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A Millionaire; Countess Westerleigh

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"You did not write this?" repeated Vane, looking at her in astonishment. She shook her head, with a puzzled frown on her face.

"No; where did you get it from?"

"From Sen," he replied. "He has been the best, the kindest friend a man ever had. It's true that he made an awful mistake in thinking that that you didn't care for me."

"He told you that?" in a low voice.

"Yes," he said. "He was wrong; I know that now; but I believed him. And yet, somehow, whenever I remembered the look in your face when I told you that I loved you, I doubted his judgment. Yes, he was wrong; but he meant it for the best. He kept your letter from me for some time. You see, I was half-mazed by your loss."

Her eyes beamed a wealth of joy, and pity upon him.

"And you say you did not write it. Why—why," he laughed, "you must have written it and forgotten it."

"Do you think so?" she said. "But I did not write it, all the same."

He looked at her, amazed.

"But—how—how did Sen come by it?" he demanded.

She handed him the note without glancing at it again.

"Give me a piece of paper and a pencil," she said, very quietly.

He tore a leaf out of his pocket book, and handed it, with a pencil, to her.

She wrote a few lines, in sense as nearly like those of the note as possible, and gave the paper to him.

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D. MISELDINE.

Notice the Virol Smile!

VIROL

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"Compare them," she said, simply. Vane stared. The writing of the notes was quite dissimilar, palpably so.

"You see?" she said.

Vane looked from the notes to her and back again. He was not so quick, mentally, as Nora, and could not jump to a conclusion, a conviction, as she had already done.

"Then—then this"—he said, touching Senley Tyers' pretty fabrication—"this is false, and—and—"

"And a forgery," she finished.

Vane turned pale and looked straight before him. Forgery is an ugly word, especially when it is used to describe the act of a friend.

"But why—why should he do it?"

Nora's breath came fast.

"Why did he tell you that I did not love you?" she asked. "Why did he tell you that I had gone to London—if it was he who told you—because he wanted, directed me to go to Canada."

Vane started.

"Why has he come between us from the beginning? Why did he tell me that in playing the part of Ernest Mortimer I had brought shame and disgrace on myself and you?"

"He—Sen—told you this?" said Vane, hoarsely.

Nora laid her hand gently on his arm.

"Yes. I can not keep it from you, Vane; not now. Senley Tyers—your friend—has done all this. The question is: why? He did not want you to marry me; but whom did he want you to marry?"

At the question back came the remembrance of Lady Florence and the wedding.

Great heavens! his wedding. He started to his feet, white as death, an expression of horror and despair in his eyes.

Nora uttered a faint cry of alarm.

"What is it, Vane? Oh, what is it?"

"Florence!" he breathed, hoarsely, scarcely knowing that he was audible.

"Florence?" she repeated. "Lady Florence? Oh, it was she, perhaps, whom he wanted you to marry"—she laughed, but faintly—"but it does not matter—not now. Don't look so—so horrified. Don't be angry, Vane. He has not separated us, after all. You are not married to Lady Florence, are you? And she laughed and laid her cheek against his sleeve.

Vane shook like a leaf. Not even yet did he see clearly; but this at least was plain: that Senley Tyers—Senley Tyers, his friend!—had plotted to separate him from Nora, and schemed to marry him to Lady Florence.

Heaven! it was incredible! It was too monstrous to be possible. And yet, the forged note, the lies he had told respecting Nora's feelings toward him, Vane.

All lies, lies! His brain whirled, his heart burned with the agony of a fierce rage, and Nora's last words drove him mad. All unconscious that he was speaking aloud, he groaned out:

"And we are to be married to-morrow!"

Nora shrank back and looked up at him, as with white, distorted face he gazed into vacancy, then she rose and drew away.

"Going to be married to-morrow, Vane! To whom? Ah!"—she uttered a low cry and drew back still further—"to Lady Florence!"

"Hear me, Nora! Don't speak; don't shrink from me. It is true—it was true—but it shall not be. I will not marry her. It is you I love and will marry. Senley Tyers do this? Sen—" He clasped his brow, then

strook his clenched hand on the rock, tearing the skin from his knuckles and covering them with blood. "He must be a devil of treachery and falsehood. Oh! it can't be true! Speak to me, Nora. Have I gone mad? Why do you look at me as if you had ceased to care for me?"

She put up her hand as he made a step toward her.

"Don't—don't touch me!" she said, hoarsely. "You have no right! You are Lady Florence's, not—not mine. Go to her—go!"

Almost beside himself, Vane caught her arm.

"Nora, listen to me. You must, you shall—"

"I will not!" she said, passionately. "You tell me that you are going to marry her. Why should I listen to you? Let me go. You never loved me! How could you have loved me and—and loved her, too? Let her go!"

She wrenched her arm from his grasp and sprang from him. Vane sunk on to the rock and covered his face with hands. Rage, disappointed love, tore at him in different directions, and left him well-nigh distracted.

He rose and appealed to her with outstretched hands.

"Listen to me, Nora. I implore you—I demand! I thought you had left me, that you did not, could not love me. I was ill, wretched, half-stupefied, and—"

"And you went to Lady Florence to comfort you," she said, with white lips. "Listen, now, to me!" Broken and husky with emotion as her voice was, there was a note of womanly dignity and suffering in it that awed him into silence. "We are parted forever!"

"No!" he breathed, with an oath.

"Forever! I can see it all. I can see how you have been drawn, driven to her. I do not blame you—Hush! Let me speak; it is for the last time. It is not you I blame, but Senley Tyers. He is a traitor—a devil! He has done it. But it is done. I would not take you from her if I could. You must go to her, marry her. You must forget me"—her voice broke—"as I shall forget you. It is too late now to alter things, even if I wished them altered; but I do not. She is better fitted to be your wife—"

He broke in passionately:

"I have heard you; I will hear no more! I will go to her—yes—but not to marry her! I will tell her the whole story—the truth—and she will release me. It is not her fault, but his—his! I will deal with him. I will—" He choked and put his hand to his throat. "Wait. I will go to her and tell her how I loved you; how you were lost—the whole truth—and that I have found you again. You hear, Nora? Give you up—now, that I know you love me!" He laughed in wild mockery. "But there is no need. Florence is too proud to marry a man who is in love with another woman. I will tell her all."

Nora looked at him—a strange look.

"Why will you abide by her decision?" she asked.

He leaped at the suggestion—at the concession.

"Yes!" he cried. "You will see! She will understand, release, and forgive me. As for him—"

"His face worked and his hands clinched.

Nora stood a moment with downcast head, then she said:

"Will you go now?"

"Yes," he said, "at once. I will not lose a moment. Nora, I will come to you—Ah!" broke from him, as a doubt or fear stole over him suddenly. "You will not run away from me again—you will not do that, Nora?"

"No," she said, gravely. "Why should I? I have your word. Our fate hangs upon Lady Florence's decision. You have promised to abide by it, and—and so also will I. Go, now—ah, go!"

He took her hand. He would have taken her in his arms, but she drew back firmly, shaking her head, and he had to be content with kissing her hand again and again. He sprang up the path, and at the top turned and waved his hand to her.

"Remember your promise!"

She raised her head and looked at him with a repetition of the strange expression in her eyes, then turned away and looked out to sea.

(To be Continued.)

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