

A Millionairess; or, Countess Westerleigh.

CHAPTER XV.
(To be Continued.)

He passed his hand across his forehead and settled himself down to his game, driving the vision from him. But even as he did so he felt the shilling—Nora's shilling—against his heart.

"Your deaf, Tempest," said Dacre, solemnly.

As Vane dealt the cards, Porter approached and murmured something in a discreet and respectful undertone.

Vane caught the word "waiting," and thought it referred to the champagne.

"Open another case," he said, promptly.

Porter looked rather surprised and puzzled, but like a well-trained servant moved away and went to carry out his instructions.

Senley Tyers, still smoking the inevitable cigarette, came and stood behind Vane's chair and watched the play, a cynical smile on his dark face.

"You are losing," he whispered, bending down.

Vane laughed carelessly.

"Rather," he said.

With the solemnity of a hanging judge, Dacre dealt the cards and scooped in his winnings. A burst of laughter from the table at which Lord Wally sat, annoyed and irritated him.

"This isn't a nursery, Baby," he said, severely.

Lord Wally laughed.

"No; more like a shambles," he retorted.

Some of the men laughed appreciatively. Vane took the cards for a fresh deal.

As he did so, Porter came up and whispered again.

"Eh?" said Vane, pleasantly. "Speak up. There is such a confounded row I can't hear."

"The young man is waiting, sir," he said.

"Young man?" queried Vane. "What on earth do you mean? What young man?"

"Champagne," called Baby, at the moment, and Porter hurried away with a fresh bottle.

Vane was losing—had been losing steadily. The wine, the noise, the fumes of tobacco, had got into his head. The clock on the mantel-shelf had struck four half an hour ago. It

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Lord Wally came up to him, radiant, happy.

"I've only lost a couple of hundred, Tempest," he said, as gleefully as if he had won.

"That will do, then," said Vane. "We'd better stop the cards now. I dare say Mrs. Porter can give us some grilled bones and coffee."

He beckoned to Porter, who approached with the air of a clergyman about to bestow a general benediction.

"Grilled bones and coffee?—yes, sir. And the young man, Mr. Vane."

"What young man?" asked Vane, carelessly.

"The young man who has been waiting, Mr. Vane," said Porter.

"He is in the other room."

Vane looked at the solemn, discreet face questioningly.

"What on earth are you talking about, Porter?" he said.

Mr. Porter coughed behind his hand before replying.

"If you remember, Mr. Vane, I came and told you that a young man wanted to see you."

"You never did."

"I beg your pardon, sir; but you didn't hear me, which was only natural. But there he is, sir, waiting still."

"Where?" demanded Vane.

"In the small parlor, sir," replied Porter.

"I don't understand," said Vane. "What on earth does a young man want with me at this time of night or, rather, morning? It isn't a dun, Porter?"

Porter smiled superior.

"Not much, sir; or I should have got rid of him long ago. No, sir; he looks like a seafaring young man."

Vane shook his head, and signed to Porter to lead the way.

The sound of laughter and talking, and the fumes of tobacco filled the room.

He cast a careless glance round, nodded with a smile to Lord Wally and followed Porter, who opened the door of the smaller room.

A lamp with a red shade was burning on the side-board, and in the rich, subdued light Vane saw a young fellow rise from a chair and stand with his cap in his hands.

He was a slim, gracefully built lad with a clear-cut face that looked pale and weary even in the rosy glow of the lamp.

Vane looked at him, noticed that he was dressed in a suit of blue serge, in the style of a midshipman; that the pale face was as clear cut as if sculptured from marble; that the eyes were shaded by long lashes as black as most penciled eye brows; that he was, in short, a particularly good and refined-looking boy; then he said:

"You want to see me?"

