

Her Great Love;

Or, A Struggle For a Heart

CHAPTER XXVII.

"By this time to-morrow you will have put a god many miles between you and that too ardent lover of yours, my dear," he said.

He called a cab, and, closely veiled, she entered and was driven off. As she passed from the house to the cab, Trevor came round the corner. He saw her and recognized her, and he stood still for a moment, with astonishment. Then he went on to the house and knocked.

"Is Mrs. Dalton at home?" he asked, as coolly as he could.

"Yes, sir," replied the French maid, blandly; but Madame is confined to her room with a bad headache.

She saw him wince and start, saw the blood leave his face slowly.

"I'm sorry," he said, curtly. "Tell her—but never mind. Good-night, Marie."

He went down the steps and walked a few paces. Then he ran. The cab was still in sight. At the end of the street he halted, and jumped into a hansom.

"Follow that cab!" he said. "Keep out of sight if you can. Follow it, and mind you don't lose sight of it!"

He crushed an oath between his teeth.

Gaunt stood with his back to the door which he had closed or Decima—and waited.

He heard the frou-frou of a woman's dress; the other door opened, there came the faint perfume which he remembered so well and loathed so bitterly, and the woman, his wife, entered.

The lamp was low, and shaded by a deep crimson shade, the faint light flickered. In the faint light she did not in the first moment or two of her entrance see him. She moved to the fire, carefully threw back the hood of her fur cape, and held out her hands to the fire; and he, motionless and in silence, watched her.

He had once loved or persuaded himself that he had loved, this woman. He could have laughed aloud with bitter self-scorn and mockery.

She warmed her hands daintily, and at the clock, yawned, put up her hands, smoothed the hair which the hood had ruffled, then she looked round the room, and saw him.

For a moment she did not recognize him, and uttered a faint cry of surprise. Then with a shriller, though strangely repressed cry, she moved toward him, her head projected, her eyes fixed on him. She looked as she moved, like a noctivagant bird, a snake. She was within a couple of paces before she spoke.

"It is you!" broke from her parted lips. Gaunt, white and rigid, made a gesture of assent.

"Yes," he said. "Why are you here?"

She drew a sharp breath, as if she were choking, then she came nearer, and stared at him as she broke into a laugh—a laugh of triumph, of derision.

"It is you!" she repeated. "You—my husband! Well—it's too good to be true! You—you here! How did you come? Why? You looked round the room as if amazed and perplexed, and then back at him. Her beautiful face flushed beneath the paint; her eyes shone like stars within the artistically drawn shadows. It was the face of a mask suddenly, hideously endowed with life.

"This is my home—my rooms," he said. His own voice seemed to him as if it belonged to some one speaking at a great distance.

"Your—your rooms!" she repeated, dubiously. Then her eyes glittered, and she laughed. "Then—then—you are Lord Gaunt!"

"I am Lord Gaunt—yes," he said, as dully and mechanically as before.

She put her hand to her forehead and then to her throat, as if her thoughts that were crowding on her were suffocating her.

"You are Lord Gaunt! These rooms are yours! You are a nobleman—a swell—and my husband!"

"Yes," he said in exactly the same lifeless tone. "I am your husband."

She leaned against the back of a chair and breathed heavily, then she laughed. "I have found you—found you at last! And you are Lord Gaunt! And I am—yes, I must be, of course—Lady Gaunt! Lady Gaunt! Well, this was worth living for!"

"It is worth living for!" she repeated, with a choking laugh. "To think of it! She snatched up a book from the small table near her, and dashed her hand on the inner cover, which bore his book-plate with its coat of arms above his name and title. "To think that I knew you were the owner here, that I've seen your name in all these books, and never knew, never guessed—"

She paused, breathless with excitement and triumph. Her voice, usually so musical, was thick and vulgar, the vulgarity of a common nature bursting through the thin coating of veneer, and she was at that moment, for all her beauty and grace, a virago of the worst type as she confronted him.

Gaunt stood quite still, his eyes fixed on her with the calmness of despair, the impassivity of disgust.

"Why did you leave me?" she demanded, stridently. "Why did you do it?"

"Can you ask?" he said, very quietly. "Do you think it was possible for me to remain with you when I discovered—that you were, what and who it was I had married?"

The reply infuriated her. She took a step toward him, and stared into his face with the passion of hate burning in her black eyes.

"You deserted me!"

"I left you, yes," he said, as calmly as before; "but deserted—in the strict, legal sense—no. I provided for you—"

"A beggarly allowance. You married me in a false name!"

