

For Love of a Woman;

New Romeo and Juliet.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE HOUR OF NEED.

"You have answered," he said, in a low voice, and the officer, after a moment's hesitation, nodded ruefully and went out.

Lord Cecil paced up and down the room with the discharge in his hand. The excitement of the last twenty-four hours, the suspense respecting Doris, the arrest, and now this sudden release, added to his physical exhaustion, told upon him fearfully.

That he owed his escape from the disgrace of imprisonment to Lady Grace he could not doubt. Doris, on whose truth he would have staked his life, had lifted him; his uncle, the marquis, had, in his hour of trouble, disdainfully deserted him and cast him aside, and this woman, whom he had regarded as a perfect type of worldliness, had come to his aid and freed him.

She had done more than that, for she had risked her reputation in her desire to show him her sympathy with him. She had done that which only one woman in a thousand would have dared to do: come to his room alone and unprotected.

A man is never so tender as regards his heart as in the moment when he has been betrayed by one woman and succored by another; and Lord Cecil's heart throbbed with a painful sense of admiration and gratitude towards this woman of the world, the girl whom he had always regarded as just a society beauty, who had, at such a fearful risk to her own name, come to his side in his dark hour.

"May Heaven forget me if ever I forget it!" he said to himself, not once or twice only. "What shall I say to her? What am I to do to show her how I feel about it? And where shall I get the money to repay her? I can't let her be the loser; I must pay her; but how—how?"

Meanwhile, Lady Grace had reached her house in Grosvenor Square, and, going to the drawing-room, found Mr. Spencer Churchill seated in an easy-chair, reading the last annual report of the Sweeps' Orphan Home.

"Well!" he said, looking up with a bland smile.

She sank into a chair, and began pulling off her gloves, her eyes downcast, her face pale and thoughtful.

"It is done," she said.

"Ah!" he said, with a nod of satisfaction. "You have seen him, then?"

"Yes, I have seen him," she said, in a low voice. "I was only just in time."

He smiled, with an air of complacency.

"Oh, I think I timed it carefully," he said. "I knew he would be at the office the moment they opened it; I calculated that he would be arrested shortly after, and that he would go to his rooms and telegraph to the marquis, allowing a little over an hour—say two—for the answer, a refusal, as the dear marquis and I arranged; and there you are, you see!" and he laughed, softly.

"Yes," she said; "you arranged it very well."

"Yes—! And the news at the office. Is he satisfied?"

"Yes, he is satisfied. He saw her name. It did not occur to him to ascertain if she had really sailed; if it had—"

She paused, significantly.

The philanthropist laughed with unctuous enjoyment.

"But he didn't, you see, my dear young lady. That is just the little risk. Why should he suspect that anyone should go to the trouble and expense of booking a passage for Miss Marlowe? And you found him in bonds—just starting for prison?" And he rubbed his hands together with renewed enjoyment. "Poor Cecil! Really, it is very sad that one should be compelled to take such strong measures. And yet, after all, will not the lesson be a salutary one? Pride must have a fall, dear lady; pride must have a fall! And our dear Cecil!—his small eyes glistened maliciously for a moment—'was very, very proud! And you paid the money?'"

She looked up with a little start.

"Yes, I paid the money. In fact, I

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have carried out your instructions to the letter."

"Yes, yes; you are a courageous girl, dear lady. It is not everyone so well known as you who so far brave the consequences as to go to a gentleman's rooms—"

She looked at him, with a flash in her eyes and with a tight compression of the lips, but he pretended not to notice the warning signs.

"Our dear Cecil ought to be very grateful to you—very! And, if I know his generous nature—and I fancy I do—I think he must be. Oh, yes, he will never forget it—never! Why, bless me, if it were known—if, for instance, any acquaintance had seen you going or departing—what would not be said?"

And he held up his fat hands.

She sprang to her feet and stood with her hand pressed against the chair, her bosom heaving, her magnificent eyes fixed upon him with supposed fury.

"A word, a hint, just a whisper, is enough nowadays for the scandal-loving world; and I can just fancy how delighted the society papers would be with such a dainty morsel as the incident of a visit to Lord C—N—e from Lady G—e P—n. They never print in full; oh, no; but everybody understands—"

"Take care!" she breathed. "Do not

drive me too far!"

"Oh, yes, yes; we must take care!" he assented, feigning to misunderstand her. "We must not breathe a word of it, of course; must flatly contradict it, if we hear a hint dropped. But there, dear Cecil would rather die than admit it!"

"Yes," she said, between her teeth; "yes, you speak the truth there: he would rather die than harm should come to me—to anyone—for his sake!"

"Y—e-s, he is so high-minded, isn't he? And how does the dear fellow bear this blow? It isn't pleasant to be jilted, is it? Is he resigned? I am curious now to hear how he takes it!"

"Go to him and ask him!" she said, with fine scorn. "Take care, Spencer Churchill! Up to the present your schemes have succeeded. You know best how far they will carry on. To me it seems that you—and I are walking on a volcano. What if he should find this—this girl?"

"Miss Marlowe, do you mean?" he said. "My dear lady, you forget; she is in Australia!" he said.

