I say good-by to any hope of happiness; good-by to ambition! Percy Levant and the world have done with each other from to-night!” [Pg 248]

“Oh, no! no!” she murmured, pleadingly. “You do not know! If I told you that I am not worthy of your love; that I am not only poor and friendless, but”—her face went paler, and her lips quivered—“but nameless! That my life has been wrecked——”

“Wait! wait!” he said, with a strange expression on his face, his voice suddenly hoarse. “Tell me nothing! I know—I know as surely as that these stars are above us, that not an ignoble thought, not one unworthy deed, has ever stained your life. What sorrows have come to you have been undeserved. Nothing could shake my faith in you, my queen, for you are my heart’s queen. Ah, Doris, give yourself to me from to-night! Let me make a fresh life for you; let me teach you to forget the past; let me make the future for you! Say yes, for my sake—or your own! Yes, for your own! See how confident I am that I can make you forget—make you happy! It is my love gives me confidence. I ask for so little—I don’t ask you to love me! I ask you to confide yourself and your future to me. I know that I shall win your love—I am not afraid.” His face lit up as if transfigured

by the hope that had sprung up within his breast. “With you by my side I can face the world, and vanquish it! Doris! Doris!”

She put her hand to her eyes, and her lips quivered.

“And you will be content?” she murmured, almost inaudibly. “Content to accept so little for all you offer me—for so much love?”

“Content? Yes!” he responded, fervently, with a world of meaning in his voice. “Yes, I shall be content! I can guess, though you shall tell me nothing now, dearest, that there has been some one else, some other man, who proved unworthy the great treasure of your love, that you have not forgotten him, and the sorrow he caused you! I ask nothing! I am content to wait, and win back your heart for myself, and I shall win it! Now, my queen, give me my sentence,” and he held his hand out to her.

Half-dazed by his passionate pleading, touched by the generosity of his faith and belief in her, thinking of him and not of herself, Doris slowly let her hand fall into his.

He did not take her in his arms, but his hand closed on hers and held it in a close grasp, then, as [Pg 249] he pressed his lips to it, he murmured: “My queen! my queen!” with a passionate reverence that would have moved a harder heart than Doris’.

She drew her hand from his clasp gently, and he did not offer to retain it, as if he meant to show her that his promise to be content to wait until he had won her love was something more than an empty phrase.

“Good-night,” he murmured. “Good-night, Doris! Some day you will know how happy you have made me! Some day when I have taught you to know what happiness means! Good-night, my love, my queen!”

She looked at him for a moment through a mist of tears—tears that fell upon the grave of her old love—and then glided from his side.

He stood, where she had left him, watching her till the glimmer of her white dress faded from his sight; then he threw himself on the ground and covered his eyes with his hands.

“Great Heaven!” he murmured, “am I mad or dreaming? Is she mine, mine, mine? Oh, my darling, my beautiful! I will keep my word! You shall be happy! I swear it! I swear——” he raised his hand to the silent, star-gemmed sky, then stopped and stared with a sudden horror, for there in front of him stood Mr. Spenser Churchill. He stood with his pale, smooth face smiling unctuously down upon him, a half-mocking smile curving the sleek lips.

“Ah, my dear Percy!” he murmured, smoothly. “How do you do? How do you do? Surprised to see me. Yes. You look rather startled. Almost as if you had forgotten me!”

Percy Levant rose to his feet, his eyes still fixed on the smiling face.

“By Heaven;” he breathed, almost with a groan. “I had forgotten you!”

“Really? Now wasn’t that a little ungrateful, eh? To forget your best friend—one who has always had your best and truest interests at heart! Tut, tut, my dear Percy.”

“When—when did you come?” demanded the other, in a low voice. [Pg 250]

“Almost this moment. I have just looked in at the villa, and greeted our fair hostess. Hearing that my dear young friend, Miss Marlowe, was in the garden, I asked permission to come in search of her, and—er—found her so deeply engaged that I did not venture to intrude myself.”

Percy Levant looked from one side to the other.

“You—you have been listening?” he said.

Mr. Spenser Churchill looked very much shocked.

“My dear Percy, what a dreadful charge! Listening? Certainly not! Seeing you—er—immersed in each other’s conversation, I took a little stroll, and waited until the interview had come to a close.”

Percy Levant leaned against the tree with his arms folded, his head bent upon his breast, but his eyes still fixed upon the other man’s. His face was pale, and there were great drops of sweat upon his brow.

“And how goes our little arrangement, my dear Percy? Am I to congratulate you? Though I didn’t listen, as you so cruelly suggested, I gathered that your suit was meeting with a favorable reception. Did my judgment play me false, or has Miss Marlowe accepted you?”

The younger man remained silent for a moment; then he said, almost inaudibly:

“She—accepted me.”

Spenser Churchill nodded with a smile of satisfaction.

“Capital! I congratulate you, my dear Percy. I congrat——”

The smooth, oily voice broke off suddenly, for Percy Levant had seized the speaker by the shoulder, and held him in a grasp of steel.

“Silence!” he groaned out between his teeth. “What devil prompted you to come here to-night?—Heaven!—to-night!”

“My dear Percy, I came to see how you were progressing; not that I was anxious! Oh, dear, no! I

knew that that handsome face and lovely voice of yours would prove irresistible; but I wanted to see for myself how our little scheme was going on——”

“And I had forgotten you!” dropped from Percy Levant’s lips. “Yes, I swear it! I remembered nothing but that I loved her——” [Pg 251]

Mr. Spenser Churchill’s lips wreathed in a rather painful smile, for the grasp of the strong hand made him shudder.

“You—you fiend, you cannot believe it, cannot understand! How should such as you believe that I had forgotten our devilish contract, that I should love her for herself alone——” He broke off and his head dropped.

“Come, come, my dear Percy, the delicate sentiment you have expressed does you credit. Of course you love Miss Marlowe for herself, and the fact that you happen to know that she is not so poor as she thinks herself—in fact, that in marrying her you make a rich man of yourself—goes for nothing. Of course, of course! Very nice and—er—proper. But—would you mind taking your hand from my shoulder; you have remarkably strong fingers, my dear Percy! But I trust you will not forget that I have a curious document in my possession——”

Percy Levant withdrew his hand with a sudden and violent thrust that caused the philanthropist to spin round like a teetotum.

“Remember? Yes, I remember!” he said, hoarsely. “It would be as well for you if I had continued to forget it! Keep out of my sight while you are here, or I will not answer for myself!”

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE GLASS OF FASHION.

Doris went back to the house scarcely knowing whether she was awake or dreaming. Could it be possible that she had promised to be Percy Levant's wife? She stood for a moment outside the door of Lady Despard's *boudoir*, trying to realize all that had passed, and the step she had taken so strangely, so suddenly, and when Lady Despard called out, "Is that you, Doris?" she started like one awakening from sleep.

"Yes, it is I," she said. "There is your bracelet."

"Oh, thank you, dear. I am afraid you have had a hard search! Why—what is the matter?" she broke off to exclaim as Doris turned her face to the light. "Why, dear, you are as white as a ghost, and your hands"—taking them anxiously—"are burning. Doris, you have taken a chill! You foolish child, to stay out so long, and on account of this stupid bracelet. Why, it isn't of the slightest consequence! Go to bed at once, dear. Stay, I'll come up with you. You look dreadfully ill!" [Pg 252]

"I am not ill," said Doris, and she sank down on the leopard skin at Lady Despard's feet. "I have something to tell you, Lady Despard. It was not your bracelet that kept me so long; I—I have been talking to Mr. Levant."

"To Percy Levant! He was there still? What could he have to say? Ah! You don't mean to tell me, Doris, that he has proposed to you?" exclaimed her ladyship, in a tone of suppressed excitement.

"Yes," said Doris, in a low voice; "he has asked me to be his wife."

"And—and you said 'No,' of course?"

"I said 'Yes,'" replied Doris.

Her ladyship sank back, and stared at the pale, lovely face.

"You—said—'yes'! But, good heavens, my dear Doris, have you thought? Percy Levant! Why, child, there are half-a-dozen of the best of the men here madly in love with you. I know—I know—that the Prince Romanis is only waiting an opportunity to propose to you! He hinted as much to me yesterday! And Percy Levant! Of course, I'm not surprised that he should ask you; I've seen that he was over head in love with you. Of course, we've all seen it, but never thought he would venture to tell you, least of all that he should ask you to be his wife. Why—why, he hasn't a penny; he is as poor as a churchmouse."

"Then he is as rich as I," said Doris, in a low voice.

"Yes; but—but——! But, there, what is the use of talking; it's his face and his voice, of course. And how long have you cared for him? Are you sure you love him?"

Doris' face grew scarlet for a moment, then went pale again.

"He loves me very dearly and truly," she murmured, almost inaudibly. [Pg 253]

"Yes! That's nothing wonderful; so do other men. But you, you—do you love him?"

"I shall marry him," said Doris, gently.

Lady Despard almost groaned.

"Why, child, you must have taken leave of your senses. You have consented to marry a poor man, a man of whom one knows nothing, and you haven't even the excuse that you love him!"

Doris leaned her head upon her hand so that her face was hidden from Lady Despard's anxiously searching eyes.

"I respect him; I think him worthy——"

Lady Despard broke in impatiently:

"My dear, dear child, how can you tell? What experience have you had?"

Doris looked up with a swift spasm of pain.

"I have had some experience," she said, in a low, troubled voice. "You ask me if I love him. He knows that I do not, and he is content. Lady Despard, I have had two great sorrows in my life—the loss of him who stood as a father to me was one; the other was the discovery that the man to whom I had given my heart——" She stopped. "Is it so easy to love, and lose, and forget, and love again so quickly?"

Lady Despard laid her hand upon her head with tender sympathy.

"My poor Doris!" she said, gently and pityingly. "And that is why you are so cold to them all? I might have known there was something. I am so sorry, dear! But—but why consent to marry Percy Levant?"

Doris smiled wearily.

"I—don't be angry with me—I don't think I can answer in set terms. Perhaps it is because I think I can make him happy; perhaps it is because he is as lonely as I am, or should be but for you, dear Lady Despard. Why should I not marry him and make his life happier and brighter? Perhaps"—her lips quivered—"I shall learn to forget the past now that I have buried it forever!"

Lady Despard looked at her with troubled apprehension.

“My dear——” she commenced, but Doris stopped her almost excitedly. [Pg 254]

“If you are going to tell me that that is hopeless, that I shall never forget, don’t go on,” she said, in a low, hurried voice. “Right or wrong, I have given my word, and—and for the future it is of him I shall think and not of myself. I am a woman—and shall not break my promise,” she added, almost to herself, and with a touch of bitterness as she thought of the man who had broken his promise to her. “Dear Lady Despard, I have told you because I thought it right you should know, because,” with a little wince, “I will never again conceal anything—anything that should be told. And now you will accept it as something fixed and irrevocable, will you not? And you will wish me happiness?” she added, looking up at her with a smile shining through a veil of tears.

Lady Despard stooped and put her arm round the slender neck and kissed her.

“Wish you happiness? With all my heart, dear!” she said, warmly. “And now you must forgive all I have said. I was a little surprised and—yes, just a little disappointed. I was thinking of the poor prince, you must remember. But, after all, you have chosen the handsomest and nicest man of them all; and I’m sure all the women will be fit to die with envy.” Doris smiled at this characteristic touch. “And as to his being poor—why, we will see about that, my dear. They tell me I’ve no end of influence, and it will be a very hard case if we can’t find some nice place for him. Oh, you needn’t blush, dear; I know he is proud, and you, too, but it’s the duty of practical folks like me to look after such romantic young couples as you! Oh, you will see! And now I’ve got a surprise for you: Who do you think has come?”

Doris shook her head.

“I don’t think I’m equal to the feeblest kind of conundrum to-night,” she said.

“I dare say not. Well, Mr. Spenser Churchill—your guardian, as I call him—is here.”

Doris started.

“He!” she said, in a low voice, as the old feeling of mingled fear and repugnance rose within her.

“Yes! I was as surprised as you are, for he had not written, as you know. He is out in the grounds looking for you——” [Pg 255]

Doris rose almost hastily.

“I—I think I will go to bed,” she said. “I am very tired, and you will excuse me.”

“Oh, yes, I’ll excuse you,” said Lady Despard, smiling. “It is only natural that you should want to run away and hide yourself to-night. And, am I to tell him, dear?”

Doris turned at the door.

“You may tell every one,” she said, quietly. “All the world may know it. It is quite fixed and certain, Lady Despard.”

Doris lay awake all through that night trying to realize the fact that she was betrothed to Percy Levant, and by the morning she had succeeded. She would begin a new chapter of her life from this date. The past, which was illuminated by the memory of those happy days in Barton meadows, when she loved and thought herself beloved by Lord Cecil Neville, must be buried forever. In the future she must set her heart upon one task, that of learning to love the man who loved her so truly and devotedly, and whom she had promised to marry.

She went down to breakfast a little paler than usual, but very calm and self-possessed, looking, as Lady Despard thought, as she greeted her with a loving kiss, like a lily, in her simple white frock.

“Well, dear!” she said, “you have come down, then! I told Mr. Churchill that you were so tired last night that you would very likely not put in an appearance till lunch. He’s on the terrace—oh! here he is!”

Mr. Spenser Churchill came in at the French window as she spoke, and advanced to Doris with his sweetest and most benevolent smile.

“My dear Miss Marlowe!” he murmured. “How do you do? I am so glad to see you, and looking the picture of health and happiness”—there were dark marks under Doris’ eyes, which wore the look a sleepless night always produces—“the very picture of health and happiness! And with good reason—good reason! You see, a little bird has told me the news,” and he wagged his head playfully.

“Am I very much like a little bird?” said Lady Despard. “I told him, Doris, dear; you said I might.” [Pg 256]

“Yes, dear Lady Despard has told me!” he said, spreading his napkin over his knee and smiling upon them both. “And I hasten to express my best and most heartfelt wishes. Lucky Percy! I must confess that I envy him! He is such a dear fellow! I have known him since he was, oh, quite a boy, and he was always, oh, quite too charming! But I never dreamed he would be so fortunate as to win so great a prize as the beautiful Miss Doris!”

Doris took her place in silence. Lady Despard laughed.

“That’s a very nice speech and hits them both,” she said.

“And it is such a strange coincidence,” he went on. “They say that good luck always comes in showers! Do you know I am the bearer of a very good offer for our dear Percy? I won’t give you the particulars, but will only say that it will make him almost a rich man. Really, the dear fellow is in favor with the gods.”

The door opened and Percy Levant walked in. He bowed to Lady Despard, and to Spenser

Churchill, then went to Doris, took her hand and raised it to his lips, and, as a matter of course, seated himself next to her.

He held a couple of small bouquets in his hand, and, placing one beside Lady Despard's plate, laid the other against Doris'.

"Oh, thanks," said Lady Despard, talking quickly to cover the little embarrassment. "You have been flower-gathering this morning? And you met Mr. Spenser Churchill last night? I am so glad he has come, for I want to hear all the news—all the London news, I mean! We seem to be quite at the other end of the world here."

Mr. Spenser Churchill shrugged his shoulders amusedly.

"One comes here to learn the news," he said, with a significant smile at Doris and Percy Levant.

Doris' face flushed, but Percy Levant's remained grave.

"As Mr. Churchill has no gossip to relate, perhaps this will be acceptable," he said. "I have just got it by this post," and he took a society journal from his pocket and handed it to Doris to pass to Lady Despard. [Pg 257]

"*The Glass of Fashion!*" exclaimed her ladyship. "How nice! I haven't seen it for ages," and she opened it with a little flush of satisfaction. "I always enjoy *The Glass*; it is always so charmingly spiteful. It ought to be called *The Cup of Poison*, for it destroys a reputation every week."

She began turning over the pages of this, the latest product in society journalism, and Spenser Churchill in vain endeavored to engage Percy Levant in conversation, then suddenly Lady Despard uttered an exclamation.

"What is the matter, dear Lady Despard?" asked Spenser Churchill. "Has *The Glass* attacked one of your bosom friends?"

"Oh, no; it's this!" replied Lady Despard. "Just listen:

"'Rumor, which is not always untruthful, hinted some time ago at the engagement of one of our principal beauties to the heir of the oldest marquisate in England; and we are now authorized to formally announce that Lady Grace Peyton is engaged to Lord Cecil Neville, the heir and nephew of the Marquis of Stoyle. The marriage will take place as soon as the marquis has recovered from his present attack of illness.'

"Cecil Neville and Grace Peyton are really engaged, then, and to be married out of hand! Well—oh, look!—Doris!" she broke off, with a cry of dismay, for Doris had fallen back in a dead faint.

Mr. Spenser Churchill, with a cry of alarm, sprang from his chair and hastened round the table; but Percy Levant had raised her in his arms, and, as he supported her lifeless form on his breast, stretched out one hand to ward Spenser Churchill off.

"Stand back!" he said, hoarsely, his white face set hard and stern. "You shall not touch her!" and, lifting her bodily, he carried her into the hall.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

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ENGAGED.

On this occasion, at least, the society papers did not lie! Lord Cecil Neville and Lady Grace Peyton were engaged! If some marriages are made in Heaven, certainly some other matches are made by the gossip-mongers, and this was one of them.

If any one had told Cecil Neville that in a few short months he would, though having lost Doris, have proposed to Lady Grace, he would have laughed the prophet to scorn; and yet propose to her he did.

From that eventful morning when he had received, as he thought, irrefutable proof of Doris' faithlessness and treachery, and been rescued from imprisonment by Lady Grace, a great change had fallen upon Cecil Neville. Life had lost its savor, and the days that used to pass so swiftly, with pleasure at the helm and youth at the prow, hung like lead upon his hands. Time, which most of us find all too short, dragged terribly with him. Do what he would, he could not drown the memory of the beautiful girl whom he had loved so passionately, and whose image seemed engraven upon his heart. Morning, noon, and night her presence seemed to haunt him. He went about as usual for a day or two, but the old amusements; the clubs, where he was always so warmly greeted; the dances, which never seemed complete successes without "Cissy" Neville; the river parties, and four-in-hand excursions, in which he was always the leading spirit, all seemed tame and spiritless, and though he laughed as usual, and tried to hide the wound which he had received, his friends noticed that he seemed preoccupied and gloomy; and when he found that they observed it, and that he was sitting silent in the midst of the carnival of pleasure, like the ghost-haunted man in the ballad, he suddenly took his fishing-rod and went off to Norway.

He had met Lady Grace frequently since the morning she had come to his rescue, but they had only exchanged a few words at meeting and parting, as he felt that he could not talk as if nothing had happened, and he would not talk of what had happened, and on the night before his sudden departure he had only said a few concise words of farewell.

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"Going to Norway?" she said, in a constrained voice. "Yes?—well, I think that is the best thing you can do; it is all very stupid here in London!" and she had given him her hand, and let her magnificent eyes rest on his for a second or two with a look that would have impressed him and set him thinking, if he had ever given thought to any other subject but the faithless girl who had jilted him.

If any one had told him that Lady Grace had gone home a few minutes after parting from him, and shut herself up for a couple of days, reappearing, looking pale and weary, it would never have occurred to him that her sudden disappearance had been on his account.

He went to Norway, and though he thought of her now and again with a gratitude which made him miserable—for he could not see how on earth he was going to repay her the money she had so generously paid for him—he was too much occupied with recalling Doris to think much of this other beautiful woman. He ought to have been happy in Norway, for the fishing was good, and he was lucky, but the big salmon did not bring him the satisfaction they used to do; and he was sitting one evening in the room of the rather rough inn at which he was staying, wondering what he should do with himself next, and whether it wouldn't be better to go and bury himself in South Africa, or volunteer for the next of our little wars, when he heard his name mentioned. There was a party of young men staying at the inn, and they occupied the room next to his and divided from it by the thinnest of partitions, through which their constant chatter and laughter filtered day and night to worry him.

When he heard his name, he woke up from a reverie in which he was wondering whether Doris was happy, and whether she ever thought of him and those days in the Barton meadows; and, remembering that listeners seldom hear any good of themselves, he took up his pipe, and was walking out to smoke in the open air, when it seemed to him that he heard Lady Grace's name also.

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Thinking that the speakers might be friends of his and hers, he waited a moment, then sunk back into his chair, his face scarlet, his brow dark with a heavy frown—for this is what he heard:

"I tell you, it's an absolute truth," said one of the young fellows. "I had it from a most reliable source. The lady in question was seen leaving Lord Cecil Neville's rooms alone and unattended ——"

"Nonsense! Lady Grace—Lady Grace, of all women in the world!—go alone to Lord Neville's chambers! You must be mad, old fellow!"

"I'm not mad!" retorted the first speaker, "and I wish to goodness you wouldn't bellow out her name; I carefully avoided mentioning it; these walls are no thicker than paper, and you can't tell who may be on the other side."

"Oh, it's all right," said the other; "but, come, you know, the story is as thin as the partition! Why, no woman would do such a thing, unless she were utterly reckless of her good name."

"I daresay not," said the first, still as coolly; "but perhaps the lady in question happens to be reckless where this gentleman is concerned. Anyhow, I had it on good authority, and I happen to know it is an undisputable fact. Why, man, it was all the talk when I left London. It is said that she is head over ears in love with him——"

"Phew!" exclaimed one of the others, "that makes it worse. If she was guilty of such an

indiscretion, all I can say is she must be very much in love! Lady Grace——”

“Do shut up!” cried the first speaker. “No names, remember!”

“Well, well, the lady in question is one of the best known women in society, and such a report would mean social ruin to her. Where did you hear it? Give me your authority.”

The first man seemed to pause a moment, then in a voice too low for Cecil to hear, said:

“I don’t mind giving it to you; I heard it from Spenser Churchill!”

“Then you may swear to its truth; that man never makes a mistake!” responded one of the young fellows. “Well, I’m awfully sorry. Lady—the lady is always very kind and pleasant to me, and I think her one of the loveliest creatures in the world. As for Lord Neville—well, if he can remain quiescent while this story is going about, and does nothing to contradict it or set it right—all I can say, he is a very different man from what I have always understood him to be. Where is he now? I hear he has come a regular cropper in money matters. I saw him a little while ago, and he looked awfully down on his luck.” [Pg 261]

“Oh, he’s gone abroad, I believe,” replied the other.

Lord Cecil sat perfectly still for a minute, his brain surging, his heart beating with mingled fury and consternation; then, with his pipe still in his hand, he got up and knocked at the door of the adjoining room.

Some one opened it, and Lord Cecil, with a slight bow, stepped in and stood before the group of young men, who stared at his now grave, pale face inquiringly.

“I am sorry to disturb you, gentlemen,” he said; “but it is only right I should tell you that I am the occupant of the next room, and that I have heard every word you said.”

“There!” exclaimed the young fellow who had started the conversation, in a tone of vexation and reproach; “I told you so! I said the partition was like paper, and that some one might be on the other side, and you fellows wouldn’t believe me!”

“Yes; I have heard every word,” said Lord Neville, sternly; “and as I have the honor to be a friend of the lady of whom you were speaking, it is my duty to tell you that the man who whispers a word against the reputation of that lady is a liar!”

They sprang to their feet as a body, and stared at him with angry surprise; but Lord Cecil put up his hand to command silence.

“Hear me out, please. You may, not unnaturally, demand to know why I should take upon myself to champion this lady’s cause. I do so because I hope to have the honor of being that lady’s husband. My name is Cecil Neville; there is my card.” He did not toss it melodramatically, but courteously placed it on the table before them. “If any of you consider that he is affronted by what I have said, I shall be happy to afford him any satisfaction he may think necessary.” [Pg 262]

With a slight bow he was leaving the room, when the young fellow who had been the first speaker, said:

“One moment, Lord Neville, if you please.” Lord Cecil stopped, and stood facing them, with a stern countenance. “If any one is to blame in this matter, it is myself; and I am ready to give you any satisfaction you may require; but I think it right to state, frankly and freely, that I did not mention the lady’s name, nor was I aware that she was engaged to you. I will say, also, that I deeply regret that I should have mentioned the subject at all. But I spoke the simple truth when I said that it was a topic of common rumor; and I may add that it will give me great pleasure and satisfaction to contradict the report whenever and wherever I may hear it repeated.”

“I thank you,” said Lord Cecil, simply, and with a grave bow that took in all of them, he turned and left the room.

An hour later he was on his way to England.

By whomsoever spread, this report was in circulation—and he could not contradict it! Lady Grace had been to his rooms alone and unattended, and it was his duty as a gentleman and a man of honor to protect her.

He had heard, with a scarlet face, the words of the young fellow, who had said that Lady Grace was in love with him, and though he did not believe it—for had she not herself said that it was not so?—it was his duty to propose to her.

What did it matter what became of him, or whom he married? He must marry some one, and some day. The heir to the marquisate of Stoyle could not remain single. Rank has its duties as well as its privileges, and it is the duty of the head of a noble house to carry on the direct line. He would have to marry sooner or later, though his heart throbbed and ached every time he thought of Doris Marlowe; and why not marry Lady Grace?

He thought of her beauty; he recalled her noble generosity to him. Why, she had not only come to his aid when he was in mortal straits, but she had done so at the risk of her social reputation! Surely, if he must marry some one, it must be Lady Grace. [Pg 263]

He might also have reminded himself that by so doing he would win his uncle’s—the marquis’—favor; but, to do Lord Cecil credit, he did not think of that; he only remembered Lady Grace’s goodness to him.

He reached London at noon, had a bath, and allowed his valet to clothe him in the regulation morning attire, and went straight to the Peytons’ house.

The footman told him that Lady Grace was out, riding in the park.

“I’ll wait,” said Lord Cecil, and he went into the drawing-room.

He paced up and down the Turkey carpet, looking out of the window, and staring at the ornaments on the mantel-shelf. Among them was one of the fashionable cabinet photograph frames, with the portrait covered by a curtain. In absence of mind he drew the curtain aside and saw a portrait of himself.

With a sudden flush he let it fall, as the door opened, and Lady Grace entered.

She was in her riding-habit—in the garb which set off her perfectly graceful figure to its very best advantage.

As she entered, her mature and majestic loveliness struck him fully for the first time, and he remembered with a sudden vividness the words of one of the young fellows at the Norwegian inn. Yes, she was one of the loveliest of society women!

She started perceptibly at sight of him, so much so that she dropped her whip. He sprang forward and picked it up for her, and by the time he had given it her—few moments though the action required—she had recovered herself.

“Back so soon!” she said, giving him her hand, small, and white, and warm. “This is a surprise! Don’t the salmon bite, or rise, or whatever you call it? Or has it rained all the time, and have you been bored to death? I’m afraid you’ll be bored just as much in London, for every one is leaving.”

“The salmon were all right,” he said, still holding her hand. “I came back because I wanted to see you!” [Pg 264]

“To see me?” she said, her eyes flashing into his for a moment, and then drooping. “Well, you were just in time, for papa and I were off to the Continent.”

“Then I have just come in time,” he said.

“Let me give you some tea; sit down,” she said, and gently tried to withdraw her hand, but he held it firmly.

