Beautiful Cynthia;

— OR —

Victory After Many Defeats.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A LOVE-INSPIRED HOPE.

Instead of replying, Parsons stole from the room and dispatched Betsy for the doctor and Lord Northam. To her amazement and indignation, the former, who arrived first, received the information with calmness and acquiescence.

"Not at all a bad idea, my dear," he said, patting her hand. "A complete change of scene——"

Cynthia smiled wanly, her eyes fixed on his kindly ones.

"I am going out to find him," she said simply.

He nodded. "Well, why not? Your emancipated sex can travel anywhere nowadays. You shall go to India if you like——"

She nodded at him gratefully.

"You are wise as well as kind," she murmured. "You understand. He is not dead, and I shall find him."

"I really believe you will, if he is alive!" he said. "But you will have to be quite well and strong before you can start on so trying a journey and mission."

"How long?" she asked, with a flushed face and shining eyes.

"Not for a year, if you excite yourself," he retorted. "But if you will keep your mind cool, and eat three square meals a day, presently—we'll say in a couple of months."

Northam stared aghast when the doctor informed him of Cynthia's resolutions.

"Going to look for him! Why—why, it's madness! And the poor fellow's dead!"

"Is he?" said the doctor, screwing up his eyes. "Well, upon my word, I'm not sure of it. You see, I've listened to her so often that I'm beginning to believe that she may be right. Anyhow, there's a month before us; and, my dear Lord Northam, I'm old enough to know that much may happen in a month. Are you going to the sale to-morrow?" he broke off.

"What sale?—oh, the Fraynes', the Court? I don't know. Why should I?"

"To employ your mind," responded the wise old man. "Go and buy something. I shall have you on my hands directly; and to tell you the truth, my lord, I've already got a patient who demands all the attention I can spare from my regular ones. Yes; I should go to the sale, if I were you."

Northam gazed vacantly at the boots which inclosed his big and useful feet. Then he looked up with a look of intelligence in his placid eyes.

"I understand!" he said. "Right you are! I'll go!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE REPENTANT SINNER.

That same afternoon Parsons arranged the table beside the sofa to which Cynthia had promoted herself, and was pouring out the tea for her beloved young mistress when she saw the only station fly draw up to the gate.

A lady stepped out and stood looking up at the windows, and Parsons, in the subdued and cautious manner appropriate toward an invalid recovering from a collapse, said:

"Here's a visitor, Miss Cynthia; but, of course, you won't see her."

"Her?" said Cynthia, with faint surprise. "Who is it, Parsons?"

"Lady Alicia, miss. Bless my heart, and how bad she looks! She's that thin and white. I'll go down and tell her that you're not well enough——"

"No," said Cynthia, quietly. "I will see her. Ask her to come up, and bring another teacup."

"The doctor——" remonstrated Parsons; but Cynthia shook her head. "Well, miss, of course, I can't help myself, if you insist; but I hope you'll tell him it isn't my fault; he's such a fiery-tempered old gentleman——"

Cynthia sat up and waited. She had suffered too much to be overcome by a visit from Lady Alicia; but she knew that the sight of her would bring back that night before the wedding, when Lady Alicia had, alas! persuaded her that it was her duty to break the engagement with Darrel.

Lady Alicia entered and stood for a moment looking at Cynthia, who, though she had been prepared by Parsons' remark, was struck by the alteration in Lady Alicia's appearance.

As Parsons had said, Alicia Northam was but a shadow of her former self; her bright, vivacious air had given place to one of settled melancholy, and the dark shadows under her eyes, the pallor of the lips, spoke of sleepless nights and brooding days.

"Are you sure you are well enough to see me?" were her first wods.

"I am quite sure," said Cynthia. "Sit down there and pour out the tea for us. Yes; I've been ill, but—you, too, have been ill, hav you not?"

Lady Alicia drew off her gloves and kept her eyes on Cynthia's face, with the expression of one doggedly carrying out a painful resolution.

"Yes," she replied. "I look what I am, a wreck."

"Are you well enough to come such a distance, to travel?"

"Perhaps not; but I had to come. I've heard of you from Northam. He does not know I am here."

"Not know!" echoed Cynthia, with surprise.

