

FOR LOVE OR MONEY

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CHAPTER XXXI.

"JACK."

He looked like a man of stone, upon whom pleading and tears would be wasted.

Fedora attempted neither at first—she seemed to speak and act as if in a dream, for his influence, whatever it sprang from, dominated her personality to a remarkable extent.

Had it been so in those days of yore Fedora would never have willingly given him up.

"You speak of Heaven in the same breath with vengeance—surely you cannot believe, Jack, that God approves of such things. I did wrong you, oh, most grievously; but I have bitterly repented it ever since, and hoped the day might come when I could tell you so. Often I have wept to remember your despair. It has been the one black spot upon my life, and kept me from being truly happy. But, Jack, won't you forgive if you can never forget—see, I plead with you; hold this wretched remembrance no longer against me. Be my friend, my brother. You already respect my husband; why be the means of his ruin?"

He showed no signs of emotion, whatever was passing within.

Before his mental vision flashed the memory of his frightful anguish, and it still had the power to make him resolute.

"While I cannot forget, I must not forgive. You have not yet begun to know what suffering means. When the world seems dark and your soul prays for death—"

"But, Jack, stop; consider; you cannot have revenge upon me without injuring my children," she said, suddenly remembering his weakness of old, and how a child had never appeared in vain so long as he had a soul left.

This was a harder task than the other, and the indomitable marquis was compelled to grit his teeth in the endeavour to stem the signs of retreat that threatened to overwhelm him.

"I regret exceedingly that they must suffer, for I am not so cruel to desire through their hold on your heart to inflict pain on you; but as I an innocent party once paid the penalty of your sin, so they, too, must inherit the legacy."

"Jack, would you not like to see them—they have talked of you ever since—oh, do let me send for them?" eagerly, with a sudden bright thought flashing into her brain.

His manner showed alarm.

"In my present frame of mind I do not care to see them, nor would I wish to look again into their guiltless eyes while remembering the great wrong their mother did me."

"Is there no way in which you may be satisfied without the burden falling on them?" she groaned, covering her face with her hands.

"I know of none. They must suffer when you do, all being members of one family. It is fate."

"Jack, have mercy!—see, on my knees I beg you to forgive. It is true I wronged you most fearfully. God knows, I am wretchedly sorry. But out of that wrong has come your bright fortune, and perhaps, Jack, some more worthy woman may fill the place in your heart I once occupied. Forget the past, and live for the future. Grasp them before they have flown. Rise above this spirit of revenge upon a weak, wretched woman, who in her thoughtlessness did you harm and lived to repent. Already you have as you say brought

ruin upon us, and cast us out from society. For that I care little; but for God's sake, leave me the love of my husband and my children."

It was enough to melt a heart of ice, and reason combined with emotion in the argument. Had not the marquis threshed this same straw himself almost daily—had it been thrust suddenly upon him, he must have been fairly overwhelmed.

At least, there came a change over him—the terrible purpose with which he had entered the house remained indefinitely balanced, for he could not attempt to advance it, and maintain any semblance of self-respect.

For the present a truce was declared, and while the white flag fluttered over the scene he could again examine his heart in all its bearings to see what it demanded as further expiation.

Perhaps the man who deliberates is lost—the wise old saying may not apply to woman only.

Time would tell that.

It was not his design that Fedora should see any sign of weakness in his manner, and he maintained the same passionless exterior he had shown through the whole interview.

"I promise nothing. Only this I say, that your children have doubtless saved you from a fate that might have come upon you. I do not relent, I simply change my tactics, and for their sakes spare you that humiliation, that shame. What further means of punishment I may decide to invoke you will know in good time. As you sowed so must you reap. That is the law of recompense of stern justice. Therefore weep over your wretched lot, and bitterly regret that false step to which you were tempted by pride. I do not dare remain here longer in your presence. At least thank Heaven that I decided to abandon the plan upon which I was working as unworthy of an honourable man."

"You are going, Jack?"

"Yes."

"Without seeing the children?" pressing a button while he was not looking.

"They remind me too bitterly of what you, their unhappy mother, seemed to me in the long ago—all innocence and trusting love. No, I do not wish to see them now."

"Oh, Jack, be reconciled—I shall pray daily that you cease to hate me, for the sake of those little ones. Did you know the boy's name is Jack?"

"What!" he gasped, weakening. "Do you mean to say your husband allowed you to do that—and I am the man you loved? Incredible!"

"I told him all, and it was he who first proposed it. You don't know his generous nature. I can see now what it was so disturbed him—you took his fire and freely gave him his forfeited life. Oh! wretched woman that I am to have been loved by two such noble men, and to have brought sorrow to both. Who will deliver me from the bondage of my sin?"

As if in answer to her forlorn cry, the patter of little feet sounded somewhere—the Marquis alarmed at his own weakness, turned to fly, but made a miscalculation, for in the hall he was waylaid by the enemy, who rushed upon him with exultant cries.

