

A Millionaire's; Countess Westerleigh

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"I'm afraid you're right, my dear, and that Nora will have to take up the burden, which Providence has laid upon her. The question is what shape shall the burden take. Do you hanker after a town house at once, or would you like to inspect your estate at Garth's Hollow? Perhaps you ought to go down there. It is certain that they expect you, and will be glad to see you."

Nora stifled a sigh. She had no great desire to see Vale Hall and its splendour. Vale Hall was near the Witches Caldron, with all its bitter-sweet memories of Vane Tempest and the first moments of her unconscious love for him.

"I will go if I ought to do so," she said, quietly. "That is, we will go, of course."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Milly. "Of course we will go. You didn't suppose we should let you face the ordeal alone? Besides, you would promote yourself to death in that vast place all alone. You want a light, cheerful, active young person like me with you, my dear."

Nora laughed and looked at Mr. Lester, who waited her decision.

"Very well," he said, with a nod. "I will arrange it. We will go down there next Monday. I will write them to expect us, and—"

"And, meanwhile," filled in Milly, "we will go and buy something to go in, because, as for me, I haven't a rag to my back. I suppose they will be quite ready for us, papa? How curious they must all be, the tenants and the old servants, to see their new landlord, or landlady—landlady doesn't sound right, somehow—and mistress."

"Oh, yes; they will be quite ready, and no doubt, are curious enough. I have been in constant communication with the steward and agent, and Nora may be assured that her property is not being neglected."

For the next few days Milly caused Nora and herself to be driven from shop to shop, and if Nora had not laughingly protested, would have purchased an outfit varied and costly enough to satisfy a Russian princess. And on the Monday they started for Vale Hall.

Nora could not but feel the con-

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trast between the manner of her flight from Cornwall and her return to it. She had journeyed thence on foot, disguised in the rough garb of a fisher lad; she was returning in a saloon carriage, specially ordered and surrounded by every luxury possible to the occasion, and attired, if not in silks and satins, in costly material made by one of London's first and most expensive artists.

All the way down Milly talked in a vein of anticipatory excitement, and any one seeing the two girls would have concluded that it was the fragile-looking little who had come into a fortune, and was reveling in all its possibilities, instead of the quiet and rather silent Nora.

They reached Trclone in the evening, and a carriage and pair was waiting to take them on. It was dark, but a small group of sailors and fishermen was gathered to look at them; and Milly leaned forward and looked at them eagerly, but Nora, after a single glance, sunk back again. In that glance she saw the face of the man who had wished her "good-night" on the beach the evening she had wrecked her boat, and the sight of his face recalled the past too painfully for her to want to recognize others.

The horses—they were her own from the Hall stables—sped along through the night, and after what seemed to Milly, in her impatience a never-ending drive, they reached the Hall.

Nora looked out and saw the vast pile, in the garish light of a dozen torches, and a strange sensation ran through her. Surely it was all a dream! Not even when a burst of cheering rose from the rough farm-laborers and miners, and cries of "Welcome! welcome home, Miss Vale!" rose on the wild night, did she realize, fully realize, that it was herself they were welcoming, and that this huge building was her "home."

The house, as Milly whispered, was like a lighthouse, and it was evident that the servants had done their best and succeeded in making the great place seem bright and cheerful.

A huge fire burned in the stone fire-place which Vane had so much admired, the antique gild candelabra which hung from the centre of the vaulted roof was filled with lighted candles; blazing fires were seen through the open doors of the room; the servants—and there seemed an army of them—were drawn up in lines in the hall, and on every face as Nora, followed by Milly on her father's arm, walked down the human lane, was an expression of genuine interest and welcome.

Only an outline of their young mistress's story was known to them, but her beautiful face, with its vague sadness, the melancholy in the lovely eyes, which, not unnaturally, were

dimmed with sudden tears, went straight to their simple hearts.

Milly, half carried by her father, caught at Nora's dress.

