

# For Love of a Woman;

## New Romeo and Juliet.

CHAPTER XXVIII.  
ENGAGED.

If anyone had told him that Lady Grace had gone home a few minutes after parting from him, and shut herself up for a couple of days, reappearing, looking pale and weary, it would never have occurred to him that her sudden disappearance had been on his account.

He went to Norway, and though he thought of her now and again with a gratitude which made him miserable—for he could not see how on earth he was going to repay her the money she had so generously paid for him—he was too much occupied with recalling Doris to think much of this beautiful woman. He ought to have been happy in Norway, for the fishing was good, and he was lucky; but the big salmon did not bring him the satisfaction they used to do; and he was sitting one evening in the room of the rather rough inn at which he was staying, wondering what he should do with himself next, and whether it would not be better to go and bury himself in South Africa or volunteer for the next of our little wars, when he heard his name mentioned. There was a party of young men staying at the inn, and they occupied the room next to his and divided from it by the thinnest of partitions, through which their constant chatter and laughter filtered day and night to worry him.

When he heard his name, he woke up from a reverie in which he was wondering whether Doris was happy, and whether she ever thought of him and those days in the Barton Meadows; and, remembering that listeners seldom hear any good of themselves, he took up his pipe, and was walking out to smoke in the open air, when it seemed to him that he heard Lady Grace's name also.

Thinking that the speakers might be friends of his and hers he waited a moment, then sunk back into his chair, his face scarlet, his brow dark with a heavy frown—for this is what he heard:

"I tell you, it's an absolute truth," said one of the young fellows. "I had it from a most reliable source. The lady in question was seen leaving Lord Cecil Neville's rooms alone and unattended—"

"Nonsense! Lady Grace—Lady Grace, of all women in the world!—go alone to Lord Neville's chambers! You must be mad, old fellow!"

"I'm not mad!" retorted the first speaker; "and I wish to goodness you wouldn't bellow out her name. I carefully avoided mentioning it. These walls are no thicker than paper, and you can't tell who may be on the other side."

"Oh, it's all right," said the other; "but, come; you know the story is as true as the partition. Why, no woman would do such a thing unless she were utterly reckless of her good name."

"I daresay not," said the first, still so coolly; "but perhaps the lady in question happens to be reckless where this gentleman is concerned. Anyhow, I had it on good authority, and I happen to know it is an indisputable fact. Why, man, it was all the talk when I left London. It is said that she is head over ears in love with him—"

"Phew!" exclaimed one of the others. "That makes it worse. If she was guilty of such an indiscretion, all I can say she must be very much in love. Lady Grace—"

"Do shut up!" cried the first speaker. "No names, remember!"

"Well, well, the lady in question is one of the best-known women in society, and such a report would mean social ruin to her. Where did you hear it? Give me your authority."

"The first man seemed to pause a moment, then in a voice too low for Cecil to hear, said:

"I don't mind giving it to you. I heard it from Spenser Churchill!"

"Then you may swear to its truth. That man never makes a mistake!" responded one of the young fellows. "Well, I'm awfully sorry, Lady—The lady is always very kind and pleasant to me, and I think her one of the loveliest creatures in the world. As for Lord Neville—well, if he can remain quiescent while this story is going

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about, and does nothing to contradict or set it right—all I can say is, he is a very different man from what I have always understood him to be. Where is he now? I hear he has come a regular cropper in money matters. I saw him a little while ago, and he looked awfully down on his luck."

"Oh, he's gone abroad, I believe," replied the other.

Lord Cecil sat perfectly still for a minute, his brain surging, his heart beating with mingled fury and consternation; then, with his pipe still in his hand, he got up and knocked at the door of the adjoining room.

Someone opened it, and Lord Cecil, with a slight bow, stepped in and stood before the group of young men, who stared at his now grave, pale face inquiringly.

"I am sorry to disturb you, gentlemen," he said; "but it is only right I should tell you that I have heard every word you said."

"There!" exclaimed the young fellow who had started the conversation, in a tone of vexation and reproach. "I told you so! I said the partition was like paper, and that someone might be on the other side, and you fellows wouldn't believe me!"

"Yes; I have heard every word," said Lord Neville, sternly; "and as I have the honour to be a friend of the lady of whom you were speaking, it

who whispers a word against the reputation of that lady is a liar!"

They sprang to their feet as a body, and stared at him with angry surprise; but Lord Cecil put up his hand to command silence.

"Hear me out, please. You may, not unnaturally, demand to know why I should take upon myself to champion this lady's cause. I do so because I hope to have the honour of being that lady's husband. My name is Cecil Neville. There is my card." He did not toss it melodramatically, but courteously placed it on the table before them. "If any of you consider that he is affronted by what I have said, I shall be happy to afford him my satisfaction he may think necessary."

