

# THE CRITIC.

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## LOVE'S MAGIC CHARM.

(Continued.)

"I must not let you hear the news of my good fortune from strangers," he said; "it is only due to you that I should inform you that in one month from to-day I hope to have the honor and happiness of making Miss Klinor Rocheford my wife."

Miss Hastings, in a few cautious words, wished him joy; Pauline's white lips opened, but no sound escaped them. Sir Oswald remained for some minutes talking to Miss Hastings, and then he crossed the room and rang the bell.

"Pauline, my dearest child!" whispered the anxious governess.

Miss Darrell looked at her with a terrible smile.

"It would have been better for her," she said, slowly, "that she had never been born."

"Pauline!" cried the governess. But she said no more.

A footman entered the room, to whom Sir Oswald spoke.

"Go to my study," he said, "and bring me a black ebony box that you will find locked in my writing-table. Here are the keys."

The man returned in a few minutes, bearing the box in his hands. Sir Oswald took it to the table where the lamps shone brightly.

"Aubrey," he said, "will you come here? I have a commission for you."

Captain Langton followed him to the table, and some remark about the fashion of the box drew the attention of all present to it. Sir Oswald raised the lid, and produced a diamond ring.

"You are going over to Audleigh Royal to-morrow, Aubrey," he said; "will you leave this with Stamford, the jeweler? I have chosen a new setting for the stone. I wish to present it to Miss Hastings, as a mark of my deep gratitude to her."

Miss Hastings looked up in a grateful wonder. Sir Oswald went on talking about the contents of the ebony box. He showed them many quaint treasures that it contained; among other things he took out a roll of bank-notes.

"That is not a very safe method of keeping money, Sir Oswald," said Miss Hastings.

"No, you are right," he agreed. "Simpson's clerk paid it to me the other day; I was busy, and I put it there until I had time to take the numbers of the notes."

"Do you keep notes without numbering them, Sir Oswald?" inquired Aubrey Langton. "That seems to me a great risk."

"I know it is not prudent; but there is no fear. I have none but honest and faithful servants about me. I will take the numbers and send the notes to the bank to-morrow."

"Yes," said Miss Hastings, quietly, "it is better to keep temptation from servants."

"There is no fear," he returned. "I always put the box away, and I sleep with my keys under my pillow."

Sir Oswald gave Captain Langton a few directions about the diamond, and then the ladies withdrew.

"Sir Oswald," said Captain Langton, "let me have a cigar with you to-night. I must not thank you, but if you know how grateful I feel—"

"I will put away the box first, and then we will have a glass of wine, Aubrey."

The baronet went to his study, and the captain to his; but in a few minutes they met again, and Sir Oswald ordered a bottle of his choicest Madeira. They sat talking for some time, and Sir Oswald told Aubrey all his plans—all that he intended to do. The young man listened with envy and dissatisfaction burning in his heart. All these plans, these

hopes, these prospects, might have been his but for that girl's cruel caprice.

They talked for more than an hour; and then Sir Oswald complained of being sleepy.

"The wine does not seem to have its usual flavor to-night," he said, "there is something wrong with this bottle."

"I thought the same thing," observed Aubrey Langton; "but I did not like to say so. I will bid you good-night, as you are tired. I shall ride over to Audleigh Royal early in the morning, so I may not be here for breakfast."

They shook hands and parted, Sir Oswald murmuring something about his Madeira, and the captain feeling more desperate than ever.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### MYSTERIOUS ROBBERY.

The sun shone on Darrell Court; the warmth and brightness of the day were more than pleasant. The sunbeams fell on the stately trees, the brilliant flowers. There was deep silence in the mansion. Captain Langton had been gone some hours. Sir Oswald was in his study, Pauline sat with Miss Hastings under the shadow of the cedar on the lawn. She had a book in her hands, but she had not turned a page. Miss Hastings would fain have said something to her about inattention, but there was a look in the girl's face that frightened her—a proud, hard, cold look that she had never seen there before.

Pauline Darrell was not herself that morning. Miss Hastings had told her so several times. She had asked her again and again if she was ill—if she was tired—and she had answered drearily, "No." Partly to cheer her, the governess had suggested that they should take their books under the shade of the cedar tree. She had assented wearily, without one gleam of animation.

Out there in the sunlight Miss Hastings noticed how cold and white Pauline's face was, with its hard, set look—there was a shadow in the dark eyes, and, unlike herself, she started at every sound. Miss Hastings watched her keenly. She evinced no displeasure at being so watched; but when the older lady went up to her and said, gently:

"Pauline, you are surely either ill or unhappy?"

"I am neither—I am only thinking," she returned, impatiently.

"Then your thoughts must be very unpleasant ones—tell them to me. Nothing sends away unpleasant ideas so soon as communicating them to others."

But Miss Darrell had evidently not heard the words; she had relapsed into deep meditation, and Miss Hastings thought it better to leave her alone. Suddenly Pauline looked up.

"Miss Hastings," she said, "I suppose a solemn promise, solemnly given, can never be broken?"

"It ever should be broken," replied the governess. "Instances have been known where people have preferred death to breaking such a promise."

"Yes, such deaths have been known. I should imagine," commented Pauline, with a gleam of light on her face, "that no Darrell had ever broken his or her word when it had been solemnly given."

"I should imagine not," said Miss Hastings.

But she had no clew to her pupil's musings, or to the reason of her question.

So the noon-day shadows crept on. Purple-winged butterflies coquetted with the flowers resting on the golden breasts of the white lillies, and on the crimson leaves of the rose; busy bees murmured over the rich clove carnations; the birds sang sweet, jubilant songs, and a gentle breeze stirred faintly the leaves on the trees. For once Pauline Darrell seemed blind to the warm, sweet summer beauty; it lay unheeded before her.

Miss Hastings saw Sir Oswald coming toward them; a murmur of surprise came from her lips.

"Pauline," she said, "look at Sir Oswald—how ill he seems. I am afraid something is wrong."

He drew near to them, evidently deeply agitated.

"I am glad to find you here, Miss Hastings," he said; "I am in trouble. Nay, Pauline, do not go; my trouble should be yours."

For the girl had risen with an air of proud weariness, intending to leave them together. At his words—the kindest he had spoken to her for some time—she took her seat again; but the haughty, listless manner did not change.

"I am nearly sixty years of age," said Sir Oswald, "and this is the first time such a trouble has come to me. Miss Hastings, do you remember that conversation of ours last night, over that roll of notes in the ebony box?"

"I remember it perfectly, Sir Oswald."

"I went this morning to take them from the box, to number them and send them to the bank, and I could not find them—they were gone."

"Gone!" repeated Miss Hastings. "It is impossible! You must be mistaken; you must have overlooked them. What did they amount to?"

"Exactly one thousand pounds," he replied. "I cannot understand it. You saw me replace the notes in the box?"