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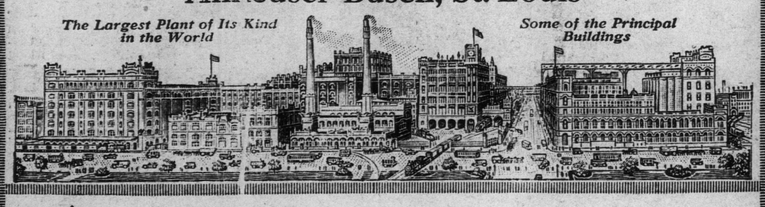

10

A Millionairess;

—or,—

Countess Westerleigh

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"I thought so. And I should have answered in the same way. How long—tell me how long you have"—she paused—a delicious pause to him if he had chanced to love her—"how long—you have loved me?"

Before he could answer some one approached the alcove.

Vane withdrew his arm from her waist and she sat upright and on her guard.

"Vane," she said warningly, caressingly, "some one is coming."

The some one was Senley Tyers.

He stopped in front of them, a smile on his sallow face, an inscrutable look in his dark eyes.

"Good-evening, Lady Florence," he said. "They are talking of a dance. I am not a dancing man, as you know, but I am willing to immolate myself on the altar of Terpischore if I can persuade you to accompany me."

At his presence, under the spell of his cynical voice, Lady Florence seemed to return to her old, haughty impassive manner.

"I am engaged," she said, with lowered lids.

Vane seemed to awake from a dream.

"Oh, give him a dance!" he said with a touch of his old brightness.

She rose at once, obedient, and let Senley Tyers take her arm.

He led her to the center of the room.

"Am I to congratulate Mr. Tempest, Lady Florence?" he said.

She looked at him before replying. His face was pale and sallow as usual, but there was a singular mocking light in his eyes. She made no reply.

"Am I to congratulate him?" he repeated, "and myself? You have not forgotten our little wager, surely, Lady Florence?"

Something in his voice, his face, made her shudder.

"Mr Tempest has asked me to be his wife," she said in a low voice.

He stopped in the middle of the bar of the waltz, and looked at her with a curious expression on his face.

"And you have consented. I congratulate him, and wish you every happiness, Lady Florence. I also congratulate myself."

She stood with closely shut lip and haughty gaze fixed on a level with his face.

"You forget? I am a poor man, Lady Florence, to whom a thousand pounds means something worth having. And so you are engaged?"

"Yes," she said, as if forced.

He smiled—a smile of conventional congratulation.

"May every happiness attend you!" he said. "You see what a reliable prophet I am, especially when I take care that my prophecy shall come true!"

She stopped and looked at him haughtily, yet half fearfully, under her lowered lids.

"I—do not understand," she said coldly. "What have you done to—to—"

"To bring about this delightfully suitable love-match?" he said, with a cynical curl of his lip, a mocking light in his eyes. "Oh! I am too modest a man to speak of my own achievements, but perhaps you may know some day. Then you will understand me better than you do now, Lady Florence."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Nora Trevanion was no longer Nora Trevanion, but Nora Vale; no longer poor and, indeed, but for the remnant of the twenty-five pounds, Milly declared, at least twenty times a day, it was more like a fairy tale than serious, solid truth.

For several days Mr. Lester and the two girls discussed Nora's future, or, rather, Milly discoursed on it while her father and Nora listened, the one with a grave smile of amusement, the other with a smile that was rather sad.

"Of course," said Milly from her place on the couch where she lay regarding Nora's beautiful face with profound satisfaction and unalloyed admiration and affection, "if you feel confused and bewildered, you can't help it. I can't myself. But it will never do to let that feeling get the better of us. What I can't help seeing is that we are losing time."

"Losing time?" repeated Nora, in the quiet voice which had become habitual with her now, and was rarely exchanged for the old, quick, resolute tones.

"Yes," said Milly, earnestly. "It seems dreadful to me that you should have all this money, that you should be quite one of the richest young persons in England, and—and be sitting here doing nothing while—"

"While she might be spending it," put in Mr. Lester, who was supposed to be engaged with his newspaper.

Milly laughed.

"Now, no sarcasm, papa. This is a serious business, sir. Don't you see," piteously, "that she doesn't seem to care about her good fortune in the very least? Why, she might just as well be a poor, helpless cripple like me, and as incapable of enjoying herself! And she's so indifferent, and so—so fitted for riches and honor—"

"And glory and conquest," put in Mr. Lester, with his grave smile. "What do you want her to do, may I ask, my dear Milly?"

Milly pouted.

"Oh, if you are going to crush me with cheap cynicism—! What do I want her to do? Why, I want to see her in her proper sphere. I want to see her take the war-path. How can you sit there and see her sitting here, as if she were a mere nobody like myself. Oh! I know she's in mourning," she went on, seeing him glance at Nora's plain black dress. "But though Nora has the tenderest heart in the world, and, also, would rather die than shock the proprieties"—Nora started slightly and bent her head—"still there would be no harm in her doing something. Why don't you take her out and buy a big house in one of the best parts of London and get a carriage and horses for her, and—and—oh! help her to spend some of this heap of money, and take her proper place in society—or 'society,' as I think it is pronounced now?"

Both Nora and Mr. Lester laughed.

"Are you so eager to get all these things, and make a hole—it will only be a small one—in your vast riches, Nora?" he asked.

Nora shook her head.

"Oh, of course she isn't; she is just a mouse," said Milly. "She would be quite content to sit there pouring over a book—she seems to know a great deal more than any of us now—as if she were grinding for a pupil teacher exam.; she'd be quite content to remain where she is for—for years, perhaps forever. But it's her duty—do you hear, sir? her duty to wake up, and if she doesn't, it's our duty to wake her."

Mr. Lester leaned back and looked thoughtfully at the beautiful face, with the sad, meditative eyes. He guessed that there was something in the history of the period between her flight from Trelorne and his meeting with her at Killin, which had cast a dark shadow over her life; but it was only conjecture, for Nora in telling him her past had carefully concealed her knowledge of Vane Tempest and the "Ernest Mortimer" episode, and Mr. Lester respected her reticence. That she must have suffered in some way, and suffered keenly, he knew; and, knowing that, he had permitted her to continue the quiet life with them which he saw had been so beneficial to her. But he felt that there was some truth in Milly's plaint, and he said:

(To be Continued.)

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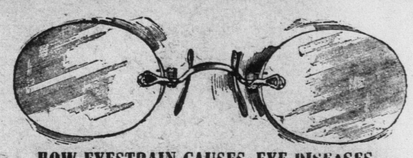

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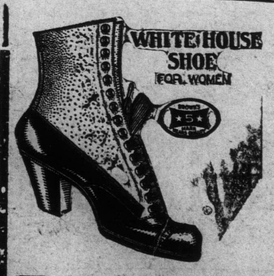

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