

For Love of a Woman;

New Romeo and Juliet.

CHAPTER XXIII.
A SAD HOME-COMING.

One morning his servant brought him a letter, and he seized it eagerly; but his face fell as he saw the Stoyke coat-of-arms on the envelope.

The letter was from the Marquis. It was the first he had written, though Cecil had sent him a short report of his proceedings each week, and the contents caused him to spring from his chair. It said:

"My Dear Cecil—I think you had better come back. It appears that your course of true love, like other persons', is not running smoothly.

STOYLE."

That was all, but it was enough for Cecil. In less than an hour he was on his way to the station as fast as the car could carry him. He was fortunate enough to catch the mail, and, by travelling day and night, arrived at Barton Towers just after dinner. The butler started and stared at the young viscount's haggard face and travel-stained clothes, and in his solemn fashion looked quite shocked.

"Where is the marquis?" demanded Lord Cecil.

"In his room, my lord. I'm sorry to say, dinner is over; but I can serve you—"

"Will you tell the marquis I have arrived, and ask him to see me, please?" said Lord Cecil, interrupting his stately periods. "I shall be ready in ten minutes."

He was scarcely longer, and still pale and wearied-looking, was conducted to the library.

The marquis was sitting in his easy-chair, wrapped in his velvet dressing-gown, and looked up with his usual cold smile, and a slight elevation of the eyebrows denoted his recognition of Cecil's altered appearance.

"How do you do?" he said, giving him the tips of his fingers. "I am afraid you have been rather hurried on your journey—"

"I came back without the loss of a moment," said Lord Cecil, gravely. "I should have come before, but I waited to complete the business, or until I heard from you—"

The marquis shrugged his shoulders. "I'm afraid you have inconvenienced yourself on my account," he said, coolly and indifferently. "There was no reason on earth why you should remain there a moment longer than you liked—"

Lord Cecil's pale face flushed, and he made a movement of indignation.

"You must have been bored to death. Oh, no; I forgot—you take an interest in those people. Ah, yes. I got your letters. Quite reports, weren't they? I am ashamed to say I didn't read them."

Lord Cecil's eyes flashed, but he restrained himself with an effort.

"My lord," he said, grimly, more firmly and sternly than he had ever

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spoken in his life. "I will not trouble you with an account of my mission—for it was a mission, carelessly as you ignore it. I am too full of anxiety on another matter. Will you tell me the meaning of the note you sent me?"

The marquis stopped again and looked at him with a faint, puzzled confusion, as if he were trying to remember what it was he had written; then he nodded.

"Ah, yes; I remember. I sent you the note because I thought you would like to hear some information I received about Miss Marlowe—"

"Miss Marlowe, do you mean?" said Lord Cecil, biting his lips. "What information—"

"Give me time, please," said the marquis, arranging his dressing-gown. "Your impetuosity is rather trying."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Lord Cecil, clenching his hands, "why do you torture me like this? You forget—or do you not forget? Is it from sheer malice that you keep me in this suspense? You know—I see you know—that I have not heard from Miss Marlowe; that I fear some accident—"

"I know nothing of your not having heard from her," said the marquis, with perfect coolness, "and I care less. I wrote to you because I considered that I should do so on a point of honour. You were absent on my business, and it was my duty to let you know what I had heard. I have always done my duty, and I did it in this case, though the writing of even a short note is irksome to me."

"Well, my lord, well!" demanded Lord Cecil—and he paced to and fro—"what is it? Is she ill—is she—"

"The word 'dead'."

"Ill? Oh, no; I hope not. The fact is, I may say 'No,' for it is generally known, I imagine, that Miss Marlowe—pardon, Miss Marlowe—has disappeared."

Dreadful as the word sounded, Lord Cecil drew a breath of relief, and a smile—a very mirthless one—crossed his lips.

"Disappeared?" he said, almost contemptuously. "You mean she has left

Barton? That accounts for her not having received my letters or answered them. Where has she gone?"

