

For Love of a Woman,

New Romeo and Juliet.

CHAPTER XXV.
AS IN A DREAM.

This evening, as she sat beside the hammock, looking at the stars, which were beginning to peep out from the midst of the deep blue of the sky, and thinking of the past, she was conscious, in a half-troubled way, of recalling one of the innumerable services Percy Levant had rendered her, and she started when Lady Despard said, in her sleepy fashion:

"I wonder where Mr. Levant is? Has he gone to the hotel? I haven't seen him all the evening. How one misses him, doesn't one?"

"Yes," said Doris. "That is our tribute to his amiability."

Lady Despard laughed. "He is quite the bright particular star of our group," she said. "Some of our fair Florentine friends are almost mad about him. I shouldn't wonder if he were caught and chained before we leave."

"Yes," said Doris.

Lady Despard leant over the hammock and regarded her with a lazy smile.

"What a cold little 'yes'!" she said. "I really believe you are the only woman here who doesn't admire him."

"But I do admire him," said Doris, smiling in return. "I think he is the handsomest man I ever saw."

She stopped and picked up the book—for, unnoticed by Lady Despard, he had come up and stood beside the hammock.

"May one enquire the subject of Miss Marlowe's encomium?" he asked, and he looked from one to the other with his usual smile; but Doris, glancing up at him, saw—or fancied she saw—the shadow of the darkness which she, and she alone, had discovered his face could wear.

"Oh, no one you know," said Lady Despard. "May one ask where you have been all this long while?"

"All this long while! A few hours! What a testimony to one's worth!" he said, as lightly as before; but his grey eyes, as they rested on Doris's pensive face, were grave and intent. "I have been wandering in the woods, listening to the birds."

"While we have been dying to listen to you," said Lady Despard, with mock reproach. "We have missed you terribly—haven't we, Doris?"

"Miss Marlowe is halting between truth and politeness," he said, as Doris remained silent. "I will spare her a reply."

"We've had no music to speak of," said Lady Despard. "Won't you sing us something now? Shall we go into the house?"

"No, no," he said, almost abruptly. "Who would exchange this"—and he waved his hand—"for four walls? What shall I sing to you? Let me think."

He thought for a moment, then he began to sing.

Doris never heard his voice, even in the crowded saloon, without feeling a thrill run through her; but to-night, although he sang in so low a tone that it seemed scarcely more than a whisper, the melody stirred her to her depths and brought the tears to her eyes.

"That is beautiful," said Lady Despard, with a little sigh. "We won't spoil it by asking for another. Come, Doris dear. Will you come in, Mr. Levant?"

"No, thanks," he said, slowly. "I'll say good-night now."

He did not offer to shake hands, and the two ladies left him and went towards the house. As they were ascending the steps, Lady Despard stopped and uttered an exclamation:

"Oh, my bracelet!"

"What is it? Have you lost it?" inquired Doris.

"Yes; I must have dropped it while I was in the hammock. I'll go back and fetch it."

"No; I'll go!" said Doris, and she ran back.

She had almost reached the spot where they had been sitting when, with a start, she saw in the starlight a man lying full length on the grass, with his face hidden on his arm. It was Percy Levant. He sprang up at the sound of her footsteps, and confronted her, and Doris saw that his face was pale and haggard—so different, indeed, to its usual bright and careless expression that she felt a shock of distress and almost fear.

"Mr. Levant!" she said, falteringly; then she recovered herself. "I have come back for Lady Despard's bracelet," stooping down and looking about her, to give him time.

"It is here," he said, picking it up. "Thanks!" she said. "Good-night!"

"Wait! Will you wait a moment?" he asked and his voice, usually so soft and musical, sounded hoarse and strained.

Doris stood, silent and downcast, and waited for him to go on.

CHAPTER XXVI.
NOT LOVE, BUT PITY.

Doris's own face grew a little paler as she looked at him, so haggard was his; and yet his pallor lent an added charm to his delicately cut features and expressive, deeply coloured eyes bent upon her with a strange, intent look, as she sat on the edge of the hammock, and half-trembling—for she knew not what reason—waited for him to speak. She was startled by the changed appearance of the man, who was usually self-possession itself. He stood for a moment in silence, leaning against one of the trees to which the hammock was slung his arms folded his head sunk on his breast, as a nightingale in a neighbouring tree commenced to sing; all her life afterwards Doris never heard a nightingale without recalling this night.

"Miss Marlowe," he said, at last—and he spoke in a voice so low that it seemed to harmonise with the voice of the bird. "If I were wise I should let you go, even now! But—I cannot, I cannot! Chance is too strong for me. It sent you back to find me—as you found me, and I must speak to you, and perhaps for the last time. I am leaving the villa—Italy. I go to England to-morrow."

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He smiled with a bitter self-scorn which lent to his face an air of tragedy that fascinated Doris.

