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TWO HEARTS UNITED

CHAPTER XXI.

If Veronica had been in love with Ralph before, she was ten times more in love with him now. As she paced slowly up and down her room, forgetting her late sprain, she told herself that no man had ever behaved more unselfishly, heroically. He had looked like a knight of old, sacrificing self at the altar of his love; he had spoken words that always force a woman's admiration and devotion; his voice rang in her ears, sentences here and there haunted her, filling her with pride for him one moment and causing her misery the next.

Because she, Veronica Gresham, of the world, worldly, knew that same world too well to deceive herself. The poor lover who leaves his mistress that he may go and win the fame and fortune which will enable him to claim he is a common object of the novel; and he always comes back with the aforesaid fame and fortune and—marriage bells reward him; but

in real life the man's sacrifice and striving generally end in failure; the course of true love runs so smoothly that it runs over the precipices of despair.

She knew that the odds were a thousand to one that she should ever see him again. She had accepted his sacrifice, his relinquishment of her at the time, because he—and the cynical, stony-hearted earl—were too many for her. But now, as she thought it all over in her own room, she grew hot with shame and self-reproach.

She was a woman and she had allowed the man she loved to sacrifice himself; had let him go out into the world to fight a well-nigh hopeless fight, had taken the heart out of his bosom and sent him away, friendless, poor, all the poorer for the loss of that heart. It was all he had, and she stolen it.

And while he was struggling and fighting the unequal fight, the forlorn hope, she was to remain at the Court, lappen in luxury and slothful ease. She was a pretty kind of woman! Why, she was a disgrace to her sex. As she pictured the days, the life she must lead in that great, stately house with its palatial rooms, its army of servants, with, for sole companion, the proud, heartless old man who had stepped in and wrecked her life's happiness with a few cynical phrases, her spirit rose in revolt. Surely no

true woman could be so base, so thankless for a good man's love as to spend her days like a lap-dog, while her lover went out into the desert of despair!

She felt that she could not appear at dinner, could not face the earl with his half-lowered, scornful, and watchful eyes, the keen regard of Talbot Denby, so she had sent the excuse of a headache, and spent the dinner-hour over a cup of tea sweetened by the bitterness of her thoughts.

Now, your true woman never thinks in vain, and presently Veronica discovered two facts: first, that she could not live without Ralph; and second, that she must see him before he went, if only to tell him that she could not exist without him—and—

Oh, could she go so far as to beg him to take her with him!

While she was pondering the problem Goodwin came up from the servants' hall with some lace in her hand.

"I've had the misfortune to upset some coffee over this collar, miss," she said. "I think if I were to take it to Mrs. Mason at once she might be able to get it out; she's very clever at such things."

Veronica gave her permission to go, and the coast was thus left clear for her; she could steal down to the but and see Ralph—and the rest must be left to chance. She waited until Goodwin had been gone half an hour, then threw a golf cape over her shoulders and drew the hood over her head; if she should be seen she would probably be mistaken for one of the maids.

As she went she tried to rehearse what she would say to Ralph; but she might as well have spared herself the trouble, for, in answer to her knock, it was Burchett who bade her "Come in," and, entering somewhat hurriedly, she saw that he was alone.

He rose at her entrance and stood gravely waiting for her to address him.

"I—I left something behind me in the arbour this afternoon," she said, with a mixture of pride and humility. She thought, "It was my heart I left!"

"Do you know—did Ralph say that he had found anything—a bracelet?"

"No, Miss," replied Burchett; "he did not."

"Where—where is he?" asked Veronica, trying to speak with indifference.

chett—her voice faltered and broke—"I am to blame—No, I cannot tell you! But—but if you can help me find where he has gone—if you could send him a message—Do you think you can?"

The tears were in her eyes and in her voice.

Burchett shook his head gloomily. "No, Miss Veronica," he said something about Australia; but he may change his mind. And as to a message—"He shook his head again. "No, I've no means of doing so; and, if I had—"

He paused significantly and the blood rushed to her face.

"You wouldn't? Ah, but you don't understand! And I can't tell you! Good-night!" She paused still. "I'm—I'm glad you liked him and gave him the money, Burchett. Good-night!"

She had gone before he could speak, and, with the rough delicacy he had already displayed, he did not follow her to the door.

She walked quickly through the clearing and had gained the spinney adjoining the lawn when she heard footsteps. She stopped, and her hand went up to her cloak and drew it more closely round her as she stepped behind a bush. The footsteps were crossing the lawn, and presently she saw Talbot's tall, thin figure merge from the shadows. It did not seem to her at all extraordinary that he should be taking an after-dinner stroll, and, waiting until he had passed, she went on, skirting the spinney and keeping out of sight. But suddenly she was aware of another presence, and, looking round, she saw Gibbon edging his way from bush to bush and tree to tree. She was rather surprised, but only momentarily so, for she concluded that he was going to meet one of the maids—probably Goodwin; and after again waiting for a moment or two she went on her way and reached her own room.

Its luxury, the costly furniture and hangings, the flicking and as costly knickknacks, the expensive piano, the water-colors and richly bound books, jarred upon her overwrought senses. Yes, she was a lap-dog, a sybarite, while Ralph, the man who loved her, was a wanderer on the face of the earth. Pride! Where was her pride if she could endure such a life of self-hate? No, pampered dependent could own less pride, be more soiled than she—if she consented to accept Ralph's sacrifices and went on living at the Court.

(To Be Continued.)

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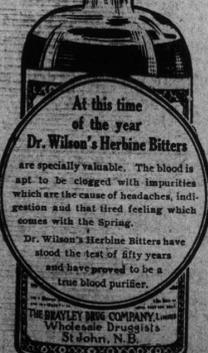
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