

Fated to Marry a Soldier.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER I.

LADY MINSTEAD'S DECISION.

Not more than a mile out of Castletown stands the Grange, a two storied house, in large grounds thickly wooded; in fact, the trees rather spoil the view, in spite of several openings having been cut through them.

It held the character of being an unlucky house, and the noble family to whom it belonged certainly had not been much favored by fortune; but Sir John Minstead when he took the place, laughed at the superstition.

"I've been a lucky man," he said, rubbing his hands, "and I'll back my good against the house's bad luck any day."

It was true that Sir John had been fortunate, for he had quadrupled the fortune and business his father had left him, had twice been elected Mayor of Castletown, and, during his second period of office, had received the honor of knighthood.

He had retired from business now, and had lately married a second time.

Never a popular man outside the walls of the city—for Castletown still boasted the remains of its ancient defences—this marriage cut away any chance he might have had of mingling in county society.

"Who was she before her marriage?" people asked, and, as usual, in such cases, there were half-a-dozen different answers forthcoming.

Lady Satiene was certain she had seen her on the Paris stage.

Her husband laughed at her. He remembered her quite well in Florence.

"In the old days," my lord remarked, probably referring to the days before he had led Lady Grisel to the altar, "she kept a boarding-house where gambling went on. A very shady place, indeed."

Others satisfied themselves by saying she was an adventuress, without troubling themselves further, but one and all pitied Lucy, Sir John's daughter by his first wife, for she had before her father's second marriage, been asked out a good deal, and even Lady Satiene had taken an interest in her, and gossip had hinted that her ladyship would not have been adverse to a marriage between her second son and the mayor's daughter.

As for Olivia, the mayor's niece, was she not an heiress, whose father had been a very respectable man, a solicitor, or something of that kind?

Castletown was a garrison town.

The cavalry barracks stood just outside the walls, tenanted in turn by Hussars, Lancers, and Dragoons, together with a battery of Royal Horse Artillery.

Within the walls new infantry barracks had been lately built, and they were now occupied by a battalion of Light Infantry.

So, as the officers of the different corps did not care a jot about the prejudices of the county families, there was no lack of male callers at the Grange, and the worthy ex-mayor had no difficulty in filling his dinner table.

But this did not satisfy either himself or Lucy Minstead.

The latter, indeed, was piqued almost beyond endurance when, from her place at the head of the table, she looked down the two long lines of handsome, mustached faces, the only ladies present being herself her step-daughter, and Olivia Talbot.

She was a handsome woman, not much over thirty, and she felt that, with her taste in dress and her husband's banking account, she could cut a better figure than two thirds of the ladies in the country, who ignored her and her dinner parties.

At length, after standing more than six months of neglect and what she looked upon as insult, her patience came to an end.

"Sir John," she exclaimed, one day, at lunch, "I have made up my mind. If your friends don't care to receive me, I will show them that I have titled friends of my own. I shall write to Giulia to-morrow, asking her to pay us a long visit."

Sir John, a somewhat portly man of fifty with grey hair and a red face, nodded.

"I shall be charmed to see the marchesa again," he said. "As a beautiful woman and an old friend of yours, she is doubly welcome. Ahem!"

Olivia laughed. "Take care, uncle," she exclaimed. "Lady Minstead will be jealous, and Lucy and I miserable, feeling we are being outdone." Lady Minstead frowned.

"Your flippancy, Olivia, is much to be regretted; you must learn to curb it. Remember, you are no longer a child!"

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"I should hope not," replied the girl. "I am twenty next birthday, and already feel the weight of years telling on me. I suppose it's the military that does it; it is hard to keep single."

Her uncle chuckled. "It's not you they are after, miss; it's your twenty thousand pounds. But, as long as I am your guarantor and hold the purse strings, not one of them will touch a guinea."

"Well, then, I shall test the next admirer who offers me his hand and heart, by telling him that I am a pauper, and that you have lost all my fortune in trying to double it."

The expected jovial laugh did not come, and Lucy, looking up, noticed that her father's face had lost its colour, and that he was sitting far less erect in his chair than usual.

"Are you tired, father?" she asked, in her low sweet voice, "or are you not feeling well?"

"What makes you ask such stupid questions?" exclaimed the ex-mayor, brusquely. "Well? Of course I am. Never better in my life. I wish you would not be so fanciful, child."

Lady Minstead shot a spiteful glance at her step-daughter.

"Child, indeed!" she exclaimed. "You forget her age and your own, too, Sir John. Lucy has been of age ever so long!"