The marquis shrugged his shoulders.

"I had better tell you what I know; we are getting rather confused. It appears that Miss Marlowe's guardian died suddenly. Probably you know this?"

Lord Cecil uttered an exclamation of dismay and pity.

"No! I did not know it! I have not heard from her—from anyone! My poor Doris! When—when did he die?"

"Some time ago—soon after you left, I believe; and here in Barton. I know nothing of the particulars."

"And she did no twirl! Why not, why not?"

"For reasons best known to herself. My dear Cecil, I am reluctant to shake your faith in this young lady, but I am afraid I must."

"What!" demanded Lord Cecil, scarcely understanding. "My faith in Doris! Go on, sir!"

"It would seem—Pray take a chair; your constant moving is harassing."

Lord Cecil sank into a chair, impatiently.

"It would seem that the young lady was not very serious in her little love-affair with you. I imagine that that kind of young person seldom is. How can it be expected of them? They are actresses by profession. I daresay she was practising for a love-scene when she was exchanging vows of perpetual faith with you. Pray don't take my suggestion in bad part!" he put in, for Lord Cecil leant forward with crimson face. "I am sorry you should have regarded the matter so seriously. It is a mistake—I speak with experience—a mistake to take any woman seriously; they are all daughters of Eve, and as unreliable as their first mother. Miss Marlowe is like the rest, that is all!"

"Will you tell me, my lord, what it is you insinuate?" said Lord Cecil, in despair.

"Insinuate nothing! Why should I? I believe it is perfectly true; but you can ascertain for yourself, of course, that she has plighted you, and gone off with her first and—pardon me if I add, her more suitable young man."

Lord Cecil started up, his face pale and working, his eyes flashing.

"It—it is a lie!" he said, hoarsely.

The marquis regarded him with a mixture of curiosity and contempt—the kind of look with which one might regard the movements of a strange animal.

"Yes, it may be. I don't answer for the truth of the story, as I said."

"Where has she gone? Who is this man? It is false! I will stake my existence upon her truth! It is a ridiculous lie!"

The marquis smiled.

"A large stake—too large for so paltry a prize as a woman's faith!" he said, calmly. "I have heard that she has gone to Australia with a man named—Excuse me, my memory is very faulty; but, fortunately, I jotted down the details. I had an idea that you would like to hear them."

He reached for an elegantly bound memorandum-book as he spoke, and consulted it. "Ah, yes, here it is! 'Miss Marlowe sailed in the "Orion" on the fourteenth, in company with Mr. Garland, late of the Barton Theatre Royal; engagement at Melbourne.' The 'Orion,' the fourteenth. I am glad it occurred to me to jot it down with the particulars."

Lord Cecil stared at him as if he were in doubt whether he or the marquis was mad, and the marquis, closing the book, regarded him with a calm, set placidity.

Then Lord Cecil laughed. It was an unpleasant laugh to hear.

"Who told you this fable?" he demanded.

"I got it from Spenser Churchill," said the marquis, promptly.

"Spenser Churchill! Spenser Churchill!" repeated Lord Cecil. "What had he to do with it?"

"Too much," said the marquis. "Very much against my advice, he insisted—you know he is a professional philanthropist!"—with a sneer—"he insisted upon pleading your case with the young lady. But it was of no avail; even so distinguished an individual could not persuade a woman to keep her faith."

Lord Cecil strode up and down, his physical weariness and exhaustion playing their part in his mental disturbance.

"It is not true!" he asserted, vehemently. "It is not true! Why should Spenser Churchill be mixed up in this matter? Why—"

Fashion Plates.

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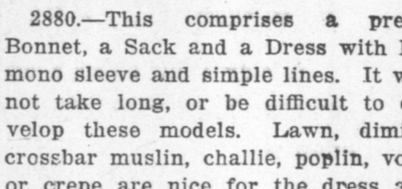


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