

If Loro had his doubts concerning the last assertion he did not give utterance to them. He drew in his chair to the table, and Mr. Barnardine helped him to soup.

Suddenly there came a dashing up of wheels, a loud peal at the bell, a clamorous barking of all the dogs, great and small, that lay behind the crimson curtains in the outer hall, and Mrs. and Miss Damer hurried rapidly in, with a great gust of cold air from the winter world without. I should probably have said Miss and Mrs., for Winnie came first. Snowflakes besprinkled her fur cloak, and lay like wet stars upon her sunny hair; her eyes shone, her cheeks were all aglow; she came flying in across the wide hall towards the little dinner settlement by the fire, unfastening her cloak as she came.

"Ah! you did not wait for me, Mr. Barnardine; you did not think I should come? Did I not tell you I would be here? Ah, what a funny thing it is that no one will ever go by what I say!"

Mr. Barnardine was apologizing profusely. "Oh, of course I know I am very late," she continued, as she sank down into her place; and Mrs. Damer, a thin and very meek-looking old lady, with a black front and a red velvet gown, took the other vacant place opposite her daughter; "but, then, I am always late—that is nothing new for me, is it, mamma?"

"Nothing, my dear."

"And what with the scramble I had to get dressed, and the slippery condition of the roads, and the horses going along like snails, oh, it's a wonder that I am here at all! I am not at all surprised, Mr. Barnardine, that you should have given me up; but you," she added, suddenly pausing, with her spoon half way to her mouth, and looking suddenly round with a strange, swift earnestness in her face and voice, "you might have believed in me a little longer, Loro!"

As he met her eyes there passed between the two one of those electric flashes of comprehension by which eyes are made to speak when tongues are forced either to be silent or to cloak themselves with meaningless phrases.

Winnie's blue eyes said as plainly as they could say it:

"You had no business to doubt me."

And Loro's dark, slumberous ones flashed as swiftly back:

"I did not doubt you, darling."

"Nevertheless," continued Winnie, no longer with her eyes, but with her voice, and yet in a sort of context to the answer which she had received, "nevertheless you had begun your soup!"

John Barnardine looked from one to the other sharply. Loro became instantly swallowed up in an absorbing conversation concerning the origin, causes, and effects of rheumatic affections with Mrs. Damer, and Winnie nodded at him with her audacious smile across her spoon.

"Oh, you needn't look so cross at me, Mr. Barnardine, because my temper is just as sweet as honey to-night; you couldn't make me angry, you know, if you had left me no dinner at all. You know it takes two to quarrel, and if I won't be one I don't see how anybody else can be the other!" and so she rattled on, gaily, heedlessly, in her own fascinating little way, that meant not so much what she said as did the pretty by-play of sweet looks and quaint, swift gestures, which, somehow, always reduced the men about her into poor silly moths that fluttered about her brightness.

"Could anybody quarrel with you, Winnie?" murmured Barnardine, bending low towards her, so that Winnie had time to remark that the little bald patch on the summit of his head was yet a little wider than it had been before. "Did you get my letter, dear?" he added, almost in a whisper.

"Yes and no," replied Winnie, not at all lowering her voice; "yes, because the postman brought it; no, because it lies unopened in my pocket now. I really had not time to read it. Shall I look at it now?" with an innocent gesture towards the folds of her dress.

"Ah, for Heaven's sake!" cried poor John, desperately, turning suddenly pale as he put forth his hand to stop her. And Winnie laughed her mischievous little laugh at his horror-stricken face.

And Mrs. Damer opposite was in full swing, Loro listening attentively.

"What you must take, Loro, is two yards of good thick Welsh flannel—I've tried Saxony, but it's of no use, there's no substance in it, though it's softer to the skin—and you fold it in three like this, illustrating upon her table-napkin, "then you soak it well in the mixture and lay it on."

"Ah! I thought you were to drink that mixture hot?"

"No, no: it's the camphorated spirit you are to drink—cold, mind—quite cold! What I am speaking of is the liniment; it's a family recipe, quite invaluable, I assure you. My grandfather swore by it; my aunt, another victim to rheumatism, used it constantly; I myself always sleep with it by my bedside."

"And Winnie?" interpolated Loro, softly. "Does Winnie, too?"

Winnie, who had ears all round, caught the sound of her name and laughed.

"Oh, I put my kitten bodily into the family mixture last week after Rover had bitten her, and I assure you she has never mewed since, except to offer up thanks to the inventor!"

After dinner, when the table had been noiselessly removed, Loro sat at the organ at the far-end of the hall, and sang the songs of his native land in his rich tenor voice. Here he was truly great; the full clear notes echoed in a flood of passionate beauty across the wide chamber. It was a glorious thing to hear Loro sing when he sang as he did to-night, out of his very heart, to the idol that his heart worshipped.

