



CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

But it became necessary soon to think of subsidiary matters. Miss Mowbray, happily, was unburdened; but by this time, no doubt, the tidings of her accident, or at any rate of her runaway steed and his fair rider having been lost to sight in the dense mist, must have reached Thorsdale, and given ground for no unreasonable alarms. They set forth, therefore, Don insisting that Miss Mowbray—his Violet, as he was never weary of calling her—should lean on his arm as she walked beside him.

Presently Thorsdale was approached. The court yard of the mansion was reached, that lighted yard where horses were being saddled and carriages got ready by the glare of lanterns, and where already a number of outdoor servants and hangmen had assembled, and were waiting for orders.

Violet's arrival under Don's charge occasioned a great relief to many minds, and put an end to the wild conjectures which were current as to her fate.

A strange sight it was as the crowd, the lights, and the clamor all converged toward where the young girl stood, pale and lovely, with disheveled hair, leaning on the arm of the young man, handsome and graceful enough to have been a prince of romance. A fair young couple they looked as for a moment they stood there side by side. Sir Richard Mortmain's brow darkened as he saw by whom it was that Violet was escorted. He stepped forward, but before he had time to speak, the joyful news had spread from lip to lip, and kindly, rubicund Lord David Todhunter came hurrying up, with almost the air of a guardian.

"My dear young lady, welcome back!" he exclaimed. "Bless my soul! what a marvelous escape! and what a fright you have given us! So this gentleman found you? I am sure we are much obliged to him. And you are not hurt? That's nice. Please to take my arm and come this way, for the countess is very anxious and distressed, and no wonder." So Violet was hurried into the house, with short space for leave-taking; and Don, having given a brief account as he could of the circumstances of his meeting with Miss Mowbray, withdrew himself as easily as possible from the noise and commotion of the crowd.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Sir Richard's room to be fitted up," said the chief housemaid. The room which was assigned at Thorsdale Park to Sir Richard Mortmain was just then vacant.

The Countess of Thorsdale was too green a lady to occupy herself personally with such matters as the inspection of an expected visitor's room, but then she put great faith in the taste of her clever maid, Mademoiselle Glitka.

She was herself won over, of course, this Mademoiselle Glitka. Young she was, though probably she looked two or four years older than an English girl of her age would have done. Handsome she was, though of a swarthy pallor of complexion, and with a thin face and well-set, mobile features. She had raven-haired black hair, very thick and long, and wound tightly round her small, well-poised head. Her figure was slight and active. But her eyes were her great attraction—eyes that spoke, eyes that flashed, dark, expressive and at times terrible.

Just then Mademoiselle Glitka was in Sir Richard Mortmain's room—not the worst by any means of the many bedrooms at Thorsdale Park—and was alone. Having satisfied herself that she was not the subject of scrutiny, she made haste to institute a special search everywhere. Mademoiselle's phantasm fingers explored every pocket as deeply as those of a member of the Paris detective police could possibly have done. But she found nothing, only a photograph of Mrs. Scoresby—a pink scented, three-cornered note from Lady Paget, asking "Dear Sir Richard" whether Tomahawk was really sure to win the St. Leger before she put her money on the long odds. Then, at last, in a drawer she found a letter of another sort. Here it is:

"Dear Sir R. Mortmain, Baronet: I am getting so sick of this worn-out old country that unless you soon force on the trump card I have put into your hand I shall have to play mine, and blow the whole concern sky-high. Mind there's no mistake about what I have to sell. The seventy thousand pounds go as surely to Miss V., and, if she marries without settlement to her husband, as her name is Violet Mowbray. You Sir R., are not the ones I talk to you for, if you cannot get a 'Yes' out of a country-bred young thing like that. I need hardly say, don't spoil your own game and mine by hinting our innocent what a fortune goes with her at the altar. You are quite fit to hold your tongue when there's money to be lost by speaking. But remember that I am weary of waiting, and shall have, if you shilly-shally, to clasp the other screw on; and remember, too, that there must be a fair share of the swag, as we say in Australia—where I wish I was again—for your old pal, RUFUS CROUCH."

Glitka's eyes glowed, darkened, glistered, as she perused this epistle. She spoke English, perhaps, better than she read it, but she had good brains and a vivid imagination, and could fill up the gaps with some approximation to the truth. First, she folded the letter and thrust it into her pocket. Then, resisting the momentary impulse, she snatched it out again, and taking up the writing material that lay on a side table near, she made a rapid but accurate copy of the contents of the epistle.

"I have him now!" she hissed out between her teeth; "I have him, hard and fast! He is in Glitka's hands now!" And just by the tightening of her little, dark fingers, it could not have been dangerous to be delivered over to the handling of tiger-footed, bright-eyed Glitka. "He is expected at once," she said, presently, and slipped away. About noon Sir Richard Mortmain drove up to Thorsdale Park, and went at once to his room. Scarcely had he reached it before there came a light tap at the door, and Mademoiselle Glitka girding in, and shutting the door, stood before him.

"I have to speak to you, Milord Sir Richard," said the girl, looking Sir Richard Mortmain very steadily in the face. "Indeed, have you? From my sister, perhaps?" asked the baronet, irresolute, but with some annoyance.

"No, but from myself," answered Glitka, opening her eyes as a she-pantcher might have opened hers ere she showed her white fangs and sprung on her prey. "You are a lord, it seems. I am Miladi's

sweetest, noblest young bride that ever a husband yet brought to reign there."

It was all mere acting. Even the trembling of the man's voice was a clever stage trick. The baronet talked of welcoming his youthful bride to the grand old halls of Mortmain, he well knew in his innocent soul that the use he designed to make of Violet's seventy thousand pounds was not to set up expensive housekeeping in the mansion of his ancestors.

He, with new-found courage, drew her hand back from his grasp. "It cannot be as you wish, Sir Richard," she said, very gently, but very firmly. The man of the world bit his lip.

"You mean, Miss Mowbray, that you cannot do me so high an honor as to consent to be my wife?" demanded the baronet with a sort of haughty surprise.

"I cannot agree to be your wife, Sir Richard; but I had no wish to give you pain or to annoy you by the manner of my refusal," returned Violet, gently, and looking aside.

"And I am!" passionately retorted the master of Mortmain, "that I will not, as the saying is, take 'No' for an answer; that I will not desist from my suit until you accept me."

"You must spare me this," answered Violet, "since believe me, Sir Richard, my reply will never be different from that which I have made to you to-day."

"Is it possible," asked the baronet, in a changed voice, that quivered with anger, "that I am forestalled?"

She flushed indignant crimson, and turned away, but she did not tell him that he had no right to ask any such question.

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