

# Love, the Magician.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE WORKINGS OF FATE.

"Well, but, Flo, you must spare me a minute. I want to talk to you seriously of—of the future."

Hugh Strathmore was a handsome, stalwart young fellow, who would seldom have had to plead in that fashion to any other woman.

But Flora Fanshaw was on frank, sisterly terms with him, that suggested no particular charm in a tête-à-tête.

She was a remarkably tall girl, with an athletically graceful figure, which just then looked its best in the well fitting boating dress she wore.

Her handsome face was a little flushed but her bright, dark eyes looked quizzically into his from under the shadow of their long lashes, as she stood poised lightly on the top of the boat-house steps, looking like a very modern water-nymph, an ear balanced in her large, white, shapely hand.

"You don't need to detain me a whole minute," she said; "because I know exactly what you want to say. You are going to ask me to name our wedding-day."

Hugh laughed, though a faint flush of vexation crossed his face.

He was honestly fond of Flora, and yet there were times when he could have wished that she was just a little different.

"That wasn't quite what I intended to say," he said; "but it is very near it. You are going to be my wife, Flo, some day, are you not?"

"Of course I am. Didn't our parents solemnly betroth us when I was three and you were five? and didn't you put this ring on my finger on my sixteenth birthday? Besides, I am so horribly poor. I positively must marry you because I have no other prospect in life."

"And you don't care for—anyone else better?" Hugh asked, as he stood in a very unlover-like attitude, looking at her, his back against the tall, straight trunk of a willow tree, his hands deep in his pockets. "I know you'll be candid with me, Flo, and tell me if that is the case."

"Of course I will," she returned lightly. "When I fall in love I will make you my father confessor and tell you all about it; but in the meantime I have quite made up my mind to be your wife. We are both so dreadfully unsentimental that we shall be a very happy couple."

"I hope so," Hugh said; "anyhow it will please the old folks, and—"

"And you will let me have my own way whenever I want it," Flo returned merrily. "As an earnest of that, you must release me now. Positively the water is too tempting. I cannot postpone my row for the sake of talking sentiment to you, though you are a dear, good boy and I love you with all my heart."

She laughed merrily as she spoke the last words, and ran down the wooden steps to enter the little skiff which was rocking on the silver tide.

Hugh did not attempt to aid her—he knew her independence too well—but remained under the willow tree while she cast off the moorings, and then, bending to her oars, sent the boat out into the mid-stream where presently it was lost to view behind an abrupt curve in the bank.

He stood there for quite a long time, but presently he roused himself and went slowly along the path beside the stream, lighting his pipe as he did so.

"That's settled, anyhow," was his somewhat moody reflection. "The pater arranged the marriage years ago, and since Flo is ready to fulfill the engagement, of course I can't draw back. I ought to be glad that she is so unsentimental. I don't believe in love outside the covers of a novel, and yet I wish Flo was a little different."

"Oh, tr—am-et, singing your way along, stay, in your onward flight; Oh, in, on, for mine is a sweet song, The song of a heart's delight."

He stopped suddenly as the joyous words came floating towards him on the stillness of the sunny, summer air, and suddenly a hot flush rose to the roots of his close cut brown hair.

It was a girl's voice that sang, sweet and clear and musical as that of the lark overhead, a voice which, like the lark, sang from the sheer joy of life and living.

A moment more, and the singer herself came in sight, a slender 'slip of a girl,' with masses of golden hair clustered in soft curls about her temples, and sweet blue eyes that first brightened with pleasure, and then dropped shyly as they met Hugh Strathmore's glance.

"E—me!" he exclaimed, and his tone told how glad he was to meet her thus. "I ought to have recognized your voice directly I heard it. What a dear contented little girl you are! though I am afraid, you have very little to make your life happy."

He spoke in a protecting, almost a patronizing way.

He had known her since she was but a little child, and he felt himself far older than her seventeen summers.

