

NENUPHAR: A FANCY.

(Concluded from our last.)

JULY.

Almost a month has passed away since Nenuphar's midnight confidences, when we take our next look at her. It is after dinner, and she is seated on a low chair by an open window in the drawing-room, contemplating with a faint, troubled look, most unusual on her calm face, Mr. Long and Heather playing chess in the furthest corner of the room.

John Clermont, looking older and perhaps somewhat harder than he did on that June morning nineteen years ago, is conversing in low tones with Mrs. Ravens on the unusual beauty of the weather they have had of late. "There will be a grand harvest," he says, conclusively; and then he rises, and goes over to the window where Nenuphar sits, and for a few moments watches her in silence. Indeed a silence seems to have fallen on the whole party. One might have said there was an angel pausing overhead, but Mr. Clermont breaks it.

"What are you thinking of, Nenuphar?"

She raises her great eyes to his, and half sighs, as she says, "Thinking of? Really I do not know."

As she thus looks up, you can see that in this month—since that day when Sebastian's shadow fell across her—a change has come over her, though wherein the change exactly lies it would be hard to say. But it is there nevertheless—a half-troubled look in the blue eyes, which gives them a depth they did not possess in the days when no sorrow or joy seemed to have any power over her.

And what is it, then, that has come over her? Not jealousy of Heather, surely; for Nenuphar is a beautiful woman, and has seen so many men bow down and do homage to her, that it is impossible for her to grudge Heather her one conquest. And as to love, why, she herself acknowledged not so very long ago that the very meaning of the word was incomprehensible to her.

At first, after his return home, Mr. Long had believed, as so many men had done before him, that in Nenuphar Clermont he had found his ideal of all that was perfect and lovely in womanhood. But after the first few days it seemed to his passionate nature there was something almost repulsive in the cold beauty, that nothing could stir out of its unnatural calm. Then he had begun to think of the other girl, so full of fire, and life, and activity; of whom his dreams had been the first night of his home-coming, and whose voice had once welcomed him back so warmly, and whose eyes had now learnt to brighten at his approach; and this vision gradually blotted out that other one that had stirred his fancy for a little while with the wonderful fascination of its beauty.

"Do you think," asked Mr. Clermont, after another pause, spent by him in speculating as to the likeliest question to gain him an insight into Nenuphar's thoughts—"do you think that these two," with a half-movement in the direction of the chess-players, "are likely to make a match of it?"

"Do you?"

"Yes, it would not surprise me."

Nenuphar lifted her eyes then, and looked in the direction indicated. "What makes you think it?" she said; and though she spoke quietly, the very faintest tinge of pink passed over her cheeks—a very unusual show of emotion for her.

"It seems like it," said old Mr. Clermont. "To think that my little, rough, careless Heather should have lived to be preferred to a beautiful woman like you—for you are a beautiful woman, Nenuphar, there is no denying that. 'Eyes, and no eyes,' is it not?"

"Beauty is not everything."

"Perhaps not. But it is nearly everything—or, rather, it is a royal road to nearly everything."

"Beauty only turns heads; it does not win hearts," said old Mr. Clermont. "Oh, I wish I knew," she went on, almost appealingly, "what it is that is wanting in me—what it is that makes me so different to every one else! why he," looking towards the far-off players, "finds something almost repulsive in me. What can it be?"

"His bad taste," retorted Mr. Clermont. "Be satisfied with yourself just as you are—it is the best way. And besides, it would be folly to wish a change; for you are lovely to look upon, and nothing more should be required of a woman. Directly they grow learned they become argumentative,—and a woman who argues, ah!" and John shrugged his shoulders expressively. "No,—ignorance and beauty for women."

"But that is not what I mean; it is not learning that makes so many lovable,—women a thousand times plainer than I—women in every way insignificant. What is it? Oh, I wish I knew; or rather, I wish I possessed it, whatever it is."

"Do not strive after it, my dear, or you may lose the blessings you have, and perhaps gain nothing in exchange. There are peonies and water-lilies, wallflowers and mignonette—and they are all prized, though for different reasons. You must not be grasping, and try to seize all the blessings; you may be sure they are equally divided."

"But I am not a flower," urged Nenuphar, still with that faint tone of pleading in her voice.