The boy's lips parted and he seemed to breathe hard, as if he found a difficulty in speaking, and Vane, thinking that it was caused by weariness, pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," he said, gently; "you look tired. I am afraid you have been kept waiting a long time; but the fact is, I did not understand my man when he came to tell me you were here. I have some friends, as you may have heard" (he smiled); the baby's laughter rang clearly in the next room, joined with the heavier voices of the other men, "and I didn't catch what my man said. Let me give you a glass of wine."

He went to the sideboard, filled a glass from a half-empty bottle of champagne, and held it out with the smile that won all hearts for him.

The lad extended his hand, a small

brown one, then drew it back and raised his gray eyes to Vane's face. "You don't know me?" he said, in a voice husky either with emotion or weariness.

Vane shook his head.

"I'm afraid I don't remember you," he said, wondering whom the lad could be. "Could he be the son of some friend who had got into a scrape, some young middy who had got into a row on board his ship, and been ass enough to desert? He tried to recall the lads he knew who were in the navy. "No," he said, "I can't remember you for the life of me, and I shall have to ask you your name. Won't you take the wine? You look as if you needed it, and I think it will do you good."

"And you don't remember me?" he said, in the same low voice, still lower and more husky. A cloud seemed to come over the gray eyes, which took a half-piteous expression, and the perfectly cut lips quivered.

"Yes; I said you would forget me."

Vane put his hand to his brow.

"Who in the name of Heaven are you, my lad?" he exclaimed.

"I am Nora Trevanion," was the reply, scarcely above a whisper, a faint flush rising to the pale, weary face.

Vane dropped the champagne glass and started back, and the two stood gazing at each other. And now Vane's face was as pale—paler than hers.

"Good God!" at last broke from him. "Nora—! Here!"

He stared at her as if he were dreaming, as if he could not, would not believe the evidence of his senses. A burst of laughter rang out in the next room. He sprang to the door and turned the key, and stood with his back to the door as if he expected an attempt to carry it by assault.

The boyish figure sunk on to the sofa, and the little brown hands stole up to his face.

The movement recalled Vane's scattered senses. He went across the room and sat down beside her on the sofa and took her hands.

"Nora—Nora! Is it really you?" he asked, hurriedly. "My—my poor girl! Great Heaven! how did you get here? Why did you come? What has happened?"

He put the questions one after another rapidly, giving her no time to answer. Her presence alone, at this hour, bewildered, confused, stunned him.

She raised her eyes. She, too, was confused. In the midst of her weariness, her excitement, she felt somehow that he was changed—that he was different to the Vane Tempest she knew. His evening dress, the white shirt-front, with its gleaming diamond stud, struck her with a sense of strangeness; but as she raised her eyes and met his gaze, she saw the handsome face she knew, remembered so well—her heart recognized him through the strangeness of the fashionable clothes, and a faint, very faint, smile flickered on her pale lips.

"I—I have come," she said, in a whisper that had nothing of shame in it—as little, indeed, as dwell in the pure innocent eyes. "You said you would be glad to take me if I were a boy, and—see!" and she looked down at her middie suit.

Vane stared at her in amazement. He could have sprang up and called out aloud in his consternation and distress.

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Merciful Heaven! what should he say?—what should he do? Her presence in his rooms, alone, and at that hour, would compromise her whole life. "Discovery meant absolute ruin to her—ruin spelled with a capital R."

She watched his face, his eyes, and into hers a shadow of doubt, of trouble, came creeping. He saw it, and at once forced a smile—a reassuring smile. At all costs, she must not know what this step that she had taken must cost her; she must never know.

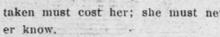
"Of course," he said, with ghostly levity and acquiescence, "of course I did, and—and I meant it! And what a splendid boy you make, Nora!"

A gleam of satisfaction and pleasure at his approval lighted up her pale face.

"Do I?" she said. "Yes, I must, for no one has guessed what I really am. And you—even you—did not know me, did you?" and she actually laughed—a low ripple of laughter that yet had a tone of weariness in it.

(To be continued.)

OH! MY WATCH IS BROKEN AGAIN.



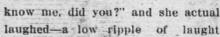
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