

For Love of a Woman; New Romeo and Juliet.

CHAPTER XXXII.
"I LOVE HIM STILL."

"Oh, yes, I understand," he said. "I understand more clearly than you guess, dearest. Try not to think too hard of me. Some day—before long, perhaps—you will know how deeply and truly I love you!" and he turned and left her.

Doris remained standing on the bridge, looking at the sleepy river, with a dull pain in her heart and her eyes half-blinded with the rush of emotion that seemed to overwhelm her.

In a fortnight! In two short weeks! Not until this moment had she fully realized what she had done in promising to be Percy Levant's wife; but now—she leaned her head upon her hands, and tried to crush down the rebellious thoughts that rose within her. Tried to wipe out, as it were, the remembrance of Cecil Neville, which haunted and tortured her.

"I love him still!" she moaned. "I love him still, and I am to be another man's wife in a fortnight! Oh, if I were only lying, at rest at the bottom of the river here! In a fortnight! Oh, what have I done, what have I done!" and she wrung her hands wildly.

Then suddenly, with an effort, she fought down the mad remorse and misery, and, in a dull despair, murmured:

"What does it matter? Why should I not marry him—or anyone else? What can Cecil Neville ever be to me, even if I were free? He will be the husband of Lady Grace; he has forgotten that such a person as Doris Marlowe ever existed; or, if he remembers me, recalls me as the girl who served to amuse him for a few days in the country. What a shame it is that I should give a thought to him who has been so base and mean, while this other, to whom I have pledged my word, is all that is good and true! Marry Percy Levant! Yes, I would marry him to-morrow if he asked me!" and, setting her teeth hard, she turned to leave the bridge.

As she did so, a tall, thin old man, with a white, wasted face, from which a pair of sharp gray eyes gleamed like cold steel, came on to the bridge, and she made way for him.

He was leaning on a stick, and, as he raised his hat in courtly acknowledgment, he let the stick slip from his thin, claw-like hands.

Doris stooped and picked it up, and, as she gave it to him and he was thanking her in Italian, his piercing eyes scanned her face with a cold earnestness.

Doris bowed and went on, but some impulse moved her to look back after she had gone a few yards, and she saw him leaning against the bridge, with his hands pressed to his heart, and his face deathly white.

She was at his side in an instant, and had drawn his wasted arm within her firm, strong one almost before he knew of it.

"I am afraid you are ill," she said. He started as her sweet, musical voice sounded in his ears, and raised his eyes to her face.

"No, no," he said, evidently with an effort. "But I have been ill, and I am a little weak, which," he added, with all the old courtesy, "is my good fortune, seeing that it has procured me the happiness of your assistance. You are English. I took you for an Italian. My eyes are not so strong"—he stopped, from sheer weakness, and leaned upon her arm heavily, if the word can be used in connection with the lightness of his frail form—"not so strong as they were. I have the misfortune to be old, you see," and he forced a smile.

"Let me help you to the seat there," said Doris, gently.

"Thank you, thank you; but I could not think of troubling a lady."

Disregarding his apologies, she led him carefully to the seat, into which he sank with a sigh of weary relief. Doris looked at him anxiously. It was a striking face, and a vague kind of idea crossed her mind that she had seen it somewhere before to-day, but she could not fix the time or place, and presently she found the keen, glittering eyes fixed in a meditative scrutiny upon herself.

"You have been very kind to me, my

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dear young lady," he said, in a voice that still trembled a little; "very kind. And you are English? Will you tell me your name? I am an old man, and claim an old man's privilege—inquisitiveness—you see."

"My name is Doris—Doris Marlowe," said Doris, seating herself beside him, and looking down the road, in the hope that a carriage might come up in which she could place him.

"Doris Marlowe? No," he shook his head; "I never heard it before; and yet I fancied your face awakened some dim memories. Do you know me, Miss Marlowe?"

Doris looked at him, and shook her head.

"No," she replied. She did not like to ask his name.

"Ah! perhaps that is as well," he said, with a faintly cynical smile; "I mean that I am not worth knowing. And are you living here, Miss Marlowe? Your mother must be a very happy woman, having so sweet a daughter," and he drooped his head towards her with the old, graceful salute.

A deep red stained Doris's pale face.

"My mother is dead," she said. He put up his white hand, with a pleading gesture.

"Forgive me, my dear! Your father—"

"I have no father," said Doris, almost inaudibly, and with a strange pang shooting through her heart.

"There was one who was father and mother to me, but—he is dead, too," and her voice quivered.

"You are young to have seen so much trouble," he said, pityingly. "But you are living here with some relative, is it not so?"

Doris shook her head.

"I have not a relative in the world," she replied. "I am living with Lady Despard. I am her companion."