"No," he said again, with a touch of weariness in his voice. "Edward Barnard are two of my names. I concealed my family name and title; yes, that is true. I must have had some presentiment—of what you were."

She flung her arms out. "The law will reach you, punish you!" she hissed.

He made a slight gesture of indifference.

"You cannot get rid of me!" she exclaimed, with an air of triumph. "You can not divorce me! You would if you could!"

"No," he said in exactly the same tone. It was as if he were confronting the passion with the calmness of despair, the indifference of the rock to the howling wave which beat against it in vain. "Do what you will, I should not seek for a divorce. I am content to suffer anything rather than bring shame and disgrace upon the name I bear."

"You can bring no charge against me!" she said, defiantly.

He made a gesture of assent.

"I am glad," he said, with a sigh. "I left you because I discovered what you were before I married you. Be silent a moment!" for she had opened her lips as if about to protest, retort. "Put yourself in my place. I loved you, desiring you all that a girl should be, all that a woman should be who takes the name of an honest man. I found—Ah, why should I tell you? You know—"

She flung herself into a chair, and leaned her face on her hand, looked up at him with a mixture of defiance and despair.

"What other course was open to me of honor when he had discovered that he had married—an adventuress of the worst, the vilest type? God knows, I loved you—"

She laughed discordantly.

"Not you," she retorted.

"Yes," he said, as calmly as before; "I loved you. Why else should I have married you? I should have loved you to the end, while life lasted, if I had not learned what you had been. Even then I would have fought that terrible knowledge and—and remained with you, if I had not learned also that you were without a heart, that you had married me for a place in the world—for money."

He paused and looked gravely at her. All the while he had been talking to her, looking at her, he had been thinking of Decima; had been contrasting this woman, his wife, the adventuress with her vile past, contrasting her with the pure-minded girl who had just left him. It was as if an angel of light had flown from his side and a fiend in woman's shape had taken her place. His heart felt numbed with the misery of despair, with the utter hopelessness of the situation.

It was as if he had been suddenly awakened from an exquisite dream of bliss to find that his hours were numbered; or, worse still, that the rest of his days were to be spent in a darkness and anguish he could never words to describe.

His hand touched the key of the door behind him, and, half mechanically, he locked it and moved to the fire-place and looked at her again.

"I am sorry that you have compelled me to say all this," he said, with a courtesy more galling than any vituperation, any reproach, would have been. "Will you tell me what, having found me, you intend to do? I suppose you and your brother have made some plan."

"Did Morgan know you were, that you lived here?" she demanded.

Gaunt looked faintly surprised.

"Yes," he said, quietly. "Was it not he who betrayed me? It would be like him, worthy of him. I did not bribe him heavily enough, I suppose."

"You—you bribed him? Then he knew all the time, and kept it from me. Kept it from me all the while he was pretending to look for you."

"Yes," said Gaunt, indifferently; for what did it matter now? "I bribed him, as you put it. I paid him to keep the secret of my identity. He discovered it."

She sprang to her feet.

"You are a pretty pair!" she exclaimed, with a hard laugh. "So he has been taking money to—to help rob me of my rights! Oh, I'll be even with him!"

"I have no doubt you will," said Gaunt, wearily. "But may I ask you to answer my question. What do you intend to do?"

"What am I going to do?" she said, mockingly, tauntingly. "Can you ask? I am going to have my rights! I am going to live with you!"

He made a slight gesture of dissent.

"You can not do that," he said, gravely. "I could not live with you."

"You can't help it!" she said, jeeringly. "The law is on my side, and it shall help me. I'll go to law. I will go to a solicitor directly I leave here. He shall claim my right to have your name—my proper name—Lady Gaunt."

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"I can not withhold that from you," he said, with perfect calm.

"No; and I mean to hold you, too," she said, defiantly, gloatingly. "Where a husband is, there a wife has a right to be. You can't cast me off, and you shall not! I'll have my title, and—and half your money!"

"Ah, yes," he said, almost to himself.

"Yes; and I'll go into the world, the society my rank is entitled to, and I'll go as your wife, by your side. You shall take me and introduce me to all your relations and friends."

He smiled bitterly, coolly; and the smile seemed to madden her.

"You refuse?" she said.

"I refuse, yes," he said, grimly. "You may have all else you demand. The title, the money—far more than half of that which belongs to me, but no more. I could not face the world by your side."

She laughed stridently.

