

"Who told you that?" she asked quickly, halting and looking straight at me.

"Everyone discusses it," I answered. "They say he is to be your husband very shortly. What would he say, I wonder, if he knew that you and I frivol so much together?"

"What right has he to say anything regarding my actions, I am free.

"Then he is not your lover?" I inquired, in deep earnestness. "Tell me the truth."

"Of course not. We have danced together, cycled together, and walked together, just as you and I have done, but as for love—why the thing is absurd."

"You do not love him?" I asked. "Certainly not," she laughed. Then she added, "I never love. That's why I am not like other women."

"Every woman denies the tender passion," I said, smiling.

"Well, I only tell you the truth," she responded with a slight sigh. "If every woman must love at one time in her life there must, of course, be some exceptions. I am one of them."

"Ah, you do yourself an injustice," I declared. "Every woman has a heart."

She was silent. Then in a hard, strained voice she answered:

"True, but mine is like stone."

"Why? What has hardened it?"

"Ah, no," she cried quickly. "You are always trying to learn my secret, but I can never tell you—never! Let us go in." And without another word she passed in through the French windows to the billiard-room, where the usual game of pool was in progress, and the merry clatter general.

Like that of her cousin, her nature was a complex one. The more I strove to understand her the more utterly hopeless the analysis became. I loved her. Nay, in all the world there was but one woman for my eye. Superb in beauty and in grace, she was incomparable—perfect.

That night when the household was at rest I still sat smoking in my room, puzzled over the curious recurrence of the sensation which seized all who entered that lethal chamber in London. The turret clock over the stables had chimed half-past one, yet I felt in no mood to turn in. The writing of that hasty note by Beryl was an incident which I had forgotten, but which now came back to me. What if I could discover its nature? She had written it upon the blotting pad in Sir Henry's study, and the thought occurred to me that I might perhaps discover the impression there.

With that object I placed a box of matches in my pocket, switched off my light, and crept into the darkness noiselessly along the corridor. The carpeting was thick, and being without slippers I stole along without a sound past the door of Beryl's room and down the great oak staircase into the hall.

I had crossed the latter and had my hand upon the green baize door which kept out the draught of the corridors, and was about to open it, when of a sudden my quick ear caught a sound. In an instant I halted, straining my ears to listen. In the stillness of night, and especially in the darkness, every sound becomes exaggerated and distorted. I stood there, scarce daring to breathe.

Through the great high windows of the hall, filled with diamond panes like the windows of an ancient church, the faint starlight struggled so that the opposite side of the place was quite light. I glanced around at the shining armour standing weird in the half light, with viziers down and pikes in hand, a row of steel-clad warriors of the days gone by when Athwath was a stronghold. They looked a ghostly lot, and quite unnerved me.

But as I listened the suspicious sound again greeted my quick ear, and I heard in the door on the opposite side of the hall, straight before me, a key slowly turn. Even in that dead silence it made but little noise. It had evidently been well oiled.

Then cautiously the door gradually opened and I saw that I was not alone. The dark figure of a woman advanced, treading so silently that she seemed to walk on air. She came straight towards the spot where I stood watching in the darkness, and I saw that she was dressed in black.

As she reached the centre of the hall the pale light fell upon her face, and although uncertain it was sufficient to reveal to me the truth.

I was face to face with the woman who had been described by Beryl—the mysterious La Gioia!

(To be continued.)

Serial Story.

(PUBLISHED BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT.)

A DAUGHTER OF MIDIAN.

By JOHN K. LEYS.

Author of "A Bore Temptation," "The Thumb-print," "The Broken Fetter," "In the Tolls,"

"A Million of Money," etc., etc.

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PART II.—THE NARRATIVE OF SYBIL GRANT.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE ENEMY'S STRONGHOLD.

