

The Heart of a Woman

By BARONESS ORCZY

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CHAPTER XIV.—(Continued)

For a moment before he spoke again the old man looked round about him, the tall mahogany bookcases filled with silent friends, the busts of Dryden and of Milton, the globes in their mahogany castings, all heirlooms from the generations of de Montford who had gone before.

It seemed as if the present bearers of the historic name could all these mute things to witness this present degradation. A crime had smirched the family escutcheon, for to some minds—those who dwell on empyrean heights to which no master of fact could ever reach—this was almost as horrible as the assassin.

Lord Radcliffe however fought his own battle silently. As yet with one more man's eye upon him he felt the two men as what he felt. Conventionally he would have been a man of letters, but he was not. He had been a man of letters, but he was not. He had been a man of letters, but he was not.

He gave to his nerves the word of command, and as soon as he had forced them to obey, he looked straight at the police officer and said calmly:

"Please tell me all that I ought to know."

He sat in his high-backed chair, curtly bidding the two men to sit down; he made no attempt to shade his face and eyes, once the battle fought, and now he had nothing more to hide: his own face, rigid and still, his firm mouth, and smooth brow were mask enough to conceal the feelings within.

The officer gave the details at full length: he told Lord Radcliffe all that was known of the mysterious crime. The old man listened in silence until the man had finished speaking, then he asked a few questions:

"I think have a clue of course?"

"Of course, my lord," replied the officer guardedly.

"Can I help in any way?"

"Any information, my lord, that you think might help us would of course be gladly welcomed."

"The man who called the cab in Shaftesbury Avenue—what was he like? I could help you if I knew."

"I'll have his description properly written out, my lord, and bring it to you in the morning."

"Can't you tell me now? Every moment lost is irrevocable in cases like these."

"I am afraid, my lord, that I cannot tell you definitely now. There's a dense fog outside—and—"

"The chauffeur's descriptions are vague," interrupted Lord Radcliffe with a sneer, "the eternal excuse for incompetence."

"My lord!" protested the man.

"All right! all right! No offence meant. I assure you. You must pardon an old man's irritability—the news you have brought me does not make for peace of temper. I rely on your department to clear this matter up with the least possible scandal."

"I am afraid that scandal is inevitable," retorted the officer dryly, for he still felt sore at Lord Radcliffe's ill-tempered thrust. "We shall have to rake up a lot of dust that might be unpleasant to many parties."

"Why should it be unpleasant?"

"We shall have to rake up something of the murdered man's past, of his antecedents before he was able to establish his claim to your lordship's consideration."

"I have no doubt that the late Philip de Montford had many undesirable associates in the past," remarked Lord Radcliffe curtly.

The silence which followed was tantamount to a dismissal. The officer rose to go. He felt nettled at the old man's obvious sneers; they had been like a cold douche over the past of his servant, for he had already drifted into his hands and promised to be the most interesting and most sensational criminal case of modern times.

"Will you see Mr. Luke de Montford?" he muttered addressing his master.

"Certainly not," replied his lordship. "I must too late. Ask Luke to call again tomorrow. And you and your wife can go to bed."

CHAPTER XV.

And Many Must Be Questioned.

By the time the police officers reached the outer hall door, Luke had received his order of dismissal. He stood on the step for a moment, undecided what to do, and saw the two men coming out of his uncle's study.

They raised their hats as they met him on the door step, and one of them said politely:

"Mr. Luke de Montford?"

"That is my name," replied Luke. "Mine is Travers—attached to Scotland Yard. Could I ask you a few questions?"

"Certainly, but not in my uncle's house, I think."

"Of course not; where do you suggest?"

"Here on the door step if you like."

"Hardly. Might I trouble you to step into the cab with me to come as far as Victoria police court?"

"It's very late, isn't it? I have an engagement at eleven o'clock here."

"He was going to fetch Colonel Harris and Louise at the Danish Legation and pilot them home to the Langham."

"It's an important matter, Mr. de Montford," retorted the man. "Are you looking anywhere near here?"

"In Exhibition Road, Kensington."

"Ah, close to Cromwell Road?"

"Not far."

"Then where shall it be, Mr. de Montford?"

"Why not in the cab?" remarked Luke. "Just as you like."