"You speak as if you were discontented," she said, looking up bewitchingly from over the bunch of white water lilies that she carried, to shake her pretty head at him. "Yet I think you have everything that could make life worth living."

Her eyes, perhaps, told more than her words, for Hugh Strathmore was her hero not simply because he was the only son and heir of rich Sir Gavin Strathmore, of

the Towers, but because he was as well her ideal of an English gentleman, the most handsome, fascinating, delightful person her rather limited circle of acquaintance contained.

"Yes, I suppose I have a good deal to be thankful for," he said, smiling, though his eyes were grave; "and you, you poor little girl, have very little. Your life cannot be a very happy one, shut up at the Vicarage, with no companions but a confirmed invalid like Mrs. Mayfield and a well-meaning miff like her son."

The girl's blue eyes overflowed with reproachful tears.

"You must not speak slightly of them," she said, a touch of indignation in her clear tones, which lent a new charm to her gentle manner. "Remember I am but a poor wail. My mother was found at the little railway station yonder, lying dead, with me, a baby, in her arms. I was left absolutely destitute with no clue to my relations or parentage, and then Mr. Mayfield, Stephen's father, who was the vicar here then, took me into his own house, and brought me up as if I had been his child. Sometimes I am almost selfish enough to be glad that Mrs. Mayfield is an invalid, for now I can be her nurse and constant attendant, though all I can do will not prove one half the gratitude I feel."

"You are hardly doing yourself justice," Hugh said, and he found fresh charms each moment in the fair, flushed face that looked up now into his with the glamour of dewy brightness in those long lashed eyes.

"I grant Mr. Mayfield was very kind; but then, the whole village was roused with sympathy for you, poor little forlorn babe that you were. He had you taken to the Vicarage, meaning to bring you up as a sort of humble dependant. It was your own charm and goodness that won his heart and made him, instead, adopt you as his daughter."

She shook her head, though she knew that what he said was true, and into her eyes there came a brighter, happier light. Surely never through all her life had any praise before then half so sweet as this which had fallen from his lips.

"At any rate, I know that the Mayfields have been my only friends," she said. "I can never be grateful enough to them, or love them half so well as they deserve."

"Not your only friends; there are plenty in the village who love you besides the Mayfields," Hugh said, and it certainly was as well that Flora was far superior to any such womanly falling as jealousy.

He had no thought of being untrue to his brilliant fiancée, but unconsciously his eyes took a brighter light as they rested on Esme's face, and he found himself wishing that the baby wail of years ago had been brought to the Towers instead of taken to the Vicarage.

It would be so sweet to have won such gratitude as this—gratitude which now, he remembered, with a thrill of unreasoning anger, was lavished on the mild-mannered vicar and his invalid mother.

"Everyone is good to me," Esme said, with her brightest smile, yet it was an April face she turned towards him, for there were tears in her bonny eyes.

"Because you deserve so much goodness," he said, and somehow her pretty white hand was clasped in his again, and his brown head was very near her golden one as the blue eyes drooped shyly.

He was trying to see her face, thinking how fair and sweet it was, when suddenly a sharp, shrill cry rent the air and made them both start.

"It is Flo's voice," Hugh exclaimed, and then in the next moment he added: "Merciful Heaven! Can she have drifted on to the mill weir?"

The same thought was in Esme's mind, and breathlessly they ran along the river side path, forgetting their own origin claim of romance in their anxiety for Miss Fanshaw.

For the mill weir was one of the most dangerous reaches in the river, where many lives had been lost.

The distance was not great, yet ere it had been quite traversed their anxieties were ended by the sound of Flo's laughter.

A moment more, and a sudden bend in the path revealed that young lady herself, most unromantically drenched, though she seemed otherwise little the worse for the accident, of which the abandoned boat, derelict in mid stream told eloquently.

"Why, Flo, what has happened?" Hugh asked, as he came up, and she advanced a few steps to meet him.