"Is she in London?" she asked, in a lower voice, and looking away from him. "If so, and he finds her—"

She stopped, significantly.

He smiled blandly.

"Let me beg of you not to be uneasy, dear lady," he said, seriously. "The young lady in question left England nearly a week ago, and there is no chance of our friend Cecil meeting her until it is too late."

"Too late?" she echoed, raising her eyes to his face.

"Yes," he smiled. "Until he is married."

She let her hand fall from the mantel-shelf, and a warm crimson flooded her face, and he chuckled unctuously.

"I am quite sure it is time dear Cecil 'rang himself,' as the French say; it really is time he was married and settled down. Don't you agree with me? Ah! I see it is too delicate a subject. Well, good-morning, dear lady. Accept my profound homage and admiration for your courage and generosity in our dear young friend's behalf," and with another chuckle he smiled himself out of the room.

CHAPTER XXV.

AS IN A DREAM.

"There is no place like Florence," said Lady Despard, in her soft, languorous voice. "One gets tired of London and Paris, and as for Venice, I always fancy, when I'm there, that I'm living somewhere in Regent's Park, near the canal, you know; and, as for the country in England, you either got

burnt up by the heat or drowned by the rain. But Florence"—she paused, and sighed contentedly—"Oh, it's always delicious!"

She was lying in a hammock, between two laburnums, on the lawn in front of the Villa Rimini, and she addressed Doris, who sat on the ground, with an open book in her lap, but with her eyes fixed dreamily on the exquisite view, which stretched out in an endless vista of grassy plains and violet-tinted hills, over which the full moon was shedding its silvery light.

The soft, evening breeze came to the two women, laden with flowers, as with an offering; there were flowers everywhere; in the long beds, starting the velvety lawns; on the banks, which ran along the limits of the garden; in huge jardinières, on the terraces and balconies; on the plains, which lay like embroidered cloths beneath them, and over the hills, to which they lent colour and perfume.

It was a land of fairies, a land of beauty, in which every breath of wind that blew carried with it the memory of music, song and laughter and joyfulness. In a word, it was Florence in the height of her loveliness, crowned as a bride for her bridegroom the summer, and rejoicing in her splendour.

The Villa Rimini, with its numerous windows twinkling with the recently lit candles, was one of the most beautiful of the many palatial residences in the "City of Flowers." It had been a home of one of the ancient princes, and when Lady Despard had first seen, fancied, and bought it, was nearly in ruins; but, with the immense wealth at her command, she had restored it, if not to quite its ancient splendour, at least to a semblance which came very near the original reality.

Marble corridors, vast saloons, with rare hangings and costly frescoes, statues which the Louvre would gladly have bidden for; antique fountains and priceless mosaics were all here, as in the days when the princely owners were, indeed, a name and a power in the land.

And here she and Doris had been living a dreamy existence, a period of lotus-eating for nearly a month.

There was the usual colony of English in Florence, of which the Villa Rimini was, by right of its splendour and the rank and wealth of Lady Despard, the centre.

Her hospitality was limitless, and the Salon of the Princes, as the vast reception-room was, almost resembled a royal levee; while the widely extending grounds were open to those fortunate individuals who had procured an introduction to the wealthy owner.

To the Villa Rimini came also the Florentine nobility; tall, grave-looking Italians, with their high-bred voices and polished manners, men whom Doris always pictured as wearing the silken hose and brocaded tunics of their forefathers in the old Florentine days, when men wore shoes almost as pointed as the swords which were always ready to leap from their scabbards with—or without—the slightest provocation.

Amidst these surroundings, Lady Despard held what might, with little exaggeration, be termed a court; but it might be said, to her credit, the admiration, the adoration she received did not turn her head, probably because she recognised the obvious fact that she shared her throne with the quiet-looking, soft-voiced girl who had come to her as a companion, and whom she had grown to regard and love as a friend.

Once, when the reception was over and the two women were alone, as they were this evening, she looked at Doris, laughingly, and said:

"Well, dear, tired of all the adulation and worship, or are you looking forward to to-morrow's repettion? Seriously, my dear, I am beginning to be a little jealous; more than half the pretty speeches this afternoon were addressed to Miss Marlowe, and your bouquets were quite as numerous as mine. Beware of vanity, Doris!"

And Doris had looked up at her with the quiet smile, beneath which always lay an undercurrent of sadness, and shook her head, as she replied:

"The danger is all on your side, Lady Despard. You are the sun, I am merely the shadow. Some day someone will pluck the sun from its place, and the shadow will be desolate!"

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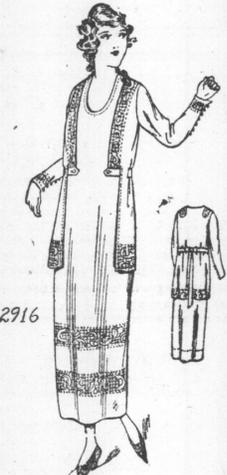


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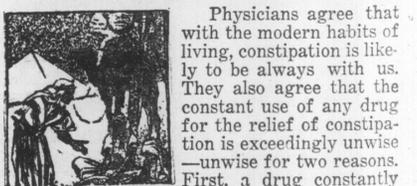
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