“Never mind the tea, Lady Grace,” he said, with something of his old light-heartedness. “You shall give me—or refuse me—a cup after you have heard what I have to say.”

“And what have you to say that is more important than tea?” she retorted, in a light tone, which was belied by the quiver on her lips.

“I have come to ask you to be my wife,” he said, quietly.

She put her left hand to her bosom, and her beautiful eyes dilated. If joy always killed, then Lady Grace would have fallen dead at Cecil Neville’s feet that moment; but it is sorrow, not joy, that kills, and instead of falling, she leaned towards him with a tremulous sigh. It was almost too good to be believed! Spenser Churchill had told her that it would come, but she had always doubted it; and now—it had come! He was hers. Hers!—he, whom she had grown to love—the man for whom she had plotted and risked so much, even her social good name—was hers!

It was a proud, an ecstatic moment; no wonder she prolonged it.

“What do you say?” he asked, still holding her hand, his grave voice as much unlike an ardent lover’s as it is possible to imagine; and yet it was like music to her! “I know I am not worthy to win so great a prize, but I will do my best to make you happy.”

“And—and you love me?” she asked.

It was a dangerous question, but she was a woman, and longed to hear the magic words which every woman loves to hear from the lips of the man she loves.

He paused imperceptibly.

“Who could do anything but love you, dear Grace!” he replied. “Will you be my wife? I will try and make you happy, indeed I will! What do you say?” [Pg 265]

Her soft, warm fingers closed on his, and she leaned towards him involuntarily.

“If you are sure”—she murmured—“if you are sure you want me to say ‘yes’——”

“Indeed I do!” he responded. “I have come all the way from Norway in the hope that you would.”

“Then I will say—‘yes!’” she breathed, and her head sank upon his breast. “You will be good to me—Cecil?”

“I will be good to you,” he responded, and he put his arm round her and kissed her in lover-wise, but not—ah, not!—with the passionate kisses which he had rained upon the lips, and eyes, and hair of Doris Marlowe!

CHAPTER XXIX.

The news spread, as such news will, and in a day or two all London knew, through the gossip-mongers and the society papers, that Lord Cecil Neville, the heir to the marquisate of Stoyle, had proposed to Lady Grace.

“So that there was something in that story of her going to his rooms, you see!” envious mothers whispered behind their fans.

And the following morning Cecil Neville received a short message from the marquis, who was staying at the big house in Grosvenor Square, requesting that Cecil would come and see him.

Cecil went, and found his lordship seated by the window of his own room, looking at the passers-by as if he were a judge just donning the black cap. His thin lips drew together with a smile that was more like a sneer as he gave Cecil a couple of cold fingers.

“So you’ve come to your senses at last?” was his amiable greeting.

Lord Cecil smiled rather grimly.

“I suppose you allude to my engagement to Lady Grace, sir?” he said. “I was coming to call on you when your message reached me.”

“Ah! Well, I congratulate you, and I wish her every happiness,” remarked the marquis by way of a blessing, and his tone said quite plainly: “But I don’t think she’ll get it.” [Pg 266]

“Thank you, sir,” said Lord Cecil.

“Yes, I think you are a confoundedly lucky fellow,” continued the marquis, “especially as you nearly got into the worst mess a man can get into. I suppose that affair turned out as I expected? The wench jilted you—oh, I don’t want to know any particulars, they wouldn’t interest me; but I may be permitted to express a hope that you have completely washed your hands of the whole affair, and that if the girl turns up again, there will be no nonsense. Grace is far too good for you, and very much too good for any trick of that kind.”

Lord Cecil bit his lip and frowned.

“If I understand you, my lord——” Then he stopped. “No, sir, we won’t quarrel to-day. As you say that—that affair is over and done with, and if Miss Marlowe were to come back, I promise that I will not, as you delicately suggest, desert Lady Grace for her.”

“Yes, that’s what I hinted,” said the marquis, coolly. “I’m glad to hear there’s no danger of it. Men are such fools—young ones especially—that one never knows.”

“I may be a fool, but I’m not a blackguard!” said Cecil, almost beside himself.

“I hope not,” assented the marquis, deliberately, “and now I suppose you mean to have the marriage quickly?”

“That rests entirely with Lady Grace,” said Lord Cecil.

“Of course. I hate long engagements; besides, I’ve an absurd fancy for seeing her married before I die. Not that I think of dying just yet, you’ll be sorry to hear. Better get the affair settled speedily. You can live in one of the places in the country; I don’t care where it is, as long as you don’t expect me to come and live with you,” and he smiled sardonically.

Lord Cecil remained silent.

“You’d better take the Barton place. I hate it; but I hate all of them, so that is not much of a reason.”

“Barton is too large, is it not, sir?” said Lord Cecil.

“That’s my business,” retorted his lordship, with something like a snarl. “I don’t mean you to be a pauper, or to live with a couple of servants and on bread and cheese. You have done as I wished you to do, though not until you were compelled,” and he smiled, significantly, “and I will do what is requisite in the way of money—for her sake.” [Pg 267]

“Thank you, my lord—for her sake,” said Lord Cecil, grimly.

“Yes. Why doesn’t she come and see me? Tell her to do so, if you please.” He was silent a moment as Lord Cecil bowed, then he added: “The affair is making some stir, I suppose. I’m thinking whether I can summon up courage to give a party—in honor of the event.”

“Pray, don’t take so much trouble, sir,” said Cecil.

“Yes, I suppose I must,” continued the marquis, as if Cecil had not spoken. “It is the usual thing, and she will look for it.”

“I don’t think Lady Grace expects——”

“You know very little of what Lady Grace expects,” he interrupted, with cold contempt. “Tell her to come to me. Wait a moment, please,” he added, as Lord Cecil was making his escape. “I am going to send her a present; that is also due to her. I suppose you have been able to afford her a thirty-shilling ring?”

“I gave rather more than that, sir,” replied Lord Cecil, with a smile.

“Ah! go to that safe, if you please, and bring me one or two of the jewel cases. I will send her

something now. Here are the keys—no, they are in that drawer," and he pointed to the small writing cabinet which always accompanied him, and handed Lord Cecil a small key.

Lord Cecil unlocked the cabinet, got the keys, and was crossing the room to the safe, when the door opened.

"What the devil do you mean by coming in without knocking, sir?" exclaimed the marquis; then, as he saw who it was, he said, in a softer voice: "Oh, it's you, Spenser, is it? You've come in time to hear the news and congratulate the bridegroom."

"Which I do with all my heart, my dear Cecil," murmured Spenser Churchill, taking Lord Cecil's hand in both of his and pressing it affectionately, while he beamed a benedictory smile all over him. "With all my heart! I can't tell you, my dear marquis, how rejoiced I was to hear the news. [Pg 268] Dear Lady Grace! So beautiful and so good! You are, indeed, a happy man, Cecil! May every good gift which Heaven has to bestow——"

"That will do," broke in the marquis, with a sneer; "we'll take the rest as read, if you don't mind. I've told Cecil that I will give a party to mark my sense of his sense."

"A party? Excellent! admirable!" exclaimed Spenser Churchill, rubbing his hands, his eyes going from the marquis' cold, sardonic face to Lord Cecil's grave and rather moody one with keen watchfulness. "Now, how good of you to think of that! Why, how many years is it since you entertained in this house?"

The marquis compressed his lips.

"The last time was"—he paused a moment, then, as if out of sheer bravado, went on—"the night before my wife ran away from me! Not a pleasant omen for 'dear Cecil,' is it?"

Spenser Churchill coughed behind his hand.

"Oh, there must be no bad omens for the young couple," he said, rather confusedly. "And what date is the party to be?"

"When you like," replied the marquis, with the most profound indifference. "I should enjoy it better if you'd wait until I'm dead, but, as it is, I don't care when it is."

"Ah! then we must leave it to dear Lady Grace," said Spenser Churchill.

"I'm sending her a present," said the marquis, listlessly. "There are some things in that safe there; get them out and choose something."

"Now, how delightful," purred Spenser Churchill. "One of the old family jewels, eh, dear marquis? A bracelet, or a ring, or something of that kind, I suppose?"

By this time Lord Cecil had reached the safe and opened it, and Spenser Churchill, with a smile of childlike interest and curiosity, went and stood beside him.

The safe was half-full of papers, and nothing but papers, as it appeared, and Lord Cecil said so, and waited for instructions.

"The cases are at the back," said the marquis. "For Heaven's sake! don't bother me over the business, or I shall regret my sudden and unusual generosity," he added, with a sneer. [Pg 269]

Lord Cecil took some of the documents out, and revealed a couple of jewel cases, and placing the former on a chair, carried the latter to the marquis.

"These papers want arranging, dear marquis," said Spenser Churchill, and he lingered behind, as if casually; but his eyes flashed over the litter of parchments with keen and searching scrutiny.

"I dare say," assented the marquis, indifferently. "There are some wills of mine there, I think, but it doesn't matter. I shall live to make two or three more to add to this collection," and he glanced at Lord Neville maliciously.

Spenser Churchill laughed, as if it were an excellent joke, and Lord Cecil opened the cases and set them on the small table beside the marquis.

"Are these what you want?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose so," said his lordship. "Choose something; here, Churchill!"

"Am I to help in the selection? Really!" he exclaimed, and leaned forward with such alacrity that he overturned the chair upon which the deeds were lying, and scattered them on the floor.

"Oh, I am so sorry! Tut, tut, how clumsy of me!" he exclaimed, apologetically, and he went down on his knees and gathered up the papers.

"Let them alone, for Heaven's sake!" snarled the marquis, with cold irritation.

"Yes, yes, I'll just pick them up," murmured Spenser Churchill, and with his back to the other two, he rapidly examined each deed as he placed it on the chair. "Now, then," and he came to the table. "Ah! these are some of the Stoyle jewels! How exquisite they are, and what a pity they should have been hidden away so long! How nice it is to reflect that they will soon adorn our beautiful Lady Grace; eh, dear Cecil?"

Lord Cecil did not answer, but moodily took the jewels from their respective cases, and held them up for the marquis' inspection.

He eyed them with his usual cold impassibility, but presently Lord Cecil held up a suite of pearls. It was an antique and evidently priceless set, and Cecil was regarding them with a listless [Pg 270] interest when suddenly a strange idea flashed across his mind that he had seen them before; and

yet he knew that he could not have done so. The last person upon whose neck and wrists that priceless suite of antique gems had shone was the ill-fated marchioness, whom he had never seen, and whose end was still a mystery to him. He was convinced that he had never seen them before, and yet he seemed to remember them.

“Beautiful, beautiful!” murmured Spenser Churchill, but looking at his companion’s face instead of the jewels with a watchful scrutiny.

“Yes, they are,” said Lord Cecil, and he turned the remaining jewels over as if searching for something.

“What are you looking for?” demanded the marquis, his eyes fixed with a strange expression upon the pearls in Lord Cecil’s hands.

“I am looking for the ring. I suppose there ought to be one to make the set complete? There is everything else here.”

The marquis’ face seemed to grow gray; then he laughed a dry, harsh laugh.

“The ring is missing,” he said, almost inaudibly. “It went with——”

“No, no,” cut in Spenser Churchill, softly. “I saw it at the bottom of the box a moment ago; but, really, my dear Cecil,” he continued, hurriedly, as if to prevent the marquis contradicting him, “I don’t think they would suit dear Lady Grace as well as some of these other things. Now, if I might suggest, may I?” and, with smooth deftness, he took the case from him and picked out a diamond and ruby bracelet. “Now, that is the kind of thing which would please dear Lady Grace. These pearls will be more suitable when she is married.”

The marquis took the bracelet, and Lord Cecil fancied that the clawlike hands trembled slightly, and looked at it absently. Then he dropped it on the table and turned aside with listless indifference.

“The pearl suite will do,” he said, curtly. “Take it and give it to her. Will you be good enough to send my man to me?” he added, as a hint that he desired to be rid of their presence.

“Good-day, sir, and thank you,” said Cecil, moving to the door. [Pg 271]

“Stop, my dear Cecil—the safe. You must put those jewels away and lock it, you know.”

“Let him go. You can lock it,” said the marquis, with icy impatience.

“Oh, Cecil will lock it,” murmured Spenser Churchill. “I am going to get some lunch, marquis,” and with a nod he went to the door, but there he turned. “Oh, would you like a newspaper, marquis?” he asked, and as he waited for the reply he watched Cecil lock the safe and deposit the keys in the cabinet drawer.

“No!” answered the marquis, almost fiercely, and the two men went out.

Spenser Churchill locked his arm in Lord Cecil’s reluctant one.

“Dear marquis!” he murmured, softly. “So generous and—er—thoughtful! You have made him very happy, my dear Cecil, and be sure that his happiness will find its reflection in your own heart. Ahem! Did you notice, my dear Cecil, how—er—unwell and, so to speak, generally feeble he looked?”

“No,” said Cecil, gravely.

“No? Then perhaps—indeed, I fervently hope—that it was only my fancy; but I certainly did think that I saw a change in him since last I was here. I do hope it was only fancy! The world could ill afford to lose so great and kind-hearted a man as our dear marquis! And so you are going to marry the beautiful and charming Lady Grace! Ah, youth, youth! what a blessed possession it is! How I envy you, my dear Cecil!”

“Thanks!” said Lord Cecil, curtly. “I’ll tell Lady Grace, who will feel duly complimented, I’ve no doubt.”

“Yes, yes—tell her, you happy rogue!” said the philanthropist, and, with a playful nod and laugh, he watched Cecil go down the hall and out at the door.

Then his face changed to one of keen reflection, and, as he went into the dining-room to the little lunch he had ordered, he muttered:

“Yes, the one I want is there! and the keys are in that drawer, which he always keeps locked. I must have that will—but how?”

When the invitations to an evening party at the Stoyle House were issued, they caused as much astonishment to the recipients and the world at large as if the trustees of the British Museum had announced their intention of giving a dance at that revered institution. [Pg 272]

Only a very few of the last generation remembered any entertainment at Stoyle House, and they declared that the rumor must either be false, or that the marquis had at last, and very appropriately, gone out of his mind; and it was not until signs of the vast preparations for the event made themselves felt that the world began to realize the truth.

Then arose such a struggle and scramble for tickets as occurs in connection with one of the events of the season, and Lady Grace was worried and pestered for an invitation as if it were a permit to Paradise itself.

For a couple of seasons she had been the acknowledged belle, but now it seemed as if suddenly

she had become one of the veritable queens of society. Wherever she went, she was surrounded by a crowd, eager to lay their tribute of adulation at the feet of the beautiful girl who had succeeded, where so many had failed, in securing handsome Cecil Neville, the future Marquis of Stoyle. Women who envied and hated her approached her with faces wreathed in smiles and voices soft and affectionate. Her carriage, or her horse, in the Park was surrounded by men eager to claim acquaintance with the future marchioness, who could give them invitations to so many shooting and hunting parties "when the old marquis died!"

And Lady Grace bore herself through it all with charming moderation. She delighted in all this worship, but it may be truly said, that she was never happier than when Lord Cecil was by her side. Some of us tire of the prize we scheme and toil so eagerly for; but in Lady Grace's eyes the prize she had so basely won increased in value day by day.

She had loved him the first night they had met at Barton Towers, and her love, perhaps by opposition and the struggle she had made to win him, had grown into an absorbing passion. She was restless and nervous when he was absent, and those who knew her well could tell when he [Pg 273] was in the room or near at hand, by the joyous smile on her lips and the soft glow in her eyes.

"Always thought that girl had no heart," remarked one keen observer. "Only shows how a fellow can be mistaken in a woman. She's as clean gone upon Cissy as a girl can be."

"And Cissy?" queried the man to whom he spoke; "what about him?"

The cynic shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't know. Seems as if he's got something on his mind, and couldn't get it off. Never saw a man so changed in all my life; perhaps his happiness is rather too much for him."

And yet Lord Cecil's conduct gave no cause for evil comment. No man could be more attentive to his *fiancée*. He was with her every day, was by her side at nearly all the "at homes," was seen at the crushes at concerts and balls, her shawl upon his arm, the arm itself always at her command; and yet the old "Cissy" had gone, and in its place was the tall, grave-faced man, with the look as if he had something on his mind.

The night of the party arrived. Some preparations had been necessary, and they had been made with a lavish hand. The big house, which had sheltered so many generations of the Stoyles through so many London seasons, was ablaze with lights, which shone upon the handsome decorations of the great saloon and the magnificent dresses of the women.

Only at one of the state balls could have been seen such a display of diamonds, and very soon after the ball commenced it was declared by the experienced that it would prove the event of the season.

It was not until the fourth dance on the list had been reached that the marquis put in an appearance. Lady Grace, magnificently dressed—robed, one might almost say—had been questioned concerning his absence by the throng that surrounded her, but had shaken her head with a charming smile as she answered:

"He has promised to come into the room, if only for a few minutes, but I don't know when he will come."

She was, by right of her beauty and position, the queen of the brilliant assemblage, and she [Pg 274] reigned in truly queenly fashion. Lord Cecil, moving about as host during his uncle's absence, glanced toward her now and again, and said to himself that if he needs must choose a mate, he could not have chosen a more beautiful or more splendid one. But he sighed as he made the admission, and there rose before him the vision of Doris' ivory-pale face, with its wealth of dark hair and witching blue eyes; and he would have given half that remained of his life to be sitting at her feet once more—only once more!

He was roused from one of these fits of reverie by a subdued murmur of interest and curiosity, and, looking up, saw the tall, thin figure of the marquis entering the room at one of the doors leading from his private apartments.

The clean-cut face was deadly pale, but the dark eyes shone with a hard, steel-like brilliance, and the thin, cruel lips wore a reflection of a smile as he came forward and greeted those near to him.

There was no vulgar pushing and crowding, but somehow, in an impalpable kind of way, a circle gathered round him, and then the marquis of old, or a shadow and semblance of him, shone forth. The polished wit, like a rapier long disused, leaped from its scabbard and set the group admiring and laughing as of yore. As he moved from one to the other, addressing his courtly flattery to the women and his biting cynicisms to the men, a feeling of wonder ran through the room.

"By Heaven!" exclaimed an old man, who remembered him in years gone by, "it is like a resurrection! It is like going back a quarter of a century! That is the kind of wit we were accustomed to, sir! Look at him, and compare him with the young fellows of the present day! And don't tell me that we haven't degenerated!"

Lord Cecil stood a little apart, looking on at the success which the marquis was making, the enthusiasm which he was arousing, when he felt a hand softly touch his arm, and Spenser Churchill's unctuous voice purred in his ear.

"Do you see the dear marquis, Cecil? Wonderful, isn't it? Quite like what he used to be, I assure you! Remarkable man. Really, it fills me with admiration and—er—astonishment. Did you hear [Pg 275] that brilliant repartee of his at which they are all laughing?"

“No,” said Cecil, gravely.

“Astonishing! Ah, my dear Cecil he is a marvelous man. They were saying that he was going to dance—a square dance, of course, just a walk through a quadrille, but I shouldn’t think—eh? Why, yes, he is—” he broke off, smoothly, “actually is!” and followed by Cecil he made his way toward a circle that surrounded the marquis who was seen going toward Lady Grace.

“These young people have set me thinking of old times, Lady Grace,” he said, in his clear, metallic voice. “Will you dare to brave their ridicule by giving your hand to an old man? Or perhaps you would prefer a more suitable partner?” and he shot a sarcastic glance at Cecil, who had now reached his side.

She bent toward him with perfect grace, and placed her hand upon his arm.

A thrill of amazement and curiosity ran through the room, and those near the two fell back. The set was formed, and Lord Cecil found himself standing at one of the sides, with a young girl for a partner.

“What a delightful man to have for an uncle,” she said, with a smile.

“Yes, yes,” he replied, absently, his eyes fixed on the thin, white face.

The music commenced, the dance began, and the marquis, with a grace which reminded those of his old friends of the days when “Wicked Lord Stoyle” was in the prime of his youth—and his wickedness—led Lady Grace to the center. A crowd had collected round the set; all eyes were fixed upon him and the lovely woman who bore her triumph with such queenly self-possession, when suddenly a cry—a shudder, rather—of alarm ran from lip to lip; for the erect, stately figure was seen to swerve and rock, and then stand still, as if rooted to the spot, with its arms held above its head, and its starting eyes fixed strangely on vacancy.

“Great Heaven! It’s a fit! He’s dying!” said some one.

Cecil sprang forward, and, just in time, caught him in his arms. [Pg 276]

Some one silenced the band, and the whole assemblage became instantly mute.

Lord Cecil raised the motionless form in his arms—it seemed to weigh nothing to him, so thin and emaciated was it—and, through a lane of horrified spectators, carried him up the broad stairs, and into his bedroom.

Three persons followed him—Lady Grace, Spenser Churchill and the marquis’ valet—and entered the room with him.

Lord Cecil laid his frail burden on the bed, and the valet quickly unfastened the old-fashioned cravat.

“It is a fit, my lord!” he murmured, agitatedly. “I expected it! I have been watching him from one of the doorways. His face was so white, and—and strained—like——”

“Go for a doctor,” said Lord Cecil, quietly. “Grace, go down, and get rid of these people.”

“Oh! come with me, Cecil!” she said, brokenly; “I—I shall break down!”

“Yes, go with her,” said Spenser Churchill. “You need not be more than a few minutes, and I’ll stay here with him.”

Reluctantly, Cecil drew his arm within hers, and left Spenser Churchill alone with the unconscious man.

Alone with him!

He waited until Lady Grace and Lord Cecil had left the room; then, scarcely looking at the white, distorted face, he searched the pockets of the helpless man, and with a suppressed cry of satisfaction, darted to the cabinet, got the keys and opened the safe.

Taking out two deeds engrossed, “The last will and testament of the Marquis of Stoyle,” he thrust one in the breast pocket of his coat and replaced the other in the safe, and locked it, and returned the keys to the cabinet.

Scarcely had he done so, and taken his place at the bedside, than Lord Cecil and the valet hurried in with a doctor, who had been one of the guests.

He bent over the unconscious marquis and made his examination.

“Is he? Oh, don’t say that my dear friend is dead?” exclaimed Spenser Churchill, with a sob. [Pg 277]

Lord Cecil waited for the answer in silent horror.

“No, no, he is not dead! Open that window!” said the doctor. “It is a fit produced by sudden excitement.”

“Thank Heaven!” murmured Spenser Churchill, devoutly. “And will he recover, doctor?”

The doctor looked grave.

“I cannot say. If he should——” He hesitated, and looked at Lord Cecil. “It is a very serious case, my lord; a sudden collapse. The unusual excitement has been too much for his lordship. He may recover, but if he should”—he stopped, and touched his forehead—“I fear it will be a bodily and not mental recovery.”

Spenser Churchill drew back, and covered his face with his hands.

“My poor friend!” he sobbed; and if he gave expression to his thoughts, he would have added: “will not be able to make a fresh will!”

CHAPTER XXX.

IN THE TOILS.

The great marquis recovered consciousness by midday, but he lay very weak and silent, the keen, hard face looking like a mask carved in old ivory. Cecil Neville scarcely left his side, and, though the marquis did not attempt to speak, he turned his eyes upon him now and again with a curious expression in them. Mr. Spenser Churchill was, as became so well-known and tender-hearted a philanthropist, most attentive and sympathetic, and he hovered about the bedside, and shed the light of his benevolent countenance upon the patient, as if he were the marquis' brother. And him, too, the sick man regarded with an expression of thoughtful watchfulness.

Mr. Spenser Churchill waited four days, then, hearing from the doctors that the marquis might possibly remain in his present condition for weeks, or even months, he thought that he had better attend to the other threads of his plot. It was time that Percy Levant secured Doris.

Everything in England was working wonderfully well for Mr. Spenser Churchill, and, in anticipation, he could almost see the accomplishment of his object and the reward of all his scheming and toiling. [Pg 278]

"It cuts me to the heart to leave the dear patient, Cecil," he said; "but I have most urgent business on the Continent, connected with one of our great charitable societies, and I really must go. I have the consolation, however, of reflecting that I leave my dear old friend in such loving hands as yours and dear Lady Grace's. He will, I know, receive every attention that affectionate hearts can suggest."

"Yes," said Cecil, rather grimly. "We shall neither starve nor neglect him; don't remain a moment longer than you like. You had better leave your address."

"Y—es," said Spenser Churchill. "Dear me, I scarcely know what address to give you. I shall be moving about so much for the first few weeks; but perhaps you had better write to Meuriguy's, at Paris. You will telegraph to me, of course. I shall be back as soon as possible. And when I come," he added, mentally, as he wrung Cecil's hand, "perhaps I may have the satisfaction of dealing you a slight shock, my self-sufficient young friend!"

He started for Italy that same evening, and three days later appeared in the garden of the Villa Rimini to find that Doris had consented to be Percy Levant's wife.

There was something so complete in the success of his plans that Mr. Spenser Churchill was almost startled. The marquis lying bereft of reason and helpless away in England, and Doris Marlowe engaged to Percy Levant! It was little short of marvelous!

"Now, if I could only see them married," he murmured, as he lay on the lawn smoking a cigarette, and blinking placidly up at the blue sky; "if I could only see them married, and the dear marquis would kindly remove himself from this troublous world, I should be ten thousand pounds richer in pocket, and be able to repay my dear Lord Cecil for the many, the very many snubs he has bestowed upon me. Ah, here comes Percy. How the young man hates me! And yet I have been the means of giving him a beautiful wife and a large fortune. Strange how deeply ingratitude is engrained in the human heart! Well, Percy," he purred, "and how is dear Miss Marlowe now? It [Pg 279] was nothing serious, I trust? Only the heat, my dear Percy? I noticed that the room was hot, and the air quite heavy with flowers. I'm not sure that too many flowers are wholesome; to some ultra-refined sensibilities, like those of our dear Miss Doris, for instance, their perfume is overwhelming. How is she?"

Percy Levant stood with folded arms looking thoughtfully into vacancy, his handsome face grave and sombre.

"Miss Marlowe has gone to her own room," he said, in a low voice. "Yes, it may have been the heat and the scent of the flowers." As he spoke, he took the society journal from his pocket and opened it. "What was it Lady Despard was reading when—when Miss Marlowe fainted, Churchill?" and he bent his dark eyes keenly upon the placid face.

Spenser Churchill touched his white, smooth forehead with his forefinger.

"Really, my dear Percy, I forget! Wasn't it something about that floral *fete* to the Amalgamated Charity Children? Or was it the account of Lady Brabazon's ball? Miss Marlowe's sudden and alarming indisposition so startled me that it drove the matter out of my head."

Percy Levant looked at him fixedly, then opened the paper and scanned it carefully; then his eyes flashed as he came across the paragraph respecting Lord Cecil's engagement, and he read it aloud.

"That was it, was it not?"

"N—o, I don't think so, but I really can't be sure. To tell you the truth I wasn't paying much attention. You see, I'd read the paper coming across."

"It was this, and you know it," said Percy Levant, in a low voice.

"Was it? I daresay. But what has that to do with Miss Marlowe's swoon?" inquired Spenser Churchill, with a patient smile.

Percy Levant paced up and down, his head sunk upon his breast.

