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The is Die Cast

For Better or For Worse.

CHAPTER XVII.
For Better or Worse.

As Lashmore lifted her into the wagon, he pressed her to him and murmured rather hoarsely, "My wife!" Then on again, she nestling within his arm, over vast plains, through thick woods, then out in the plains again and to a fertile valley lying basking in the sunlight below them, a substantial house, with smoke wreathing from the chimneys, and behind and beyond vast hills crowned by gigantic firs.

"Quirapata, dearest!" he said, with a whisper, breaking the silence which had reigned like a magic spell. "But we do not stop here; the cottage—our cottage—lies in the dip beyond the trees there."

But they had to stop, for the round and comfortable figure of a man with a shrewd, good-natured face was standing at the gate leading to the farm.

"Mr. Coke," whispered Harry, "That's kind of him! He's one of the best."

Mr. Coke raised his hat, and with a smile, came to the wagon.

"I couldn't let you come to Quirapata without saying a word of welcome, Miss—I mean, Mrs. Lashmore," he said, as he shook hands with her.

Then he shook hands heartily with Lashmore and nodded and smiled approvingly.

"You'll find it all right down there, I think," he said. "Polly—that's your maid, Mrs. Lashmore—has got everything ready for you. You'll come up to the house when you feel inclined, and as often as you feel inclined, I hope."

Lashmore drew him aside and whispered huskily:

"Thank you, thank you! Isn't she— isn't she beautiful?"

"She is!" assented Mr. Coke. "And she looks as good as they make 'em. You're a lucky chap, Lashmore. Be good to her! Off with you, my lad, and God bless you!"

Lashmore went back to Kittie, laughing rather shakily.

"He told me to be good to you!" he said as he pressed her to him. "Do you think I shall be, dearest?"

They came in sight of the cottage, and Kittie drew a long breath. "Oh, how beautiful!" she murmured.

She was at the gates of her earthly paradise; they were swinging wide open for her; she had only to enter.

A man was waiting to take away the horses; a rosy-cheeked, well-fed looking girl was standing at the door to receive them.

"Well, Polly," said Lashmore, beaming at her; "this is Mrs. Lashmore, your new mistress." His voice rang with pride. The girl gazed at Kittie with an admiring awe; she had never seen any one like her, and thought of the portrait of the queen on the almanac nailed on the kitchen wall.

"Supper's ready, miss—ma'am, when you're ready," she faltered.

Kittie went up to her room, a dainty room with new furniture, snow-white chintz, with flowers on the dressing-table, the window sill, everywhere. She took off her things slowly, and heard Lashmore's voice as he talked to the girl below. Still in a dream, she went down stairs again; his supper was laid, as Polly had said; Lashmore had changed his riding-suit for one of blue serge. He looked, as Mrs. Vanstone had said, amazingly handsome, distinguished; a man whom any woman might love and be proud of.

He drew her to the head of the table and kissed her.

"Welcome home, dearest!" he said. He held a folded paper in his hand, and he shook it at her, laughing, his eyes brilliant, his face flushed with happiness.

"What do you think it is, Eva?" he said. "You'll never guess! It's the draft of a deed of partnership. I'm 'man' no longer, but part 'master.' Didn't I say he was one of the best! You'll like him, darling; no one could help it. He's as sharp as a needle, but as soft-hearted as—as a woman. He's been like a father to me; and I feel like—a son to him. You must eat something, dearest!"

He put something on her plate, poured out a glass of wine, brought them round to her, and, of course, availed himself of the opportunity to take her in his arms.

"Do you think you like the place, dearest?" he asked. "Do you think you will be happy here, away from the old country and—all your friends?" He looked at her anxiously, gratefully, as he put the question. "Don't think I don't know all that

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you have given up for me, and that my only way of making it up to you is to make you happy."

She raised her eyes to his with something like entreaty in them.

"I—I have given up nothing," she said, "I have made no sacrifice. I am—ah, yes; I am happy, happier than I deserve to be." The last words were spoken more to herself than to him.

He laughed, but his eyes glowed. "That's your way of putting it, dearest," he said. "You speak like an angel. You are an angel! But I was wondering whether you'd feel lonely—there is no other woman here but Polly."

She caught her breath. "I shall not feel lonely. I do not want any one else. I only want—you." She breathed the word with such an intensity of passion that he sat and looked at her for a moment in silence.

"My wife!" he said in a whisper.

There was such an accent of devotion, of pride, of perfect trust in his voice, that it broke Kittie down. She struggled for a moment, then her head fell in her hands, and she burst into a storm of tears. He sprang to her and put his arms round her.