"Are you not, my dear?" said old John, mockingly. "I am not so sure of that!"

Now let us cross over to the chess-players for a few minutes, and see how their game is progressing.

"Check to the queen," said Sebastian. And at his words, and perhaps also at a certain inflection in his voice, and a certain tender look in his eyes, a quick, bright flush passed over Heather's face.

"Check!" she repeated, inquiringly.

Sebastian touched a black knight with his finger. "Do you not see now?"

"Then I may as well give up the game at once," she replied, somewhat petulantly, "for there seems nothing left for me to do. I do not feel in the humour for playing to-night."

"Then you will give up the game to me, will you not?" said Sebastian, in a low voice.

"No, I will not," said Heather, as she rose from her seat. "I never could bear to give up a game without fighting for it; so we will leave the pieces as they are, and put off the conclusion of the game till to-morrow, when perhaps I may have discovered some way out of my difficulties."

"That is hard upon me," said Sebastian; "for very likely if we wait till then you will have thought of some way of conquering me, whereas if I pressed my advantage now—"

"You are too generous to do that," replied Heather, softly. "So good-night: I will think all to-morrow, and perhaps I shall beat you yet."

"Have you ever heard," said Sebastian, rising also, "that, next to victory, there is nothing so sweet as defeat,—if only the right adversary overcomes you?"

And Heather turned away, feeling that so far Sebastian had had the best of it. As to the game itself it was written in the Book of Fate that it should never be played on; for the next evening, when Heather should have been making her final effort to extricate the white queen from the difficulties that surrounded her, she was out on the terrace-walk, listening to the old story.

So the white queen was conquered; though the defeat was, as Sebastian had said, as sweet as a victory would have been; for when she re-entered the drawing-room, it was as the affianced wife of Sebastian Long. In this way the game of chess was forgotten; and the next morning, the housemaid, who had been much annoyed all the previous day by the untidy appearance the pieces presented, took upon herself to return them to their box, and thus all chance of redeeming her fortunes was taken away from Heather.

"I am glad of it," she said, when she discovered what had occurred; "for it is a sort of satisfaction, after, to know that I gave up the game—that I was not beaten."

"Were you not?" said Sebastian—and there was a smile in his dark eyes as he spoke. "I am not so sure of that; but perhaps," he added, "I was the right adversary."

And then Heather, with a blush on her cheeks, and a soft light in her eyes, that transformed her from a somewhat plain girl into a beautiful woman—beautiful, at least, in Sebastian's eyes—dropt into his arms, and laid her head upon his shoulder; and for the time being they two had reached that "kingdom far and wide,"—that kingdom wherein lovers stand alone, seeing no footprints around of those who have trodden it before them, hearing no echo of those who have lived to descend the mountain from which they have gained their view of the promised land.

As he left the house that night, and was making his way across the garden to his own home, Sebastian was startled by Nenuphar appearing suddenly before him.

She looked whiter and more lovely even than usual, was his first thought; the second, that it always seemed to be by moonlight that they met.

He was going to pass her with a simple "Good night," knowing her fondness for solitary moonlight strolls, when she stopped and held out her hand as though to arrest his steps.

"Mr. Long."

"Yes?" he questioned, stopping also.

"Tell me," she said, more impulsively than he had ever heard her speak,—"what it is that I want to make me liked? Liked as Heather is, for instance. No, you need not fear to pain me by telling me the truth," she went on, seeing that Sebastian hesitated. "I am not afraid, for I really want to know. I asked Heather, who is fond of me, you know, and she says I need nothing. That she would not have me changed, if she could; then I asked my father, and he—well, you know him well enough to be able to guess what he said. Please do not think me vain for repeating it: That I was beautiful, and that a woman should require nothing else; but I am not satisfied. So now I come to you; tell me, what is it other women have, that I have not?"

Then she looked up at Sebastian with those wonderful blue eyes, which used to be so cold and unmoved, but in those depths he fancied there was a something of softness, which for the moment made them look almost tender—or was it only a combination of moonlight and shadow on a lovely face?

"What is it?" she repeated; "tell me."

And Sebastian looked down at her, and said quietly, "Love."

"Given or received?" she questioned; but she spoke so low that it was more like the sighing of the wind than the utterance of a human voice.

