

Millionairess;

Countess Westerleigh.

CHAPTER XII.
(Continued.)

Old Reuben Vale regarded Vane suspiciously. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, sternly. Vane met his gaze steadily. "I came here because I heard foot-

steps," he said. "What had that to do with you?" was the grim response.

"Well," said Vane, "I heard some one sighing, as if he were in pain, and I came to see what the matter."

The old man watched him keenly; but there was no sign of flinching, no indication of duplicity, in Vane's frank eyes.

"Were you spying on me?" he demanded, with subdued wrath.

Vane colored, and an indignant denial sprang to his lips, but he checked it.

"The slightness of our acquaintance is the only excuse you have for such a question, sir," he said, quietly.

Reuben Vale's eyes dropped; then he raised them again.

"How did you come here?" he asked.

Vane nodded over his shoulder. "Through the gun-room, I discovered the well, secret door, I suppose it is—by accident. If I had known that you were here, I should have come all the same; for I thought by the sounds I heard, that you were ill. You are ill, are you not?" he added, more gently, as he noticed the pallor of the lined and rugged face.

"No," said the old man, slowly; "I am never ill."

"I am very glad," said Vane, "and I'll go as quickly as possible."

He turned toward a door he could just discern behind the old man, and, as was only natural, glanced unconsciously at the curtain which now hid the portrait. Swift as the glance was, the old man noted it.

"You—saw that picture," he said, rather than interrogated.

Vane nodded.

"Yes."

"And you are going to ask questions," said the old man, gloomily.

"I beg your pardon—not a question," said Vane, quietly but emphatically.

The squire looked at him strangely.

"You do not want to know who it is," he said, incredulously, "or why

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you find me pulling before it like a whipped cur?"

He spoke with a repressed savagery quite indescribable.

Vane leaned against one of the old chairs, and looked at him as steadily as before.

"Of course I want to know," he said. "You are my uncle; you have behaved like a friend to me. I have lived in your house as an honored guest. If I said that I was not at all curious you wouldn't believe me."

"I shouldn't," was the stern assent. "Just so," said Vane, as quietly as before. "But I neither ask, nor do I want you to tell me, and I certainly shall not try to learn. I am, not in the habit of intruding on the private affairs of my host, squire."

The old man looked at him with a kind of reluctant admiration and respect.

"You are too much of a gentleman, I suppose," he said, but without sneer.

It was singular—it was almost exactly what Mrs. Trevanion, at the Witches' Castle, had remarked.

"I hope so," said Vane. "I will leave you now, sir; that is, if you are sure that you are all right."

The old man motioned to him to remain, stood as if lost in gloomy reverie for a moment or two, then strode to the curtain, drew it back, and holding up the light, nodded fiercely at the beautiful woman.

"Do you call her good-looking?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Vane, instinctively lowering his voice.

Deep down in his heart was that adoration, worship, for woman which had kept him pure and unstained even through the moral slush of fashionable London.

"Yes, she is lovely," he said.

"And you don't ask who she is?" inquired Reuben Vale.

Vane shook his head.

"Cover it up, sir," he said, almost pityingly; for he saw how the sight of the exquisite face moved the old man.

"Look at her," said the squire, pointing a shaking finger at her, a finger that shook accusingly. "That was my wife. That is the portrait of the woman who nearly sent me mad with joy for one short year, and the memory of whom has nearly sent me mad with misery ever since. She was my wife."

Vane looked his surprise.

"Your wife!" he said; "I did not know you were married."

The old man seemed scarcely to hear him.

"One short year!" he murmured, more to himself than to Vane. "To pay with the misery of a life for one short year! And yet the fools who write poetry and novels would tell you that love is well worth buying at such a price. Love!"

He turned to Vane, who stood fixedly regarding him.

"You laugh! You think that such as I, a plain country clod, love is impossible. Were you ever in love, boy?"

Vane started and shook his head. "I think not, sir."

