

THE VILLAGE ANGEL;

Or, Agatha's Recompense.

CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

"I have," said her niece. "I do not pretend to say which was which, but I am sure they were not equal. It is possible he may have been below her in station, or she may have been below him; but that there was some disparity I feel sure."

After two years' unswerving constancy, he felt that he was really entitled to some little reward, and if this brilliant young beauty could amuse, please and flatter him at the same time, why should she not? So it came to pass that the invitations were more frequent, and at last Valerie spent so much time with them they were almost like one family.

Sir Vane never dreamed of a flirtation with her; it was the last thing that occurred to him. But Valerie was queen of the whole scene, and it was impossible always to avoid the plots she laid for him. She had a peculiar faculty for finding out when he was alone; for meeting him in the garden and when Agatha was absent; and Sir Vane was never very strong at resisting the advances of a beautiful woman.

It will be a terrible infringement of the law of etiquette, if I do persuade you to go, mademoiselle," he said. "I am quite ready to infringe them," she replied, "indeed, I would enjoy it."

Once out on the clear blue waters, she turned to him. "I love the lake," she said, "and I was afraid you were going to disappoint me after all."

"Why need you have thought that?" he asked. "You seem to have such notions of etiquette and propriety. I do think English people are—"

"No, no," she replied, "and so narrow in their ideas." "I can bear that, and more, from you," he replied.

And then she became her most brilliant self; she talked to him and amused him, until he was really attracted by her ready wit and brilliancy. She took a sudden and pretty caprice for learning to row, and her little hands flashed so white and fair with their shining jewels, he could not help admiring them; and while giving her lessons in the art of rowing, what was more natural than that she should hold those pretty hands in his? She grew more beautiful and more brilliant as he grew more demonstrative in his attention.

"I have enjoyed that hour," she said. "I am almost sorry that we must go back. Will Mr. Heriot think you too long?" "I hope not," he replied, suddenly growing serious. "I should be very sorry if she minded me."

"You spoil your wife, Mr. Heriot. She will expect the same amount of attention from you." He looked at her in wonder. "She will always receive it," he said, smiling.

And Valerie laughed to hide her confusion. CHAPTER XVIII. THE MARKED HANDKERCHIEF. There were times when Sir Vane looked at his young wife and wondered whether it was possible to excite the feeling of jealousy without her. Not that he wished to do so; it was merely curiosity to know whether one so perfect, so seemingly far above all other mortal beings, could feel as other people did. He would have been pleased to know that Agatha was just a little jealous; he would have liked to see those eyes, tender arms and rounded neck, and that gleam of reproach in the violet eyes, and a sweet voice to whisper, "Did he really love her best?" That was the kind of thing that he understood and was accustomed to.

If Agatha had been inclined to jealousy she had plenty of cause. The time had been when Sir Vane had shrugged his shoulders at the mention of madame's niece, and lamented that their solitude was broken; but now it was quite a different matter; he seemed to look with eager longing for her. "Ask Valerie to go with us," were the words constantly on his lips, and Agatha never once hesitated.

It was natural, she said to herself, that he should like some one who could talk to him about his own world, of which she knew nothing. Sir Vane never meant to hurt her. When they were all three out together, it often happened that Valerie laughing and jesting, walked with him, while Agatha went on alone. Then suddenly his heart would be touched, and hastening to her, he would say: "Darling, why are you alone? Come with me."

And it struck him with wonder that she always turned to him a face as sweet and bright as a loving face could be. It would have been better for them all had she looked just a little more keenly after her own interests; for Valerie, day by day, disliked her and liked her husband more and more.

her attention was at once attracted by a mark in the corner. She looked at it long and curiously. There was a crest, half worn away, and underneath the letters "V. H. C." She repeated them over and over again—"V. H. C."—they were not his initials, they would have been simply "V. H." Still it was strange that they should be identical with the same with the addition of another letter—"V. H. C." She tried to make out the crest, or mark, but could not, and a faint idea that she had been right in suspecting a mystery came to her.

"I will see what he says when I give it to him," she thought, and she arranged it in such a fashion that the letters were the first thing on which his eyes must fall. "Mr. Heriot," she said, suddenly, holding it out to him, "is this yours?" He looked to see what it was, and, as she anticipated, he saw the initials at once. She looked straight into his face, no passing expression could escape her, and she saw distinctly, when his eyes fell on the three letters, his color change.

