

SALT IS SALT BUT THE BEST IS



LADY IRIS' MISTAKE;

Hero of 'Surata'

CHAPTER X.

"I would brave death in a thousand horrible forms for your sake. Shall I not dare, then, to tell you that I love you a thousand times better than man ever loved woman?"

She tried to check him; but it was impossible. She raised her hand and held back the almond-blossoms that touched her face.

"I know well what a gulf lies between us," he continued; "but my great love shall bridge it over. You have all that the world can give you; I have merely energy and patience, in which I have full faith.

She felt that she must speak. She flung the almond-blossoms from her hand and cried—

"Hush, hush. You are mad! It would be like sacrilege!"

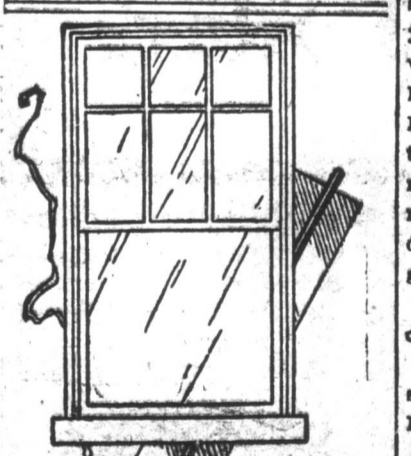
"Sacrilege?" he questioned.

"Yes. Besides, of what use could it be to give my name to you?"

Slowly he rose from his knees and stood before her, all the gladness fading from his face.

"I do not understand you. Will you repeat your words? I have not heard you right. The wind, the wind from over the mountain, has driven me mad!"—and he gave a laugh that was terrible to hear.

"I repeat," she said, "that it would



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be like sacrilege to give my name, the name of an ancient, honored, noble race, to you, the son of a commoner."

"Twenty generations removed from being a gentleman!" he added, with a wild, mirthless laugh.

Lady Iris had recovered herself. At first the shock had been so great to her, the surprise so complete, that she was quite unable to get the better of it. She had now recovered her calmness and her judgement.

Her first feeling was one of indignation that he should have dared to touch her, to take her hand, to force her by the power of his will to go out into the grounds with him, that he should have dared to make love to her, he, whom she had never in the least degree acknowledged as an equal; that he should have presumed to ask her to be his wife and to intrust him with the grand old name she held in honor.

Her face flushed with anger, her eyes grew proud and cold and her lips scornful.

"I wonder," she said, slowly, "that you have dared to say what you have said! I have given you no encouragement for such presumption. Why have you dared to hold my hand and kneel at my feet?"

"Am I lower than your dog?" he asked. "I have given you lay your hands carelessly on him and have envied him."

His words only angered her the more.

"I cannot understand," she said, "how you have the presumption to speak to me in this way. I have never by word or look given you the least pretext for addressing me in such a fashion. Let me hear no more of this; your love insults me!" she added, in a clear high voice.

He trembled, and his face blanched. His first impulse was to turn aside with a muttered curse; but once more he fell upon his knees by her side, and hot tears filled his eyes, once more he clasped the hands of the girl who had wounded him so sorely—and the very majesty of his sorrow compelled her to listen and be silent.

"Listen to me only once," he cried; "let me say all that is in my heart! You condemn me because I am humble-born. Be just. Is it my fault? Let me ennoble myself—every man can do so if he will. I would work night and day to make myself noble in your eyes. Do not send me from you with harsh words; do not call my love an insult. Remember that, though I am lowly born, my heart is human and sensitive. Have you no compassion, no pity for me?"

For a moment she was sorry for him. She saw in the moonlight all the passion of pain in the wet eyes, and something like pity stirred in her heart. But it soon gave place to hot indignation.

"I do not wish to be unkind to you," she said; "but you have no right to speak to me in this way—nothing can justify it. You have sought my advice; and I have given it to you; you have sought my friendship, but that I never gave you; and now you come to me and ask for my love. You ask me to marry you, to give you my name, to make you a Faye of Chandos. I say that your presumption is greater than that of any man I know."

"You should pardon it for the sake of the love that inspires it," he said.

"I acknowledge no such love, and I shall never pardon it. I repeat what I have said—your love insults me!"

She had stung his pride at last. He sprang to his feet, and a hot flush came to his face.

"If I am presumptuous," he said, "you are proud; if I go too far in one direction, you do the same in another. The love of an honest, honorable man can insult no woman."

"You insult me," she returned quietly; and for a few moments they looked at each other steadily.

He spoke first, and it was with some warmth.

"I have staked so much on my love," he said, "that I feel that I must appeal to you once more. If you send me from you without hope, you will embitter my whole life."

"I cannot help it," she replied coldly.

"If you send me from you," he continued, "you will prevent my ever becoming a good man. If you would be kind to me, I would spend all my life in doing good. Send me away, and I go out into utter darkness."

"It is not my fault," she said proudly. "I have nothing to do with it. I tell you honestly that I do not love you, that I have never felt much liking for you, that nothing would ever make me love you, and that, being what you are, even if I loved you to

distraction, I would not marry you; and no time or words will ever make any difference."

"In fact, the love of a man so humbly born, although the son of a millionaire, is but an insult to you?"

"It is but an insult," she echoed; and again they stood in silence for some moments looking at each other.

Her words had some home—they had struck the very core of his heart. He gazed at her steadily as she stood there in the moonlight, her beautiful face so proud and cold; and, as he looked, the love which had filled his heart changed slowly to deep undying hate. His love died a violent death—her cruel, scornful words had killed it—and with it all that was best and noblest in John Barton. Presently he said—

"While I live, Lady Iris, I shall never forget those cruel words. I have said that I love you. I have told you that I worship you. I take back my words; I have no love for you. Had I known you as I know you now—fair of face, but cold, proud and haughty, without pity, without heart—my love should never have been offered to you."

"I am very glad to hear it," she replied frostily; and her coolness angered him even more.

One gleam of pity or of tenderness would have brought him to her feet again, and they would have parted friends; but her proud indifference enraged him more than her scorn.

"The time will come, Lady Iris," he said, "when you will bitterly repent the words you have spoken to me, and will wish that they had never been said."

"I do not think so," she replied coldly.

"If a child came to you from one of those poor cottages in King's Forest and offered you a flower grown in his humble little garden, would you fling it from you scornfully? No, you would take it with kindly smiles and thanks. Why, then, when a man comes to you with his greatest treasure—his love—should you throw it back to him with so much bitter pride? I offered you the most precious gift I had. Why have you rejected it with such infinite scorn? Why did you not speak gently to me? The pain was hard enough to bear without the scorn."

There was enough truth in his words to make her feel annoyed with herself, but his speech only increased her anger toward him.

"I have no desire to hear a lecture from you, Mr. Barton," she said. "If you please, we will go back to the house."

He raised his miserable face to the sky.

"Great Heaven," he cried, "how cruel a woman can be! How can so fair a face hide so cold a heart!"

"My heart is not cold," she replied. "Because I do not love you, you are not to assume that I love no one. I wish to return to the house, Mr. Barton."

"And that is all you have to say to me and ask for my love. You ask me to marry you, to give you my name, to make you a Faye of Chandos. I say that your presumption is greater than that of any man I know."

"No," she said coldly, "not one."

"You have crushed every hope I had, you have pierced me to the heart with your cruel words, and yet you have not one word of pity for me."

"Not one."

"You have nothing to give me in return for my life's love but the assurance that my love is an insult to you and like sacrilege!"

She was silent for a few moments and then said—

(to be continued.)

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