

Beautiful Cynthia;

OR

Victory After Many Defeats.

CHAPTER XV.
THE SNAKE IN THE GRASS.

He pressed her to him still more closely.
"You are worth everything, Cynthia," he said. "I will write to you. I must go now. Perhaps Mr. Standish will suggest something"—he laughed, a mirthless laugh—"I'm a bit off my head. Good-by, darling. I shall find some way of sending to you, letting you know."

Their lips met. He let her go at last, and went out—she, with her hand on the door, watching him with love-laden eyes till the last moment.
Percy was waiting in the hall.
"Come with me, Frayne," he said. "I have thought of something. It may not be of much use, but—"

"I do hope you will not think me intrusive, my dear Frayne," murmured Percy as they went down the steps. "It was very painful for me to have to remain in the room, an unwilling spectator, I assure you, of the distressing scene. But I ventured to hope that my presence would in some way restrain Lady Westlake. As you know, her wrath is absolutely unbridled when she gives way to it. She is a very terrible old lady, and I must confess that I myself have always a sneaking fear of her."

"Do you think she will carry out her threat, and turn Cynthia out of the house in twenty-four hours?" asked Darrel, rather hoarsely.

Percy shook his head gravely. "I'm very much afraid she will," he said. "Aunt Gwen is capable of anything when she is in one of her furies, and I have never seen her more furious than she was this afternoon."
Darrel stopped and stared at the ground, biting his lip. His brain was in a whirl. What was to become of Cynthia? Where could she go?

"The notice is very short," said Percy, with a sideways glance at his companion; "but Cynthia could go to her people—"

"She has no people," said Darrel, a trifle bitterly. "She has only her father, and he is travelling in South America."
"Surely she has some friends?" suggested Percy, with another glance.
"I know of none to whom she could go," replied Darrel moodily. "I have never heard her speak of any. She has plenty of acquaintances; I've no doubt, friends of Aunt Gwen's; but she could scarcely go to any of them."

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It would make trouble. She couldn't go home to Summerleigh; there is no one there. The place, the cottage in which she and her father live, is shut up; besides, she could not live alone.

"It is a difficult position," mused Percy. "Of course, there is one way out of it, but it is of so desperate a nature that I do not like to suggest it. Besides, no doubt you have already thought of it."

Darrel laughed grimly. "I'm scarcely able to think," he said. "I'm too confused, bewildered, by Lady Westlake's cruelty to Cynthia. How anyone calling herself a woman—but what was it you were thinking of, were going to suggest? I'm awfully grateful to you, for your kindness to me, and to her, Standish; and please speak right out. I'm ready to jump at anything."

"If you insist—" murmured Percy. "Has it occurred to you that there is one, and I'm afraid only one way out of this impasse—an immediate marriage?"

Darrel stopped short again, his face suddenly crimson, his eyes fixed on Percy's face.

"I never thought of it!" he said under his breath and with a leap of his heart. "Of course! But—but it is possible to do it so soon?"

"Everything is possible," said Percy softly, and linking his arm in Darrel's.

"I have brought some tickets for a concert for Miss Drayle, James," said Percy blandly. "At this moment Percy's luck still standing by him, Parsons happened to cross the hall. Ah, there is Parsons!" said Percy. "I will give them to her, if you please."

As he went toward her he saw that her eyes were red, as if she had been crying.
"Can I see Miss Cynthia?" he asked in an undertone.
"Oh, no, sir," said Parsons, shaking her head. "She is too ill, upset. I've let her lie down."

"Quite right," he said, quickly and approvingly. "Please give her these tickets at once, and ask her not to be so late. Give them to her—and no more—Lady Westlake. You understand?"

Parsons shot a sharp glance at him, nodded, and went upstairs quickly. Cynthia was lying on the bed, her face on one arm, her eyes closed. It was the collapse after the terrible scene. She was trying to realize that she was going to be parted from Darrel, that in twenty-four hours she would have to leave Aunt Gwen's and go—where? Parsons approached the bed softly.

"Here are some tickets from Mr. Percy, Miss Cynthia."
Cynthia opened her eyes, gazed at her vacantly, and shook her head; but Parsons had locked at the envelope, and saw that the writing on it was not Mr. Percy's.
"I think you had better open it."

"Tell the man where to drive," he said, his face flushed, his whole manner changed from that of doubt, perplexity, and dismay to one of hope and resolution.

They were fortunate enough to reach the office in Doctors' Commons before it had closed. Guided and prompted by Percy, Darrel made the necessary application, signed the usual form, and came out with the precious license in his breast pocket.

He felt as if a load had been lifted off his heart, his eyes were bright there was a smile on his lips; and yet it seemed to him as if he were moving in a dream, for could it be possible that Cynthia would be his before another day had passed!

