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For Love of a Woman;
OR,
New Romeo and Juliet.

CHAPTER IX.
A SECRET COMPACT.

"Oh, yes," she said, indifferently; "and now, having hooked me, I'll leave you to go for Lord Cecil."

And with a nod and a smile to the latter, she turned and entered the house.

Spenser Churchill looked after her with a rapt gaze of benevolent admiration.

"What a beautiful young creature!" he murmured, softly; "and as good as she is beautiful!"

"Eh?" said Cecil, seating himself on the balcony, lighting an immense cigar, and offering his case to Spenser Churchill, who shrank back and put up his hands with a gesture of alarm.

"I never smoke anything so—er—er—er—strong. But is she not as good as she is beautiful, now?"

"She is beautiful enough, certainly," said Lord Cecil, carelessly; "as to her goodness, why, yes, I suppose she is good enough. All women are good, especially pretty ones."

"I see," murmured Churchill, with his head on one side. "You'd say that—er—there was a faint sign of, shall we say, temper in dear Lady Grace? Well, perhaps—but—oh, really you must be mistaken, my dear Cecil; so charming a creature!"

"Why, I didn't accuse her of temper!" said Lord Cecil, with some astonishment and an amused laugh. "It was you yourself."

"No—really? Did I? I'm sure I had no such intention. But I see you think—eh?—perhaps a little inclined to jealousy? Well, there may be a touch of that in her composition, now you speak of it."

Lord Cecil stared at him with a half-amused smile.

"Terrible thing, jealousy, Cecil. My poor father—I don't think you knew him?"

Lord Cecil shook his head, as he thought, "And no one else that I ever heard of."

"My poor, dear father," continued Spenser Churchill, with a plaintive air

of reflection, "had warned me against that peculiar temperament. 'Never, my dear Spenser,' he would say, 'never marry a jealous-natured woman. You had better throw yourself into the first horse-pond.'"

"And you have never done either?" said Lord Cecil, knocking the ash off his cigar.

"N—o," said Spenser Churchill; "and do you really think that dear Lady Grace has a jealous disposition? Nor, really Cecil, I think you must be mistaken—"

"Confound it!" said Lord Cecil, "I never said anything of the kind. Don't put words I never used into my mouth please, Churchill!"

Didn't you? Then how did I get the idea, I wonder?" responded the other, looking gravely troubled. "Surely not and he looked extremely pained. "I should very much regret giving you a wrong impression of my opinion of that charming young creature, my dear Cecil. Most charming! Ah, what a wife she will make! You don't agree from Lady Grace herself? Oh, no, no! These London belles are—er—like this with me—no? Well, perhaps—er—yes, I understand you. Beauty, however charming it may be, is not the best possession a woman can boast. No; after all, perhaps, as you think, a young, unsophisticated girl, unaccustomed to the intoxication of constant admiration, would prove a more valuable companion for one's life—well-known Oriental fruit, more beautiful to the eye than the touch, and—"

Lord Cecil broke into a laugh.

"What on earth are you driving at?" he demanded.

"I driving at!" exclaimed Spenser Churchill, opening his eyes with an innocent stare. "What do you mean, my dear Cecil? What on earth do you mean?"

Lord Cecil clasped his hands round his knees, and looked at the round, smooth face and extended eyes with faint amusement.

"You'd make an excellent Chinese puzzle, Churchill," he said. "If what you mean is to warn me against marrying Lady Grace—"

"My dear Cecil," broke in the soft voice, pitched in a tone of strained horror.

"—You can spare yourself the trouble, for I haven't the least intention of doing so—at present."

Spenser Churchill's thick eyelids quivered almost imperceptibly; but beyond this faint sign, no other trace of any emotion was visible at this frank announcement.

And the Worst is Yet to Come—



"Really?" he said. "I thought—But, my dear Cecil, don't you consider her a most beautiful and charming woman? and—er—come, now, after all, you would find it difficult to discover a more suitable partner, eh?"

Lord Cecil frowned.

"Let us change the subject," he said, curtly.

"Well, perhaps you're right, after all," said the other, with bland propititude. "Yes, no doubt you are right. That sort of woman is better in a picture, eh? Yes, we'll change the subject. What time do you dine here?"

"Eight," said Lord Cecil. "I don't dine at home to-night—at the Towers," he corrected himself. "I have an engagement."

"Really? I am so sorry! Can't you put it off—for my sake? Write and tell the people that you are too good natured to dine out when an old friend turns up."

"I'm not going to dine out," said Lord Cecil, absently.

"No—really? Now, where can you be going?"

"I think the marquis is inquiring for you," said Lord Neville, curtly. "I'll tell him you are here."

And dropping from his perch, he sauntered into the house.

Spenser Churchill leant over the balcony and smiled.

"Going to the theatre again!" he murmured. "Yes; I haven't been to a country theatre for some time. I really think I should like to go and see what it is like!"

CHAPTER X.
FOR HIM ALONE.

Doris went home, her heart throbbing with an emotion which was half-pain, half-joy.

Lord Cecil Neville had asked her to meet him to-morrow. "I promise nothing," she had said, and when she said it she fully meant that she would come; and yet, now, as she walked hurriedly to the lodgings, she knew that when the morrow arrived she would feel drawn to the spot as the steel is drawn to the magnet.

