

Well Worth Winning.

CHAPTER III.—THE END OF A WEEK.

With a heart full of bitterness and conscious impotence, Arthur Loring rose from his bed in the middle of the night and went out. The streets were silent and deserted. He walked southward, and along Oxford St. and Park Lane, and down Knightsbridge way, thinking all the while not of whether he was going, but whether it would not be wiser to take himself off the scene at once, by enlisting as a soldier next day.

In this unsatisfied, and distracting state of mind he found himself, somewhat to his surprise, in front of his uncle's house in Cadogan Square.

Arthur was rather ashamed on making the discovery, and beat a quick retreat. On his way back to Marylebone, the poison of Ralph Loring's advice began to have its turn, as poisons have a way of doing—it flew rapidly through every vein.

"If there only was a chance, over so faint a hope!" he exclaimed. "Ah, but it would be worth trying for!"

The fates seemed to be with Loring, or against him, according as you look at it. Sleeping none that night, he went out early for a walk in Hyde Park, and met Maud Lavelle having her morning gallop. She was unattended, and reined up her horse immediately she saw him. How charming she looked! with the light of youth and health in her eyes, and their pink on her cheeks. And she was glad to meet him, too, and made no secret of it.

She glanced at his face with some concern, and, hesitating a little, asked: "Have you been ill since we saw you last night?"

"Oh no," he answered laughing, "not ill; a little ill at ease, perhaps. I am not quite reconciled to things as yet, I suppose. But that is nothing. Tell me, Maud, were you offended with me?"

"Surely not—Arthur," she replied, adding his name with the sweetest and friendliest shyness imaginable. She continued more soberly: "Mr. Longfield, I think, didn't like it; but I suppose you don't mind that. Mamma said nothing at all. And, Mr. Loring, would you guess what he said?"

"I should never guess."

"He said it was just what he expected. There. And for my part, Arthur, now that I know you, I should like to know you better; it is so nice to have a cousin to talk to and go out with sometimes, and I have had nobody."

She said this so innocently and seriously, that Arthur Loring, conscious of his own thoughts, felt ashamed.

"Mamma and I lunch at half-past one," she proceeded in the same way: "and if you mean to call to-day, and can come about that hour, you might lunch with us."

"I shall be delighted, Maud."

"And afterwards, would you—would you take me to see the Tower of London on one of the penny steamboats?"

The proposition was a little startling, but if the thing could be carried out he would go with her too gladly.

"Do you know," she continued, feeling relief for having got the expedition to the Tower off her mind, "I have often thought that if I had a brother—or a cousin," with ever so faint a blush at this point, "I should like him to take me all over London, at least once a week in fine weather, on the outside of an omnibus."

"It would be jolly, I admit," he assented, with considerable doubt as to whether such pleasure was ever to be his. "You have a capital view from the top of an omnibus; and as only two can sit on one chair—an advantage to which he was not oblivious—"you are never crushed. And if you take one of the front seats, you escape the tobacco-smoke, if there is any going."

Certain thoughts, suggested by the confident innocence of this charming girl, troubled the breast of Arthur Loring on his way back to breakfast. He feared it was not honourable to lay siege to the unsuspecting citadel of her heart. But the temptation was too great to be resisted, and once for all he defiantly flung to the winds every anxious forecast of the result. He should find it easy enough by-and-by—if successful—to prove to himself that it was his duty to save her from the fate of becoming Longfield's wife.

"It is mean," he said, "to have to resort to treachery in getting at her heart; but if she suspected it now, she would be too alarmed to suffer me to go out. However, in the end it will be best for her, and she will forgive me."

Doubtless she would, supposing everything to turn out as he hoped.

Arthur Loring did not fail to present himself at half-past one, and he was received by Mrs. Loring with a stately courtesy that rather chilled him. However, Maud made

up for this, and he was much surprised and puzzled by the absence of interest with which Mrs. Loring appeared to regard the excursion to the Tower of London. She did not utter a syllable, in his hearing, either for or against a project the nature of which might certainly suggest some special observation.

"Does your mamma care for your coming with me down the river?" he asked Maud when she was buttoning her gloves in the hall before starting.

The suppressed interest of his manner was different from that of the matter-of-fact reply: "Mamma is quite satisfied; why shouldn't she?"

"I don't know, though, what my uncle Henry would say."

"Mr. Loring knows all about it, Arthur; I told him at breakfast."

This was another surprise, for Maud's way of speaking left no doubt that she had her step-father's sanction. Arthur was next half tempted to make a remark as to Mr. Longfield's sentiments in relation to the matter when he should hear of it; but he thought he had gone far enough.

Carrying a warm shawl on his arm, in case it should be cold on the river, he took her out to Sloane Street and hailed a hansom. When he had put her in and taken his seat beside her—paying the design of the vehicle a silent tribute of admiration—he pulled the doors to. For a time Maud sat looking straight before her, saying nothing, until he asked what she was thinking of.

"I was thinking, Arthur," she said, "might we not come back on an omnibus?"