"I don't know," he muttered, inaudibly; "but I will know!"

"Don't look so distressed, my dear Percy!" purred Spenser Churchill, leaning his head on his elbow, and watching him through half-closed eyes. "I trust there is nothing to be really anxious about. Miss Doris will be well and honor us with her presence at lunch, or at dinner, at latest. Of course, I can understand your anxiety, but don't give way to it, my dear Percy. Will you come and sit down? I want to talk to you for a few moments." [Pg 280]

Percy Levant stopped short in his pacing to and fro, and looked down at him.

"Well?" he said, impatiently.

"I want to speak to you about the marriage," said Spenser Churchill.

"What marriage?" demanded Percy Levant, with a frown.

Spenser Churchill opened his eyes and laughed softly.

"Why, your marriage, my dear fellow," he returned; "yours and Miss Doris'. I don't know whether you agree with me, but I am, on principle, strongly opposed to long engagements. When two young hearts are yearning for each other——Percy, this marriage must take place at once," he broke off with a sharp and sudden change of voice.

Percy Levant watched him closely and in silence for a moment.

"Why?" he asked.

Spenser Churchill smiled blandly.

"For several reasons; one, and not the least, being my anxiety to see two young people in whom I am deeply interested, made happy; another, if I may be candid, is because I am anxious to complete our contract and destroy the bond," and he touched his breast-pocket.

A strange expression came into Percy Levant's face, came and passed like a flash.

"You want your money?" he said.

"Naturally, and you want your bride! So that we are of one mind, my dear Percy."

"And what if I say I will go no further in this vile business; if I say that I will no longer be a party in this conspiracy against a helpless girl!" said Percy Levant in a low voice, and with a sudden crimson rising to his face.

Spenser Churchill smiled blandly.

"But you won't say any such nonsense, my dear fellow," he retorted, blowing a thin wreath of smoke from his complacent lips; "and it would be nonsense, sheer nonsense, for you couldn't draw back if you would, because, my dear Percy, you are so completely and madly in love with her!" [Pg 281]

Percy Levant grew pale, and he clenched his hands.

"You fiend!" he muttered.

Spenser Churchill laughed softly.

"Come, come, we had enough hard names last night! If I am a fiend, as you call it, don't you be a fool. Why, my good sir, you have got everything you wanted, and, like a spoiled child, you are still dissatisfied, and want to quarrel with the person who has been your best friend. What, give up charming Doris Marlowe! Tut, tut, you couldn't do it; now, could you?"

Percy Levant turned his head aside, and something like a groan escaped his compressed lips.

"No, you couldn't. And therefore I say that the sooner the marriage takes place, and you have got for your bride the beautiful young creature with whom you are so madly in love, the better. 'A bird in the hand,' and 'There is many a slip, etc., etc.' You know the two old, but exquisitely true, proverbs, I daresay. Get the marriage over, my dear Percy!"

"You speak of a marriage, and we were engaged only last night!" he said, after a pause. "Do you think she would consent? How little you know her. Perhaps you think"—with a bitter smile—"that she is as madly in love with me as I am with her!"

Spenser Churchill shook his head.

"No, my dear fellow, I don't think anything of the kind. I think I can understand why Miss Doris has promised to marry you. But if she doesn't love you now, she will do so. Oh, yes, believe me, with most women love comes after marriage!"

A light shone in the dark eyes for a moment, then faded out again, and left the handsome face grave and moody.

"I think she will consent—in fact, I am sure she will." He leaned forward on his elbow, and whispered the ensuing words insidiously: "She must be made to!"

"Made to?"

"Yes. Tut, tut, don't look so black. Moral force, not physical, my dear Percy, is what I mean. Listen to me. I think you will admit that, up to now, my judgment has been pretty correct, and that I didn't start you on a wild-goose chase that morning in Soho, when I offered to give you a beautiful wife, and make your fortune. Eh, my dear Percy? Well, I'll finish what I began, and here is my little plan. Do you know Pescia?" [Pg 282]

Percy Levant nodded.

“A charming little place, my dear Percy. So quiet and secluded, and so much healthier than Florence. Now, if I were a medical man I should say that Miss Doris wanted a change, and that no place, within even easy distance, could be more suitable than Pescia. Though I am not a doctor, I think I shall venture to suggest to Lady Despard that she and Doris go there for a few weeks.”

Percy Levant listened intently, his brilliant eyes covered by their long, dark lashes, so that Spenser Churchill could not see the expression that gleamed in them.

“Well, they go to Pescia, and you, of course, with them. You are there, say, a fortnight or three weeks, when I write to offer you an engagement at a large salary, in Australia.”

Percy Levant did not move a muscle.

“It is a most tempting offer, but, alas! poor as you are, you cannot bring yourself to leave your ladylove for years, perhaps forever, as the song says. And what so natural and reasonable as the suggestion that you should marry her, and take her out with you? At first, she will hesitate—oh! yes, certainly she will hesitate—but I think—” with a smile, “I think I do not over-estimate your powers of persuasion when I say that I am convinced you will overcome her reluctance to so hasty a marriage. There is a charming little English church in Pescia—most charming!—the very church for a quiet wedding. A *quiet* wedding, mark me, my dear Percy! You see! Come admit that I am as thoughtful on your behalf as even a parent could be!” and he laughed unctuously.

“To Australia!” said Percy Levant in a low voice.

Spenser Churchill made a mocking gesture.

“Nonsense, my dear fellow! Why should you go to Australia? On the day after the wedding you and I will have a little explanation. I shall have the happiness of telling you whom you have married, and the extent of your good fortune; of putting you in the way of paying me that little bonus we agreed upon—and then you may go where you please—London—Paris—Jericho!” [Pg 283]

“I see,” said Percy Levant, slowly. “It is a clever plan. And you will tell me nothing until after the marriage? You will not trust me——”

The gentle philanthropist’s smile spoke volumes by way of answer. It really meant, “Do you take me for a fool?”

“Yes, it is a clever plan,” repeated Percy Levant. “But, clever as it is, I think you will spoil it, Spenser Churchill.”

“I! Spoil it!” he echoed with reproachful indignation.

“Yes, I think so. Do you think Lady Despard will not suspect that there is something wrong when you dog our footsteps and follow us about——”

Mr. Spenser Churchill laughed.

“But I do not intend to inflict my presence upon you, my dear Percy. I shall ask dear Lady Despard’s permission to remain here at the villa, in charge, as it were, during her absence. You see? So that there will be nothing to be suspicious about.”

A curious expression, almost one of satisfaction, shone for a moment in Percy Levant’s dark eyes.

“I understand,” he said quietly. “Though not with us you will be near at hand? And I am to come here the day after the wedding?”

“Yes,” said Spenser Churchill, nodding complacently. “You will come to me and obtain the key to the enigma, and I flatter myself, my dear Percy, that you will, I fear, alas, for the first time, overwhelm me with gratitude! Ah, lucky, lucky boy! If I had had the good fortune in early life to possess such a friend as I have proved myself to you, where should I be now, I wonder?” and he sighed unctuously.

“In gaol, I should say,” retorted Percy, grimly. Then he added, quickly, “But I like your plan, and I shall do my best to carry it out. As you say, it is too late to draw back now——”

“Much too late,” laughed the philanthropist, “even if you wished to, which you do not, my dear boy.”

“No, I do not,” he assented, and he took a cigar from his case and lit it, his white, shapely hands trembling slightly. “I am willing to follow your instruction; and all I ask is that which you have consented to: that you keep away from Pescia.” [Pg 284]

Spenser Churchill nodded acquiescingly.

“Certainly. I agree with you, that the less I am in evidence the better.”

As he spoke, a footman came across the lawn with a telegram.

It was from Lord Cecil, and had been forwarded from Meuriguy’s. Mr. Spenser Churchill took it and opened it.

“The marquis’ condition is unaltered. Cecil Neville,” it ran.

He tore it into minute fragments.

“A request that I will speak at the annual meeting of the Washerwomen’s Burial Fund next week. You see what sacrifices I am making in your behalf, my dear Percy,” he said, shaking his head. “I think I am rather thirsty; it is this peculiar air, I suppose. A small brandy-and-soda, now—will you join me, my dear Percy? No?” and with a gentle sigh he ambled toward the house.

Percy Levant dropped down on the grass and smoked furiously for some minutes, then he flung the cigar from him as if he were too agitated to smoke.

“Yes, I’ll do it!—I’ll do it!” he muttered. “Oh, my beautiful angel, for your sake—it is for your sake.”

CHAPTER XXXI.

A POSTPONEMENT.

Some men take a great deal of killing; the Marquis of Stoyle ought, according to medical rules and poetical justice, to have died out of hand; but he clung to life tenaciously, and not only refused to die, but got better!

In ten days from Spenser Churchill's departure, his lordship rallied, and, to the surprise of every one, including the doctors, regained sufficient strength to enable him to leave his bed.

But a great change had taken place; one of those extraordinary changes which baffle medical [Pg 285] science and set all its knowledge at naught. The marquis had not lost his reason, but his memory.

He was perfectly sane, understood every word that was said to him, and could converse with all his wonted acuteness and sardonic cynicism, but he had forgotten everything excepting those things which had occurred in years long back. It was exactly as if the later years of his life, with all their experience, had been wiped clean from the tablets of his mind, and, as he sat in his easy chair looking out of the window, he was under the impression that his wife had just left him, and that Time had put back the hands on life's dial twenty years.

The doctors were both startled and puzzled. If he had become actually insane and idiotic, they could have understood it; but that a man should lose all hold upon twenty years of his life, and yet be able to understand what was said to him and converse rationally, was little short of phenomenal.

They sent for Lord Cecil, who came hurriedly, and was received by the old man with a cold, haughty courtesy, as if they had not met for years.

"I am glad to see you, Cecil," he said. "You have altered a great deal since I saw you last; you have grown, grown very much. I suppose you think of entering the army? Well, I will consider the matter. I imagine you would do as much mischief as a civilian as you will do as a soldier. Tell your father, my brother, that, though I bear him no good will, I will do my duty by you. Ask the steward to give you a five-pound note, and—you may go now, please," and Lord Cecil, dismissed like a schoolboy, left the room, too embarrassed and confounded to utter a word.

"What is to be done?" he said to the doctors. "Will he remain like this? It is terrible, terrible!"

Sir Andrew shook his head.

"It is very extraordinary, very; but I must remind you, Lord Cecil, that it might be worse. His lordship is in possession of all his faculties, and, excepting this remarkable loss of memory, is as sane as you and I. I have had a long, and, I must add most interesting, conversation with him this [Pg 286] morning, and he talked with all his old brilliance——"

"And bitterness," said the other famous doctor, under his breath.

"As to how long this singular lapse of memory will affect him, I really cannot say. It is an altogether unusual case. It is very bad, my lord, I admit," for Lord Cecil was much moved by the old man's condition; "but, as I say, it might be worse. His lordship's physical strength is improving daily, we may say hourly."

Lord Cecil sighed.

"It is dreadful to hear him talk so strangely," he said. "Can nothing be done, no experiment be tried? Perhaps if I brought Lady Grace?"

"Bring her ladyship, by all means," said the doctor. "There is no knowing what a familiar face may do. Yes, bring her, Lord Cecil."

Cecil jumped into a hansom, and returned with Lady Grace, whom he took up to the marquis' chair.

"Here is Grace, sir," he said.

"Grace? Grace? What Grace?" demanded the old man, with a hard, keen glance at the beautiful face he used to know so well. "I have not the honor and pleasure of the young lady's acquaintance. Do me the favor to introduce me, if you please."

"Surely you know me, dear marquis!" said Lady Grace, bending over him.

The old man took her hand, and turned it over in his, with a vacant smile. "Let me see, Peyton calls this girl of his Grace, doesn't he? Are you Peyton's daughter?"

"You know I am, my lord!" she said. "You remember my father, your oldest friend!"

"Jack Peyton! Oh, yes!" he said, with his old, caustic smile. "My oldest and best friend; he proved himself so by running off with the girl I was going to marry. And then I married Lucy——" His lips tightened, and seemed to grow stiff and hard—"and she ran away, too. I dare say she had reason. The child was a girl; it ought to have been a boy, and I hated it because it was not one. Yes, it ought to have been a boy, and cut out Cecil. And now Cecil will be the heir. I beg your pardon, Cecil," he broke off with his sardonic smile, "I forgot you were present. Yes, it was a girl. Some [Pg 287] one told me that it was dead, and Lucy, too. No, I don't wear mourning; why should I?" with a hard, haughty stare. "Let the man who went with her wear mourning; I dare say he regrets her, the fool. He was an old flame of hers. Spenser Churchill can tell you all about him, for he helped me to get Lucy away from him. Heaven knows what I saw in her to take so much trouble! I don't! Where is Churchill, by the way?" he broke off to inquire.

“He is on the Continent, sir,” said Lord Cecil.

“Oh, what a Pecksniff the fellow is! The biggest hypocrite on the face of the earth, but useful—oh, yes, useful! And so you are Grace Peyton, are you?” turning his glittering eyes upon Lady Grace, who shrank back, half-frightened. “Hem! I should think you’d make a good match with Cecil.”

“Have you forgotten that we are engaged, Cecil and I, marquis?” she murmured, bending over him.

“Engaged, are you?” he said. “Rather early, isn’t it? But I’ve no objection. Engaged to Cecil, eh? By gad, I pity you if he has any of the Stoyle temper! The Stoyles are the worst husbands in the world, so they say, and I think it’s true. He’ll make you wish you were dead before you have been married twelve months!”

“Come away, Grace,” said Cecil, pale and stern, and he led her out of the room.

“Oh! Cecil, I am sorry!” she murmured, clinging to his arm, and looking up into his face. “And we were to be married soon, too!”

“Yes,” he said, “I am afraid the wedding must be put off, Grace!” and, though he spoke in accents of regret, a guilty thrill of relief shot through him. “Poor old man! Poor old man! We were never on very affectionate terms, but it hurts me to see him like this!”

“And he may remain like it for ever so long!” she said, raising her eyes, as her head lay on his breast. “For months, perhaps. Do—do you think it would matter if we had a quiet, a very quiet, wedding, Cecil?”

He frowned.

“I am afraid it isn’t possible, Grace,” he replied, and again he was conscious of the same guilty thrill of relief. [Pg 288]

She drew a long breath, and pulled irritably at the lace on her sleeve.

“It couldn’t have been more awkward if he had died,” she said, almost sullenly.

Lord Cecil looked down at her gravely.

“I am very glad he is not dead,” he said. “I hope, and I think, he may recover completely. We can wait, Grace.”

“Oh, yes,” she said, with an effort; “we can wait; but it is terribly awkward, all the same, and people are talking so.”

“Let them talk!” he said, almost sternly. “What do I—or what should you—care what they say?”

A week passed, and the marquis still remained in the same condition mentally, but physically he progressed in a remarkable manner.

To all intents and purposes he was as well and strong as he was before his sudden attack, and one morning he rang for his valet, and said, in his old, haughty, listless manner:

“It is very cold here, in London, Williams.”

“Cold, my lord? We are all complaining of the heat!”

“So you may be; but that does not affect me, if I am cold,” retorted the marquis, grimly. “I shall go south! Pack up what is necessary, and see that we start to-morrow.”

The valet was too well trained to exhibit any sign of surprise.

“Yes, my lord,” he said, quietly. “Lord Cecil will accompany us, I presume?”

“You do presume!” retorted the marquis. “Lord Cecil will not accompany us! Great heaven, do you think I want a schoolboy hanging to my coat tails? Certainly not—we go alone! Let me see, it will be very pleasant in Italy! Rome! No; not Rome, it will be too crowded; and Florence is full of tourists at this time! We will go to Pescia.”

“Very good, my lord,” said the man, and he left the room and went straight to the doctors.

“Italy?” said Sir Andrew. “Well, yes, it will do his lordship no harm and may do him good. Pescia is a quiet place and will suit the marquis. I will write to the doctor over there and ask him to watch his lordship. And he wants to go alone, does he? Well, I suppose you can take care of him?” [Pg 289]

The valet professed himself quite capable of doing so, and in the end it was decided not to thwart the sick man’s fancy.

Lord Cecil was consulted and came to see him.

“Will you not let me come with you, sir?” he asked.

“Thanks, no,” replied the marquis. “Delighted as I should be to have you as my companion,” with a bow, “I must not forget that your military duties have a prior claim upon you. No, I shall go alone. I am aware that you all think I am dying, but I can assure you, with some regret, that you are very much mistaken. You will have to wait for the title a little while longer, Cecil Neville,” and he smiled sardonically.

What could Cecil say or do but assist as far as he was able in securing the comfort and safety of the old man, who even in his weakness possessed a fiercer self-will than most men can boast of in the prime of their strength? They wrote to the English doctor at Pescia, engaged a villa in the best part of the town, and sent over his lordship’s traveling chariot and those servants whom he was accustomed to have about him. And Cecil himself accompanied the party across the channel,

though even to this short escortage the marquis was opposed.

“Great heaven!” he exclaimed, irritably. “I have traveled half round the globe several times without your assistance, and I cannot conceive why you should consider it necessary to bore yourself, and me, too, by coming across the channel.”

“You forget that you have been ill, sir,” said Cecil, quietly, “and that it is my duty to see that your journey is made as comfortably as possible.”

“Thanks,” retorted the marquis. “It’s a pity you couldn’t have arranged a calm passage; but you couldn’t do that, and for the life of me I can’t think of anything else you can do. Good-by. Don’t trouble to write, I hate reading letters when I am abroad.”

And this, with a cold touch of his thin hand, comprised his adieu to his nephew and heir! [Pg 290]

CHAPTER XXXII.

“I LOVE HIM STILL.”

“Really, that was a very good idea of Mr. Spenser Churchill’s,” said Lady Despard, looking round her, as she leaned over the bridge which spans the river running sleepily down to the sea. “I should never have thought of coming to Pescia, but, then, I never have any ideas of any sort, and Mr. Spenser Churchill is so clever, isn’t he, Mr. Levant?” she added, turning her head lazily to where Percy Levant sat upon the stone coping of the bridge, looking down at the river, and now and again glancing at the face of Doris, who stood with her eyes fixed dreamily upon the perfect blue of the skies.

“Oh, yes, he is very clever,” he assented, quietly; “very.”

“And I really think the change is doing Doris good,” continued her ladyship, looking admiringly at the ivory pale face and dark blue eyes; “I think she is better. Not much to boast of in the way of color, perhaps, but we have only been here ten days, and you never do run to color, do you, Doris?”

Doris started.

“I—I beg your pardon,” she said. “I am afraid I was not listening——”

Lady Despard laughed.

“What a dreamer you are, dear,” she said, banteringly. “I often wish you would sell me your thoughts for the proverbial penny; they should be worth it, judging by your face. Does she sell them—or give them to you, Mr. Levant?”

He shrugged his shoulders, and pushed a loose pebble from the coping of the bridge into the water.

“‘My thoughts are all I have, but they’re my own,’” he quoted. “Will you tell me what you were thinking of, Doris?” he added, in a low voice.

A dash of color came into the pale face.

“They were not worth telling,” she said, with a little twinge in her voice. “I—I scarcely know what I was thinking about!” [Pg 291]

“Just dreaming, dreaming,” said her ladyship.

“Well, you couldn’t have come to a more suitable place than sleepy, old Pescia, where nothing happens, or has happened since the Ghibellines and the Florentines used to squabble and fight,” said Percy Levant. “By the way, though, something has happened; there has been a new arrival lately. I met a handsome carriage in the Via Grandia, and was told that it belonged to some great English milord, who had come for the benefit of his health.”

Lady Despard yawned.

“I do hope it’s no one we know, and that we sha’n’t be compelled to call,” she said. “Did they tell you his name?”

“No,” replied Percy Levant, “for a very good reason—no native of Pescia could possibly pronounce an English name. They make something awful out of Smith, even.”

Lady Despard laughed.

“I think I shall go in,” she said. “This sun is making me feel drowsy, and, as when I dream I fall asleep, it would be awkward tumbling into the water. You need not come, Doris,” she added, as Doris made a movement to follow her, and, after a moment’s hesitation, Doris remained.

It was seldom that she was alone with Percy Levant, though they were engaged, and his manner toward her was as full of respect, almost as full, indeed, of reserve, as it had been before the night she had promised to be his wife. Not once had he ventured to kiss her, and when his lips touched her hand it was with a reverence which was almost that of a subject for a monarch. And certainly no monarch ever had a more devoted servant. As Lady Despard said, Percy Levant was a model lover, and she declared that his devotion almost made her wish that he had proposed to her instead of Doris.

“I wish he had,” Doris had retorted, with a smile that was rather too grave to accompany a jest.

They stood now in silence for a moment or two, then he turned his head and looked at her. [Pg 292]

“I am glad you stayed, Doris,” he said. “I have something to tell you, to show you.”

“Yes?” she said, leaning on the bridge, and shading her eyes with her hands, that she might the more easily watch the upward flight of a hawk which had been hovering over the plain.

“It is some news I have had,” he said, and he drew a letter from his pocket and held it out to her, but kept his fingers closed on it, as he added, quietly: “Before you read it, let me tell you that I shall accept the offer it contains. Now will you read it, Doris?”

She took it.

“It is from Mr. Churchill,” she said; “I know the writing.”

He nodded, and she read the letter, and as she read her face grew pale.

“To Australia?” she said, in a low voice; “and you are going?”

“Yes,” he said. “And now the question I am going to ask you, Doris, is—am I to go alone?”

“Are you to go alone?” she repeated, as if she did not understand him; then, reading his meaning in his eyes, she shrank back a little, and her face grew crimson, and then white. “You mean that—that——”

“That you should come with me,” he said, in a grave voice.

“But—but——” she glanced at the letter again, “he says that you must start in a fortnight!”

“We could be married in less than that, Doris,” he said, gently.

She clasped her hands tightly, as they rested on the bridge.

“In a fortnight—in two weeks!” she said, with a little catch in her breath.

“Is the idea terrible?” he murmured, with a touch of sadness in his voice.

“No—oh, no!” she made haste to answer. “But it is so—so sudden! Two weeks——!”

He watched her anxiously, with a strange and curious watchfulness.

“Yes, it is a short notice, but, you see, it is Hobson’s choice with me. Poor men must take what is offered them, and I, as you know, Doris, am very poor, and this—well, it is a wonderful offer!” [Pg 293]

“It comes through Mr. Spenser Churchill,” she said, as if speaking to herself.

His lips twitched, and he looked quickly at her.

“Yes—why?”

“Nothing—nothing,” she murmured, thoughtfully, and with her brows knit; “but—it is so strange!”

“What is strange, dear Doris?” he asked.

“Ever since I have known him, Mr. Churchill seems bound up and connected in some way or other with my life!” and she sighed.

He leaned forward and averted his face, as she turned her eyes toward him.

“It—it is strange, coincidental,” he said, in a dry voice. “But—what is your answer, Doris? Stop! Don’t think of me, think of yourself——”

She shook her head.

“I—I will go if you wish me,” she said, almost inaudibly.

He took her hand—it was as cold as if she had been bathing it in the river beneath them—and pressed it to his lips.

“Thanks, dearest,” he said, and his voice trembled. “You shall never regret your choice—never. I will say no more,” and he let her hand fall, and moved away, as if he could not trust himself to speak further.

A moment or two after he came close to her, and laid his hand, with an almost imploring gesture, upon her arm.

“Doris,” he said, and his voice rang solemnly, “you think me selfish and exacting, I know——”

“You are always all that is good and kind to me!” she broke in, her lips quivering, her eyes growing moist with tears. “Am I to do nothing—give nothing—in return?”

“Oh, yes, I understand!” he said. “I understand more clearly than you guess, dearest. Try not to think too hardly of me. Some day—before long, perhaps—you will know how deeply and truly I love you!” and he turned and left her.

Doris remained standing on the bridge, looking at the sleepy river, with a dull pain in her heart and her eyes half-blinded with the rush of emotion that seemed to overwhelm her. [Pg 294]

In a fortnight! In two short weeks! Not until this moment had she fully realized what she had done in promising to be Percy Levant’s wife; but now——! She leaned her head upon her hands, and tried to crush down the rebellious thoughts that rose within her. Tried to wipe out, as it were, the remembrance of Cecil Neville, which haunted and tortured her.

“I love him still!” she moaned. “I love him still, and I am to be another man’s wife in a fortnight! Oh, if I were only dead—if I were only lying at rest at the bottom of the river here! In a fortnight! Oh, what have I done, what have I done?” and she wrung her hands, wildly.

Then suddenly, with an effort, she fought down the mad remorse and misery, and, in a dull despair, murmured:

“What does it matter? Why should I not marry him—or any one else? What can Cecil Neville ever be to me, even if I were free? He will be the husband of Lady Grace; he has forgotten that such a person as Doris Marlowe ever existed; or, if he remembers me, recalls me as the girl who served to amuse him for a few days in the country. What a shame it is that I should give a thought to him who has been so base and mean, while this other, to whom I have pledged my word, is all that is good and true! Marry Percy Levant! Yes, I would marry him to-morrow if he asked me!” and, setting her teeth hard, she turned to leave the bridge.

As she did so, a tall, thin old man, with a white, wasted face, from which a pair of sharp gray eyes gleamed like cold steel, came onto the bridge, and she made way for him.

He was leaning on a stick, and, as he raised his hat in courtly acknowledgment, he let the stick slip from his thin, clawlike hands.

Doris stooped and picked it up, and, as she gave it to him and he was thanking her in Italian, his piercing eyes scanned her face with a cold earnestness.

Doris bowed and went on, but some impulse moved her to look back after she had gone a few yards, and she saw him leaning against the bridge, with his hands pressed to his heart, and his face deathly white. [Pg 295]

She was at his side in an instant, and had drawn his wasted arm within her firm, strong one almost before he knew of it.

“I am afraid you are ill,” she said.

He started as her sweet, musical voice sounded in his ears, and raised his eyes to her face.

“No, no,” he said, evidently with an effort. “But I have been ill, and—and I am a little weak, which,” he added, with all the old courtesy, “is my good fortune, seeing that it has procured me the—the happiness of your assistance. You are English. I took you for an Italian. My eyes are not so strong”—he stopped, from sheer weakness, and leaned upon her arm heavily, if the word can be used in connection with the lightness of his frail form—“not so strong as they were. I have the misfortune to be old, you see,” and he forced a smile.

“Let me help you to the seat there,” said Doris, gently.

“Thank you, thank you; but I could not think of troubling a lady——”

Disregarding his apologies, she led him carefully to the seat, into which he sank with a sigh of weary relief. Doris looked at him anxiously. It was a striking face, and a vague kind of idea crossed her mind that she had seen it somewhere before to-day, but she could not fix the time or place, and presently she found the keen, glittering eyes fixed in a meditative scrutiny upon herself.

“You have been very kind to me, my dear young lady,” he said, in a voice that still trembled a little; “very kind. And you are English? Will you tell me your name? I am an old man, and claim an old man’s privilege—inquisitiveness—you see.”

“My name is Doris—Doris Marlowe,” said Doris, seating herself beside him, and looking down the road in the hope that a carriage might come up in which she could place him.