"Nothing very serious," she answered; "I have had a ducking, that's all. It would have been a good deal worse, though, for I can't swim a stroke, if it had not been for the heroism of Mr. Mayfield here. Thank him for me, Hugh, for absolutely I owe my life to him."

Hugh's attention was thus drawn to the little vicar, who presented a pitiable object in his drenched garments.

He had performed a really brave act, as Hugh well knew, for the stream was no easy one for even the strongest swimmer, but so far from realizing his heroism, the Reverend Stephen Mayfield only looked very much ashamed of himself.

"Pray don't mention it," the little man said tremulously. "I really did nothing to assure my mother I am not hurt? It might cause her a shock if she were to see me like this, without being prepared for it."

The girl obeyed, of course, and sped

away on her errand, while, after a few words of congratulations and thanks were made, Hugh went off with Flo to the Towers.

He walked on in silence, thinking of Esme, and very much inclined to wreak summary vengeance upon the Reverend Stephen Mayfield for having cared to address her by her Christian name, in spite of the fact that she was to all intents and purposes his adopted sister.

There was silence until they were close to the Towers and then Flo abruptly spoke her thoughts aloud.

"It's wonderful how mistaken you may be in anyone," she said, apparently irrelevantly. "I have felt a sort of contempt for Mr. Mayfield before, and now he has proved himself a hero. He is so modest, too; and wasn't it good of him to think of his mother as he did?"

"I don't see that he has done anything very remarkable," Hugh retorted with unusual ill-humour, upon which Flo, who was always quick-tempered, stamped her foot impatiently, and, having given him a piece of her mind, went away in high dudgeon, to leave him alone with his thoughts of Esme.

## CHAPTER II.

### A WEEK LATER.

Esme stood by the river side, her eyes bent upon her own reflection as it was mirrored in the clear water, though her thoughts were far away.

On one hand lay the little village, its thatched roofs showing between the trees clustered around the old, old church; and there, too, was the red Vicarage—her home.

On the other side she could see the tall towers of the great mansion which would one day form part of Hugh's inheritance, and, distant though it was, its stately grandeur seemed to press upon her like a real burden.

Her own life story had indeed been told in those few words which she had exchanged with Hugh.

She was a waif, a foundling, who had been taken from her dead mother's arms and sheltered and cared for by the old vicar, who was the father of the present holder of the living.

Who she was, or what was her real name, none had ever known.

One thing, however, was evident—her dead mother had undoubtedly been a gentle woman, though very poor.

It was of the past the girl was thinking as she stood by the river on this sunny summer day.

A little while before, she had seen Flo and Hugh riding side by side through the village, and, as she had looked at them, and had seen the radiant smile upon the other girl's face, a sudden passion of jealousy had thrilled her gentle heart for the first time in her young life.

"Why should this world's goods be so unequally divided?" she asked herself in this new bitterness.

And then she contrasted Flo's life with her own.

The other girl was surrounded by friends and admirers; her life was one kaleidoscope of gaiety, and even the costly clothes she wore had a fascination for Esme now, though she had never cared for them before.

Then she thought of her own life and its desolation, and suddenly she, who had always been so bright and contented before, flung herself upon the mossy bank, and burst into a passion of bitter tears.

There came the slow tramp of a horse's hoofs along the grassy path, and in a moment more Hugh came in sight mounted on his great grey hunter. The horse stopped abruptly, and Hugh from his saddle looked down at the girl's slim form as she sat among the ferns.

Her head was bent, and she was glad that the brim of her hat must hide her face from him.

She had checked her sobs by an effort, and wanted to conceal the tears which trembled on her lashes still.

"I thought I should find you here," he said. "I came along this path on purpose."

"I thought that here I should be quite alone," she answered, with a little laugh that cost her a great effort, but there was a quiver in her voice as well, which made him look down at her curiously.

"I saw you ride through the village with Miss Fanshaw, and believed you had gone for a gallop on the moor."