"Certainly, Maud, if you wish," he answered with alacrity.

They were soon on the steamboat, churning down the river; and the breeze was so cool and strong that he foresaw the keeping of the shawl round her pretty shoulders would demand his constant and close attention.

There is no doubt that Arthur Loring made the most of his opportunities during the remainder of that week, and laid siege to Maud Lavelle with an ardour that arose not from deliberate design, but from an intensity of love that was akin to worship. In the fire of this passion, fed by daily intercourse which was free—on her side—from reserve as the companionship of a child, he forgot or refused to listen to the warning that had in the beginning startled his conscience. The week was all too short for love; but when it came to an end, it looked indeed to have been too long for prudence. Never missing a change in her sweet face, Arthur Loring was reproached by an expression of trouble that began to hover at times about the girl's eyes.

The last day—the day before he was to commence his duties under Mr. Longfield—they had gone for only a short walk in the Park, and Maud was most of the time very silent. Once he asked what was the matter; but she quickly brightened up said, "Nothing at all!" This was not satisfactory; and if her pensiveness were due merely to the termination of what might be likened to an enjoyable holiday, he knew her habitual frankness well enough to be sure that she would have said so. But she never referred to it at all, which was very strange.

Two other explanations of her manner occurred to him, but he dared not mention either. She might be in fear of Mr. Longfield on account of the liberty she had enjoyed those past few days, and no doubt she had earned the man's displeasure, and should experience it. Or it might be—Arthur Loring hardly ventured to form the wild hope—it might be that, if her choice were free, she would not now become Longfield's wife.

"Good-bye, Maud," he said that evening, after taking her home. "I suppose that is the right word now, for I go to work to-morrow, and Heaven knows when I shall meet you again."

She did not raise her eyes, but quickly answered, "Good-bye, Arthur," and ran up the stairs.

He was standing looking after her in pained surprise, when Mrs. Loring came out of an adjoining room. "Where is Maud, Mr. Loring?" she asked.

"Gone up-stairs. I have just said good-bye to her."

Mrs. Loring looked at him with her cold eyes, reflected a moment, and said: "I believe you are going to the office to-morrow, and that we shall consequently not see you so much after to-day. Could you spare me a few minutes before you go?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Loring," he answered; and then he followed her to the back drawing-room with an uneasy feeling.

Mrs. Loring sat down and pointed to a chair facing her, and facing the light of a window as well. Loring did not fail to notice this, and the circumstance did not make more comfortable.

"I suppose, Mr. Loring," she said, coming

to the point with a directness that gave him a start, "you are aware that my daughter is engaged to be married very soon to Mr. Longfield?"

"I have concluded as much," he answered, trying his utmost, with his face to that high window, to betray no discomposure.

"I am glad you have known it, Mr. Loring. Indeed, I think you ought to have been told; but then, it is a somewhat embarrassing thing to do all at once. But I am glad you have known it, for your own sake as well as my daughter's."

This was plain speaking, and Arthur Loring turned very red. "I am very conscious, Mrs. Loring," he answered, with a visible effort to suppress, "that in my altered circumstances I should be a very ineligible suitor in any quarter, and I know that in this case I should be a most uncomfortable one. May I therefore request you to believe that, if I have lost everything else in the way of inheritance, I have not yet lost my pride?"

Mrs. Loring's impassive face changed ever so slightly under this speech—it might have been from surprise, perhaps. But she made no answer in words, merely inclining her head in acquiescence.

Then there was silence, and Loring rose. "I presume, Mrs. Loring, the situation is quite clear now, and I may take my leave? I must thank you for a few very pleasant days. Of course I need not say that in the walk of life on which I enter to-morrow all my old habits and relations of life come to an end."

"I do not know that it need be so, Mr. Loring. No doubt my husband will still recollect that you are his nephew, and you will not cease to be a gentleman."

"I hope not," he answered, with a laugh; "but the character of a gentleman and the resources of a pound a week—which I suppose will about represent Mr. Longfield's estimate of my value—do not go well together. But I do not complain; I am quite ready and resolute to accept the fact."

"I trust you do not mean all that—quite," she remarked, with more courtesy than sincerity, as it certainly seemed to Arthur Loring.

"I do mean it, Mrs. Loring," he answered quickly, with the blood again in his face. "I am too proud to go out of this house with a concealment. I love Maud with my whole heart, and I never again can enter this house for that reason. There. I do not deceive you, nor have I dishonoured myself. Your daughter has no suspicion of my secret, nor shall she ever know it from me. As a humble clerk in her husband's office, she will understand the unfitness of any further acquaintance with me."

Mrs. Loring was moved now, but the inscrutability of her face gave no index of the character of her emotion. Loring cared too little to give the matter a moment's thought.

"I expected it would happen," she said. "I do not know what my husband expected, or why he was so willing to throw you two together. It was a thing that was sure to happen."

"I hope, then, you do not hold me to blame? I have been honest with you."

