

# The Earl's Mistake

"Can you?" he pleaded. "I do not desire that you should bear with me, Carrie!" he goes on humbly, with the humility which all strong men possess. "I have been a fool and blind not to have known my own heart before this! But I know it now. I must have loved you the first night I saw you! I remember now that I could not sleep for thinking of you! But I struggled against it—I was mad, foolish and blind! But I am sane and in full possession of my sight now, Carrie! Tell me—whisper to me—that you love me, if it be only a little!"

Only a little! Heaven, if he but knew how full her heart was with love of him! If he could but know! With a maidenly jealousy she keeps her secret for a moment or two longer still; tempting him, wooing him to speak the sweet words once again. "Will you not speak to me?" he whispers, bending still closer, his hand upon her arm. "Do you still doubt me? Ah, Carrie, that is cruel! Carrie, I love you—will you be my wife?"

Then she turns her head slowly, and looks at him, and in the beautiful eyes softened with passionate love, in the exquisite face tinted with maidenly shame and purity, he reads his answer. "My darling!" he murmurs, his heart giving a great leap. "My darling! You love me! and he takes her in his arms and presses her to his breast. With a little shiver she nestles against him and hides her burning face. For a minute there is silence, silence save for the language which the two hearts so near each other may whisper each unto each. Above them sails the moon, tinting Carrie's head with soft silvery glamour; on the tree that rustles beside them sings the nightingale. All nature seems to have taken up the harmony of those three magic words and to sing softly—"I love you!"

Half bewildered with joy and delight, Carrie hides her face, and lets the dream—if it be a dream—glide on. She feels his kisses on her hair and on her cheek, hears his sweet, softly murmured vows, and still finds it hard to believe that it is true; that it is true that he and she are alone in the early dawn, and that he is her lover.

It is not until he drops the reins and gently, so gently, takes her face in his hands, and turns it upward to meet his lover's kiss, lips to lips, that she realizes the truth and lets it sink into her soul. Yes, he loves her!

CHAPTER XIII. Presently, with a long sigh of mystic happiness, she raises her head. Woman-like, she is the first to remember that all-important element in our lives—time.

"Isn't it a very long—quarter of an hour!" she says, shyly. Lord Cecil starts and laughs as he looks at his watch. "I can't see, the light is confusing. Yes, I suppose, you are rather more than a quarter of an hour. But what does it matter, darling? It has been the most precious quarter of an hour in my life!"

"She doesn't say 'and mine.'" It seems too obvious to be necessary. "The happiest," he says, looking down at her as she nestles against him, her face turned up to the sky toward the "waning stars" on which her eyes rest with dreamy content. "But I suppose I must turn this ill-used animal round toward his stable. Where are your thoughts wandering now, my darling? I shall not offer you a penny for them, as I did this evening; they are my own for nothing now!"

"Yes," she says, simply, "my thoughts, my heart, myself, are all yours. How strange it sounds! A quarter of an hour ago, you and I were miles, continents, worlds apart, and now—"

And she smiles softly. "Yes," he responds, musingly, wondering whether in all the kingdom of fair women there ever reigned one more fair than this willful love of his. "Yes, and yet we were so near, if we had but known it," he says. She looks at him with a sudden gravity in her eyes.

"You did not know it? You did not suspect that—that you loved me until"—her face grows hot as flame—"until I cried!"

He tries to put the question aside with a kiss, but she will not be evaded. "Not till then?" she says. "As to that," he says, smilingly, "I never gave it a serious thought."

"Ah!" with a spasmodic pain. "I mean," he explains, tenderly, "that I did not think it possible to have ever got over your dislike of me; and so—so—" he blunders rather lamely. "And so it was I who first led you to think that you loved me!" she says, her lips twitching, the brows coming down over the dark eyes.

"No, no! great heaven, no!" he answers, vehemently. "Do not put it in that way! I mean that I never thought that I had any chance—that well, they all led me to believe that Fairfield—poor Fairfield, I pity him!" She makes a gesture of impatience. "Do not speak of him," she says. "To-night let us talk of ourselves. Why should you pity him? Perhaps—perhaps it was a lucky escape for him; his mother will tell him so—with a short laugh—" she always hated me! "No, don't pity him—perhaps it is you who are to be pitied."

quant words of his friend written on the pink paper, and further still to Zenobia de Norvan. For a moment the smile dies out of his eyes, and his lips twitch. It is only for a moment, but she is swift to note the change, and her own smile dies out.

"You do remember! How angry, how scornful you looked, Cecil—swiftly as if she had found courage to speak his name—"Cecil, tell me, did you think that I had read that telegram?" "Great heavens, no!" "She draws a little sigh, and then laughs.

"What agony and misery of shame I suffered that night!" she says. "I thought that you suspected me, and the thought drove me mad! I lay awake tossing to and fro, and trying to shut out the sight of your face. But it was just punishment, for I was curious about that telegram, Cecil! I teased Philippa into reading that I should open and read it!" and she laughs softly. "Dear Philippa, how—how surprised she will be!"