He made a swoop for the little girl and swept her up in his arms, until her golden curls nestled against his shoulder when he kissed her pouting lips again and again.

Then came the boy, to whom he had paid so little attention before. Now he held him off at arm's length, where he could look into his resolute face and bold black eyes—yes, he was surely the image of what Livermore must have been as a lad, and yet, and yet, strange to say, the Marquis actually believed he could see some traces of his own characteristics in the boy—learned philosophical and psychological scholars and doctors have long argued this point, and agreed that it is not only possible, but actual—the image of her first love still remained strong in Fedora's heart at the time the child was born.

Kissing the youngster, the Marquis hastily quitted the house, followed by the anxious gaze of the wretched Fedora, until the children, astonished at the strange actions of their friend, loudly bewailed his flight, and demanded her attention.

Weep no more tears of repentance and fear, wife and mother, since the seed has been sown and the harvest must come in due season—that name of Jack, together with the Captain's generosity, proved the last straw that broke the camel's back.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"LOVE HAS REDEEMED ME!"

The game was drawing near its close.

With each struggle that iron will of the marquis, which had been the marvel and admiration of his friends, came out much weaker.

Many things conspired to bring about the ultimate collapse of that stern decree with which he had bound himself while exiled from London.

There was the rebellion within, for nature had given him a generous spirit, and even such fearful wrongs as he had endured could not wholly change this into an aggressive one, living upon the hope of revenge.

Then he had been almost overwhelmed by the discovery made under Fedora's roof, and the magnanimity of his old-time rival, the captain.

Perhaps, however, the thing that had the most decided influence upon him was the startling conviction that there had been awakened within his heart a glow of love for the little miniature painter.

He had scornfully mocked at this idea at first, and declared such a thing was not only ridiculous, but utterly impossible.

And yet the evidences multiplied and returned again and again to the attack until in sheer despair he abandoned his lines of defence and threw up the white flag.

Once this occurred it sounded the death knell of his long-cherished plan. With the flower of love blossoming again in his heart he could hardly have continued in his former policy.

To adore one woman and desire to punish another for cruelly jilting him years before would be, indeed, a remarkable condition of affairs. When a man has lived upon a cherished plan for five years—when it has been meat and drink to him, and the one spur urging him on to climb ambition's ladder—it cannot be dropped in an hour or a day.

The marquis wrestled with this problem.

Should he be magnanimous and freely forgive, or should he turn aside the bright vision that tempted him, shut himself up in a narrow compass and carry out the miserable plan of the past?

Thus he debated, pro and con. Any one who was accustomed to reading human nature could easily tell how the battle so savagely fought within the confines of this man's heart must eventually end, for the poet knew man was included as well as woman when he sagely wrote:

When love once pleads admission to our heart,

In spite of all the virtue we can boast, The woman who deliberates is lost.

But it chanced that the marquis was not given an opportunity to fight his battle to a finish in the usually accepted term—there was a surprise in store for him, a flank movement, as it were, on the part of one who meant to be an ally, yet proved his worst enemy.

That person was the Spanish-American belle of San Jose.

Senorita Juanita had not changed her tropical nature when she abandoned her native country and mingled with the society people of the world's metropolis.

She might dress as the occasion demanded and cultivate the polite manners of her aunt's friends; but not even the restraints of good English society could ever tame that bold, restless spirit.

If she had vowed to win Jack Overton when he was the involuntary president of Gautarica Republic, how much stronger must this resolution have become now that his name was on every lip as the lion of London, whose most simple action was recorded in the papers, and whom all men declared to be the most remarkable as well as the richest American nabob alive?

His reluctance to meet her half way had but little effect on this child of nature—she believed he still loved, even while he hated the woman whose inconstancy had sent him adrift years before, and in her mind she had decided that when his revenge had been fully carried out he must surely turn again to her.

It was wretched reasoning, but quite in a line with her exotic nature—all she realised was that somewhere there must be a stumbling block which, when removed, would allow the free passage of the stream.

However much the marquis might condemn with horror the method by which Juanita sought to force an entrance to his heart, this feeling must as time passed on, gradually give way before the powerful conviction that it was love for him that urged her to take such desperate measures.

It was on the evening following that when the marquis received such a shock at the hands of Fedora.

The marquis, as usual, was surrounded by a host of satellites at his hotel—men who were well known leaders in financial and society circles, who had even gained a fair measure of fame as military or diplomatic heroes, and who, one and all, courted the wonderful sun that had arisen in their midst, because Montezuma was a marvel, the lustre of whose dazzling presence had not been dimmed, even though he had been some weeks before the public.

It was probably eleven o'clock when

A Beautiful Fabric.

THE

'Louis'

VELVETEEN.

NOTE WELL!—Each yard of Genuine "LOUIS" Velveteen bears the name (spelled LOUIS and in no other way) and is stamped with a guarantee of wear.