

Love and Crime

CHAPTER I

Two people are sitting on the veranda of a Paris hotel. They are in strange contrast. One, a woman of uncertain age, with a thin, unmusical voice and unattractive features, but dressed in the very height of fashion. The other, a young man, broad-shouldered, keen-eyed, with cheeks flushed and lips parted in a kindly smile, the very image of fresh, young manhood.

"This is paradise," murmurs the woman, pressing the edge of her fan ecstatically to her thin lip. "My dear Miss Surtees," retorts the man, "I should never have suspected you of being one of the seasonal."

"No, you fancy that because we put on a veneer of cold politeness we do not feel as deeply as the outspoken, rude, common crowd."

"I did not mean that." "Then let it pass. Why quarrel on this, our last evening together?" she asks, softly.

"I agree with you," he replies. "I will confess, you have made my short stay in Paris very enjoyable. Let me thank you, Miss Surtees."

"Please, don't," she puts in quickly. "Do not thank me. I am not so unselfish as you fancy. What would you term my kindness to you for no more than pleasing myself, for I frankly confess that I have never known a man whom I could more highly respect than yourself."

"You forget I am but the son of a settler in Australia, my dear Miss Surtees. I fear you flatter me."

"No, I never flatter. I am a rich woman, and I have been saturated with flattery. Perhaps that is why I have never married, and one reason why I have given up so much of my time to show you Paris. You have never breathed a word of lying flattery to me."

He turns and looks at her. The thin cheeks are flushed, the clear, deep eyes are bright, the masses of still beautiful hair clinging in soft waves over the broad brow.

"How beautiful she must have been!" The words come to his lips, but he is silent. He has seen as a lightning flash that the few days' companionship of this wealthy society woman, bored with the exaggerated attentions of needy suitors, has revealed the possibility of a union that staggers him.

Coming from the heart of Australia, Roderick Lindsay found himself a stranger in Paris, and was glad to turn to the well-bred lad of quality, who looked upon him with friendly eye the first evening she saw him at the table d'hotes. But he never guessed that the soul of this woman of forty-five had been filled with a passion of love by the intercourse of the subsequent days. Yes, Lydia Surtees, self-willed, selfish, hard, practical woman as she was, had fallen in love with the dark-blue eyes, and the strongly marked features, and the stalwart, masculine beauty of the young Australian.

For her, life would hold no more sweetness unless she could thrust her handsome fortune into Roderick Lindsay's pockets and call him husband.

Truly, there is no madness like the madness of a woman who has set her heart's desire on a man twenty years her junior.

After that conversation on the hotel veranda Roderick avoided Miss Surtees, and quietly slipped away to Brussels next day. Thither she followed, for Paris was unbearable to her. But on arriving there she found he had gone on to Rotterdam and Antwerp.

It was useless for her to chide herself on obeying an impulse of this kind. She had thrown common sense to the winds. To remain long in any city was impossible for her, and she patiently took up the trail, and finally came up with her Australian hero just as he was going aboard the steamer for Harwich, England.

"Why, Miss Surtees," he cried, as he caught sight of his hotel acquaintance. "You did not tell me you were going to Harwich."

"No; I-I have business here, and-and I walked toward the docks from mere curiosity."

She was as shy as a schoolgirl, and he felt almost as embarrassed as she. "Too bad," he said, striving to speak lightly. "I shall have no time for a chat. My boat leaves in a few minutes."

"You will return?" she asked. "No, at least not to stay. I expect to remain in England a week or two, and then I must be on my way back to Australia."

"Is there anyone—there—whom—you care very much for?" "Why, of course; but no, not in the way you mean. But I must be going. The world is a small place, after all, and we may meet again. I assure you, I shall always remember your kindness to an 'Australian bushranger,' as I have been more than once styled."

"And this is good-by," she whispered. She laid her palm in his, and her thin fingers fastened themselves about the great strong muscles.

"Yes, you wish me a pleasant visit, don't you?" "Somewhat roughly he disengaged his hand from the frantic pressure.

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key, which she always carries in her own purse, and turns to glance out of the window at her end of the compartment, which is nearest the platform, impatiently wondering at the delay in starting.

It is explained, as she sees a porter rushing past with a portmanteau, followed by a tall, stalwart, young fellow, who strides easily along, covering as much ground on one step as the porter does in two.

"Here you are, sir!" the man ejaculates, when, after a passing glance at the car window, and Miss Surtees, looking out in haughty resistance of the intrusion of "some common tourist" into her presence, he snatches open the door of a smoking compartment some distance further on.

Miss Surtees notices with careless, disdainful eyes the young man's big, symmetrical limbs attired in a coarse, brown, heavy, well-cut suit, and chin, the broad, sun-tanned brow above the deepest, clear, dark blue eyes, and the heavy, tawny-brown moustache, which almost conceals the splendid, even, white teeth, has haunted her day and night since Roderick Lindsay left Paris.

"What a storm coming, Scrope," Miss Surtees says, complainingly, as they fly along.

"I feel quite warm and uncomfortable in this horrid, small compartment," she continues, with a tone of anxiety in her voice. "My face is quite red and flushed looking, I know. Get out some cologne and powder, Scrope."

"There is some in my handbag, if you like to use that, Miss Surtees," her companion says, meekly.

By every means in her power she would avoid the discovery of the unlocked bag until she has achieved her purpose—the purpose that she has resolved on at the moment she hears of her intended dismissal from a service which, though she bitterly hates it, has been a refuge to her from swift destruction.

"I am glad to get away from this horrid place," she is saying, languidly, while the guard is giving the final signal. "I hope I shall never see it again. I had an idea that the pine woods would be pleasant for reading and sketching in this hot weather, but the air never felt so ill. I must get back to Switzerland at once; I never feel better than at the Pension Hildebrand, in my own special room, which I always insist on having, with my own special view of the Alps."

"How warm you do look, Scrope," she adds, impatiently; "you had better take off your hat and sit by the window. Stay, give me the paper knife first. Oh, you haven't left one out! How stupid; you knew I should want to read. There is one in the travelling bag, of course! Get it out, please."

She gives Miss Scrope the Bramah

darkening afternoon, beneath the great, violet storm clouds that rise like menacing battalions on the low horizon. "No! How provoking! You should have put a useful book of that kind among the hand luggage! Give me the dressing bag key," she adds, irritably.

She takes the little, gilded key from Miss Scrope's hand, instead of locking the bag herself, as she habitually does, and the dressing bag, with the money and jewels, remains unlocked. She has not troubled to think about it in the pleasant preoccupation of her thoughts. And Miss Scrope, in the preoccupation of her thoughts, has not troubled her head concerning the cause of her employer's sudden excitement.

She has been replacing that costly, fragile ivory knife—a splendid toy of carved ivory and silver—in its morocco case, and she has deftly snapped the spring lock of the bag into its place, and made an elaborate pretence of locking it afterward.

But if Miss Scrope had glanced out of the window; if she had had one glimpse, one suggestion of the presence so close at hand of the strong, handsome face and figure which have bewitched Lydia Surtees, she would have fled to the ends of the earth in her guilty terror of coming face to face with Roderick Lindsay.

"There is a storm coming, Scrope," Miss Surtees says, complainingly, as they fly along.

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