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**THE
Lady of the Night**

Amelia Makes a Success

**CHAPTER XV.
MRS. RYALL IS WEAKE.**

The day after the picnic Sir Joseph had called at the Grange to ask whether Mrs. Ryall's health had suffered from her hospitable exertions. He had seen Ryall drive away from the house, and therefore knew that Mrs. Ryall would be alone. The lady was, of course, delighted to see him, and for a time they discussed the joys of the picnic, and the other topics of small talk. But presently Sir Joseph's manner changed, and, after glancing at the door to ascertain that it was closed, he said—

"My visit this afternoon, my dear lady, is not solely one of pleasure. I have come on a matter of business."

"I am sorry that Reginald is out," said Mrs. Ryall. "I'm afraid he won't be home until late"—Ryall had gone on another weak and ineffectual search for Nora—"is it anything very important?"

"Oh, no, not at all," said Sir Joseph. "To tell the truth, you and I could do so without troubling Mr. Ryall; in fact, it is a little matter which we could perhaps manage better without him."

Mrs. Ryall was flattered, and met the steady regard of Sir Joseph's eye with a mixture of curiosity and pleased anticipation.

"I am sure anything I can do—" she murmured.

"You can do it very well, my dear lady," he said, his lips twisted in an easy, careless smile. "It is a little matter of business connected with your

step-daughter. I am very sorry she is away from home just at this time, and I gather that she is not returning for a little while. Now, I want her signature to a paper. It's a mere matter of form."

Mrs. Ryall picked up her ears. She was not wholly unacquainted with the phrase; it is the one which is always used by the gentleman who wants you to back a bill, or subscribe your name to some document of a more or less dangerous character. Sir Joseph, who was watching her, saw his mistake, and hastened to correct it.

"Scarcely a matter of form," he said, "because it is important we should have it. It is a deed in reference to a piece of land which adjoins my estate, and which I am desirous of purchasing. It is of very little value; but I think of cutting a drive across it, so that we can reach the Hall from the cross-roads instead of going round. I have spoken to Mr. Trinton, and he and I have agreed, subject to Mr. Ryall's approval, on the price. It's not for me to say that it's a liberal one, but I may remark that Mr. Trinton considered it to be extremely so."

"Reginald—" began Mrs. Ryall, but Sir Joseph stopped her with a wave of his fat and unhealthy white hand, and smiled at her with a flatteringly confidential air.

"I know. You were going to say that Mr. Ryall ought to be consulted. Exactly what Mr. Trinton says. But that is my difficulty. Of course I am aware of Mr. Ryall's prejudice against parting with even so small and valueless a piece of his land, and I have not the least doubt in the world that he would be strongly opposed to his daughter's selling this particular piece."

He waited a second or two to see if Mrs. Ryall would shrink from countering at the treachery he was proposing, but she behaved just as he had expected her to do. She nodded and sighed as if deploring her husband's lack of commonsense, and Sir Joseph went on more confidently—

"Of course, by so doing, by opposing the sale, Mr. Ryall would stand in his daughter's light. She would never have such an offer as I am making again; probably never have any at all. I am willing to give her a thousand pounds."

Mrs. Ryall's eyes opened with astonishment.

"Yes," continued Sir Joseph with a nod. "It's a very large sum, and I am quite sure that, once the thing were done, Mr. Ryall would be more than satisfied, though perhaps he would not say so. You county gentry have such pride, my dear lady." Mrs. Ryall tried to look as if the term were quite applicable to her, and Sir Joseph, heading forward, his whole attitude confidential and persuasive, went on as softly as his thick voice would permit him. "Now I suppose that you and I should manage this little matter between us. It is really quite simple; you run up to town, just for a little change, see Miss Ryall, and get her signature. You will have to sign it as a witness, also a very simple matter, which I will explain to you. I will give you the



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money to take with you, and you can pay it into a bank. There's no need to trouble any lawyers, or persons of that sort; it's just a little business between us three. Excuse me one moment," he added quickly, as Mrs. Ryall, whose face had become very pale, opened her lips. "You will find London—rather expensive; of course you'd like to remain there for a week or so. I know what London means to ladies; the shops are very attractive; a lady gets through a lot of money without meaning it."

Mrs. Ryall nodded pensively.

"Now, I'm sure you won't be offended, my dear Mrs. Ryall, if I venture to take the responsibility of this little outing. I should say it will cost you a hundred pounds at the very least, and I shall take it as a favour if you will allow me to hand you that sum. I beg you won't hesitate; you are going on my business; you will be saving me a great deal of money." Sir Joseph did not even wince as he made this remarkably truthful statement. "You must consider me as a friend—in fact, as a father; for I am old enough to be your father."

He fluttered some bank notes between his fingers, and Mrs. Ryall's eyes glittered as they rested on the precious pieces of paper. But she was very pale, and there was a strained expression about her mouth; her lips trembled, and the hand which she put up to steady them trembled also. Sir Joseph thought it was good, but he was only partly right; there was fear also. The temptation was a terrible one, though it did not, at that moment, present itself in its grim entirety. But a hundred pounds! All her own! To spend in the foolish things which her narrow soul loved and thirsted for!