With a slight bow he was leaving the room, when the young fellow who had been the first speaker, said: "One moment, Lord Neville, if you

"If anyone is to blame in this matter it is myself; and I am ready to give you any satisfaction you may require; but I think it right to state, frankly and freely, that I did not mention the lady's name, nor was I aware that she was engaged to you. I will say, also, that I deeply regret that I should have mentioned the subject at all. But I spoke the simple truth when I said that it was a topic of common rumour; and I may add that it will give me great pleasure and satisfaction to contradict the report whenever and wherever I may hear it repeated."

"I thank you," said Lord Cecil, simply; and with a grave bow that took in all of them he turned and left the room.

An hour later he was on his way to England.

By whomsoever spread, this report was in circulation—and he could not contradict it! Lady Grace had been to his rooms alone and unattended, and it was his duty as a gentleman and a man of honour to protect her.

He had heard, with a scarlet face, the words of the young fellow who had said that Lady Grace was in love with him; and though he did not believe it—for had she not herself said that it was not so?—it was his duty to propose to her.

What did it matter what became of him or whom he married? He must marry someone and some day. The heir to the marquessate of Stoyke could not remain single. Rank has its duties as well as its privileges, and it is the duty of the head of a noble house to carry on the direct line. He

would have to marry sooner or later—though his heart throbbed and ached every time he thought of Doris Marlowe—and why not marry Lady Grace?

He thought of her beauty; he recalled her noble generosity to him. Why, she had not only come to his aid when he was in mortal straits, but she had done so at the risk of her social reputation. Surely, if he must marry someone, it must be Lady Grace.

He might also have reminded himself that by so doing he would win his uncle's—the marquis's—favour; but, to do Lord Cecil credit, he did not think of that; he only remembered Lady Grace's goodness to him.

He reached London at noon, had a bath, and allowed his valet to clothe him in the regulation morning attire, and went straight to the Peytons' house.

The footman told him that Lady Grace was out riding in the park.

carpet, looking out of the window, staring at the ornaments on the mantelpiece. Amongst them was one of the fashionable cabinet photograph frames, with the portrait covered by a curtain. In absence of mind he drew the curtain aside and saw a portrait of himself.

With a sudden flush he let it fall, as the door opened and Lady Grace entered.

She was in her riding-habit—in the garb which set off her perfectly graceful figure to its very best advantage.

As she entered, her mature and majestic loveliness struck him fully for the first time, and he remembered with a sudden vividness the words of one of the young fellows at the Norwegian inn. Yes, she was one of the loveliest of society women!

She started perceptibly at sight of him—so much so that she dropped her whip. He sprang forward and picked it up for her, and by the time he had given it her—few moments though the action required—she had recovered herself.

"Back so soon?" she said, giving him her hand, small and white and warm. "This is a surprise! Don't the salmon bite or rise or whatever you call it? Or has it rained all the time, and have you been bored to death? I'm afraid you'll be bored just as much in London, for everyone is leaving."

"The salmon were all right," he said, still holding her hand. "I came back because I wanted to see you."

"To see me?" she said, her eyes flashing into his for a moment, and then drooping. "Well, you were just in time, for papa and I were off to the Continent."

"Then I have just come in time," he said.

"Let me give you some tea. Sit down," she said, and gently tried to withdraw her hand; but he held it firmly.

"Never mind the tea, Lady Grace," he said, with something of his old light-heartedness. "You shall give me—or refuse me—a cup after you have heard what I have to say."

"And what have you to say that is more important than tea?" she retorted, in a light tone, which was belied by the quiver on her lips.

"I have come to ask you to be my wife," he said, quietly.

She put her left hand to her bosom, and her beautiful eyes dilated. If joy always killed, then Lady Grace would have fallen dead at Cecil Neville's feet that moment; but it is sorrow, not joy, that kills; and instead of falling, she leaned towards him with a tremulous sigh. It was almost too good to be believed. Spenser Churchill had told her that it would come; but she had always doubted it; and now—it had come. He was here! Hers!—he, whom she had grown to love—the man for whom she had plotted and risked so much, even her social good name—was here!

It was a proud, an ecstatic moment; no wonder she prolonged it.

"What do you say?" he asked, still holding her hand, his grave voice as much unlike an ardent lover's as it is possible to imagine; and yet it was like music to her. "I know I am not worthy to win so great a prize; but I will do my best to make you happy."

"And—and you love me?" she asked.

It was a dangerous question; but she was a woman, and longed to hear the magic words which every woman loves to hear from the lips of the man she loves.

He paused imperceptibly. (to be continued.)

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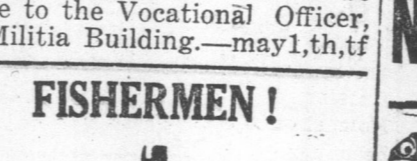
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