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A Millionaire's

Countess Westerleigh

CHAPTER XXXVII.

He leaped on his horse and rode away at the risk of his neck. His soul was in a tumult; the thought of the risk he was running, of Nora restored to him only to be snatched away again, filled him with sorrow and apprehension one moment; the realization of Senley Tyers' vile treachery drove him half mad the next. As he reached the high road, he saw a drover, and inquired of him the way to the Grange, and made for it at racing speed.

When he pulled up at the entrance to the house the horse was covered with foam-flecked sweat; his clothes were spattered with mud, some of which had fallen on his face, which was white and drawn. He flung the reins to a groom and went quickly up the steps and into the hall. Several persons were there; the bride-maids and visitors asked down for the wedding; and they stared, with good reason, at his appearance. A pretty kind of bridegroom he looked!

"Florence—Lady Florence!" he said, and his voice sounded hoarse as a raven's.

They gathered round him in astonishment and alarm.

"Has anything happened?" asked some one.

Before he could answer, Lady Florence looked over the stairs and called to him:

"Vane!"

He fought hard for composure, and forced a smile.

"Nothing has happened," he said. "I—I have been kept. An accident—I mean—"

He strode up the stairs with the gait and air of a man repressing a terrible excitement.

She looked at him and uttered a faint cry.

"Vane, something is the matter!" And her face went white.

"No, no!" he said. "I want to speak to you. Don't be frightened, Florence. Yes, something has happened. I must tell you without the loss of a moment."

She led him by the hand she still held into a small room, a kind of

boisoir, and stood trembling before him. Had he discovered the hand Senley Tyers had had in promoting the marriage? Had he discovered the shameful wager she had made if so—if so, all was over. She knew Vane too well to hope that he would forgive such an unwomanly, immoral act.

"What—what is it?" she demanded. "Tell me, tell me quickly!" another hand went to her heart.

"Yes," he said; "I can't do other wise. I have come to you at once. It is right you should know the truth. Florence, pity me if you can; try not to hate me. This marriage must not take place."

She sunk into a chair, and her lip moved.

"Not—take—place! Our marriage!"

"Yes," he said, his eyes on the ground, for he could not endure the look of fear and pain in hers. "Florence, before—before I asked you to be my wife I had met and loved—"

She gasped and half rose, but sun down again and clutched the chair.

"She was to have been my wife but a villain came between us, an with lying treachery separated us."

"His name?" she panted.

"Senley Tyers," he groaned out between his teeth. "Do you know—"

"I know nothing—nothing!" she asseverated.

"Florence, to-day, scarcely an hour ago, I met her—"

"The—woman you love?"

He met her wild gaze steadily.

"Yes, the woman I still love. All was cleared up between us. He—this devil—had wronged and deceived us both. I should wrong you ever more than he wronged us if I concealed the truth from you and let you marry me. I can not do it. Florence, forgive me the pain I am giving you. Forgive me, and—let us part."

She clutched the chair still more tightly.

"Part! Part!" she murmured; then she looked at him with a sudden flame in her eyes. "Who is she—this woman?"

"No one you know," he said. "Do not ask me."

Her face flushed and her lips curled with scorn.

"Some woman you are ashamed of?"

He started, and the veins stood out on his forehead.

"It is true," she said, between her teeth. "I can see it in your face. And you would flit, desert me for her? Do it at your peril!"

He started. She rose and stretched out her hand.

"Do it at your peril!" Then her mood changed, and she flung herself upon him and strained him to her. "Vane! Vane! I can not give you up. I can not let you go—I can not!"

He strove to unclasp her hands gently.

"Florence, Florence! for God's sake! This is madness. I have told you—I could not help but tell you! I have only just seen her to-day—"

"It was she for whom you were grieving. It was the loss of her that made you ill!" she panted, with quick intuition and with a shudder.

He hung his head.

"Don't ask me any more questions. For God's sake, let me go—let us part now!"

"Never!" she cried, hoarsely. "You are mine! mine! You belong to me, not to her! Who is she that she should come between us? I am almost your wife. A few hours—Vane, you will not leave me! You shall not!"

He groaned and tried to soothe her.

"You shall decide, Florence," he said, hoarsely. "I have promised that you shall decide. I would not marry you with a lie on my soul, my lips. I have wronged you. I know that. I wish I were dead! I have wronged you, but she—she has been wronged more cruelly than I have—and my first thought—forgive me—must be of her."

She breathed hard.

"Tell me her name!"

He set his teeth hard.

"Nora Trevanion."

She pushed the hair from her forehead, and looked at him, vacantly.

"I—I never heard of her. She is nobody—some girl beneath you? And you would leave me—me—for her?"

He drew herself to her full height and looked at him in all her imperious saut. "Vane, you must be mad! I must be the fever again. I will not believe it. You shall tell me more—until after the wedding!"

He started.

"Then—then—you hold me to my word?" he whispered, huskily.

She sighed—a broken, terrible sigh.

"I save you from the consequences of your mad folly, in spite of yourself," she said. She drew nearer to him, and bent her head so that her face nearly met his. "Play the cards you threatened to do, and I will old you up to the scorn of the whole civilized world! I will degrade you in the sight of every honest man. What you dare—you dare—to dream of jilting me!"—she laughed—and on the eye of our marriage!"

"Florence, for God's sake, listen to me!" he said, pleadingly. "I know seem to deserve your scorn, your hate, but as there is light in heaven or would pity me—ay, and her—if you knew all!"

"Pity!" She threw out the word with a fierce gesture. "I should not pity her if she lay dead at my feet! I would to God she were there, dead! Who is she, to come between us? But she shall not!" She raised her head and looked steadily at him.

"Vane, you say the decision rests with me. I will not give you up. I will save you, in spite of yourself. I hold you to your promise—the pledged word of a man of honor."

He turned from her for a moment, and when he faced her again his face was set and rigid as if carved in stone.

"Very good," he said, gravely, sternly. "The decision rested with you; you have decided."

He moved away from her, and she sunk into a chair, her head falling on the arm which hung over the side.

He went up to her, and let his hand fall on her head gently, pityingly, as it seemed.

"God forgive you! God forgive us both, Florence!" he said, hoarsely.

She did not look up, and he left her, opened the door, and passed down the corridor.

As he did so, the Earl of Warlock, mounting the stairs with his crutch-stick, looked up at him.

"What the devil is the matter, Vane?" he demanded, irritably. "Have you fallen from your horse, or what?"

Vane laughed, and looked at him with unnatural calmness.

"Nothing is the matter," he said. There was a hectic spot on both

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checks, and an absent, vacant look in his eyes.

Afternoon tea was going on in the hall below, and the sound of voices and laughter floated up to him.

"Where have you been?" said the earl, testily. "You are in a deuce of a state."

Vane looked down at his mud-spattered cords.

"Yes; I am going home to change."

"Can't you change here?"

"No," said Vane, as if he were speaking from a distance. "I forgot to tell them to send my things on. I shall not be long, but do not wait."

The earl grunted.

"You'd better let them drive you over," he said. "You've ridden this horse you came on to death almost. He's quite done up."

"Thanks," said Vane.

(To be continued.)

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