

## Lucy Graham's Secret

Continued.

"I scarcely think there is a greater sin, Lucy," he said, solemnly, "than that of a woman who marries a man she does not love. You are so precious to me, my beloved, that deeply as my heart is set on this, and bitter as the mere thought of disappointment is to me, I would not have you commit such a sin for any happiness of mine. If my happiness could be achieved by such an act, which it could not—which it never could," he repeated, earnestly—"nothing but misery can result from a marriage dictated by any motive but truth and love."

Lucy Graham was not looking at Sir Michael, but straight out into the misty twilight and dim landscape

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far away beyond the little garden. The baronet tried to see her face, but her profile was turned to him, and he could not discover the expression of her eyes. If he could have done so, he would have seen a yearning gaze which seemed as if it would have pierced the far obscurity and looked away—away into another world.

"Lucy, you heard me?" "Yes," she said, gravely; not coldly, or in any way as if she were offended at his words.

"And your answer?"

She did not remove her gaze from the darkening country side, but for some moments was quite silent; then turning to him, with a sudden passion in her manner, that lighted up her face with a new and wonderful beauty which the baronet perceived even in the growing twilight, she fell on her knees at his feet.

"No, Lucy; no, no!" he cried, vehemently, "not here, not here!"

"Yes, here, here," she said, the strange passion which agitated her making her voice sound shrill and piercing—not loud, but preternaturally distinct; "here and nowhere else. How good you are—how noble and how generous! Love you. Why there are women a hundred times my superiors in beauty and in goodness who might love you dearly; but you ask too much of me! Remember what my life has been; only remember that! From my very babyhood I have never seen anything but poverty. My father was a gentleman: clever, accomplished, handsome—but poor—and what a pitiful wretch poverty made of him! My mother—But do not let me speak of her. Poverty—poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations. You cannot tell; you, who are among those for whom life is so smooth and easy, you can never guess what is endured by such as

we. Do not ask too much of me, then. I cannot be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot, I cannot!"

Beyond her agitation and her passionate vehemence, there is an undefined something in her manner which fills the baronet with vague alarm. She is still on the ground at his feet, crouching rather than kneeling, her thin white dress clinging about her, her pale hair streaming over her shoulders, her great blue eyes glittering in the dusk, and her hands clutching at the black ribbon about her throat, as if it had been strangling her.

"Don't ask too much of me," she kept repeating; "I have been selfish from my babyhood."

"Lucy—Lucy, speak plainly. Do you dislike me?"

"Dislike you? No—no!"

"But is there any one else whom you love?"

She laughed aloud at his question. "I do not love any one in the world," she answered.

He was glad of her reply; and yet that and the strange laugh jarred upon his feelings. He was silent for some moments, and then said, with a kind of effort:

"Well, Lucy, I will not ask too much of you. I dare say I am a romantic old fool; but if you do not dislike me, and if you do not love any one else, I see no reason why we should not make a very happy couple. Is it a bargain, Lucy?"

"Yes."

The baronet lifted her in his arms and kissed her once upon the forehead, then quietly bidding her good-night, he walked straight out of the house.

He walked straight out of the house, this foolish old man, because there was some strong emotion at work in his breast—neither joy nor triumph, but something almost akin to disappointment—some stifled and unsatisfied longing which lay heavy and dull at his heart, as if he had carried a corpse in his bosom. He carried the corpse of that hope which had died at the sound of Lucy's words. All the doubts and fears and timid aspirations were ended now. He must be contented, like other men of his age, to be married for his fortune and his position.

Lucy Graham went slowly up the stairs to her little room at the top of the house. She placed her dim candle on the chest of drawers, and seated herself on the edge of the white bed, still and white as the draperies hanging around her.

"No more dependance, no more drudgery, no more humiliation," she said; "every trace of the old life melted away—every clew of indentured and forgotten—except these, except these."

She had never taken her left hand from the black ribbon at her throat. She drew it from her bosom as she spoke, and looking at the object attached to it.

It was neither a locket, a miniature or a cross; it was a ring wrapped in an oblong piece of paper—the paper partly written, partly printed, yellow with age and crumpled with much folding.

### CHAPTER II.

He threw the end of his cigar into the water, and leaning his elbows upon the bulwarks, stared meditatively at the waves.

"How wearisome they are," he said "blue and green and opal; opal, and blue and green; all very well in their way, of course, but three months of them are rather too much, especially—"

He did not attempt to finish his sentence; his thoughts seemed to wander in the very midst of it, and carry him a thousand miles or so away.

"Poor little girl, how pained she'll be!" he muttered, opening his cigarette, lazily surveying its contents; "how pleased and how surprised? Poor little girl. After three years and a half too; she will be surprised."

He was a young man of about five-

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