“Doris Marlowe? No,” he shook his head; “I never heard it before; and yet I fancied your face awakened some dim memories. Do you know me, Miss Marlowe?” [Pg 296]

Doris looked at him, and shook her head.

“No,” she replied. She did not like to ask his name.

“Ah, perhaps that is as well,” he said, with a faintly cynical smile; “I mean that I am not worth knowing. And are you living here, Miss Marlowe? Your mother must be a very happy woman, having so sweet a daughter,” and he drooped his head toward her, with the old, graceful salute.

A deep red stained Doris’ pale face.

“My mother is dead,” she said.

He put up his white hand, with a pleading gesture.

“Forgive me, my dear! Your father——”

“I have no father,” said Doris, almost inaudibly, and with a strange pang shooting through her heart. “There was one who was father and mother to me, but—he is dead, too,” and her voice quivered.

“You are young to have seen so much trouble,” he said, pityingly. “But you are living here with some relative, is it not so?”

Doris shook her head.

“I have not a relative in the world,” she replied. “I am living with Lady Despard. I am her companion.”

“Lady Despard?” he put his white hand to his head. “Lady Despard? I—I think I know her. And you are living with her? I envy her her companion, my dear. I will do myself the honor of calling upon her. Tell me your name again. I—I forget, sometimes. I am very old, older than you think, because you see I am so strong still. You smile?” sharply.

“No, no, I did not smile, indeed!” said Doris, quickly. “But I do not think you are strong enough—you have told me that you have been ill, you know—to walk about alone.”

He sighed, and shrugged his shoulders, with a mirthless smile.

“Alone. I have only a valet, and I hate to have him with me. I had a wife once”—he stopped, and looked darkly before him—“she left me—she died, I mean, of course and I’ve no one else. I had a child, a little girl, but she died, too. You see, I am like you somewhat, though I have other relations who, doubtless, wish that I would die also,” and he smiled, cynically. [Pg 297]

Doris shrank a little, then, ashamed of the momentary repugnance, said, gently:

“That is not true, I am sure. And now, will you tell me where you live? I will come with you if you will let me. Or will you come with me to Lady Despard’s, and have her carriage?”

He shook his head and straightened himself.

“I have the Villa Vittoria,” he said.

Doris knew it. It was the largest, and, after Lady Despard’s, the handsomest in Pescia.

“Yes, I know it,” she said. “It is too far for you to go alone. When you are rested—but there is no hurry, we will stay as long as you like—I will go with you.”

“You are very kind, my dear,” he said, looking at her with a gentleness which assuredly was an unfamiliar expression on that cold, haughty face. “Very! I will rest a little longer, if I may.”

He sat silent for a short time, and Doris heard him murmuring her name several times, and then he looked up and sighed.

“No, I don’t remember, and yet——” he passed his hand over his forehead with a wistful, puzzled look in his keen eyes. “I am ready now, my dear young lady,” he said, presently. “You see, I accept your kind offer,” as he placed his hand upon the arm Doris offered him. “Not so long ago, fair ladies were wont to rest upon my arm; now the order is changed. One gets old suddenly!” he added, with a grim smile. “And I have been ill. I think I told you. Yes, very ill. They thought I was dead; but”—with a gesture of defiance—“my race die hard—-die hard! And you have no father or mother? That is sad! Did I tell you I had a little girl once? She died! Yes, she died!” His head drooped for a moment. “If she had lived and stayed with me, I should have had her arm to lean upon. By Heaven, I never thought of that before!” he exclaimed, in a suppressed voice, and his head sank lower.

They crossed the bridge in silence, and reached the Via Grandia, where Doris saw a man, whom she took for a servant, hurriedly cross the road and approach them. [Pg 298]

“I am afraid you are ill, my lord,” he said, touching his hat. “I missed you on leaving the chemist’s ——”

The old gentleman drew his hand slowly from Doris’ arm, and took the servant’s.

“This is my man, Miss Marlowe,” he said, “and I shall not need to tax your kindness and patience any longer. How deeply grateful I am for that kindness and patience I cannot tell you. But for you ——” He stopped expressively. “Will you tell Lady Despard that I shall have the honor of calling upon her to-morrow, to congratulate her upon having so sweet and beautiful a friend?”

“Yes,” replied Doris, allowing her soft, warm hand to remain in his, which seemed to cling to it confidingly. “But you have not told me your name yet?” she added, with a smile.

“Have I not?” he said; “I am the Marquis of Stoyle, my dear.”

Doris recoiled, and drew her hand away so suddenly that his thin, feeble one fell abruptly to his side.

“The Marquis of Stoyle!” she echoed, every vestige of color leaving her face. “Yes, I will tell her, my lord,” and she turned and walked quickly away.

The marquis looked after her with knitted brows—looked so long that the valet gently pressed his arm as a reminder.

“Yes, yes—I am coming!” exclaimed the old man, impatiently. Then he said, “Do I know that young lady? You saw her—do I know her? She has been very kind to me—very!”

“No, my lord, she is a stranger to me,” replied the man.

“A stranger. Yes, yes. And yet——”

And, with knitted brows and troubled look in his eyes he permitted his man to lead him away.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

[Pg 299]

OUT OF THE PAST.

“So the illustrious visitor turns out to be the great Marquis of Stoyle!” exclaimed Lady Despard, with a laugh of surprise. “The Marquis of Stoyle! And you have been leading him about like a blind beggar? How I wish I had been there to see you! But it seems to have upset you, dear,” she added; “you look really pale now, and—why, you haven’t been crying?” and she drew Doris beside her on to the lounge.

“No, I haven’t been crying,” said Doris, quietly; then, after a pause, she said, gravely, “I have promised to marry Percy Levant in a fortnight’s time, Lady Despard.”

Her ladyship started.

“In a—what time did you say? A fortnight! Oh, nonsense! No wonder you look pale! I think it is a shame you should try to impose upon my credulity, Doris; for, of course, it is only a joke!”

“It is sober earnest, dear Lady Despard,” said Doris; and then she told her of the letter of Spenser Churchill containing the offer of an engagement for Percy Levant.

“And you intend to marry him and go with him! What on earth shall I do without you? What shall I do? What a wicked girl you must be to entice me into loving you so, and then to leave me! Why, I didn’t expect this dreadful marriage to take place for at least two years, and now—! Two weeks! You must love him very dearly, Doris.”

“I respect him very highly,” said Doris. “He is not like some men—” she sighed—“he is true and steadfast, and he—he really cares for me, I think,” in a low voice. “Why should I not make him happy if I can?”

“Really cares for you! Yes, I should think he does; why, child, he worships every inch of ground those little feet of yours tread on. And so he might, considering the many others who would be only too happy to take his place. And why should you make him happy? Well, I don’t know. But it [Pg 300] seems to me, dear, that you are one of those women who consider that they were only born to make others happy. I only hope that you will make yourself happy.”

“Oh, yes; I shall be as happy as I deserve,” said Doris with a faint smile.

“And you have quite made up your mind?” demanded Lady Despard.

“Quite,” said Doris.

“Then the only thing to be done is to grin and bear it, for I know the stiff-necked, resolute kind of young person you are. Oh, there is one other thing we must do: we can set about getting your things ready.”

“I shall not want many,” said Doris; “we are both very poor, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” said Lady Despard, dryly. “All the same, I suppose you will go decently clad.”

“And the wedding is to be very quiet,” said Doris, pushing back the hair from her forehead with a weary little gesture; “quite quiet. I don’t want any bridesmaids—”

Lady Despard shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, very well; have it all your own way. You shall be married at midnight, and in darkest secrecy, if you like. And in a fortnight! Great heavens! Why, it scarcely gives one time to make a couple of dresses.”

“Which are all I shall require,” said Doris, with a smile. “Dear Lady Despard, you forget that it is not your sister who is going to be married, but only your companion.”

Lady Despard moved away with a despairing gesture.

“I only wish you were my sister. I would show you if you should make ducks and drakes of your future in this way.”

“Don’t let us talk about it any longer,” said Doris, rising and stretching out her arms as if she were ridding herself of some incubus.

“No, the better thing to do is to act and not talk. Put on your hat, and let us go down to the shops and see if there is anything decent we can buy. A fortnight! I rather liked Percy Levant on the whole, but now I feel as if I hated him. I wish to Heaven, Spenser Churchill had not sent him with [Pg 301] us!”

Apparently the Pescia drapers had something decent on sale, for her ladyship made purchases so extensive as to alarm Doris, who, when she remonstrated, was told to mind her own business; and the next two or three days were occupied in consultation with dressmakers and milliners; and Lady Despard had quite forgotten the Marquis of Stoyle and his promised visit.

But Doris had not. And often as she sat, surrounded by “materials” and bonnet shapes, she thought of the strange meeting with the man who had stepped in between her and Lord Cecil, and robbed her of her lover.

How surprised he would have been if she had said:

“Yes, I know, my lord. You are the man who has wrecked my whole life, and broken my heart!”

And yet that was what he had done; for in losing Cecil Neville she had lost all that makes life

worth living.

Was there a single night in which, in feverish dreams, she did not hear his voice, and feel his passionate kisses on her lips? Was there a single morning on which she did not wake with that dull aching of the heart which some of us know so well! And she was to marry another man in a fortnight!

During these two days Percy Levant was absent. He, too, had to make preparations for the approaching wedding, and, strange to say, Doris missed him. He had been so like her shadow for months past, always near her and ready, and promptly ready, to forestall her lightest wish, that his absence made itself felt.

On the third day Lady Despard and she were sitting in the former's boudoir, literally up to their knees in millinery, when a footman brought in a card.

"Can't see any one this afternoon," said Lady Despard. "Unless they understand and can undertake plain sewing. Who is it, dear?"

Doris took the card.

"The Marquis of Stoyle," she answered, falteringly.

Lady Despard rose in her usual languid style.

"The marquis! Oh, I think we must see him, dear. He has come to pour out his gratitude——"

"It isn't the marquis, my lady, but his valet," said the footman. [Pg 302]

Lady Despard sank back into the midst of the whirlpool of muslin.

"Oh, well, show him in."

"Here, my lady?"

"Yes; I'm too busy to go to any one short of a marquis."

The valet, a grave, distinguished-looking man, who might well have been taken for a marquis, or, for that matter, a duke, entered a moment or two afterward, and bowed.

"His lordship's compliments, my lady, and he would be glad to know how Miss Doris Marlowe is."

Lady Despard jerked her thumb lightly toward Doris.

"That is Miss Marlowe."

The valet bowed respectfully—very respectfully—to Doris.

"His lordship is very ill, miss; or he would have done himself the honor to wait upon you to thank you for your great kindness to him," he said.

Doris' face flushed for an instant.

"I am sorry," she said, bending over her work; "but I did very little, as the marquis knows."

"He is very ill, miss—that is, he is very weak, and——" he hesitated, "and he requested me to say that he should deem it a very great favor, indeed, if you would come and see him. He wished me to say that, if he could have crawled—crawled was his word, my lady"—turning to Lady Despard, "he would have come himself. But he is quite confined to his room, and perfectly unable to leave it. The marquis is an old man, you see, my lady, and has been ill, very ill."

Lady Despard looked at Doris and seemed to wait her reply; and the valet crossed his hands and also seemed to wait, respectfully and patiently.

Doris' white brow wrinkled painfully, and she laid a tremulous hand upon Lady Despard's arm.

"I—I don't know," she said, in a troubled voice.

"His lordship has spoken of you several times, miss," said the valet, in an earnest tone; "indeed, he has talked of little else since he came home. He is very old, you see——" [Pg 303]

Doris' gentle heart melted at the repetition of this simple formula.

"What shall I do?" she whispered to Lady Despard.

Her ladyship shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose you had better go. Of course you will go. Why, you know you couldn't resist an appeal of this kind!"

Doris looked before her with wistful, troubled eyes for a moment or two, then she laid down the work she was engaged on.

"I will come with you," she said.

When she re-entered the room with her hat and jacket on, she looked round, and taking some flowers from one of the vases, quickly rearranged them, and then said:

"I am ready."

"I will get a carriage, my lady——" said the valet; but Doris shook her head.

"It is no distance; I would rather walk."

Lady Despard waved her hand to her with a smile made up of affection and amusement.

"Another conquest, my dear," she said. "It's a pity Percy Levant isn't a curate; you would have

made such an admirable district visitor."

On their way through the quiet streets the valet, answering Doris' questions, gave her some information respecting the marquis' condition.

"It was the excitement of the grand party, you see, miss," he said. "The party given in Lady Grace's honor, the young lady who is to marry my Lord Cecil, that did it. His lordship isn't used to excitement, and it was quite against Lord Cecil's wish that the party was given, but the marquis was so delighted at the engagement that he would insist—I'm afraid I'm walking too fast for you, miss," he broke off, as he glanced at Doris' face, which had grown pale and wan.

"No, no," she said, quickly. "It—it is rather warm. Lady Grace is very beautiful, is she not? Yes, I know she is beautiful."

"Oh, yes, miss; her ladyship is one of the acknowledged beauties, as I dare say you are aware."

"Yes," said Doris, raising her nosegay to her face to hide the quiver of the lips. "And—and Lord Cecil"—how little the man guessed the effort it cost her to speak the name!—"he is very much attached——" she stopped, remembering that it was rather indiscreet to discuss his master's affairs with this man. [Pg 304]

"Attached to her ladyship, miss?" he said, with perfect respect. "Yes, oh, yes; how could he be otherwise?" He seemed to hesitate a moment, then he said, rather reflectively, "Lord Cecil has rather changed of late."

"Rather changed?" said Doris, faintly.

"Well, yes, miss. He used to be rather wild, and certainly always in the best of humors, what would be described as light-hearted. I used to say that it made one laugh one's self to hear his laugh, so free and blithesome it was, so to speak. But he's got quieter of late, and we hear him laugh scarcely at all now. But perhaps you know his lordship, miss?"

A scarlet wave of color rose and passed over Doris' face, and she shook her head silently.

"Ah, well, miss, you wouldn't have known him for the same person. Perhaps it's the responsibility of this engagement and the marquis' illness."

"He—is not here?—here at Pescia?" she asked, stopping short suddenly, with a look of alarm.

"Oh, no, miss; or of course he would have brought the marquis' message instead of me. Oh, no; it was the marquis' wish that he should come on the Continent quite alone, and Lord Cecil remained, very reluctantly, in England. Of course, I should take upon myself to send for him if the marquis got seriously worse. This is the house—villa, as they call it," and he conducted Doris into the miniature palace which his agents had succeeded in renting for the marquis.

Doris waited in the—literally—marble hall, while the valet went upstairs to convey the result of his mission to his master, and she employed the few minutes before his return in composing herself.

She was going, in obedience to his whim, to sit beside the bed of this sick old man, who had robbed her of her lover and wrecked all her life, the Marquis of Stoyle, at whose request or command Lord Cecil had abandoned her! [Pg 305]

"If any one had told me that I should have done this thing," she mused, in sad wonderment, "with what scorn I should have repelled the suggestion; and yet—I am here. And, what is more wonderful still, I cannot hate him—could not, if I tried. Is it because he is so old, and ill, and helpless, and looks so unhappy? Only the wretched can feel for the wretched, they say," and she sighed as she followed the man up the stairs into a carefully-shaded room.

The great marquis lay upon a couch wrapped in his velvet dressing-gown, the brightness of which seemed to heighten the effect of his pallid, wasted face, with its piercing eyes shining like brilliants in their hollow, dark-ringed sockets.

He made an effort to rise as she entered, but fell back with an apologetic wave of his emaciated hand.

"You see how helpless I am, my dear!" he said; "worse than when you so generously came to my aid the other day. And so you consented to gratify the sick fancy of an old man, and have come to see me!"

Doris drew near and took the hand he extended to her, and as she bent over him a strange, mysterious feeling of pity thrilled through her.

"I am so sorry to see you so weak, my lord," she said, gently; "but you will be better when the weather is cooler."

"Yes, yes," he assented, eagerly. "Oh, yes; I shall get better! It is only a passing weakness! I have been very ill—I told you? Yes, I am very strong. We Stoyles have the constitution and"—with a grim smile—"the temper of Old Nick! Yes, I shall get better."

"I have brought you some flowers," said Doris.

The valet came forward with a vase, but the marquis waved him back.

"No," he said. "Give them to me! Give them to me," and he took them from her with a courtly eagerness. "Ah, beautiful; and you were so gracious as to think of them! They are almost as beautiful as yourself; but not more pure, not more innocent or pure," he added to himself, with a strange, wistful gravity, as his eyes rested on her sweet face, "whose goodness lay open to all [Pg 306]

men's eyes," as the poet says.

The valet came forward again to arrange the pillows, which had slipped down, and the marquis' face flashed angrily.

"Go, go!" he said, irritably.

The man drew back with unmoved countenance, and Doris leaned forward.

"Let me put them more comfortably for you, my lord," she said.

He allowed her to do it, without a word or sign of protest or resentment, and sank back with a sigh.

> Oh, woman, in our hours of ease,
> Uncertain, coy, and hard to please;
> When pain and anguish wring the brow,
> A ministering angel thou.

"Scott! Walter Scott! I can understand that now—now you are here! Yes, a ministering angel!"

He seemed lost in thought for a moment, then he turned his keen eyes upon her inquiringly.

"You look pale and sad. Have you been in trouble? I have no right to ask, you will say; but curiosity is an old man's privilege, remember, my dear."

"'Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward,' my lord," said Doris, in a low voice.

"Aye," he said, knitting his brows "Yes. Trouble we make for ourselves; but sorrow must have been unmerited in your case, child. Tell me——" he stopped short and sighed. "I am forgetting," he said. "Why should you tell me? I am not your father——" he stopped again. "Did I tell you that I had a daughter once? She is dead. If she had lived she would have been about your age, I think. I wish——" again he stopped, and the proud lips quivered slightly. "I have neither son nor daughter; only a nephew, who, doubtless, thinks I am an unconscionable time dying; and he is right. It is time that there was a new Marquis of Stoyle."

Doris looked down.

"I—I think you do him an injustice, my lord," she said.

He laughed the old cynical laugh.

"If he doesn't, I've no doubt Grace does. Lady Grace Peyton, the girl he is going to marry," he explained, "is a clever girl; too clever for Cecil," and he smiled half-scornfully. "She will have all the brains, and, perhaps, he will have all the honesty. Yes, I'll say that for him; he may be a fool, but he's no knave. A knave would have been too sharp for us——" He put his hand to his brow as if his memory were slipping from him and he was endeavoring to keep a hold upon it. "Did I tell you about him and Lady Grace? I think I told you." [Pg 307]

Doris shook her head.

"No, my lord," she replied, almost inaudibly.

"No? I thought——" He paused, and looked round with a helpless sigh. "I have forgotten it now. Spenser Churchill could tell you. It will amuse you." He smiled with childish enjoyment. "I wish I could remember, but I can't. My memory is worse, much worse since my illness;" and he sighed again.

"Do not distress yourself, my lord," said Doris. "You shall tell me when you remember it, if you like."

He inclined his head.

"One time, not so long ago, I could remember everything," he said, with a forced smile which was infinitely pitiable. "Not a face or a story but I could carry it in my mind, and now"—he looked at her apologetically—"I have actually forgotten your name, who have been so kind to a feeble old man, my dear."

"Doris Marlowe," said Doris.

He repeated it twice or thrice; then shook his head.

"Yes, a pretty name. I don't think I ever heard it before. My little girl's name was Mary. They wanted to call it Lucy, after her mother; but there has always been a Mary Neville—until now. I told you she died, did I not?"

"Yes, my lord," said Doris, soothingly.

"Y—es," he repeated, musingly. "If she had lived I should have had some one, like yourself, to see me through the last mile of life's race—the last mile. I kept race horses once. I've done and seen everything in my time. Wicked Lord Stoyle they called me. But through it all I was never so bad as some. Spenser Churchill, for instance——"

"Mr. Spenser Churchill has been very good to me, my lord," said Doris, gently. [Pg 308]

The keen, piercing eyes opened upon her with amazement.

"Good to you!—Spenser Churchill? You are jesting, child. He was never good to any one, man or woman!" he laughed. "Spenser Churchill. Why, it was he who——" He stopped, with a troubled look on his face. "No—I've forgotten—it has slipped me again. It is something Grace was in, too.

Clever woman, Grace; too clever for Cecil. But I had my way. Yes! I had my way."

Doris rose.

"I must go now, my lord," she said, faintly.

"Yes?" he said, wistfully. "Yes, I suppose so. It was very good of you, my dear, to humor an old man's whim. Let me look at you," and he raised himself on his elbow. "You are very pretty. Did I tell you I had a daughter? Yes, yes. I think—it is only a fancy, this—that she would have looked like you. He will be a happy man who wins that beautiful face and gentle heart!"

Doris' face flushed, and her eyes dropped, and his keen ones noted her embarrassment.

"Ah," he said; "there is some one already, is there not?"

"Yes, my lord," said poor Doris, in a low voice.

He nodded.

"Yes, yes! Who is he? What is his name? But it's no use telling me; I can't remember, you see! I should like to see him. Will you ask him to come and see me, an old man on the verge of the grave? You can say that, though it isn't true! No, I'm worth twenty dead men still," and he raised himself, and glared at the opposite wall with a proud, cold hauteur, which made Doris shrink, for suddenly there flashed upon her mind the night Jeffrey had taken her to Drury Lane, and she had seen the old, stern-looking man in the box; and this was he! She remembered and recognized him now.

She rose trembling, and filled with a vague fear.

"Must you go? Thank you for coming to me! Remember, tell the fortunate man who has won you that I shall esteem it a favor if he will bring you to see me again. I should like to congratulate him upon the treasure he has got." [Pg 309]

His shaking hand rested in her soft palm for a moment, then he fell back with a sigh; but immediately afterward, as she left the room, she heard him address his valet in a dead, cold voice.

Doris went home greatly agitated.

"Your visit has been a trying one, I am afraid, dear," said Lady Despard, regarding her pale face with sympathetic curiosity. "Was he a very irritable old man? I've heard all sorts of stories about him."

Doris sighed.

"He is very ill and old," she said. "He—he was very kind and gentle to me," and, though she could scarcely have told why, her eyes grew moist.

"Well, he would have to be a perfect monster, with a heart of stone, if he had been anything else than kind and gentle to you. And now I have some good news for you. Percy Levant has come back. All his preparations are complete, he says, for the happy event——"

Doris started. She had almost forgotten Percy Levant in the excitement of the interview with the marquis, and the memories and emotions he had evoked.

"I should think he had been working pretty hard or worrying about something," continued Lady Despard, "for he looks as grave as a judge, and hadn't a laugh in him. Oh, here he comes."

Percy Levant entered the room as she spoke, and Lady Despard, murmuring some excuse, left the two young people alone.

He took Doris' hands, and looked down at her with a grave tenderness that, if she had met his gaze, would have startled her by its sadness.

"Well, Doris," he said, "I have come back, and all is ready."

"I am glad you have come back," she said, in her low, sweet voice. "Lady Despard has missed you terribly."

"And you?" he asked.

"And I!" she answered, lifting her eyes to his face for a moment. "Yes, I have missed you. I have not so many friends that I can afford to lose one without missing him."

"Friend!" he said, almost inaudibly. "Well, yes, I am truly your friend. And you don't regret—you have no misgivings as to the future, Doris?" [Pg 310]

She paused, almost perceptibly, then, in a still lower voice, replied:

"No, I have no regrets, no misgivings. I—I trust you entirely."

"Yes, dearest," he said, and he bent and kissed her hands, "and you may do so, I think, entirely. I must go and dress now."

"Wait a moment," she said, falteringly. "I have something to tell you," and she told him of her meeting with the marquis and her visit to him.

"The Marquis of Stoyle!" he said, as she mentioned his name, and he let her hands drop suddenly. "The Marquis of Stoyle!" and his eyes rested upon her face with a curious expression.

"Yes," she said, her heart beating. "Do—do you know him?"

"No; but I have heard of him," he replied. "Who has not? He is the uncle of Lord Cecil Neville;"

and he watched her closely.

Her face flushed for an instant, then grew pale again.

“Yes,” she said, simply. “And will you come with me to see him? He is very ill, worse than he thinks, and—and nearer death than he would believe.”

“I will come with you if you wish it,” he said. “I will do anything you wish, now and always, Doris.”

“Well, I do wish it. I don’t know why,” she said, with a smile that was rather troubled, “but I do wish it.”

“Then we will go,” he said, as a matter of course. “And now I’ll go and make myself presentable.”

With his change of clothes he seemed to have got rid of the gravity and melancholy which Lady Despard had remarked upon; and that evening he was the Percy Levant of old, causing Lady Despard to laugh until she declared that she was tired, and bringing a smile even to Doris’ quietly brooding face.

Once or twice Lady Despard referred to the now rapidly-approaching marriage day, but when she did so he evaded the subject and changed it, as if it were too close to his heart to be spoken of lightly.

“After all, dear,” said Lady Despard, as she came into Doris’ dressing-room for a few minutes’ [Pg 311] chat before going to bed, “I don’t know that you could have done better. He loves you to distraction, and he’s awfully clever and light-hearted. You’ll never know what it is to be bored for a single moment,” and her ladyship, recalling the many wearisome hours she had endured in the society of her dear departed, sighed; “and he is really the handsomest man I have ever met. Yes, I don’t know, dear, that you haven’t done wisely in choosing him. But I wish he had some money and a title. I have a fancy that you ought to be called ‘my lady.’ There is something about you—a certain dignity——”

Doris swung her thick hair over her shoulders, and looked down at Lady Despard’s pensive face with a smile.

“That’s ‘spoke sarcastic,’ as Artemus Ward would say,” she said. “I ‘my lady’! Plain ‘Mrs.’ will suit me better than anything grander, I think.”

“I don’t agree with you,” said Lady Despard; “but it can’t be helped now, and, after all, one is none the happier for a title; and I do hope you will be happy, dear! You deserve it so very much,” and she put her arm round the slim waist and kissed her.

Doris slept little that night. The white, haggard face of the old man haunted her, and, strangely enough, the frank, handsome one of Lord Cecil, in all its bravery of youth and strength, mingled with it in an inextricable fashion.

At breakfast Percy Levant was still in a bright humor, and jested even about their visit to the marquis.

“Not content with playing the Lady Charitable herself, you see, Lady Despard, Doris must needs make a district visitor of me! What part do I take now? Am I to carry the basket with the tea and tracts, or what? Perhaps, when you get there, the marquis will have forgotten your existence.”

“I am quite sure he is too gallant to do that,” interrupted Lady Despard.

“Or perhaps he will regard my presence as an intrusion, and order me to be cast into the deepest dungeon. Anyway, I suppose we have got to chance it, so put on your things, Doris, and let us get it over.”

Doris filled a basket with some flowers, and a bunch of grapes—“just to keep up the character,” [Pg 312] Percy Levant remarked—and the valet received them in the villa with an air of respectful gratitude.

“His lordship has been inquiring for you all the morning, miss,” he said. “He has spoken of nothing else, scarcely,” he said, as he led them upstairs.

