

THE USURPER

Jordan fidgeted with his feet, and, keeping an eye on the street, turned up the collar of his coat and pulled his hat over his brow.

"My good Rachel," he said, "you can't expect me at this time of night and in the open street, to stand here talking with you. We shall be seen, and—"

"You did not mind being seen with me two years ago, Jordan," she said, with sad reproach.

"Didn't I?" thought Jordan, but he said aloud: "That was very different; circumstances have altered, and—"

He saw some of the people coming from Lady Marlowe's coming up the street, and turned upon her with a smothered anger. "Follow me toward the park," and he walked away with his head bent even lower than usual.

The woman followed him with a weary gaze which spoke of mental as well as physical weariness, and Jordan, stopping in the darkest corner he could find, turned and confronted her.

"Now, Rachel," he said, with something approaching his ordinary smoothness, "tell me what this extraordinary proceeding means."

"Is it so extraordinary, Jordan? Did you think that I should receive that letter and do nothing; that I should submit to be treated like a dog—ah! worse; a toy you had got tired of?"

"Hush, hush!" he said, for her sad voice had grown louder, and a policeman paused in his heavy tramp and looked at them. "For heaven's sake, my good girl, don't make a scene! It can do no possible good, quite the reverse, in fact, and—"

She declined his arm with a gesture, and walked beside him, her trembling hand holding her shawl together.

"Now, tell me all about it, and what—what you hope to effect by dogging me in this way," he said, with barely concealed impatience "and for goodness' sake, speak quietly, and don't give way to heroics. I thought I had explained everything in the letter."

"That cruel letter!" she exclaimed, her voice trembling. "How could you write it, Jordan, remembering all that we were to each other, and so shut a time ago?"

"What is the use of harping on the past?" he said, with a sudden burst of irritation, which he checked by a palpable effort. "The past, my dear Rachel, and the present are very different things. When you and I—er—er—amused ourselves by playing at lovers two years ago down at that infernally stupid watering place, I was only Jordan Lynne, the son of a man who might inherit my name, and you—"

"And I," she said, in a voice hoarse with suppressed emotion, "what was I, Jordan, an innocent, ignorant girl, who believed in and trusted the man who told her that he loved her? Yes, trusted, Jordan."

Sir Jordan bit his lip.

"All that, as I say, was two years ago, and—in short, the dreams you and I indulged in cannot be realized. Great heaven! It was seldom Sir Jordan permitted himself to use strong language, and his doing so on this occasion showed how much upset he was by this inconvenient interview—"Great heaven! you—you didn't suppose that I was going to marry you, after—after—"

"After you became a rich man with a title," she finished, with a catch in her voice, her dark eyes fixed on his face, which looked mean and sneaking at that moment, and quite unlike the intellectual countenance which shone in the House of Commons. "Yes, Jordan, that is what I thought, when you promised me that you would have married me."

"You will not be so unjust, so cruel, so heartless, as to desert me now!" and she stood still, panting and searching his pale, downcast face for one faint sign of relenting.

He shook her hand off his arm.

"Desert you? Certainly not," he said. "I am not capable of such conduct. As I told you in my letter—in which I am sure I endeavored to be explicit enough, and which you think you must have understood—"

"Ah, yes," she said, with a heavy sigh. "It was easy to understand."

"Very well, then," he resumed. "I pointed out to you plainly that it was not possible that you—well, under the circumstances, really, reasonable wishes could be realized. I have no intention of marrying. But, as I said, I am anxious—"

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would have accepted it with, if not gratitude—for I am aware, my dear Rachel, that we must not look for gratitude in this world—at least with satisfaction. It appears, however, that my not unreasonable expectations were doomed to disappointment, and instead of acquiescing in the—deceit of Providence, and falling in with my view of our mutual obligations, you have thought fit to follow me to London, and here in the public streets—my dear Rachel, I did not deem you capable of fit—to force yourself upon me and—make a scene."

He had finished at last, and stood looking at her steadily from under his lids, an expression of mock indignation and long suffering on his pale face. But he could not meet her eyes; eyes which had grown darker with the sombre light of an injured woman's anguish and scorn.

