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**For Love of a Woman; New Romeo and Juliet.**

CHAPTER XXXVI. CONSPIRATORS.

Percy Levant, on the occasion of his interview with the marquise, had noticed—very few things escaped his quick eyes—the arrangement of the rooms, and at half-past three on the afternoon of the sixteenth the valet, who had received his instructions from Percy, ushered that gentleman, Lady Despard, and Doris—who were closely veiled—into the ante-room and softly closed the door.

Lady Despard raised her veil and shrugged her shoulders deprecatingly. "Well, here we are, my dear Percy," she said, in a low voice; "but I don't think anyone else in this world but you would have induced me to have come; and do you mean to say that you still decline to give us any explanation of these extraordinary proceedings?"

He shook his head as he drew Doris to a chair, into which she sank with a weary but resigned gesture. "And you think that you are treating us properly by all this mystery; and on the dear child's wedding-day—for I suppose you two mean to be married this evening? Or is this but a preliminary to the breaking-off of the match—for of course I can see something in the matter between you two?" and she dropped into the chair with a movement of impatience.

"I shall be ready to marry Doris this evening," said Percy Levant, holding Doris's hand. "It rests with her to decide, dear Lady Despard, and she crossed the room and bent over her appealingly. "When you consented to come here with her this afternoon you did so knowing that I should have to keep you in ignorance of my motives. Do you think I am not grateful for your confidence in me? Do you think I would inflict unnecessary pain on dear Doris?"

"No, I don't!" she said, with languid irritability. "I'm quite ready to admit that you love her to distraction; but it certainly is enough to drive one out of one's senses, these mysterious proceedings of yours; and Doris tells me nothing lately," she added.

Doris raised her lovely eyes plead-

ingly, but remained silent. "Don't blame her," said Percy Levant, gravely. "She, too, is in ignorance of this, which I am about to do, and my motive! She trusts me; will not you, Lady Despard?"

"Well, I suppose I must," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "But why have we come here? My acquaintance with the marquise is too slight to excuse this intrusion."

"If it is an intrusion, that which will result from it will excuse it," he said. "The fact is—and he smiled rather sadly—"I have arranged a little comedy for your ladyship's amusement. Comedy and tragedy, alas! are very thinly divided; there is but a step between them. All I ask of you is that you will remain quiet and silent, whatever you may hear; and I intend you to hear all. Doris I can rely on, and he laid his hand upon her arm with a reverent, gentle touch.

"Oh, I'm not hysterical or nervous," said Lady Despard. "I shan't shriek, however sensational your conjuring trick—or whatever it is—may be. Come and sit beside me, dear, will you? And, Percy, remember, if the marquise should hear of our visit here, and want to know why on earth we came, I shall refer him to you."

"I abide by that," he said, gravely. "And now I am going to leave you," he added, as they heard the valet speaking to someone in the hall. "Doris," and he bent over her "you will be patient and brave?"

She looked at him trustfully. "I will be silent at least. I can promise that," she said, in a low voice. "I am content with that," he said. "And—and if you should hear that which might shake your faith in me—" he asked, his face pale and his lips quivering.

"Nothing can do that," she responded. "We shall see," he said, almost inaudibly, and left them, closing the door behind him.

Lady Despard took Doris's hand and caressed it. "For all my bravado, I feel rather nervous, dear," she said, with a forced laugh. "His manner has been so strange of late, and you—you have had something on your mind, Doris. Oh, of course I have seen that, though I would rather have died than asked you to tell me!"

"And I think I would rather have died than tell you!" said Doris, with something like a sob. "Has there been a quarrel between you? Do you want the match broken off? For Heaven's sake, speak while there's time if you want it broken off!" Doris shook her head sadly.

"No; I shall marry him this evening,

if he wishes it!" she murmured. "If he wishes it! Why, of course—Ah!" she broke off, her hand closing nervously upon Doris's burning finger. "That is Spencer Churchill's voice!"

It was Mr. Spencer Churchill's voice, and as he was ushered into the centre room he held out both hands to Percy Levant and smiled his sweetest smile.

"My dear Percy, may I congratulate you? May I?"

"You may," said Percy Levant, giving him a hand.

Spencer Churchill drew a long breath and laughed an oily laugh of vast contentment.

"Happy bridegroom! Lucky fellow!" he murmured. "Thus is the happy day, yes," said Percy Levant. "Sit down, won't you? I'm afraid you are tired. Let me offer you some wine?" He went to the sideboard. "I'm sorry there's nothing but brandy here. I'll ring for some—"

"Pray don't trouble, my dear Percy," said Spencer Churchill, blandly; "a little brandy is an excellent thing, if taken in moderation."

