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CHAPTER IX.

"I have had an accident," she said, haughtily, but her voice shook and Ralph's heart melted at her distress.

"So I see. Are you hurt?" he asked, trying to speak casually, but his anxiety displayed itself in his voice and in his eyes eloquently enough.

"No, I don't think so," she replied. "My mare was startled by a hare that ran under her nose, and bolted. The rein broke—and I was thrown." She endeavored to laugh with self-contempt. "I don't think I am hurt—but I struck my head, and I feel—dizzy."

He nodded. "I know." "My mare—if she gets to the Court Lord Lynborough may hear of it and be alarmed."

"That's all right. I've got the mare," he said. "If I only had some water—do you think you could come as far as the hut? Lean on my arm."

She rose, supported by his arm, and staggered a little.

"Lean on me," he said, almost with an air of command. "That's right!"

it's not far; but you know. You only want some water and a rest—Ah, you're not going to faint!" for her eyes closed.

"No, no!" she said, in a low voice, and evidently struggling womanfully with her weakness. "I think I must have hurt my foot; it's so painful."

"A sprain!" he said, more to himself than to her. "You must not walk on it. Put your hand on my shoulder."

"What—what are you going to do?" she asked.

"Carry you!" he said, simply.

"I forbid you!" she said, the color rushing to her face.

"Not much use," he retorted, as quietly as before. "To walk on a sprain is a silly thing. It will mean a bed or a sofa for you for months, perhaps. Keep still."

Her pride would not permit her to struggle with him, and she suffered him, under mute protest, to raise her in his arms. As he strode off with her slowly but firmly, the pain nearly made her faint again and her eyes closed, her head drooped lower and lower until, against her will, though she strove with all her force to exert it, rested on his shoulder.

He carried her into the hut and put her on a chair. His heart was beating fast but not with the exertion of carrying her; though Veronica was no feather; every vein in his body was tingling; he saw the lovely white face as through a mist. Then he shook off the influence of her beauty. He went presently and, getting some water, put the cup to her lips.

She drank some, breathing slowly and painfully, and wiping her lips with her handkerchief. He took it from her and, dipping it in the water, bathed her brow, and in doing so, unconsciously drew her head till it rested against him. The faintness passed and she opened her eyes and looked up at him with a vague, uncertain dreaminess.

"Where—ah, yes, I remember!" she breathed. Then the color rushed over the ivory of her face. "Thank you," she said, coldly, but her eyes were shy, as they still met his as if she could not withdraw them. "I—I am sorry you should have so much trouble."

Ralph tried to say the conventional "No trouble!" but his voice died away in a mutter. She moved and winced.

"Your foot!" he said. "Let me see."

"No, no!" she said, earnestly. "It's nothing—I can walk." She put her foot to the ground and he saw her lips writhe. "Oh, how shall I get to the Court!"

"I'll go for a carriage," he said. "But we must get that boot off first or else—"

"No, no," she said again; but, disregarding her refusal, he knelt down and untied the boot. The foot was

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already swollen, and as he endeavored to take off the boot she winced again. He took out his knife and cut up the back of the boot and slid it off gently and skilfully, and the small shapely foot, already beginning to swell, rested in the palm of his hand. She leaned back, but her eyes rested on his bent head with a strange expression from which pride was quite absent.

"I seem born to give you trouble," she said, in a low voice.

Ralph started. He was like a man in a dream. Her helplessness, her sudden meekness, had wiped away the resentment which her past treatment of him had caused. His heart was aching with pity and something else that was at once a delight and a pain.

"No, no," he said, rather huskily. "It is fortunate I was near. I'll—I'll go for a carriage. But you must rest the foot. Let me bring another chair—no, there's a couch there. Stop!" as she tried to rise. He put his arms round her and, lifting her, though she struggled slightly and drew back, carried her to the couch. "You'll lie still; you won't attempt to get up while I'm gone?" he said, authoritatively.

"No," she said, in a low voice and with downcast eyes. "You will not be long?"

"I'll run—oh, I'll ride; I forgot the mare!" he said.

As he went to the door he met Burchett.

"Oh, Burchett! Miss Gresham's had an accident. I'm going for a carriage," he said, quickly.

Burchett frowned and glanced at Veronica. It was evident that he did not relish a *tele-a-tele* with the lady of the Court.

"Stay here," he said. "I'll go. The horse? I know. I saw it."

Ralph went back to the couch. Veronica opened her eyes and looked at him.

"You are back already!" she said, faintly.

"Burchett's gone," he said, awkwardly. "I'll go outside. If—it you want me—"

"Stay, please," she said. "I—I do not wish to be left alone."

CHAPTER X.