"Come," he said, "let us part as friends, my dear Rachel. We will not exchange any more harsh words. You will see the wisdom of the step I have taken—to—"

—end our little friendship, and I am sure you know me better—"

"Know you! Yes, I know you!" came pantingly from her writhing lips. "I know you now! Oh!—she raised her clenched hands and let them fall again heavily—"oh, that I should ever have been deceived by you! How my God!—how could I ever have believed in you for one single moment? Why couldn't I see that you were a devil and a monster instead of a man? But I was alone in the world, and innocent—no father, mother, friend, to warn or guard me, and—"

She broke down and leaned against the park railings, covering her face with her hands and shaking with sobs that brought no relief.

Jordan gazed at his under lip and looked round waterfully.

"Come, come, my dear Rachel," he said, soothingly. "Permit me to say that you take too black a view of—of the case. Now let us be more cheerful. Your future, as I have pointed out, is provide for. The money I have offered—"

She turned on him so suddenly that the amiable Sir Jordan started back from her blazing eyes and upheld hand.

"Money! Do you dare to think I would touch it—that I would accept one penny? No, not if I were starving! You offer me money! Jordan Lynne, you don't know what you are doing. You are driving a broken-hearted woman desperate! Desperate! Do you hear? Do you hear? Do you know what that means? Do you?" She drew nearer to him and glared into his shrinking eyes. "You—your coward!" She drew a long breath. "With all my money in this hour of my humiliation, the bitterest pang of all is the thought—the thought that burns, burns into my heart—that I once trusted you, yes, and loved you! And you offer me money! The woman who should be your wife, but whom you have betrayed! Look at me! Look at me, Jordan; look well at me. You remember what I was. I've heard from your own lips often enough—those lying lips—that I was pretty—beautiful. Look at me now; look at your handiwork!" She drew the shawl from her white face, distorted by passionate despair and indignation. "Do you think money can restore me to what I was—give me back all I have lost, all you have robbed me of? No, not all the riches of the world! There is only one thing you can do for me now that with a miser you have told me that you will not, never did mean to, make me your wife; you can kill me! You shrink from that—for Jordan, biting at his lip, had shrunk. "Is it worse to kill the body or the soul? What is there left for me but to die?" Her voice broke into a wail, a moan that might have touched the heart of a satyr, then suddenly grew fiercer and harder and determined. "But no, I will not—I will not die! I will live, Jordan Lynne; live for the hour in which God shall strike the balance between you and me. The hour will come!" she struck her breast—"it will come, sneer as you may." Jordan was not sneering, he was far too uncomfortable to manage a sneer. "And when it does come, I will show you as much mercy and pity as you have this night shown me."

She looked at him full in the eyes, her face distorted by the convicting emotions—despair, resentment, humiliation—which tortured her; then, dragging the shawl round her, turned and left him. Before she had gone many yards he saw her stagger and fall against the railings, by which she supported herself by one hand.

Sir Jordan Lynne did not go to her assistance, but waited until she had recovered and moved on again; then, he, too, turned on his way home.

He was very much annoyed; very much upset, indeed. He had actually offered this foolish young creature, who really had no—no claim upon him, fifty pounds a year, and she had treated him thus.

It was quite an agitated face upon which the policeman who had been watching the interview from the corner, turned his lantern. He recognized Sir Jordan and saluted him, and Sir Jordan smoothed the harassed lines from his face and acknowledged the salute graciously.

"Hope that young woman hasn't been annoying you, sir," said the constable.

"No, no," replied Jordan. "She is a pensioner, the daughter of a servant in our—"

family, and I am sorry to say she has fallen into evil ways. I have just been saying a few words in season, constable, but I am afraid—and she shook his head and sighed. "If—if you should meet with her loitering about near my place, perhaps it will be as well to point out to her that the police have instructions to protect persons from annoyance. You understand me, I have no doubt."

The policeman's hand, with Jordan's half sovereign in the palm, went to his helmet.

"I understand, sir," he said. "I'll give her a word of warning if I see her loitering about."

"Thank you, Good night, constable," murmured the good and moral baronet, and with a glance behind him to ascertain if Rachel was in sight or not, he opened his door with a latch-key and passed in to the repose which so estimable a gentleman deserved.

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