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# "KYRA,"

OR,

## The Ward of the Earl of Vering.

CHAPTER IV.

I am afraid that Percy Chester will have lost all chance of being considered heroic by some persons; for heroes never do anything wrong, are never weak, never vulnerable, never anything but impossibly virtuous and preposterously perfect. But Percy Chester was a man with about the usual characteristics of his sex, and among them that strong prepossession for a beautiful woman, and that dangerous faith in the sex as a whole which makes the wisest and coolest of men an easy prey to the least cunning of it. Still, however, he possessed a full share of anti-matrimonial prudence, was in no hurry to twist the chains of love about his handsome person, and almost determined as he rose the next morning to start for Scotland on the following day, and so fly from the fascinations of the most lovely face he had ever seen.

"Percy, my boy," he muttered to himself, nodding his head at the glass in a way that startled his somewhat nervous valet, "fly while there is time, or those deep violet eyes will bring you down, as sure as fate."

Then he walked down to the stables, got on his horse, and trotted into the park as the clock struck nine. Of course he did not expect her at that time; he was too well acquainted with the attributes of the sex to expect punctuality from any member of it. So he turned into the Row, and padded up and down, his horse fretting and fuming for a gallop, and wondering what on earth ailed his usually equally restless master.

Presently Lilian Devigne came in sight, mounted on the new mare, and followed by a sedate groom, who touched his hat to Percy Chester the moment he saw him, and then kept at respectful distance, as much as to say: "I resign her to your care, sir," but with a glance at the mare which seemed to add, "Keep you eye on both of 'em."

For a moment the animal—a superb creature, with a beautiful head, and in supreme fettle—passed unnoticed; it was impossible to give a thought, good or bad, to her until her mistress had received recognition and admiration.

Fresh and ingenuous as a dairymaid yet graceful and high-bred as a duchess, looked Lilian Devigne that morning "thorough," too, in the plain habit that fitted as if it had grown upon her, and the plain, well-poised hat throwing up the sunshiny hair.

"Yes," thought Percy, as he took her hand and bent over it bareheaded, "there can be no doubt that she is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen; and she is here riding with me at nine in the morning!"

Can it be wondered at that a certain kind of gratification ran through him; he was a man of flesh and blood not a statue of stone or wood.

"You see I am here," she said, with a smile.

"Yes, and I can scarcely believe my good fortune. I never doubted it more than ten minutes since."

"Ah, I was just finishing the battle with mamma. Dear mamma, she is too good. But there is no harm. It is so absurd. Do I not ride every morning? And if I am rather earlier than usual——"

"It is to be accounted a virtue, rather than otherwise," said Percy.

Then he dropped his dark, piercing—but now musingly admiring—eyes from her face to the horse.

"Ah!" she said; "is she not pretty and so quiet—just now. I suppose she is comparing notes as to their owners with your horse. She is not always so quiet. John had some trouble with her this morning; and she would scarcely let me mount because I touched her with the whip; playfulness, I suppose."

Percy did not answer; he was looking with experienced eyes at the peculiar twitch of the fine, sensitive ears. It might be playfulness certainly, but it looked very much like a nasty temper.

While they were speaking they had continued, pacing along the tan, Percy drawing a little apart to watch the action of the mare; and so absorbed was he, that he almost forgot her mistress—only for the moment, however.

"I am quite nervous," said Lilian Devigne; "I am glad it is not I who is being criticized."

"You need have no qualms," he said, with his earnest gaze.

She dropped her eyes and pulled at her gauntlet.

"Put her to a canter," he said, and with an instant obedience Lilian Devigne did as she was told.

Percy trotted at a little distance and then regained her side.

"Admirable!" he said, "she is as sound as a roach, and, I hope, quiet."

"Are you sure?" she said, and with a little flash of the eye she dropped the end of her jeweled whip on the satin neck.

With her ears thrown back like a hare's, the mare started and dashed forward; but the rider was no novice, and held her well in. The start threw all the grace of both mistress and mare out to perfection; nothing was lost to the spectator.

"Let us have a gallop," said Percy; "I think she can go by the way she throws her forelegs out," and touching his horse with his hand away they went.

"This is glorious!" exclaimed Lilian Devigne, her head erect, her face exquisitely tinted with the bloom of a young and healthy woman, her eyes sparkling, and her sweet lips half parted.

"I do love a gallop! Oh, if I were a man I think I'd live in the saddle!"

"Do you wish to make a Cossack of me?" said Percy, in a low voice.

"I?" she responded, with a little gaze of wonder, "what should I——" Then she broke off with a laugh.

"You would not make a bad one."

"Thanks," he retorted, with a smile; "I'll let my hair grow and cultivate trailing mustaches."

