

## LOVE THE VICTOR.

CHAPTER XXIX.—(CONTINUED.)

"I shouldn't 'a' thought Mither Burke would be so hard to tackle in the wather," says his rescuer, as he lands him safely in the boat. "But he lost his head altogether. He kept a tight hold o' the young lady, till I thought he meant really to dthrow her out right."

Whatever he meant, as he recovers from his senseless condition (which is in a minute or two) he exhibits the most terrible grief and remorse as his gaze falls upon the pale, limp, senseless figure of Vera, now lying on the deck, with Lady Clontarf and the others bending over her.

"Ah! she breathes! she breathes!" says Doris, suddenly; and then the poor little thing's eyes unclose, and consciousness returns.

"Doris," she says, faintly.

"Darling, yes. I am here," says Lady Clontarf, who has her sister's head on her knees. "It was terrible, but you are safe now." Then, seeing some anxiety in Vera's pale face, and anticipating some sad confidence. "You want to say something," she says. "You have something to—"

"Fling your scarf over my head," whispers Vera, with difficulty, "and then take me below. Wet hair is so unbecoming!"

So the pretty silky curly locks are decently covered, and she is carried below and put regularly to bed.

That it has been anything more than a most unfortunate accident has not occurred to any one. Even Doris, though a little frightened by the anger on Gerald's face a while ago, honestly believes now that the mishap was caused by a false step backward on the part of Vera and an effort at rescue unsuccessfully attempted by Burke. And Vera, when she is warm and dry again, and has been compelled to swallow some brandy, says little or nothing about the affair likely to throw light on it. Gerald has been equally silent, and, beyond a passionate request to be allowed to see and speak with Vera, lets no words pass his lips.

"Can't he see her, poor old chap!" says Clontarf to Doris when Vera is lying with recovered color in her tiny berth. "He is so distressed about this unlucky affair that it would be a positive mercy to let him behold her once again in a dry and living state."

"I'll ask her if she will see him," says Lady Clontarf.

"And you will, won't you, darling!" she says, bending over her sister a minute later.

"Oh, I can't!" says Vera, with a shudder.

"But, why dearest? The accident was not his fault, you know."

"Oh, no—of course not."

"Then do see him. He is very, very unhappy. So—so—Donat tells me."

"Is he?" She laughs a little. "Why, I wonder? Is he disappointed?"

"Oh, more than that. He is naturally very distressed that you should have turned out such a failure."

"The failure is his," says Vera, with the same curious amusement in her tone. Then, quickly, "I did slip—I know that—but when he caught me, why did he draw me forward instead of backward, and why did he hold me so when the waters closed over us?"

"Vera, what are you thinking?" says Doris, receding from her.

"Nothing. It is nonsense, I dare say. And he only meant to save me. So my deliverer (shall we call him that?) wants to see me? Tell him no! no! that I don't want to see any one."

"You have some strange anger in your

heart toward him. Yet he is miserable about you. Surely his love cannot anger you?"

"No. I am not angry with him about that."

"About what, then?"

"Well, let us say because he has put my hair out of curl," with a provoking smile. "No man with any heart could have done me such an injury. Indeed, you must not ask me to see any one, Dody, now when I am looking so ugly."

"You could never look that." Coaxingly—"See, your hair is almost dry again, and quite lovely. Now, darling, you will be kind to him?"

"You are very tender to him," says Vera, with a sudden flash.

"I pity him from my soul," says Lady Clontarf, with a quick sigh. "He loves—and he is miserable!"

"So he ought to be,"—pettishly. "Even if my words of a moment since cruelly wronged him, still but for him I should now be dry and able to amuse myself. And if he does love as you suppose, why, then misery should be far from him, according to your own theory revealed to me a long while ago. Do you remember it? You used to regret your own inability to fall in love, and tell me you believed the very fact of being able to lose one's self in an affection for another should be sufficient for the earthly happiness of any one."

"True. 'Out of my own mouth you condemn me,'" says Doris, with a faint smile. "But," growing very pale, "one says many foolish things in one's time, and—it was, as you say, a long while ago. I have now in my later years thought it all over again, and it seems to me that love unrequited is 'sharper than a serpent's tooth.'"

"Like the ingratitude of a child," says Vera, flippantly. "But you, Dody, what should you know of love unrequited? you who have never loved?"

A great wave of color sweeps over Doris's face; she lifts her head as if to make some careless reply, but her lips refuse to obey her. Tears rise to her eyes. She grows crimson—a shamed crimson—and with a sad little effort to conceal it she turns away as if to hide her confusion.

"Doris! Doris!" cries Vera, sharply. She catches her sister's hand, and drawing it to her lips, kisses it with such feverish fervency that the caress leaves a pink mark upon the fair white flesh. The girl's whole face changes, the inexplicable rush of almost violent emotion that crosses it driving out of remembrance (for the moment) the careless, soulless, mischievously childish expression that usually characterizes it. This glimpse of soul Doris alone has had it in her power to conjure up on one or two very rare occasions.

"I have hurt you, but I don't know how," says Vera, with keenest contrition. "Look at me! I promise to do whatever you wish. I will even see him, and I will be kind to him—kinder than you know—if you will only forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive," says Doris, calmly. "But I shall be glad if you will try to assuage poor Gerald's grief."

"Bring him to me," says Vera, throwing her arms round her sister's neck with a most unusual betrayal of feeling. "I will do any thing for you."

He comes!

He falls upon his knees beside her, his mad passion now quelled, and deadly remorse reigning in its stead. He does not attempt to touch the small hand lying outside the

coverlet like a pale snow-flake. As though afraid to look at her, he bows forward and bows his head upon his arms.