"Only three months," replied the girl. "I am just a year and four months older than Olivia."

"Bless me!" cried Sir John, who had regained his colour, and seemed bent on appearing gay. "We must look out for a husband for you! And that reminds me, my dear—turning to his wife—that, as you are going to invite the marchesa, we might as well have the Vicomte de Friel down at the same time. He gave me his card, and said that he should be in London for some time."

Lady Minstead looked pleased.

"I really forgot the vicomte," she said, glancing, perhaps involuntarily, at Lucy. "Will you write, or shall I? I had better do it, perhaps, and be might come at once—even if dear Giulia is not free for the moment."

"Well, you will see to it, then," and the knight pushed back his chair from the table. "I shall go into the city for an hour."

"Excuse me, Sir John, but I want you to come with me in the carriage. I have a card to leave on Colonel Stonor's wife, though it is ages since she called on me, and has always a previous engagement when invited here. All the same I shall call, and you can leave your card on the colonel at the same time."

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Olivia, as Lady Minstead, followed by her husband, left the room. "What are we going to do this afternoon, dear? We have so many distractions to choose from that it is quite embarrassing. Shall we stay at home and receive the garrison, or shall we go shopping, or shall we ride out together along the scented lanes and muse about our future fate?"

Lucy hesitated.

"I think I shall sit in the garden," she answered, looking anywhere but in her cousin's face; "that is if you don't mind doing the honors at tea. I feel dreadfully lazy."

"Now, I do not like that!" cried the younger girl. "I am to entertain the old the young, the fat, the lean, and to just let pass a certain Dick Sutton, who has had the bad taste to admire you more than me."

"But you may have all the rest of the garrison to choose from," answered Lucy with a little laugh and a blush.

"I hate soldiers!" was the reply; "that is from a matrimonial point of view. Well I suppose you must have your way, dear. I am not afraid to meet single handed, even twenty subs; it comes from habit I suppose. Know one and you know them all."

The sun shone brightly and made the shade of the trees pleasant enough, and so Lucy found it, doubtless, for the seat she chose was shaded by some of the larger of the trees, and quite out of view of the house.

A book lay on the seat beside her, and on her lap was a heap of brightly tinted silks, which she was sorting.

She was not so busy, however, as to notice the approach of a certain officer of Light Infantry.

He was tall, rather good looking and fair, and Lucy thought there was not such another soldier in England.

She rose, a flutter in her heart, and advanced a few steps to meet him, thereby letting fall a little avalanche of skeins of silk on to the grass.

He took the little hand she held out, and, drawing her closer, kissed her cheek.

"Here is a work for Samson," he cried, gaily, as his eyes fell on the scattered silks. "Sit down, my darling, whilst I pick them up; only, you need not trouble to shear my flowing locks, as Delilah sheared the original Samson's. Indeed, you couldn't very well, as I had my hair cut extra short to-day, for there is a rumor of our being sent 'foreign' directly."

"Oh, Dick! not Egypt?"

He had been thinking how to break the news to her ever since he left the barracks, and had decided that the quickest way was the best.

It gave him all the longer time to comfort her afterwards.

"Why, you would not grudge me my chance?" he said. "It's not as if I was

going to India. This will be but a short campaign, and, when it's over, half the troop will be sent home, or, at the worst, to Gib., or Malta, from where it will be easy to get leave."

"But you may be killed; and I not to see you any more!" "Oh, Dick, I did not know how much I—"

"Loved me, dear," he said, seating himself beside her, and throwing the silks back into her lap.

She nodded, and then, fairly breaking down, buried her face in her hands.

He took her in his arms, and laid her head on his shoulder, whispering words of love and comfort.

Still she sobbed and clung to him as if her heart would break.

"Hanged if I can stand this!" he muttered, after a while. "Lucy," he went on, aloud, "will you marry me? Marry me before we go out, I mean. You are of age, so it is only for me to get a licence. We must keep it a secret till I come back, I suppose, seeing how your father and mine hate one another. But it shall be just as you like, even if we have to part at the church door."

Lucy looked up at him with a scared, frightened expression in her dark eyes.

"Oh, Dick, it is impossible!" she exclaimed. "We must wait until you come back, and then, perhaps, father—"

"My pet," he said, without allowing her to finish, "what is the good of hoping that? Our fathers quarrelled thirty years ago over a girl each wanted to marry, and who jilted them both. I know mine would never consent to my marrying Sir John Minstead's daughter, and Sir John would rather turn you out of doors than see you my wife."