Percy Levant mixed a stiff glass and placed it before him.

"You can understand why I sent for you," he said, seating himself opposite to Spencer Churchill, whose back was turned to the curtains which divided this room from the marquise's dressing-room. "My part of the contract being fulfilled, I want to know what my position really is, and whether this nonsense of yours has any particle of truth in it?"

Spencer Churchill stared indignantly. "Young man!" he exclaimed, solemnly, "this is the first time I have been accused—to my face—of falsehood! This nonsense! If you allude to the agreement—the perfectly legal agreement, which you signed, and which I hold—you will discover that it is anything but nonsense."

"I'm delighted to hear it, of course," said Percy Levant. "Don't be angry! Well, then, seeing that I am to give you ten thousand pounds as a fee for your assistance in procuring me a wife, I should like to know exactly how I am to manage it—I should like to know all about my wife's property."

"Your wife! How well it sounds!" chuckled Spencer Churchill. Then his face grew suddenly suspicious. "By the way, my dear Percy, have you the marriage certificate? I am not of a suspicious nature. Heaven forbid! I am, indeed, too trustful and confiding; but I should like to see the certificate, my dear boy."

"Certainly," assented Percy Levant, cheerfully. "I'll go and ask my wife for it. Indeed, she may as well be present—"

"No, no," interrupted Spencer Churchill, putting out his hand. "Never mind; don't trouble. The fact is—ahem!—there are some things which Mrs. Levant—Mrs. Levant!—had better not hear. And, to tell you the truth, my dear fellow, your wife is a young lady I'm not over anxious to meet. There's something about her which makes me uncomfortable. I'll—I'll take a little more brandy, my dear Percy—a capital and useful spirit, if used in moderation. I have been recommended to take it by my medical man."

Percy Levant rose to get the decanter. As he did so, the curtain parted and Lord Cecil Neville stood in the opening.

Percy Levant made a circuit so as to approach him.

"Remember our understanding, my lord, and wait!" he said, in a whisper. Lord Cecil seemed to hesitate, his eyes fixed on Spencer Churchill suspiciously; then he dropped the curtain, which again concealed him.

"There you are! And now to business, Churchill!"

"Yes, to business," said Spencer Churchill unctuously. "I dare say, my dear Percy, you think I have earned that ten thousand pounds very easily—By the way, it ought to have been twenty, it ought, indeed! and he shook his head solemnly.

"I'd as soon pay you twenty as ten," said Percy Levant, carelessly.

"You would? Give me your hand, my dear boy!" exclaimed Spencer Churchill, with bland enthusiasm. "You are just what I always thought you—a noble youth, a truly noble and unselfish young man! You would just as soon give me twenty!"



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that he was constrained to turn his head aside and wipe his eyes.

"You are an honourable, a noble young man, my dear boy!" he murmured. "And now I will lay the whole story before you. But, as I said, don't think I have not earned the money! My dear Percy, are you aware that your wife was once engaged to Lord Cecil Neville, the marquise's nephew, the heir to the title? Eh?" and he chuckled.

"Really?"

"Yes, yes! Oh, it's true, and I assure you that they would have made a marriage of it but for me. Oh, don't look so surprised. Bless my soul, if I am not a match for a simple and confiding couple like those, why—" He raised his hand. "But it was a troublesome affair, my dear Percy, and cost me a deal of thought. And rather risky, too!" he added, thoughtfully. "Forged letters—ahem!—that is, fictitious correspondence, though rendered inevitable by the circumstances of the case, is dangerous."

"I see," said Percy Levant, distinctly. "You forged letters from Lord Cecil Neville to Miss Marlowe—"

"Yes, but quietly, my dear Percy. Bless my soul, you and I don't want to publish our little mutual confidences on the housetops; and—this room is rather—I say, rather public, isn't it? What's behind those curtains? Good gracious! and he half-rose.

"My dear fellow, all the servants speak Italian," said Percy Levant, leaning back in his chair with a careless and indifferent air. "While you speak English you are quite safe!" Spencer Churchill fell back.

"Oh, all right!" he said. "I rely on your discretion. Well, it didn't suit me that Cecil should marry Miss Marlowe for several reasons. One being that I could not drive a bargain with him as I could—"

He stopped.

(To be Continued.)



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