Winnie crept up, and sat behind him in the dim light; she was Winnie no longer, but a tamed, softened creature, with a hushed voice and tears in her eyes.

Presently he ceased to sing, although his hands wandered still in grand, full chords over the keys; then he leant back his dark head, and gazed into her face with all his passionate love in his eyes.

"Winnie," he whispered, blindly, "tell me that you love me, darling."

Winnie was herself again, and she smiled back at him her wicked little mocking smile.

"Ah, yes, Loro. Can anybody help loving you when you are playing like that?"

And Loro was fain to be satisfied.

Later on, John Barnardine stood beside her at the open doorway, wrapping her fur cloak about her slender little figure.

"Winnie, won't you give me my answer to-night—the answer to my letter, you know? You guess what it is, I am sure; it is to ask you to be my wife. I do not think I can be mistaken in believing that of late you have returned my affection; tell me that you will marry me."

And Winnie looked out over the snow-sprinkled earth all lit up with dazzling splendour of the moon, and she saw the great avenue of trees in the wide park, each with its sombre shadow beneath it; and she saw the quadrangle in which her mother's carriage stood, and she glanced back to the rich luxury of the hall behind her, with its pictures, and its old oak, and its tapestry; and some evil spirit within her whispered to her that Quarter Court was a fine place, and its master a rich man, and that it would be better to be mistress of Quarter Court than even to bask for ever in the love-glances of Loro's beautiful eyes.

"Loro," said John Barnardine to his adopted son when the guests had gone and the doors were shut again—"Loro, it is from your voice that I must have my first wishes of joy. Winnie Damer has promised to-night to be my wife."

A dead silence. The little Neapolitan song that hovered upon Loro's lips died away. Something else, too, died away—something that life never gives back again—the first boundless trust and faith of a man's young heart! One sharp pain of actual physical agony—one frantic, maddening effort to stifle every sign and to be strong—and then Loro reached forth his hands and grasped Barnardine's tightly in his.

"My father—my more than father—I wish you joy!" he said, simply. And so the winter night ended.

PART II.

Another winter night. It is a month later, yet still the iron hand of the frost holds the earth fast in its grip. There is no snow to-night, only hard roads along which the horses' footsteps ring out sharp and clear, and a deep black vault sown with myriads of shining stars overhead.

Outside Quarter Court there is a great crowd of horses and carriages, and a gleam of many lights and lanterns. Within there is the sound of music and dancing, for Mr. John Barnardine is giving a ball to-night, and the old oak-panelled hall is crowded with gay dresses and bright faces.

Winnie has insisted upon it. To-morrow is her wedding-day, and she is to be spirited away to Paris; but to-night she has declared that she will dance out the hours of her last maiden-day and dance in the dawn of her marriage morn. It is like Winnie, everybody says; she is so original, so headstrong, so unlike everybody else! Where other girls would seek the solitude of their own chamber to spend those last few hours in prayer, perchance in tears, Winnie likes best to be in a giddy crowd in a glittering ball-dress, floating round the room with glowing cheeks and glistening eyes, with the lights of a hundred candles reflecting themselves on the diamonds which are her bridegroom's wedding-gift, and which glitter round her long fair neck like a chain of living fire.

And at midnight I will go home," she had said. "Like Cinderella in the fairy-tale, I shall vanish into the darkness; but I must dance on my wedding-day, you know."

And so she had her way—Winnie always had her way; the only difficulty she ever experienced was in clearly herself apprehending where that way might lead her wandering fancies, and what she herself desired to do.

Was there some ulterior motive in the very background of her mind to-night?—some motive to which she will not give a name even in her innermost heart, and yet which has given rise to this strange and almost unnatural fancy of hers concerning this ball which her bridegroom has given her, sorely, we may be sure, against his own inclinations?

Winnie is dancing with Loro; his arm is about her waist, his hand locked fast in hers, his dark head within a few inches of her golden locks, as they glide round together in that perfect harmony of time and step which makes waltzing an ecstasy of delight to two persons who really waltz well; his eyes drink in the beauty of hers with a dangerous delight, and his voice murmurs ever and anon little broken words into her ear.

"It is the last time, the very last, Winnie! I shall never waltz with you again."

"Who knows," she whispers back; "never is a horrid word, Loro; and you don't suppose that I am going to leave off waltzing, do you, because I am married?"

"Oh! but I shall not be here to see you."

"What nonsense! John says you are to live here with us just the same, and I say it too."

