One in a Thousand,

BUT TRUE TO THE LAST

CHAPTER XVII.

"We have been saying that it will be a great joke when the colonel's the only one left at mess, besides the orderly officer."

"I suggested that he might get married himself," I put in.

The two men laugh heartily, and then Mrs. Brancepeth and her nieces are announced.

"Whatever were you laughing at?" she asks. "It must have been something immensely funny."

Mr. Bertie tells her, but the joke falls very flat. It is evident that to them, Col. Cardylion is the next heir to the dukedom of Idleminster, and not a confirmed, woman-hating bachelor.

"Why should not Col. Cardylion marry?" inquires Edith Dare, who is a very outspoken young lady. "I'm sure he's very handsome, and all that."

"But you never saw him speak to a lady yet," says Adrian.

"No, I never did," she allows, frankly. "Does he not like women?"

"Absolutely detests them," puts in Mr. Bertie.

"You would like to know him, Stewart," laughs Edith. "You always get on with those queer sort of men."

At this I cannot help laughing; it is so absurd to hear Adrian classed among "those queer sort of men."

"I will ask you to meet him when he comes back," I tell Stewart.

"If you can get him to come," puts in Adrian.

"Oh, he will come!" I say, carelessly. "Ah, here is Loys!"

Unlike me, Loys looks very well in black. She is a little soft mouse of a woman, and, since her marriage, has grown very plump. She has more color than I have, and looks what she is—perfectly happy. She has a single diamond at each ear, and at her throat a locket also set with superb diamonds—Adrian's present on her marriage. When I first saw them I wondered not a little at the costly gift. I understand it now plainly enough.

The only other guest is a Mr. Wynne, the squire of the parish, who has been very civil since we came. As soon as he comes, dinner is announced, and Adrian offers Mrs. Brancepeth his arm, and the others file out after them, and I and Mr. Wynne bringing up the rear. I have Capt. Cust and Edith Dare on my right hand; and, as they are fully occupied with one another, I devote myself exclusively to my other neighbor. He is a big, shy, awkward man, young, remarkably handsome, and unmarried. I find very soon that his great topics are horses and hunting, so I very quickly am quite friendly with him, for I know more of those subjects by far than I do of sewing

and district visiting! Indeed, before the dinner is half over, he confides to me that the abbey is awfully dull to live in alone, and he has neither mother nor sister to share it with him and enliven it.

"You've no idea, Lady Charteris," says this great, honest, handsome "waif," "how dull it is, nor how often I long for a sister! I'd give anything for one."

"You would find a wife a great deal nicer," I remark, scarcely able to help laughing; "and you can get one without any trouble."

But his great, blue eyes regard me with such amazed terror that I can keep a grave face no longer; however, he does not mind me a bit.

"I shouldn't know how to set about it," he says, slowly. "You see, Lady Charteris, I can't talk about anything but horses and stables, and I don't think that would do."

"Well, I haven't a sister," I reply; "at least, only Lady Lasselles, and she wouldn't suit you at all. She never took any interest in poor Lasselles' pursuits. No, Mr. Wynne; you want a nice, quiet, wife, who won't worry your life out, don't you?"

"If you think any lady would ever take me," he says, dubiously.

I think of his superb appearance, and his eight thousand a year, and wonder what his mother can have been thinking of to bring him up thus.

"Will you take my advice, if I give it to you?" I ask.

"Of course."

I glance down the table at Stewart Dare, who is talking very quietly and gravely to Teddy. His eyes follow mine, and a pleased flush comes over his handsome face.

"There is only one drawback," I say, in an undertone; "she is timid, and cannot ride."

"I don't mind that a bit," he says eagerly; "not a bit; but, oh, Lady Charteris, I daren't ever ask her to marry me!"

"Yes, you will," I say, assuringly; "not just yet, of course, but when you know her a little more—unless you meet some one you like better, that is," I add, with a laugh.

"I shall not do that," he says, gravely. "I give you my word of honor, I never thought of marrying any woman before."

"How was that?"

"I'll tell you. You know, I wasn't born the heir to the abbey. I was the second son."

"I did not know," I answer. "But go on."

"Well, I had one brother, Edward, and our mother died when we were quite little children. I don't remember her at all; and eight or nine years afterward my father married again, and, in fact, made rather a mess of it, for Mrs. Wynne was not a lady at all. She took an intense dislike to me, and the governor was so foolishly fond of her that he followed her in everything; and the result was that my ugliness and my stupidity and my awkwardness were dilated upon to such an extent that they nearly drove me mad among them. The only person who ever stood up for me was Ned, and him I absolutely worshipped, notwithstanding that he was always held up to me as the very opposite to myself, and made a favorite of in every way."