"Lady Despard?" he put his white hand to his head. "Lady Despard?—I think I know her. And you are living with her? I envy her her companion, my dear. I will do myself the honour of calling upon her. Tell me your name again. I—I forget sometimes. I am very old, older than you think, because you see I am so strong still. You smile?" sharply.

"No, no, I did not smile, indeed!" said Doris, quickly. "But I do not think you are strong enough—you have told me that you have been ill, you know—to walk about alone."

He sighed, and shrugged his shoulders, with a mirrorth smile.

"Alone. I have only a valet, and I hate to have him with me. I had a wife once"—he stopped and looked darkly before him—"she left me—she died, I mean, of course—and I've no one else. I had a child—a little girl—but she died, too. You see, I am like you somewhat, though I have other relations who, doubtless, wish that I would die also, and be smothered, cynically.

Doris shrank a little, then, ashamed of the momentary repugnance, said, gently:

"That is not true, I am sure. And now, will you tell me where you live? I will come with you if you will let me. Or will you come with me to Lady Despard's, and have her carriage?"

He shook his head and straightened himself.

"I have the Villa Vittoria," he said. Doris knew it. It was the largest, and, after Lady Despard's, the handsomest in Pescia.

"Yes, I know it," she said. "It is too far for you to go alone. When you are rested—but there is no hurry, we will stay as long as you like—I will go with you."

"You are very kind, my dear," he said, looking at her with a gentleness which assuredly was an unfamiliar expression on that cold, haughty face.

"Very! I will rest a little longer, if I may."

He sat silent for a short time, and Doris heard him murmuring her name several times, and then he looked up and sighed.

"No, I don't remember, and yet—"

He passed his hand over his forehead with a wistful, puzzled look in his keen eyes. "I am ready now, my dear young lady," he said, presently. "You see, I accept your kind offer," as he placed his hand upon the arm Doris offered him. "Not so long ago fair ladies were wont to rest upon my arm; now the order is changed. One gets old suddenly!" he added, with a grim smile. "And I have been ill. I think I told you. Yes, very ill. They thought I was dead; but"—with a gesture of defiance—"my race die hard! And you have no father or mother? That is sad! Did I tell you I had a little girl once? She died! Yes, she died!" His head drooped for a moment. "If she had lived and stayed with me, I should have had her arm to lean upon. By Heaven! I never thought of that before!" he exclaimed, in a suppressed voice, and his head sank lower.

They crossed the bridge in silence, and reached the Via Grandis, where Doris saw a man, whom she took for a servant, hurriedly cross the road and approach them.

"I am afraid you are ill, my lord," he said, touching his hat. "I missed you on leaving the chemist's—"

The old gentleman drew his hand slowly from Doris's arm, and took the servant's.

"This is my man, Miss Marlowe," he said, "and I shall not need to tax your kindness and patience any longer. How deeply grateful I am for that kindness and patience I cannot tell you. But for you—" He stopped expressively. "Will you tell Lady Despard that I shall have the honour of calling upon her to-morrow, to congratulate her upon having so sweet and beautiful a friend?"

"Yes," replied Doris, allowing her soft, warm hand to remain in his, which seemed to cling to it confidently. "But you have not told me your name yet?" she added, with a smile.

"Have I not?" he said. "I am the Marquis of Stoyile, my dear."

Doris recoiled, and drew her hand away so suddenly that his thin, feeble one fell abruptly to his side.

"The Marquis of Stoyile!" she echoed, every vestige of colour leaving her face. "Yes, I will tell her, my lord," and she turned and walked quickly away.

The marquis looked after her with knitted brows—looked so long that the valet gently pressed his arm as a reminder.

"Yes, yes, I am coming!" exclaimed the old man, impatiently. Then he said, "Do I know that young lady? You saw her—do I know her? She has been very kind to me—very."

"No, my lord, she is a stranger to me," replied the man.

"A stranger. Yes, yes. And yet—" And, with knitted brows and a troubled look in his eyes, he permitted his man to lead him away.

CHAPTER XXXIII.
OUT OF THE PAST.

"So the illustrious visitor turns out to be the great Marquis of Stoyile!" exclaimed Lady Despard, with a laugh of surprise. "The Marquis of Stoyile! And you have been leading him about like a blind beggar? How I wish I had been there to see you! But it seems to have upset you, dear," she added; "you look really pale now, and—Why, you haven't been crying?" and she drew Doris beside her on the lounge.

"No, I haven't been crying," said Doris quietly; then, after a pause she said, gravely, "I have promised to marry Percy Levant in a fortnight's time, Lady Despard."

"Her ladyship started.

"In a—what time did you say? A fortnight! Oh, nonsense! No wonder you look pale! I think it is a shame you should try to impose upon my credulity, Doris; for, of course it is only a joke!"

"It is sober earnest, dear Lady Despard," said Doris; and then she told her of the letter of Spenser Churchhill containing the offer of an engagement for Percy Levant.

(To be Continued.)

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