"My dearest, my dearest!" he murmured consolingly, and in a terrible fright and anxiety. "What is it? What is the matter? Tell me, Eva. Oh, my love, why do you cry? Is the sacrifice too great, are you—repenting?"

His face was white, his voice shook. She hid her face against his breast, pressed it there, as if to force back her tears; her small hand gripped his coat and clung there, as a drowning man clings to a rock; her voice found its way through her sobs.

"There is no sacrifice," she said, almost inaudibly. "I am not giving up anything. I am wicked, wicked, wicked! Oh, I can't tell you—but I ought to do so, I ought! But I love you—it's my love that makes me wicked—and selfish. If you knew—if you only knew—but I can't tell you. I feel as if it would kill me. I couldn't bear to see you change to me—I should die. Yes, I should die!"

Manlike, he thought it was only hysteria. He had come upon her suddenly at Cornita; she had had a long journey, the excitement of the wedding, the solitude of this lonely spot—perhaps all newly married girls broke down in this way. He soothed her, kissed her brow and lips, gently stroked the hair from her forehead, drew her on to his knee and murmured phrases of tender endearment and encouragement.

"Of course you realize all that you have lost, dearest," he said. "That's only natural. I expected that. Leaving England, your father, wealth, rank—entrusting yourself to a man you scarcely know. Why, yes; it's

only natural. But, dearest, you know that I love you, that I would give my life to make you happy? And you love me—just a little, don't you?"

Her arms strained round his neck and she hid her face still more closely against him.

"Yes, yes, I love you, I love you! That is it, that is why! Oh, I am weak and wicked—I can't speak—I can't tell you." She raised her face suddenly and looked at his anxious, but still love-laden eyes. "Harry—"

"Do you know that is the first time you have called me that," he said with a forced laugh—he really must try and get her to laugh, coax her into a lighter mood. "Harry! I didn't know the name sounded so good. I like to hear you say it. Call me by it again, dearest. But what were you going to say?"

She looked beyond him for a moment; then her eyes returned to his, seeming to search them, to plead for mercy, to seek assurance there of his love, of his pardon.

"If—she said, as if speech cost her pain. "If some day you found that I was—was not so good as you think me; that I had not—not given up all that you thought I had—"

"Would I love you still!" he laughed. "Why, yes!"

Her hands writhed together behind his neck, she drew a long breath and her eyes closed; but, as if she were forcing herself to speak, she went on again, her eyes seeking his, with a feverish, agonized eagerness.

"But if—I want to know how much you love me? They say that when a man loves with all his heart, he can forgive everything."

"I am prepared to forgive everything, Eva, dearest," he said with a laugh, as he tried to imagine something he would have to forgive, some little, trivial, foolish, girlish fault. "Try me!"

"I am—I am!" she panted. "I am trying to tell you—but, oh, I can't, I can't! If you found that I had deceived you, I was—was—not what I seem—would you love me still? Oh, don't laugh. If you knew—if you knew!"

His face suddenly grew grave, a look of anxiety, of something between disappointment and doubt came into his eyes.

"You were going to tell me that you once—once cared for some other man," he said huskily. "Hold on, dearest! Don't be frightened. Was it long ago; before I met you that night—would you remember—at the Exhibition at Earl's Court? Was that one of the reasons why, when I saw you again at Ripley's Court, you kept me to my promise, our agreement, pretended that we had never met before? Was he—did he exist then?"

She shivered and shuddered in his arms as he referred to Ripley Court! for his words called up Eva Lyndhurst and all that may have passed between them; and her heart grew hot with jealousy.

(To be Continued.)

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THERAPION No. 3
GOUT, RHEUMATISM, GRAVEL, NEURALGIA, MIGRAINE, SCIATICA, BRUISES, SWELLINGS, BURNS, SCALDS, SORE THROAT, ETC.

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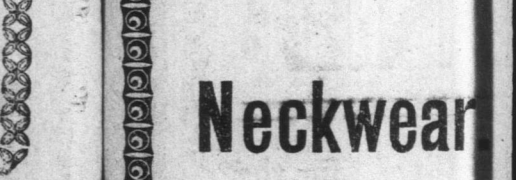
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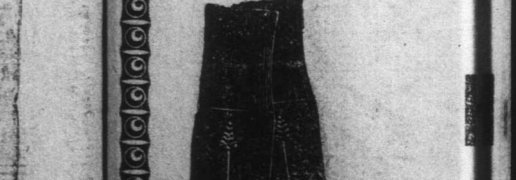
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