"I was just what I did intend to do," he said, "but Flo was in a very bad temper; indeed she has been in one ever since the day of her boating adventure a week ago."

So we parted, especially as she saw Mayfield going into one of the cottages, and insisted on following him. She wants to talk about the new soup-kitchen, I believe, though the idea of Flo taking an interest in parish work is just a little absurd."

"She has never done so before," Esme said, and the quiver in her voice was more pronounced than ever.

Hugh looked down with double interest at the bowed head, and then sprang from the saddle.

"Why, you are crying!" he exclaimed. "Esme, little Esme, what is troubling you?"

"It is nothing," she said, springing to her feet with some thought on taking flight; "only, I am silly and ungrateful enough to feel miserable and alone."

"Alone—you, who have the whole neighbourhood to love you?" he said, just a little illogi ally considering his previous condition.

"I can't help it," she murmured apologetically. "I don't think I have ever felt like it before; but now—oh I pray let me pass, Mr. Strathmore. Indeed, I would rather be alone."

It was not a very polite speech, but Hugh Strathmore understood the confession of woman's weakness which it contained.

She was afraid of breaking down utterly—afraid, perhaps of him, but still more certainly afraid of her own heart.

She turned as those last words were said—turned to escape along the winding

river path—but as the first movement was made, Hugh caught her hand to stay her, and then—neither exactly knew how it happened, but she was clasped closely in his arms, and though her tears were falling fast they were now those of joy, because she knew his heart was beating against her own, and the knowledge of his presence thrilled all her soul with a new and sweet content.

"You will have to stay here with me for a little while," Hugh whispered tenderly. "You will have to let me comfort you, little one, because I love you—I love you with all my heart."

She did not answer by words; her senses were dazed still, and as yet no coherent thought would come.

It was as though the shadows which before had surrounded her life had been suddenly banished by a flood of dazzling light, a light so brilliant that her whole soul was held in thrall by its glamour.

"You must have seen my love long ago, Esme," Hugh whispered presently, when he had waited for her reply, and yet had felt no words were needed. "You must promise that you will never again feel alone or unhappy while I live."

He was not a bad man, and did not mean to be false to the two women with whom his life was tangled.

But the sight of Esme's tears had suddenly revealed the depths of his own heart to him—depths whose secret had been unguessed before.

In that moment he knew that he loved her—loved this gentle, unassuming girl with the one great passion of his life, and, away by love's own instinct, he had sought her in his arms, thrusting away all his doubts and that of his love, as their lips had met in a long, long kiss.

As for Flora, his promised wife, absolutely, for the moment, all memory of her faded from his mind as it no such person existed in the world.

Perhaps he had never fully realized his engagement.

It had been so much a matter of course ever since it had first been arranged by their parents.

His future, perhaps, belonged to Flora by right of that old arrangement, but his heart and love would all be Esme's so long as his life would last.

"You love me? Oh! I never dreamed of that," she whispered at last, and faint though her voice was, its sweet, low tones were eloquent of the sudden gladness which filled all her being. "I never knew there could be happiness like this in the world eternally."

Her tender words pierced, as it were, his inmost heart, and suddenly he remembered all.

A groan that was almost a curse of himself broke from his lips.

His love had lured him into this double falsehood; his love was doomed only to bring her sorrow.

His arms fell from around her, he put her a little from him, and took a step back his handsome face showing grey and stern in the summer sunshine.

"Esme," he said, and his voice was broken as though by a sob, "forgive—forgive! I should not have told you of my love."

She stood a little from him, looking into his face with tender, innocent eyes, whose trustful light was full of terrible reproach for him.

The perplexity in her glance was more than he could endure.

He threw himself upon the trunk of a fallen tree which formed a rustic seat near, and hid his face in his hands.

At the sight of him in his abasement, her own wonder and dawning pain were forgotten.

She thought only of him, and a great flood of womanly sympathy filled her heart making her love seem almost divine.

