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OR,
TRUE LOVE'S PASSION.

CHAPTER XXVII.
Spurned.

Even with this trivial matter he connected Norah in his thoughts. "If the house would only catch fire, and I might be lucky enough to save her!" he thought. "Perhaps that might help me; I'd burn down all London if by so doing I could secure her."

He pushed open the door, and was surprised to see the earl sitting at the table.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I did not know you were here, and was coming to put out the lamp—"

Then he stopped, and hurried to the earl's side, for he saw that his face was white and drawn, and that he was ill. "What is the matter?" he asked. "Are you ill?"

The earl put out his hand warningly, and looked toward the door.

"Yes, I—I am not well, Guildford," he said, feebly. "Don't—don't be alarmed."

"But I am alarmed," said Guildford Berton, with simulated anxiety. "What is it?"

The earl tried to rise, but fell back; and even as he did so he took out his pocket handkerchief and tried to wave it in his usual stately fashion.

"It is—nothing very much," he replied. "A—sudden faintness. I

believe the medical men term it—er—pressure on the heart. Probably I have been—er—reading too long."

"I'll get you something," said Guildford Berton, and he went up to his room and brought some sal-volatile, thinking swiftly all the time: Would it be better for him that the earl should die or live?

"Thank you, thank you," said the old man, with a stately bow of his shaking head.

"Have you had an attack like this before?" asked Guildford Berton.

"Yes," replied the earl, "this is the third. But I beg you will not alarm yourself; it is a—mere nothing. I—I am not a young man—he waited a moment, as if he hoped that Guildford would be bold enough to contradict him—"and these—er—attacks try me."

There was silence for a moment, then he said:

"There is a flask of perfume in that drawer; will you give it me, please? Thanks. Did you—er—spend a pleasant evening?"

"Yes," said Guildford.

"You are later than usual."

"I looked in at the club after I had sent Lady Norah home," said Guildford, still watching the white, drawn face closely.

"Ah, yes, she has come home?" murmured the earl, passing his hand over his forehead with a confused air. "She did not come in to wish me good-night as usual," he added, after a pause, and with a kind of repressed anxiety. "That was—er—unlike her, Guildford."

Inwardly surprised, Guildford Berton said:

"I expect she thought you were engaged writing or reading, and did not like to disturb you, sir."

"Ah, perhaps so," he assented. "Er—you may have noticed, Guildford, that Norah has an affectionate nature."

"Indeed, yes."

"I—er—should not like her to be alarmed."

Still more surprised at this novel exhibition of the earl's regard for his daughter's feelings, Guildford Berton nodded assent.

"I beg you will not mention this—er—slight attack of mine to her, Guildford."

"Certainly not, my lord," he said, quietly. "I should be the last person in the world to cause Lady Norah and disquietude or anxiety."

The earl inclined his head.

"You are considerate yourself, Guildford," he said.

After a moment he added:

"I—er—think I will consult Sir Andrew to-morrow morning. These attacks may be of little gravity, but still—" He stopped, and started Guildford by suddenly exclaiming, with perfect naturalness: "My God! am I going to die?"

"Oh, no, no, no," Guildford responded, quickly. "Everybody is subject more or less to these—fainting fits, my lord. You will find Sir Andrew will attach no sinister importance to them."

"I hope not; I—er—hope not," faltered the old man; and then, as if ashamed of his sudden outburst, he said:

"I—er—was thinking of Norah, Guildford. It would be—terrible to leave her alone. She has no mother, no one. If she were married—" He stopped and leaned back with a sigh.

Guildford Berton's breath came fast and his face grew hot.

"You would feel more at ease?" he said.

The earl moved his head assentingly.

"Yes, yes; she is young and inexperienced. She is just the girl to be led away by her feelings. I



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have never mentioned it to you, but I had a dread of her becoming entangled by that young scoundrel who ran away with Betsy North—South—I have forgotten her name."

"Oh, no, my lord," said Guildford Berton, in a low voice. "You wronged Lady Norah by such a suspicion."

"I am delighted to hear it," faltered the old man. "But she is—impressionable and impulsive; she might marry—impudently; I should have seen to it. Yes!" He drew a heavy sigh. "I fear—" he was going to say, "I have not done my duty," but he could not bring himself to utter such self-condemnation. "The—subject pains me."

"And me also," said Guildford Berton, in a low voice, and with down-cast eyes.

Should he seize the opportunity created by the old man, and avow himself?

The earl looked up at him. "I beg your pardon, Guildford? Painful to you?" he asked, with polite interrogation.

"Yes, my lord," said Guildford Berton, his face white, his lips set. "It is not the time—he moistened his lips—"there can be no time, perhaps, in which I should speak of what lies so near my heart as to be a matter of life or death to me, but your lordship's words—your mention of Lady Norah's possible marriage—"

The earl looked at him as he faltered and stammered with a stare of feeble surprise and bewilderment.

"I fear I fail to comprehend," he said. "Are you in any trouble? What has Norah to do with it?"

"Everything, alas!" responded Guildford Berton. "I must speak out now, my lord," he went on, "even though by so doing I lose your friendship. But, oh, I do trust you will bring yourself to remember how much your words will mean to me, that for years past I have experienced nothing but kindness at your hands, and that now I need it and your forbearance more than I have ever done. Be generous, I beseech you!"

The earl struggled into an upright position, and stared at the white face with a puzzled frown.

"What is this?" he said, huskily. "Have you—been getting into debt, Guildford?"

"Debt? No, my lord. If that were all, I should fear far less acutely the doubt and fear that oppress me. My lord, what I have to tell you, the confession I must make, will, I know, take you by surprise, but I plead for your forbearance, your generosity. I love Lady Norah!"

The earl stared at him for a moment as if he did not comprehend.

"I—I beg your pardon," he said. "What was that you said about Lady Norah? I—I am afraid this attack has left me a little deaf, Guildford."

"I said, sir, that I love Lady Norah," said Guildford Berton, biting his lip and breathing hard. "I have loved her, sir, since—"

The earl staggered to his feet, and, still looking at him, broke into a laugh.

It was a horrible laugh; full of scornful amazement, almost of amusement.

"You have been—drinking, sir!" he said, not sternly, but with simple contempt.

Guildford Berton started as if the old man had struck him; indeed, he would have preferred a blow to that awful laugh and those scornful words.

"Excuse me," said the earl. "I—I—er—have not been well this evening, as you are aware, and am not in a fit condition to enjoy this tipsy jest. Will you—er—leave me, please?" and he waved a shaky hand toward the door.

(To be continued.)

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