



The Lost Will; OR LOVE TRIUMPHS AT LAST.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN autumnal drizzle fell on the pit and gallery queues waiting outside the Theatres. They were doing good business at the Theatres; the queues were long, and, notwithstanding the police regulations, straggled somewhat over the pavement; a man who was slouching along, with a hangdog expression and his hands thrust into his pockets, was forced into the roadway. He muttered an oath, looked up to see the cause of the obstruction, and, pausing in his progress, gazed vacantly at the gaily-lit theatre entrance; then, in an undecided way, joined the long line of waiters for the gallery. When the doors opened he got a place in the back row, and sat hunched up, gazing before him with the same vacant expression, which still remained unchanged when the curtain was raised. Indeed, judging by the lack of interest he displayed in the performance, the man might have been dead. But suddenly—in fact, when Miss Grace Lawless made her entrance and her first speech—his manner altered. He started, stared with wild interest, and even rose to his feet. Slowly there mounted to his ugly and yet haggard face an unhealthy flush, his eyes became alive, his swollen lips moved excitedly, and the time Miss Lawless was on the stage his eyes were fixed on her with a feverish eagerness, and when she left it he sank back and lost all interest in the play.

At the dropping of the curtain he shuffled down the stairs and, making his way to the stage door, stood a little way from it and waited. In about a quarter of an hour the actors began to emerge, and presently Maud appeared, throwing a "Good-night" over her shoulder to someone behind her. A taxi-cab was waiting, and she was going towards it when the man who was watching slouched forward, and, laying his hand on her arm, said thickly:

"Maud!"

Maud started slightly, drew back, and eyed the man at first without recognition—for, indeed, this seedy, disipated-looking wretch was very different from the old Stephen Fleming, even on his worst days. She reddened angrily, flung off his hand, and went on her way to the taxi; but Fleming followed her, muttering:

"Don't go. I want to speak to you. I tell you I want to speak to you, and you'd better hear me," he went on, with a threatening note in his husky voice. "I've got something to tell you about—him."

Maud was acute naturally, and the practice of her profession had trained that acuteness. She stopped short, looked at him, and then said, with a forced cheerfulness:

"Who is it? Oh, it's you, Steve! You took me by surprise. You're looking in a pretty state. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"I'm all right," he replied, impatiently, sullenly. "Are you going to listen to me? Is there any place where we can go?"

"I don't know," she replied, thoughtfully, but quickly; for some of her fellow-actors were coming out, and, not unnaturally, were regarding her disreputable-looking companion curiously. "Yes, there's a coffee-shop over the way. Follow me—but not too close."

She walked towards the narrow street behind the Theatres and entered a fifth-rate restaurant, and Fleming followed her.

"Now, then," she said, seating herself with an air of resolution. "Why were you waiting outside there for me? What do you want to say? Here, you look as if something to eat wouldn't hurt you."

She beckoned to the waiter, but Fleming said shortly:

"I don't want anything to eat; I'm not hungry. I'd like something to drink—brandy, if they've got it."

"Looks to me as if you'd had too much already," said Maud, with barely veiled contempt. "You'd better have coffee."

The waiter brought coffee for them both. Maud made pretence of sipping hers, but Fleming thrust his aside.

"So that's what you are—an actress," he said, his dulled eyes wandering over her; "and a swell one."

"Yes, I'm an actress, and doing very well, thank you," said Maud, fighting with her disgust and speaking as pleasantly as she could, for the words, "I've got something to tell you about him," were ringing in her ears, and she knew she would have to humor the man.

"An actress with plenty of money," he said, eyeing the rather expensive jacket of fur, the diamond ornament glittering at her throat. "You've turned him off."

The colour rose to Maud's face and faded slowly, as she forced a smile and shrugged her shoulders.

"Who told you?" she asked lightly.

"And whom do you mean?"

"You know who I mean well enough," he said, with rising anger. "The man you went off with. What did you send him away for? Did you get tired of him?"

Maud shrugged her shoulders again and laughed.

"That's not a nice way of putting it," she said. "But suppose I did?"

He leant forward and eyed her with a strange mixture of desire and distrust.

"I suppose you left him because he couldn't give you any money—because he was poor? That's the way with you women; you're all alike."

"Oh, we're none of us angels," said Maud, with an affectation of cynicism, and, leaning back in her chair, she surveyed the pale, bloated face opposite her through half-closed eyes.

"How did you know he was poor and hadn't any money?"

"Ah!" he said, with the cunning displayed by the habitual drunkard in his sober moments, "you'd like to know, I dare say. But no; I don't suppose you care. You're the sort, Maud, that don't care what happens to a man when you've done with him."

"Oh, don't be so disagreeable," said Maud, playfully. "You're talking like an old friend, I don't think. What's the matter with you? Here, you're right; that stuff's too horrid to drink. Better have some brandy after all."

She beckoned the waiter and gave the order. It was a non-licensed house, and she paid for the liquor in advance. When it came Stephen

clutched at the glass with his unsteady hand and drained it. The neat spirit went straight to his head, his face flushed and his eyes brightened with an alcoholic glare.

"You're right," he said. "I'm an old friend, the best you ever had—a true friend, mind you—not one as would lead a girl astray. It's no fault of his, but owing to your own cleverness that you ain't lying in the gutter."