"He hates me coming here, it's plain enough to see that in his face; only, he can't make me an exception when all the rest of the regiment are welcome. No don't let's blind ourselves to the truth, dear. Whether now, or when I come back, we shall have to marry without the paternal benediction, so why not tie the knot now? It is not that I doubt you, my darling, but I do fear your step mother. She wants you married and out of her way, and she'll move Heaven and earth to get rid of both you and your cousin."

The girl sighed wearily.

"It's all hard, Dick," she said. "It is very difficult—though I try my best to like her and make her like me—to get on with Lady Minstead. Even father has been different lately. I think he is not well, or else something is worrying him. And now they talk of having some people down to stay—foreigners—an Italian marchesa and a French vicomte. I don't think I shall like them. But all that's nothing to your going away. Can't you exchange, Dick?"

"Exchange!" he cried, indignantly. "Why, I should deserve to be turned out of the service."

"You can't love me very much, or you would make me happy, and stay."

"You don't mean that, little woman," he said, kissing her. "You would not like the man you love to be branded as a coward. I must go, but I want you to become my wife first. Then no one can force you to marry against your will, and you don't know what pressure may be brought to bear by a woman of the world like your step mother. Say 'Yes, Lucy, and I will get the licence at once, and arrange the matter. There is so little time to spare.'"

She turned a white, frightened face to his.

"Dick," she whispered, "you have deceived me. You are ordered away directly—tomorrow, perhaps. Tell me the truth, dear. I—I am quite strong now and won't cry."

"No so bad as that," he answered, trying to speak jovially. "It's expected—the colonel's had a hint, I believe; but it may be a week yet before the order comes down; only, it was better to prepare you."

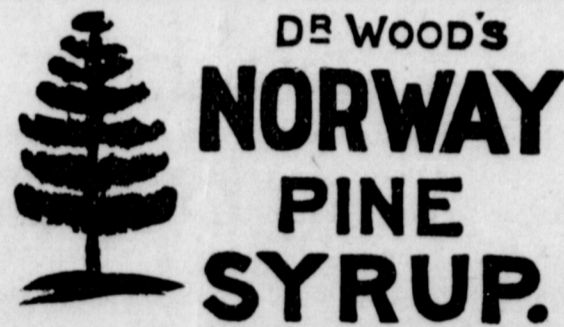
"A week! It is such a little time. I would almost rather—no I would not. I must see you every day, Dick."

"Every day, dear," he whispered, drawing her close. "But Lucy, you have not yet given me an answer to my question. This talk of vicomtes and marchesas coming down here makes me all the more anxious that we should be married before I leave. It's a plot of that old—I beg pardon—of Lady Minstead's, I feel confident. My darling, if you love me as I do, you will not hesitate!"

But she did, and it was long before he could wring from her a half promise.

"Come tomorrow," she said at length; "it is so terrible to think of marriage without my father knowing anything about it. Of course, I must tell Olivia."

"Why, yes," he said, half reluctantly.



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"You must have a lady with you I suppose, and for your sake she will keep the secret, expect. You could not go with the regiment, you see, and my father's place is out of the question. If it were not, we would get married openly, and let Sir John say what he liked."

Oh, no, I could never have courage to face that! and the girl shuddered at the very thought of the life she would have to live with her father and step-mother both thoroughly incensed.

It seemed to the lovers that they had been together but a few minutes when Olivia appeared, hastening through the trees.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she said, with a bright laugh, as she took Dick Sutton's hand. "But, as Lady Minstead has just returned, bringing uncle home with her, I thought we had better all walk back together. You know you are not a favorite with Sir John, Captain Sutton, and my lady looks on a red coat with disfavor; she said it is possible even to get tired of soldiers. Rank heresy, of course."

Then, dropping her voice, she whispered so that Lucy could not hear—

"You have told her?"

"Yes."

She glanced at Lucy's eyes, and shook her head.

"Poor dear!" she murmured. "I will never marry a soldier—never!"

CHAPTER II.

M. LE VICOMTE.

The Vicomte de Friel not only accepted Lady Minstead's invitation, but came down the very next day.

He might have been thirty, or he might have been more.

His hair and moustache were of a chestnut brown colour; whilst long dark lashes shaded eyes of deep blue.

He and Lady Minstead met on the footing of old friends; with Sir John it was nearly the same, and even Lucy and Olivia found themselves chatting with him, quite at ease, before he had been at the Grange four-and-twenty hours.

