

THE BEAUTIFUL LADY GLADYS.

CHAPTER VII.

Dollie awoke the next morning after a restless night of feverish, troubled dreams. She had not dared to indulge in the luxury of tears, for fear that her eyes would be swollen, and so betray her sorrow to Sir Vivian; but though they were not swollen, there were dark circles round the sad violet eyes, and she was paler than ever. The sorrow which she had so bravely suppressed had left its mark on her childish face.

She went down to breakfast at last, rather late. She hesitated at the door, not daring to go in, until at length she was startled by a slight "Ahem!" and, turning round, met the astonished eyes of the butler, who had been standing behind her for a long time, waiting with two hot dishes in his hand. Dollie entered the room hurriedly and found the other guests talking together in a state of great excitement.

"Come here, Dollie," said her mother, as she saw her surprised look. "We have had such a pleasant surprise this morning. Can you guess what it is?"

Dollie had time during this speech to see that Sir Vivian was leaning against the mantelpiece in silence, and that he was looking keenly at her. Dollie was thoroughbred to the core, and without a moment's hesitation, went up to Lady Gladys, looked straight into her triumphant eyes, and forcing a poor little smile to her pallid lips, said steadily—

"I congratulate you, Lady Gladys, on your engagement with Sir Vivian. I wish you all the happiness you deserve."

Lady Gladys winced—yes, winced in the hour of triumph, in the flush of victory, before a pale slight girl with dim blue eyes. Dollie could not tell exactly how Lady Gladys had come between her and Sir Vivian, but she felt sure that she had in some way or other. There was a pause.

"Thank you," murmured Lady Gladys sweetly. "We shall indeed be happy!"—turning with a bright smile to Sir Vivian, as if asking him to join her in a public avowal of joy.

The moment was unfortunate, for he had gone to the breakfast-table. Lady Gladys moved away, catching sight of Bell's face, which wore such a smile of delight at her discomfiture that it called forth a sympathising one from Charlie and Captain North, who was standing by. Bell had seen something of what had been going on, but she had thought that it was only a lover's quarrel, that sooner or later Sir Vivian would ask Dollie to be his wife and she would accept him. Passing Dollie as she went to her seat, she gave her hand a loving squeeze.

"You are a brick, Dollie!" she whispered enthusiastically.

Dollie smiled at her faintly, and sat down by Charlie's side, feeling more miserable than she had ever been in her life before.

Sir Vivian, glanced furtively at her white face and tired eyes, which looked everywhere but at him, and wished with all his heart that he had not been in such a hurry.

"There must be some mistake," he thought, "surely! But then would she have taken a present from North if she had not been engaged to him?"

About a quarter of an hour before the time they were to start for their drive to Rainsforth, Dollie slowly descended the broad staircase dressed in her out-door attire. There was no one in the hall, so she sat down on the great lion's skin before the fire and stared at the marble nymph, over which the painted window was throwing "gules of argent, purple, and gold." She was just the same, still poised on one delicate foot in exquisite grace, careless of the little tragedy which

had been played out beneath her, heedless of everything but the lamp in her cold hand.

"Does nobody care that such sorrow has come to me?" thought Dollie mournfully. "Ah, here is Roger!"—as the gold-brown collie came up to her and laid his beautiful head on her lap. Dollie pulled him down beside her and hid her face in his brown coat. "Oh, doggie, doggie, what have I done that he should be so angry with me?" she said brokenly, feeling that, if tears did not come soon to her relief, her heart would break. But her hot eyes were dry; hers was a grief "too deep for tears."

Presently she heard a man's steps approaching her slowly. She looked up, and met Charlie Murdoch's brown eyes full of pitying love. He had guessed Dollie's secret at last, the secret which she had so strenuously tried to keep to herself.

"Are you all alone here, Miss Dollie?" he inquired, after seeking vainly for a more brilliant opening to the conversation.

"Yes, except for Roger"—raising the dog's brown head in her small white hands.

"May I sit down?"

"Yes, do!"—making room for him beside her. "Who is going to drive us?"

"Oh, Bramhall, I suppose; he is a very good whip!"

"And Lady Gladys will sit beside him," she supplemented to herself.

There was a pause.

"I wonder how it feels to be like a dog"—dreamily gazing into the fire—"never to know what sorrow or joy is."

"I do not think you would care to change," said Charlie softly. "After all, sorrow is followed by joy generally."

"Is it?" said Dollie opening her eyes in surprise. "How do you know?"

He laughed rather sorrowfully.

"Do you not think that I have troubles as well as other people?"