"I know there will be sorrow out of this," she said, without looking up from the carpet.—"Good-bye, Mr. Loring. I think you had better not come here again, even if your uncle invites you."

Arthur Loring swept out of the house looking savage. It is little to say that his blood was boiling. There were a hundred and one wild notions dancing through his head—desperate schemes for blowing sky-high that infamous and heartless plot for the disposal of poor, innocent Maud Lavelle, whom he worshipped; and it was at the same time maddening and sickening that every thought of the kind should receive its sudden death-blow from the despicable fact of an empty purse. The iron went into his soul. It was no wonder he looked savage.

As he went tearing along the pavement down Sloane Street, his aspect and impetuosity sent an exceedingly pretty maiden flying out of his way before him. He could not avoid noticing her after a while, and when he saw her going along at that pace, now and then glancing back at him over her shapely little shoulder, the idea struck him—did she fancy he was pursuing her to take her life? He had to stop and laugh, the incitement was so irresistible; and the curious thing was that the girl stopped too, regarded him doubtfully an instant, and then laughed likewise. It was altogether a comedy of the pavement.

She waited for him while he approached, and for his life he could not think what it all meant. As there was no doubt that she was waiting for him, he halted when he came up with her, looking into her very winsome pink and white face with considerable surprise and interest.

"Law, Mr. Loring," she said, showing her pretty teeth in a laugh, "never look as if you'd eat a body when a body wants to speak to you."

"I'm not a cannibal, yet," he answered, joining in the laugh; "but if I was, you would be a very dainty body to catch and eat."

He recognised the girl now, though he had only casually seen her once or twice at his uncle's house. She was Maud's maid; and of course Arthur became at once attentive and interested, and walked on with her. Equally of course he expected that the girl wanted to speak to him concerning her mistress; but to his great surprise he discovered presently that she had no such intention. She wanted to talk to him about herself, and about herself, too, in the most interesting relation which a girl can have. After a good deal of blushing and giggling, he learned that Kitty—which was her name—was privately engaged to a young man, who was pressing on the propriety of their marrying without further delay. Interrogated as to the young man's name and prospects, Kitty confessed, shyly, that his name was "Jack"—Jack Hornby, and that by profession he was a clerk. The name struck Loring as one that he had heard before, but he could not recollect where, until the girl gave him the uncomfortable information that Mr. Hornby was a clerk in Mr. Longfield's office, Kitty herself having obtained the desirable post for her lover through the friendship of her mistress.

Arthur Loring roughly handled his adolescent moultache for a minute. Did Kitty know that her lover was now under "notice," in order to make way for him, Mr. Arthur Loring? The thought was bitterly humiliating to him; until it occurred to him that perhaps another arrangement might have been made at the Annuitants' office during the past week.

"Well, now," said Arthur Loring by-and-by, when they had become confidential on the subject and were sitting on one of the seats in Sloane Square, "the question is, are you willing to make Jack a happy man?"

"Oh, quite willing, Mr. Loring," she answered simply; "but it isn't that exactly. I don't know that I ought to consent to this particular time, though Miss Maud tells me that I should."

"Miss Lavelle says you should?" remarked Loring with livelier interest.

"Yes, sir. You see Jack is losing his place to-day, though of course he is sure to get another one."

"Does Miss Lavelle know this?" he inquired, turning to look after a passing omnibus.

"Oh yes, and she is very sorry; but still she thinks I ought not to hold back."

"Why is he losing his place?"

The girl looked up, her face red with surprise. "I thought you knew, sir," she answered gently. "They will not want Jack when you go to the office."

"Very well, Kitty. Tell Jack I am not going to the office, and then, I suppose, he will be kept on. I shall write myself to my uncle presently to say that I have changed my mind.—No, no," he added laughing, as he saw the girl preparing to remonstrate. "You are quite wrong, Kitty. I had made up my mind before I met you, and nothing would make me alter it.—Shall I tell you why, since you have told me so much? I detest Mr. Longfield, and could not work under him."

Kitty drew a breath as long and deep as the capacity of her small bosom admitted, and said: "I can well understand that Mr. Loring. Everyone detests him."

He would have liked to ask if Miss Lavelle was included in "every one," for he was afraid she was; but of course he did not ask.

"So that difficulty being removed, Kitty, I suppose you will decide to give Jack his way in regard to the marriage.—When and where is it to take place? I should like to come and see it."

"Oh, would you, Mr. Loring?" cried Kitty quickly with a violent blush. "And that is just what I wanted to—to ask you sir. If you would—would kindly consent to be—be best-man to Jack?"

To see Kitty collapse after that effort, and clasp her tiny hands tightly together, and stare straight before her with the rigid look of a person ready for the worst that could happen, was a sight of interest. Loring looked at her for a few seconds, dumfounded by so unexpected a request, and unable to make anything of it; then his good-humour came to his aid, and he laughed.

"But, Kitty," he said, "I haven't the pleasure of knowing Jack. If I had, and he asked me to stand by him on that trying occasion, I would be delighted."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Loring; that's all