Her light, girlish laugh rang out softly. "Once more," she said, and again they flew over the noiseless tan.

"How I should like a race!" she breathed. "A real race, for life and death! to fly like the wind across a battle plain, with the whistle of a thousand bullets about one's ears."

Percy laughed gravely.

"It is not so nice as it sounds. I did it once in Greece, with a score of dirty cutthroats at my back, and—no it is not as nice as it seems."

"Greece!" she mused, pulling up into a walk, and drooping with exquisite grace into a meditative attitude. "You have traveled a great deal, have you not? How nice to be a man! Some day you must tell me some traveler's stories. I have a schoolgirl's love of adventure and romance."

He looked down at her with a smile.

"Some day," he said, then stroked his mustache.

"Or some night," she ran on, with a rippling smile, "when we are sitting on some countess' stairs, or yawning at a garden party—ah, I forgot though, your cousin said you were going into Scotland for the fishing."

Percy colored and looked aside.

"I have not quite made up my mind," he said, with the slightest trace of confusion, "I may stay the season out—or part of it—it all depends."

"Shall you?" she exclaimed, in a little tone of surprise. "How strange. Now I cannot imagine any one staying in London all through the glorious summer when they could away into the fresh air—away from the dust and the crowd, and the monotony of the routine," and she sighed.

"You differ in your estimate of the delights of a London season from most of your sex," he said, looking at her curiously, and thinking how nice, how glorious it would be to have her by his side—this sweet girl-woman, as he rambled by mountain tarn and valley lake. Yes, evidently she was not one of the common herd; there was a soul within that fair temple above the vain frivolities of her class.

"Am I not pastoral?" she said, breaking in upon his thoughts, or rather chiming in with them. "I dare a great deal in confessing my bad taste. It is the freshness of the morning that makes me long for the country, the real quiet, peaceful country. Perhaps I shall think differently at midnight."

He nodded.

"No; I don't think you will," he said, "unless you are very fickle and vacillating."

"I am not that," she replied, and raised her eyes to his face. "I leave that to your sex."

"I plead the exception, if you please," he retorted, in blissful ignorance of himself. "Once black with me is always black, once loved is always loved," and he looked at her with his dark, earnest eyes. She turned her head for a moment, then looked back at him.

"An unfortunate characteristic; more likely to entail pain to yourself than pleasure."

"Certain to," he said, quickly, "unless——" Then he stopped.

"Unless?" she asked, with innocent eyes.

"Unless one meets with a corresponding constancy."

"Ah," she breathed, with a light laugh that nevertheless had a certain tremor in it. "Such natures as 'love but once and that always,' to quote Shelley, are few and far between."

"Not always," he said, drawing closer to her, his eyes fixed on her thoughtful face. "Not always, and when they meet there is something for the gods to applaud."

"And men to wonder at," she added, quickly.

Then, as he nodded, she drew herself together with a little start.

"We have been here half an hour, and that is my limit. Where is John?"

"One more turn," pleaded Percy. "One more turn down to the chestnuts and then I will escort you to Park Lane, and bear all the blame that awaits disobedience."

She laughed, lightly touched the mare with her dainty whip, and away she flew.

"Yes," said Chester, "she goes well; how she frets at it. I think she could jump, Miss Devigne."

"Shall I try her?" she said, suddenly.

"No," he replied, promptly. "Not the first time."

"Why?" she asked, with an arch twinkle. "There is no danger. Let me put her at the rails."

"No, no," he said, but his words scarcely reached her, for, with a quick movement, she turned round and sent the mare at the rails. To herself and Percy's surprise, however, the animal refused point blank.

Percy laughed.

Something in the laugh, though it was not directed at her, seemed to jar on Lilian Devigne's ears, and the temper that lay hidden beneath the velvet of her manner rose hotly.

"She shall go," she said, and raising her whip gave the mare a cut across the shoulders.

With a nasty start the animal showed its vicious nature in a moment, reared for one second, then sprang off as if she had been an arrow discharged from a bow.

In an instant Percy had stuck the spurs into his own horse and was after her.

"Keep her well in hand!" he cried, gently, "and mind the turn!" he added, as a thought, a dread, flashed upon him.

She locked back for a moment with a little smile and nod, but he saw that her face was white to the lips, and his own set hard as he urged his horse in pursuit.

A minute or less and he was at her side; the mare, alarmed and irritated by the sound of the horse's breath so near her, cut short her gallop, and, shaking her head, began to prance about with the set purpose of hurling the rider.

"Sit firm! Sit firm!" said Percy, quietly, feeling, for the moment, an apprehension—only for the moment, however, for as he came nearer and was able to see Lilian Devigne's face under the shadow of the hat he saw that it was distorted by fear, and that the apparently composed woman had lost her head.

(To be Continued.)


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