It is all very well for the stern moralist, or the visionary, or the man of disappointed ambition, to sneer at those who frankly acknowledge the influence of wealth. But certainly Alexander Craig Mitchell, J.P., looked a much more considerable personage when standing in the hall of his own castle than he had done when I saw him on the gravel path outside his factor's house. True, it was a mean, scurvy, little face, when you came to look at it. Nothing could make it appear grand or generous, or even pleasant. Yet the mere fact that he knew that this splendid mansion—for it is that if nothing else—belonged to him seemed to lend a dignity to the little man's bearing. He did not perk his chin so far forward—a thing he has a trick of doing—nor purse in his lips in quite so objectionable a way, nor (in a word) look quite so consequential and absurd.

I even thought that he regarded me with a certain approval as I entered the great doorway, as if he thought I was likely to do credit to the establishment. But he did not offer me a word of welcome—only paused a moment to note my involuntary glance of admiration as the fine proportions of the hall struck my eye, and then strutted on before me in the direction of the music room.

It really is a magnificent building, and the idea of its serving for a house to this self-complacent "Glasgow body" and his family is more than a trifle incongruous. What strikes one first is the sense of space in every direction. Looking up at the ceiling of the hall is like looking up at the roof of a church. The corridors are like streets for width and airiness. The great staircase—there are several subsidiary ones, which I shall no doubt learn in time—ascends in spacious, leisurely fashion from the farther end of the hall, branching out to right and left after rising to the height of an ordinary room. The great window which lights this superb apartment is filled with stained glass; and that is the only bit of colour to be seen. In anything, the hall is bare. There are great empty wall spaces, broken only by a deer's antlers or a pair of crossed halberds, here and there. But to my mind the effect is good. I hate to see a hall that would hold two hundred armed men furnished with the luxurious prettiness of a lady's boudoir.

Mr Mitchell stopped on his way to the music room to show me a view of the lake from a narrow window set deep in the wall. It was superb. I have no doubt the narrowness of the window added to the effect; at any rate it was like a painting for effectiveness, like an Italian scene for beauty. Right below us lay the blue waters of the loch, reflecting us in a looking glass every cloud that drifted in the sky. At the farther end of the loch the hills rose abruptly from the water, and beyond them a range of higher hills, purple now in their autumn splendour, filled in the view.

I gazed as one enraptured for a few seconds; and Mr Mitchell, who was evidently as proud of the view as if he had created the loch and the hills himself, was evidently gratified by my unspoken admiration.

With a queer little wave of the hand as much as to say, "Very nice, but we are quite used to it," he went on, expecting me to follow him. A few yards farther on the tinkle of a piano and then some long-drawn reedy notes from a badly played violin fell on my ear. Another step or two, and we were in the music room.

As soon as I caught a glimpse of the man's brown velvet coat I guessed who the musician was—the man who had looked so curiously at the Professor and me as we left the inn together on the day of my arrival. His back was turned towards us, the violin at his shoulder, and his head twisted to one side, so that his cheek rested on the instrument, after the affected manner of some players. He was drawing the bow very slowly across the strings, so as to produce what is called a "wailing" note, but in this instance the wail was scratchy, and reminded me of a serenading cat. It was excoet to me that however much music there might be in the performer's soul, there was not much in his fingers.

The performers were too much engrossed by the music they were composing together to notice us, and as we advanced slowly up the room I had time to take stock of the lady at the piano.

She was in every way a complete contrast to her companion—a tall, raw-boned Scotchwoman, of perhaps forty summers, her sharp features tense with the effort of "locating" and correctly rendering every note, her thin fingers sprawling over the key board. Her scanty brown hair was worn in a tight coil at the back of her head; and she was dressed in an ill-fitting dress of some black stuff, which did not make any attempt at improving the lines of her flat figure.

Mr Mitchell fidgeted about till the movement they were rendering came to an end, for the musicians remained, or pretended to be, oblivious of our presence while the spell of their music held them. When the last "wailing" note of the violin had died away the gentleman in the velvet coat let his instrument slide down his coat sleeve, raised his head to the perpendicular, and turned to us with a far-off look in his eyes, as if he were being unwillingly dragged back from the dream-world.

"This is a young lady—daughter of a man I once knew in Australia. Miss Grant—my niece, Miss Dalrymple."

Having said this he left his niece and me to get on together as best we might, and then stepped away out of the room—he had an odd way of walking, half mincing, half strutting—as if he had wasted too much time over me already.

