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ART DEPT. CANADIAN MAGAZINE

His Little Girl

By L. G. MOBERLY

CHAPTER XIII.

"TO a man of the world like myself, the mystery is, why you ever engaged yourself to that boy. Compared to you, Giles Tredman is a boy. Can you deny it?"

"I am not trying to deny it. Still, the fact remains that I am engaged to him, and intend to marry him in five weeks from now."

"It is so certain as that!" Hermann Muller stooped forward in the big arm-chair he occupied, and his hand as though inadvertently, touched Grace's hand that lay in her lap. She coloured vividly, and drew her hand away, but her tone was less assured, as she answered—

"Yes, as certain as that. I am arranging about my trousseau now."

"Ah! your trousseau?" The man's dark eyes ran over with an insistent, appraising stare. "I have always been considered a good judge of ladies' gowns. Perhaps I could offer you some suggestions."

They were seated in Mrs. Cardew's drawing-room on this June afternoon, Grace leaning back upon the couch in what she knew to be her most fascinating pose, and wearing a frock of some pale blue gauzy material which clung about her figure in graceful diaphanous folds, its colour enhancing the brightness of her eyes, and emphasizing the delicate loveliness of her complexion. Muller sat near her, his dark head thrown back against a crimson cushion, his eyes drinking in the superb beauty of the woman, a little smile hovering over his lips, a smile that held in it something of mocking triumph, something of amused cynicism. This man did not know the world, and above all, the world of women, for nothing. With a woman of Grace's type, he could calculate to a nicety just how far he could carry easy familiarity into an insolence that bordered on brutality, just how much flattery was needed before the bird fluttered into the snare.

"I am usually considered an adept about gowns myself," Grace answered, with her rather hard laugh, but from under her eyelashes shot a glance at her companion that somewhat belied her laugh. "You can't say I am not becomingly gowned now," and she drew herself upright, and looked full at him.

"You are superb," he replied lazily, his eyes again appraising her, from the crown of her bright hair to the tips of her dainty shoes, "as I am trying to point out to you, far too superb to throw yourself away on a soldier and county squire. Why did you agree to do it?"

He suddenly dropped his masterful, somewhat brutal tone, and bent towards her again, this time putting his hand firmly over hers, and keeping it there.

"That is my affair," she said, but her voice was not quite under control, and her eyes no longer met his with their daring challenge.

"You are not going to pretend to me that you care for him?" Muller's voice dropped into caressing accents, his hand pressed the hand that lay beneath it, "you won't try to make me believe you are in love with that boy."

WHETHER because of the pressure of his hand, or because of the sudden tenderness in his voice, Grace could herself scarcely have told, but something impelled her to look straight into his face, and a slow smile crept round her mouth, as she met his significant glance.

"I—don't think I believe in being in love," she said, "hearts are doubtful blessings."

"But about a title and a big place in the country there can be no doubt whatever? No, I agree with you," and Muller, having uttered his insolent remark, leant back in his chair again, and eyed her flushed face with a smile more mocking than before.

"You are not the kind of woman to be satisfied with the worshipful adoration of a boy," Muller went on, before she could speak, "you need a man who is your master, as well as your slave."

"Do I?" she exclaimed fiercely, rising to her feet, and looking down at him with exactly the gesture of indignant

pride which he had meant to draw forth, "do I?" A man who is my master, indeed? I should like to find the man who could master me."

"You would not have a very prolonged search," Muller dragged himself up from his chair with a well-feigned semblance of indifference, verging on boredom, "I want you, and I mean to have what I want, and the sooner you put an end to the farce of your engagement to Sir Giles, the better."

In a lightning flash memory brought back to her the chivalrous courtliness of Giles' wooing, but something in the utter brutality of the big, dark man who towered over her, made an appeal to the ingrained coarseness that underlay her delicate beauty. And though she drew away from Muller, and laughed scornfully, a thrill ran along her pulses.

"The wedding day is fixed, the trousseau ordered, you are talking nonsense," she said.

"You can ante-date your wedding, your trousseau will do as well for one bridegroom as for another," he answered quickly. "Go on buying it, I have no objection to that. Fool Sir Giles to the top of your bent. The more you fool him the better pleased I shall be,"—a savage note made itself audible in his voice—"I owe him a grudge. If I can pay part of it through you, so much the better."

"What is the grudge?"

"Never mind just now. All you need remember is that I want Giles Tredman to taste a handful of dust and ashes: if yours is the hand that gives them, so much the better."

"But—" she began, when he interrupted her sharply.

"LISTEN to me," he said, seizing her hands in a grasp that hurt, and compelling her to meet his gaze, "I know you through and through. I am not a chivalrous ass like your prospective bridegroom. I have no delusions about women of your type. There are good women in the world, yes! I am ready to admit it, but you don't happen to be one of them. But you do happen to suit me, and though I am not going to fall down at your feet and tell you you are an angel, I can give you the sort of life you will like."

"But—" she began again, trying to wrench her hands from his, only to be gripped yet more firmly in his iron grasp, whilst he went on speaking as though her voice had not reached his ears.

"You are marrying this Tredman because he is rich, because you want to be my lady, because you think you will get a pleasant rise in the social scale. If you do as I wish, you will be a million times richer than you dream, and you will be able to call yourself—princess! Will that appeal to your ambition?"

"I don't understand," she said, "you are Herr Muller, how—"

"It suits me to pass here as Herr Muller. My own name and title are something quite different. My wife will call herself princess; I am rich now, and if everything works itself out as I mean that it shall, my wealth will be increased by—well, by a very large amount. And"—he paused, his hands loosed her hands, and laid themselves heavily on her shoulders, "and you are the woman I want for my wife."

"You take too much for granted," she said indignantly, trying in vain to draw away from his clasp. "I am bound to another man. How dare you—"

"How dare I?" he laughed, a low, masterful laugh. "How dare I do this—and this?" He stooped and kissed her passionately. "How dare I? Because I am your master, my fair lady, and you know it, and—you like it." And before she could utter a syllable of protest he had seized her in his arms and was kissing her with a violence that half frightened her, half thrilled her. She was powerless in the grip of his brute strength, and when presently he let her go, she was panting and breathless. But his face was alight with triumph.

"You and I together will have the world at our feet," he said, "we will settle Tredman's part of the business (Continued on page 27.)"

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