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A Millionaire's Countess Westerleigh

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"I am very strong," said Nora, with a sigh.

If she were only quite dead.

"But you are knocked up, and ill and faint," said the girl, with gentle eagerness. "And have you much further to go? Oh, I hope not!"

"I don't know," replied Nora, looking straight before her with that look which the homeless, friendless fugitive so soon acquires.

The girl leaned forward in her chair and scanned the pale face with pitying scrutiny.

"You don't know?" A long breath then a soft, "Ah! you are in trouble!"

Nora's color flickered, then went again.

"Yes," she said in a low voice.

"Will you—can you tell me?" asked the girl, gently, and she stretched out her hand and laid it timidly on Nora's arm.

Nora touched it gratefully.

"No, I can not tell you," she said, "I could not tell any one. It is not a great trouble," she went on, almost to herself; "it only means that I am alone in the world—"

She stopped.

The sick girl's hand tightened on Nora's arm.

"All alone in the world? How dreadful! And you do not know where you are going?" Her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, you must let me help you. You must let papa—"

Nora shook her head.

"Oh, but you don't know how good he is and how clever! He will be

sure to be able to help you, for he always knows what to do. You need not tell him anything more than you like—indeed you need not. He is so clever and so quick at reading people and understanding them that he will not need to be told anything."

Nora's face flushed and then went pale again.

"I must be going on," she said hurriedly; and she rose. But she did so with difficulty, and the girl could not see how weak she was. She held Nora's arm and tried to force her down on to the seat again.

"Not yet," she said, pleadingly. "Do not go yet. Wait just for five minutes." As she spoke she glanced impatiently toward the inn door.

"Wait until you are a little stronger—please do, and just to please me. No one refuses me anything, because—well, because I am spoiled and a—cripple, you see."

Nora sat down again.

"I will wait a few minutes," she faltered.

As she spoke the servant came out of the inn with a tray.

The girl uttered a cry of thanksgiving, and held out her hand impatiently.

"Thank you, thank you! Go in please. Do not wait," she said to the servant, who examined Nora with some surprise. "This is my tea. I isn't tea, really, but one of those new-fangled foods they give to invalids. And they always send me such a lot of it—as if I were a plow-horse—and if I don't finish it papa is heartily broken. Will you help me? You are so kind, I know. Help me to eat it."

She poured half of the contents of the basin into the saucer and pushed it eagerly into Nora's hand.

Nora did not hesitate, but smiled faintly.

"Yes," she said, simply. "I am very hungry. I think that is why I nearly fainted."

"I know it!" exclaimed the girl, al-

most tragically—"I knew it! Oh, take this! Do, do, do!" and she held out the bread and butter and a glass of wine which were on the tray. "To think that you should be wanting food!—you so young! Why, you can't be much older than I am! And so beautiful! Oh, I have read of such dreadful things, and now I know that they can be true! You will eat it all, won't you?"

Nora smiled again.

"Every bit," she said.

The girl watched her with the quiet joy, which, thank God, is still left us—the joy of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, succoring the helpless.

"There!" she exclaimed, as Nora set the empty plate and saucer on the tray. "Do you feel better now? Better and stronger?"

"Ever so much," said Nora. "So much better that I can go on my way now. Good-bye, and thank you; and she held out her hand with a kind of boyish frankness which doubtless she had acquired during her masquerading period. The girl caught her hand and clung to it.

"You must not go," she said, her color coming and going. "I can not let you go, not yet. Don't be angry and—don't laugh at me, please."

"I am not likely to laugh," said Nora, in her downright fashion, but with a quiver of her lips.

"No, I didn't mean that; you are so tired to laugh. But you must wonder why—why I ask you to stay. You think that it is because I pity you. Yes, yes, I do pity you, of course, but it isn't only that. It's your selfishness as well. I know I'm selfish; sick people always are; and I want you to stay for my own sake. You see it is so lonely here. Papa and I have been here for weeks, and here is no one, absolutely no one to speak to. And—and"—she hesitated then went on shyly—"and I have taken a fancy to you; oh, it is true, believe me, it is true. Do you ever take fancies? No? Ah, you see you are not a sick cripple tied to a chair. Wait and let us talk for a little while."

She had half raised herself as she murmured this rapid appeal, and had displaced the cushions at her back; so that when Nora firmly drew her hand away the girl slipped into the chair into an uncomfortable attitude. Nora took her on her arm and raised her, setting the cushions in their place with her disengaged hand. The girl drew a breath of relief and gratitude.

"Thank you, thank you! How kind

you are, and how strong—oh, how strong! Why, only a minute or two ago you were fainting, and now you can lift me as if I were only a baby. I wish—"

"What is it your wish? Is it anything I can get before I go?" asked Nora, gently.

The girl shook her head, the color coming and going in her wasted face.

"I was going to say that I wish you could be always with me."

Nora touched her hand and smiled a sad incredulity.

"You don't believe me; you mean that I don't know anything about you; that I have only seen you for a few minutes. Ah, you don't know what it is to be like I am; to feel lonely and to long for some one—some girl like myself, I mean, of my own age—to talk to and—she blushed shyly—"to love. Of course I have papa; and you must not think that he is not everything that is kind and good; and that I don't love him. I love him dearly, but—but he isn't a girl. And I've no mother nor sister," she went on; "only him. Tell me your name, will you? Mine is Milly—Milly Lester. My father is a lawyer, and we live in London; in Elm Square. Do you know it?"

Nora shook her head. She had sat down again, and was holding the girl's hand, hot and restless now with an excitement which Nora felt was bad for her.

"It is a delightful old square! Not fashionable, you know, but such a quiet and peaceful spot in the midst of the hubbub of the great city. Papa says it is an oasis. But it is dull—ah, yes! it is dull!—when he is away at the office all day, though he does not know that I feel it. But you haven't told me your name, I haven't given you time, have I? That's because I'm afraid you'll run away if I stop talking."

And she laughed wistfully, the laugh suddenly broken by a cough that shook her from head to foot.

As if he had heard the cough, her father came quickly from the inn to her side, and bent over her, scarcely seeming, in his loving absorption, to notice Nora.

Milly caught his hand and put her flushed face close to his.

"Papa," she said, eagerly—"this young lady—you see her?"

He glanced at Nora with a kind of impatient attention; then with a faint surprise in his eyes. He had thought that it might be one of the inn servants.

His manner changed to the reserve with which we Christians always regard the stranger within our gates, and he bowed.

"Who—who is it, Milly, dear?" he asked in a low voice. "Why are you so agitated and excited, my darling? What is the matter?"

Nora rose.

"It is my fault," she said. "Your laughter has been very kind to me, sir, and has talked too much. She is not strong. I will go now."

He watched her and listened with increased surprise. A man of the world is quick to discover the signs of good breeding, and they were evident enough in Nora's face and voice.

"Don't let her go, papa," said Milly. "She is tired. She has walked twenty or thirty miles, and she does not know where she is going; and—bowed down lower, papa—she was faint with hunger until I gave her my tea!"

Very naturally, Mr. Lester grew suspicious, and his manner grew graver and colder. Nora had risen; she inclined her head slightly, and with a stifled sigh moved away.

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