As Doris entered she saw, or fancied she saw, that a change had taken place even in the few hours since she had last seen him; and his voice sounded to her weaker, as, raising himself on his elbow, he stretched out his hand toward her with feeble eagerness.

“Thank you, thank you, my dear!” he said, his thin, wasted fingers closing over her soft, warm ones. “This is very good of you, very! And this, who is this?”

“This is Mr. Levant,” said Doris, in a low voice.

“Mr. Levant,” he repeated, in quite a different voice. “And who is——Ah, yes, I remember. I thank you sir, for granting my request,” and he inclined his head to Percy Levant with stately courtesy. “I wished to see you, wished to see you very much. This young lady has been very kind to the old and feeble man you see before you. She has a gentle and a good heart, sir. And you are the fortunate man who has won her, it would seem.”

“I deem myself very fortunate, my lord,” said Percy Levant.

The keen, piercing eyes seemed to dart through him.

“That is the truth, if you never spoke it before,” he retorted, in his old, cynical way. “Have I had the honor of meeting you before, Mr. Levant?”

“Never that I am aware of, my lord,” said Percy Levant; “and my acquaintances are so few that I am not likely to have forgotten it.”

“Ah,” said the old man, still eying him as if he were trying to gain some glimpse of his character. “You are ready with a repartee, I observe.”

“One need be who would hope to be worthy of crossing swords with the Marquis of Stoyle.”

The old man’s eyes glittered.

“Good, good!” he said, in a low voice; then, to Doris, whose hand he still held as she sat beside the couch: “You will have a clever man for a husband, my dear, and that is better than having a fool.” [Pg 313]

Doris hung her head.

“And you, sir, will have such a treasure as falls to the lot of few mortals.”

Percy Levant, as he stood with folded arms, bowed gravely.

“I am fully sensible of that, my lord.”

“You should be,” said the marquis.

There was a moment’s silence, during which his eyes lost their keen expression and grew absent and dreamy.

“Marriages are made in heaven,” he said, as if to himself. “Yes, in heaven. Do you know my nephew, Cecil Neville?”

Doris sank lower into her chair, and averted her face.

“I have heard of him, my lord,” replied Percy Levant.

“Ah, no doubt! He is not clever, but he marries a clever girl! Yes, Grace is clever,” and a smile curved his thin lips. “Cecil gave us some trouble, but we were too sharp for him. I think I told you, my dear?” he broke off to ask of Doris.

She shook her head and tried to speak, to lead him away from further mention of the name which struck her heart, but with the persistence of old age he went on:

“It’s a curious story, Mr.——forgive me, sir, but I have forgotten your name.”

“Percy Levant; but it is of no consequence, my lord.”

“Thank you, Mr. Levant. A curious story. My nephew, Cecil Neville, is the next in succession. He will be the Marquis of Stoyle. We were never very friendly. My fault, no doubt; I plead guilty, my dear,” to Doris. “All old men in my position have plans, and I have one. I wanted him to marry Peyton’s daughter Grace. You see, Peyton and I were old friends, and Grace had a claim upon me. I thought she would make a very good marchioness, and a capital match for Cecil. I’m afraid I weary you, sir,” he broke off.

“On the contrary,” said Percy Levant, in a constrained voice, and carefully avoiding looking in Doris’ direction.

“No? You are very good. Well, I wanted Cecil to marry her. I expected some opposition, but, by gad, I didn’t expect that he would thwart me to the extent of falling in love—engaging himself to another girl!” [Pg 314]

Doris, white and trembling, laid her hand upon his arm.

“You—you will tire yourself, my lord,” she managed to murmur.

“No, no,” he said. “I want to tell you, my dear. It is a very good story. Where was I——”

“Lord Cecil was in love with another lady, I believe, my lord,” said Percy Levant, in a dry voice.

“Yes, yes,” murmured the marquis, feebly, “a young person by the name of——” He stopped and knit his brows. “I’m sorry, but I can’t remember her name!”

“It is of no consequence, my lord,” said Percy Levant, still averting his eyes from the spot where Doris sat with drooping head.

“I can’t remember her name. She was an actress. An actress! Imagine it, my dear!” and he turned to Doris with a smile. “A common actress to be the Marchioness of Stoyle! I thought Cecil had gone out of his mind, and that I could laugh him, or argue him out of his absurd fancy; but sarcasm and logic were thrown away upon him, and I admit that I should have been beaten, yes, beaten!—I, who had never been thwarted in my life!—but, fortunately, some one came to my aid.”

He stopped and dropped back upon the cushions; and Doris, with an effort, rose and gave him some water.

“Thank you, my dear,” he said, gratefully, his eyes resting on her pale face with an affectionate smile.

“Spenser Churchill——” Doris nearly let the glass fall and sank back into her chair.

“Mr. Spenser Churchill, the great philanthropist, my lord?” asked Percy Levant, in a dry voice.

The marquis laughed a sardonic laugh.

“Yes, the great philanthropist! The man who takes the chair at the great annual meetings; the man who champions the cause of the widow and the orphans. Yes, that is the man. Everybody

knows Spenser Churchill." He stopped and smiled, as if he were reveling in some memory connected with the name. "That is the man. You know him?"

Percy Levant nodded.

"Every one knows him, my lord."

"And believes in him! That's an admirable joke! Well, he came to my assistance. My nephew, [Pg 315] Cecil, had arranged to meet his 'ladye love,' this actress girl, or to put a letter to her underneath a stone or in a hollow tree—the usual thing, Mr.—Mr.——"

"Levant, my lord," said Percy.

"Thank you, thank you! Yes, Mr. Levant. And my friend, Spenser Churchill, the great philanthropist, suggested that I should send Cecil out of the way, and that he, Spenser Churchill, should forge a letter from Cecil dissolving the engagement, and place it in the hollow tree, or whatever it was. I forget——" and he fell back, struggling for breath.

Doris sat motionless as a statue, with her hands clasped in her lap. Percy Levant bent over him and gave him some water.

"It—it was dangerous work, for Cecil had not left for Ireland, and—and if he had caught Spenser Churchill——" He stopped and smiled significantly. "But I'll give Churchill his due. He risked the thing, and exchanged the real letter for the forgery, and—*heigh, presto!*—the engagement to this actress girl was done away with. The simple girl fell into the pit Spenser Churchill had dug for her, and"—he waved his thin, white hand—"there was an end of her, thank Heaven!"

"Yes," said Percy Levant, grimly, his eyes still fixed on the white, wrinkled face; "and Lord Cecil, what of him?"

"Oh, he'll get over it in time," said the marquis. "I think he was hard hit. I remember when he came back from Ireland he was rather cut up. I think so. My memory is very bad. But he could not have felt it much, for he proposed to Grace."

"And Mr. Spenser Churchill—did he have anything to do with this engagement, my lord?"

The marquis thought for a moment.

"I don't know; but I expect he had. Oh, yes, he must have had, for I promised to give him a couple of thousand pounds the day Cecil and Grace were married and I daresay he did his best to earn it. Trust Spenser Churchill for that!"

"Yes. And Lord Cecil and Lady Grace Peyton—are they married yet?" asked Percy Levant. [Pg 316]

The marquis shook his head.

"No; they are waiting until I get better, and I am getting better! I shall be quite well directly; and, my dear, an idea has just struck me. You shall be one of Grace's bridesmaids!"

Doris started, and shrank back speechlessly. Suddenly she felt Percy Levant's hand upon her arm.

"Say 'Yes,'" he said, hoarsely.

"I—I cannot!" she almost moaned.

Percy Levant looked at her; then he took her hand in his, and held it for a moment.

"I understand," he said, and dropped it gently. "Your lordship is very kind," he said; "but Miss Marlowe is going to be married very soon, and, probably, before Lord Cecil. You have not told us the name of the young lady whose engagement to Lord Cecil was so cleverly broken off by Mr. Spenser Churchill. What was it?"

Doris rose, pale as a ghost, and caught Percy Levant's arm.

"No, no!" she breathed. "No! Do not ask him that!"

The marquis knit his brows.

"Her name?" he said, in a low voice and with a bewildered air. "I—I can't remember. I am an old man, you see, sir, and—and—her name? What was it?"

Doris, drooping like a lily bent by the storm, clung to Percy Levant's arm.

"No, you shall not ask him," she panted.

Slowly, painfully, he removed her fingers from his arm.

"There is no need," he said, inaudibly to the marquis; "you have told me already. Her name was Doris Marlowe!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"I, TOO, AM FREE."

"No need to tell me," said Percy Levant in a voice inaudible to the marquis. "I know!"

Doris sank back into her chair and covered her face with her hands. The marquis leaned forward, [Pg 317] regarding her with alarm.

"What is it? What is the matter?" he inquired, agitatedly. "What have I said——" He broke down and began to cough and tremble, and the valet hurried to his side; but the old man waved him away with feeble savageness.

"What is the matter with her?" he demanded of Percy Levant as imperiously as his weak voice would let him.

"Miss Marlowe is not strong, and the heat of the room——Come, Doris," he broke off more gently, and he drew her hand through his arm.

She was going with a glance—a glance of reproach—at the thin, wrinkled face; then her heart seemed to yearn, and she touched the wasted hand stretched out to her.

"Heaven forgive you, my lord!" she murmured, with infinite sadness, and allowed Percy Levant to lead her away.

The marquis almost rose in his alarm and anxiety.

"Where are you going? What have I said? Come back——" Then he fell on his side gasping for breath, and the terrified valet sprang to the bell and sent for the doctor.

Doris walked home in a state of mind easy enough to imagine but very difficult to describe. Imagine the emotion of a tender-hearted woman who for many weary months has deemed the man she loved with all her pure, ardent nature false, and then suddenly discovering that she has misjudged and wrongfully condemned him!

The sudden shock of joy that ran through her almost seemed to deprive her of her senses, and it was with the greatest difficulty that she could refrain from crying aloud, "Oh, my love! my love! forgive me! forgive me!" And if she did not say it aloud, the prayer rose from her heart. The cruel letter, which she read and re-read daily in the hope that its perusal would crush out her love for him, was false! A fiend in the form of a man had betrayed them both, and Cecil was true! He had loved her—loved her, Doris, until he had received that letter which she had given to Spenser Churchill—had loved her and deemed her as false as she had thought him!

For a time her mind failed to realize the web and woof of the plot which the "philanthropist" had [Pg 318] woven with such devilish cunning; but though she did not know all the threads and lines of the scheme, she gradually began to understand how completely she and Cecil had been deceived. But why? What was the motive? She put the question away from her, and returned to the delicious thought that, after all, he, Cecil, had not deserted her; that the wicked letter was a forgery; and that her faith in him was restored to her.

And Percy Levant watched by her side, tenderly supporting her trembling arm in silence. Love bestows a keen insight into the feelings of the one beloved, and he knew all that was passing through her mind, and read it as one reads a printed book, and—he kept silence.

They reached the villa, and he led her into the hall.

"Go up to your room and rest," he said, in a low voice.

"Yes," she said, with a little start, as if she had forgotten his presence. "Yes, I—I am tired—very, very tired!" and she pressed her hand over her heart.

"Rest," he repeated. "I shall remain in the house in case you should want me," and he dropped her hand, and, strolling into the drawing-room, walked to the window, and looked out with the face of a man who has received sentence of death, and to whom all mundane matters can be of no consequence whatever.

Doris went upstairs to her own room slowly, and sank into a chair.

"Cecil was true! Cecil was true! Cecil loved me!" she repeated to herself a hundred times; then suddenly she started, for on a chair opposite her she caught sight of her wedding dress.

It was as if a ghost had suddenly risen to dispel her newly recovered joy and happiness with a word, a breath.

Cecil had been true, yes, but he was engaged to Lady Grace, and she, Doris, was within a few days of her marriage with Percy Levant.

The sudden revulsion of feeling sent the blood from her cheeks, and made her blind and dizzy, and she stretched out her hands as if to push some terrible phantom from her.

So she sat for a full minute; then her brain cleared, and she saw the situation distinctly and [Pg 319] plainly.

She had regained her faith in her lover, but—it was too late to save her! After all, Spenser Churchill had effected his purpose, whatever it was, for Lord Cecil Neville was almost wedded to Lady Grace, and she——! She uttered a cry, almost a sob, as she thought of the man who was waiting for her downstairs.

If Lord Cecil had loved her, so had Percy Levant, and with a love as strong, and as true! Could she desert him? If so, then she would prove herself as false as she had deemed Cecil Neville, who could be nothing to her now, for was he not to marry Lady Grace? He had forgotten her, Doris, by this time, and even if he had not, her word was pledged to the other man who loved her so devotedly! What should she do? She fell on her knees and hid her face in her hands, and in that attitude of despairing supplication remained for half-an-hour.

Then she rose, and, bathing her burning eyes, went slowly downstairs. He was there, standing at the window, and he came to meet her with a haggard face, which told of the agony the intense suffering of waiting had cost him.

“Are you—are you rested?” he said, in a low voice, and he took her hand and led her to a couch. “I waited because I thought you would like to say ‘good-by.’”

She just raised her heavy lids, then clasped her hands in her lap and waited for him to go on.

“I am going. Of course, you know that. My love for you has not yet robbed me of all manliness, Doris, and—I am going. This discovery which you made this afternoon was half-suspected by me. The eyes of a man who loves are keen in all matters pertaining to the woman he loves, and from certain signs I suspected that Lord Cecil Neville was bound up in your past life; but it was suspicion only. The marquis’ innocent exposure has turned it into certainty. And so—I have waited to bid you good-by.”

She sat perfectly motionless for a moment. Then she looked up at him, with a piteous entreaty.

“What shall I say?” she murmured.

“Say nothing,” he replied, huskily. “I give you your freedom, Miss Marlowe. Knowing, as I do, [Pg 320] how cruelly you have been deceived—you and Lord Cecil,” he put in, as if the speaking of his name were difficult to him, “there is no other course open to me. I love you—ah, yes!—you know that; but my very love for you pleads for you against myself! And so I give you back all your pledges, and say simply, ‘good-by!’”

He held out his hand, eying her keenly and sorrowfully. But she did not place her burning hand in his. Instead, she shook her head slowly.

“Stay,” she murmured, almost inaudibly, and her pale face grew crimson for a second.

He leaned upon the couch, and bent over her, trembling, and white as death.

“You say ‘Stay!’” he breathed. “Think—think what the word means to me, Doris!”

“I—I have thought!” she breathed.

“It means—ah, you cannot imagine all it means to me! Will you repeat it?”

“Yes,” she said, in as low a voice as before.

He took her hand and held it in his.

“And will you tell me that—that you do not love Lord Cecil; that you can forget him?”

She turned her face away.

“Don’t—don’t drive me too hard!” she murmured, piteously.

His face grew wan and haggard again.

“I—I understand,” he said. “Yes, I understand—and I must be content.”

He let her hand fall, and walked to the window, turning his back to her. Then he returned, and kneeling beside her, said, in a low voice:

“Doris, I asked you to trust me. I ask it still. Remember that no man, not even Lord Cecil”—with a touch of bitterness—“could love you more dearly than I love you; and—trust me.”

“Yes, I trust you! I have always done so,” she said, almost inaudibly.

“We are to be married on the sixteenth,” he said, musingly. “Everything is ready, Doris.”

She inclined her head.

“We will be married on the sixteenth!” he said, almost solemnly. He raised her hand to his lips. [Pg 321] “Don’t look so scared, Doris,” he said, with a curious smile. “I—I am a better man than you think me!” and, dropping her hand, he left the room.

Doris had burned her boats. There was no returning across the river. She had pledged herself now irrevocably.

The next morning at breakfast the marquis’ valet called to inquire after Miss Marlowe.

“His lordship has been in a terrible state, miss,” he said, gravely. “He was afraid that something he had said had offended or alarmed you, and although he was put at a loss to remember what it was, the idea distressed him very much, and seems to be preying on his mind. He was very ill, indeed, last night, quite wandering, so to speak, and the doctor did not leave him for a moment.”

“Please tell the marquis that I—I have forgiven all that he said, that I know he was not aware there was anything to offend me in—in the incident he related,” said Doris, painfully. “Yes; tell him that whatever it was, I forgive it freely.”

“Thank you, miss,” said the valet, with a look of relief. “His lordship will be very glad to get the message. Begging your pardon, miss, but his lordship seems, if I may be so bold, to be wrapped

up in you. He was talking about her ladyship, the marchioness, last night, her ladyship and the little girl, and he kept repeating your name, as if you reminded him of her."

Doris sighed. Percy Levant stood gravely regarding the tablecloth, saying not a word.

"I suppose you have sent for Lord Cecil as the marquis is so much worse?" said Lady Despard.

The valet shrugged his shoulders.

"I certainly intended doing so as soon as the telegraph office was open this morning, my lady; but directly the marquis became conscious he distinctly forbade me doing so. Of course, I should not disobey him while he was sensible, and there was no immediate danger. The marquis demands implicit obedience from his household, my lady."

"Perhaps Miss Marlowe will be able to call and see him this morning," said Lady Despard, [Pg 322] glancing inquiringly at Doris; but Doris grew pale, and shook her head.

"Not to-day," she said, in a low voice, and almost pleadingly. "To-morrow—perhaps."

The valet bowed.

"Thank you, miss," he said, gratefully, and as he withdrew he added, respectfully, "a sight of you will do him more good than all the doctors in Italy, I am sure, miss."

If Doris had promised to pay the sick man a visit she could not have done so, for Percy Levant, without consulting either of the ladies, ordered the phaeton and pair and calmly requested them to get their things on.

"I am going to take you ladies for a long drive," he said, with that air of resolution which all women admire in a man. "You, Doris, because you need it for your health's sake, and you, Lady Despard, because you are in danger of becoming a monomaniac!"

"Oh, indeed!" retorted Lady Despard, languidly; "and what's my mania, pray?"

"Wedding millinery," he replied, pointing to the confused mass of lace and muslin amid which Lady Despard seemed to exist.

"Well, there's some truth in that," she said, with a smile; "and, anyway, I suppose we shall have to go, eh, Doris? And this is the man whom we thought all milk and honey, so meek and docile as scarcely to have a will of his own!" she added, pouting. "You see what you have done, my dear; you have completely spoiled him by being foolish enough to promise to marry him!"

She went for the drive, Percy Levant taking the reins and Doris seated beside him, and in after years she remembered, with a singular vividness, every incident of the day, almost every word he spoke. Never had he been in lighter humor, or in better "form;" and if his object was to drive, for the time at least, all remembrance of the marquis and his story of Spenser Churchill's villainy from her mind, he almost succeeded, and as the hours sped by, the exquisite scenery, the keen, fresh air, and the unflagging wit and humor of her companion brought the color to Doris' pale cheeks, and drove the lines of care and trouble from her brow.

And through it all he permitted no sign of his own suffering to become visible. The handsome face [Pg 323] was serenely cheerful, the pliant lips wore a settled smile, causing Lady Despard to look at him once, and exclaim, with a sigh:

"I wish you could sell me that butterfly nature and disposition of yours, Percy. I would give you more than half my kingdom."

"Would you?" he said, turning on the box and glancing at Doris as he did so. "Would you?" and a curious expression flashed across his face for a moment. "I'm afraid you would be like the man who thought he was doing a clever thing in buying a sovereign for nineteen shillings and sixpence until he tried to change the coin and discovered that it was—a counterfeit!"

They went to a country inn, at which he had ordered dinner by a servant sent on before, and Lady Despard was enchanted by the dainty simplicity of the menu and the manner in which he played the host, and when he strolled off to smoke his cigar and leave them to trifle with the grapes and the ripe figs which nestled in the center of a huge *repousse* dish of such flowers as only Italy can produce, Lady Despard patted Doris on the cheek, causing her to start from a reverie, and said:

"Yes, my dear, I will say it again: You have done very well! He will be simply a treasure of a husband. I assure you, I don't know another man in all my extensive list of friends and acquaintances who could have behaved so perfectly. Fancy taking two women out for the day, keeping them amused every minute, and then giving them all the nice things women love, not ugly chops and steaks, but all these delicate things for dinner. And he'll be just as fresh and bright all the way home, of course! Yes, I must repeat it, my dear. I think you have made an excellent choice, and if I hadn't registered a vow never to marry again, why—oh, there's time to cut you out yet if I tried very hard, so don't look so exasperatingly self-confident! And now the best thing you can do," she went on, as Doris smiled and sighed, "is to go and find him, and repay him for all his trouble with one of those sweet, little speeches of yours, and several of those upward glances of those blue eyes which seem so innocent and commonplace, and yet, as I have been told, drive poor men to thoughts of suicide. Go and find him, my dear; he hasn't gone far, [Pg 324] and is, of course, waiting for you to join him. I shall be quite happy and content for an hour, I assure you. Come back when the moon is up above those trees, and then we will start."

"Which means that you want to go to sleep," said Doris, smiling as she rose.

"Quite right, dear," assented Lady Despard, serenely. "I want to go to sleep for a few minutes, and dream that I, too, have got a handsome young man who is fortunately poor enough to have to

work for me, and who worships the ground I tread on. Go and find him, and—be good to him, for he deserves it!”

Doris went slowly in the direction Percy Levant had taken, but she did not see him, and presently, losing herself in her thoughts, she wandered across the lawn which stretched between the inn and the high road, and, leaning against the low wall, gave herself to brooding over the confession which the marquis had made—if confession it could be called!

Presently she was startled by the sound of wheels coming down the steep road to her right, and a few minutes afterward she saw a traveling carriage pull up at the door of the inn, amidst a great bustle and confusion, the stamping of horses’ hoofs, the click of changing harness, and the shouting of outriders.

Then she heard voices asking and answering questions, and among them the landlord’s suave tones, begging some one—the travelers, presumably—to enter and rest themselves while the horses were fed.

Doris listened in an absent kind of fashion, in which the noises and voices came to her like those in a dream, until, suddenly looking up, she saw the moon had risen above the tree tops, and she turned to go back to the arbor in which Lady Despard was doubtless sleeping the sleep of the just. As she did so, she heard a slow step at her side, and glancing in its direction, saw a tall figure coming toward her with a slow and listless step. She was drawing back into the shadow of the shrubs to let him pass without seeing her, when suddenly the moon smiled from behind a cloud, and poured its light full on his face, and she saw that it was Lord Cecil Neville!

Yes, it was his face, but how altered! Pale and haggard it looked, as if as many years as minutes had passed over it since she saw it last in all its bright, fresh youthfulness, and it was the shock caused by this change in the beloved face, as much as the sudden appearance which kept her rooted to the spot. [Pg 325]

She could not have moved if her life had depended on it, and he was almost upon her before he noticed her. Then, raising his hat, he murmured:

“Pardon, senorita,” and was going on, when, looking more closely at her, he uttered an exclamation, and stood like herself, stock-still.

For a space in which one could count twenty, these two stood looking into each other’s eyes speechless, then he said:

“Doris!” and stretching out his arms, made a step toward her.

For a second the desire to sink upon his breast was terrible, but she fought against it and shrank back.

The color which had rushed to his face as he spoke her name died away at her gesture of repudiation, and letting his arms drop to his side, he said in a constrained voice:

“Miss Marlowe! Am I dreaming? Doris, is it you?”

“Yes, it is I,” she said, almost inaudibly, her heart beating so loudly in her ears as almost to drown her voice.

“You! You!” he repeated, looking round as if he could not believe the evidence of his senses. “You, and here! Good Heavens, I thought I was dreaming!” he muttered. “I—I thought you were—when did you come here?” he broke off as if he scarcely knew what he was saying; his eyes devouring her face with the expression in them which might shine in the eyes of a man who, dying of thirst, sees the limpid stream—just beyond his reach.

“I—I came here, to Italy, some months ago, my lord,” she said, and her voice sounded strange and hollow.

“Some months, some months?” he repeated, putting his hand to his head and pushing the hair from his forehead; a trick which Doris remembered with a vividness which was like a stab.

“Why, how could that be? You could not get back from Australia—and yet, yes, I suppose so!”

She started and looked at him, and was about to exclaim, “Australia? I have never been there, my lord!” when she thought it better to remain silent, remembering the marquis’ story. [Pg 326]

“You—you did not stay long,” he said. “Were you, are you happy?” he asked, abruptly.

She turned her head away; her lips quivering at the dull accents of pain in his voice.

“Few mortals are happy, my lord,” she replied, in a low voice.

He waved his hand impatiently.

“For Heaven’s sake don’t address me as if we were strangers!” he broke out. “It is a farce in which I find it impossible to play! Doris——” he stopped and drew nearer to her—“are you so hard of heart, or so light of memory, that you can forget, absolutely forget, all that passed between us—you and I? Have you forgotten Barton meadows? The day I fell off the horse at your feet? the day I told you that I loved you, and asked you to be my wife? the day you promised to be my wife?”

She shrank back against the wall, and put her hands against it as if to sustain her and keep her from falling.

“Have you clean forgotten?” he demanded, bitterly.

“I have tried to forget,” she panted.

“Oh, Heaven!” he exclaimed, with suppressed passion; “and they say women have hearts, they boast that women are gentle and merciful! You tried to forget; and, of course, you succeeded! While I——” he drew near to her and looked longingly at her pale face, all the lovelier for its pallor and the intense light shining in the beautiful eyes, the tremor on the perfectly curved lips; “while I have thought of you day by day, night by night! I swear that there is not a night in which I have not dreamed of you, in which you have not stood beside me to mock me with those eyes of yours, to murmur the vows which fell so readily from those sweet lips. Great Heavens, how cruel, how merciless even the best of you can be!”

In the fury of his agony it almost seemed as if he were about to strike her with his upraised hand, and Doris felt a wild thrill run through her as the conviction that he still loved her forced itself upon her.

“He loves me still! He loves me still!” she almost cried aloud. [Pg 327]

“Yes, the best of you,” he repeated, dully, like a man whose senses are half numbed with pain. “For I counted you the best, and—Heaven help me!—I still count you so! Doris—I don’t know by what name I should call you, but till I die you will be ‘Doris’ to me—Doris, why did you deceive me? I have lain awake at nights trying to answer that question. I ask you to tell me now, now that all is over between us——” and he bit his lips till the blood came as he gazed at the lovely, downcast face. “All is over, and we are miles apart, worlds apart,” and he stifled a groan, “and you can tell me safely. Why did you treat me as you did? Was it simply deviltry, coquetry, what? What fun, amusement, was there in it? They said you were practising your profession upon me; that I was a mere block, which you were acting—always acting—up to. Was that true?”

She made no reply, but stood statue-like, her hands pressed against the rough wall, her heart beating in dull, heavy throbs which seemed to stifle her.

“Was it true? If so, then you were the wickedest, the cruelest woman God ever made!” he said, fiercely. “There are some women whose trade it is—professed flirts—to fool and betray men; but they carry the sign of their trade on faces and voices, and we men are aware of them. But you—you, with that innocent face of yours, with that sweet, girlish voice of yours, with those eyes whose truth a man might stake his soul upon——” he stopped and gazed at her as if his soul were slipping from him. “Why don’t you answer me?” he broke off, almost savagely.

