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LADY LAURA'S RELEASE

THE STORY OF A SPOILED BEAUTY.

CHAPTER XXII.

Presently a shadow fell across the turf, and he looked up to see the fair face and golden head of his wife. Any other man must have found her inexpressibly fair; her white morning-dress, with its rich laces and blue ribbons, sweeping the grass in graceful folds; an exquisite bloom, brought by the fresh morning air, brightening her face, a knot of roses at her throat. She had tried to look her best, so that she might please his eyes and win a few words of affection from him. But his face darkened as his eyes rested on her, and he looked anything but pleased at the interruption.

"What a lovely morning, Vance!" she began. "You look the picture of luxurious idleness."

"I do not feel very miserable," he responded; but no light came into his eyes when he saw her. He was tired of her soft loveliness.

Lady Laura stood by him in silence for a few moments, while he took up the paper and began to read, ignoring her presence altogether.

"Vance," she said, gently, "if you are not particularly engaged, will you give me five minutes of your time?"

And, considering all that she had bestowed upon him, she felt that it was not much to ask.

He sighed, and resigned himself with as much grace as he could to listen to what she had to say.

"What is it, Laura? A toilet from Worth's, a costume for Harborough House? Something very important, I see, from your face."

There was a ring of satire in his voice which reached even the heart of the woman who loved him so well.

"Nay, Vance; I like nice dresses, but my mind is not so entirely absorbed in them as to leave me nothing else to speak of. It is about yourself that I wish to speak." Then a sudden

den hesitation came over her, and a fear lest she should displease him seized her, and almost silenced the words on her lips.

"Me?" he questioned. "Why, Laura, what can you have to say about me?"

"I will tell you," she answered. "I have not been very happy lately, Vance; my heart has ached until it has grown heavy within me, and tears come more naturally to me now than smiles."

He moved impatiently in his chair, but spoke no word. He had a shrewd suspicion of what was coming.

"I do not think," she continued, that any wife could love her husband with deeper, truer love than I give to you."

He smiled complacently. What less royal gift than perfect love could be given to him?

"And I?" she went on, "expect the same love from you; and," she added, with a trembling voice, "I am sure that you can give it to me."

An expression of relief passed over the captain's face as his wife uttered these last words.

"But there is just one thing," continued her ladyship, "that would make me happier, if you would do it."

"What is it?" he asked.

And again her lips seemed unable to frame the words. She looked at her husband with something that was like a mist of tears in her eyes.

"Vance," she said, "do you know that I am almost afraid of you? I find myself wondering whether I dare say what I find myself longing to say."

"You need not fear to say anything you wish to me," he said kindly; and the gentle tone of his words brought back all her courage.

"Well, Vance, I want you to give up your intimacy with Gladys Rane."

The trusting, loving woman did not notice the fiery gleam of anger that darkened his face; but she did see the sudden movement of his fingers, the quick clinching of the strong hands.

"What have you to do with Gladys Rane?" he asked, in a cold, stern voice. "And why should I give up one of the best and dearest friends I have in the world?"

"If she were no more than a friend," said her ladyship, "I would not make the request."

"And who dares to suggest that she is more than a friend?" he demanded, angrily.

"Every one! Oh, Vance, do not be angry! I know it is weak and foolish of me. You gave me the best proof of your love by asking me to be your wife; but I am jealous of Gladys Rane, and the jealousy is poisoning my life."

"You have no cause to be jealous," he said, coldly.

"Oh, yes, beloved, I have!" she cried. "I have cause—my own heart tells me I have most bitter cause. I love you with my whole soul, and the instinct of my love tells me that your heart has gone from me."

"My dear Laura," said the captain, languidly, "never talk sentimentally on a warm day."

He saw the spasm of pain that passed over her face; but he felt no compassion for her suffering. He decided resolutely that this kind of thing must be nipped in the bud.

"Do not laugh at me, Vance," she pleaded, with gentle dignity. "I have come to you with my soul on my lips; do not meet me with ridicule. I have been very unhappy ever since I noticed how much time you spend with and how attentive you are to Gladys Rane. Oh, Vance, I have watched the glances from your eyes to hers and I have seen the love in them—deeper love, Vance, than you ever gave to me! And your voice—do you know how much love and music comes into it when you speak to her? Do you know how your eyes follow her—how she seems to draw you to her by touching your very heart-strings? Do you know how every one makes way for you to occupy a place by her side? So soon as you enter a room where she is, it is as though a magnet drew you together. People smile; those nearest to Miss Rane make way for you, as though you had a right to be near her; and, when I see that, Vance, my heart aches. Then, when you are near her, both you and she seem to forget everything in the world but each other; and I—oh, Vance, I feel as if I were left out in the cold and the darkness! I go away, for I cannot bear the pain of it. Again, you do not know how often you dance with her; and, Vance, when one has seen you waiting with her, there can be no more doubt—no



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