"You think not?" repeated the old man. "You'd soon know, if you had loved as I loved her. I worshipped her. I would have laid down my life for her. I did lay it down, for the life I live now is a living death. I would have cast myself at her feet that she might tread on me. Day and night I thought of her, and her only. I toiled for her. I wrought with heart, and head, and hands to make her happy—to gratify her slightest wish; and willingly, cheerfully, with no thought of sacrifice. Why not? What was it? A common man,

with an ugly, common face, with a form like this, hands like these"—he stretched them out, quivering, before him—"compared with beauty like hers. She was a star, a goddess, and I had but to kneel at her shrine, to pour out at her feet all that I possessed. I gained wealth for her. I held it but as the dirt from which I tore it. I loaded her with jewels"—he strode to a corner of the room and flung open the lid of an iron box. Vane saw that the keys were in the lock, as if it had just been unlocked. "Look!" The old man plunged his thin-veined, knotted hands into the box and dragged out a heap of sparkling gems. She was fond of them, as a child is fond of a glittering toy, and I lavished them on her. I hungered day and night to prove to her how I loved her, to win her love in return. I would have committed any crime—murder itself—if she had bidden me, and made the prize her love. And I thought that I had won her—I thought that she loved me—for a year—just twelve months."

He laughed, and wiped the sweat from his face, staring hard at the face looking down, as if almost seemed to Vane, with sweet scorn of his emotion.

"I was older than she," went on the old man, "but I told myself that such love as mine would wipe a score of years away. She was a lady—one of your class—and I was what you see me; but I told myself that she must—she must—see that underneath this rugged exterior there burned and throbbled a heart as full of love and tenderness as any that could beat in one of her own kind. She said so herself often enough. Those lips—see how true they look!—could lie, boy, as readily as smile. The night before she left me she let her head rest on my shoulder and whispered of wifely love."

His face went white, his voice almost inaudible.

Vane, filled with pity, moved toward him; but the old man seemed to have lost all consciousness of his presence, and stared before him vacantly.

"They went together," he said—"she and the man who betrayed me and stole her from me. He was a gentleman." It was fine sport for him to pretend that plain Reuben Vale was his friend, and to rob the country clod of his wife.

There was a moment's silence, then the old man's voice sounded through the dim room again.

"Take her back?" he muttered, as if he were addressing some one who was pleading to him—"take her back? Forgive her? Yes, yes! when she can give me back my ruined life—when she can change this heart she turned to stone back into one of flesh and blood. Yes; when she can give me back herself as she was—the woman I loved—but not till then!"

His voice dropped and died away. He put his hands to his forehead and held them there for a moment or two; then, with a deep sigh, he seemed to recover consciousness of the situation and the fact that he was not alone. Going forward slowly, but with a steeper step, he drew the curtain again and faced Vane.

"You know my secret," he said, sternly, grimly. "That was my wife. She left me—betrayed me. She is dead. The man who took her from me was a gentleman—an aristocrat, like you and yours. I hated them before; hated them when your father took my sister from me; judge if I

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have not still greater cause to hate them. You are one of them. You will never inherit a rood of my land, a penny of my money. But you are my sister's child, and for her sake I will give you money to fling in the gutter, after the manner of your kind."

Vane would have indignantly refused the proffered gift, but pity restrained him. But the old man's eyes were sharp.

"You refuse? You need not." Vane shook his head.

The old man pointed to the door. "Go to the library," he said, in still calmer tones.

Vane took a last look round the gloomy place, made his way to the library, and in a minute or so the squire followed him. His face was still white, and its lines seemed even deeper cut than usual; the dust of the room had fallen on his corduroy coat, and even on his hair; but his hands no longer trembled, and his gaze was steady and keen as usual.

"Let us speak of business, and that only," he said. "The offer I have just made you is one you can accept without sacrifice of pride. When your mother married, I bought some of the land belonging to her at the ordinary price, not knowing the wealth beneath it. Some of that wealth—I know the proportion—fairly belongs to you. Vane Tempest, I will give it you. What you do with it is nothing to me; save it, squander it, as you will."

(To be Continued.)

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