"Is it yours?" she said, looking up at him with great innocent eyes. "I hardly know," he replied, with some hesitation. "The initials are right," she said, laughingly; "but there is a 'C' added to them which is not yours; yet I saw it fall from your hand."

"It has been put with my things by mistake," he said, but Valerie saw that all was not quite as it should be. "There is no such thing under the sun," laughed Sir Vane; "everything is old, and very often the oldest is the best."

"I must not stop to listen to treason. Old wives' tales, old books, old friends are all right; but what about old maid and old women, Mr. Heriot? You need not answer me—I must go, or my aunt will wish to know something about my absence. Au revoir, mademoiselle."

"What an escape!" she sighed, as she laid "Debrez's Poem" on the table. "If he had seen what I was reading, he might have suspected me, I am sure. What an escape! I will keep it here for the future."

She spent the whole of the bright, sunny morning in literally poring over the book. The only way in which she could be quite sure was by beginning at the first leaf and going straight through to the last; then if there was any truth in her suspicions, with what she knew already, she should soon know his secret. It was a tiresome task, from the table of contents and list of abbreviations to the word "finis" at the close of the volume. She saw a picture of earnest intent as she rested her white arms on the table, and bent her beautiful head over the puzzling pages. Her head was soon in a whirl—ideas, early, marvellous; but among them all, nothing that answered to what she wanted. An, yes, here was an earl whose name was Victor Hay Carlington. The very initials, but according to the entry he must be quite sixty. Again she found the motto, *Vincit Veritas*, belonging to several families; the crest of the crown and olive branch she could not find. Still she was not discouraged; she could not waste a moment through a thick volume in a few hours, but she could return to it again and again.

At last she came to the end of this long list of peers. She had been through it carefully—she had not missed one single entry—and she was slightly disappointed; it would like to have found out that he was an earl at least. Then she went to the baronetage.

"I may have better fortune here," she said to herself. It was night then; every one else in the household was asleep; she alone was awake, vigilant and active. The moon shone, as it does in that lovely land, bright as day. She could see perfectly well to read by it; and a very fair picture she made, leaning by the open window, the moonlight falling on her face and hair, and on the open pages of the book she held. She went through the letters A and B without any result. Her face clouded. What if it were all a myth? She came to the letter C, and her interest deepened. If she could find a name those initials filled. She must be right.

"Carlyon; creation 1633; of Silverdale." The name took her fancy. She read on. "Sir Vane Heriot Carlyon, sixth baronet, born 18—, succeeded his father, Sir Arthur Carlyon, 18—; Baron of Silverdale; seat, Garwood and Silverdale Abbey; Lord of the Manor of Borkdale; Silverdale House, Mayfair. Arms: an eagle, supported by lions rampant. Crest: a crown and olive branch. Motto of the Carlyon family: *Vincit Veritas*—Truth Conquers."

As she read her eyes flashed, the breath came in hot puffs from her lips; her hands trembled so that the book almost fell. "I have it," she cried. "I have found him at last!" She was almost petrified with astonishment; she had felt quite sure that he was not what he seemed to be, a rich English commoner, of no great account; but she had hardly anticipated such perfect success. There could not be the least doubt of his identity.

Now, for what reason in the world had Sir Vane Heriot Carlyon laid aside his rank and title? Why did he choose to hide himself in the solitude of a Swiss chateau? Could he possibly have done anything which compelled him to leave his native land? No; that was not the reason she felt sure; she remembered the saying of the French king, that a woman was at the bottom of everything. Then it flashed across her suddenly that he must be in exile for Agatha's sake—for Agatha.

Her face suddenly grew pale, and a light came into her eyes that was not pleasant to see. She turned to her book again, and looked at the date. It was that same year, 18—, and there was no entry of his marriage; on the contrary, it said, "His presumptive, Arthur Blackbury, cousin." There was no entry of a marriage. Yet Agatha, speaking the other day to her, said it was nearly three years since they were married.

How could that be? Had the marriage been a private one? Was he below him or above him in position—or if it were possible such a dreadful thing could be—perhaps they were not married at all? She laughed at the notion—this handsome, aristocratic man, who worshipped his wife with the fondest love that could be lavished on any creature—it was quite impossible that he could have stooped to such folly with that beautiful, angelic Agatha, who seemed to belong to heaven rather than earth. As she might believe that the stars could fall from heaven as that one so pure and perfect could have gone wrong, in her own mind Valerie had often thought that Agatha was a little too good for this worldly world. Of course the idea was utter nonsense, yet it grew upon her. She could not trust it from her mind. That fact would explain everything if it were true. There was no doubt; but that he loved Agatha with his whole heart—loved her well enough to live in exile his whole life long for her sake; that being the case, why had he not married her?