"My soul," he says at last, in a stifled voice, "to be forgiven by you—that I know is not possible for me; I only wanted to see you—to hear your voice again—to know you had not passed away from me, I still living!"

Mindful of her promise to the one thing dear to her in her life (*fatal promise*), to be kind to him, Vera stretches the outlying hand a little further until it rests on his.

"I do forgive you," she says.

He bursts into tears, silent but terrible, and, clasping the little hand, presses it between his own as though with its touch salvation has come to him. Speech is to him impossible, and for a long time a strange stillness falls upon the tumultuous heart beating so wildly in the tiny half-lit cabin.

"I think you might say you are sorry," says Vera, at last, oppressed by this violent calm.

"I cannot."

"You cannot?"

"No," rejoins he, fiercely lifting his haggard face at last. "I am sorry for one thing only—that my plan failed. I wish with all my soul we two were lying now dead and cold under those merry live waves out there."

"Oh no! no!" says Vera, shrinking from him. "Do not talk so horribly. No sun, no light, no flowers, only darkness and cold, forever!"

She shivers violently, and with a sudden movement he takes her in his arms.

"You are my light and my sun," he says, with passionate fondness. "I live but for you. I cannot—I will not see you live without me. But we shall live together. Is it not so, beloved? Oh, Vera, my life's life! tell me you will not forsake me."

"You seem very determined that I shan't," says Vera, with a bewitching smile. "And now, one little word; keep our secret a secret. Say nothing to anybody of this day's work. Don't make confessions to inquisitive friends, because your 'heart is full,' or for any other absurd reason. Remember, it was a mere accident, as—" here she looks at him intently, and a puzzled expression grows within her eyes, "as perhaps it was."

"I shall remember," says the young man, slowly. He neither refutes nor acknowledges the truth of her insinuation.

"Now go," says Vera, gently.

Without another word he departs, and so quietly that Doris, who is standing in the saloon beyond, with her palms religiously pressed against her ears, lest she should by chance overhear a word that is passing within, unaware of his departure. She is unaware too, of Clontarf's approach from the other side, until he lays his hand upon her shoulder.

"What on earth are you doing?" he demands, naturally surprised at her attitude.

"Trying not to hear," returns she, speaking low.

"Hear what?"

"What Vera may be saying to Gerald, or he to her."

"Well, you may save yourself any further pain in your arms," says Clontarf, "because I am listening with all my might, and I can't hear anything."

"Perhaps they are whispering," says Doris, preparing to listen herself.

"Perhaps so," says Clontarf. Doris has now approached the door leading into the cabin where Vera lies, and is bending forward in an anxious attitude; Clontarf, following her, bends forward also, and tries to look as anxious as she does, as hard as ever he can. This naturally brings their heads very close together.

"I can't hear a sound," says Doris, in a subdued undertone.

"Nor I," in a tragic whisper. Here the

yacht lurching somewhat to the right, Doris staggers a little to the left—that is, to Clontarf, who instantly places his arm round her and brings her to anchor so.

"Very unsteady at times, isn't it?" he says, with quite an absent air.

"Very," says Doris, with her eyes immovably fixed upon the keyhole of the door before her.

"It is sure to be unsteady again in a minute or two," says Clontarf.

"I shouldn't wonder," says Doris.

"At that rate, I think we had better stay as we are; don't you?" suggests Clontarf.

"You—you don't much mind, do you?"

"Not much," says Doris. Another lengthened pause.

"Dear me, I wish some of them would say something," whispers Doris, at last, rather nervously. "This silence is very strange."

"You think she has forgiven him his awkwardness?"

"Oh, yes, I think so; I hope so. He loves her so dearly she should be able to forgive him anything."

"Does she love him?"

"I cannot be sure of that; but I think it would not be difficult to a woman to find him very dear. He is in many ways most lovable."

"Is it such a man that you could love?"

"No," she says, with a suddenness that surprises even herself, and sends a warm rush of color to her cheeks and brow. Then she grows pale, and stirs uneasily. "I think I had better go in and see how she is," she says, with some nervousness.

"Wait a moment; you may as well give them two minutes more; and, besides, there is something else I want to ask you: I—"

"No, I am anxious about her; I must go now," says Doris, breaking from him gently, but with determination, and entering Vera's room, to find her there—alone.

"Why, is not Gerald here?" she says, with quick surprise.

"No; he left me quite a quarter of an hour ago," says Vera, lazily.

## CHAPTER XXX.

"Her mouth was sweet as bracket or as mecha."

"To look on her him thought a merry life."

"For she was wild and young, and he was old."

Already the fiddles are beginning to squeak, although none of the guests as yet have arrived, except the Kilmalooda party, who have dined at Coole, and are now roaming idly here and there through the rooms and galleries, which are brilliantly lighted. It is the Thursday night, the night of Monica's ball; and up and down the picture-gallery (undaunted by the dreadful frowns of grim cavaliers and the still more dreadful simpers of long-buried ladies) Brabazon and Kit are having a preliminary waltz before descending slowly and decorously to the ball-room.

In the library, Vera too is doing a little preliminary business, but in a manner far more staid. She has quite recovered the effects of her submersion, and is now sitting opposite Sir Watkyn (who is looking very many degrees more ghastly and shrivelled in his evening clothes, and is evidently in spirit hankering after the furred coats) in the daintiest costume Worth could produce, and the happiest mood.

Sir Watkyn bending tenderly towards her tries to infuse into his powdered and painted old face an expression of sentimental grief and regret, whilst the lovely guileless face opposite to him smiles encouragingly and entreats him to forget the unhappy accident that so nearly lost her to her friends two days ago.

"How did it happen?" asks Sir Watkyn, anxiously. "I was looking on, yet could