

LOVE THE VICTOR.

CHAPTER XVII—(CONTINUED.)

"A story indeed I have got to tell," he says, with over-increasing gravity, "but whether the end of it will mean for me mirth or woe, depends entirely upon you. My admiration for you must, I think,—I trust,—have been for some time apparent. I now detain you for the purpose of laying my hand and fortune at your feet."

"And your heart?" says Kit, trying miserably to treat the whole affair with lightness. "What of that? Will you not offer me that too?"

"Impossible!" with a stately bow. "It is no longer mine to give. It has been in your possession for six months and fourteen days precisely."

At this accurate mention of so curious a date Kit may be pardoned if she shows undue astonishment.

"I allude to that hour when first I saw you," says Mannering, answering her look, "in the China Section of the South Kensington Museum."

There is something so honestly earnest even in his pomposity that Kit's heart, a tender thing at all times, is touched; yet she is silent. What to say, and how to say it, is now her chief trouble.

"May I hope that I am worthy of your acceptance?" says Mannering, regarding her silence as mere maidenly confusion. He likes the thought that this shyness has been produced by him. It only renders him still more desirable in his eyes. How sweet, how gentle she looks, with her soft eyes thus cast down, and her color heightened. She was naturally nervous, as a young girl should be under such circumstances, and not unbecomingly so.

"In his highest beauty without pride,
And youth without greenhood or folly."

She is indeed, all that his heart can wish her.

"Am I worthy?" he says again, humbly indeed, but yet with a latent sense that all things will soon be well with him.

"I wish all this had never happened," says Kit, suddenly yet slowly. "I wish with all my heart it had not."

There is something in the profound seriousness of her tone that carries conviction with it and makes itself felt.

"I have taken you somewhat by surprise, perhaps," says Mannering, hastily, the first faint doubt of a favorable ending to his suit dyeing his face crimson. "I entreat you not to answer me too hurriedly. Take till to-morrow, take until next year, if you will only—"

"It would be of no use, indeed," says Kit, ever so gently. "None."

"A young girl cannot always be sure of her own mind; many ideas may serve to change it," says the unfortunate man, his voice growing more and more unsteady. "Do think it over. I can wait. I shall be thankful to be allowed to wait."

"I am sure if you waited forever it would make no difference," says Kit, tenderly, now in deep distress. Why will he not take his rejection reasonably, and go away? But Mr. Mannering has one last card to play before rendering himself invisible. It is indeed his last card, and, as he hopes, a trump.

"There is one other thing," he begins, flushing nervously. "I—I greatly dislike having to bring it before you, and I assuredly should not do so if matters had been different between us. But now,—now every little thing that may help me in my suit is of importance. I cannot afford to let it go by. And—and, in fact, I must tell you"—raising his head—"that my income is fifteen thousand a year."

"I thought it was even more," says Kit, quietly.

This is indeed a death-blow: no other answer she could have given could have been so effectual. To refuse more than fifteen thousand pounds a year! It is all up with him indeed. And yet a final effort breaks from him.

"I would settle anything you like on you," he says, forlornly, in a choking voice that hasn't a vestige of hope in it now. "Anything!—desperately—everything! The whole of it!"

"Oh! I do not talk to me like that," says Kit, with tears in her eyes. "Indeed, it does no good. If I loved you, it would make no difference to me whether you were poor or rich. Would you have me marry

you when I don't love you? No, surely not; and, besides, I could not do it."

"I believe that. I believe you are too true and pure to be bought by any gold," says Mannering, with a burst of diabolical admiration. Seizing her hand, he wrings it spasmodically, until pain brings fresh tears to her eyes, and they threaten to overflow; yet, full of martyr zeal, she scorns to make a sign but suffers, and is strong.

"Let me be your friend still," entreats she, liking him better now in his downfall than she has ever liked him before. "You—"

"No! no! not that! Do not let us waste time over such nonsense as that!" exclaims he, miserably. "You will be trying to make yourself out my sister next,—girls always do; but what's the good of a sister to a fellow when he wants a wife? No, it must be all or nothing!" He looks almost tragical as he says this, and stalks away from her (walks wouldn't do at all) to the door, as though all things have indeed come to an end for him and he is meditating an immediate start for the North Pole.

But at the door he comes to a halt, and finally returns to where she is standing near the billiard-table.

"It is Brabazon, of course?" he says, forlornly.

"Yes," says Kit, hanging her head.

"He hasn't a penny," says the wretched young man.

"That has got so little to do with it," returns she, softly.

"Yes, yes. One can understand it; he is a very handsome fellow," says Mannering, in a very desolate tone.

It is so desolate that Kit fairly bursts out crying.