Her dry lips quivered, a longing so intense as to be almost irresistible assailed her; the desire to exclaim: “I did not deceive you; I did love you; I still love you. No treachery of mine parted us!” but she remembered the promise she had made to Percy Levant, the promise renewed only that morning; remembered that he, Lord Cecil, was either already married, or pledged to marry Lady Grace, and she remained silent.

He drew a long breath and shrugged his shoulders.

“You can’t answer. I suppose it was merely for amusement that you led me on to loving you, merely for amusement that you got the heart out of my bosom, merely for amusement that you promised to be my wife, and still merely for amusement—broke my heart!” [Pg 328]

She turned. They say the worm will turn if trodden on too persistently.

“Was it only a broken heart you offered to Lady Grace, my lord?” she said. The moment after she had spoken the words she would have recalled them, for she saw by the sudden pallor of his face, the quiver of his lips, how much they had cost him.

“I see,” he said, in a low voice; “you seek to excuse yourself of unfaithfulness by accusing me!”

“No, no,” she breathed; but he went on, disregarding her.

“Yes, I am engaged to Lady Grace! It is quite true. All the world knows it,” with a suppressed bitterness; “but I did not ask her to be my wife until you had—jilted—me! Jilted! It is too light a word. Men use it as a jest. But you did not jilt, you deserted and betrayed me!”

“I—I!” she panted.

“Yes!” he said, passionately. “You waited until I had left England—left England to please and conciliate my uncle—and then, disregarding my letters, my appeals to your love and your honor, you coldly—like a finished coquette!—cast me off with a few cold words. Good Heavens, I cannot recall it without feeling the old pain, the old madness!” he broke off. “Oh, Doris, you have broken other hearts than mine, I dare say, but you never broke one that loved you half as dearly, half as truly, as mine did! I would have staked my life, my honor, on your truthfulness. I would have upheld it in the face of the whole world, and,” with a bitter smile, “should have been rightly laughed at for my pains! Doris, the treachery that was sport to you, was death to me! Look at me!” he drew nearer to her, and folded his arms. “That day I lay with my head in your lap I was a young man, with all a young man’s keen zest for life, with all a young man’s keen desire for life and belief in happiness! I feel like an old man now, bereft of all hope, haunted by the memory of your deceit. This is your work! Be proud of it, if you can!” [Pg 329]

She hid her face in her hands, lest it should tell him too much, and he mistook the gesture and attitude for a confession of her guilt, and it moved him to a softer mood.

“I—I beg your pardon,” he stammered. “Don’t—for Heaven’s sake—don’t cry! That won’t do any good. I’m awfully sorry I should have blared out what I felt. It’s—it’s all past and gone now. Of course, you are married?”

Her lips formed the word “no,” though it was not audible.

“No!” he exclaimed, and the blood rushed to his face. “Not married! Then you are still Doris Marlowe, still Doris—the Doris I think and dream of——” He laid his hand on the wall and bent over her, trembling visibly. “Not married! Why—why—I don’t understand! I thought—that is—Doris——” a strange change in his voice smote upon her ears suddenly, a tone of wild, mad hope. “Doris, I thought you were utterly lost to me! That you were married! Why have you not married?”

She remained silent, and the color came and went on his face, and his eyes flashed.

“Why, Doris? You must answer me! Is it because—ah, no! you can’t have remembered—and yet ——You are still Doris Marlowe! The dear, sweet Doris who won my heart in Barton meadows! Doris—you—you—drive me almost mad! The mere sight of you wipes out all the weary months since we parted! You are free still? Free? By Heaven, I can scarcely believe it!” He drew nearer, panting heavily, like a man who suddenly dares entertain the hope that dawns upon him. “Not married! Doris, do you remember? Let me look at your face! Why do you turn away from me? Are you playing with me still? If you are not married, there must be some reason! Great Heavens! don’t deceive, don’t betray me now! Listen! I, too, am free! I will be free! I’d give up all the world for your sake! Doris, listen to me! It may not be—it may not be too late!”

He was bending over her so closely now that she could feel his breath upon her cheek; an awful, a terrible languor was creeping over her; if he had caught her in his arms, and touched her lips with his, she could not have resisted. Love, the all-powerful god, was pleading with her for this, the only man she had ever loved, and she was conscious that she was yielding—yielding. [Pg 330]

“Tell me, Doris; tell me again!” he exclaimed, passionately. “It may not be too late! You are not married; and I thought—they told me——My darling, my love, my Doris——”

His hand was upon her arm, his lips close to her face, his breath stirred her hair; she felt powerless to move; in another moment she would, by no consent of her own, have been in his arms, when, suddenly, she felt herself drawn from him, and a voice said, in calm, clear accents:

“Lord Cecil Neville, I believe?”

Cecil drew himself up to his full height.

“My name is Neville,” he said, haughtily.

Percy Levant slowly and gently drew Doris’ arm within his.

“So I imagined, my lord,” he said, not sternly nor haughtily, but with a calm—almost judicial—gravity. “I could have wished that our meeting could have been under freer circumstances,” and he nodded significantly; “but as it is, allow me to introduce myself! My name is Levant—Percy Levant!”

Lord Cecil gave the short, military bow which is half a nod and half an obeisance, and glanced at Doris, who leaned upon Percy Levant’s arm, and hung her head; her quivering lips and pallid face bearing evidence to the emotions which wrung her heart.

“Yes, I am Cecil Neville,” said Lord Cecil. “I am an old—” he paused—“an old friend of Miss Marlowe’s, whom I did not expect to meet here. You are a relation, I presume?”

“No,” said Percy Levant, meeting the half-fierce gaze of the dark Stoyle eyes. “But I hope to be. I have the happiness and honor to be Miss Marlowe’s affianced husband.”

Cecil Neville drew back a step, and his face grew white.

“I—I beg your pardon,” he said, stiffly. “I—I did not know. Why did you not tell me?” he asked, turning to Doris with white lips and reproachful eyes. [Pg 331]

She tried to speak, had opened her lips, indeed, when a voice, impatient and querulous, broke the silence. It was the voice of Lady Grace.

“Cecil! Cecil!” she called. “Where are you? Ce—cil! Ce—cil!”

His face reddened.

“I am going to Pescia to visit a sick relative,” he said, addressing Percy Levant, in a low voice. “You will be able to find me at the hotel, if you should require me,” he added, significantly.

“Thank you, my lord,” said Percy Levant, as significantly.

“Ce—cil!” called the voice again.

He bit his lip, and, without another word, turned and left them; but as he passed out of the walk, illumined by the bright rays of the moon, he stopped, and looked back, as Adam might have looked back upon the Paradise he had left forever, as one might have looked for the last time upon a treasure utterly and entirely lost.

Lord Cecil walked toward the carriage, in which Lady Grace and the marquis’ lady housekeeper were sitting, and Lady Grace, leaning through the window, greeted him with a smiling, but scarcely concealed impatience. She was dressed in a traveling costume of Redfern’s, which must have astonished the intelligent foreigner pretty considerably, and looked, for all her famous loveliness, rather tired, worn and ill at ease.

“Why, Cecil, where have you been?” she exclaimed; “I have been calling for the last half-hour.”

“Scarcely as long as that, Grace,” he said, and his voice sounded hoarse and strained. “I have

only been a few yards away, and heard you."

"At least, then, you might have answered," she retorted. "Do you know how long we are to wait here?"

"Not much longer," he replied, leaning against the carriage, and averting his face from the gaze of her sharp, keen eyes. "Horses are not machines, you must remember, and want rest sometimes."

"Horses, I don't call them horses," she said, contemptuously; "they are living skeletons. I am so tired of sitting here!" [Pg 332]

"Will you come inside the inn?" he asked, with a barely concealed weariness.

"Oh, no, thanks. I know what that means. These inns are a disgrace to any civilized country. What with the smell of garlic and the dreadful men hanging about them, they are too awful. If you could get me a glass of wine, of decent wine, dear——"

"All right," he said, and went into the inn. "Give me a bottle of the best wine you have got, and a glass of brandy," he said to the landlord, and he drank the latter almost at a draught, his hand shaking as he carried the glass to his lips. If he had seen a ghost instead of sweet Doris Marlowe, he could not have been more completely unmanned and upset. Indeed, he had seen a ghost; the ghost of his lost happiness and wrecked life, and she was to marry this stranger, this Percy Levant; what had become of the Mr. Garland, with whom she had sailed to Australia, then? He was so lost in troubled reverie that he had quite forgotten Lady Grace, until the familiar, too familiar, "Ce—cil," issuing from the carriage, recalled his wandering mind.

He caught up the wine bottle and a glass and strode back to the carriage, filled with that weariness and despair which renders every moment of existence almost unendurable to the galley slave and convict. At that moment he would have given half a continent, had he possessed it, to be alone and free to indulge in his sad and bitter reflections.

Unknown to the valet, the Pescia doctor had telegraphed to him a few days ago, and he had told Lady Grace that he must start for Italy, and at once. Much to his surprise, to his embarrassment, also, she had declared her intention of accompanying him. The fact must be stated, alas! that Lady Grace could not endure her lover's absence from her side, even for a few days. Her love for him—her passion, as it must be called—had become the absorbing sentiment of her life, and, like all absorbing emotions, it tortured her. She knew, knew for a certainty, that he did not love her, and all her days and nights were filled by a devouring jealousy and discontent. She was rendered [Pg 333] wretched if he spoke to or danced with a young and pretty girl. She was jealous of his past as a whole, but madly, fiercely jealous of the girl Doris Marlowe, from whom she had, by the assistance of Spenser Churchill, succeeded in separating him.

She knew he did not love her; that she had entrapped him into the engagement, and she dreaded with an agony of apprehension lest anything should occur to separate them. It is not too much to say that she hated the marquis for being ill and causing the postponement of her marriage. A woman, when she knows that love is returned, is full of trust and confidence, but Lady Grace, knowing that Cecil bore her no love, was full of distrust and suspicion, doubt, and fear. She was never happy, nor at ease, unless he was in her sight, and she found it simply impossible to allow him to go to Italy without her. Sometimes, in the dead of night, she would awake with a start and a cry of terror from a nightmare in which she had dreamed that he had discovered her share in the plot which had robbed him of Doris and bound him to herself, and by day she lived in a constant dread that some accident would reveal the conspiracy and deprive her of him.

So intense an anxiety began to tell upon her, and already there were lines and wrinkles on the face which artists had painted and of which poets had sung.

To put it briefly, Lady Grace's punishment had commenced even in the first hour of her triumph! Black care sits behind every sorrow, but he is never more safely seated than when he rides behind the man or woman whose success depends upon a lie.

She knew that the world would talk and shrug its shoulders if she accompanied Lord Cecil to Italy, although she took the elderly lady as a *chaperone*; but she set the world's opinion at naught, just as she had done when, in obedience to Spenser Churchill's prompting, she went down to Lord Cecil's chambers. She could not let him out of her sight, and that was the long and short of it.

Lord Cecil took the wine to the carriage, and poured some out for her, but she only put her lips to it.

"It is too awful!" she said, irritably. "Pray hurry them on, Cecil. I am sure those horses must be rested by now. It is sheer laziness. Who was that you were talking to when I called you?" she [Pg 334] asked, abruptly, her keen eyes fixed on his face.

He felt himself growing white.

"Nobody you know," he said, abruptly. "Try and drink some wine, it is not so bad."

"Are you sure I don't know them? I thought I heard English voices."

"You don't know them," he said, almost curtly.

"Let me out and let me see," she said, querulously. "I am sick of being cooped up here."

"Come out by all means, if you like, Grace," he responded, "but there is no one there, and the horses are just being put to."

As he spoke, the postilion led the weary animals into the shafts, and Lady Grace sank back with a restless sigh.

“We shall find the marquis dead,” she said, callously. “We seem to have been years on the journey; yes, he’ll be dead!”

“I trust not,” he responded, grimly. “I’ll ride outside and smoke a cigar,” he added, as the postboy smacked his whip.

She flung herself back among the cushions.

“Oh, very well,” she said, petulantly.

Lord Cecil got on the box, and the carriage rolled onward to Pescia and the Fate awaiting them.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE APPROACH OF THE SHADOW.

Heaven only knows what complexion Cecil's thoughts took during the journey, but he was graver and grimmer than ever when he got down at the door of the villa to help his affianced bride to alight.

The marquis' valet received them with surprise, tempered by satisfaction.

"I am glad you have come, my lord, though I did not like to take the responsibility of wiring for you. The marquis is much worse. Oh, yes, decidedly much worse. He is asleep just now, but it is [Pg 335] quite as well that you came."

"I will see him at once," said Lord Cecil.

"And I, too," said Lady Grace, slipping her arm within his.

The valet led the way upstairs.

The old man was lying apparently asleep, but as Lord Cecil bent over him he opened his eyes, and after a few seconds said, in a feeble voice and with the old cynical smile:

"Oh, it's you, Cecil, is it? And is that you, my dear?" turning his eyes in the direction of Lady Grace.

"Yes, it is I, dear marquis," she murmured.

He started.

"Oh, Grace, is it?" he mumbled. "I thought it was she."

"She? Who, dear marquis?" she demanded.

He smiled.

"No matter. And so they have sent for you, have they? They think I am in danger. You have come on a fool's errand, both of you. I"—grimly—"I don't mean to die yet, Grace."

"Oh, I hope not! Pray, don't talk of anything so dreadful," she responded with a false smile. "Why, you know," and she bent lower, with a fine affectation of modesty, "you are to dance at our—our —wedding, dear marquis."

"Ah, yes!" he said, wearily, and with none of the enthusiasm she had expected. "Yes, yes, of course. You are going to be married; you and Cecil. Yes, I remember. I'll make haste and get better. In a day or two——" his eyes closed and he turned his face away.

"He may last for weeks, months, even years, my lady," said the doctor, of whom Lady Grace made inquiries with a scarcely concealed impatience. "Marvelous constitution, you see, and with care ——" and he waved his hands deferentially.

The days passed in what her ladyship declared to be a tediousness almost insupportable. She had the best rooms of the best hotel, but they were not grand enough for her fine London taste, and, as for the scenery, Lady Grace would have exchanged the whole Alpine range for a quarter of a [Pg 336] mile of Hyde Park. She would have been happy enough if Cecil could have spent every minute of his time with her, but this Cecil could not do. In his present condition of mind, the society of his engaged wife nearly drove him mad, and he spent most of his time either beside the marquis' bed or at the villa.

"Surely you do not intend to play the part of sick nurse, my dear Cecil!" Lady Grace remonstrated when, on the third morning after their arrival, he told her that he could not go out riding with her, because he had promised to sit with the marquis.

"Not exactly that, Grace," he replied, quietly. "But I am naturally anxious about him and wish to be with him, more especially as, strange to say, he seems to desire my presence."

"He must have changed to an extraordinary extent!" she retorted, with something like a sneer on her exquisitely carved lips.

Cecil nodded.

"Yes," he assented, simply. "He has changed—for the better. I suppose we shall all feel the approach of the Great Shadow! Poor old man!"

She stared at him, then laughed, a cold laugh of amusement, almost of mockery.

"Really, you are the most forgiving of men, Cecil!"

"I'm afraid not," he said, stifling a sigh. "I'm sorry I can't go with you, Grace."

"Oh, I dare say you will be happier with the marquis!" she retorted, as she turned to the glass to arrange her riding hat. "I only hope and trust that the marquis will soon get better, and allow us to leave this place. I was never in a duller hole in my life."

"They call Pescia pretty, too," he replied, absently, as he followed her out and helped her to mount.

Then he lit a cigar, and was going across to the villa, his mind heavy with thought, when suddenly Percy Levant stopped in front of him and raised his hat.

Cecil's face reddened for an instant; then, as he responded to the greeting, he said:

“I had expected to see you before this, Mr. Levant. Will you walk upstairs?”

Percy Levant declined the offer.

“What I have to say will take but a few minutes,” he said, gravely. “We neither of us desire a prolonged interview.” [Pg 337]

“I am at your service,” returned Lord Cecil, with a slight bow.

Percy Levant eyed him with a strange expression, scarcely that of resentment as of dull, heavy sadness.

“I presume, my lord, you conceive that I am here to demand from, or offer, you the satisfaction which an appeal to arms would afford both of us—both of us!” he added, grimly.

“I can only say that I am prepared to accept any proposal you may have to make, Mr. Levant,” said Lord Cecil. “But I am obliged, in honor, to say this: I don’t want you to take it as an apology; great Heavens, no! But I’m bound to say that the words you heard me address to Miss Marlowe the other evening were uttered in complete ignorance that her word was plighted to you or any other gentleman.”

Percy Levant bowed.

“Were you in ignorance that your word was plighted to another lady?” he said, in a low voice.

Lord Cecil’s face flamed, then grew pale, and he sprang from his lounging attitude against the mantel-shelf to an upright position; but, with a palpable effort, he restrained himself.

“That is a rebuke which I have deserved and must submit to, Mr. Levant,” he said, grimly. “It is true that I am engaged to Lady Grace Peyton, and that I had no right to address Miss Marlowe as I did, but”—he turned his face away for a moment—“but I think if you knew all the circumstances of the case, you, even you, would feel more inclined to pity than to condemn me. But I don’t appeal to your consideration. As I said”—with a touch of hauteur—“I am at your disposal, in any way, and at any time.”

“You mean, of course, that you are ready to fight, my lord?”

“You interpret my meaning,” replied Lord Cecil, calmly. “I have no doubt you feel aggrieved. I should if I stood in your place. I have no doubt Miss Marlowe”—his lips quivered—“has told you of our past—our past relationship——” [Pg 338]

“Miss Marlowe has told me nothing, but I have drawn my own conclusions. I have been content to accept Miss Marlowe’s silence—complete silence—respecting the past.”

“Ah, yes,” said Cecil, with a repressed sigh. “What does it matter to you, who have the priceless boon of her present and future love?”

The words were wrung from him, and he would have recalled them if he could have done so, when he saw the effect they produced upon Percy Levant, whose face grew white, and whose eyes flashed.

But he, too, seemed to be striving for self-restraint.

“I am afraid you do not know all, my lord,” he said. “But to come to the business which brought me here! Miss Marlowe and I are to be married on the sixteenth!”

Lord Cecil bit his lip and nodded.

“So soon?” he said, almost inaudibly. “Well, sir, why do you tell me this?”

“Because I have to make a proposal to you, my lord. You expect a challenge from me?”

“I have expected it for the last three days, Mr. Levant.”

“Will you, my lord, permit me to withhold that challenge until the sixteenth?”

Lord Cecil stared at him.

“Till the day of your marriage?” he exclaimed.

“Exactly,” returned Percy Levant. “Such a request astonishes you, no doubt. It is only natural that you should demand my reasons for this delay, but I shall ask, as a favor, that you permit me to keep them to myself until the sixteenth! I have another request to make, which, I fear, you will deem as strange as those which have preceded it.”

“Go on!” said Cecil, knitting his brows.

“I shall be glad if your lordship will permit me to call at the Villa Vittoria, Lord Stoyle’s residence, at four o’clock on the sixteenth. I shall have an explanation to make, which you may consider an ample excuse for accepting any challenge I may offer.”

Cecil, after a moment’s perplexed consideration, turned to him. [Pg 339]

“I haven’t the least idea of your motives in these requests, Mr. Levant,” he said, with a quiet dignity, “but I don’t think I can do anything else than grant them. After all, I have no claim for satisfaction from you; the offense lies with me.”

“Just so, my lord,” said Percy Levant, taking his hat. “I wish you good-morning. On the sixteenth you and I shall understand each other more easily.”

“I hope so,” said Cecil, grimly. “One moment,” he added, hesitatingly, as Percy Levant turned to leave the room. “Is—is Miss Marlowe in Pescia?” he asked, in a low voice.

“Miss Marlowe is in Pescia, my lord,” replied Percy Levant, looking at him steadily.

Cecil’s face grew hot.

“Will you tell her that—that I knew nothing of her engagement? No! tell her nothing!”

“I think that is far the better course, my lord,” said Percy Levant, and with another bow he went.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CONSPIRATORS.

Mr. Spenser Churchill had been having the very good time which a man might be expected to have who has had a magnificent palace with a host of obsequious servants placed at his disposal, and who is monarch of all he surveys—of another person's property.

He enjoyed himself most amazingly. He went on pleasant little excursions to the neighboring towns; he ordered the richest and most luxurious dinners; he accepted the best of the numerous invitations which Lady Despard's neighbors freely accorded him, as a friend of her ladyship left in charge of the Villa Rimini, and wherever he went he was voted a most charming and agreeable companion. Indeed, since Percy Levant's departure no one had so completely won the hearts of the Florentine ladies as Mr. Spenser Churchill.

[Pg 340] And do not for a moment suppose that the good man gave himself up to carnal enjoyment without giving thought to his less fortunate fellowmen. No! The eminent and tender-hearted philanthropist remembered his poor brethren, and gave such touching accounts of the various charitable societies with which he was connected—"The Sweeps' Orphanage," "The Indigent Knife Grinders' Society," "The Society for the Distribution of Knives and Forks to the South Sea Islanders," and so on, that he succeeded in collecting a very tidy sum for these eminently deserving and practical charities; and everybody agreed that if ever there was a man too good for this sinful and selfish world, Mr. Spenser Churchill was indeed that individual!

And so the days passed pleasantly—and profitably—and on the morning of the sixteenth Mr. Spenser Churchill was sitting over the second bottle of Lady Despard's choicest claret, with a cigarette between his lips, and his benevolent eyes half-closed, with that expression of bland peace and serenity which only the truly good can experience, when a servant brought him a letter.

He eyed it with sleepy indifference until he saw the writing, and the man had left the room; then he tore the letter open eagerly.

"Dear Churchill," it ran, "the marriage takes place to-morrow morning. Come, without fail, to the Villa Vittoria here, at four o'clock to-morrow afternoon.—P. L."

Mr. Spenser Churchill's face grew radiant.

"I knew he'd do it! I knew it! What an eye for character I have! I should have made a good general! I know how to pick my men. I was confident Percy would do what I wanted! To-morrow! Oh, yes, I'll be there. Spenser, my dear friend, you have won the trick; you have——" He stopped, and a shade crossed his benevolent face. "I wish I'd made it twenty thousand, instead of ten," he muttered, wistfully; "I might just as well have done so—he would not have said anything, and she wouldn't have missed it. Why, her mother's portion, of settlement money, will bring her five-and-twenty thousand a year, and that will which the marquis is not capable of altering makes her the mistress of all his money. Yes, I might just as well have had twenty! However"—and the smile [Pg 341] beamed out again—"dear Percy shall make it up to me. He wouldn't like his wife to know of our little contract, I should think, and I might feel it my duty to tell her, unless—unless he made it worth my while to hold my tongue. Yes, Churchill, my dear friend, you have warmed your nest pretty well; and now"—filling his glass—"now for the enjoyment. No more of these beastly charitable societies; no longer any need for playing the saint. Let me see—I'll live in Paris, I think, most of my time. A man can enjoy himself in Paris without a parcel of fools interfering or holding him up to censure! In Paris or—yes, Constantinople. That's not bad! Oh, what a time I will have! And Cecil, dear Cecil, who used to sneer at me and treat me as if I were an impostor; I think, yes, I think, dear Cecil, I shall have the laugh on you this time, you and your beautiful bride! For I'm afraid I shall feel it my duty to tell you how completely you have been fooled. Yes, I think I must do that, really! To-morrow! To-morrow the new life begins. Hem! well, the old one hasn't been so bad! The charitable business has paid, it certainly has paid; but no more of it; I'm sick of it and the whole cant of it. I'll enjoy myself in a proper fashion, enjoy myself in my honestly earned wealth. Let me see! Ten thousand pounds, with what I have—ahem!—saved, together with say a thousand or two a year out of dear Percy—how grateful he will be, of course —will make a nice little income. Spenser, my dear boy, you are a genius, and you ought to have been a general. Here's your health and your future happiness!" and, with a chuckle, he filled his glass till it ran over, and drained it at a draught.

The Italians are not fond of high houses, and the Villa Vittoria, like most of its fellows in Pescia, covered a long space of ground, its rooms being arranged on two stories, with very few stairs and fewer corridors.

The apartments which the marquis occupied for his own personal use consisted of a sitting-room, and a dressing-room and bedroom adjoining, the latter divided from the sitting-room by heavy curtains. On the other side of the center room was a small anteroom which the marquis had not used; it was intended as a reception-room for tradespeople or persons who paid visits of business.

[Pg 342] Percy Levant on the occasion of his interview with the marquis had noticed—very few things escaped his quick eyes—the arrangement of the rooms, and at half-past three on the afternoon of the sixteenth, the valet, who had received his instructions from Percy, ushered that gentleman, Lady Despard and Doris—who were closely veiled—into the anteroom, and softly closed the door.

Lady Despard raised her veil and shrugged her shoulders deprecatingly.

“Well, here we are, my dear Percy,” she said, in a low voice; “but I don’t think any one else in this world but you would have induced me to have come; and do you mean to say that you still decline to give us any explanation of these extraordinary proceedings?”

He shook his head as he drew Doris to a chair, into which she sank with a weary but resigned gesture.

“And you think that you are treating us properly by all this mystery; and on the dear child’s wedding day; for I suppose you two mean to be married this evening? Or is this but a preliminary to the breaking-off of the match; for, of course, I can see something is the matter between you two?” and she dropped into the chair with a movement of impatience.

“I shall be ready to marry Doris this evening,” said Percy Levant, holding Doris’ hand. “It rests with her to decide, dear Lady Despard,” and he crossed the room and bent over her appealingly. “When you consented to come here with her this afternoon, you did so knowing that I should have to keep you in ignorance of my motives; do you think I am not grateful for your confidence in me? Do you think I would inflict unnecessary pain on dear Doris?”

“N-o—I don’t!” she said, with languid irritability; “I’m quite ready to admit that you love her to distraction, but it certainly is enough to drive one out of one’s senses, these mysterious proceedings of yours; and Doris tells me nothing lately,” she added.

Doris raised her lovely eyes pleadingly, but remained silent.

“Don’t blame her,” said Percy Levant, gravely. “She, too, is in ignorance of this, which I am about to do, and my motives! She trusts me; will not you, Lady Despard?” [Pg 343]

“Well, I suppose I must,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “But why have we come here? My acquaintance with the marquis is too slight to excuse this intrusion.”

“If it is an intrusion, that which will result from it will excuse it,” he said. “The fact is,” and he smiled rather sadly, “I have arranged a little comedy for your ladyship’s amusement! Comedy and tragedy, alas, are very thinly divided; there is but a step between them. All I ask of you is that you will remain quiet and silent, whatever you may hear; and I intend you to hear all. Doris I can rely on,” and he laid his hand upon her arm with a reverent, gentle touch.

“Oh, I’m not hysterical or nervous,” said Lady Despard. “I shan’t shriek, however sensational your conjuring trick—or whatever it is—may be. Come and sit beside me, dear, will you! and, Percy, remember, if the marquis should hear of our visit here, and want to know why on earth we came, I shall refer him to you.”

