

LOVE'S MAGIC CHARM.

(Continued.)

"Are such women common, then?" she demanded, passionately. "I knew evil enough of your world, but I did not know this. This woman is sweet-voiced, her face is fair, her hair is golden, her hands are white and soft, her manners caressing and gentle; but you see her soul is sordid—it was not large enough to prevent her marrying an old man for his money. Something tells me that the vengeance I have promised myself is not far off."

Miss Hastings wrung her hands in silent dismay.

"Oh, for something to redeem you, Pauline—something to soften your heart, which is hardening into sin!"

"I do not know of any earthly influence that could, as you say, redeem me. I know that I am doing wrong. Do not think that I have transformed vice into virtue and have blinded myself. I know that some people can rise to a far grander height; they would, instead of seeking vengeance pardon injuries. I cannot—I never will. There is no earthly influence that can redeem me, because there is none stronger than my own will."

The elder lady looked almost hopelessly at the young one. How was she to cope with this strong nature—a nature that could own a fault, yet by strength of will persevere in it? She felt that she might as well try to check the angry waves of the rising tide as try to control this willful, undisciplined disposition.

How often in after years these words returned to her mind: "I know of no earthly influence stronger than my own will."

Miss Hastings sat in silence for some minutes, and then she looked at the young girl.

"What shape will your vengeance take, Pauline?" she asked, calmly.

"I do not know. Fate will shape it for me; my opportunity will come in time."

"Vengeance is a very high-sounding word," observed Miss Hastings, "but the thing itself generally assumes very prosaic forms. You would not descend to such a vulgar deed as murder, for instance; nor would you avail yourself of anything so commonplace as poison."

"No," replied Pauline, with contempt; "those are mean revenges. I will hurt her where she has hurt me—where all the love of her heart is garnered; there will I wound her as she wounded me. Where she can feel most there I mean to strike, and strike home."

"Then you have no definite plan arranged?" questioned Miss Hastings.

"Fate will play into my hands when the time comes," replied Pauline. Nor could the governess extract aught further from her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FATE FAVORS PAULINE.

Autumn, with its golden grain, its rich fruits, and its luxuriant foliage, had come and gone; then Christmas snow lay soft and white on the ground; and still Captain Langton had not paid his promised visit to Darrell Court. He sent numerous cards, letters, books, and music, but he did not appear himself. Once more the spring flowers bloomed; Sir Oswald had been lying for twelve months in the cold, silent family vault. With the year of mourning the last of Lady Darrell's gracefully expressed sorrow vanished—the last vestige of gray and lavender, of jet beads and black trimmings, disappeared from her dresses; and then she shone forth upon the world in all the grace and delicate loveliness of her fair young beauty.

Who could number her lovers or count her admirers? Old and young, peer and commoner, there was not one who would not have given anything he had on earth to win the hand of the beautiful and wealthy young widow.

Lady Hampton favored the suit of Lord Aynsley, one of the wealthiest peers in England. He had met Lady Darrell while on a visit at the Elms, and was charmed with her. So young, fair, gifted, accomplished, so perfect a mistress of every art and grace, yet so good and amiable—Lord Aynsley thought that he had never met with so perfect a woman before.

Lady Hampton was delighted.

"I think, Elinor," she said, "that you are one of the most fortunate of women. You have a chance now of making a second and most brilliant marriage. I think you must have been born under a lucky star."

Lady Darrell laughed her soft, graceful little laugh.

"I think, auntie," she returned, "that, as I married the first time to please you, I may marry now to please myself and my own heart."

"Certainly," said her ladyship, dubiously; "but remember that I have always told you—sentiment is the ruin of everything."

And, as Lady Hampton spoke, there came before her the handsome face of Aubrey Langton. She prayed mentally that he might not appear again at Darrell Court until Lord Aynsley had proposed and had been accepted.

But Fate was not kind to her.

The next morning Lady Darrell received a letter from the captain saying that, as the summer was drawing near, he should be very glad to pay his long-promised visit to Darrell Court. He hoped to be with them on Thursday evening.

Lady Darrell's fair face flushed as she read. He was coming, then, this man who above all others had taken her fancy captive—this man whom, with all her worldly scheming, she would have married without money if he had but asked her. He was coming, and he would see her in all the glory of her prosperity. He would be almost sure to fall in love with her; and she—well, it was not the first time that she whispered to her own heart how gladly she would love him. She was too excited by her pleasant news to be quite prudent. She must have a confidante—she must tell some one that he was coming.

