

LOVE THE VICTOR.

CHAPTER XVII.—(CONTINUED.)

"Sometimes, however, the travelers do return," goes on Mr. Browne, thoughtfully. "There have been several authentic stories to that effect. They return to earth to haunt those to whom in life they owed their destruction. You won't like it when Manxering comes to your bedside some night with the blue and vivid marks of strangulation on his lily-white throat. Though—meditatively—"perhaps, after all, it is better than his taking his head under his arm."

"You are surpassing yourself to-night. You are positively eloquent," says Kit, scornfully.

"He sent you his love," goes on Mr. Browne, unmoved, "and a kiss. He said I was to deliver the latter. It was his parting legacy to me. What! you decline to receive even the dying embrace of your unhappy victim? Can callousness go further?"

"I insist upon knowing what he really said to you," says Kit.

"There need be no insistence; I am only too willing to communicate to you our poor friend's expiring remarks. 'Tell her,' he said, 'that one word will recall me to her side forever! Oh, think of that! Fancy the horror of having a ghastly corpse tied to your side forever. Fortunately, he forgot to say the word, or I should be obliged to repeat it, and in your dreams some night you might by some fell chance give voice to it and be henceforth his slave.'"

"I suppose you think you are amusing," says Kit, with scathing contempt.

"He said something too," says Mr. Browne, dreamily, "about fifteen thousand a year. I don't exactly remember what; I was naturally agitated beyond my powers of endurance, but no doubt it was to the effect that he meant to bequeath to you all that he possessed, before taking the fatal leap. Oh, Kit! How could you so mislead a trusting heart?"

"I didn't,"—indignantly. "He never got the faintest encouragement from me. I always thought him the greatest—"

"Speak gently of the dead," says Dicky, softly, elevating his hand. "It must be all over now. Would you like to come up with me and cut him down? It will be the last sweet service you can render him."

"I wonder"—wrathfully—"how you can be so unfeeling."

"I wonder how you can ever know a happy moment again. Alas! all tragedies are finished by a death; all comedies are ended by a marriage."

"There wasn't one spark of tragedy about this wretched affair. There couldn't be, when he was the hero of it."

"You wouldn't say so if you saw him as I did. He mouthed like King Lear, ranted like Othello, and lamented like Romeo."

"A pretty Romeo, forsooth!"

"He made very flattering mention of you at first, but just at the last he—he—really, my dear Kit, I quite shrink from confessing it, but the truth is, he called you—a brute!"

"What!" says Miss Beresford, growing really two inches taller on the spot.

"Well, yes, it sounds horrid, doesn't it? But the fact remains; he certainly called you a 'gazelle.' I don't think that was nice of him. It wasn't gentlemanly, I think; do you?" with anxious inquiry.

"I shall go to bed," says Kit, with dignity, turning away from him.

"But not to rest, I trust. At your tender age the conscience cannot be altogether seared. Remorse must gnaw you. Remember, as you lie upon your downy couch, that he is still hanging in mid-air."

"Oh, good-night!" says Miss Beresford, contemptuously.

"So young, and so untender!" murmurs Dicky, with a regretful sigh.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Upon thy glad days have in thy mind
The unwarlike woe of harm that comes behind."

"A happy Christmas to you, my bird! my treasure!" says Mrs. Desmond, bending over the cot that contains her son and heir.

It is indeed Christmas morning. Outside all the world is white with snow, and up from the village, faintly, sweetly, borne upon the strong wind, come the bells, welcoming in this holiest of tides.

It is barely eight o'clock, but Monica,

clad only in slippers and a dressing gown, has rushed along the corridor to be the earliest to wish sweet wishes to her pretty boy on this his first Christmas day.

"Darling thing! See how he puts out his arms to me. Oh, nurse, isn't he sweet?" appealing to the big and comely woman beside her.

"Deed he is, ma'am, that surely, an' a deal more," says nurse, heartily. "It's but a poor word for him. To my thinking, there isn't his like in the country, let alone the children round us, an' he's that clever, there's no bein' up to him—the darlint!"

There is no knowing to what lengths of imbecile worship Mrs. Desmond and her nurse might presently have got, but that the nursery door opening at this moment compels the former to raise her eyes from the all-engrossing baby.

"Ah! A happy Christmas to you, Bridget," she says, gayly, seeing it is her own maid who has entered. She is a tall, handsome, rather peculiar-looking girl, with deep earnest eyes and a firm mouth. Just now she is ghastly pale, and her eyes shift a little beneath her mistress's friendly gaze.

"Thank you, ma'am," she says, in a low voice, but the usual kindly return—"an' the same to you, ma'am, an' plenty of them"—is not added.