"It isn't that, either," she says. "It is neither beauty, nor money, nor anything: it is only that—that—that he is he! Oh, how I wish that you and he were one, and then nobody need be unhappy!"

As this remarkable phenomenon (the incorporating of two bodies into one) is hardly likely to occur in Mr. Mannering's time, this tender wish fails to convey to that afflicted gentleman the comfort he desires.

"Do—do try to forget me," she sobs, and hurries from the room.

Left to himself, he paces the floor in a state as nearly bordering on distraction as can be felt by a phlegmatic man.

"All love is sweet
Given or returned."

sings Shelley; but Mr. Mannering in his present frame of mind would have written him down an ass, and voted him laboring under a delusion when giving way to such sentiment. Given! Where unreturned? What gall can be more bitter?

"Common as light is love,
And its familiar voice warbles not ever"

There again, to Mr. Mannering's mind, the poet is at fault: he at least is wearied to death by it. What has it brought him? Only disappointment, sorrow, and loss of self regard. He is still striding up and down the room, sore and sick at heart, and to all things disallied, when to him enters Mr. Browne.

"Have a game, Mannering?" says he, in his most buoyant style, unheeding the blighted look of his companion.

"No," says Mannering, brusquely. Now, few people say "No" in that uncompromising way without adding a qualification of some kind, so that, naturally, Mr. Browne stares hard at him.

"You won't?" he says, mildly.

"No, I won't," says Mannering, who feels that billiards and friends and such like necessities must for the future be regarded by him as less than naught.

"What's the matter with you, old man?" says Dicky, staring harder. There is a touch of concern in his tone, beneath which Mr. Mannering gives way.

"It's all over with me! I'm a ruined man!" he says, letting his head fall forward on his hands. By this time he is sitting down in a huge arm chair near the fire.

"Bless me, what has he done now?" says Dicky to himself. "Is it poison? or money? or Kit?" He evidently inclines to the latter belief, because presently he says, in a low tone, "Have you been having it out with Kit?"

"She wouldn't let me have it out; she rejected me almost before the words passed my lips. I am positively abhorrent to her."

"Oh, come now!" says Mr. Browne, cheerfully. "You mustn't talk like that, you know. She's too nice a girl to abhor anybody. And, after all, a little affair of this sort is really not worth troubling about. It doesn't make a fellow a bit worse off because one particular girl don't choose to fancy a fellow. Some other girl will, if she won't."

"There is no other girl," says Mr. Mannering, in a deep voice, his face still hidden in his hands. This sweeping assertion is treated by Dicky as it deserves.

"Oh, yes, there is,—lots of 'em," he says, scorning grammar. "Somebody told me yesterday that there are fifteen women to every man in Ireland. Think of that! Kit is number one of your lot; you will be all right when you meet number two."

"I shall not," says Mannering, in a still more hollow tone, grief rendering him feeble. He has fallen so low that he is even glad to air his woes before the erstwhile detested Dicky. Any sympathy is better than none, and Dicky is full of it. "I tell you; she has ruined my life. I shall never meet another girl."

"If no continues much longer in this mad strain," says Mr. Browne to himself, "I shall have to have recourse to violent remedies."

"You're sure to. They are not to be avoided," he says, aloud, with the utmost cheerfulness. "They are everywhere, like the mumps."

"And equally to be desired," says the slighted man, with a groan. "No, no; you mean well, Browne, but consolation is useless here. 'I feel,' smiting his breast, 'that—that I can't feel!' (This is obscure, and therefore decidedly telling.) 'All is a void, a chaos! I had so set my heart upon her. She is the only woman I,' he was going to say 'ever loved,' but checks himself in time, a twinkling in Mr. Browne's eye, or some memory of a comic nature, restraining him. 'I adored her,' he says at last, very dolefully.

"You oughtn't to feel so bad about it, at that rate," says Dicky, comfortably. "We've been told that the pleasure of love is in loving. That ought to stand to you. You can't—severely—'have loved her properly, if you don't feel some of the pleasure now."

"Well, I don't," says Mannering, candidly. "Pleasure is a thing I shall never know again. What's the good"—with vehement indignation—"of my having money? What's the good of anything. It won't buy me a set of Greek features, or the girl I want!"

"It would if you went to the East," says Dicky.

"I'm the most unfortunate man alive. Everything is against me. I declare to you," throwing out his hands, "I never set my heart upon a thing that I wasn't thwarted!" "I never loved a tree or flower," quotes Mr. Browne, sympathetically, in a carefully subdued voice,—which is strictly true, Dicky's affections being confined to a few chosen friends and—Dicky Browne.

"Yes, just so. That exactly expresses my unhappy state," says Mannering, grasping at the sickly sentiment. "I never loved a dear gazelle,—yes! That is indeed how it is with me."