She went to the study, where Miss Hastings and Pauline were busily engaged with some water-colors. She held the open letter in her hand.

"Miss Hastings, I have news for you," she said. "I know that all that interested Sir Oswald is full of interest for you. Pauline, you too will be pleased to hear that Captain Langton is coming. Sir Oswald loved him very much."

Pauline knew that, and had cause to regret it.

"I should be much pleased," continued Lady Darrell, "if, without interfering with your arrangements, you could help me to entertain him."

Miss Hastings looked up with a smile of assent.

"Anything that lies in my power," she said, "I shall be only too happy to do; but I fear I shall be rather at a loss how to amuse a handsome young officer like Captain Langton."

Lady Darrell laughed, but looked much pleased.

"You are right," she said—"he is handsome. I do not know that I have ever seen one more handsome."

Then she stopped abruptly, for she caught the gleam of Pauline's scornful smile—the dark eyes were looking straight at her. Lady Darrell blushed crimson, and the smile on Pauline's lips deepened.

"I see my way now," she said to herself. "Time, fate, and opportunity, will combine at last."

"And you, Pauline," inquired Lady Darrell, in her most caressing manner—"you will help me with my visitor—will you not?"

"Pardon me, I must decline," answered Miss Darrell.

"Why, I thought Captain Langton and yourself were great friends!" cried Lady Darrell.

"I am not answerable for your thoughts, Lady Darrell," said Pauline.

"But you—you ring so beautifully! Oh, Pauline, you really must help me!" persisted Lady Darrell.

She drew nearer to the girl, and was about to lay one white jeweled hand on her arm, but Pauline drew back with a haughty gesture there was no mistaking.

"Pray understand me, Lady Darrell," she said—"all arts and persuasions are, as you know, lost on me. I decline to do anything toward entertaining your visitor, and shall avoid him as much as possible."

Lady Darrell looked up, her face pale, and with a frightened look upon it.

"Why do you speak so, Pauline? You must have some reason for it. Tell me what it is."

No one had ever heard Lady Darrell speak so earnestly before.

"Tell me!" she repeated, and her very heart was in the words.

"Pardon me if I keep my council," said Pauline. "There is wisdom in few words."

Then Miss Hastings, always anxious to make peace, said:

"Do not be anxious, Lady Darrell; Pauline knows that some of the unpleasantness she had with Sir Oswald was owing to Captain Langton. Perhaps that act may affect her view of his character."

Lady Darrell discreetly retired from the contest.

"I am sure you will both do all you can," she said, in her most lively manner. "We must have some charades, and a ball; we shall have plenty of time to talk this over when our guests arrive." And, anxious to go before Pauline said anything more, Lady Darrell quitted the room.

"My dear Pauline," said Miss Hastings, "if you would—"

But she paused suddenly, for Pauline was sitting with a rapt expression on her face, deaf to every word.

Such a light was in those dark eyes, proud, triumphant, and clear—such a smile on those curved lips; Pauline looked as though she could see into futurity, and as though, while the view half frightened, it pleased her.

Suddenly she rose from her seat, with her hands clasped, evidently forgetting that she was not alone.

"Nothing could be better," she said. "I could not have asked of fate or fortune anything better than this."

When Miss Hastings, wondering at her strange, excited manner, asked her a question, she looked up with the vague manner of one just aroused from deep sleep.

"What are you thinking of, Pauline?" asked Miss Hastings.

"I am thinking," she replied, with a dreamy smile, "what good fortune always attends those who know how to wait. I have waited, and what I desired has come."

Thursday came at last. Certainly Lady Darrell had spared neither time nor expense in preparing for her visitor; it was something like a warrior's home-coming—the rarest of wines, the fairest of flowers, the sweetest of smiles awaiting him. Lady Darrell's dress was the perfection of good taste—plain white silk trimmed with black lace, with a few flowers in her golden hair. She knew that she was looking her best; it was the first time that the captain had seen her in her present position, so she was anxious to make the most favorable impression on him.

"Welcome once more to Darrell Court!" she said, holding out one white hand in greeting.

"It seems like a welcome to Paradise," said the captain, profanely; and then he bowed with the grace of a *beau sabreur* over the little hand that he still held clasped in his own.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CAPTAIN LANGTON ACCEPTED.

Lady Darrell was obliged to own herself completely puzzled. All the girls she had ever known had not only liked admiration, but had even sought it; she could not understand why Pauline showed such decided aversion to Captain Langton. He was undeniably handsome, graceful, and polished in manner; Lady Darrell could imagine no one more pleasant or entertaining.