Miss Dalrymple got up from her music-stool, and with the shy look of an overgrown girl advanced and shook hands with me, her companion meantime idly turning over the leaves of his music, as if the proceedings were a troublesome interruption, but otherwise did not concern him in the least.

"Is this your first visit to Scotland, Miss Grant?" asked my hostess. She spoke the sentence as if it were a stock phrase, useful in the case of visitors from the South.

"How did you know I came from England?" I asked with a smile. "I am sure my name is Scotch enough."

"Oh, I know it by—by your accent, and a hundred other things. You are going to stay at the Castle, aren't you?"

"For some little time, perhaps." I saw the gentleman in the velvet coat move slightly, just enough to make me feel certain that he was listening to our conversation, conventional as it was.

Miss Dalrymple placed a chair for me, and went back to her music-stool. We exchanged a few more sentences, and then it seemed to occur to Miss Dalrymple that she was neglecting her duty. She turned red, nervously cleared her throat, and finally said in a timid sort of way, "Mr. Durant, this is Miss Grant, who has come to stay with us for a time. Are you mus-

sical, Miss Grant?" she enquired, scarcely giving me time to acknowledge the introduction.

I evaded the question, for I did not wish it to be known that I could sing. "He is devoted to it. He plays like a master—indeed far better than most masters," she added in a loud "aside."

Miss Dalrymple gave a little hysterical giggle as she said this. It was plain to my mind that there was but one "he" in the world for her. She worshipped the artistic gentleman with the French name. And it seemed to me that although he affected to deprecate her flattery he was secretly pleased with it.

I may as well take this opportunity of saying a word or two about the appearance of Mr. Durant. I wish I could make my readers see the man as clearly, or half as clearly, as I see him now in my mind's eye.

Short, rather muscular, but inclining to stoutness. Face clean shaven—or, rather, smooth as a girl's: I might doubt whether it has ever been shaven, were it not that Mr. Durant wears a small neat black moustache. His hair, as I have already mentioned, is long, black and curly. His complexion is of a flabby paleness, such as one sees so frequently in London. His hands are particularly small, soft and white. His eyes are brown, and really rather handsome, but he has a trick of suddenly opening them a little wider as he looks at one, particularly when he asks a question, that is rather disconcerting.

Mr. Durant leant over the piano, placing his elbow on it, and resting his chin in his hand, coolly studied me. I was furiously angry, but took no notice of him, and went on making talk with Miss Dalrymple.

"You are musical, Miss Grant," said Mr. Durant. "It is useless to deny it. I see it in your face, your manner—I hear it in every tone of your voice."

I had already made up my mind to snub Mr. Durant, for this reason: It was necessary that I should make a friend of Miss Dalrymple, who may be most useful to me; and it was tolerably evident that I could not remain her friend and at the same time accept the civilities of Mr. Durant. So I intended to ignore the remark altogether, and treat Mr. Durant

with the indifference which his impertinence deserved; but I saw from Miss Dalrymple's face that there was danger in this course also; the devotee does not like to see the object of her worship treated with contempt. I turned to the speaker, therefore, and said quietly—"I paint a little—if that is any justification of your opinion—but only a very little."

"I knew it," said the artist, in a tone of quiet triumph. "I am seldom wrong in my diagnoses of temperaments."

"I must go and take off my hat," I said, jumping up, "so I won't keep you from your music any longer."

Miss Dalrymple, with an apologetic glance at Mr. Durant, offered to show me my room, but I laughingly declined the offer. "I won't be so selfish as to take you from your music—and besides, it would be rude to leave Mr. Durant alone." I added in an undertone. Miss Dalrymple looked pleased, and had turned to the piano again before I closed the door behind me.

With some little difficulty I secured the services of a housemaid, and got her to show me to my bedroom. The household at the Castle is on a very modest scale, a senile quite unsuited to the magnificence of the building. There is only one indoor man servant, the butler; and in a word the family lives in the quiet, comfortable style of a fairly prosperous Glasgow merchant, rather than in the style of a great landowner. I think that in this Mr Mitchell shows his good sense; but