"Well, neither did I, you know," says Dicky, who, seeing breakers ahead in the increasing tearfulness of his companion, thinks it prudent to fall back again upon the cheerful tack. "And so much the better, eh? They've got horns, haven't they? even the dearest of 'em,—eh? Tough customers to shower one's caresses on! Look here, Mannering, you just pull yourself together, and you'll forget it all in no time."

"I shan't," says Mr. Mannering.

"I tell you you will. Take example by me. Love all women, but don't love one. That's the whole law. The one plays the very mischief with a fellow. Take care of Number One."

"I always do," says Mr. Mannering, regretfully, shaking his head as though to insinuate that this advice is superfluous.

"No, you don't," says Dicky, innocently, "or you wouldn't have made such an ass,—that is, I beg your pardon,—reddening—" "you wouldn't have been such a fool—ahem! Fact is,"—growing absolute—crimson—"you should try and be more like man."

"I can't," says Mr. Mannering.

"Oh, I say! rouse yours!" exclaims Dicky, in some disgust. But the other is past rousing—intellectually, at least.

"I shall leave here to-morrow morning by the earliest train," he says, in a suicidal

tone. "I shall never willingly see her again. But—but—Browne, I may have wronged you in some ways, I may have thought you light, frivolous, unthinking—"

"Oh, don't mention it," puts in Mr. Browne, parenthetically.

"But I will confide to you my last message to her! Tell her," says the rueful knight, rising tragically to his feet—"tell her that, though she has burst my heart in twain, the fragments shall lie upon her shrine forever. Tell her, one word will recall me to her side, though my tent be fixed upon the arid plains. Tell her—Browne," with a sudden collapse from the heights of tragedy to the plains of common sense, "I'll be very much obliged to you if you will just say a word or two to her about the fifteen thousand a year."

"I'll say as many as over I can get in," says Mr. Browne, grasping the proffered hand, and speaking in a tone that suggests the possibility of his choking presently. This possibility (being, as he believes, the outcome of suppressed sympathy) is deeply grateful to Mr. Mannering's wounded spirit, though a less intelligent observer might have thought it the result of suppressed laughter.

"I shall go to my room. I could not trust myself to see her again. Good night," says Mannering, dolefully, and hurries from the room.

Only just in time! He is hardly out of sight when again the door opens, and Kit peeps cautiously in.

"Oh, it's you, Dicky," she says, with an air of undisguised relief; then she comes quite in. "What's the matter with you?" she says, a moment later, looking at Mr. Browne with an austere glance, that young man being in the state that is commonly and vulgarly called "doubled up with laughter."

"It's nothing—a mere spasm," he says, and then chokes, and roars, and wriggles, all over again.

"A very severe one," she says, with ominous calm. "You won't be able to undo yourself if you go on twisting like that." Mr. Browne taking no notice of this sarcasm, she changes her tone. "Dicky," she says, in a careful whisper, looking once more in stage fashion around her, "where—where is he?"

"First 'her,'—then 'he,'—I feel as if I were at school again. It is nothing but pronouns to-night," says Dicky, lifting his brows. "If you mean the man you have so cruelly consigned to an early grave, all I can say is—"

"Where is he?" demands Miss Beresford, ruthlessly interrupting him. "Is he gone? for good, I mean—or—"

"No, for bad," ominously.

"What I mean is," says Kit, impatiently, "is he coming back here again to-night?"

"He is never coming back anywhere again. When he left this room a few minutes since, it was with the avowed design of making way with himself. 'Tell her,' he said, 'I go to put it beyond her power to cast her false eyes upon my face again.'"

"I don't believe one word of that," says Kit.

"Don't you? If it gives you troubled conscience any ease, don't, I entreat you. But my own belief is that your unfortunate victim is now this moment dangling by the neck from the tower window, and that he is dead—dead—dead." No writer could convey to you the rooted melancholy of Mr. Browne as he slowly delivers himself of these last three words.

"I wish you wouldn't, Dicky," says Kit, whimpering, and feeling rather frightened. "I know you are talking nonsense, but it is such nasty nonsense! What I really want to know is whether he is going away at once—out of the house, I mean? Do say he is going somewhere—anywhere, far from this."

"Very far," says Dicky, solemnly. "The rope" employed is even now, now as we are talking here, transporting him to "the turn from which no traveller returns." "Is it a stout rope: don't you? Poor, poor fellow!"

"I think you might try to be sensible just for once," says Kit, tearfully.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Good temper, like a sunny day, sheds brightness over everything. It is the sweetener of toil and the soother of disquietude.

The main token of a strong character is not to make known every change and phase in thought and feeling, but to give the world the finished results.