"The taxi which had brought the police officers was standing some few paces farther on, its strong lights only just placing the intensity of the fog, and its shrilling, as at the last moment, of two policemen with upraised flags, filled the night with their strangely familiar sound."

The three men got into the cab, the officer telling the chauffeur to remain stationary until told to move on.

"I know very little about the business, Mr. de Montford," remarked Luke as soon as all three of them had snored themselves fairly comfortably in the interior of the vehicle. "I suppose it is about this ghastly affair that you wanted to speak to me."

"Yes, sir. It was about that. I thought you could give us some information about the late Mr. de Montford's past life, or his former friends."

"I know nothing," retorted Luke dryly, "of my cousin's past or present life. He did not confide in me."

"But you were good friends?" interposed the other quickly.

"We knew each other very little."

"And tonight?"

"Ask him at his club."

"Where was that?"

"The Veterans in Shaftesbury Avenue."

"About what time?"

"I don't know; it was the first time I had ever been there."

"Did you know of the staff?"

"No—since I had never been there before."

"You were not known to any member of the staff?"

"Not that I know of."

"You were shown into the club rooms without being known there at all?"

"The Veterans Club is a new club, and its rules apparently are not very strict. I asked if Mr. de Montford was in the club and was told that I should find him in the smoking room, and I did."

"How long did your interview with Mr. de Montford last?"

"About three-quarters of an hour I should say."

"And it was of a perfectly amicable nature?"

"Of a perfectly indifferent nature," answered Luke.

"And after the interview what did you do?"

"I walked out of the club."

"Did you see any one on the way?"

"I walked about."

"In the fog?" This in an undisguised tone of surprise.

"In what direction?"

"Really," he rejoined Luke with a sudden show of resentment. "Mr. de Montford, I fail to see how my movements can be of concern to you."

He was certainly not going to tell this man that he had made his way through the fog as far as the residence of the Danish minister, and that he had walked up and down for over an hour outside that house like a love-sick fool, like a dog looking for his master, like a man who had waited patiently for a reward which would come for a moment the long longing of his heart.

What the man near him said in answer to Luke's reply could not be heard. He had not heard, for in a moment his thoughts had flashed back to that lonely vigil in the fog, to the sound of her voice, which came, oh! so faintly, to him, and then to the first breath of gossip that came from the passers-by, the coachman and chauffeurs who had drawn up in long rows along the curb, the idlers who always hang about outside in the cold and the damp when a society function is in progress, the pickers-up of unconsidered trifles, lost or willingly bestowed.

From these he had first heard the news; vaguely at first, for he did not could not realize that the amazing thing which was being commended on as a triumph had anything to do with him. The talk was of murder, and soon the name of de Montford was mentioned. The details he got were very odd, and he was puzzled by allusions as to "some whom the crime will benefit," never really reached his brain, which was almost numb with the violence of the shock.

His first thought after that was to go and see Uncle Rad. He had, for the moment, almost forgotten Louise. Every time he thought of her, his mind was drawn to the one clear duty: Uncle Rad would be alone; the awful news must be broken very gradually to Uncle Rad. He had hurried to Grosvenor Square, only to find that emissaries of the police had forced their way into his study, and he had stalled him in his duty.

All this he could not explain to the man Travers, who had sounded him and barely plausible. Nowdays men do not walk outside houses wherein their lives lie, and if they do, they do not choose a foggy night for the enterprise. Luke, however, had no choice, for the emissaries of the police had forced their way into his study, and he had stalled him in his duty.

"If I can help in any way?"

"Any information, my lord, that you think might help us would of course be gladly welcomed."

"The man who called the cab in Shaftesbury Avenue—what was he like? I could help you if I knew."

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the personification of modernity, of ordinary commonplace life, but exquisite—just as the poet knows the love of the world, the love of his kind, every tender of his being and every sense within him. A soft perfume of sweet peace clung to her gown and hair, and she looked at him with her eyes, and drew in a long breath of supreme delight. Now and then as the cab gave a jerk his knee came in contact with hers, and on the ground quite close to his own there rested a small neatly shod foot, the sole of which he would have given his heart's blood to kiss.

