



WHEN LOVE Came Too Late.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Pleader.

"Hear the tears in her voice," he said, more to himself than the girl.

Bessie nodded quickly: "Yes, that's the words, sir; and it seems so—so dreadful to me that Miss Olivia should have any trouble; it's just as if an angel were to cry," and her own eyes grew dim.

"I understand," he said. He stood for a moment looking down at the path, and flicking his leg with his riding whip; then he said: "And Miss Vanley went to the wood, Bessie?"

"Yes, sir," she replied; "and, oh, Mr. Faradeane, if you—"

She stopped, abashed. "Well?" he asked, with a faint smile. "I was going to say, only I'm afraid, if you'd only go and find her and talk to her. She thinks so much of you—"

She stopped again, for the smile had suddenly vanished from his face. "That's nonsense, Bessie," he said. "But, as it happens, I want to see Miss Vanley, and I'll go and find her."

"Yes, sir," said the girl, humbly. "Are—are you angry with me?" and her lips quivered piteously.

"Angry with you, my dear child!" he exclaimed, reassuringly, and he patted her arm under the thick shawl. "Why should I be angry? But—he paused almost imperceptibly—"but you must not talk such nonsense as that Miss Vanley thinks much of at all of me—"

"But she does!" interrupted Bessie, eagerly. "If you only heard her—"

"I mustn't hear you any longer, you foolish child, or I shall miss Miss Vanley."

And with another gentle and—to Bessie—forgiving touch, he turned and rode toward the wood.

All through the night Olivia had lain awake, tossing to and fro, like a soul struggling in chains. The scene with Bartley Bradstone seemed like a hideous dream, from which, try as she would, she could not awake.

That he should have dared to tell her that he loved her, have asked her to be his wife, was torture enough to her proud, maiden spirit; but that her father should be in his toils, and his happiness and even life—for she knew that Bartley Bradstone spoke only the truth when he said that to leave the Grange would mean death to the squire—was an agony almost insupportable.

At any time in the past the idea of accepting him would have been repugnant; but now, since the last few days, she shrank from the prospect with an absolute loathing. She rose, pale and weakened, bewildered; she felt she could not meet her father that morning. She dreaded to hear even Bartley Bradstone's name. And yet what escape was there for her? If what he had said were true, he held

her in an iron thrall. For her father she would sacrifice anything—life itself. But she must have time to think, time to realize the awful ordeal through which she must pass; time to learn how to school her voice and conceal the agony that racked her.

Taking up her hat, and telling the footman that her father was not to wait breakfast for her, she went out, caring nothing about the direction she should take, and, after leaving Bessie, she wandered aimlessly on to the woods and threw herself down on the thick undergrowth in an abandon of misery and dread.

She—she Bartley Bradstone's wife; she who could not endure the sight of his face, she upon whose ear his very voice and laugh jarred! It was terrible; and yet—and yet there was no other way of saving her father, whom she loved with a passionate devotion. Her hot hands clasped each other fiercely, her cheek burned as if she could almost feel the outrage of the man's kiss; then the paroxysm passed, and left her pale and wan and weary, and she lay with her head against a tree and her hands lying loosely in her lap, lovelier in her exhaustion than in her passionate indignation.

And it was at this moment that Harold Faradeane, leading his horse up the narrow footpath, came upon her. For a moment she did not hear the sound of the horse's feet upon the thick undergrowth of moss and bracken; then it seemed as if she felt the dark, sad eyes fixed upon her, for she turned her head and, her pale, lovely face growing warmer, rose to her feet, putting her hand to her brow with a half-startled gesture.

He tossed the bridle over the horse's neck, and came toward her; and as he did so Olivia knew why the idea of being Bartley Bradstone's wife seemed more terrible now than it had done a few weeks ago: knew by the sudden leap of her heart, the swift rush of her young blood through her veins at the sight of this other man!

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to listen patiently to me, however much I shall try your patience, your sweet gentleness? Will you not sit down?"

She sank on to the grass, and looked up, and yet not at him, for her eyes were heavy with a strange shyness, and it seemed to her that he must hear her heart beat, it echoed with such full joy every word of his musical voice.

"I shall try your patience," he said, with a suppressed sigh, still looking on the ground. "I came this morning to stand here before you as a suitor—her face grew pale and her lips quivered, and a wild thrill of joy ran through her—as a humble suitor, as a man pleading for something dearer even than life!" His voice broke for a moment. "Yes, dearer than life. You see I find my task difficult; even now, now that I have ventured to begin, I would draw back if I could—"

She glanced up at him, half-amazedly, half-sorrowfully. "For I realize how great, how precious a treasure it is that I am striving for. But I am not free—a stronger will than mine impels me. Miss Vanley forget if you can—I know it will be hard—that I am almost a stranger, that you know nothing of me, and—listen to me. Do not send me away till I have told you what I came to tell you, what I would have kept from you, even now, if I had not given my word."

Again the look swept over her face. "You will not wonder that a man should love you. I don't think it is possible for any one to see you, to hear you, to be in your presence for one short day without loving you."

No words can describe the infinite tenderness and reverence, and yet the infinite sadness of his voice. At that moment, even so soon, she could have stretched out her arms to him.

"No!" he continued. "No one could help loving you, and no one loves you more dearly, more truly, more passionately. That I can say with perfect truth; and I beg, I implore you to believe it! There are better, wiser men, but none in all the world who will more greatly prize the treasure of your love, if you will give it to him."

She sat, her hands clasped, her eyes hidden under their long lashes. All thought, all remembrance of Bartley Bradstone, of her father's impending ruin, had passed from her. She was living, absorbed, in this, the one, the great moment, of her existence.

"If a life's devotion can insure your happiness, I can pledge it. I do so. Of all else I say nothing. You know something of him already; I think, I know you can trust him. What will you say to me, Olivia?" The name slipped from him unawares. "What answer shall I get? Will you trust yourself to the man who loves you with all his heart and soul? Will you make him the happiest or the most wretched man in all the world?"

He had grown earnest, for all his guard upon his words and voice, and as he made his final appeal he bent over her.

She lifted her eyes to his, then raised her hand.

He took it, and his own closed round it with a quick, almost painful grasp.

"You say 'yes!'" he said, then he dropped her hand as if some hidden pain had overmastered him, and sprang, like a wild animal breaking his bonds, to his feet. "Bertie is a happy man!" he said, almost hoarsely, turning away his head.

Her hand fell into her lap, her face grew white, her eyes expanded with a look of doubt, dread, horror.

"Bertie!" she breathed.

He turned slowly, and she saw that his face was as white as her own, and

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