"Could you not? We will see! The law will help me. I will avail myself of it. I will enter an action—compel you, yes, compel you to acknowledge me and live with me."

"You can not," he said, as if he were stating a simple fact. "I leave England in a few hours; I shall be beyond the reach of even your malice."

She sprang from the chair, upsetting it in her violence, and it fell against the small table, overturning it.

It came to the ground with a crash, and the bric-a-brac was strewn upon the floor. As she rose to her feet she uttered a cry, a cry like that of a wild beast balked of its revenge.

Gaunt looked at the overturned table and chairs indifferently. A knock came at the door.

"Did you call, sir?" asked the maid outside.

"No," said Gaunt; and she went away.

"Take care!" said Laura, hoarsely, as she pushed the hair from her forehead. "You don't know what I can do! You talk of your name—the disgrace and shame! I can drag it in the dust for you—and I will, too! I'll tell the whole story! I'll fill the papers with 'Lord and Lady Gaunt's Case. I'll make you a laughing-stock throughout England."

"Yes," he said, with terrible calmness, "you can do that; and I have no doubt you will. But you can not compel me to live with you. And the world will understand why I do not."

Her face went white, and she ground her teeth.

"What do I care?" she said. "I shall have had my revenge. You won't be able to show your face in England again; and I—I shall live here, shall be Lady Gaunt, your wife, your ill-used wife!"

He smiled.

"Yes," he said. "Let that thought console you; let it content you. I shall say no word to deny it."

The calmness of his acquiescence startled her. She went closer to him, and looked at him keenly.

"You are going away—out of England. Are you going alone, I wonder?"

For the first time his calmness broke down. It was as if she had found the chink in his armor through which she could thrust an envenomed dagger.

She saw the change in his expression, and uttered a cry.

"Ah, you are not! There is some woman!" she laughed discordantly. "Don't deny it! I can see it in your face! So that's it! I can understand now!"

She stood before him, her face flushed, her eyes glittering.

"What a fool I was not to have hit upon it before! There's another woman!"

He had regained his old calmness, and met her furious, taunting gaze with impassive sternness. No man could be more impassive, more stone-like than Gaunt when he chose.

"You don't deny it!" she went on, scanning his face. "Ah, I know that look! There is some one else!"

She came and stood beside him, so close that the perfume he hated seemed to suffocate him. He caught his breath, but said never a word, and his silence increased her fury.

"You talk of shame and disgrace!" she said. "You hypocrite! You—you liar! Shame and disgrace, indeed! Yes, you shall have them, and not you alone, but she, whoever she is! I'll find it all out! I'll have the best detectives money—your money—can buy, and I'll drag her through the divorce court!"

He did not move a muscle, but stood regarding her with perfect calm.

"Who is she?" she demanded. "You may as well tell me. One of your good lady friends—a woman of rank, or some common girl?" She paused for breath and looked round the room.

As evil chance would have it, her eye fell upon Decima's veil. It had become unfastened from the side of her hat as Decima had entered, and she had taken it off and laid it on the top of a cabinet.

Laura sprang to it, and seizing it, held it out to him.

"Whose is this?" she demanded, hoarsely. "Why, she's here now—this moment—in your rooms!"

She sprang to the door of the inner room and tore at the handle. Then, when she found it was locked, she turned upon him.

"She's here—in that room. Unlock that door! Unlock it! I'm your wife, and I order you—" Her voice broke and failed chokingly. Gaunt watched her—or say, rather, that his eyes were fixed on the veil. Remember how he loved Decima, how devotedly he worshipped her innocence and purity. He pictured this fury dragging out the girl he loved and covering her with vituperation and abuse. Remember this, and bear with him, for he needs all your charity and clemency.

He sprang forward, and seizing her by the arm, flung her on to the couch.

"Silence!" he said, as he tore the veil from her fingers. "Silence! You—desecrate—" He thrust the veil in his breast, and stood over her, panting and struggling for the mastery of his passion.

"Do what you will," he said at last, when he had regained something like calm. "Do all you have threatened; but—do not leave me! It is not safe!"

His voice rose at the last words; they could have been heard plainly by any one who happened to be in the corridor.

She leaned back, rubbing the arm he had gripped.

"Go! go!" she retorted, defiantly, tauntingly. "No, I will not go! Why should I? This is your house, and I am your wife! My place is here! I shall not go!"