What would she say when she learned of this desperate plan of his? But how was she to know? As if he had seen what was passing through Darrel's mind, Percy said:

"You'll have to let Cynthia know. I think I can help you here, Frayne. I will go back to Aunt Gwen's and ask to see her. I shall, of course, say that I have come to plead on Cynthia's behalf. It won't be a bit of use, and it is more than likely that Aunt Gwen will have me turned out, but I will try and manage to see Cynthia, and ask her to meet you, say, at the



Park gates at half-past six. If I can't get to see her, I will send a note to her by her maid or one of the servants. You might write a line or two. Come on to my club."

They went to the club, and Darrel made at once for a writing table. Percy ordered a soda and whisky for both of them, had Darrel's put beside his elbow, and drank his own, seated at a little distance, his eye fixed on the floor thoughtfully. If his luck stood by him, Cynthia and Darrel might have been married and Cynthia out of his way forever.

Darrel only wanted to write three or four lines, and yet, before he succeeded in doing so, he had torn up half a dozen sheets of note paper.

He handed the precious missive to Percy, who took it and rose at once. "I will let you know the result," he said. "Shall I come to your rooms, or will you come to mine?"

"Yes," said Darrel briskly. "I shall have to go down to quarters to-night and arrange for leave, and so on. I don't never thank you enough, Standish, for all you are doing for us. You have been a true friend."

He held out his hand and gripped Percy's soft and delicate one with a grip that made its sensitive owner shiver. Darrel rushed out of the club and into a hansom and Percy calmly smoked a cigarette, then as calmly repaired to Belgrave Square.

"Her ladyship is not at home to anyone, sir," said the footman "passively."

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miss," she said significantly; and, half unconsciously, Cynthia took the envelope and, without looking at it, opened it.

She had to draw her hand across her burning eyes before she could manage to read the note; then she uttered an exclamation, sat up, and sprang from the bed. Her eyes, dull with crying, suddenly became bright, a flush rose to her tear-stained cheeks.

She had not parted from him forever; she was to meet him, and soon, again! Half-past six! What was the time? Had Parsons kept back the letter for fear of disturbing her? Was she too late?

"Give me a walking dress, Parsons," she said. "I am going out—I must go. Oh, be quick! Give me some eau de Cologne. Oh, look at my eyes, how swollen they are! Oh, be quick, be quick, Parsons!"

Now, you cannot play melo-drama in the drawing-room without its reaching the servants' hall. Parsons knew that there had been a terrific scene between Lady Westlake and Cynthia and Mr. Frayne, and it is very probable that when Cynthia had gone up to her room she may, in her misery and confusion, have let out a few words to confirm Parsons' suspicion of what had occurred.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the girl, who was devoted to Cynthia, was entirely on her side, as were all the other servants.

"It's all right, miss," she said soothingly, as she bathed Cynthia's face. "What time do you want to be there?"

"Half past six, the Park gates," said Cynthia, too excited to be secretive.

"There's plenty of time, miss; here's plenty of time," murmured Parsons caressingly. "Now, don't you be worried and flurried, dear Miss Cynthia; it will all come right! You let me bathe your pretty eyes, and try and be calm."

"I will, I will," said Cynthia; "I'm a great trouble, Parsons. Ah! you don't know."

"Perhaps not, Miss Cynthia," said Parsons soothingly; "but we aren't deaf and blind, we servants, though her ladyship thinks that we ought to be. But I mustn't speak like that about my betters. Now, miss, sit down quiet in the chair and let me do your hair nicely. You don't want to go to your young gentleman—I mean, into the streets—looking untidy. That's better, Miss Cynthia!" as Cynthia smiled and blushed. "Lor, miss, if I was a gentleman, as strong and brave and handsome as Mr. Frayne, I wouldn't let any one, no, not even her ladyship, come between me and such a beautiful, sweet creature!"

"Oh, hush!" murmured Cynthia. "You mustn't say that, Parsons. And to be quick; I know I shall be late!" She put on a motor veil, though there was no earthly reason for her doing so, and was at the Park gates ten minutes before her time; but, early as she was, Darrel was there sating up and down, impatiently waiting for her.

They looked into each other's eyes; she gave him her hand for a moment, and then walked demurely by his side till they reached a seat among the trees and away from all beholders.

"Oh, Darrel!" she breathed. "Ah, you mustn't, some one will see us!" or he had drawn her to him for a moment and kissed her. "How clever of you to think of this!"

"Well, I didn't," he said honestly, and a little regretfully; "it was Percy Standish. Cynthia, he has proved a true friend. He's a clever chap, and it was he who thought of— Now, Cynthia, you mustn't be strangled, and you mustn't argue; you must say 'Yes' at once. Cynthia, my dear darling, will you marry me to-morrow?"

She started, drew her hand from his, and stared at him; her lips apart, her breath coming quickly.
"Will I— Oh, Darrel, you can't mean it!" she gasped.

"But I do," he said. "Cynthia, there is no other way out of it. We are in a fix. Lady Westlake will carry out her threat. Percy Standish says so. There is no place for you to go. But there is no need to think, to talk of that. There is no reason why we shouldn't be married."

"But—but we can't be!" she exclaimed breathlessly.
(To be Continued.)

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