

Serial Story.

(PUBLISHED BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT.)

A DAUGHTER OF MIDIAN.

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

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PART III.—MR MITCHELL'S SECRET.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PROFESSOR'S WARNING.

"What is it that you desire?" asked Signor Zucatti, regarding his visitor with a fixed stare. Under that calm, deliberate gaze Durant was conscious of a certain uneasiness which he tried to shake off by assuming a free and easy, devil-may-care manner.

"I wish you to take a look at my hand and tell me what you read there. That is your profession, isn't it?"

"That is my profession," said Zucatti without the bow that Durant expected.

"But first," said the visitor, "I want to know—Do you know who I am?"

"I do not. I have never seen you before."

"Is the man lying?" Durant asked himself, but he could not feel sure about the answer. Certainly, nothing in the Italian's face or manner betrayed the fact that he had ever set eyes on his visitor before.

"I remember you, however. I saw you at a certain murder trial in Italy, a good many years ago."

"I think you must be mistaken."

"Oh, no. I am not mistaken. I never forget a face that I have looked at attentively."

"So be it. I am ready to examine your hand now."

And Durant, who had intended asking the Professor a few questions before offering his hand for inspection, found himself meekly yielding his palm for examination.

All the time the Italian was tracing the lines on the smooth palm of his consultant, his subtle brain was rapidly forming conclusions from what Sybil had told him of this man, from his knowledge of his position at Inveroran Castle, and what he saw in his face, and heard in the tones of his voice. Still keeping his head bent over the hand he began to speak in those clear level tones which he always brought into requisition when practicing his art.

"You have the artistic temperament, but you are not an artist by profession," he began. "For some time past you have practiced no profession. You have unfortunately fallen in love with a lady—"

he paused for the fraction of a second—"who is indifferent to you."

Durant gave a low, mocking laugh.

"There you are in error, my good sir. The lady in question will not show herself indifferent to me, whatever else she may feel, or I am vastly mistaken."

"I only speak of what I see," said the Italian tranquilly.

"Oh, all right. Go ahead!"

"You will shortly set out on a journey—"

"Correct!"

"Which will have great issues for you. The line is weak and broken. I advise you not to go."

"Do you think the lady would give me the same advice?" asked Durant, in the same bantering tone.

"I have not the lady's hand before me, therefore I cannot tell you."

"And yet you know her. In fact, I have seen you together."

It is probable that if it had not been for the generous wine he had been drinking, Durant would not have spoken so freely; but he was curious to know what the nature of the connection between the oddly assorted pair really was.

"I think you must be mistaken," said the Italian coldly.

"Oh, no. You and she visited a place called Inveroran last summer."

"We are not here, sir, to discuss my affairs, or those of third persons."

"May I ask if you are related to the lady in any way?"

"Business is that of yours?"

"Insolence was that of yours?"

ing the Italian's temper to breaking point.

"Oh, nothing very much, only one likes to know something about the relations of the lady one proposes to marry."

The Italian made no reply, but bent his face once more over the hand that still lay palm uppermost before him. If he had glanced up at that moment he would have seen that his visitor's face wore a malicious grin.

"I had the honour of mentioning that you contemplated a journey," said Zucatti, after a pause; "and I warned you that it would be wise to delay that journey, or give it up altogether. I now repeat that warning. The meaning of the lines in your hand is unmistakable. If you go, it will be at the peril of your life."

"Enough of this nonsense!" cried Durant, snatching away his hand. "If you must know, I came here to get information, not childish warnings. Will you tell me what is the nature of the relationship between you and Miss Sybil Grant? Are you merely friends? Was your meeting at Inveroran accidental or pre-arranged? You will not tell me? Never mind. She will tell me fast enough. Good day."

Before leaving the room he took a sovereign from his pocket and with a contemptuous gesture threw it on the table. It rolled off and fell on the floor. The Italian let it lie.

"If you neglect the warning I have given your blood will be on your own head."

The tone in which these words were spoken was so deliberate, so passionless, so free from anything ranting, that Durant was sobered for a moment; but the next instant he had regained his self-assurance. "No use, my friend. That little trick won't serve your turn this time," said he, and with another contemptuous laugh he quitted the room.

When he reached his hotel Durant sat down and wrote a telegram to the caretaker at the Lodge, which he still retained, telling her that she must have the place ready against his arrival on the following day, and he then wrote a letter to Mr Mitchell. He saw no reason in beating about the bush, and he told him in so many words that he knew all about the assignment of the Lonely Gully mine, and that it was in his power to ruin him in purse and in reputation alike. More than this, it was in his power to have him sent to penal servitude; but he proposed to stay his hand—on conditions, of course. He must forthwith surrender one clear half of his shares in the Lone Gully Company and half of the remainder of his fortune, and also do his best to incline Miss Sybil Grant to give him her hand. On these terms Mr Durant would say nothing of the somewhat important secret he had discovered. He added that he proposed to go to Scotland on that or the forthcoming day, and he would then hear his decision. He had little doubt what that decision must be.

More in a spirit of mischief than from any other motive Mr Durant added a postscript to the effect that if Mr Mitchell wished to keep Inveroran as his share of the spoils the castle and estate must be valued, so that an equivalent in cash might be paid to him.

Having despatched this letter, Durant set about making preparations for his journey north.

When the Italian was left alone by his tormentor he gave himself up to a fit of rage. Throwing himself upon the floor he tore his hair and cursed the man who had come and boasted of his success with the woman he had loved so long. The glitter of the sovereign thrown down by Durant caught his eye. He seized it, and

opening the window flung it with a fresh curse into the street. He could not rest, not even sit down, and was for the time like a madman.