Ralph stood beside the couch, looking at nothing in particular and, for the first time in his life, at a loss for words. Veronica lay with her eyes closed, but her mind was busy behind them. She was marvelling at the fate which threw her and this man together, which persisted in placing her under an obligation to him; and the wonder of the fact was too great to allow of resentment. Besides, the woman in her clamoured for her admiration and gratitude. Her sex adore readiness and strength in the man: Ralph had been as prompt as he had been to save the puppy, and he had picked her up and carried her as if she had been a bundle of straw, and—almost as marvellous—he had done so with a self-possession, or, rather, a forgetfulness of self, that had robbed his service of offence. No gentleman could have been more

gentle, or more completely lost himself in his anxiety on her account.

"I'm afraid your foot is painful," he said, at last finding his voice.

She opened her eyes upon him.

"Yes, it is! Do you think it will get better quickly? I should hate being lame, laid up, for any time."

"You will have to rest it," he said. "I think it all depends upon keeping quiet for a day or two. I once sprained my ankle when I was gold-digging, and because I kept hopping about on it, I had it bad for a long time."

"Gold-digging? You seem to have been a great many things," remarked Veronica.

Ralph nodded. "Oh, yes, I've tried all sorts of things. Jack-of-all-trades and master of none, as they say."

"And yet you found time to go to school," mused Veronica, absently.

"Yes," he said; and as he answered he reached a chair and sat down a little behind her so that he could see her face.

It was still pale and a little weary, but Ralph was struck by its loveliness as he had not been struck hitherto. Perhaps it was because it did not at that moment wear its usual expression of pride and hauteur; perhaps it was because Fanny had dined Miss Veronica's beauty in his ears. How graceful she was stretched out at full length, one white hand on her bosom, the other hanging by her side like a plucked lily. Watching her sent a thrill, a series of thrills through him, such as he remembered feeling when he had looked at a beautiful picture in a London picture-gallery into which he had strayed one day. He was conscious of a peculiar sensation of unrest, of disquieting restlessness which was quite novel to him, and yet not altogether painful.

"Yes, my mother was very anxious about my schooling, and kept me to it. She was rather out of the ordinary. I think she had ideas above her station," as you would say. I remember she was fond of telling me it was easy to be a gentleman. I don't know what she meant, unless it was that any man could be a gentleman if he chose. She was ambitious on my account."

"Why did you say 'as you would say'?" said Veronica, as if she resented the personal application of the phrase.

Ralph laughed shortly. "I was only thinking of you as one of the 'gentry,'" he explained.

Veronica colored. "It was because you think I am very proud and—and contemptuous towards my—inferiors?" she asked in a low voice.

"Well, yes," he said, coolly. "Oh, it's all right! You've something to be proud of. It's a fine thing to be nobly born, I think; to be rich and powerful. I suppose I should be as proud as you—as the rest—if I were, say, the nephew of an earl."

Veronica tucked her hand under her cheek and turned to look at him.

"Will you move your chair so that I can see you, please?" she said.

He dragged the chair forward and gazed at the opposite wall as if he were having his photograph taken.

"Thanks. It hurt my neck, craning. So you think I am proud and contemptuous," she said, thoughtfully. "Do you know"—suddenly—"that I have not always been rich and powerful, as you call it? Do you know that I was once, and not so very long ago, quite, quite poor?"

"No," he said, turning to her with his interest shining in his eyes.

"Yes, I was," Veronica went on, vaguely thinking as she looked at him that his eyes and lashes were almost too good-looking for a man, and too expressive for a woman. "My father was very poor; so poor that there was not always enough food—" As the pity and sympathy softened the surprise in his eyes, her voice grew lower and her own eyes grew misty.

"We lived in a poverty-stricken neighborhood, and found it hard to live even there. I have done needle-work—" She held up her white hand with its taper fingers. "It was months after I had come to the Court before the marks of the needle wore off."

Ralph's eyes moved to the white fingers and clung to them.

(To be Continued.)

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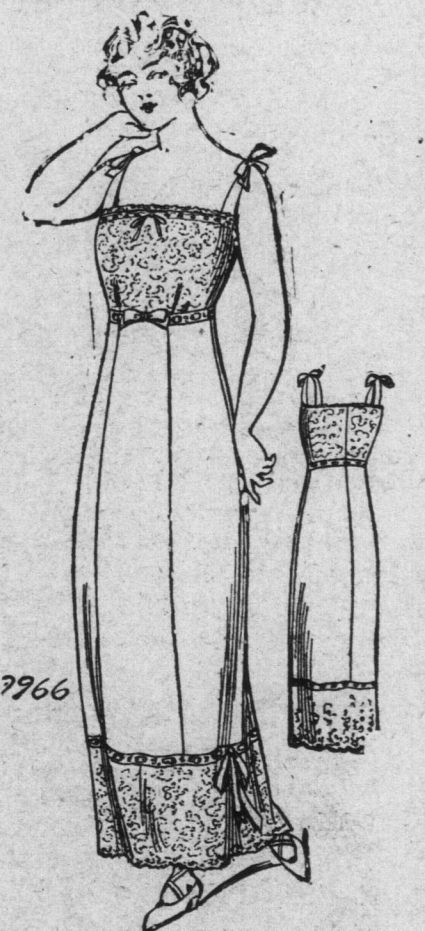


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