There was a flaw in her rank, title, position, and everything for her, why had he not married? Or was it possible that this was a private marriage—one that he would, perhaps, never acknowledge? She longed to know the truth; she would have given anything she had in the world to have found out where he had been, and what he had done. If they had been privately married, and he had dared not, for some reason or other, let his marriage be known, even then the knowledge of the secret might be of value to her. If there had been no marriage—and her thoughts inclined that way—how could she tell what might happen. She might, in all probability, be his wife herself!

A thousand plans and schemes rushed through her brain. She would find out—he would know whether they had been married or not, and then she would plan accordingly. Not one word would she say to madame; it would be fatal; but she would watch and lay in wait. There were little signs and little words that must betray the truth. She laid the book aside. "No one must see that," she said to herself, "or I shall lay myself open to suspicion at least. Can it be possible that that quiet, fair, fond girl is Lady Carlyon? I do not think it; but it may be sometimes by Lady Carlyon myself. If she is not his wife, and I can win his heart—win him to betray ways—I shall do so. She can go back to her friends, and I shall be happy, for I am sure he is beginning to like me."

She was too agitated to sleep. Little did Sir Vane think that under the same roof there was one who had followed through his story, whose keen eyes had looked through his disguise, and whose heart was set upon finding out the truth about the girl whom he loved and honored with all his heart. If he had known it, he would have left Bellefleur that same hour, never to return. Valerie lay thinking how, without attracting attention, she could ask such questions as would at least disturb their self-command. "I must ask more from her than from him," she thought, "and I will make my questions so general she shall suspect nothing."

and she drew the folds of her dress over the book. "If I had unexpectedly found Mrs. Heriot studying a Bible," he said, "I should not have been surprised; but you—well, it is rather unexpected."

She did not contradict him at first, but drew the folds of her dress more closely over the volume. "I cannot help asking," laughed Sir Vane, "to what phase of your character this love for study belongs?" She saw that he was inclined to laugh at her, and she said, "I am not reading a Bible, Mr. Heriot; perhaps all the more unfortunate for me. I have a profound respect both for the Bible and its readers. Any little criticism you may feel inclined to make on that score will be entirely lost on me."

"I beg your pardon indeed, mademoiselle; I had no intention of offending," she said, with a sudden change of manner, and laughing in her brightest fashion. "You will be amused when I tell you this is only a book of old family receipts. My aunt is very proud of it; it contains four hundred receipts for puddings, and a countless number for sauces."

"Why are you studying it? Neither pudding nor sauce are at all in your line," said Sir Vane. "No, not at all," she said; "but madame thinks the cook does not give you variety enough, and I am searching for something quite new."

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The nervous confusion and agitation of Agatha convinced her that she was right. If she had been married legally, with all proper form and ceremony, she would, of course, be able to tell when and by whom. From that moment she gave her life to the finding out of that secret and the winning of Sir Vane's affections for herself.

Looking over one of the English daily papers, she came across the advertisement of a private inquiry office. "The very thing for me," she said, and that same day she wrote to John Mickelvitich, asking for all information concerning Sir Vane Heriot Carlyon, of Garwood, whether he was married—whether he was supposed to be paying his addresses to any one, where he was, and if any man was mixed up with scandal of any kind. She arranged the terms herself, enclosing one-half of the sum she considered sufficient, and promising to send the other half when she had his reply. Then came a week of anxious suspense; the answer came saying that in three weeks he would be able to send every particular.

They were three weeks of great anxiety to her. She made the most of it, by busily studying Sir Vane, by doing her best to amuse him, to draw him into a sentimental flirtation, and she did not fail.

The answer came at last, and she vowed to herself that it was worth double the money she had spent upon it. Sir Vane Carlyon, of Garwood, was immensely rich—twenty-eight years of age, exceedingly handsome, was not married, nor had there been any rumors of his engagement. He had had many *affaires de coeur*, and did not care the highest reputation—more than one ruined life lay at his door. He was now on the Continent—somewhere, it was believed in Switzerland, but the whereabouts was not certain, and he was not alone—a young and beautiful girl had left England with him, of whom nothing was known.