"Ah, Winnie, I had better not," he answers, with

a sigh, and he knows that he has settled to go away this very night from her for ever, for a man can stand a certain amount of suffering, but after that there comes a limit which he can endure no longer; and Loro has made up his mind that sooner than go mad with the sight of John Barnardine's happiness, and sooner than betray his benefactor by loving that benefactor's wife over-much, he will turn his back for ever upon his adopted country and home, and go back to his own land and begin life afresh there for himself. He has spoken no word of this intention, only he has made his preparations. These are easy enough, because, owing to the filling of the house for the ball and the subsequent wedding, he has gone to take up his abode at the farm just outside the park gates, and here he has collected his belongings, and ordered the dog cart that is to take him away to the station, to come for him. And then he has written two letters, one at great length to Mr. Barnardine, and one very short one to Winnie—the former he has left with the valet to give to his master in the morning, the latter he now contrives to slip into the very middle of Winnie's bouquet.

When the waltz is over he takes her to a seat and stands for a few moments before her speechless, looking at her strangely with all the agony of a man who knows he is looking his last upon that which he loves best on earth.

Winnie's heart goes a little faster perhaps for that yearning gaze, for that oddly white face that looks down upon her so silently.

"Well," she says, lightly, more lightly than she feels, "and what do you see to stare at, Loro?"

"Am I not right to look, when you go away to-morrow?"

"Only a fortnight to Paris; and John will want to get back to his home when the frost breaks and the hunting begins again. I shouldn't wonder if we are back sooner. I shall get very tired of living in a hotel with nobody to amuse me," and she makes a little petulant face like a spoiled child; "besides, you will see me to-morrow morning."

"I think not," he answers softly. "Winnie, when the next waltz is over—read before—read that little scrap of paper I have stuck into your bouquet—there under the white stephanotis-flower, do you see?—and then you will forgive me for wishing you now good night. Good-bye, and Heaven bless you always, dear. See, here is your partner."

A cousin of John Barnardine's came forward to claim her. Winnie felt a little frightened, a little bewildered, she could not quite understand what he meant; but her partner passed his arm round her and swung her quickly out amongst the crowd of dancers; and when she tried to look back to the corner of the room where she had been sitting she could not see Loro's dark handsome face any longer—he was gone!

"Might I speak to you, sir, for a moment?" It was Peter Symes, Mr. Barnardine's valet, who thus mysteriously addressed his master some twenty minutes later, catching him in an angle of the long passage that led from the billiard room, where Symes was already in full swing. Symes was a conifer, a dignified and privileged person, and had been in his master's service ever since the days when his master had picked up little Loro Faleri's mangled frame, "out of the very gutter," as he expressed it, in order to set him up in high places. It was not in Symes' place to speak his mind upon that event; but Mr. Barnardine knew very well that Symes had never approved of it, and he was also pretty well aware that his marriage with so young and lovely a maiden as Winnie Damer met with no approval in the eyes of his old servant. When he met Symes' eyes, grave and troubled, fixed anxiously upon him as he proffered his request, Barnardine knew that whether it were agreeable to him or not, he must perforce give attention to what he had to say to him.

"Would you mind stepping in here a moment, sir?" He opened the door of a small room which was not in use to-night, and ushered his master into it.

"Well, what is it? Be quick, Symes, as I ought to be back in the supper-room."

"Sir, I sadly fear as how things is not going right to-night," began the old man seriously.

"Not going right! Why, Symes, everything surely is going off capitally; and everybody enjoying themselves. I hope none of the men are drunk, or that there is anything disagreeable going on amongst the servants, is there?"

"No, no, sir. Do you think I would have troubled you about any little thing of that kind at such a time? No, sir, it's more serious, I fear. Mr. Loro—"

John Barnardine looked uneasy at once.

"Mr. Loro! Why, he was here not ten minutes ago; I saw him dancing myself. No, I come to think of it, though, it must be nearly half an hour ago that I saw him. Where is he—is he ill?" He made as though he would turn to the door, but Symes stopped him.

"No, sir, he's not ill as I know of; but he has gone away, I think. Sir, he gave me a letter that I was to give you to-morrow morning, but I think it my bounden duty, owing to things which I have seen myself, to give it to you at once!" and Symes drew a letter out of his pocket.

John Barnardine cast his eyes hurriedly over the closely-written sheets.

"What is the meaning of this?" he muttered.

"Going away—cannot wait for my wedding—must go at once—for ever—back to Italy—undying gratitude—will never forget me! Why, bless my soul!"

suddenly crushing up the letter in his hand, "the boy must be mad! What on earth does he want to go away for before my marriage? He must be stopped, Symes. Why, I wouldn't part with him not for fifty wives; I love him like my own son."