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the dim, romantic conservatories, who should walk down the arcade of palm trees and festooning similar, but Mrs. Essex herself, led thither by Mr. Coan Grant.

Now Mr. Essex had always maintained a special dislike for Mr. Coan Grant to come, forsooth, that gentleman had been his most formidable rival in the days when both paid court to pretty Violet Gray. For the briefest space of time imaginable Mr. Essex was dismounted, and stood tugging plexipately at the drooping corners of his moustache, while Mrs. Essex tripped by with the swish of a long train, a vision of lace drapery, opal ornaments, and pearl-fair arms and shoulders.

"The devil!" said Mr. Essex, in an undertone.

"Well, if that isn't a surprise!" said Miss Pritchard. "There goes your wife, Percy, hanging on to Coan Grant's arm."

"I see her," said Mr. Essex, indignantly.

And he took Miss Pritchard back to the parlors only to be again astounded by a sight of his wife and Coan Grant promading slowly along one of the outer balconies.

"Upon my word," muttered Mr. Essex, "that fellow is making himself unpleasantly agreeable—as though she cared the veriest atom for him or any other man save me! Perhaps, now, I'd better propose for the next dance. Like as not she's all anxiety to be rid of him."

Excusing himself, he left Miss Pritchard, and walked away in the direction of the balcony, just in time to meet the pair as they stepped into the parlor.

"My dear, I was coming in search of you," said Percy, with an effort at nonchalance. "I must positively insist upon the pleasure of the next dance."

Mrs. Essex raised her hand and eyes, and the faintest sound of suppressed laughter arose upon his ear.

"So sorry and all that, but I haven't one dance left. Come, Coan, there are the first strains of that delicious Brugal Polka, Percy, there is Susanne, and without a partner."

And away she floated in Coan Grant's arms, leaving Percy to stalk moodily up and down the checkered floor of the balcony, chafing at himself, and grinding his white teeth together in a proxy of jealous rage.

"This is a new phase in my lady's character," he muttered, with a gesture of menace. "But she shall know I am not a human plaything, and will not have my name bandied from tongue to tongue because of her."

From which one might infer that Mr. Essex was blind as well as jealous, and consequently did not see his wife's actions were but a reflection of his own.

The dance came to an end finally, and, hurrying into the parlor, Percy lost no time in finding Mrs. Essex.

"We will return home now, if you please."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Essex, with a most becoming pout. "Going home, and it scarcely twelve, and I enjoying myself so hugely! I shall do nothing of the kind, if you are tired you may go, and send the carriage back for me at two. Mr. Grant, I am sure will have no objections to attending me home."

"Oh, none," said Mr. Grant, quite heartily.

And they were about to pass on into the supper-room, when Mr. Essex placed a detaining hand upon her plump, bare arm.

"I desire that you shall return home with me. Not another word! Come."

And trembling from head to foot with very fear, Mrs. Essex obeyed with only a hasty word of apology to Mr. Grant. Ten minutes later, they were flying homeward as rapidly as the sleek bays would carry them.

"I'm so very tired!" said Mrs. Essex, with a smothered yawn prophetic of returning composure.

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it," snapped Mr. Essex, burying his hands in his trousers pockets, and glaring savagely at her from the opposite seat.

"My goodness! you state me," said Mrs. Essex, as bland as a spring morning.

"You have been acting disgracefully," went on the gentleman, hotly indignant. "I'll wager my head that half the women in the house are fairly agog over your flirtation with Coan Grant."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Essex, with imperturbable selfpossession. "You think so?"

"I know so. You have degraded not yourself alone but also me."

Mrs. Essex leaned forward until her hand rested upon his arm.

"Degraded is a fitting word, Percy, and declares the affair clearly and completely. I have degraded you, you say. Well, but did it ever occur to you, when Miss Pritchard and yourself were continuously in each other's society, that you were degrading me? Did you ever question your actions or modify them to my wishes? Use your own common sense, Percy, and ask yourself if a wife has not the same right and privileges of a husband. You have degraded me, I have degraded you; it is an even measure. Shall we play quiet?"

"The cases are not parallel," burst in Mr. Essex. "A man's folly is a woman's crime."

"It has not been folly in you, Percy, but blindness, self love and stupidity. Not crime in me, but retaliation."

And the very next thing Violet knew she was held in the tight clasp of two manly arms, and the ride was ended.

Several days later, when Miss Lydia dropped into the Essex studio, Mrs. Essex met her with a radiant face.

"Q Lydia!" cried she, ecstatically. "It has all come about just as you said it would, and Percy has promised to eschew Miss Pritchard and all his other flirtations, and as we as much of a lover as he was a year ago—and isn't it nice?"

"Very nice," said Miss Lydia.

"And most like a real life novel."

"Very like it," assented the spinster.

"And such a wise woman as you are!"

Mrs. Lydia smiled with becoming modesty.

"Not at all. Only I believe 'it's a poor rate that won't work two ways,' said she."

And Mr. and Mrs. Percy Essex—a model couple now—are living explications of that old maxim's truth.

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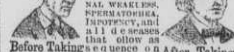
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