

Beautiful Cynthia;

Victory After Many Defeats.

CHAPTER XXX.
A STRANGE MEETING.

Darrel laughed as he stretched himself out obediently, remarking apologetically, "Abdurmahn and I get on very well as long as I refrain from shaking his conviction that he has a kind of orphan child to take care of."

In less than five minutes he was fast asleep. The stranger, not so tired as his rescuer and host, lay with open eyes, which rested with rather a strange expression on the stars which shone through the mouth of the cave. Suddenly Darrel stirred in his sleep and uttered a word—one word only.

The man beside him started and raised himself on his elbow, to find Abdurmahn's fierce eyes flaming through the darkness at him; and, knowing that if he made a movement which the Afrid might deem suspicious, he would probably never make another, he dropped down again.

When Darrel woke he found the stranger sitting up and regarding him with intense gravity.

"Good sleep?" he asked. "I wonder whether you will think me intrusive if I ask you your name?"

"Not at all," said Darrel, stifling a yawn and stretching himself. "My name's Frayne—Darrel Frayne."

"I thought so," observed his companion calmly. "I knew your father, and now that I can see you, I see that you resemble him."

"You—knew—my father?" said Darrel sharply. "Who—what is your name, sir?"

"Bradley Drayle," was the quiet reply.

Darrel sprang to his feet, his sudden movement causing Abdurmahn to spring toward them, knife in hand.

"Bradley Drayle!" echoed Darrel, in a husky voice, for the poor fellow was almost certain that he was dreaming; "Bradley Drayle! Then—then you are Cynthia's father!"

Drayle nodded with his pleasantly cynical smile.

"Yes. The world is a small place. You have heard the remark before, no doubt. Here are you and I on a hillside in the great Goola Pass; we meet as strangers; you have saved

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my life—sorry to remind you of it—have slept side by side—at least, you have slept, I am glad to know—and in the morning light we find that we both come from a little village in old England, a place not one Englishman in fifty thousand has ever heard of. How do you do, Mr. Frayne?"

He held out his hand, and Darrel caught it and pressed it. Drayle felt the young man's hand shaking like a leaf. Suddenly Darrel withdrew his hand and covered his face, for he was stunned, well-nigh unmanned—remember he was weak still—by the meeting. Drayle looked straight in front of him and kept silence for a minute or so, then he said, in a low voice: "I understand, Frayne. The sight of me has brought back—I was sorry, very sorry, to hear of Sir Anson's death, and—your misfortune."

Darrel nodded, but he could not speak yet. His heart was thumping the blood was surging through his veins. "Cynthia's father, Cynthia's father!" he repeated to himself mutely.

"Can you give me any news of my daughter?" asked Drayle, as quietly as before, and still with his eyes set straight.

Darrel shook his head. "No," he replied hoarsely. "She was well when I saw her last, there in England. Oh Mr. Drayle—his voice broke for a moment—"I must tell you! You know—she must have written to you—I love her. She was all the world to me. I—I lost her! She did not care for me. She promised to marry me, but she found that she did not care enough; she wrote and told me so—"

His voice failed, and he averted his head.

"It is not like Cynthia not to know her own mind, and it is still less likely to change it," said Drayle gravely.

"Don't blame her," exclaimed Darrel quickly and almost angrily. "I was a mistake, and she found it out in time. It was like Cynthia to face the truth."

Drayle shook his head and rubbed his eyebrow.

"I don't understand," he said simply. "And I must admit that I am curious to learn the reason of her action; for Cynthia, unlike most of her sex, has generally a reason, and a good one, for her proceedings. How strange that you and I should be discussing them, and in this place!"

"Of course she had a reason," said Darrel, with something between a sigh and a groan. "But we won't talk of it, Mr. Drayle, please."

"We won't," said Drayle, laconically. "We will forget it until we remember to remember it when we get back."

"Forget!" cried poor Darrel, between his teeth. "That's easier said, sir. Forget! Why, there isn't an hour of the day that I don't think of her; for, you see, Mr. Drayle, that I—I love her still!"

Drayle laid his hand upon Darrel's shoulder and pressed it.

