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CHAPTER XXV.
 She rose and got a bottle—Bobby opened it—and she filled the glasses of the players—Then she leaned over Trevor's cards, just dealt, and touched them with the slim taper finger of her left hand; with her right she smoothed the soft dark hair from her forehead.
 Trevor looked up at her and caught her hand, held it for a moment, then pressed it to his lips. Bobby saw the action, but Morgan Thorpe did not, or appeared not to see it.
 She pouted, withdrew her hand slowly, and went back to her place.
 A moment later Trevor flung down his cards.
 "Lost!" he said. "Was it double or quits?"
 "It was," replied Morgan Thorpe. "Lucky I played that king, Trevor!"
 "Yes," snarled Trevor. "It was almost as if you knew I held the queen."
 Thorpe laughed.
 "Wasn't it? A mere fluke on my part; a rare piece of luck."
 Trevor pushed some bank-notes across the table, drank a draught of champagne, and rose suddenly, very nearly upsetting the table.
 "I'm done for to-night," he said, roughly.
 He went toward the fire and stood glowering at it, his hands thrust in his pockets.
 "And so you don't play, eh, Deane?" he said, looking down at Bobby with a sneer.
 "No," said Bobby; "I've chucked it. As I said, I can't afford it!"
 "By Heaven, it would have been well for me if I'd come to that years ago," said Trevor, with a harsh laugh.
 Bobby rose.
 "I must be going," he said. "Are you coming, Trevor?"
 "No," replied Trevor, curtly.
 Bobby said "Good-night."
 "You will come again soon?" Laura murmured, as she pressed his hand—and left.
 Trevor stood staring at the fire for a few minutes, then he looked over his shoulder at Morgan Thorpe, who was lighting a cigarette.
 "Thorpe, I want to speak to your sister," he said.
 Morgan Thorpe looked over his cigarette and raised his brows.
 "Certainly, my dear Trevor!" he said, pleasantly. "I efface myself instantly!"
 When the door had closed upon him, Trevor looked down at the woman sitting over the fire. His eyes were blood-

shot, they and his red hair accentuating the pallor of his face.
 "Laura, I want to speak to you," he said. "I'm sick of this."
 She looked up at him with a faint smile.
 "It's about played out as far as I am concerned," he went on in a strained voice. "I can't stand it any longer—and don't it, what's more, I won't!"
 "Why use such language; what is the matter?" she murmured.
 "Never mind my language," he retorted. "It expresses my feelings. Laura, you know I love you, you know that I love you—Bah! what's the use of saying it? You know it all. Will you be my wife? I want your answer. I'm sick of playing this game, sick of seeing you flirting with that—that d-d boy. If you care for me enough to be my wife, say so. I can't and I won't wait any longer!"
 His eyes shone redly, his lips were set and dry, and his voice rasped huskily. For a moment the woman was daunted. She had played this man as an angler plays a trout; now tightening, now loosening the line. And now that he had come to the surface, lo! it was not a trout, but a shark, a dragon with gleaming teeth, a thing almost to be feared! She turned rather pale under her powder, but she smiled tenderly, as she murmured:
 "You know I care for you—Ralph!"
 "Do I?" he said. "But do I? I'm not so sure that I do. Sometimes I have half an idea that you—you have been fooling me, that—" The words were broken by his clinched teeth; his face grew red. Then, suddenly, his mood changed, and he flung himself on his knees besides her and gripped her hands. "Laura, for God's sake, tell me the truth! If you love me, be my wife at once—at once! I can not, I will not wait any longer. I am half mad with love of you; I am drifting to the devil while you—you keep me shilly-shallying. You know that, you know that I am on the road to ruin; marry me and save me—if you love me. If you do not, then—I will go. Oh, Laura, have pity on me!"
 His upturned face was distorted by his passion, and suddenly his head fell until his face was hidden in her lap, his hands gripping her dress.
 There was something terrible in his self-abandonment, terrible and pitiable, and most women would have been both terrified and pitying. But this woman had no heart, and was incapable of pity. The touch of fear which had assailed her passed away as he surrendered himself to his passion, and loathing and contempt took its place.
 She looked down with a moue of contempt at the bowed red head, at the clinched hands, upon which the veins stood out in thick cords; but her voice was exquisitely tender and loving as she whispered:
 "You know I love you, Ralph, and—and I will marry you if you wish it; if you think it wise to trust your life to mine so full of the sorrows of the past."
 He raised his head, his face transfigured by relief, joy; and keeping his arm around her, he drew her down to him.
 "Laura, my own!" he cried, hoarsely.
 She suffered the embrace for a moment; she even put her lips to his hot forehead, then she slipped from his arms and rose.
 "Go now, Ralph!" she said, caressing his hand. "You—you almost frighten me!"
 "Forgive me, dearest, forgive me! If you knew how I love you!"
 "Perhaps I do." She smiled sweetly at him, and let her head rest on his

