



For Love of a Woman;
OR,
New Romeo and Juliet.

CHAPTER XVII.
A CHANCE FOR ESCAPE.

"Well, well, we will not speak of it; but I will say: the quarrel—the misunderstanding—arose from no fault of his. The fault was mine, entirely mine, my dear young lady."

It was a cunning speech, and produced the effect he had intended.

"Looking back to that time—when we parted, friends no longer—my heart is filled with remorse and sorrow. Ah, Miss Marlowe, if we would all of us reflect that life is short, and that death may come to prevent forever any reconciliation between parted friends, how often—ah, how often the rash and foolish quarrel would be averted!" and, apparently overcome by his emotion, he turned his head away and softly blew his nose. "But we will not go back over this sad quarrel," he said. "I have come to see you this morning that I may see if I can be of any further use to you. I trust I may be. There are several things I find that I must speak to you about, much as I should wish to have you undisturbed."

"Will you please tell me everything I should know," said Doris. "I am ashamed that I should have left everything so entirely."

"No, no," he murmured. "Such a terrible bereavement as yours, so sudden, is so overwhelming that no excuse is needed." He took some papers from his pocket. "I will not trouble you more than I can avoid with business matters, my dear young lady; but there are a few things that I find I must speak to you about. First, I must ask you if there is anyone, any friend you would rather I went to who would take this trouble off your shoulders?"

Doris shook her head. "No; there is no one," she said, quietly enough, and with a firm voice. "I have no friend in all the world."

"Except—dare I say, except my humble self?" he murmured. "My dear young lady, what little I have done afforded me a melancholy satisfaction. I have felt all through that by serving you in some slight measure I have been making an attempt at some atonement for the error that separated my poor dead friend and myself. Will you allow me to call myself your friend?"

Doris turned to thank him, and he inclined his head gratefully. "Well, then, I have taken upon myself to see to all the arrangements, and have ventured to act just as if I were, say, your father. It was necessary that I should look into poor Jeffrey's affairs, and I have come to tell you the result. I am sorry to say, my dear young lady, that your guardian did not leave any wealth behind him. He died a poor man. Perhaps this will not surprise you?"

"No, no," said Doris. "Tell me everything, please. I do not know what to do—I am so alone."

"Yes, yes," he said. "About your future—forgive me if I mention such a subject—but I presume you will continue your profession."

A shudder ran through Doris's frame at the thought of again facing the crowded theatre.

"No, no!" she said, almost fiercely. "I shall never act again!"

As she answered, the scene of the first night of "Romeo and Juliet" rose before her, and she thrilled with the recollection of the inspiration which had come to her from her love for Cecil Neville. That inspiration had vanished forever now, and to act with a broker's heart would, she knew, be impossible to her.

"No," said Doris, in a low voice. "We were always poor, I think. There was always enough."

He nodded. "Yes, yes, I understand. There is some money; it is not much—about a hundred pounds, I think."

Doris listened with faint interest. If she had heard that she had been left without money, or heiress to a million, it would not have affected her in her present condition.

"Besides the money there are some papers. Nothing of any consequence, however—letters and documents relating to business affairs, engagements at theatres, and so on."

A faint flush came into Doris's face, then left it absolutely colourless. "Nothing more?" she said, with downcast eyes.

"Nothing more," he said, gravely, watching her closely, though he seemed occupied in turning over the papers. "Did you expect—"

"I do not know," she faltered. Then she raised her large, sad eyes. "You know that I am not Jeffrey's daughter?"

He inclined his head. "Yes, I know that; and I know what you expected—hoped, shall I say—that I should find something, some papers that would give us a clue to your parentage. Is that not so?"

Doris's lips formed the "Yes." He sighed and shook his head. "I regret there is no such clue. The secret of your birth, my dear young lady, is buried in my poor friend's grave."

Doris had leant forward with a suppressed eagerness, and she sank back as her eyes filled with tears.

"I am sorry—sorry," he murmured. "for I, too, had hoped that I might make some discovery. But there is not a single paper, not the slightest clue."

"And yet," said Doris, more to herself than to him, "there was something he was going to tell me—some papers; he had them with him the morning—"

Her voice broke. Spenser Churchill listened with the deepest sympathy glowing in his benevolent face.

"Dear, dear!" he murmured. "And he did not tell you? And these papers, now? He had them with him, you say? They were not found. I myself did not examine—but the doctor assured me there was nothing beyond a little money and so on. I fear—I very much fear—that our poor friend must have decided to allow the mystery to remain, and have destroyed the papers you speak of."

Doris's hands closed tightly. "He knew best," she said, with all a woman's loving loyalty. "I—I am satisfied. He knew best," and tears came at last and rolled down the pale cheeks.

Spenser Churchill heaved a sigh. "Nobly said, my dear young lady. Yes, doubtless he knew best. Rest assured that he kept the secret from you for good reasons. Yes, he knew best! Poor Jeffrey! poor Jeffrey!" He wiped his eyes. "And now shall I go—some other time—"

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"And yet," said Doris, more to herself than to him, "there was something he was going to tell me—some papers; he had them with him the morning—"

"I shall never go on the stage again," she responded, firmly. Spenser Churchill put up his white hand to his lips to hide the smile of satisfaction her words called up on them.