"So you told me in your sleep last night, lad!" he said gently. "No, my good Abdurmahn—for Darrel's vigilant guardian had approached them threateningly—"I am not quarrelling with your master, and I've no intention of killing him. Come, Darrel—yes, it must be, 'Darrel, lad—we'll make a bee line for England and get Cynthia's explanation, though I've a shrewd notion of what it will be. You see, I've known our little Cynthia longer than you have, and I'll venture to go bail for her!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A LOVE-INSPIRED HOPE.

Cynthia reached the cottage. She walked slowly, her hand stretched out as if she were still blind, still groping her way.

Parsons saw her from an upper window, and with a cry of alarm, rushed down the stairs and caught her.

"Oh, are you ill, faint, Miss Cynthia?" she asked apprehensively, and, as Cynthia seemed incapable of speech, Parsons led her into the sitting room. Cynthia's hand closed tightly on Parsons' arm as if she felt the need of some support.



"I am not ill," she said, in a dull, mechanical way. "No; I am not ill, and yet—have I fainted? I met Mr. Sampson Burridge—he told me—what was it he told me, Parsons? Ah!"

She remembered, and uttered the sound of a mortally stricken person; then she smiled and put out both hands as if to thrust back some dreadful threat, some great calamity. "It was only Sampson Burridge; it is not true—he said it to pain me, in revenge."

Parsons had deftly removed Cynthia's hat, and was plying the eau de Cologne bottle—her panacea for all sudden attacks of faintness, headache and the nervous ills of life.

"What is it he told you, miss?" she asked soothingly. "Whatever it was, I'll be bound it was a lie. Everybody else hates that man and his father; and I've got to hate them myself already. To think that he should have the impudence to stop you and speak to you after being told not to."

"Cynthia had been staring vacantly at the floor, and suddenly she raised her head.

"Get a telegraph form, Parsons, please," she said.

With a trembling hand she wrote: "Please tell me where Mr. Darrel 'Frayne' is," and was addressing it to Lord Northam when the reflection came to her swiftly that she had no right to inquire; she had given Darrel up long ago! She crushed the telegram in her hand and sat brooding over the torture Sampson had inflicted.

Was it a lie? She had heard nothing of Darrel; she had not had the courage to ask after him, to pronounce the name which was engraven on her heart; she had, since Lady Westlake's death, scarcely read a line in a newspaper.

She was so absorbed in the vague horror of the dread Sampson's words that she did not hear the

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sound of footsteps on the garden path; but Parsons did, and exclaimed: "It is Lord Northam, Miss Cynthia. Shall I tell him you are ill—ask him to wait?"

But Cynthia rose and went toward the door, and Northam saw her as he entered the little hall. He stopped short, for her face was that of one who is prepared for a deathblow.

Without speaking, she held out the crushed telegram. He took it, read it, and raised his eyes to her; and his face was that of the man who is doomed to deal the blow.

"Come inside," he said, and he followed her into the sitting room. "You were going to send that? The answer would have been 'I don't know.' Cynthia, you will be brave. You'll bear in mind that nothing is known for certain. He was in this last expedition—you didn't know that? I thought not. There was fighting—won't you sit down?" She shook her head.

"Tell—tell me quickly," she said, in a low voice. "It is the suspense!"

He nodded and shook her hand. "A man has come down with me, one of the Rexfords, which Frayne joined. He has some news, some message."

She looked over her shoulder, and after a moment's pause, as if to give her time to summon her strength, he turned to the window and beckoned. A thin, worn-looking young man came limping up the path and stood in the doorway of the room.

"Come in, Dunton," said Northam, in a low voice. "This is Miss Drayle. Yes, you'd better tell her now, at once," he added, for Dunton, shrinking from his painful task, had looked from one to the other aghast.

"I'm—I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Miss Drayle," he said, almost inaudibly. "But—but I promised. I've—I've a message from Captain Frayne. It was entrusted to me the night before the attack on the fort, you know. We exchanged messages."

Cynthia held out her hand; it trembled no longer; her face was calm, but deadly white; her eyes were fixed on his with an expression which poor Dunton remembered for the rest of his life. He placed the tiny packet in her hand, and both men turned aside. She undid the wrapper and looked down at the ring as it lay in her hand. Then she spoke. To their relief—and yet to their alarm—her voice was as calm as her face, curiously and unnaturally calm.

"He gave you this to give to me if—if he died, if he were killed?" she asked.

(To be continued.)

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