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breast for a moment. "But, Ralph, we—we must not be rash. You will wait." His face darkened instantly.
 "Wait! Why should we?" he began.
 "Foolish boy, I do not mean for long; for—for a month."
 "A fortnight," he said, eagerly.
 "Three weeks, then!"
 She made a gesture of assent.
 "Go now, dearest!"
 She had to endure his parting embrace, with a tender, smiling affection of returning it; but what it cost her was expressed by the cry of disgust which broke from her lips almost before he was out of hearing.
 Morgan Thorpe, coming in, found her crouching over the fire, and wiping her lips, her arms, which his lips had touched, with her handkerchief, as if to free them from some stain.
 "Bah!" she exclaimed, with a gesture of loathing. "Why did you not come in sooner and save me from that—that savage?"
 "What is the matter?" he asked.
 "Has Trevor—?"
 "Yes," she said, between her teeth. "He has been making love, has asked me to be his wife." She gave a low laugh of derision. "And insisted upon an answer."
 "And what did you say?" he asked.
 She laughed again.
 "Yes."
 He started.
 "Great Heaven! Couldn't you have—?"
 "No, I couldn't!" she broke in, with something like a snarl. She did not look very beautiful at that moment. "I couldn't put him off. I was—yes—afraid. He behaved like a madman. Look at his hair! I hate all men; you are all brutes!"
 Morgan Thorpe watched her with a cunning intentness.
 "This is indeed serious," he said again. "Look here, Laura, this chap isn't like most of the others; he's a nasty one to tackle. We shall have to make a bolt for it."
 She shrugged her white shoulders indifferently.
 "Yes, we must fold up our tents like the Arabs, and silently steal away," he said. "It's lucky he didn't break out before."
 "Yes; I suppose you've plucked him pretty well by this time?" she said, callously.
 Morgan Thorpe nodded quite as callously.
 "Pretty near," he assented. "And, come to think of it, it's as well that we should make a move. The other boy has grown shy, and there's no more to be made out of him."
 She yawned with profound indifference.
 "He's not so bad as the other," she said. "He's only a fool. Trevor is a brute and a savage as well."
 "All the more reason for giving him the slip," said Morgan Thorpe. "We could clear out in a few days. By a stroke of luck, I have not paid the last quarter's rent." He poured out some wine and took it to her, and she drank it at a draught, and he followed her example. "I'm not so sure that the other boy, Deane, is quite exhausted," he said, musingly. "He took up his I. O. U.'s to-night, and he is good for another hundred or two. Look here, Laura, here's an idea." He came over to the fire and leaned against the mantel-piece, looking down at her. "He won't play any more, I'm certain of that. But couldn't we run a grand coup? How would it be if you were to work him for a bigish sum, say, a couple of hundred pounds?"
 She yawned.
 "How?"
 "It's easy enough. You can do anything with him."
 "I'm not so sure," she said, reflectively. "He's not such a fool as you think him, and I fancy he is getting a trifle suspicious. I saw him looking at me curiously when I was making the sign behind Trevor to-night."
 "Oh! Then it's time we wound up these operations. But look here; I'll show you the way to draw that couple of hundreds, my dear girl. You go to his rooms one night. Woman in great distress, tearful 'make-up,' with dark rings round the eyes. You've come to him—flicking compromising yourself and all that—because you are in great trouble. Threatened with ruin unless you can obtain a couple of hundred pounds. Have come to him because he is the closest, truest friend you have. See? He can save you by just putting his hand to a little bill. You may not want to use it, will in all probability return it to him in the morning, but in any case it will have you from ruin and despair. See?"
 (To be continued)

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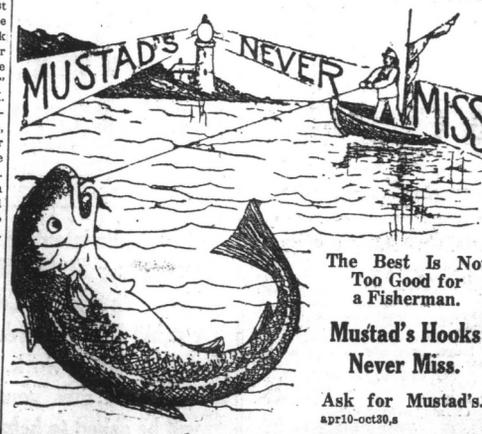
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