"Oh, yes; had was quite happy; this was reality; his exquisite Louise, the outline of her perfect head, the touch of her knees, the scent of sweet peas which intoxicated him and whirled his senses to madness and to dreams! It was reality and the other was only the wild phantasmagoria of a wild imagination—the insane thought that he had been desired."

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the upper grades of English society. They are their perfect strength, their well-drilled calm what the most dire calamities, or most unexpected blows had often caused him astonishment when he was a younger man, fresh from hospital work, and from the haunts of humbler folk, who had no cause or desire to hide their feelings of their feelings. Now he was used to his fashionable patients and had ceased to wonder, at the impassiveness on hearing of his uncle's sudden illness, did not necessarily strike him as indifference.

"Is it serious?" asked Luke.

"Serious. Of course," assented the doctor.

"Do you mean that Lord Radcliffe's life is in danger?"

"At sixty years of age, life is always in danger."

"I don't mean that," rejoined Luke with a slight show of impatience. "Is Lord Radcliffe in immediate danger?"

"No. What I mean is, that if Lord Radcliffe, he may soon rally, though I doubt if he will ever be as strong and hearty as he was this time last year."

"Then would the doctor be kind enough to send me a nurse?"

"I'll send one down today, but—"

"Yes?"

"Lord Radcliffe's present household is—well, hardly adequate to the exigencies of a long and serious illness. He ought to have a day and a night nurse. I can send both, but they will want some waiting on; a couple of proper maids and ordinary comforts."

"I can see to all that. Thank you for your advice."

"A good and reliable cook is also necessary. I understand that Lord Radcliffe is a great eater."

"And shall be attended to at once. Is there anything else?"

"I am very quiet and of course are the chief things."

"I shall not worry him, you may be sure, and no one else is likely to come near him."

"Except the police," remarked the doctor dryly.

"The grave events of the night before, and those that were ready to follow one another in grim array for the next few days had almost fled from Luke's memory in face of the other—to him more personal calamity—his uncle's illness."

"Oh! Ah, yes!" he said vaguely. "I had forgotten."

"The nurse," rejoined the doctor with a pompousness which somehow irritated Luke, "will have my authorization to forbid any one having access to Lord Radcliffe for the present. I will write out the certificate now, and this you will present to any one who may show a desire to exercise official authority in the matter of interviewing my patient."

"No, I can do all that, all that is necessary at the instant, and so on—Lord Radcliffe need not be worried."

"He mustn't be worried. To begin with, I would not know any one, and he is wholly unable to answer questions."

"That settles the matter of course. So, if you will write the necessary certificate, I'll see the police authorities at once on the subject. Would Lord Radcliffe know me, do you think?" added the young man after a slight pause of hesitancy.

"Oh! Ah, yes!" he said vaguely. "I don't think he would remember me today. We'll see how he gets on."

"He'll probably ask for me."

"That is another matter, and if he does, you must of course see to it that there is a marked improvement during the time he won't ask for any one."

Luke was silent a moment or two while he scribbled on the writing table and sought for pen and ink.

"Very well," he said after awhile, "we'll leave it at that. Lord Radcliffe—I can assure you, will be all right. I'll see to it that he is properly looked after."

"Within the hour. The night nurse will call, and the day nurse will be sent."

Doctor Newington wrote out and signed the usual medical certificate to the effect that Lord Radcliffe's state of health was such that he was unable to rest and that he was unable to answer any one or to answer any questions. He read his own writing through very carefully, then folded the paper in half and handed it to Luke.

"This," he said, "will make everything all right. And I'll call again in a couple of hours' time. You won't forget the cook?"

"No, I won't forget the cook."

When the doctor had taken his leave, Luke stood for a moment quietly in the library; he folded up the medical certificate, and he had a sudden recollection of Doctor Newington, and carefully put it away in his pocket-book.

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became a nonentity in his own household. The grand seigneur, imbued with every instinct of luxury and refinement, became a souly old hermit, unloved, for not properly waited on, feeding badly, and living in one room.

All this Philip de Montford had accomplished entirely by his mere presence. The waiting of a maid—a devil's wand—and the metamorphosis was complete! What magic was there in the man himself? What the tale which he told? What subtle charm did he wield, that the news of his terrible death should strike the old man as some withered old tree robbed of its support?