Then his fit changed. He grew calm and became master of himself, and immediately he resolved that he would start for Scotland at once and if possible reach Inveroran before Durant. He would then ascertain whether Durant was telling the truth—whether Sybil loved him, or was willing to marry him. He would at the same time plead his own cause. If Sybil did not love him now what hope was there that she would ever come to love him? That interview must decide his fate.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PROFESSOR LEARNS HIS FATE.

"A gentleman, ma'am, to see you," said the parlourmaid, handing a card to Sybil. She took it and bit her lip. She knew that Miss Dalrymple, and Sidney too, for that matter, were watching her curiously, and for the moment she did not trust herself to speak.

"Did you show the gentleman into the library?" she asked the servant.

"Very good." Tell him that I shall see him immediately. A gentleman I knew in Italy," she went on, answering Miss Dalrymple's unspoken question. "I wonder how he came to know that I was staying here."

With these words she rose and crossing the floor left the room and went slowly towards the library. She wished that the professor had stayed in London, all the more because her conscience was by no means easy with respect to him. She had made use of him, and now she felt that she would like to drop him, and she felt ashamed when she confessed as much to herself.

It was in vain that she told herself that he had offered her his services with his eyes open, and that it would be absurd to maintain that she was bound to return the affection of any man from whom she accepted a favour. Her feeling was that, none the less, she had, by accepting the professor's offers of help, placed herself in a very disagreeable position.

She opened the door and went forward timidly into the room. The Italian sprang up as soon as he caught sight of her and was by her side in a moment.

"You are not looking well; you are anxious about something," were his first words.

"No," she said, smiling. "Nothing has happened lately. I told you what I had overheard of the conversation between Mr Mitchell and the factor, but nothing has come of it. Mr Mitchell seemed to have forgotten in the morning that he had something of importance to say to my sister and me. We have heard nothing more of it since, and I have persuaded my sister to stay on here and keep me company, for it is dreadfully dull here in winter."

"That I can understand," said the Italian, and as he spoke he took from his pocket the packet of Australian newspapers which Sybil had sent him, and laid it on the table. "This is a dreary, melancholy land. Why not come with me to Italy—to Italy, where it is always spring—to Italy, the land of music, of flowers, of love! What holds you to this wretched country, which for half the year is uninhabitable? Tell me, Sybil, that you will come with me."

Sybil said nothing, and sat with her eyes fixed on the floor. She did not dare to raise them and encounter the living flame which she knew was burning in the eyes that were reading her

face as though they would pierce to her very soul.

She thought it best to affect to misunderstand him.

"Yes, it is true," she said, throwing her arms over her head with a pretence of stretching herself in weariness. "It is very dull here and Italy is very gay and very charming, and it would be delightful to have done with this miserable scheming and suspecting and plotting and counter plotting."

"Ah, so it would," cried the professor. "And what have you gained by it? Nothing. Is it not so? Nothing."

"Not much, certainly."

"With me, on the contrary, in sunny Italy, this wretched intriguing would be heard of no more. We would spend our days in music and painting and in gathering grapes and flowers."

Sybil shook her head and laughed rather hysterically. "You would tire of that in a week," she cried.

"But I would not tire of you, my angel, my queen."

The fiery Southern blood had at last overleapt the restraint of prudence, and unconsciously the Italian went back to his beautiful mother tongue, pouring out in its soft, liquid tones the lava torrent that rose in his burning heart.

Sybil listened, and something of her lover's passion thrilled her soul. She lifted her eyes and saw a middle aged, suitow checked man, whose hair was turning grey—a man she did not love and never could love. As she looked her heart became harder and harder till it felt like a stone.

"Please say no more, Signor Zucatti," she said, when the Italian paused for an instant in mid-stream. "I am very sorry, but you know that what you ask is impossible."

Signor Zucatti did what nineteen men out of twenty would have done in the like case. He stopped short, drew himself up a little, and asked in a harsh, dry voice, very unlike that in which he had been pleading, "Why impossible?"

"Because—because—" How could she tell the man that his age was itself a sufficient barrier to a union between them, that he was queer and decidedly ugly, and that she would rather die than marry him?

At that moment Signor Zucatti recognised for the first time that his cause was hopeless. He knew that he would never clasp that beautiful form in his arms, never rain down kisses on that fair face turned up to meet his own, and the sharp steel entered in his soul.

For a little while he was speechless. And then a great tidal wave of jealous wrath arose in his heart and swept before it. He was ready to sacrifice anything—Sybil's regard, his very life, as a victim to this fierce resentment.

Sybil, mistaking his silence for a wordless reproach, nervously put away the packet of newspapers he had restored to her, and then in stammering words began trying to excuse herself, telling him how grateful she was, and ever would be, for the help he had given her in the time of her need, but she sternly interrupted her.

"Tell me this one thing. Has this man—there is no need to mention names—has he stolen your heart? Do you love him?"

Sybil thought he was speaking of Ronald Keith.

"How—could you—know?" she faltered.

"Is it true?" he demanded fiercely.

Sybil was prepared to bear much from the Italian, for she knew she had good reason to be grateful to him, but his peremptory tone stung her into a quick response.

"Yes, it is true. I see no reason to be ashamed of it."

On the instant his voice fell, and became soft as a mother's when she speaks to her favourite child. "Ashamed? No. There is no reason for you to be ashamed. But for him—he has cause, not for shame, but for fear. I cannot live without the hope of winning you, my angel, and I shall not die alone. I will kill him. He at least shall never be your husband. I swear it."

At first Sybil did not think he was serious. She put down what he said as Southern exaggeration—the ravings of a disappointed man. But when she looked in the Italian's face and marked the wild, fiery resolution that was in his eye she trembled.

"You cannot mean what you say?" she stammered out. "You would not be so wicked."

"Hear her! A man steals my purse, or a turnip from my field,