“I abide by that,” he said, gravely. “And now I am going to leave you——” he added, as they heard the valet speaking to some one in the hall. “Doris,” and he bent over her, “you will be patient and brave?”

She looked at him trustingly.

“I will be silent, at least. I can promise that,” she said, in a low voice.

“I am content with that,” he said. “And—and if you should hear that which might shake your faith in me——” he asked, his face pale and his lips quivering.

“Nothing can do that,” she responded.

“We shall see,” he said, almost inaudibly, and left them, closing the door behind him.

Lady Despard took Doris’ hand and caressed it.

“For all my bravado, I feel rather nervous, dear,” she said, with a forced laugh. “His manner has been so strange of late, and you—you have had something on your mind, Doris. Oh, of course I have seen that, though I would rather have died than asked you to tell me!”

“And I think I would rather have died than tell you!” said Doris, with something like a sob.

“Has there been a quarrel between you? Do you want the match broken off? For heaven’s sake, speak while there’s time if you want it broken off!” [Pg 344]

Doris shook her head sadly.

“No; I shall marry him this evening, if he wishes it!” she murmured.

“If he wishes it! Why, of course—ah!” she broke off, her hand closing nervously upon Doris’ burning fingers; “that is Spenser Churchill’s voice!”

It was Mr. Spenser Churchill’s voice, and as he was ushered into the center room he held out both hands to Percy Levant and smiled his sweetest smile.

“My dear Percy, may I congratulate you? May I?”

“You may,” said Percy Levant, giving him a hand.

Spenser Churchill drew a long breath and laughed, an oily laugh of vast contentment.

“Happy bridegroom! Lucky fellow!” he murmured. “This is the marriage day, eh?”

“This is the happy day, yes,” said Percy Levant. “Sit down, won’t you? I’m afraid you are tired. Let me offer you some wine?” He went to the sideboard. “I’m sorry there’s nothing but brandy here. I’ll ring for some——”

“Pray don’t trouble, my dear Percy,” said Spenser Churchill, blandly; “a little brandy is an excellent thing, if taken in moderation.”

Percy Levant mixed a stiff glass, and placed it before him.

“You can understand why I sent for you,” he said, seating himself opposite to Spenser Churchill, whose back was turned to the curtains which divided this room from the marquis’ dressing-room. “My part of the contract being fulfilled, I want to know what my position really is, and whether this nonsense of yours has any particle of truth in it?”

Spenser Churchill stared indignantly.

“Young man!” he exclaimed, solemnly; “this is the first time I have ever been accused—to my face—of falsehood! This nonsense! If you allude to the agreement—the perfectly legal agreement, which you signed, and which I hold—you will discover that it is anything but nonsense.”

“I’m delighted to hear it, of course,” said Percy Levant; “don’t be angry! Well, then, seeing that I am to give you ten thousand pounds as a fee for your assistance in procuring me a wife, I should like to know exactly how I am to manage it—I should like to know all about my wife’s property.” [Pg 345]

“Your wife! How well it sounds!” chuckled Spenser Churchill; then his face grew suddenly suspicious. “By the way, my dear Percy, have you the marriage certificate? I am not of a suspicious nature. Heaven forbid! I am, indeed, too trustful and confiding; but I should like to see the certificate, my dear boy.”

“Certainly,” assented Percy Levant, cheerfully; “I’ll go and ask my wife for it. Indeed, she may as well be present——”

“No, no,” interrupted Spenser Churchill, putting out his hand. “Never mind; don’t trouble. The fact is—ahem!—there are some things which Mrs. Levant—Mrs. Levant!—had better not hear. And to tell you the truth, my dear fellow, your wife is a young lady I’m not over-anxious to meet. There’s something about her which makes me uncomfortable. I’ll—I’ll take a little more brandy, my dear Percy—a capital and useful spirit, if used in moderation. I have been recommended to take it by my medical man.”

Percy Levant rose to get the decanter. As he did so, the curtain parted and Lord Cecil Neville stood in the opening.

Percy Levant made a circuit so as to approach him.

“Remember our understanding, my lord, and wait!” he said, in a whisper.

Lord Cecil seemed to hesitate, his eyes fixed on Spenser Churchill suspiciously; then he dropped the curtain, which again concealed him.

“There you are! And now to business, Churchill.”

“Yes, to business,” said Spenser Churchill unctuously. “I dare say, my dear Percy, you think I have earned that ten thousand pounds very easily—by the way, it ought to have been twenty, it ought, indeed!” and he shook his head solemnly.

“I’d as soon pay you twenty as ten,” said Percy Levant, carelessly.

“You would? Give me your hand, my dear boy!” exclaimed Spenser Churchill, with blind enthusiasm. “You are just what I always thought you—a noble youth, a truly noble and unselfish young man! You would just as soon give me twenty!” [Pg 346]

“Yes, or thirty! I’m as unselfish as you are,” said Percy.

Spenser Churchill’s emotion was so great at this fresh proof of his dear young friend’s unselfish generosity that he was constrained to turn his head aside and wipe his eyes.

“You are an honorable, a noble young man, my dear boy!” he murmured. “And now I will lay the whole story before you. But, as I said, don’t think I have not earned the money! My dear Percy, are you aware that your wife was once engaged to Lord Cecil Neville, the marquis’ nephew, the heir to the title? Eh?” and he chuckled.

“Really!”

“Yes, yes! Oh, it’s true, and I assure you that they would have made a marriage of it but for me. Oh, don’t look so surprised. Bless my soul, if I am not a match for a simple and confiding couple like those, why——” He raised his hand. “But it was a troublesome affair, my dear Percy, and cost me a deal of thought. And ra—ther risky, too!” he added, thoughtfully. “Forged letters—ahem!—that is fictitious correspondence, though rendered inevitable by the circumstances of the case, is dangerous.”

“I see,” said Percy Levant, distinctly. “You forged letters from Lord Cecil Neville to Miss Marlowe——”

“Yes. But, quietly, my dear Percy. Bless my soul, you and I don’t want to publish our little mutual confidences on the housetops; and—er—this room is rather, I say, rather, public, isn’t it? What’s behind those curtains? Good gracious!” and he half rose.

“My dear fellow, all the servants speak Italian,” said Percy Levant, leaning back in his chair with a careless and indifferent air. “While you speak English you are quite safe!”

Spencer Churchill fell back.

“Oh, all right!” he said. “I rely on your discretion. Well, it didn’t suit me that Cecil should marry Miss Marlowe for several reasons. One being that I could not drive a bargain with him as I could ——” he stopped.

"As you could with a penniless adventurer like me," finished Percy Levant. "I understand. And so you succeeded in separating them and—selling her to me. That's quite clear. I've no doubt you managed it very cleverly; I should think forgery and that kind of thing would come easy to you, my dear Churchill." [Pg 347]

"Sir! Mr. Levant!" exclaimed Spenser Churchill, pugnaciously, and half rising from his chair; then, as he met the steady gaze of the dark eyes, he subsided again, and waved his hand pityingly.

"My dear Percy, you wrong me. What I did, I did as much in the interest of my dear friend, the Marquis of Stoyle, and the young man himself. It was the marquis who assisted me, I assure you. Packed dear Cecil off to Ireland, and kept him there—kept him there—till I'd got his ladylove away."

The curtain stirred behind the self-satisfied, triumphant plotter, but Percy Levant, unseen by his companion, held up his hand warningly.

"Really! And the marquis is gratified, no doubt. But, after all, this is not my business. I want to know——"

Spenser Churchill leaned forward and dropped his voice, but not to so low a pitch but that the listeners on either side of the room could hear distinctly.

"You want to know whom it is you have married. I'll tell you. Wait, you don't know the Marquis of Stoyle?"

"I've seen him," said Percy. "Speak louder; what are you afraid of, man? We are not two conspirators on the stage!"

"Quite right, my dear Percy. Conspirators! Certainly not! We are two men bound by a common impulse to—to—relieve—benefit our fellow creatures, and—ourselves!"

"Exactly," said Percy Levant. "But go on. Remember that you have just congratulated me on my marriage, and that I am anxious to join my bride."

"Yes, yes. Well, then, are you aware, my dear Percy, that my friend the marquis was once married?"

"I know nothing about the Marquis of Stoyle."

"That he was married——" he stopped and laughed with unctuous enjoyment. "When I think of it, my dear boy, I'm always tickled by the desire to laugh. You must know that the young lady had three lovers—the marquis, a certain Jeffrey Flint, and—myself!" and he laid his hand upon his heart and bowed. [Pg 348]

As he did so, the curtains opened and three figures stood in the opening. They were those of Cecil, Lady Grace—and the trembling, emaciated form of the marquis himself. White, deathly white, the old man stood, clinging to Cecil's arm, his piercing eyes fixed on the smooth, long-haired head of Spenser Churchill, with an expression that baffles all description.

Percy Levant rose, and, under the pretense of filling Spenser Churchill's glass, made a warning gesture to them. Lady Grace seemed about to speak, but the marquis turned upon her with an awful ferocity, which seemed to deprive her of the power to speak or move.

Percy Levant sank back in his seat.

"Well?" he said.

Spenser Churchill sipped his brandy and water.

"Well, the case stood thus: The girl was engaged to the fellow Jeffrey. Consequently there was no chance for me. So, my dear Percy, I decided, as most men of common sense would have decided, to—ahem!—assist the marquis. I did so, and, bewildered and fascinated by the offer of a marchioness' coronet, Lucy accepted and married the marquis. The result was—er—rather disastrous. With all respect to my dear friend, the marquis, I must say, my dear Percy, that if ever there was a fiend incarnate he was one! I don't wish to be hard upon a fellow mortal—Heaven forbid!—but if there is anything worse, more cruel and selfish and altogether unscrupulous than a fiend, then that being may yield the palm to the Most Honorable the Marquis of Stoyle!"

The marquis, shaking in every limb with fury, clutched Cecil's arm, who, with some difficulty restrained him from rushing upon the oily-voiced speaker.

"Well, the natural result followed. The marchioness fled. Where, and to whom? Why, to her former lover, Jeffrey Flint. No, my dear Percy, her conduct was blameless. She died within a few hours after reaching him. She died, but she left a child, a girl, behind. That girl Jeffrey Flint adopted and called—can you guess her name?" [Pg 349]

"Doris Marlowe," said Percy Levant, hoarsely, and with white lips—for this was a revelation to him.

Spenser Churchill lolled back in his chair with an unctuous smile of enjoyment.

"Right! Quite right, my dear Percy! Doris Marlowe! That is—ah, ah!—Mrs. Percy Levant!"

The marquis staggered, and clutched at Lord Cecil, and Lady Grace was rushing forward, but Cecil raised his hand, and, holding her face in her hands, she sank back.

"So Doris Marlowe is the daughter of the Marquis of Stoyle?" said Percy Levant.

“Just so,” assented Spenser Churchill. “And now, my dear Percy, that cat is out of the bag; the daughter of the Marquis of Stoyle—in other words, Lady Mary Neville! And the money! Well, I think you won’t regret your liberal offer when I tell you that her mother’s portion amounts to five-and-twenty thousand a year, and that her father has made a will which will leave all he can leave to her.”

“Which he can unmake!” said Percy Levant.

“I think not,” murmured Spenser Churchill, blandly. “There have been later wills, I think, but—ahem!—I have taken charge of them——”

“You are a clever fellow, Churchill.”

“Y—es, I think I am! I honestly, and modestly, think I am! I ought to have been a great statesman, or a general, my dear Percy.”

“You ought, indeed!” said Percy Levant. “But—pardon me!—although I believe every word you say most implicitly, I am afraid the world, including the marquis, will want some proofs. It is all very well to say that Miss Marlowe—that is, my wife,” he put in, hurriedly—“is Lord Stoyle’s daughter; but proof, proof, my dear fellow!”

“You’re no fool, either, Percy,” said Spenser Churchill. “Of course, we want proofs, and here they are!” and he took some papers from his pocket. “Here is the certificate of marriage of Lucy—Miss Marlowe’s mother—to the marquis; the certificate of Miss Marlowe’s otherwise Lady Mary Neville’s, birth, a full and exhaustive statement of Lady Stoyle on her deathbed, duly attested; and a statement of Jeffrey Flint. Pretty complete, I think.” [Pg 350]

“Complete, indeed! And how did you get them, Churchill? Upon my word, you are a cleverer man even than I thought you.”

“How did I get them?” he repeated, lowering his voice; “I got them from Jeffrey Flint.”

“He gave them to you?”

“Not exactly! My dear Percy, I took them. What use are papers to a dead man?” He stopped and turned pale, as the scene of Jeffrey’s death rose before him. “But don’t let us talk of it; it—it was a most unpleasant affair, I assure you, my dear Percy. But you will, with your quick intelligence, soon understand how, once having those papers in my possession, I saw my way to making, with your assistance and Lady Grace’s, a *grande coup*!”

“Lady Grace’s, eh?” said Percy.

Spenser Churchill laughed softly.

“My dear Percy, never despise women. They may be fools—I fear they generally are—but they are, oh, they are so useful! Without Lady Grace I could have done little or nothing; but she was really invaluable. Cecil—dear Cecil—was always suspicious of me; but, of course, he trusted Lady Grace, and she and I between us caught him. ‘Caught him’ is the only expression applicable! To this day he considers himself under an obligation to her which only marriage can repay.” He laughed. “Poor Cecil; I can’t help pitying him; for between you and me, my dear Percy, I’d rather marry a tigress than beautiful Lady Grace! But don’t let us talk of him or her. Let us talk of ourselves. The whole thing has gone splendidly, though I say it. Providence, my dear Percy,” and he turned up his eyes, “has been on our side. The dear marquis—how surprised he would be if he knew this true story I have revealed to you!—is lying in a senseless and utterly incapable condition in London; Cecil and Lady Grace are going to be, if they are not already, married; and you—you, my dear Percy, are the happy husband of Lady Mary, the daughter of the Marquis of Stoyle! Think of it! Realize it, and oh, my dear Percy, make it twenty instead of the ten thousand you agreed upon! Here are the papers. They are at your service; indeed, I consider that they belong to you——” [Pg 351]

He pushed the papers across the table, smiling with oily triumph and satisfaction, and Percy Levant leaned forward to take them, when a thin, wasted hand clutched them clawlike and a harsh, strained voice said:

“No! They are mine!”

Percy Levant sank back into his chair, and wiped the perspiration from his brow; but Spenser Churchill sprang from his seat, and grabbed at the papers mechanically. Then, as he encountered the piercing eyes fixed upon him, he, too, sank back, and, in a terrified voice, gasped:

“The marquis!”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FOILED.

"The marquis!" gasped Spenser Churchill, and he sank back, still staring at the haggard and wasted face, from which the piercing eyes glared down at him like ardent coals, with a fearful, horrified gaze.

Then he half-rose, and, with a grotesque attempt at a smile, wagged his head at Percy Levant, who stood erect and alert.

"This—this—is a very pretty little plot, my dear Percy," he said; "but you don't imagine that the dear marquis will take your word against mine? Marquis," and he managed to raise his eyes to the fierce face with a ghastly attempt at a smile, "I am sorry that you should have been deceived by what was palpably an attempt on my part to lure this gentleman into a trap. He is—you don't know him, but I do, and I must introduce him. This man is an adventurer, a scamp who would sell his soul for a ten-pound note. You won't let his word weigh against mine—against Spenser Churchill's!"

"It is quite true, my lord," said Percy Levant. "As this man says—I am an adventurer. I have been willing to sell my soul for a ten-pound note; I am utterly unworthy of belief," his voice grew hoarse and broken, "and it is only the influence of a woman's pure and spotless nature that has, at the eleventh hour, induced me to stop short in the villainous work to which this man tempted [Pg 352] me. I am as bad as he—up to this point. I ask for no mercy, no indulgence, no credit; from his own lips you shall judge him, and from the papers you have in your hand."

The marquis just glanced at him—no more, then turned his fierce eyes upon Spenser Churchill again.

"Very good," said Spenser Churchill, shrugging his shoulders, and stretching a trembling hand toward his hat. "I—I leave the whole business to you, my dear marquis. I will not condescend to—to answer the accusations which—which——" He shuffled nearer to the door, and his heart rose as he saw that neither Percy Levant nor the marquis made any attempt to stop him—"which my character will enable me to—to repel. I wish you success, Mr. Percy Levant, and—and good-morning."

He made an ironical bow as he backed toward the door, and was turning to make a rush for it, when Lord Cecil stepped before him.

At sight of him Spenser Churchill's face grew livid, and he put up his hand as if to ward off an expected blow; but Lord Cecil scarcely looked at him, and passed to the marquis' side.

"Is—is this true, my lord?" he demanded, hoarsely.

The marquis dropped into a chair, and, still clutching the papers, gazed up at him with a wild despair which would have touched even Lord Cecil if he had not loved Doris too well to think of any one but her.

"It is true, my lord!" said Percy Levant, solemnly and sorrowfully. "Would to Heaven that both he and I had lied! It is true, every word of it! The separation between Miss Marlowe and yourself was worked by Spenser Churchill. He did, by word and deed, sell her to me."

Lord Cecil made a movement as if to strike him, but Percy Levant stood patient and unresisting.

"And yet more, my lord! It was he who set the trap which caught you and handed you, fettered and bound, to his accomplice."

"Grace! It is—it must be—a lie!" broke from Cecil's white lips.

A hollow laugh rang out behind him, and Lady Grace glided from her dressing-room. All eyes [Pg 353] were fixed upon her as she stood, her exquisitely-clad form posed in an attitude of contemptuous defiance. A hectic flush burned on her cheeks, and she swept the group with a disdainful glance, as she fanned herself.

"Permit me to bear my testimony to this gentleman's veracity," she said. Spenser's face, which had cleared suddenly at her appearance, fell again, and he shrank back and leaned against the wall, where he stood, nervously passing his hands over each other. "What he states is quite correct. I don't know how he discovered it, but he seems to have made a tool of 'dear' Mr. Churchill, while 'dear' Mr. Churchill was under the pleasing delusion that he had got a submissive and willing dupe in him. It is probable that he knows the whole scheme. For it was a scheme, Cecil, and," with a disdainful smile, "a very good one. Any but the most trustful of men would have seen through it. I compliment you, my dear Cecil—I suppose I must say Lord Cecil now!—upon your credulity."

Cecil looked at her; then hung his head with shame—for her, seeing her utter shamelessness.

"I am utterly at a loss to conceive why my dear Mr. Churchill should have exerted himself on my behalf. Of course, I knew it was from no love he bore me—but I understand it all now!"

Cecil turned his back upon her, and, leaning his elbow on the mantel-shelf, covered his eyes with his hand.

"Mr. Spenser Churchill is really and truly a remarkably clever man; but, like some other clever men, he has chosen his tools badly. I can't understand why he should have confided in a person of Mr. Levant's character!" and she shot a contemptuous glance from under her half-closed lids

at his pale face. “But having done so, he has, of course, been betrayed. ‘Put not your trust in—adventurers’ will for the future be an excellent motto for him!” She laughed, and the fan moved a little more quickly. “And now, having borne my testimony to the truth of Mr. Levant’s assertions, I have only to express my sympathy for ‘dear’ Mr. Churchill’s discomfiture, and your disappointment, my dear Cecil”—her face grew red, and her delicately-molded nostrils expanded [Pg 354] with a malignant enjoyment—“your terrible disappointment! If you had only known all this a few hours earlier, why, you would have thrown off your new love, and been on with the old! But as it is, Mr. Levant, with all his newly-born penitence, has been clever enough to secure Miss Marlowe, otherwise the marquis’ daughter, for his wife, and you are tricked. It is a vulgar word, Lord Cecil, but it is the only suitable one.” She laughed again, and her fan moved rapidly. “Won’t you see—or do you?—this penitent and remorse-stricken gentleman’s game? You don’t! Why, you observe that he has married the lady he wanted, and by his betrayal of his accomplice saved his ten thousand pounds. Mr. Levant, I congratulate you upon your dexterity,” and she made him a sweeping curtsey. “Mr. Spenser Churchill is clever, I admit. I, too, always had an idea that I possessed a turn for intrigue; but you—oh, you are a genius, and the honors remain in your deserving hands.”

Percy Levant remained as silent, as impressive, as a statue; but Spenser Churchill, whose face had reflected every word Lady Grace had uttered, began to draw himself upright, and a low, chuckling laugh broke from him.

“You are right,” he said, half-gloatingly, half-fearfully; “you and I are out of the game, dear Lady Grace; but I think—I really do think that dear Lord Cecil is in the same boat! Yes, Mr. Levant has been one too many for us all. All! My dear Cecil, you have my profound sympathy in the loss of the young lady you had set your heart on. My dear marquis, if I may be permitted to offer a word of humble advice, I should recommend you to forgive your newly found daughter, the ballet girl—no! pardon, the actress; and welcome as a son-in-law the gentleman upon whom she has bestowed her hand. It is true that he is an adventurer; that he sprang from the gutter; that he bought her and captured her by a plot; but he is her husband after all, and, really, he is no worse than the stock from which she sprang. He will be a worthy addition to the house of Stoyle! Forgive the young couple—the adventurer and the actress—and make them happy with your blessing. Do! my dear marquis.”

Lord Cecil’s hand closed spasmodically, but he kept it at his side; Percy Levant stood silent and [Pg 355] impassive, and the marquis merely raised his eyes from the paper upon which they had been fixed.

“I—I really don’t think we need remain any longer, dear Lady Grace,” murmured Spenser Churchill. “I really don’t think we have any right to intrude upon this happy family party. We must leave them to settle their little differences, eh? Allow me to escort you to your hotel. I have to preside at a charitable meeting in London the day after to-morrow, alas! or I should like to remain and see the mutual reconciliation; but duty—duty.” He crept nearer the door and offered his arm, but Lady Grace, with a haughty gesture, waved him off.

“No? You would like to linger till the denouement? Yes? Then I must go alone——”

“Stop!” said Percy Levant, quietly.

Spenser Churchill pulled up and looked at him sideways. “I—I beg your pardon.”

“Move at your peril,” said Percy, sternly.

Spenser Churchill sidled toward the window, and with a quick movement threw it open.

“You mean to threaten me, detain me, offer me violence, my dear Percy,” he said, with a leer. “I think not. If any person—any person,” and he glanced at Lord Cecil, “presumes to prevent my departure, I shall call for assistance. There are police in the street, who will protect me, an English gentleman of unblemished character and honorable repute. There are police, I say.”

“There are,” said Percy Levant, quietly and incisively. “There is an English detective at the door ready to arrest you.”

Spenser Churchill shrank back from the window.

“Indeed! On what charge, pray?”

“Conspiracy, and robbery from the dead!” and he pointed to the papers which had been stolen from Jeffrey Flint’s body.

Spenser Churchill’s face grew white, but he forced a laugh.

“Conspiracy, eh? The other is nonsense, utter nonsense! Who’s to prove—ahem! But, conspiracy? [Pg 356] With whom? With Mr. Percy Levant?”

“With Mr. Percy Levant,” repeated Percy, grimly. “Your fellow criminal! One step, one cry for assistance, and he arrests us both.”

Spenser Churchill clutched the curtain.

“You—you—traitor!” he gasped.

Percy Levant turned to Lord Cecil.

“I have simply stated the truth, my lord. A detective is waiting outside. It rests with you; it is for you to decide whether you will charge us. One thing remains for me to do.”

He went to the door of the anteroom, and taking Doris’ hand led her toward the group.

“Doris,” he said, in a low voice that trembled and broke for the first time. “Doris—your father!”

With pale face, wet with tears, Doris stood for a moment, irresolute. The old man, who had raised his head as her name smote upon his ear, made an effort to rise; then sank back with outstretched hands and piteously pleading face.

“My child, my child!” he cried, hoarsely.

It would have required a harder heart than Doris’ to resist such an appeal, an appeal for forgiveness, a cry of penitence and remorse. She hesitated a moment, while one could count twenty. Then she was at his knee, and his weak, quivering hands were upon her head.

Lady Grace, panting with the suppressed fury of jealousy, glanced at the picture which nearly moved two of the spectators to tears.

“How—how charming!” she said in a harsh voice. “Father and daughter. You have only to extend your blessing to the husband, my lord!” and she swept a contemptuous courtesy on Percy Levant.

“Yes, don’t forget the wily adventurer, the music teacher of Soho, your son-in-law, dear marquis!” pursued Spenser Churchill, sardonically.

The marquis started, and looked up at Percy Levant piteously.

“Are you—are you her husband?” he managed to articulate.

Percy Levant turned his haggard face toward him. “No, my lord,” he said, hoarsely, “we are not, and never shall be, married.” [Pg 357]

The marquis drew a long breath. “No!”

“No,” said Percy Levant, almost inaudibly. “If I had loved her less——” he stopped. “My love for her has saved her, my lord. Miss Marlowe—Lady Mary—is free from any claims from me.”

Lady Grace’s fan came to a sudden stoppage.

“Not married!” she gasped.

“Not married!” echoed Spenser Churchill, in accents of malignant disappointment.

Percy Levant looked at them both with a steady gaze. “Not married,” he said. “You may go now, Spenser Churchill.”

“No!” cried a grave voice. It was Lord Cecil’s; and he sprang to the window. “Not till justice——”

Percy Levant folded his arms and stood resigned and patient.

“Not till justice has been satisfied. I charge you, Spenser Churchill, with conspiracy——”

“And—and—Levant, and Lady Grace!” said Spenser Churchill, with a leer.

“I am ready,” said Percy Levant, quietly.

But as he spoke Doris sprang to her feet, and, gently putting her father’s arm aside, stood in front of Percy Levant.

“No!” she cried, panting; “I say no!”

Percy Levant drew a long breath. “Let the law take its course, Lady Mary!” he said, in a low voice. But she still stood in front of him as if to shield and protect him.

The marquis held out his hand to her as if he could not bear her to leave his side.

“Come to me, come to me. Let them—let them go,” and he glanced in the direction of Lady Grace and Spenser Churchill.

The latter did not wait for the permission to be repeated. With an air of long-suffering patience and saintly resignation, he shook his head reproachfully at Percy Levant.

“Judas!” he murmured, “we shall have a day of reckoning, we two, Judas!”

Percy Levant scarcely glanced at him; and Spenser Churchill as he moved slowly to the door, smiled a ghastly smile at Lady Grace. “Let me escort you from this exclusively family party, dear Lady Grace,” he said, sardonically. But, like most conspirators when the plot has failed, she drew back and eyed him scornfully. [Pg 358]

“Thanks, Mr. Churchill; but I have no further use for you.”

At this turning of the tables, at this repudiation by the woman he had regarded and used as a tool and dupe, Spenser Churchill was almost overcome, and his light eyes flashed viciously; then, with an effort that must have caused him a great deal of self-restraint, he checked himself, and stretching out his hand and casting up his eyes to the ceiling, said decorously, and proudly:

“I forgive you, Lady Grace. I pity you, and I shall not forget to remember you in my prayers. Poor woman!”

