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EDWIN MURRAY.

That is What the People Say.

A Millionaire; or Countess Westerleigh

(To be continued.)
CHAPTER XXVI.

"Oh, yes! we'll have a good time of it, little one," he went on. "We'll go abroad for a bit, as I proposed to Sen. By the way, how did he manage to lift upon the truth—to learn our secret?"

She was silent, and he laughed carelessly.

"It doesn't matter. Come to think of it, it is wonderful that he didn't discover it at first; Sen is such a sharp, clever fellow. It's lucky that it was he and not some one else who found us out, isn't it? Because, you see, Sen can be trusted. He'll see, he'll just behave as if there never had been such a person as Ernest Mortimer."

She shivered slightly, and, of course, he noticed it.

"You are not afraid, Nora?" he asked, quickly. "You are not afraid that—that the truth will ever get out? How should it? When we come back to London, your hair"—he kissed it—"will have grown again, and you'll be dressed as a woman;—how well the Burns girl's dress suits you!—and no one will ever dream of connecting you with Ernest Mortimer."

He drew her to a chair—she was trembling still—and she sank down at his feet, and resting her arms on his knee, laid her face on them.

They remained thus almost in silence for a time. To Vane the realization of the truth—that he loved this girl as passionately as ever woman was loved by man—was coming some slowly but surely—more sure by—every moment. He looked forward to the morrow with impatient eagerness, to the future with delight.

Was there in all the world any girl so beautiful, so lovable, as this girl woman whom he had discovered—yes, he had discovered her!—in the western wilds? Was there any girl so pure, so innocent? Why, the very escapee which might have ruined her had been the result of her innocence and ignorance of even the existence of evil! Yes, he would make her happy. The rest of his life should be devoted to keeping her purity unstained, untroubled.

Of solemnity fell upon him—the sort of feeling one is conscious of in some great cathedral. Compare her with the women of the world—the women he knew! How soulless, how gnomish they seemed beside this pure minded, tender-hearted, unselfish child of the wild sea coast!

He bent and kissed her reverently.

"My dearest! my wife!" he murmured. The kiss, the embrace, seemed to rouse her.

A shiver ran through her, as if she were awaking from some blissful dream to the cruel reality of the world. She rose and stood with clasped hands looking at him, her lips parted as if she were trying to speak; but no words would come and he took her hands and held them.

"You are tired, Nora?" he said, understanding to some small extent how the scene must have tried her. "You would like to go upstairs and rest? You would rather not see"

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Sen again to-night? He made this suggestion with a sense of saying the right thing, and nodded with loving, considerate encouragement.

"Very well; you shall not. He and I will talk it all over and arrange for the—oh, the wedding!" He smiled. "Good-night, Nora! good-night, my wife!"

She let him hold her for a moment or two, then she slowly drew herself away and left him.

Outside, Senley Tyers leaned against the cottage and smoked his cigarette. They say that the devil looks after his own. If that be so, most certainly Senley Tyers' master had come to his assistance in a most efficient manner that evening. As he lounged there, listening to the murmur of Vane's voice, he was filled with amazement at his own luck. If he had arranged the denouement in all its details it could not have been more satisfactory, from his point of view. And now, if only the girl could be persuaded to act like the "dots most girls are—these were his thoughts, not mine—all would go swimmingly."

He heard the room door open and turning quickly, beckoned to Nora. She hesitated a moment, then moved out toward him. He put his hand on her arm, and glanced toward the window with a warning gesture. "I was right, you see," he said in a whisper. "He will marry you. And now, I suppose, you are satisfied?"

She raised her eyes and met his mocking, half-amused, half-contemptuous gaze steadily.

"Oh! I don't blame you," he went on as if she had spoken. "Ninety-nine girls out of a hundred would jump at the chance; it's only the hundredth that would be capable of sacrificing herself for the man she loved."

He looked at her keenly, as if to see that she understood.

"And perhaps even she, the hundredth, wouldn't understand that in sacrificing herself she was also escaping from untold misery."

He was silent for a moment or two, then continued in a reflect voice, as if he were communing with himself. "I've seen several of these marriages, and upon my soul, my dear Miss Trevanion, I haven't known which to pity most, the man who had persuaded himself that he loved the girl, but soon found out his mistake, or the girl who found herself married to a man who was tired and—ashamed of her."

Nora's breath came fast, and she pressed her hand to her bosom as if every word of the soft, cynical voice stabbed her.

"Because that is what always—always, my dear young lady,—happens. He is bound to get tired of her, bound to grow ashamed of her. How can it be otherwise? And then—he knocked the ash off his cigarette and looked up at the sky with pursed lips and raised eyebrows—then there's the devil to pay. I know a woman, the wife of one of these unequal marriages—she was a farmer's daughter, and the man was a gentleman of birth and good position—who poisoned herself. Yes, Miss Trevanion, she preferred death to the daily misery of living with a man who had grown to hate the sight of her and wished her dead."