And you can't compel me! I am your wife—your wife! It's that other woman who is hiding here, the other—"

She uttered a word that can not be written, and as it struck his ears, Gaunt raised his hand as if to silence her mocking, taunting lips. Then the hand fell to his side, and he said, hoarsely:

"If you will not go, I will! Stay where you are! Do not attempt to follow me! I—I can not answer for myself!"

He strode to the door and unlocked it, and looked at her for a moment.

"Go!" she cried, with a strident laugh; "go to her, I say! This place is mine—mine! I am your wife! As for her—Shame and disgrace. You shall have enough of it—both of you—and to spare. I'll—"

Gaunt took up his hat, passed into the inner room, locking the door as he did so. He looked round wildly. The room was empty. Decima was not there.

His brain was in a whirl; he scarcely knew where he was, what he was doing. All his thoughts were of Decima—to get her out of the place, out of reach of the demon he had just left.

He looked round the room again. Her hat and jacket were not there. He went hurriedly into the next room—a bath and dressing-room. She was not there, nor was there any trace of her. The room adjoining was a kind of "den" in which he kept his guns and fishing-tackle—a bachelor's litter-room. She was not there. He looked round, and drew a breath of relief. She must have gone. It was just possible that she had not heard a word of what had passed between them and—his wife.

He stood for a moment, and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He had been calm enough until the last moment or two; but now his heart was beating furiously, and he was all of a shake. But it was because he was thinking of Decima.

He saw now how mad—how bad—she had been. He had tempted her, persuaded her, which had dealt it, had, at the same time, been stretched out to save her—his dear, sweet girl-love!

She had gone. She was safe at Lady Pauline's house in Berkeley Square—safe from him and his fatal love.

He was glad, and yet—and yet, the thought that she was lost to him, that he should never hold her in his arms again, never, perhaps, see her again, filled him with anguish. He could have borne it all if he had not known that she loved him. But he knew that she loved him. To hear her sweet confession of love ringing in his ears, to feel her kisses upon his lips! He was almost mad with longing and with remorse.

He rose presently. It had seemed hours while he was sitting there; in reality it had only been minutes. He rose and looked round with the numb feeling of a man waking from chloroform.

From this room a door led directly on to the corridor. It was always kept locked, but the key was in its place. He went to turn it, but found the door unlocked. Then he understood. Decima had escaped—yes, that was the word, escaped—this way.

He drew the key sharply from the lock. It had been in its place so long that it stuck, and as he jerked it violently, it cut his finger. He did not feel the cut, did not know that his finger was bleeding, until he saw a spot of blood on the wrist-band of his shirt.

With an impatient gesture he put the key in his pocket, wiped his finger on his handkerchief, and passed into the corridor, locking the door behind him, and slipping the key in his pocket.

As he went down the corridor he heard voices, and he saw the parlor-maid leaning beside the lift talking to the porter within it.

She started guiltily at sight of him, and she touched his hat as the maid fled hastily.

Gaunt returned the salutation and went quickly down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The infuriated woman tore at the handle of the door for a moment, then she stopped. There had been something in Gaunt's face, in his eyes, which, if it did not exactly frighten her, warned her that it would not be safe to follow him.

She left the door, and paced up and down the room for a moment or two.

"Yes, I'll wait. I'll stay here. It's my proper place. I'm his wife. He'll find me here when he comes back—if he does come back; if he doesn't, I'll stay here. I'll drag his name in the dirt; I'll—"

She sunk on to the couch, and rocked herself to and fro. She was choking with passion. But presently the violence of the fit passed and she rose and went to a mirror and looked at her face. She was burning hot, the perspiration had played havoc

with her "make-up" and the powder and colors showed in streaks upon her face. She wiped it with her lace handkerchief and smoothed her hair; then she looked round the room searchingly, went to the sideboard, and wrenching the door open, found what she was looking for. She poured out a glass of brandy and drank some of it eagerly, greedily; then she drew a long breath, and seating herself by the fire, bent forward, her chin resting in one hand, the glass held in the other. (To be continued.)

Dire Distress.

"Excuse me, Wombat," said the well-dressed one, "but personal, friendship prompts me to speak."

"What is it, old chap?"

"I fear that, unless you improve your personal appearance, you may lose your job."

"I hope not."

"You need a new hat."

"Um."

"You need a new suit."

"Um."

"You need shoes. Man alive, your feet are on the ground!"

"Quite true," admitted Wombat, with a sigh.

"Then take this week's salary and spruce up."

"Can't squander any money on myself, old man. My wife is worse off than I am."

"Dear me! How is that?"

"She needs a new feather in her hat."

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