Now, Lady Grace ought to have turned her back upon him in silent contempt, but she had been sorely strained, and this, the hypocritical taunting of the worm who had a few moments ago been ready to crawl at the feet of his accusers, was the last straw which broke the back of her self-restraint, and as Mr. Spenser Churchill passed her, I regret to say that she closed her fan sharply and struck him across the face with it. Lady Grace possessed a magnificent arm; the fan was a large one, of carved ivory, with many sharp corners. Mr. Spenser Churchill uttered a howl of pain, and fled.

Lord Cecil approached her and offered her his arm. She had merely, if not quite, wrecked his life, she had caused pain and suffering to the girl he loved, she was unworthy of one moment's pity, but he remembered that she was a woman, and that she would have been his wife, and he offered her his arm in silence. She looked up at his face with a quick, almost agonized, questioning, then turned from him, her face white, her lips quivering.

"No!" she said, almost inaudibly, "there can be no half way for us. Friend or foe, Cecil! Will you keep your promise to me?" She had no need to go further; his face, grave and grim, answered for him. With a swift compression of her lips she caught up a shawl that hung on a chair, and without lifting her eyes to his face, again slowly left the room. [Pg 359]

Percy Levant took up his hat and went to Lady Despard, who was standing beside Doris.

"Will you—will you stay with her and—and help her? She was never more in need of your love than now," and he glanced significantly at the white face of the old man at whose knees Doris knelt.

She nodded silently, and Percy Levant, as he passed Lord Cecil, said in a low voice:

"I hold myself at your disposal, my lord, completely, entirely, without any reservation." Then he stopped and looked at Doris—a look impossible to describe, easy enough to imagine—and seemed about to speak, but with a sigh he turned and walked out, and Doris scarcely knew that he had gone.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

RETRIBUTION.

Lady Despard and Lord Cecil stood beside the marquis' bed, at which, still holding the hand now slowly growing cold, Doris knelt. Death, whom the old man, with the stubborn obstinacy of the Stoyle race, had hitherto kept at bay, was drawing near, very near. They had carried him from the adjoining room, speechless and sightless, and so he had remained through the long hours of the night. It was morning now, and white and weary with all she had undergone, Doris saw the rosy streaks faintly penetrating the window shutters.

Now and again the valet or the doctor, or perhaps Cecil, moistened the old man's lips; and now and again Doris smoothed the pillow, which might have been of stone for all it mattered to the head that rested on it. On the bed, and clasped tightly between the rigid fingers, were the papers which proved her right to the title of a peer's daughter, and beside them the will which might make her the mistress of the Stoyle wealth. Suddenly, quite suddenly, as if, though appearing so incapable of effort, the old man had been battling in the darkness for consciousness and strength, [Pg 360] the marquis opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Doris!" he said. "Mary!"

"I am here!" she said, inaudibly to all but him.

His fingers closed on her hand. "Cecil—all who are here!" They drew closer to him, and he flashed his dim eyes upon them. "Listen to me. These are my last words. I—I acknowledge this lady to be my—my daughter—the child of my wife, Lucy!" A spasm shot across his face. "My will—the will which leaves all to her—is my last. Remember—remember! My daughter—my child!" His eyes closed, and they thought he was dead, but his lips opened again, and Doris, if no other, heard the words that struggled from them. "Lucy! Lucy! forgive! I am punished—punished!"

These were the last words of the great Marquis of Stoyle, who had all his life boasted that he had earned the title of "wicked," whose heart had never once melted until death came to turn it into the dust to which even penitence and remorse are impossible!

The wicked flourish as the bay-tree, and the truly good are unable to live through persecution. If any one imagines that Mr. Spenser Churchill was utterly annihilated by the disclosure of his pretty plot, that person is very little acquainted with the peculiar character of which Mr. Spenser Churchill was a prominent type. For a week or two the good man betook himself to Paris, and there, in that quiet and peaceful spot, soothed his troubled spirits with, doubtless, pious reflections; but shortly afterward he emerged from his retreat, and the papers of London announced that the great philanthropist would deliver a lecture at Exeter Hall to aid the funds of the Broken-winded Horses' Society. The subject of the lecture was to be a glorious and inspiring one: "Truth."

Punctually at the hour announced the eminent man, with placidly serene face, and softly, tenderly melting eyes, stepped on to the platform, amidst the cheering of the audience, the majority of whom were ladies, who waved their pocket handkerchiefs, which they well knew they should presently require. Mr. Spenser Churchill began his address. It was eloquent, touching, [Pg 361] impressive; the handkerchiefs grew quite moist long before it was concluded, and when at last his soft and tearfully sympathetic voice died away in his final words, many a soft-hearted woman—and dare I say soft-headed man?—felt perfectly convinced that Mr. Spenser Churchill was far, far too good for this wicked world!

I am surely convinced that the hour will come in which the world will see him without his mask, and be ready to stone the hypocritical villain whom they almost worshiped as a saint; but the hour has not yet come, and the great philanthropist still flourishes as the bay-tree. Great will be the fall thereof when the truth he so loves to talk about shall prevail, and the ax lays the accomplished hypocrite low! May we be there to see!

A year passed away, and the sun, which goes on shining, though marquises die and hypocrites continue to flourish, shone through Lady Despard's beautiful boudoir in Chester Gardens.

In her favorite attitude—half-reclining, half-sitting—her ladyship nestled among the soft cushions of her favorite couch. Near her sat Doris—who, though known to the world as Lady Mary Stoyle, shall be Doris to us till the end of this eventful history. She was sitting at a writing-table, spread with letters and volumes, some of them fearfully like pages of account books, and her beautiful face was puckered up with a charming frown.

Every now and then she consulted one of the appalling volumes, and then wrote for a few moments, after which operation she would grow more puckered and draw a series of perplexed and bothered sighs.

"How happy you look, dear!" said Lady Despard, with a smile, after watching her for some time.

Doris started slightly, and turned round to her.

"I thought you had gone away hours—days—weeks ago. Happy! I am almost driven to distraction. I wish—oh, I do wish, there were no such things as accounts! or, at any rate, that I had nothing to do with them."

Lady Despard laughed.

"'Muckle coin, muckle care,' my dear. Though I sympathize with your misery, I must confess I rather enjoy the sight of it. I suffered so much when I came into my own property. Oh, the weary, [Pg 362] weary hours I plodded through heavy columns of figures and dreary 'statements.' But I've got used to it, and that's what you will do, in time."

"In time! Yes, when I have grown prematurely old and gray," said Doris, with a vexed smile. "I never understood what hard work it is, this being rich."

"I am afraid we shouldn't like it if we were very poor. I wonder"—she paused a moment, then went on—"I wonder how a certain marquis likes poverty?"

Doris bent lower over her blundering and utterly futile arithmetic. "I don't know," she said, stiffly.

Lady Despard smiled. "Any one would know you were a Stoyle by your pride, my dear," she remarked.

Doris looked up with affected indignation.

"Pride! I am the meekest and humblest——"

"Of empresses," put in Lady Despard. "My dear girl, you may not know it, but you are as proud a minx as ever lived, and the most unforgiving."

Doris looked over her shoulder for a moment, then turned her head away.

"I think you are unjust," she said, in a low voice.

"Oh, no, I'm not. For instance, here are you suddenly become possessed of a grand title, large estates, and heaps of money. The title you can't help taking, if people choose to call you by it, and the money. Well, you take as little of that as possible; but not once have you set your foot in any one of the houses that are yours, or upon a spot of the many acres which your father left you. That's pride, though of course you'll say it isn't."

"I——"

"I haven't finished yet. Counsel for the prosecution first, if you please; afterward we shall be happy to hear what you have to say in defense——"

"And find me guilty, whatever that may be," said Doris.

"Here, too, is a young woman with two lovers——"

"Oh, don't," muttered Doris, wincing; but Lady Despard declined to show mercy.

"My dear, I am going to continue. It is well that you should hear the truth from some one, and, as [Pg 363] I am the only person who dares tell it to your royal highness, why, I'll do my duty. Two lovers. One was utterly unworthy of you, poor fellow, an adventurer, who—but never mind. He repented in time, and I am not the woman to be hard upon him. The other is a young man who loved you devotedly, and is all that is honorable and lovable—and miserable! He never wronged you in any way, and, though I can understand your sending the penitent adventurer about his business, I cannot understand how you could let poor Cecil go to this beastly little war, where, as likely as not, he will either be killed by some dirty, half-naked savage, or die of the yellow, or blue, or black, fever, whichever it is they have over there. Yes, I must say I do pity Lord Cecil, who never did anything——"

"But transfer his affections to another woman," murmured Doris, her face and neck a vivid crimson.

Lady Despard sank back onto the cushions and laughed with evident enjoyment.

"You little goose, I was leading you on to showing your hand. And you didn't see it! Of course, that is his offense. We could forgive the adventurer-lover who would have sold us for filthy lucre, and who only repented and drew back at the last moment; oh, yes, we can forgive him; but the other—he must be sentenced to lifelong disappointment, because possibly he was caught, lured into the net of the cleverest and most unscrupulous woman in England, and the cleverest and most unscrupulous man to back her. And we are not proud, we are not unforgiving! Oh, no, certainly not!" she summed up, ironically.

Doris screened her face with her hands.

"Why does not he——?" she stopped.

"Why doesn't he come forward and beg for forgiveness and ask you to become his own little Doris again and Mrs. Marquis?" cried Lady Despard, dryly. "Because he is as proud as you are, my dear. What! Ask a girl as rich as a female Crœsus to be his wife when he has only a few paltry thousands a year; ask the girl who would scarcely speak a word to him when he came to wish her good-by, perhaps for the last time. Why, isn't he a Stoyle, too, and haven't all of you got, and [Pg 364] haven't all of you always had, the pride and stiff-neckedness of the dev—ahem! the evil one? My dear, I am the laziest soul in London, and I've registered a vow that I'll never get excited and warm over anything; but really when I think of you spending your days and nights in hungering for him——"

"Oh!" murmured Doris, and she glided to her and hid her face on her shoulder.

"So you do! Do you think I can't hear you sighing long after you ought to be asleep, you obstinate and abandoned girl," retorted Lady Despard. "Doris, my dear, if I were only old enough, or you

were young enough, it would be my pleasing duty to shut you up in your room on bread and water till you came to your senses and consented to hide your silly little head against his shirt front, spoiling his clothes instead of mine. My dear, would you mind covering my dress with your pocket-handkerchief if you are crying."

"I'm not crying," said Doris, indignantly, and giving her a little push, but still hiding her face. "When—when did you hear from him last?" she asked, in a whisper.

"Just two months ago," replied Lady Despard, her voice growing suddenly serious. "You were too proud to ask for the news, or I would have told you. He was well then, but was going up the country after those miserable Decoys—Dacoits, or whatever they're called, and from what I've read in the papers I'm afraid——"

Doris' hand tightened on her shoulder spasmodically.

"Don't pinch me, my dear. I didn't send him there. Catch me! I only wish he'd ask me to be his wife. I'd have married either of the two men you sent to Jericho; but that's the way with the gods, they always shower their gifts on the unworthy and ungrateful, and deserving people can go starving."

"I wish he had," murmured Doris; "you would both have been happy then."

"No, you don't wish anything of the kind," retorted Lady Despard, indolently. "You would be ready to tear my eyes out if there had ever been the slightest chance of such a thing. Oh, you can't delude me into thinking you the gentle dove most people imagine you, you little scorpion." [Pg 365]

"And that is all you know about—about him?" said Doris, timidly.

"Nearly all. I wish I knew more. I did mention the matter to his grace at the reception the other night, and he looked rather grim and solemn, as if the whole expedition was sentenced——No, no, Doris, I don't mean that!" she added, hastily, as Doris' hand relaxed its hold, and she drew herself up, white and shuddering. "No, it ain't so bad as that; but—but——Well—Ah, my dear, you ought not to have let him go."

Doris threw herself down again. "It was not my fault; if—if he had said—if he had asked——"

"Give me no ifs!" retorted Lady Despard. "My dear child, no man could have asked you anything while you treated him as you treated Lord Cecil after the marquis' death. You were not a live, breathing woman, but a marble effigy, a block of ice, and you froze him—you froze him—and sent him to Burmah to thaw himself. Now, I'm not going to talk any more about him. Get on your habit, and let us go for a ride. Thank Heaven, I love no man, and no man loves me! Heigh-ho!"

The footman brought in the evening papers as she spoke, and she took one and glanced at it languidly; then suddenly she sat up, and uttered a low cry.

Doris, who had gone to the door, but who had not left the room, went back to her swiftly.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

Lady Despard closed the paper. "I—thought you had gone," she said. "Matters?—nothing. The pins and needles in my feet——"

"There is something in that paper," said Doris, in her low voice, her eyes fixed on it. "Tell me what it is!"

Lady Despard hesitated a moment, then she shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, you'd buy one and see for yourself, so I may as well show it to you; but—but don't imagine the worst at once."

She handed her the paper, and pointed to a letter from the seat of war.

In a few—but, alas, how pregnant! words the correspondent told the story of the disaster which had befallen a detachment sent into the interior. Surrounded and outnumbered by the enemy, savages in nothing more than their mode of conducting warfare, the handful of English soldiers had fallen, as so many thousands of their fellows in the glorious years of the past have done, fighting to the last. There were only the few details which can be crammed into a column of newspaper type, but one line stabbed Doris to the heart. [Pg 366]

"I am sorry to say that an aide-de-camp, the Marquis of Stoyle, better known as Lord Cecil, accompanied the detachment. Throughout the campaign Lord Cecil has distinguished himself by his bravery and devotion to duty, and by his genial and modest disposition had won the hearts of both officers and men. If, as there is too much reason to fear, his lordship has fallen with his ill-fated comrades, his loss will be sorely felt, and he can never be replaced. It will be remembered that he succeeded to the historic title just twelve months ago, and very shortly before joining the regiment."

Doris said not a word, but stood staring at the paper, with dry eyes, and that awful feeling of benumbing anguish which crushes pain for a time but to lend it additional force afterward.

Lady Despard put her arm round her.

"Doris, Doris! my dear, my dear!" she murmured. "Don't give way! While there's life there's hope; we can't tell what may have happened; I have reason to hope, to think——" She stopped and sprang—actually sprang—to the door, and throwing it open, said, hurriedly, "Come in; oh, come in!"

The next moment a tall figure, with a sunburned face and one arm in a sling, entered, and after a

glance, one anxious glance, at the white face, rushed forward and caught Doris to him with his sound arm. Lady Despard waited until this happened, then glided out.

They sat up very late that night, and Lady Despard's boudoir was so dimly lighted that as she reclined on her couch she could not see, or pretended not to see, that Doris, as she sat at the marquis' feet, had got his hand fast locked in hers, almost as if she dreaded lest he should vanish as suddenly as he had come. And every now and then she, glancing fearfully at Lady Despard, laid the brown hand against her cheeks, and near, very near, to her lips. [Pg 367]

There was not much talking, for Lady Despard was merciful, but at last she looked up.

"And now, my dear Othello, if you can and will deign to recount some of your adventures, Desdemona and your humble servant will be gratified. Though I have known since yesterday that you had escaped, I haven't any of the details, and I will confess to a faint and lazy kind of curiosity. Touching that interesting wound now, which I do trust will soon be all right, for it must be so awkward——" she stopped and glanced at Doris, with provoking archness.

"Yes, tell us!" murmured Doris.

Lord Cecil—he shall be Cecil for us to the end—looked suddenly grave, and hesitated.

"Yes, I want to tell you, and I must," he said. "Not about myself so much as——" He stopped. "Did you see the list of the killed? Did they give a list of names?"

"No," said Lady Despard, "it was all surmise. Why do you ask that?"

"Because——" he stopped again. "Doris," and he laid his hand on her head, soothingly, "there was another person whom you know in this awful business, besides myself. Cam you guess his name?"

Doris shook her head apprehensively. Lady Despard leaned forward.

"He was—he became a fast and devoted friend of mine, Doris. But for him I should not be here, dearest. He came out with the hospital, and I saw him first beside my bed. He pulled me through the fever." He stopped again, and Doris held her face low down, out of the lamplight. "We were great friends after that, and when our detachment was ordered to the interior he volunteered. I tried to dissuade him. There was no reason that he should go, but he insisted, and——On the evening of the fight he stood by the guns with the rest, and with the rest fought like a lion. Once or twice I found a moment to speak to him, for he was always near me. When the fast struggle came, I joined in the rush—that's the only word for it—and saw a couple of the Dacoits making for me. One I cut down, the other gave me this," he pointed to his arm, "and would have settled me—hush, dearest, don't cry—but this friend was near me still, and he threw himself between us." [Pg 368]

He stopped and drew a long breath. "I don't remember any more till I came to, and, crawling about, came upon him. He was alive, just alive, but he knew me. I—I took his head on my knee, and bent down. Doris, my darling, Doris, my dearest. Hush, hush! 'Tell her that her love saved me from worse than this, Cecil,' he said. 'Tell her that I died with her name on my lips. Be good to her, Cecil; be good to—Doris!'"

Lady Despard was crying audibly.

"You know, dear, who it was that saved my life," said Cecil, in a low voice. "It was Percy Levant." And he drew her head upon his breast, and kissed her with protecting tenderness, as if he were responding to the dead man's solemn injunction.

When the marquis and marchioness returned from their long—but for them not too long—honeymoon, society, deeming it incumbent upon itself to bestow an impressive welcome on two of its most distinguished members, gave a ball in honor of the young, and, as the journals put it, "romantic couple."

It was a very grand affair, and the *Morning Post* next morning devoted a column and a half to its description and a list of the high and mighty and famous guests, and stated, rather emphatically, that the most beautiful woman in the room was the young lady in whose honor the entertainment was given. It went into newspaper raptures over her manner, her smile, her dress, and, lastly, her jewels, which, as it said, consisted of a *suite* of magnificent diamonds—the Stoyle diamonds—and poetically declared that their brilliance was only outshone by the wearer's eyes.

They were very beautiful, as a matter of fact, and no other jewels in the magnificent assemblage could compare with them, excepting, perhaps, a *suite* of pearls set in antique silver, which was worn by—Lady Grace Peyton. [Pg 369]

Twice in the course of the evening Doris and she met each other, and on both occasions, while Doris, with the meekness which, somehow, always distinguishes the injured innocents, turned her head aside, Lady Grace stared at her rival with a bold, defiant flash of her handsome eyes.

"I think," said Lady Despard, as she stood for a moment in a corner with Doris, "I think that for cool, unbrazen impudence, Grace Peyton excels all the world. Most women, all other women—having done what she has done, and knowing that we know what she has done—would have

buried themselves in some German watering-place for the rest of their lives. But, oh no! she not only thinks fit to put in an appearance here to-night, but actually—actually flaunts that set of pearls which she got by fraud—stole, if any one ever stole anything in this world—from your husband. The whole set!”

“No, not the whole set,” murmured Doris, softly, as she looked at Lady Grace gliding through a waltz. “I have the ring.”

“You have! Why, I have never seen it. The ‘ring!’”

“No, you never saw it,” said Doris, a warm flush rising to her lovely face. “I don’t wear it on my finger, dear, but—here,” and she touched her heart. “She is welcome to all the rest while I have that and—him!” she added, turning to her husband as he came up to them.

THE END.

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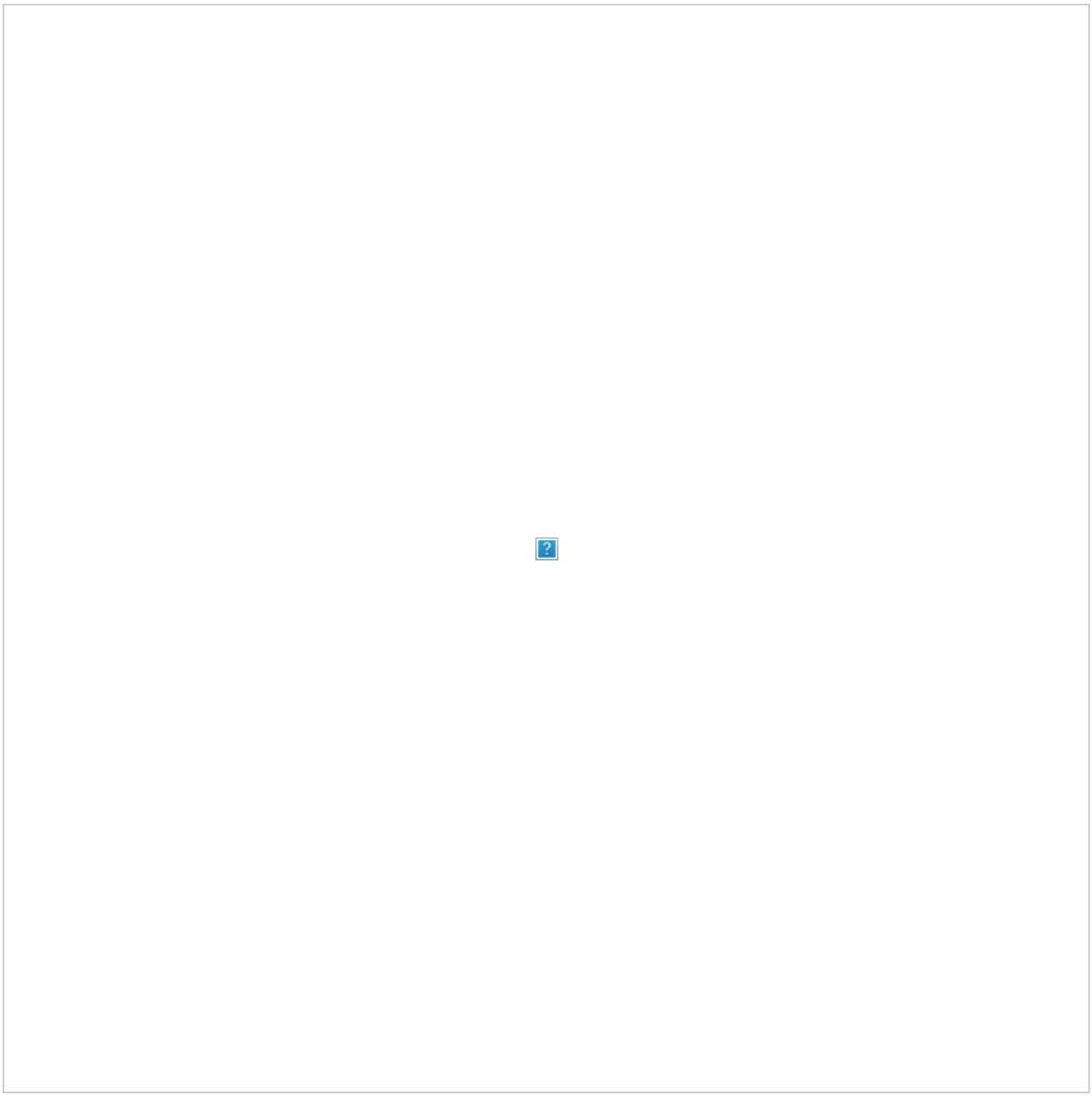

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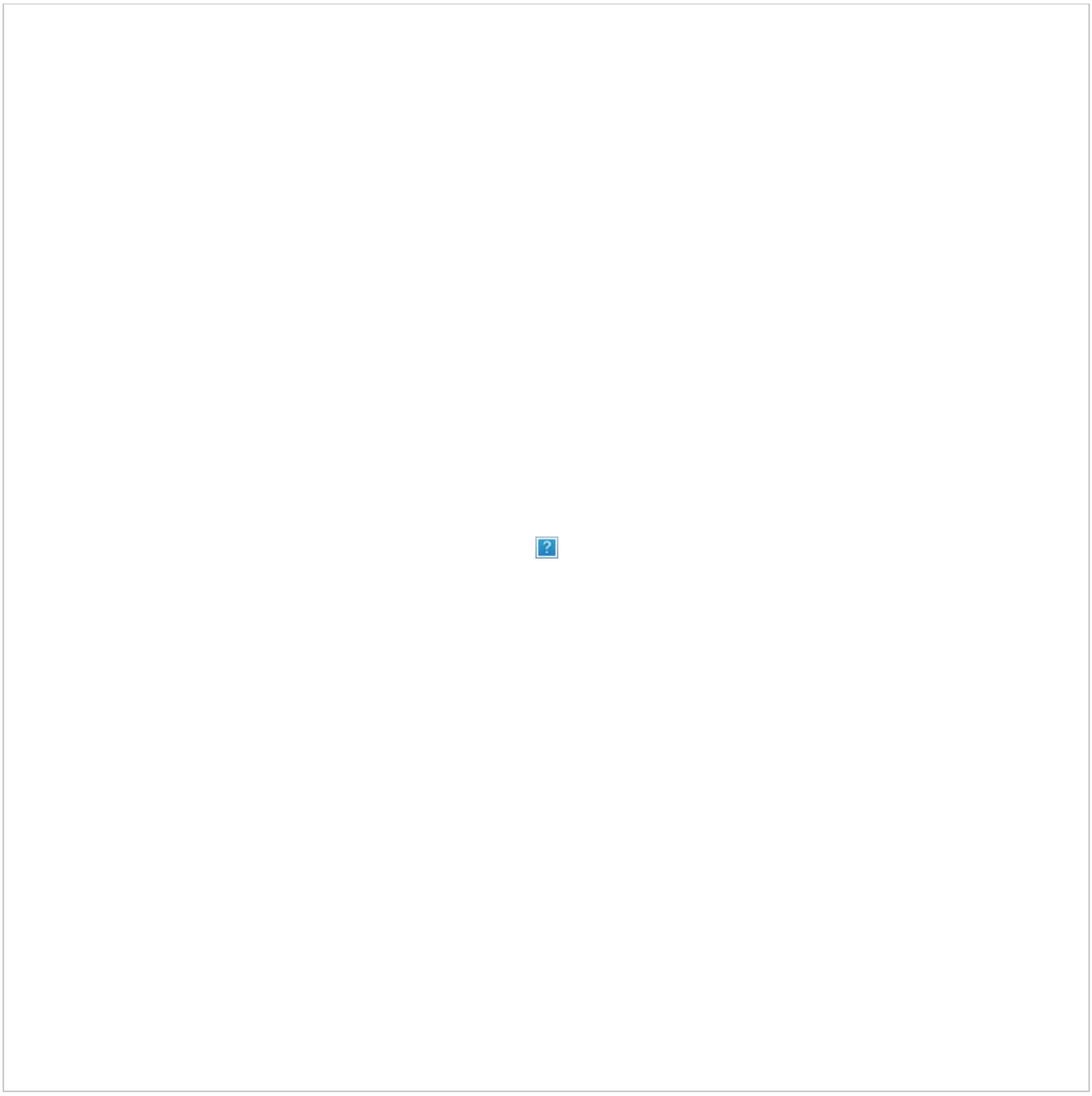

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Obvious typographical errors have been silently corrected.

The last sentence of page 201 is unclear in the source printing and the words “be in” may be an incorrect transcription.

Some inconsistent hyphenation has been retained from the original.

This book has been published under a variety of other titles, including: *A Woman’s Soul: Behind the Footlights*, *A Woman’s Soul; or, Doris* and *Doris Marlowe; or, A Woman’s Soul*.

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