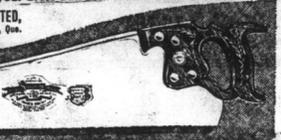


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## Happiness At Last, OR Loyalty Recompensed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

He rolled off the nefarious scheme fluently, and she listened, with her head on one side, her eyes fixed on the fire. Then she laughed.

"I dare say I could manage that," she said.

"Of course," he said, with a laugh. "The boy's in love with you. You take him unaware; give him no time to think. You can promise him anything—seeing that we can start in the morning."

She yawned. There was no compunction in her nature, no sense of shame. She had been an adventuress all her life, and a successful one—simply because of that absence of compunction and shame.

"Very well," she said. "Oh, yes; I can do it easily enough. But mind, I take that two hundred, Morgan."

His face fell.

"My dear Laura! Think of my expenses!"

She looked at him with a glint of anger in her eyes.

"I take that two hundred," she repeated, emphatically. "You have plenty of money; I know that; and I've wondered sometimes where you get it. You have had more than you got from Trevor and Deane."

He changed color, and she laughed contemptuously.

"Don't trouble to lie," she said, coolly. "I shouldn't believe you. And I don't care how you get it. All I know is, that I mean to have this haul. And do you know how I am going to spend it?"

"Another diamond bracelet? My dear, you might get it on credit."

"No; I'm going to spend it on detectives. I am going to find out that husband of mine."

Mr. Morgan Thorpe smiled a sickly smile.

"My dear Laura, you know best; but is it worth while?"

"Yes!" she said, with sudden fury. "I mean to find him. You've tried—or pretended to—and have failed. I'm going to try, and I mean to succeed."

"My dear, why be angry with me? I hope you will succeed; though why you should want him, seeing that you hate him like poison."

"Yes, you're right. I hate him like poison; and that's why I want him. I'm going to make life a hell for him."

She rose and stood looking before her with eyes which blazed with a malignant fire; her lips were parted, showing her white, even teeth; her powder showed almost yellow against her white face; her small hands were clenched tightly at her side.

Morgan Thorpe looked at her with a mixture of fear and admiration.

"Upon my soul, Laura, I don't envy him if you do find him," he said, with an uneasy laugh.

She drew a long breath.

"You'd have no cause to," she said, significantly, as she moved toward the door. "Tell me when you want me to get that money. Good-night."

The next morning Mr. Morgan Thorpe began his preparations for a sudden and secret flight. Such preparations with gentlemen of Mr. Morgan

Thorpe's character are beautifully simple. They consist in getting as many articles on credit as confiding and trustful tradesmen will supply. He bought a nice stock of clothes, some choice cigars, a few—but they were costly—articles of jewelry; he borrowed as many five-pound notes as he could from men with whom he had scraped acquaintance.

It was, "By Jove! I've left my purse at home! My dear fellow, will you lend me a few pounds for to-night?"

And at last, when the landlord of 31 Cardigan Terrace wrote demanding the rent by return post, Mr. Morgan Thorpe informed his sister that everything was ready for the exodus, and that she might bring off her grand coup against that young fool Deane.

She went up to her room after dinner, and locked the door, and in about an hour she came down and presented herself for approval, as it were.

Morgan Thorpe looked at her, as she stood before him, and uttered an exclamation of admiration. She was pale; there were dark rings round her eyes; but her expression was the highest achievement. She looked hunted, harassed, full of despair.

"By Heaven! you ought to have gone on the stage, Laura!" he said, preventively. "You ought, indeed. Why, you'd melt a heart of stone with that face and that look! Really, I think I should try for three instead of two hundred!"

She laughed, the heartless, callous laugh of the adventuress.

"Too high a sum would frighten my baby," she said. "Call a cab for me, Morgan. Here—give me a glass of champagne before I go."

He gave it her, still eying her with admiration.

"Perfect actress!" he murmured, ecstatically.

She laughed and nodded exultingly.

"Oh, I shall play the part all right. It's easy enough with such an innocent child as he is."

"If Trevor comes I'll have him told that you're in bed with headache."

She arrested the second glass on its way to her lips, and exclaimed:

"Thank God, I shall escape from him! He was here yesterday, and—well, that was a hard part to play! It was as much as I could do to keep from screaming out: 'I hate you—hate you! Take your hands off me!'"

Morgan Thorpe laughed.

"By this time to-morrow you will have put a good many miles between you and that too ardent lover of yours, my dear."

He called a cab, and, closely veiled, she entered and was driven off.

As she passed from the house to the cab, Trevor came round the corner. He saw her and recognized her, and he stood still for a moment, with astonishment. Then he went on to the house and knocked.

"Is Mrs. Dalton at home?" he asked, as coolly as he could.

"Yes, sir," replied the French maid, blandly; "but madame is confined to her room with a bad headache."

She saw him wince and start, saw the blood leave his face slowly.

"I'm sorry," he said, curtly. "Tell her—But never mind. Good-night, Marie."

He went down the steps and walked a few paces. Then he ran. The cab was still in sight. At the end of the street he halted, and jumped into a hansom.