"There you puzzle me," he answered, "and I do not exactly know how to answer you,—for

love begets love, she who gives most, receives most!"

"But how am I to gain it?"

"Give your own freely to those about you; do not try to stand apart from the world—not even above it—but mingle freely with its inhabitants, and you will find one day, when you least expect it, that you have won that for which you are seeking."

"And when one has gained," she queried, "is it rest, is it happiness?"

"When you have felt its power, you will not doubt its happiness," said Sebastian, confidently. Heather's soft kisses returning to his remembrance as he spoke. "It is the only foretaste of heaven that is granted us here; and it is granted, I believe, to make us long more than ever for that place where there is no death, no parting to separate us from our beloved ones," replied Sebastian, reverently.

"Yes, I see," said Nenuphar, slowly. "So you think that to love some one is all I need. But supposing that I learnt this love, and that then—"

"Well?"

"That then the one I loved did not return it?"

"Even then," said Sebastian, gently, "even at such terrible cost, I should think the lesson well learnt. For we should always try and remember, hard though it seems at times to believe it, that we gain more from what we give than from what we receive."

"Thank you," said Nenuphar, suddenly raising her eyes from the ground, and looking up into his face. "then you think that it is only love that is required to make me more—what shall I say—human?"

And the shadow of a smile passed over her face.

Sebastian did not reply.

"Good night," at length she said.

He took the hand she held out, and without another word turned homewards, his thoughts suddenly reverting from this strange conversation to where they had been before Nenuphar's appearance—namely, to Heather, and her tender eyes and loving words.

AUGUST.

One more month has come and gone; the summer, such a lovely summer as it has been, is nearly over; and now John Clermont, following a study which has always been particularly interesting to him, can note the change that has come over those about him in the last three months.

Perhaps, after all, it was not so much a change as a gradual development—a gradual development of character wrought by love, the great motive power for good or evil, in much the same way as the sunshine during these long, hot months has brought to perfection many bright, delicate flowers, but has also caused to droop and wither away their slighter, trailer sisters, that could not bear the piercing heat of its rays.

No one would ever call Heather plain now. Indeed, sometimes Sebastian, looking from her to Nenuphar, finds himself wondering how he could ever have compared the two to the disadvantage of the former. Even Mr. Clermont himself, pondering over this and that, and striving as he had striven for so many years to forget that his fellow beings were anything else but a curious study for those who, by reason of some inward bitterness of spirit, had determined to shun aside and let the world go by,—not joining in its revels, nor yet sorrowing with its griefs, but becoming, as he had fancied he had become, a looker-on—one who would amuse himself by laughing at the slips and falls of those who passed him by, and never heed the cries of distress from those who needed help,—even he, watching Heather's eyes as they rested on Sebastian's face, would half wonder whether he had gone quite the right way to work to forget the grief that had so bowed him down; whether, if he had mingled more with those around him, and had not tried so long to stand above them, he would not perhaps have hushed his grief to a gentle sleep.

And when thus perplexed, a glance at Nenuphar would cause his conscience to prick him fresh. The study that had interested him so long was almost completed now. He knew it; the human soul he had so often laughed at her for lacking, was coming to her at last—coming slowly and surely, and bringing with it grief immeasurable, such as only those quiet self-contained natures can feel.

Sometimes as he looked at her, and saw her watching Sebastian and Heather as they walked together in the garden, he would see come into her wide blue eyes an expression of such intense bitter pain, that, startled and horrified, he would turn away. At such moments he would seem to hear his dead wife's voice; his dead wife's figure would rise before him, pleading by her motherhood for the motherless girl—reproaching him for the years of selfishness that were now bearing such bitter fruit. Then Mr. Clermont would answer the accusing voice by saying that, after all, he could not attach any blame to himself. He had acted most generously by her, and so the world must acknowledge.

He had saved her from certain death as a child—he had brought her up in his own home—he had denied her nothing; and now, was he to blame himself because the girl, when she was grown up, had chosen to fall in love with a man who had no thought for her?

It was nonsense—so he argued; but, all the same, the voice would make itself heard at times. He had left her alone; he had not, indeed,

biassed her for evil; but, unfortunately, the mind has to be strongly biassed for good, not left to find its own way out of the evil that surrounds it.

