One in a Thousand,

BUT TRUE TO THE LAST

CHAPTER XXVI.

"To My Cost!"

"Not just yet," I plead; "after a while, perhaps. Couldn't we try Scotland, or Wales?"

"Both, if you like; or we might go to Park Royal."

I laugh immoderately at the idea. Poor "daddy"—he does not know it, but the idea is so absurd!

It ends by our taking a house in the Isle of Wight; and, before very long, we are established there. I find it just as irksome, just as distasteful as Utrecht; but I contrive to keep my sentiments to myself. I cannot drag my father about much more; he is not so young as he was.

If a pretty house and picturesque scenery could satisfy anyone, I should be as happy as possible; but, unfortunately, they cannot, and they do not. I think very often that I frighten my father, for all during the long July and August days I exist—I do not live. Hour after hour I sit doing nothing; a book or newspaper I never touch; fancy work never enters my head. I drive out, when someone suggests it to me; but I do not think I should adopt the plan of my own free will. I do not care to be out of doors, but sit hour after hour in that very chair Theo used to be so fond of at Idleminster, looking out, with blank, unseeing eyes, across the sea, and indifferent to everybody and everything around me. Lane dresses me as she likes, and now does not often ask my wishes; the answer was, and is, always the same—"Just as you like," or "I don't mind at all."

In the beginning of September Loys and Teddy come; but even that does not rouse me from the stupor into which I have fallen. I often find Loys looking at me, with tears in her soft eyes; but that does not touch me at all. I even wonder sometimes, in a dull kind of way, why they seem to be so troubled about me. I have a painful impression that I am going mad! I wonder indeed—I have speculated many times—if insane persons have any knowledge of their infirmity. I suppose not; they are probably past that. Very likely, when I am quite mad, I shall forget who I am, and all my story—forget the dread I once had of my brain going. I wonder if I shall be a dangerous lunatic. I smile at myself as the question rises in my brain. I dangerous! Why, I have not the strength of a cat!

But there comes a sudden check, which clears the cobwebs out of my brain, and makes me restlessly active once more. We are sitting one evening at dinner, when a telegram is handed to "daddy." He reads it through, and gives it to Teddy, without a word. In his turn, Teddy reads it, and then looks doubtfully at me.

"You have bad news," I say, calmly, holding out my hand. "Give it to me, please, Teddy."

"Sir Adrian Charteris was hurt out shooting to-day. If possible, come at once."

"I must go at once," says my father, rising from his chair.

I rise, too, and follow him out of the room.

"Daddy," I say, going close up to him, "I am going with you."

"There is my good girl," he says, fondly; "but can you do it? Won't it knock you up?"

"I shall die of anxiety here," I say, passionately. "I must come, or I shall go mad. I think I was almost so as it was."

"Then you shall go. Lane must go with you, and Loys will stay till we return."

We have a long, tiresome journey, for Thornton Charteris is in the west country, and not very easy of access. By the time we drive up to the door, I am almost fainting from exhaustion. A very stately housekeeper receives me, with grave formality, and tells us that Sir Adrian was hurt by the exploding of a gun, not his own, and is seriously wounded in the chest.

"What the doctors fear is injury to the lungs, my lady," she says, "and that hemorrhage may set in."

"But he is not in danger?" I say, piteously.

She will, evidently, spare me nothing.

"In the greatest danger, my lady," she says, gravely, "or we should not have sent for you."

I turn so faint that I am obliged to sit down, while my father goes with the doctor, who has been in the house ever since the accident, to see my husband.

"Mrs.——" I begin.

"Smith," answers she, quietly.

"Thank you. Mrs. Smith, has Sir Adrian asked—has he——"

"Asked for you? Yes, my lady, several times."

I was not going to ask if he had inquired for me. I did not expect him to do that. What I wanted to know was, had he been wishing for anyone else, otherwise Theo. While I am casting about in my mind for the best way of obtaining this information, my father comes back.

"Do you think you can come up, dear?" he says, anxiously.

"He is not worse, daddy?" I ask, my voice shaking.

"No, no, dear—a little better. But he has been asking for you, and seems restless and fretful."

(To be Continued.)

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— or, —

Countess Westerleigh.

CHAPTER II.

(Continued.)

Notwithstanding his boast, he felt that even his vaunted Irish frieze would not withstand such rain as this, and he cantered up to a sheltering rock at the entrance to the valley and got into as much shelter as he could.

He lighted his pipe, turned up his collar, and made himself as comfortable as possible. The storm came on, and broke in real earnest; the thunder rolled along the hills and through the mountain-gorge with the roar of a park of artillery, and the flashes of lightning revealed a scene of grim solemnity which made him—alas! he was not an artist—think of the opening scene in a pantomine, when, to the weird squeaking of the fiddles and the double bass, the demons and ghouls flit about the stage and threaten things portentous.

The comparison had scarcely crossed his mind when, to his amazement, he saw, on a ledge of rock in front of him, the figure of a young girl.

For a moment he thought he must be dreaming. He had not passed a house, had not seen a sign of one; the only road was the one from which he had just turned off. It was impossible that a young girl should be walking, in what seemed an unconcerned manner, along the side of a cliff upon which a goat would find it difficult, in such a wind and rain storm, to keep its footing.

He strained his eyes through the darkness, but the flash had almost blinded him and he could see nothing.

Suddenly he heard a cry. It was something like that of a curlew. But Vane did not spend all his life in his chambers in St. James's Street. He had stalked wild fowl too often not to know a counterfeit "cur-loo!" from the real cry. It came from the spot—a little higher, perhaps—on which he had seen the figure; and as he stared curiously, another flash came, and he saw the girl again.

"Anyway, they're not afraid of a storm in these parts," he said to himself, keeping his eyes fixed on the cliffs opposite; but the figure did not appear again, though he fancied he heard the curious "cur-loo" still higher up the mountain.

The storm subsided, and he rode out on to the moor again. He was wet through, notwithstanding the rock, and his horse was as wet and cold as himself.

To make matters worse, he discovered, after half an hour, that he had lost his way. The slight moor track had disappeared, and he was riding hap-hazard, without anything to guide him.

He pulled up and looked around. It was growing late, and through the rifts in the clouds the moon was shining in a watery fashion, which foreboded another storm presently.

"Well, of all the beastly places!" he began. Then he swore a little but finished up with a laugh. "I would give anything if Sen were here," he said. "He hates this kind of thing so heartily. What's to be done? Go back, I suppose; but it seems to me that it would be as difficult to find my way back to the inn as to the Hall. What it really means, I expect, is a 'camp-out' in the most sheltered spot I can find. Thank goodness, there's food for the horse; but oh, Lord! what would I give for a chop and a glass of Bass! It's lucky I've gt some bacca; it's generally on occasions like this that you run out, or find you've forgotten your pipe, or used your last match."

He dropped the reins to get a light, and as he did so, the horse which had stood perfectly still—the storm and the distance had taken all the mischief out of it—moved forward slowly and steadily, and his doing so sent a sensible idea into Vane's head.

"Right!" he said. "You know the way, perhaps. Anyhow, I don't; so you can't make it worse than it is, old man. Go your own road;" and he let the reins hang loose.

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