Maud's face went red, her eyes flashed, and her hands gripped each other under the table; for the longing to strike him was almost irresistible.

"Oh, you're a friend all right enough, I dare say," she said.

"Yes, and more—I'm your own true lover still," said Fleming, leaning forward, his lips working. "Maud, I don't take no account of what's happened. I'm willing to forget all that's passed between you and him. I'm ready to marry you, even now."

She leant back, her teeth clenched to restrain the torrent of scorn and indignation which threatened to escape her.

"You're very kind, Stephen," she said, "and—and we'll talk about it. After all, an actress's life is a very hard one, and uncertain, too, and I don't know but what I should like to go back to the country, to the old place."

"Aye," he said, eagerly. "Come back with me, Maud. There's the farm—you shall be mistress of it. The old man will be only too glad to have you. There no one shall dare say a word against you. As for him—"

His hands clenched, and he grinned, showing his teeth, like a dog that has come off victorious in a fight, and left the vanquished one lying in the gutter. At his concluding words Maud's restraint nearly gave way. She had almost sprung to her feet and overwhelmed him with her contempt; but, with an effort, she mastered herself, and with downcast eyes, and bosom still heaving with the struggle, she murmured:

"We'll talk about it some other time. You've seen him, then, Steve?" she asked, with an air of indifference, as she took up her gloves and began to put it on.

"Aye, I've seen him," he replied, with a chuckle of malignant satisfaction.

"Down at Chertson?" she said, casually. As she did so she beckoned to the waiter and signed to Fleming's glass; and the little motion was made so covertly that Stephen did not notice it, but, when the waiter had refilled the glass, took it up "half mechanically and drained it as before."

"No, not at Chertson," he said, with a laugh. "I reckon he won't go back there; he durstn't."

"Why?" almost sprang from Maud's lips; but she checked herself, and said, instead, and with the same air of indifference, "Ah, I dare say not."

"No," said Stephen, emphatically. "I up and told Miss Norton what he'd done; how he'd misled you."

It was almost too much for Maud. She rose, with the movement of a tigress; but, battling with herself, she sank down again, and even forced a laugh.

"Oh, you told her that I'd gone off with him! And what did she say?"

"She said 'naught,'" replied Steve, blinking, and evidently struggling against the effects of the raw spirit on an empty stomach. "She said she wouldn't interfere; 'twas no business of hers."

"No more it was. She was right there," said Maud; and there was a note of spite in her voice.

"But it was business of mine," said Fleming, shaking his head with drunken gravity; "and I interfered right enough. Don't you be afraid that he's gone unpunished, Maud. I've made up old scores with him, on your account and my own too. Don't you be afraid; he's had cause to rue the day he ever played you false, my girl!"

Maud's heart beat so hard and fast that she was almost suffocated; but she managed to laugh, as she was, and, leaning across the table and fighting against the loathing which possessed her, she patted the arm in the dirty sleeve approvingly.

"You would, Steve," she said, between her teeth. "You're a true friend. Where did you find him?"

Her heart, which had been racing a moment before, almost stopped beating as she waited for the answer. Would he reply—would he tell her? Jack Chalfonte had not left England, had not gone abroad; he was in England still, and this drunken wretch knew where. The temptation to seize



him by the shoulders and shake the truth from him was almost irresistible; but yet again she controlled herself and laughed and nodded at him with a pleasant approval.

"I suppose you came across him in London here?" she asked.

Fleming shook his head and half closed his eyes with a cunning smile.

"No; 'twasn't here," he replied, gloatingly. "I had him at a better advantage than I should have had him here; 'twas more lonesome like; a place where a man could meet him face to face and have it out with him. I've given him cause to remember the way he treated you—and me too; that is, if he ain't beyond remembering anything, which is more than likely."

There was silence for a moment; Maud stared, her face grown suddenly pale, stared above his head, her hands gripped each other again under the table, and something seemed to grip her heart—a deadly fear, a terror beyond words. She moistened her lips and forcing her voice, which threatened to desert her, she said, lightly:

"So that's where you met him?"

"Aye," said Fleming, with a nod and a tipsy, complacent smile. "Twas a surprise to meet him, I own; for the first minute or two I thought I was dreaming. There he was, dressed like a navy, with his boots all over clay and gravel, and his hands all big and hard, looking just like a common labouring man—him, 'twas used to be such a swell! It took me by surprise—and, come to think of it, Maud, not without cause—for even now I don't understand what had brought him so low, or why he was a-working there, at the embankment, like a labourer."

"Oh, it was on the Embankment?" she said, as slowly as she could, and waving her gloves to and fro; she had taken them off again, for their pressure seemed to add to the sensation of choking which threatened to overcome her. "On the Embankment here in London? I don't understand."

"No; not here in London," he replied, slowly and thickly, as if the spirit were finishing its work and actually stupefying him. "No, not here; but over there."

He paused for a moment; then, with a vacant expression, as if he were turning over his tongue the sweet morsel of his revenge, he wandered on, in a sleepy voice:

"I looked him up and down. He was as surprised to see me, and, with that cursed free-and-easy way of his, he give me 'Good-day;—but I wasn't to be soft-sawdered—not me, Maud! I thought of you. I said nothing; but I bided my time. And it came; it allus does, if you wait long enough. I watched on him, day by day, night by night, as you might say; and at last I come upon him all alone, when there was no one to help him."

(To be continued.)

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