Valerie's face flushed and her heart beat with triumph, as she read this letter. "I hold her death warrant in my hands," she said to herself, with a smile, "but I must take my time." After a few days she wrote again, asking John Mickelvitich to find out a place called Whitecroft, where Sir Vane had been visiting, and to do his best to discover whether he had been privately married, or whether he had eloped with any one from that place. There was to be no question of expense, she said to herself. She would bring her whole fortune on the die. If she succeeded, she should be Lady Carlyon—if she failed, it would matter little enough what became of her. The answer was longer this time in coming, but when it did come, she was repaid for the waiting.

Mr. Mickelvitich, finding the inquiry to be an important one, and likely to be lucrative also, had gone down to Whitecroft himself, and made all his discoveries with his own hands. It would be useless to narrate all his disguises—how he went to the rectory as a footman—how he beguiled old Joan as a fortune teller, and, after confiding with her over the fatigues of her work, won her to talk of Miss Agatha, who had disappeared so wonderfully.

He found his way to Croft Abbey disguised as a groom, and from other rooms there learned plenty of Sir Vane. He did still more—he searched the marriage registers of all the churches in the neighborhood; he found out the exact date on which Agatha had disappeared from Whitecroft; and he discovered the exact date on which they went to Paris; and he knew that (on English ground at least) there had been no time for a marriage.

He went on to say how Agatha Brooke was loved and worshipped as how her memory was shrouded in a gloom, and how the memory of a saint; how they associated her with the figure on the stained-glass window; and how she had been known among them as the "angel of the poor." There was no house he entered where she had not taken her comfort and relief; but there was no man or woman who spoke of her with dry eyes.

"Not a very likely person," he added, "to have run away with Sir Vane." Nevertheless, the proofs that she had done so were incontrovertible. He added that among the villagers there was a certainty that she was married; that they had also a sure conviction that she would return to them some day, beautiful and good as ever, and better able to help them. But old Joan and the doctor never over her as one that was lost and would never return. Did mademoiselle wish to know any more?

It is still an open question whether the most good or the most harm is done by detectives. They may, at times, serve the most useful and honorable purposes; again, they may be used in the most disloyal manner, and for the most dishonorable purposes. Certainly, Valerie Evers would never have found out Sir Vane's secret but for them. Now, at last, she held the secret in her own hands. She could stab her, slay her, do as she would with her; at one word from her the whole of the fabric would fall at once into ruins; at one word madame would rise in righteous wrath and expel them. But such words Valerie was not likely to speak. She would wield her power as she liked, and always with the same end in view—that she should be Lady Carlyon herself.

Knowing the real purity and goodness of Agatha's character, she felt quite certain that Sir Vane had deceived her in some way over the marriage. She was too keen a reader of character to believe for one instant that Agatha had willingly or wilfully gone wrong, or that she had been with him all this while without firmly believing herself to be his wife. She paid her that much respect quite unconsciously.

What a power it was to hold! She looked at the lovely, refined lady, clad in gorgeous dresses and costly gems by Sir Vane's desire, and thought to herself that by one word she could strip her of all this, and bring her down to the very dust; and by another word she could hurl her from this, the height of her social grandeur, to the very lowest depths of shame and disgrace. Yet she was woman enough to feel sorry that another, and so peerless a woman, should be soiled. She had a strange and complex nature; she would have done anything to achieve her ends; she would have trampled the beauty from Agatha's face, she would have

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Mr. Mickelvitich, finding the inquiry to be an important one, and likely to be lucrative also, had gone down to Whitecroft himself, and made all his discoveries with his own hands. It would be useless to narrate all his disguises—how he went to the rectory as a footman—how he beguiled old Joan as a fortune teller, and, after confiding with her over the fatigues of her work, won her to talk of Miss Agatha, who had disappeared so wonderfully.

He found his way to Croft Abbey disguised as a groom, and from other rooms there learned plenty of Sir Vane. He did still more—he searched the marriage registers of all the churches in the neighborhood; he found out the exact date on which Agatha had disappeared from Whitecroft; and he discovered the exact date on which they went to Paris; and he knew that (on English ground at least) there had been no time for a marriage.

He went on to say how Agatha Brooke was loved and worshipped as how her memory was shrouded in a gloom, and how the memory of a saint; how they associated her with the figure on the stained-glass window; and how she had been known among them as the "angel of the poor." There was no house he entered where she had not taken her comfort and relief; but there was no man or woman who spoke of her with dry eyes.

"Not a very likely person," he added, "to have run away with Sir Vane." Nevertheless, the proofs that she had done so were incontrovertible. He added that among the villagers there was a certainty that she was married; that they had also a sure conviction that she would return to them some day, beautiful and good as ever, and better able to help them. But old Joan and the doctor never over her as one that was lost and would never return. Did mademoiselle wish to know any more?