So poor Nenuphar—for surely she needs pity now, if she never needed it before—had grown up quietly and calmly, with never a quicker pulse-beat than was strictly healthy; never a flush of pleasure at any one's appearance; never a feeling of pain at any one's departure; just living, that was all, calmly and evenly from day to day, hearing from John Clermont, or rather seeing from his manner to her, that there was something about her different to all other women; until at last, so firmly did she become imbued with the idea that she was different to those around her that she began in a manner to feel that she ought to act up to the character assigned to her. All this till that June evening when she first saw Sebastian Long's face, and Sebastian's shadow fell across her. Then, into her tranquil mind was borne a feeling that there was something greater to be got out of life than the mere pleasure of living from day to day, and also the knowledge that there was something essential to a perfect woman wanting in her; and whatever it was, she felt that it was making her, despite her beauty, less pleasant in Sebastian's eyes than Heather.

So she asked him that question in the moonlit garden, and from his own lips she had the answer; and then she saw him go away into the light of Heather's smiles, leaving her—having learnt her lesson, although as yet she was scarcely aware of the fact—to struggle with the knowledge, and to conquer the grief that it brought with it, as best she might, all alone.

Even now she did not give the sorrow that possessed her a name; or rather, she did not know that, like the tendrils of the vine when first they begin to grow, love must have something near at hand round which to twine; and failing a right support, it will seek about, and cling to whatever is nearest—and always supposing that there is absolutely nothing near, that it will fail and die for want of support.

The fine weather is going, Nenuphar. Do you see those black clouds on the horizon? They mean rain, I am sure," said Heather, laying a caressing hand on her friend's shoulder—"but we ought not to grumble, we have had a lovely summer."

"It makes it all the sadder to think that it is coming to an end. I cannot bear the idea. The winter always seems so terribly long."

"I enjoy it," said Heather. "Of course I like these long cloudless days we have had lately; but, all the same, I think it would be very dull and monotonous if there were no such things as storms—if it were always sunny."

"That is just what Sebastian told me," said Nenuphar, dreamily.

"Did he?" and Heather blushed a soft, rosy red. "I entirely agree with him. Just in the same way that life would be dull, I fear, if it were not for its storms, which come at intervals. I am afraid we are not capable of enjoying uninterrupted sunshine at present."

"Ah, but you are so strong!" sighed Nenuphar. "I cannot bear storms." And she raised her eyes, in which that shadow of pain had now become habitual, to Heather's face.

"Cannot you?" said Heather, simply. "I should have thought you were so calm, and so far above all the rest of us, that storms would scarcely have had the power to disturb you. Now I—I am different. I feel things dreadfully."

Nenuphar half smiled at the energy in her friend's voice.

"Do you! I think I envy you then; for perhaps it is that which makes you so lovable."

"Lovable? Scarcely that; for until Sebastian came, I do not think any one ever cared for me, but his love seems to have changed me altogether. I seem now to carry my summer about with me; perhaps that is what makes me so careless about the red summer's departure."

Into Nenuphar's eyes again came a look almost of envy.

"And you are really quite, quite happy?"

"Yes, indeed I am," Heather replied, and then turned away at the sound of Sebastian's voice calling her name.

"What is it," cried Nenuphar, clasping her hands, and looking towards the place where the sun was setting, amidst red angry clouds—"oh, what is it I need? He says that it is love—love given, he thinks; but whatever it is, I will discover it before I die."

She had spoken impetuously; but the momentary energy died away immediately, and the quiet apathetic look habitual to her stole over her features, and she was outwardly calm at least as she also made her way back into the house.

Night,—not a soft, balmy, moonlit June night like that first one on which Sebastian came, and cast his shadow across Nenuphar's white dress—but dark and stormy, with black clouds scudding across the sky before a westerly wind, which caused every now and then little rifts and chasms in their blackness, through which a watery moon appeared.

A night, when any one who had a roof under whose safe shelter he could rest, would seek it and leave the outside world to those to whom a home had been denied.

But there is some one apparently who thinks differently: some one who prefers being out of doors, notwithstanding the darkness of the night to the comfort of a sheltered room, where two lovers are playing a game of chess; a careless game, in which no move has taken place on either side for the last half hour—and where an