"No?" he said, thoughtfully and significantly. "Yes, I understand, I quite understand; and I must say I think your decision is a wise one. It was different while your guardian was alive, to watch over you and protect you. You, great as your success has been, I think you are right in your resolve to leave the profession."

"I shall never go back," she said, quietly.

"Then—forgive me—may I ask what you intend doing?"

Doris let her eyes fall upon him almost vacantly for a moment. She had been lost in the memory of those few happy days and nights, and had almost forgotten his presence.

"What I intend doing? Oh, I don't know. I have not thought," she said, and her white hand went to her brow.

"I understand, I understand, and fully sympathise, my dear young lady; but, as your friend—you know you have allowed me to be your friend—it is my duty to ask you. This sum of money, alas! will soon take to itself wings, and—"

Doris roused herself. "And I must still live and eat, even after it is gone, you would say," she said, not bitterly, but, ah, so wearily. "Yes, I know."

"You could earn a large sum on the stage, of course," he murmured. She put out her hand as if to silence him.

"That is out of the question," she said. "I suppose there are other ways of earning money?"

"There are," he murmured, softly. "I am young and strong," she said. "Other women have to work. What do they do? Needlework—"

She looked at her hands with a smile that was like the glint of her old, light-hearted one.

He shook his head. "That, too, is out of the question," he said. "But there are still other ways, I believe—indeed, I have heard that you are very accomplished, Miss Marlowe."

"Am I?" said Doris, simply. "I believe that you are a musician, and that you speak several languages."

"Yes," she said, as simply as before. "Ah, how much I owe to him! I understand it better now—now that it is too late to thank him," and she turned her head away.

"A good musician and linguist need not take to her needle for her maintenance," said Spenser Churchill. "I have, of course, foreseen that the question would arise, and I have—pry forgive me, my dear young lady—been making some enquiries on your behalf."

He drew out a pocket-book and took a letter from it. "It happens that a friend of mine—Lady Despard—you may have heard of her; she is known for her charitable work—"

Doris shook her head. "I have never heard of her," she said, trying to speak with some interest.

"A sweet creature. A widow, alas! though young. Very wealthy, moving in the best society—ahem!—and fond of travelling. She is just going abroad, and requires a companion. I think—I am sure—that you would like her, and that if you could bring yourself to accept the position, which is so much below your genius—"

"No! It is nothing. The heat—stay, please!"

He stood, regarding her silently, watchfully, with an anxious, sympathetic expression on his smooth face.

"This lady"—she went on, speaking every word as if it cost her an effort—"this Lady Despard. Will you ask her to take me?"

"But, my dear Miss Marlowe, had you not better consider—"

"I have considered," she said, interrupting him. "If she thinks I can be of any service to her—if she is going away from England at once—"

"She is," he said, softly.

"Well, then, tell her, please, that I am ready—that I will go with her."

(To be Continued.)

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"She is going abroad?" said Doris, with sudden eagerness.

He inclined his head. "Yes, to Italy. The change would do you good—is, indeed, absolutely necessary."

Abroad, out of England, beyond the chance of meeting Cecil Neville! A faint hope, for the first time since Jeffrey's death, rose in Doris's heart.

"But you need not decide to-day. You shall think it over," he said, taking up his hat. "By the way, if you should need me will you send word—at any time, and the very moment you would like to see me—to Barton Towers? I am staying with my friend, the Marquis of Stoyler."

Doris started, and the blood rose to her face. "Barton Towers?" she murmured, mechanically.

"Yes," he said, smoothly, as if he had not noticed her sudden agitation. "The marquis is an old friend of mine. So is his nephew and heir, Lord Cecil Neville. You may have heard of him?"

"Yes—I have heard of him," said Doris, in a low voice, which faltered, notwithstanding her effort to keep it steady.

"Yes; a charming young fellow," he went on, with a smile, "but a terribly unsteady one. But there; we must not be hard upon a young fellow in his position. Young men who are blessed with good looks and heirships to marquisates are apt to be unsteady; though I am glad to say that Lord Neville's wild days are nearly over. He is in Ireland at present; but when he comes back he is to marry Lady Grace Peyton."

Doris sat perfectly motionless, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes fixed on the lovely summer scene framed in the window; but the view was all blurred in her sight, and a sound as of rushing waves rang in her ears.

"To marry Lady Grace Peyton!" she echoed, dully, as if the words possessed no sense.

"Yes," he purred. "It is a very old attachment. She is a most charming and beautiful creature, and I am not surprised that, notwithstanding his numerous flirtations, Lord Neville has remained constant. It will be a most suitable and advantageous match for both of them—My dear young lady"—he broke off, for Doris had sunk back, white to the lips, and with closed eyes—"you are ill. Let me call Mrs. Jelf."

But with an almost superhuman effort, Doris fought down the terrible faintness, and, stretching out her hand commandingly said:

"No! It is nothing. The heat—stay, please!"

He stood, regarding her silently, watchfully, with an anxious, sympathetic expression on his smooth face.

"This lady"—she went on, speaking every word as if it cost her an effort—"this Lady Despard. Will you ask her to take me?"

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