It is still an open question whether the most good or the most harm is done by detectives. They may, at times, serve the most useful and honorable purposes; again, they may be used in the most disloyal manner, and for the most dishonorable purposes. Certainly, Valerie Evers would never have found out Sir Vane's secret but for them. Now, at last, she held the secret in her own hands. She could stab her, slay her, do as she would with her; at one word from her the whole of the fabric would fall at once into ruins; at one word madame would rise in righteous wrath and expel them. But such words Valerie was not likely to speak. She would wield her power as she liked, and always with the same end in view—that she should be Lady Carlyon herself.

Knowing the real purity and goodness of Agatha's character, she felt quite certain that Sir Vane had deceived her in some way over the marriage. She was too keen a reader of character to believe for one instant that Agatha had willingly or wilfully gone wrong, or that she had been with him all this while without firmly believing herself to be his wife. She paid her that much respect quite unconsciously.

What a power it was to hold! She looked at the lovely, refined lady, clad in gorgeous dresses and costly gems by Sir Vane's desire, and thought to herself that by one word she could strip her of all this, and bring her down to the very dust; and by another word she could hurl her from this, the height of her social grandeur, to the very lowest depths of shame and disgrace. Yet she was woman enough to feel sorry that another, and so peerless a woman, should be soiled. She had a strange and complex nature; she would have done anything to achieve her ends; she would have trampled the beauty from Agatha's face, she would have

smiles either, but she was growing nervous and confused. It was perfectly natural that one girl should talk to another about weddings; but she knew so little what to say. If she could have given even over so small an account—if she could have said, "I was married in such a place—in such a church"—there would have been a story to tell. How would it sound if she told Valerie that Sir Vane had knelt down by her side and had read the marriage service over with her, and had then solemnly assured her that she was his wife—how would that sound? Valerie, of course, would not understand it, even though it were all true.

"I have nothing to tell. My marriage was, I suppose, like others." Valerie's heart beat high with triumph. To herself she said: "I do not believe there was any marriage at all, and if not, I will be Lady Carlyon after all."

The nervous confusion and agitation of Agatha convinced her that she was right. If she had been married legally, with all proper form and ceremony, she would, of course, be able to tell when and by whom. From that moment she gave her life to the finding out of that secret and the winning of Sir Vane's affections for herself.

tortured her, she would have slain her; yet she recognized the value of the woman she was about to destroy. "I have read," she said to herself, "of generals who have made a ladder of the dead bodies of soldiers to scale a fortress; I shall have to tread upon one human heart, and it must be broken for my sake."

CHAPTER XXI. "NOW I CAN DEAR MY FATE." One holding the sword in the hand naturally longs to strike. There were times when Valerie had the greatest difficulty in refraining from striking the blow. The one thing that restrained her was this—she was not yet sure of Sir Vane. Money a heart, she knew, was caught in the rebound. What she really hoped for was that when Agatha was destroyed, no matter in what fashion it happened, Sir Vane would turn to her, would seek comfort and amusement from her. Even if he did not love her so much at first, it would not matter—that would come afterwards. In the meantime she must try more than ever she had done to fix his attention on herself.

She knew every art in the science of flirtation. She knew when to laugh or to look sad, when to advance, when to retreat, when to be coy, and when to be demonstrative; she understood the whole science. Herbert had been most amusing; he had helped them to while away many hours; she had been ready to respond to their invitations, and had seldom neglected a chance of placing herself in Sir Vane's way. Now she did exactly the opposite. She declined most of the invitations on one pretext or another; she avoided rather than sought Sir Vane. When with them, her brilliant spirits seemed to have left her—she was silent, very often sad. When Sir Vane addressed her, she never looked at him, and she did just what she had wished to do—she piqued him. More than once he found her in her favorite seat by the marble fountain, and the moment she saw him she rose hastily and went away, instead of welcoming him, as she had done before, with kindly words and bright eyes. One morning, when this happened, he hastened after her. Hearing his footsteps, she quickened her pace.

"If it is to be a race, I shall most surely beat you, mademoiselle," he cried. "I must speak to you." He overtook her and held out his hand in kindly greeting to her. "I never see you," he said, half-reproachfully. "How is it?" "I cannot tell," she replied.

But the frank pleasure with which she had been wont to greet him was all gone; her eyes drooped, her face was turned from him. "It must be my fancy," continued Sir Vane, "or I should