In all her struggling, disreputable life she had never had so large a sum in her hands. Its possibilities appeared at that moment illimitable, and she literally gasped for breath. And how could she refuse? She knew that Sir Joseph had, as she would have put it, "reined her up" with absolute accuracy. If she refused she would have to tell him that Nora had completely disappeared; there would be a scandal; her social reputation in the place would be injured; there might be a break in her friendship with the Ferrands; and she would have to fall back to the old dreary life at the Grange, which she hated.

Then it flashed upon her that it was possible she might come upon Nora in London; she would find out from Ryall the names and addresses of any friends of his living there to whom Nora might have gone. A hundred pounds! A fortnight, three weeks, in London by herself, to swagger amongst her old friends; to play the part of a great country lady, rich enough to spend a large sum of money, to treat them to suppers at Romano's and the Savoy! The perspiration started to her brow, and she stared at the floor, almost forgetting Sir Joseph's presence.

"Well, my dear lady, what do you say?"

She looked up with a start, and dear an affected air of reluctance.

"I should so like to 'do you, dear Sir Joseph," she said. "And it would be such a good thing for Nora, wouldn't it? It would be such a pity if Reginald stepped in with his foolish pride and prejudice and spoiled such a chance for her. Yes; I really must try and manage it."

That was all Sir Joseph wanted; he placed the notes in her hand.

"I suppose you will take advantage of the present fine weather, and go up at once?" he said presently.

Mrs. Ryall nodded.

"To-morrow or the day after," she said huskily.

"Clever move of mine, that," remarked Sir Joseph to himself, as he waddled down the weedy avenue. "She'll get that signature right enough, and she'll keep her mouth shut; the hundred quid will do that for her. She's a stupid little fool, and, like most women, as greedy as the deuce."

Sir Joseph, clever and astute as he was, little guessed to what lengths Mrs. Ryall's folly would carry her, or how would not have been so complacent or so contemptuous.

**CHAPTER XVII.
A STRANGE MEETING.**

The days passed drearily and wearily enough with Elliot; he sold his horses, and was going out to "The Mountain Retreat" to take tea and farewell of

Mr. Stribley, when, crossing Oxford Street, he saw no less a person than Mrs. Ryall alighting from a hansom, in company with a lady of similar appearance, and, if possible still sayer and more multi-coloured raiment. Acting on the impulse of the moment, he hurried over and raised his hat. Mrs. Ryall appeared to be rather taken aback, but endeavoured to mask her confusion under a shrill and effusive greeting. She had abused him to Nora, and called him a servant; but even Mrs. Ryall had sense enough to appreciate the indications of the gentleman which were pretty plain in Elliot's manner and bearing; and so she exclaimed, more than graciously—

"Lor! What a surprise! Who ever would have thought of seeing you?—Gerty, my dear, this is a friend—a gentleman—from our part of the country—this is Miss Gertrude Montmorency, Mr. Graham—'Monty Gert,' you know," she added, with a nod of proud significance.

As Elliot did not favour music-halls, he was so unfortunate as not to know the famous "serio-comic"; but he expressed his pleasure at meeting the lady, and, inspired by a happy thought, invited them to take tea with him; he was prompted more by the desire to learn something of Nora than by the laudable one of hospitality. The ladies accepted; Mrs. Ryall led the way to Fuller's, and she and her companion had got through a liberal selection of more or less rich cakes before Elliot had found an opportunity to stem the torrent of chatter, and remark, as casually and indifferently as possible—

"I suppose you have seen Miss Ryall? I hope she is well."

Now, Mrs. Ryall had been expecting this inquiry, had, in fact, been trying to state it off; but she rose to the occasion with the readiness of an accomplished Sappho.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I've been staying with her—that is, in the same house, I parted from her yesterday. She's gone on the Continent with her friends—and her special friend," she added with a smirk of complacency. "I am 'appy to say that's all settled—a most satisfactory match. Never saw a young couple so suited to each other; never saw a girl so 'appy. It was perfectly ridiculous, absolutely absurd. Love's young dream, Mr. Graham!"

"Oo are you talking about, 'Melia'?" inquired her companion.

"Oh, my stepdaughter," replied Mrs. Ryall. "I 'aven't told you about her yet. Such a nice girl! We're just like sisters—I am afraid we really must be going, Mr. Graham; we 'ave such a lot of shopping to do."

As they were bidding him farewell, Mrs. Ryall lingered for a moment, and, patting Elliot playfully on the arm, she said, with an affection of archness, but looking round to see that her friend was out of hearing—

(To be continued)



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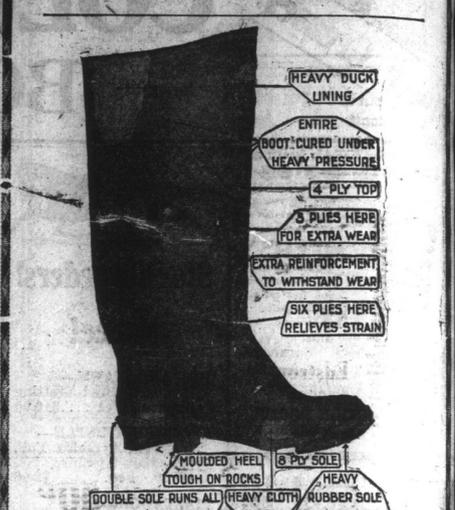
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