"Philippa is a dear girl!" he says, warmly. "She is the dearest and best girl in the country, and if you had possessed a grain of common sense, sir, you would have chosen her instead of such a worthless creature as myself!" "But," softly, shyly, "ah! how glad, how glad I am that you did not!" "You need not have feared," he says, with a smile; "though I did not know it, it was you I wanted, and I should have chosen you if all the belles of Devonshire had been at hand to select from!"

"How I like to hear you say that," she murmurs. "Cecil, love makes cowards of us all. Yes, as fully and surely as conscience. I could not bear to think, even ever so faintly and slightly, of anything having happened to come between us! I mean as to the past. As to the future—"

"What were they?" he asks. "Oh, nothing—some nonsense!" she says, softly. "She was worrying me about—about Willie, and threatening me with dire punishment for my coldness. I was to suffer such untold rages and pains for love's sake! Poor Philippa, she makes but a poor kind of prophet, does she not? You see how happy I am! Ah, happier than I deserve!" and her lips quiver even while they smile.

"Then what must I be!" he says in a low voice. "Deserve! If we men had our deserts!" He stops. "She smiles. "After all, life is worth living if one is content to live in the present, as I am to-night. I will not look into the future, even to please Philippa!"

"Why should you not?" he says, with half-playful gravity. "Is it so terrible a prospect—that of being my wife?" "No," she says, softly, "the color deepens on her face, her eyes grow thoughtful. "Do you think I will not make it pleasant to you?" he asks. "Indeed I will try."

"It will be so strange," she says. "Ah it all seems a dream, even now—now that I have learned to realize that you love me, Cecil!" "Well!" he murmurs, bending down. This new mood, this sudden tenderness is so maddeningly delicious and unexpected that he is half dazed under its sweetness. "Well, my queen, my angel!" "It seems to have awakened in me the knowledge that I am alive—awakened to it to-night for the first time. It is so strange a feeling. All the past seems unreal, as if I had read of it in a book and had nearly forgotten it! I wonder—looking up at him dreamily, "curiously—" "if you know what I mean?"

"I think I do!" he says. "No," she says, with a little wistful sigh. "I can see by your eyes that you do not! I wonder why it is that I should feel it, and not you. I know, yes, I know! It is because my love for you is deeper than yours for me!" "What is it the man says in the book I found on your table? You see I am not ashamed to confess my misdeeds! Of two, the maid and he, one loves, the other merely is beloved? If so, it is a bad bargain for me, is it not?" "But," she says, with a swift, bewitching smile—"I must be content! At least, my life from to-night; there is no past for me. After all, it was such a piteous trifling past! I can lose it without a sigh!" and she laughs.

He laughs in harmony, but there is at the end of this laugh a half tone of discord. "The 'past'! It is a hideously inconvenient word! Before him rises that episode which threatened to make havoc and waste of his life, which might have done so but for the chance which sent him into the loving arms of this girl at his side; before him floats, as if in a vision, the face of Zenobia, the woman whose falseness had nearly made life a barren burden to him—prudence, conscience, call it what you will—whispers: "Now is the time to make a clean breast of it; tell her now that she is close to your heart; and under the sweet spell of this one hour of her life. Tell her now that chance and circumstances favor! They may never do so again. Tell her of that brief madness, infatuation, fascination,

call it what you will, and receive her forgiveness!" But he shrinks from the task. The word is so recent, it has healed over so short a time ago that he shrinks from baring it. For her sake, too, he falters and quails. She is so happy, so happy! He has not the heart to break in upon her almost sacred joy. To-morrow, some future time, he will tell her all, and so wipe the record clear! Not to-night, when she lies in his arms so fully assured of his love, so fully believing that she is the first and only one to whom he has ever whispered the honeyed words which are still echoing in her heart. Besides, he is half afraid. Of all fair women this, the woman he loves, is surely the most willful; it may be that the breaking of the spell would mean its disruption forever. She may turn away with that laugh he knows so well, and in that voice he heard so often say—"Take back the love you have offered me. Against my pure and unstained heart, yours is not worthy to be weighed. I'll none of it!"

And so he remains silent, and with an effort shuts out that gas-lit room in the pretty villa, and the face of the fair, false woman who had ensnared his first passion!

"How quiet you are," she says. "Are you thinking that after all you have made a poor sort of bargain?" "No," he says. "I was hoping against hope that you might never come to think that way! Why, here's the farm!" "And there are papa and Philippa at the gate!" she says edging away from him quickly, and drawing the cloud around her face. He laughs. "Poor Mr. Harrington! Do you think he will be angry, dearest? Do you think he will refuse to give me his darling, his 'ewe lamb'?" "I should not wonder," Carrie laughs softly. "I know what he will say," she says, with a half smile. "What?" he asks. "'Good Heavens! What is this? Some nonsense of Carrie's, I suppose,'" she says, so exactly mimicking Mr. Harrington's voice and manner that Lord Cecil breaks into a laugh which lasts him until they get to the gate, and causes the two tired and impatient individuals who are awaiting them to stare with mingled indignation and amazement.

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