"How was that?" I ask.

"I think because I was so like my mother, who was an earl's daughter. Mrs. Wynne was furiously jealous of her. Well, Ned was dark, like all the Wynnes, so that our stepmother could hourly flatter my father through him. When I was sixteen, Ned died of rheumatic fever, caught in a fishing expedition we had been on together. Mrs. Wynne openly charged me with having caused his death, and my father never spoke to me again."

"I am very sorry for you," I say, looking into his brave, yet troubled eyes, "and I quite understand all your feelings; but, believe me, you must not allow a woman of that description to set you against yourself."

"She is dead," he says, simply.

"Yes? Well, do as I tell you, and I've no doubt you will be a great deal happier than you have ever been in your life before. Now, we must be moving."

I signal to Mrs. Brancepeth, and we leave the gentlemen to themselves. While we are drinking our coffee, Mrs. Brancepeth sits down beside me, and Loys stays with the two girls at the other side of the room.

"You are very much pleased about Capt. Cust?" I say to her.

"I am," she admits, frankly; "the great desire of my life is to see Edith and Stewart happily married. Poor dear children! Their mother, who was my sister, died when Edith was born. Mr. Dare married again within a year, and there are eight of the second wife's children."

"I can understand that they prefer staying with you," I remark, with a laugh.

"Yes; but it is not only on that account. Mr. Dare's property is in a most lonely part of the Highlands, and they are neither of them very strong."

"I think you don't know Mr. Wynne?" I say, quietly.

Mrs. Brancepeth looks at me inquiringly.

"No, I do not," she replies, finding I do not speak. "I have heard that he does not go much into society."

"He has rather a painful story," I say; "and the reason that he does not visit is because he has got some ridiculous idea that he is peculiarly ugly."

"Not, really?"

"Yes, really," and then I tell her, word for word, the story that Mr. Wynne told me of his youth. "And," I conclude, "I have been recommending him to marry as soon as possible."

"And he is well off, is he not?"

"He has nine thousand a year—no; eight," I say, correcting myself—"eight thousand a year. It is not a bad income, more especially when it comes hand in hand with such a man as that, eh, Mrs. Brancepeth?"

"No," she responds, thoughtfully; "as you say, it is not a bad income."

"Well," I cry, impatiently, for she seems to me to be very dull at perceiving the gist of my story; "well, Mrs. Brancepeth, don't you see what I mean?" And I glance across the room.

"Yes, I see what you mean," she says, slowly; "but it is hardly likely that he——"

"But I tell you it is likely," I interrupt; "and, if it does not come off, it will be her own fault."

"Oh, they are here!" she says, as the gentlemen come in.

I beckon Mr. Wynne to me, and introduce him to Mrs. Brancepeth. He flushes crimson, and is evidently at a loss to know what to do next. I come to the rescue by rising and telling him to take my seat, and then go away, leaving him to Mrs. Brancepeth's tender skill. I ask Loys to play something, and take her place by Stewart Dare.

"You are not looking very well," I say, by way of opening the conversation.

"No," she answers; "I so often have headaches."

"Ah, you want country air! Suppose you come and stay here for a few days? I am sure it would do you good. I will not ask you," I say, turning, with a laugh, to the younger girl, "for I should not dare face Capt. Cust's wrath."

"Why should he be wroth?" she asks.

"The reason is obvious, if I put five miles between you. Oh, I would not do it for anything! Then you will come, Miss Dare?"

"I should like it very much, if Aunt Margaret does not object," she answers. "It is very kind of you, Lady Charteris."

"Not at all. Now, will you have some tea?"

Mr. Wynne comes to fetch a cup for Mrs. Brancepeth, and I seize the opportunity to introduce him to Stewart. He comes back to my side—for Adrian has appropriated his seat—and as I devote myself to Mr. Bertie, he is emboldened to address the object of his admiration.

"What a pretty song that is!" he remarks, diffidently.

"Very," she answers. "Mrs. Vincent sings so nicely. It makes a good waltz, too." The song is "Sweethearts."

"Oh, I can't dance!" I hear him say, regretfully. "I can only ride and shoot, and that sort of thing."

"I cannot ride," she says, in her soft tones; "I am so very nervous."

(To be continued.)

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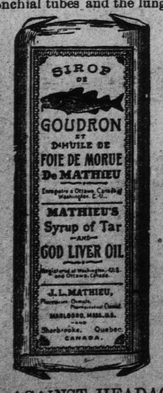

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