Nurse having taken up her young gentleman and carried him over to the fire, with a view to preparing him for his morning's amusement—namely, his bath—Mrs. Desmond is at leisure to regard the girl with closer attention. Her pallor, the purple rims beneath her eyes, that speak of a night spent in unhappy vigil, not unbowed by tears, awake vague suspicions in her mind, and a desire to administer consolation if possible.

Bridget has gone to the window, and is now standing there silent, gazing upon the laurestinus and the laurels drooping beneath their load of snow.

"What is it, Bridget?" asks her mistress, gently, touching her arm. "Is it any trouble?"

"Trouble!" says the girl, quickly, facing round with some vehemence, whilst a dull red flashes into her pale cheeks. Then, in an instant, she calms her evident agitation by a violent effort, and with downcast eyes says, respectfully, "You are very kind to ask me, ma'am, but—what trouble should there be with me?"

As a rule, she speaks excellent English—as most Irish servants of the better class can—but in moments of strong excitement she slips into the old soft guttural style again.

"None, I hope," says Monica, very kindly. She is one of those women who think it by no means derogatory to their dignity to feel an open and expressed sympathy with the weals and woes of their domestics. This girl Bridget is regarded by her with special favor, having been her maid before her marriage, and her faithful attendant since.

"There is none—none at all," says the girl, with nervous eagerness.

"I am glad of that; I feared"—looking at her earnestly—"there might be something about—Con—to make you unhappy."

A subdued expression of fear creeps into the girl's eyes, and she recoils a little.

"There is nothing, indeed!" she says, with unnecessary force. "What should there be? I'm sure"—with a miserable attempt at a smile—"Tis Con himself, ma'am, would be proud to think you'd take the thought to ask after him."

At first Mrs. Desmond had been inclined to think a lover's quarrel was the cause of the girl's changed appearance, but some instinct tells her that those colorless cheeks have not been born of love's wounds. Bridget has half turned away, but yet Monica lingers. Then—

"Come to me, if I can ever be of use to you," she says, softly, and having again caressed her baby, goes back in a somewhat thoughtful mood to the warmth of her own fire.

Twenty minutes later still finds her standing before it, gazing into its depths, conjuring up from it happy thoughts. Bridget and her white face are forgotten: Brian and his last tender speech are full in her mind. She is beginning to wonder what gift he has in store for her this Christmas morning,

and whether he will be pleased with what she has for him, when a sound upon the threshold wakes her effectually from her pleasant day-dreams.

The door is open. Just within it stands Bridget, regarding her mistress silently, fearfully. As their eyes meet, she stirs into life, and, entering the apartment with a determined step, turns and locks the door deliberately behind her.

"Bridget, something has happened," says Monica, going quickly up to her.

For all answer the girl falls upon her knees at her feet, and, clasping her white dressing gown, looks into her eyes as though she would read her very soul.

Her face was pale a few minutes since, but now it is positively haggard, and large blue veins stand out prominently upon her forehead. Her eyes are wild, her lips parted and quite bloodless.

"Bridget!" exclaims Mrs. Desmond, nervously, laying her own upon the girl's right hand as it clutches her gown.

"I must speak," says Bridget, in a low hoarse voice; "though they kill me for it, I must. It has been like a raging fire in my veins during all the dark and terrible hours of this past night. An' when you spoke to me awhile ago—Miss Monica, listen to me." (Her mistress is always "Miss Monica" to her, as in the old days, in spite of the baby in the nursery beyond; and the general impropriety of it.)

"Say what you will to me," says Monica, gently.

"Ay, ay, but how to say it? I tell ye I have come here this mornin' to give my life into yer hands. An' more—far more"—throwing out her arms with a passionate gesture: "I am goin' to give ye the life of him I love!"

She covers her eyes for a moment, and then looks up again, a terrible calm upon her face.

"Swear to me," she says, "by the heaven above us both, that, as I hope to save the man you love to-night, you will save mine, if ever the power to do it lies wid ye."

"What horrible thing are you going to tell me?" says Monica, faintly, recoiling from her. It is noticable, however, that, though she does recoil, she still shows no small inclination to ring the bell that is almost at her hand, and summon assistance.

"Horrible, by my faith, it will be if it succeeds," says the girl, violently; "but you have not sworn yet."

Monica hesitates. It is not, however, a time to distrust warnings of brutal deeds, or treat them as theatrical effects: the hesitation is barely perceptible before it dies away.

"I swear to help you in your extremity, as you will help me in mine," she says, slowly, her eyes upon the girl's.

"It is an oath," says the latter, quickly.

"The trouble of him I love will be my trouble; an' so ye have pledged yerself to help us both."

"It is Con?" says Monica, with a curious change of feature.