She made a step forward to where he sat, and knelt upon the grass, laying her clasped hands lightly on his knee.

"I think I understand what you mean," she said so softly and gently, that the words were veritable coils of fire to him. "I should not have been so foolish as to listen to you. Of course, we must part for you are the son of Sir Gavin Strathmore and I am but a nameless girl; yet you need not reproach yourself for having told me that you love me. You will go away and forget, but I—her voice sank yet lower, and became a thrice as sweet as the tender music of infinite joy—"I shall remember as long as I live, and be happier for the memory."

"You must not speak like that," he answered passionately. "You are a thousand times my superior, and even if you were

not, have you not heard that 'Love, like death, levels all ranks?' Oh, Esme, Esme! I think that for your sake I could brave any ordeal; it would be nothing to me that my father might disinherit me, that we should both be poor."

"Ah, yes; I had forgotten Sir Gavin's anger!" he said faintly, and he knew that she trembled at the thought, for Sir Gavin was a very important person in Strathmore where he ruled with quiet feudal power. "I would not have you make a sacrifice like that for me."

"But if I were poor?" he could not help asking. "Esme, if any freak of destiny made me no longer my father's heir, would you love me still? Would you still share my fate?"

"She found courage to raise herself a little higher, and then to clasp her loving arms about his neck."

"I have never been anything else but poor," she said, "poverty would not frighten me," she said. "Oh! you make me selfish; I could almost wish that you were poor, too, and then—then we need not part like this."

A sob broke her tender voice as those last words were said, and he stung by a passion of contempt for himself, suddenly drew himself from her clinging clasp.

"You are right!" he said, bitterly, bitterly. "If I were a beggar I should be free to love and marry you."

It was not his words, but rather his tone which brought some knowledge of the truth to her.

He had risen to his feet, while still she knelt beside the fallen tree, her innocent child-like eyes raised to his face.

"Free!" That was all she said, yet there was an entreaty as well as pain in the tone in which the word was uttered.

"You have not heard," he said, yet I thought the whole village knew the truth. Esme, Esme, I am a coward, a villain, to have told you of my love, for I am engaged to marry Flora Fanshaw."

He spoke despairingly. Through all his life before, he had been an honorable gentleman, and now for the first time, he knew the bitterness of shame and self-reproach; and, as if to make his punishment complete, he saw, while he spoke, a change come to her fair face—the blue eyes, which had been so soft before, grew hard; the tender blush, which had made her girlish beauty almost divine, faded to leave her white as driven snow.

Within the space of those few moments she seemed to grow years older, to change from a girl upon the verge of childhood still, to a woman who has loved and suffered.

She rose to her feet, slowly, firmly, and still her clear eyes looked straight into his; but their was a question in their glance—absolutely she doubted her own senses then.

"Why do you say that?" she asked slowly. "Are you only trying my love, to see if it will stand the test? What you have told me cannot be the truth!"

"It is the truth. Heaven help me!" he answered, and the flush of shame grew deeper on his face. "Esme—Esme, why do you doubt me?"

She took a slow step back, shrinking from him with a little pitiful gesture, that went to his heart.

"I don't doubt you," she said, "I could not, for I—I would as soon doubt Heaven itself. There is some dreadful mistake—it cannot be true—you are not engaged to Miss Fanshaw when you have told me that you love me."

"Esme, Esme, you will break my heart," Hugh cried. "Oh, my dearest, do you know so little of the world and its ways as never to have heard of a man marrying for money or position, or a thousand other motives besides love, and then, too late, meeting the one woman to whom his love could be given?"

It was pitiful to see the paleness of her pretty face, and the shadow, almost of despair, which lay in the sweet blue eyes that had shone with love's own light before.

Yet she was very calm now, struggling with an heroic courage to conquer her rising tears.

"Yes; I have heard of such cases," she said, "but they have always seemed to me stories of wicked men. Do not—do not

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