"He is delightful!" exclaimed Olivia, when talking him over with her cousin.

"And now you must least admit, dear, that civilians can be quite as nice as soldier; and his English—why it is as good as yours or mine."

"He does speak English very well," Lucy answered; "but he is hardly a civilian, for he has served, and besides, been a military attaché, he told me, but I forget where."

Olivia threw up her hands in mock despair.

"I am out of it," she cried. "Cut out by my dearest friend. Oh, Lucy! what will Dick say?"

"How can you talk so, Olivia?" exclaimed Lucy, her face flushing. "Why, Dick is all the world to me, and he is going away."

And the girl's anger was quenched in grief.

"Lucy darling, he will come back safely; you will be happy as the day is long," and Olivia put her arm round her cousin's waist.

"But we must think of him—we are to keep the appointment at Seven's Cross. Shall we send the horses on a little way first, and then follow on foot, passing out through the side gate in the wall, or how?"

"No," replied Lucy, firmly. "In case we were seen, how should we explain sending on the horses? Let us ride out. What does it matter if we start earlier than usual?"

Olivia opened her blue eyes wide in astonishment.

"My word, Lucy!" she exclaimed, you are the lion, and I am the lamb, today; but, after all, I think you are right."

The vicomte coming up, stopped the conversation.

To Lucy, who thought that, perhaps she might meet Dick in the town—for she and her cousin were going thither—his chatter seemed interminable.

As she stood aside, fidgetting with the button of her glove, she thought she had never seen her cousin look to less advantage.

"At the same, Olivia lingered, and it was Lucy at last who had to beg Vicomte de Friel to excuse them, else they would be

late back from the town. The girls had scarcely vanished down the path, when Lady Minstead appeared, descending the steps which led from the house to the garden.

Not only were the vicomte and my lady good friends, but it was he who had introduced her to her present husband, so she opened her mind to him without reserve.

"I shall succeed," she said, after they had chatted for awhile; but it will take time. Let us not talk of it any more, however; it is for me to think of paying my debt to you. You understood what I said in my letter?"

"Perfectly."

"And you have already decided?"

"I should think so. The younger one, of course. A girl with twenty thousand English pounds for her dower is not to be found every day."

"But Lucy may have more at her father's death."

The vicomte shrugged his shoulders.

"Your husband may live a long time, madam," he replied. "Besides I do not forget that you are his wife and have first claim. No, I take the young lady with the money of her own. In one little year she will be of age; but that matters not."

"But Sir John will see her money tied up; settlements you understand, vicomte."

The latter smiled.

"We might arrange it differently, madame," he said. "It must be what you call a runaway match; with your aid I see no difficulty."

Lady Minstead's eyes glittered.

"You may rely on me," she exclaimed, "as far as I can go safely—but here is my husband."

Sir John's face looked worn, as if he had not slept.

"I just came out here to tell you my dear," he said to his wife, "that I may not be back as early as usual. I am going to see Matthew Grimes on a matter of business, so do not wait for me. Vicomte, you will excuse me I know."

He turned and re-entered the house.

All his usual joviality of manner had vanished, as he mounted into the phaeton, which stood awaiting him at the ball door.

He called to the groom, with an oath, to get out of the way, and clutching the reins dashed recklessly down the drive.

He kept the horses going, so that they were in a lather of sweat by the time they pulled up at the door of the Holt, Mr. Grimes's residence.

A servant, who looked half groom, half gardener, answered the bell; Sir John did not wait to be shown in, but marched down a dingy passage, and so into the room of Matthew Grimes.

The latter, a thin, shrivelled up man, with heavy eye brows, which shadowed small bloodshot, grey eyes, rose from before the desk at which he was seated.

"How are you, Grimes?" inquired the knight, holding out his hand.

The other, instead of replying directly to the question, took a pinch of snuff, and inquired if Sir John had received his letter.

"Why, yes," replied the knight; "and deuce take me if I can understand it."

"Regarding the accounts between us, Sir John, there can be no doubt. The shares we bought have fallen heavily. I advised you to sell when I did, but you persisted in holding on, and now, with one thing and another, you are in my debt to the amount of fifty thousand pounds. The security does not cover it, Sir John, and I must call on you to pay within the month, according to agreement; but we had better go through the accounts together."

The knight's face was pale.

"It is no good beating about the bush, Grimes," he said, his voice husky from emotion. "Your figures are about right, I know. What does a thousand or so matter when I cannot pay? Time I must have

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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