"Follow that cab!" he said. "Keep out of sight if you can. Follow it, and mind you don't lose sight of it!"

He crushed an oath between his teeth.

Gaunt stood with his back to the door which he had closed on Deane—and waited. He heard the front-door of a woman's dress; the other door opened, there came the faint perfume which he remembered so well and loathed so bitterly, and the woman, his wife, entered.

The lamp was low, and shaded by a deep crimson shade, the fire-light flickered. In the faint light she did not in the first moment or two of her entrance see him. She moved to the fire, carefully threw back the hood of her fur cape, and held out her hands to the fire; and he, motionless and in silence, watched her.

He had once loved, or persuaded himself that he had loved, this woman. He could have laughed aloud with bitter self-scorn and mockery.

She warned her hands daintily, glanced at the clock, yawned, put up her hands to smooth the hair which the hood had ruffled, then turned and looked round the room, and—saw him.

For a moment she did not recognize him, and uttered a faint cry of surprise. Then with a shriller, though strangely repressed cry, she moved toward him, her head projected, her eyes fixed on him. She looked, as she moved, like an exquisitely beautiful snake. She was within a couple of paces before the words—

"It is you!" broke from her parted lips.

Gaunt, white and rigid, made a gesture of assent.

"Yes," he said. "Why are you here?"

She drew a long breath, as if she were choking, then she came nearer, and stared at him as she broke into a laugh—a laugh of triumph, of derision.

"It is you!" she repeated. "You—my husband! Well—My God, it's too good to be true! You—you here! How did you come? Why?" She looked round the room, as if amazed and perplexed, and then back at him. Her beautiful face flushed beneath the paint; her eyes shone like stars within the artistically drawn shadows. It was the face of a mask suddenly, hideously ended with life.

"This is my home—my rooms," he said. His own voice seemed to him as if it belonged to some one speaking at a great distance.

"Your—your rooms!" she repeated, dully. Then her eyes glittered, and she laughed. "Yours! Then—then—you are Lord Gaunt?"

"I am Lord Gaunt—yes," he said, as dully and mechanically as before.

She put her hand to her forehead and then to her throat, as if the thoughts that were crowding on her were suffocating her.

"You are Lord Gaunt! These rooms are yours! And you are a nobleman—a swell—and my husband!"

"Yes," he said in exactly the same lifeless tone, "I am your husband."

She leaned against the back of a chair and breathed heavily, then she laughed.

"I have found you—found you at last! And you are Lord Gaunt! And I am—yes, I must be, of course—Lady Gaunt! Lady Gaunt! My God, this was worth living for!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

"It is worth living for!" she repeated, with a choking laugh. "To think of it!" She snatched up a book from the small table near her, and dashed her hand on the inner cover, which bore his book-plate with list of arms above his name and title. "To think that I knew you were the owner here, that I've seen your name in all these books, and never knew, never guessed—"

She paused, breathless with excitement and triumph. Her voice, usually so musical, was thick and vulgar, the vulgarity of a common nature bursting through the thin coating of veneer, and she was at that moment, for all her beauty and grace, a virago of the worst type as she confronted him.

Gaunt stood quite still, his eyes fixed on her with the calmness of despair, the impassivity of disgust.

"Why did you leave me?" she demanded, stridently. "Why did you do it?"

"Can you ask?" he said, very quietly. "Do you think it was possible for me to remain with you when I discovered—that you were, what and who it was I had married?"

The reply infuriated her. She took a step toward him, and stared into his face with the passion of hate burning in her black eyes.

"You deserted me!"

"I left you, yes," he said, as calmly as before; "but deserted—in the strict, the legal sense—no. I provided for you—"

"A beggarly allowance. You married me in a false name!"

"No," he said again, with a touch of weariness in his voice. "Edward Barnard are two of my names. I concealed my family name and title; yes, that is true. I must have had some pretense—of what you were."

She flung her arms out.

"The law will reach you, punish you!" she hissed.

He made a slight gesture of indifference.

"You can not get rid of me!" she exclaimed, with an air of triumph. "You can not divorce me! You would if you could!"

"No," he said in exactly the same tone. It was as if he were confronting the passion with the calmness of the rock to the howling wave, which beat against it in vain. "Do what you will, I should not seek for a divorce. I am content to suffer anything rather than bring shame and disgrace upon the name I bear."

"You can bring no charge against me!" she said, defiantly.

"He made a gesture of assent.

"I am glad," he said, with a sigh. "I left you because I discovered what you were before I married you. Be silent a moment!" for she had opened her lips as if about to protest retort.

"Put yourself in my place. I loved you, deeming you all that a girl should be, all that a woman should be who takes the name of an honest man. I found—Ah! why should I tell you? You know."

She flung herself into a chair, and leaning her face on her hand, looked up at him with a mixture of defiance and hatred.

"What else could I do, but leave you?" he said. "What other course was open to a man of honor when he had discovered that he had married—an adventuress of the worst, the vilest type? God knows I loved you—"

She laughed discordantly.

"Not you," she retorted.

(To be continued.)

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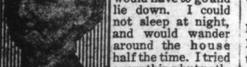
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