"Nora still looked at him, but with eyes that did not see him.

"But don't let me discourage you, my dear Miss Nora," he said in the same soft whisper. "After all, you may be luckier—though, by Jove! I don't think you've much chance; you may marry my friend Vane and be happy ever afterward. Who can tell? At any rate, he has done the proper thing in sacrificing himself.

It's true he couldn't do anything else. I should have done it myself. I should, indeed, I assure you," with a half-mocking inclination toward her motionless figure. "I dare say he thinks that he is in love with you—I should think so, too—and it's something more than pity for you that—"

He had driven the steel home. She raised her hand and struck him across the lips. It was not a heavy blow—there was not much strength left in the sorely tried frame—but it dashed the cigarette from his lips and caused him to swear. He looked up at her, into her blazing eyes, and then raised his cap without a word. It was the involuntary homage of a bad man to a noble, pure-hearted woman tortured into resistance.

Also without a word she turned and entered the cottage. She went slowly up to her room, supporting herself by the hand-rail. The fire which had sprung up within her at Senley Tyers' mocking words died out almost as quickly as it had flared up. She fell on her knees beside the bed, exhausted, powerless. But only for a moment or two. The cruel words followed her, rang like demoniac laughter in her ears, goaded her. She rose, felt her way to the candle, lighted it, and bathed her face in cold water. With a shudder she took up the serge suit, but dropped it with a half-articulate moan of loathing. If her life depended upon it she could not wear the things again. She found a cloak and hat in the wardrobe, and putting them on, extinguished the candle, and slowly, noiselessly moved across the room and down the stairs, locking the door after her.

The outer door was still open, and Senley Tyers figure was still there. He either saw or heard her, however, for he drew back into the darkness, out of the light of the window, as if to assure her that she was safe from any interference from him.

She paused at the door of the living room and stretched out her arms with a gesture of farewell too terrible for words. It seemed as if she could not tear herself away. Her hand felt as if it were drawn to the handle, but she pressed it hard against her bosom, bent and kissed the panel of the door, and drawing the cloak over her face, as if to shut out even the mental vision of the dearly loved form within the room, hurried out into the darkness of the night.

Senley Tyers softly dabbing his lips with his silk handkerchief, watched her go with a smile of triumphant satisfaction. He raised his

cap and waved a kiss to the departing figure as it was swallowed up in the shadows.

"Good-bye, Miss Nora!" he murmured. "Upon my word I am half inclined to bring you back. You are superb, bewitching. Yes, I pity Vane. I pity him. Love you? Why, you fascinating little devil, I'm more than half in love with you myself!"

He carried the pocket-handkerchief to the light of the window to see if there was any blood on it—there was a spot or two—then with a shrug of his shoulders went inside.

Vane was smoking furiously, a smile of subdued happiness on his handsome face, a light "entirely new and original" in his eyes.

"Halloo, Sen!" he said; "come in. I beg your pardon, but I quite forgot you were out there. Forgive me. Come and sit down, old man."

He took his friend by the shoulders and gently forced him into the chair, and stood looking down at him with the happy, glowing eyes.

"Well, you don't want to ask any questions, I suppose?" he said. "You know all, as they say in the play; and I'm sure you'll congratulate me and wish us happiness, Sen."

Senley Tyers nodded with a grave smile.

"Of course you'll think I ought to tell you the whole story," Vane went on. "But I'll get you to excuse me, I think. Not that you wouldn't understand," he added, quickly. "You know her too well—to think ill of her. But come, Sen, don't you think I'm a deuced lucky fellow? Is there any girl half so beautiful in the world?"

He put the question with a burning ardor, and began to pace the room, emitting great clouds of smoke.

"But her beauty's only the small part of it," he continued. "It's herself—herself, Sen—the sweetest, dearest little woman that God ever made! And I was such a fool as not to—to know my own mind till tonight. And yet I did—in reality, I did. I've been in love with her ever since the night I saw her—"

He stopped. Not even to Senley Tyers could he speak of those days—days which his love had now made sacred.

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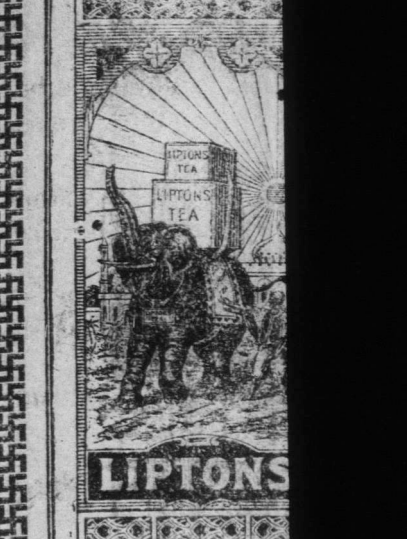
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