"No," said Lady Alicia slowly, "and I do not wish him to know. I shall return by the night train. A meeting between us would not be pleasant. You told him that it was I who advised you, persuaded you to—to jilt Darrel Frayne?"

Cynthia colored. "No," she said simply.

"Then he guessed it," said Lady Alicia. "He is quicker than most people think. He wrote to me——" she took a letter from her pocket, but thrust it back again. "No, I won't show it to you. Northam can be angry when he likes, and he has not spared me. And I'm not in the humor to spare myself. I've come to make a confession, Cynthia."

"To make a confession?"

"Yes, perhaps it isn't necessary; very probably you have hit upon the truth before this. Cynthia, you may say what you like, curse me with your lips as, no doubt, you have cursed me in your heart. I deserve it, and, if you can understand, it would be a kind of relief; though I have been punished enough."

"I don't understand——" said Cynthia, pale again now, but trying to suppress her agitation, for she had to get well and strong quickly. She must not permit herself to be thrown back; she would need all her strength for the journey that lay before her.

Lady Alicia looked at her with a kind of dull curiosity.

"You do not? Cynthia, you will remain a girl all your life! You are unlike any woman I have ever met. Even as a girl I was never so simple or unsuspicious as you; and it was this simplicity that helped me to get my way with you. Another woman would have been suspicious, have asked herself why I should have taken the trouble to dine with you that night, to talk to you as I did. You thought I had come to dinner in the ordinary, casual way? It was arranged between me and Lady Westlake, and I came with the intention of separating you from Darrel Frayne."

Cynthia's face flushed for a moment. "My aunt acted for the best according to her lights," she said, in a low voice. "She is dead——"

"And I wish I were dead, also!" said Lady Alicia quietly. "You think that I played the part I did out of friendship for her? I saw that. I performed my part well; my friends call me a good actress. I was brought up in a different school from yours, Cynthia, and learned to lie at an early age. I was lying to you that night. If I had been in your place I would have married Darrel Frayne if he had not possessed a coat to his back."

Cynthia stared at her. "And yet——"

"I persuaded you that it was for his own good that you should jilt him. Oh, don't you see?" for there was no comprehension in Cynthia's steady gaze. "I had an object in what I did; every word was uttered with a purpose. I wanted to separate you from him, because, because——"

Her hard voice faltered and her eyes sank; but no color came to her face. The truth dawned on Cynthia at last, and she shrank back involuntarily.

"Don't—don't say any more!" she breathed.

"Yes; you see now," said Lady Alicia bitterly. "It was because I loved him and wanted him for myself; I would have moved heaven and earth, would have gone through fire to snatch him from you. You look as if you were startled, amazed. You did not deem me capable of so much feeling? You are still so innocent that you do not know that we cold-natured women are more passionate when our hearts are touched than women of warmer natures. With us it is one love, one love in a life! Darrel Frayne's was mine. The first time I saw you and him together—in the Park, you remember?—I saw that you were in love with each other. Trust a woman to know in an instant when another woman loves the man she wants. And I had loved him the first time I met him; had set myself to win him. And you, a bit of a girl just freed from the school-room, were to take him from me! Do you wonder that I planned and schemed, set all my wits to work, to balk you?"

Cynthia leaned back, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her eyes fixed on Lady Alicia's.

"But—but you spoke the truth; your advice was—was sensible."

Lady Alicia laughed almost scornfully.

"The truth! You didn't see that, robbed of you, Darrel Frayne was more likely to rush headlong to ruin, ruin of body and soul, than to work his way back to his old place! I knew that, and I counted upon his turning to me when his ruin was complete. And I would have taken him all too gladly, thankfully, if he had sunk as low as a man could sink. You were a fool to take my advice, Cynthia."

"Yes," said Cynthia quietly. "I was a fool. I know it now. And that makes my punishment harder to bear."

"It is not harder than mine," said Lady Alicia, "for my remorse is keener, more bitter. We sent him to his death between us; but it is I who must answer for his life; it was I who prompted, persuaded you. Day and night I am conscious of that. I know what a murderer feels when he is haunted by his victim."

"He is not dead!" breathed Cynthia, almost inaudibly.

Lady Alicia started and caught her breath.

"You have heard—news?" she panted.

(To be Continued.)

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