"Oh! wait—wait a moment dear!" she pleaded. "Isn't it lovely—simply lovely? I've tried to picture an old place like this—a really old, ancestral house—but I never imagined anything quite so perfect as this Hall. And how nice they look!" she went on, excitedly, but in a lower voice. "And they all seem so pleased to see you! Aren't you going to—do you think you could manage to say just one word to them? Look! here is the housekeeper, I suppose."

An old dame in black merino, with a snow-white cap of lace, and the indescribable air of self-respect and dignity which the "old retainer" acquires, separated herself from the rest, and advanced with a courteous

"We are very glad to see you, miss," she said, "and we hope that you will be happy in your new home. We wish you every happiness, miss and offer you our duty."

Nora held out her hand and stifled her trembling lips. "Thank you! Thank you!" she said. "You are all very kind to come in this way, and—and I am very grateful."

Perhaps they had expected more pride and self-possession in the newly made mistress of Vale Hall perhaps they had expected a kind of lady Florence. Anyway, her manner of taking their reception, the beauty of her face, and the sweetness of her voice and eyes went home to them.

A cheer rose, and the old dame's eyes filled with tears.

"God bless you, miss," she faltered, "and give you happiness in your new home."

Then her manner changed, and she was once more the person in authority as she turned to a modest-looking maid—dressed in black like the rest—and said:

"Conduct Miss Vale to her room, please," said Nora; and the two girls were escorted up the broad stairs to the best bedrooms.

"Dinner will be served in an hour, miss," said the butler, who had also received the honor of Nora's handshake.

"Dinner! as if either of us wanted dinner!" exclaimed Milly, when they were alone. "Oh, Nora, isn't it like a page out of the 'Arabian Nights'? Papa talked as if this were quite an out-of-the-world place, but it might be one of the palaces in Kensington, only that everything here is so beautifully—what's the word?—'dignified' and mellow. And that dear old lady in the black merino. Did you see her tears in her eyes? Oh, Nora, how happy you must be—ought to be!"

She corrected herself gently, and with a wistful look in Nora's eyes, which still wore their sad expression, though she smiled as she bent over the couch beside the fire and kissed

Milly's flushed face. She was very

the faded dappery and iron-clamped boxes—the two girls looked round with awed curiosity.

"What's behind that curtain, I wonder?" said Milly in a whisper.

(To be Continued.)

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quiet, and it was still Milly who talked, while their maid dressed them or dinner.

The dining room, with its old oak pictures, its big table with the Vale plate, increased Milly's rapturous satisfaction.

Neither of the girls eat much of a dinner, but Mr. Lester, who had arrived at the philosophic stage, did not permit his admiration to interfere with his gastronomic enjoyment.

"You have a first-rate cook as well as a magnificent house, Nora," he said, "and a cellar that would vent a great deal of beating; but I'm afraid that portion of your worldly goods won't receive proper appreciation from you. You will excuse my saying that such claret and port as these are thrown away upon young ladies, who generally prefer the awful concoction known as ginger wine to the rare vintages of Portugal or France."

They found the great drawing room lighted up as if for a grand party, and it is not to be wondered at if Nora, looking round the stately room, with its painted ceiling and hangings of old brocade, was too tired to realize that all this splendor belonged to her. The next day was wet, and the two girls made a tour of the vast place under the guidance of the housekeeper, a couple of footmen at times carrying Milly in a portable wicker-chair, which Nora had caused to be brought with them from London. At other times she limped round, leaning on Nora's strong arm, and expressing her astonishment and delight at everything. At one door the old lady paused with her hand on the handle.

"I don't know whether you'd care to go in here, miss," she said. "It's an old lumber-room and dreadfully dusty. No one ever went in here excepting the master—I mean, Mr. Vale."

"Oh, do let us go in," said Milly, pressing Nora's arm; and the housekeeper, at an assenting glance from Nora, unlocked the door, while one of the footmen was sent for a light. When the lamp shed its beams over the scene of confusion—the overturned tables and broken, piled-up chairs,

the faded dappery and iron-clamped boxes—the two girls looked round with awed curiosity.

"What's behind that curtain, I wonder?" said Milly in a whisper.

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