But if she had promised nothing, he had promised. He had said that he would be at the theatre that night, and she remembered how her heart had leaped at his words; even now they rang sweetly in her ears.

Heaven only knows with what delight she dwelt upon the thought that he would be present, listening to her as she spoke the passion-laden words of Juliet.

All this was joy, but the pain came on. Alas! that all our joy should be attended so closely by that grim companion

"Love's feet are softly shod with pain," says the poet.

For the first time in her young life she had a secret from Jeffrey. It had been difficult to tell him yesterday of her acquaintance with Lord Cecil Neville; she felt now that it would be impossible to tell him, for she knew that she could not recount the incidents of their meeting without letting him know how interested she had become in this young nobleman, whose head had rested on her knee, and whose face haunted her night and day.

And she knew that once she had told Jeffrey, he would forbid her even to see or speak to Lord Neville again. And this seemed too dreadful for her to bear.

Yes, it had come to this; that the great actress, with the heart and purity of a child, had become so interested, so fascinated—if that is the right word—with this stranger, that the thought of not seeing him again, or hearing his voice, was intolerable.

Her steps grew less hurried as she neared home, and her thoughts had crystallized into this shape:

"After all, where is the harm? He is good and kind, and I have so few friends—no one, excepting dear old Jeffrey!—that I cannot afford to lose him. Besides, I shall act better if I know that he is in the theatre. I don't know why that is, but it is so. And Jeffrey ought to be glad of that. Oh, if I could only tell him! But I cannot!"

Once during the day she did make the effort; she began to talk about the fields and the beautiful coming of spring, but Jeffrey would not listen. He was full of the business of the theatre, full of expected offers from the great London managers, and paid no attention to what she was saying, merely remarking that, after all, the open air was the place to study in.

To study in! Yes, she knew that! It was in the open air that she had first seen Lord Neville, and leant the way to speak Juliet's "Good-night!"

She did not leave the house again



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that day, but spent it studying her part. There were one or two points that she had missed, so Jeffrey said, and she went over them again and again.

And how do you think she mastered them? By imagining that Lord Neville was the Romeo, and it was for love of him she suffered and died.

"It was wrong?" Yes; but life is full of wrong, and it is not until youth is passed and experience is gained that we learn to distinguish the wrong from the right.

The night came, and with it the fly to carry them to the theatre.

There was an immense crowd collected outside the pit and gallery doors, and the manager met them with the glad tidings that all the reserved seats were taken.

"An immense success, my dear Miss Marlowe. You have hit them hard!" he said, smiling and nodding.

That he had only spoken truly was patent from the welcome which she received when she made her first appearance. A roar went up and shook the very chandelier, as the slim, graceful, girlish figure entered from the wings.

As is usual, I believe, with actors, for some minutes she could not see beyond the footlights; but presently she began to distinguish faces in the hazy glow, and she saw the handsome, tanned face she had expected—and looked for!

He had come, then, as she had promised.

He was in the box he had occupied on the preceding night; leaning forward, his hands clasped on the velvet edge, his eyes following her every movement.

She lost all consciousness of the rest of the audience, and played only to those rapt, attentive eyes.

Every word she uttered she spoke to him, every glance of the blue eyes—which grew violet when she was agitated—though bent upon Romeo on the stage, was meant for the one face in the vast audience.

She played, if anything, better than she had played last night, and the manager came to her and told her so.

"Better and better, Miss Marlowe!" he said, bowing and smiling. "If you go on like this—"

"The house is crammed," said Jeffrey, who was standing near the wings with a shawl to throw over Doris's shoulders—for, like that of most country theatres, the Barton was one rich in draughts.

"Yes," said the manager, "and a first-class audience. Did you notice those two side-boxes?"

Jeffrey looked.

"They have got the curtains drawn," he said.

The manager laughed.

"Yes. They have been drawn like that since the first scene. I expect that a London manager is behind each. Eh! Miss Marlowe? Ah! I sha'n't be able to keep you long!"

Doris smiled absently and passed on to her dressing-room.

But in the next act she happened to look up at the right-hand box, and she saw the curtains had been drawn aside.

She glanced at it with the pre-occupied look of an actor, and saw that the only occupant of the box was a young and very beautiful girl, with dark, flashing eyes, and bright, golden hair.

(To be Continued.)

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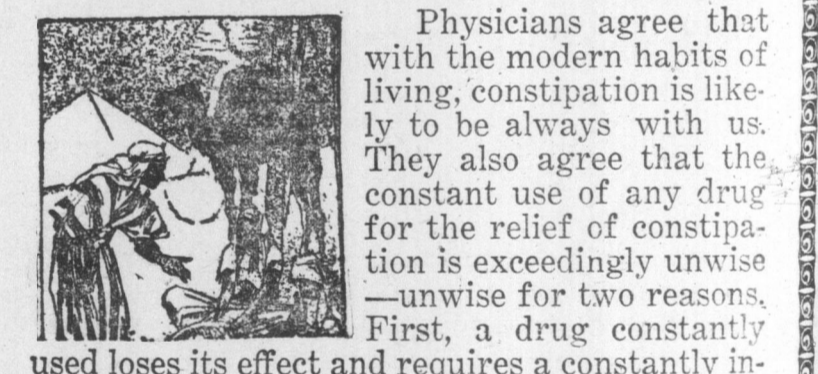
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