"And now you wonder, seeing that I am basking in the sunshine just at present, that I should wish to leave it, and sink into the mire again. I don't wish it. If I could, I would remain at the Villa Rimini, to play the part of Lady Despard's singing man, till she grew weary, or the voice which renders me acceptable lost its novelty and became valueless. But I cannot stay. A power stronger than my will is driving me, and if you had not come back to seek for her ladyship's bracelet, I should have gone without a word of farewell to you, who are the cause of my flight."

Doris started and looked up at him. "It" she said, her brows drawn together with startled trouble.

"Yes, you, Miss Marlowe," he said, quietly, but with something in the music of his voice that thrilled Doris. "You will listen while I try and tell you? Heaven knows, I find it heard enough. Be patient with me—oh, be patient with me!" He held out his hand with a sudden gesture of entreaty, then let it fall to his side. "How poor, how friendless, how completely alone I am, you know; but I was more am base enough to be proud as well, and all my life I have been prouder of nothing more than my power to repay the world's scorn of my poverty and abjectness with my scorn for the world. I prided myself on the fact that I had no heart. For other men there might be happiness, a life shared with someone whom they loved, and who loved them in return; for me, the social outcast, the pariah, there could be no such thing as love, no hope that any woman could be found to share my poverty and my hopelessness. So I went through the world, hardening my heart, and telling myself that at least I should be spared the madness which men call love."

He paused a moment, and looked at her downcast face, then went on: "This was before I went to Chester Gardens. You don't remember that night, I daresay. I shall never forget it, for it was the night upon which I first saw you—first learnt that all my pride was to melt at the sight of a woman's voice. Miss Marlowe, if I had been a wise man I would have taken my hat and gone out of your presence never to return; but the spell was wrought and I consented to come here in the train of Lady Despard, as her jester—her singing man. I would have come in the capacity of her footman or boot-boy if there had been no other place for me, no other way of being near you."

Doris looked up with a pale, startled face, and made a movement to depart; but he stretched out his hand again pleadingly.

"Ah! wait! Let me finish. I fought hard against the influence which had fallen on me—fought day by day, with all my strength; but against the spell you had, all unconsciously, woven

around me, fighting was of as little avail as it would be to try and stem the incoming tide. The iron had entered my soul, and I knew all at once that my heart and life were bound up in one sentiment, my intense love for you!"

Doris rose trembling. "I have said it now," he continued. "My secret is out. I love you, Miss Marlowe—I, Lady Despard's camp follower, the jester of the Villa Rimini, have dared to love its brightest ornament!"

And he laughed with mingled sadness and bitterness.

"I was mad, was I not? I ought to have selected her lady's-maid—any one of the maids about the place. But Miss Marlowe! The beautiful creature for whose smiles lords and princes, men of fame and note, were willing to contend! Mad! Yes! But all love is madness, so they say, and—well, that is my only excuse. And now, before you send me away with one of those gentle smiles of yours, let me tell you what I have to offer you. Myself—and nothing! I have nothing but my voice to depend upon. I lay it at your feet, knowing well that at a word from you other men would lay their coronets and there gold there." He laughed again. "Not much to offer, Miss Marlowe, but it is my all, and my life goes with it! And yet, if you stooped to take it—well!—he drew a long breath, and his magnificent eyes seemed to glow—"well, I think I could make a good fight of it! The world should hear of Percy Levant, and you should not be ashamed of the man whose hand you had stooped to take. Yes!"—he bent forward with outstretched hands. "With your love to encourage me, with you by my side to make the struggle worth while, I would win a name which at least might be not unworthy of you! Ah! think a moment!" he pleaded, his voice suddenly quivering in its intensity. "Think what your answer means to me! To any of these others it might matter a good deal, I grant, whether you said them 'yes' or 'no'; but they have so many other things to live for—rank, wealth, place in the world! But I have nothing but this wild, mad love of mine, this deep love for you which seems part and parcel of my very being! Miss Marlowe—Doris—it is a beggar who pleads to you for the one chance which will lift him from a life which has never yet known happiness to one of hope and perfect joy! Think and—ah! I love you! I love you! Don't send me away!" and he was on his knees beside her, his face upturned to hers with an expression which a man might wear who is indeed pleading for his life.

Doris looked down at him speechlessly. His passionate avowal, the wonderful music of every word, the handsome face and thrilling eyes affected her strangely; but she was more moved by the confession of his loneliness and loneliness than by aught else. She, too, was she not lowly enough and lonely enough also? This, at least, made a bond between them.

She did not love him, but—she pitied him; and pity, with such a girl as Doris, is, indeed, near akin to love.

(To be Continued.)

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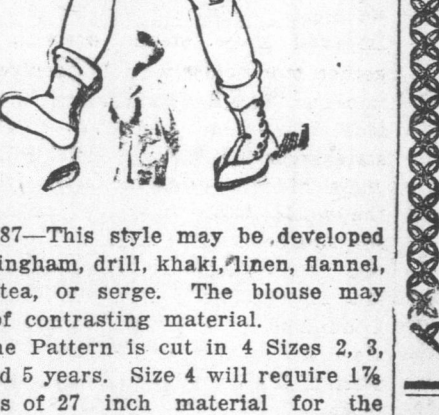
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