"Ay, 'tis so," says the girl, in a voice of the most intense anguish, rocking herself to and fro, with her arms clasped across her bosom. "He's in it too. Them devils who preach of good to be got from fire an' blood caught a holt of him: while past, an' now he's in the thick of it. There's mischief to you an' yours brewin' by night and day for weeks past, an' now it has come to a head. I tell ye"—crawling even closer to her, and staring at her with horrified eyes—"there's murder in the very air ye're breathin'."

Still grasping her mistress's robe, she looks suddenly around her, and her tone sinks to a whisper.

"Yes—last night—" says Monica, bending over her.

"I stole through the frost an' the snow to the cabin where I knew they held their meetin', and I put my ear to the hole in the window, and listened, and first I heard—niver mind what—I won't tell ye that, but I heard of many evil deeds yet to be done, and at last—at last," smiting her breast, "of one that pierced my heart as I listened. It was—Hiss! was that a step boyant?" She cowers at Monica's feet, and again tightens her clasp upon her gown, and points in a frenzied fashion towards the door.

"No, there is nobody. Go on, go on; it was—"

"It was what ye're thinkin'," says the girl, solemnly. "To-night they are to come in a body to this house, and the doors are

to be open to them by one inside its walls, an' then—"

She pauses. The pause is ominous. "Inside these walls! You would tell me that one of our own people would betray us? I will not believe it," says Mrs. Desmond, growing deadly white. For the first time her self-possession fails her. Detaching the girl's hand from her dressing-gown, she walks rapidly in an agitated fashion up and down the room. "It cannot be true," she says; "I have so trusted them all! What one in our service can speak of anything but kindness shown? It cannot be true."

"It is true," says Bridget, sullenly, who also has risen to her feet. "Led away, like many another, by false words an' false hopes, there is one within yer walls who is willin' an' ready to betray ye. Yet the tool is not so bad as him that handles it. I tell ye that the very one that now is consentin' to yer death, only two years ago would have shrunk from the sight of blood. May our Blessed Lady in Heaven," cries the girl, flinging her arms above her head, and lifting her flashing eyes to the sky without, "rain down deadly curses upon those black-hearted villains who have led our lads astray!"

As though a little exhausted by her vehemence, her arms sink slowly to her sides again, and her head falls in a dejected fashion on her breast.

"Who is this traitor who would open our doors?" asks Monica, coldly.

"I cannot tell ye that. I will not," says the girl. "I have delivered myself an' him I love into yer hands, on the faith of yer oath. But more I will not do. If harm comes to Con of this mornin's work, I'll kill meself before yer eyes, and then you will have two deaths, not one, upon yer soul."

Then her defiant mood changes, and she bursts into tears.

"Oh, don't be angered with me, asthore," she says, weeping bitterly. "What can I do at all, at all! But I tell ye again be warned in time; make plans to save yerself an' them ye love while yet 'tis aisy to ye. But be secret! an' remember always," with subdued vehemence, and a terrible intensity upon her pale, haggard, but resolute face, "that my life is in yer keepin'." If the boys once suspected me of this day's work, they'd think as little of slitting my throat as if I were a dog! The lightest word ye utter may be heard, and be the signal for my death."

"I shall speak no word that will do you harm," says Monica, steadily. "But you have not yet told me all. When the doors are opened, what then?"

"The ould mather—The Desmond himself—is to be murdered in his bed, an'—an' any one else that interferes wid the doin' of that deed. Then the house is to be burned, an' made a bonfire of, to show the country round what power is wid 'the boys,' an' how they will make an example of them as goes again Farnell an' his laws; them that try to escape by door or window will have a hard time wid the rabble awaitin' them widout, an' them that don't will be burned alive. Ye hear me," says the girl, rocklessly: "I've told ye all. See to it. She wipes her damp brow as she ceases speaking."

"To-night!" says Monica, in a faint whisper; "to-night!"

There are but eight policemen, all told, in Rossmoyne, and the troops, by order of a benevolent government, were removed from Clontree some months ago. Eight men!

What would they be among so many?

"So soon!" she says again, in a terrified voice. And then, "The child, Bridget—the child!" she says; "what is to be done with him?"

"Send him down to the ould ladies below—to Moyne House," says Bridget, eagerly. "I have thought of all that. Nurse can take him. It will not seem strange that he should go to them, bein' Christmas."

(CONTINUED.)

There may be such a thing as chance, but there is ou—ning certain, no man can prove it.

When alone we have our thoughts to watch; in our families our temper, in society our tongues.

It is not the quantity of the meat, but the cheerfulness of the guests, which makes the feast; at the feast of the Centaurs they ate with one hand and had their drawn swords in the other; where there is no peace there can be no feast.