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The Die is Cast For Better or For Worse.

CHAPTER X.
Engaged.

He gazed at her, half-distraught with passion, with amazement. The blood flooded his face, his eyes were flashing, his lips tremulous.

"Why!" he cried. "Because I am what I am! Do you mean to say—Heaven and earth, I can't believe it! Do you mean to say that if I were not what I am, you would—you would listen to me, give me some hope?"

Kittie forgot all about Eva Lyndhurst. She was herself, Kittie Norton, and the man before her was making love, appealing to her, herself.

She shrank from him a little, for at that moment, as her eyes were fixed on his, as if he would read in them the confirmation of his wild hope, she thought he would recognize her; for the space in which one draws he faltered, and her heart seemed to contract; she turned away again, gasping for breath. But he did not recoil from her, uttered no exclamation, showed no sign of discovering the fraud she was perpetrating, as he rose and gazed down at her.

"You mean—what is it you mean?" he asked hoarsely, as if he dared not accept the wild hope her single word had given him. "For Heaven's sake don't play with me—but you wouldn't do that, you are too good, too gentle, too true!"

He sank on his knee beside her and his hand sought hers, found it, and held it tightly, his voice trembled and came painfully.

"Eva, do you know that your question puts hope into me, that—that I am daring to think you might—care for me? Do you, do you? I—I don't want to take advantage of your pity, to trade on it. No, no; I love you too much, too dearly for that! Do you understand, realize the meaning of what I've told you?"

She had forgotten Eva again; it was as if his passionate words had power to drive her doubt from her mind; while he was speaking, it seemed to her that it was to herself he was pleading.

"Yes," she whispered.

"That—that is, if you could try yourself to care for me you would be giving yourself to a man who is—what I have told you I am? Nameless, of no account, not worthy to breathe the same air. Do you really understand this?"

"Yes," she said again.

His other hand went toward her, but he checked himself. He had played the cur and the scoundrel once, he would not be tempted to do so again; she should have time to think

and watch for. For it will mean you, you! And—and, Eva"—he paused and his voice grew grave with the import of what he was going to propose. to ask of her—"If I should succeed, if the luck—I'm the luckiest, the most fortunate man in the world to-night!—If the luck stands by me, and I should be able to send for you, would you—would you come? Think, dearest, don't answer without realizing."

She lifted her face and looked up at him, forgetting all fear of discovery now.

"Yes," she breathed. "I—would—come!"

He kissed her with a passion of love and gratitude.

"Leave everything—your father, rank, position, Eva!"

"Yes," she whispered. "I—I should have to come. I could not stay away from you, if you sent for me!"

His lips quivered. "Never to come back?" he said. There should be no deceit, no concealment of the gravity of the case, of the sacrifice she would make, if she gave up all and came to him.

"It would be forever, for I shall not be able to come back to England. My life must be spent out there, somewhere where no one knows me, no one knows my story!"

She made a gesture of assent, not a weak or timid one, but one as complete as any words could be. He pressed her to him and kissed her again.

"I know now that you love me, Eva," he said, brokenly. "To give up all for me—so—so unworthy! Oh, would to God that I were a better man, more worthy of your sacrifice. Dearest, I may write to you? Ah, no, how can I? The letter might be seen. How can I let you know? How—"

He looked from side to side with a frown. At the question, Kittie came back to her own personality. She grew white to the lips, for she was now face to face with facts, with tangible things. But she was acute; the quick brain came to her aid in a moment. There was a little post office, the usual stationer's news-vendor's shop, in a street near her own. In faltering accents she gave him the address, and he repeated it twice and slowly, to impress it on his mind.

"Dearest! How clever you are! Yes, yes! I see! And Eva—"

He paused a moment. "I can't bear to think that I'm leaving you, that I shan't know what is happening to you. You'll write to me?"

"No, no!" she said, with a little gasp.

He looked at her with a faint questioning, but accepted her refusal.

"You know best, dear love!" he said. "You shall not write unless you want me, unless you are in trouble—though I cannot see what trouble can come to you! But"—he paused and looked down at her—"if you should want me, or"—he paused again; the contingency was so remote, so unlikely that it seemed scarcely worth providing against; and yet he would do so. "If—you could come out to me—no one knows what may happen in this world—why, hasn't the most wonderful thing happened? You love me! You are here in my arms!—If you can come to me, you will do so? Will wait for nothing; let no—no scruples, shyness, keep you back?"

"No," she whispered. "I will come."

They sat, hand in hand, for some minutes; but the moment of parting was creeping down upon them, and they felt its chill approach. She slowly disengaged herself from him; and he understood that the moment had come.

"I'm going," he said huskily. "When—when shall I see you again? When I've gone, I shall think I've been dreaming, just dreaming. Give me something belonging to you, something you have worn!"

She shared his craving and her heart went out to satisfy him. In the boom of her dress was a small cluster of roses, so exquisitely counterfeited that they looked like living flowers; she had taken it from Eva Lyndhurst's pink dress. She took the cluster out, put it to her lips, then offered it to him. He took it and kissed it passionately and put it away against his heart. Then he took a ring from his finger, and slipped it on one of hers.

"Remember those roses!" he said, almost inaudibly. "And now it's good-by, Eva! It's good-by!"

He took her small white face in his

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hands and gazed down at it as if he were impressing it on his mind, his very soul. Their lips met and clung together; then at last with a groan, his grasp of her relaxed and he turned away. But he came back, to renew the bitterness of the parting; but at last he left her, and Kittie, shaking in every limb, no longer a girl but a woman, storm-tossed on the tempest of love, racked by the sorrow of parting, hid her face in her hands to shut out the sight of his slowly retreating form.

She fought hard for composure as she slowly went back to the cottage; she feared that Mrs. Bickers, near-sighted as she was, might notice her agitation, the white face, the eyelids swollen with tears; but luck—or her evil genius—continued to stand by her; she found the old lady sleeping peacefully in her armchair beside the open window; and Kittie stood and looked at her and then round the room, with a sensation of being enclosed in a cage and stifling. Mrs. Bickers woke under her gaze and exclaimed with a start:

"Why, how late you are, my dear! I had nearly fallen into a doze. I'll get the lamp."

"No, no!" said Kittie. "I—I have had a long walk, and am rather tired. I will go to bed at once."

As she kissed the placid face, a pang of remorse smote Kittie and a dry little sob escaped her. Mrs. Bickers' arm was around her directly.

"What is it, dear?" she asked anxiously.

"Nothing, nothing," replied Kittie, forcing a laugh. "I am only tired. Good night."

She lay awake all that night, going over every incident of the scene, dwelling on his words, his looks, his caresses, with a face that was white one moment and burning with shame the next; now she told herself she was a wicked girl; then she would plea excuses for herself.

(To be Continued.)

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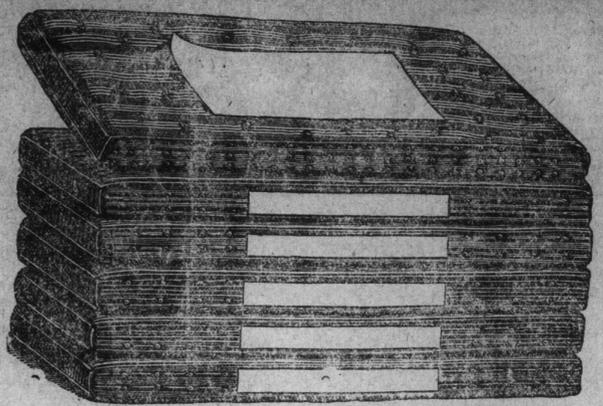
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