Dollie looked at him curiously. He was always the gayest of the gay, laughing and jesting with everybody; she certainly had not connected the idea of sorrow with him before; but when she turned away her eyes from his bonny brown face, she knew there were other sore hearts in the world besides her own.

"I am sorry," she said hesitatingly.

"I wish I could show you how sorry I am for you—Charlie!"

The last word came out rather suddenly, as if it had been an afterthought; but it had the desired effect. His face brightened at once, and he said eagerly—

"May I tell you?"

"If you wish"—gently.

And Charlie told his story in few words—how he cared for a girl with all his heart, and she did not return his love.

"Poor boy!" commented Dollie pityingly. "Perhaps she may reciprocate your affection one day still. What is she like? Is she pretty?"

"Yes, she has a clear pink-and-white complexion, dark violet eyes, a dear little red mouth, soft brown hair, golden-tinged, and little white hands."

"She must be nice. Poor Charlie!"—and Dollie stroked soothingly the brown hand which lay near her. "Do I know her? Do you mind telling me her name?"

Charlie looked at her sorrowfully.

fluencing him in all his joys and pleasures. "Dear, is it possible that you do not know that I love you?" he said gently.

"Me!" repeated Dollie, so astonished that she hardly knew what she was saying. "Me! Why me?"

"Why you?" he echoed, half amused, half pained by her utter surprise, which

crushed completely the faint spark of hope which almost unconsciously he had cherished. "Why you? Because I could not help it, I suppose."

"Oh, Charlie, I am sorry!"—gazing ruefully up at him.

"It is not you fault, fear," he said, trying to speak steadily. Never before had she seemed so sweet and lovable as now, with the great tears swimming in her eyes for his sake. "I knew, before I told you, that I had not a chance. It is all right. Don't cry, Dollie!"

She resumed her old position by the dog, and clasped her hands round his brown neck. Did nothing ever go right in this world? she wondered.

The clock struck twelve. The guests streamed out of their rooms. The drag dashed up. Dollie and Charlie rose from their lowly position on the lion's skin, and, with every trace of sorrow carefully hidden away, joined the party. They were all soon settled on the drag and driving off merrily to Rainsforth.

It was evening before the four bay horses trotted through the quiet little sea-port, which lay at the foot of a high cliff, the top of which was crowned with the village church. They passed through the stony straggling street, up the steep hill, down the other side, and then pulled up before a low, long cottage, half covered with ivy.

Sir Vivian's yacht had been brought to Rainsforth during the night; so the next day they all walked down in a body to see her.

"That is the *Seabird*—the larger of the two," said Sir Vivian to Lady Gladys, who was standing by his side on the beach, her beautiful face softly radiant with love and happiness.

"Whose is the other?" she asked, after duly admiring the trim and graceful vessel.

"I do not know—some wanderer put in for the night, I suppose."

It was too cold to go on board, they determined; so they sauntered up the village. By-and-bye, they came across a small crowd, which had gathered round a short red-haired man in blue serge, who was so absorbed in admiration of the one shop-window which the place boasted that he did not even turn round as they passed, with little boys shouting and hurrahing in their train.

Lady Gladys was strangely silent all the way home; and her face had a curious strained look upon it which made Sir Vivian seriously uneasy, though to all his questions she replied that she was quite well. When they reached the cottage, he took her into the library and made her sit down on the sofa.

"What is the matter, Gladys? Will you not tell me, dear?" he said tenderly, kneeling down beside her and taking her cold hands in his.

To his surprise, she drew them away with a low moan of pain which pierced his heart with its anguished tone. Sir Vivian had a tender heart for all suffering helpless things, and could not endure the sight of a woman in sorrow.

"I have a headache," she said, at last, in a low voice.

"Poor child!" he returned gently, relieved to find that it was nothing worse. "Let me make you comfortable on this sofa."

He placed some soft cushions at the head, removed her furs and hat with womanly gentleness, made her lie back in the corner he had prepared for her, and moistened her brows and temples with eau de Cologne.

"Try and sleep now, dear," he said tenderly, covering her with a soft shawl.

Lady Gladys raised her heavy purple eyelids and looked at him for a moment—a look which haunted him for years after—such a one as a condemned criminal might give his fellow men crowding in thousands to see him die, ere the drop

falls and his life is cut off—so deep was the despair and sorrow in the dark blue eyes before him.

"My darling, what can I do for you?" he cried, passionately kissing her white lips. "Will you not tell me? Let me stay with you at least."

"No; leave me!" and Sir Vivian obeyed.

That very evening Captain North proposed to Dollie, and was gently but firmly refused. They were standing together in the window, looking over the quiet sea.

"I love you so, Dollie," he pleaded. "Do not decide too quickly!"

But Dollie shook her head. His handsome face darkened, and he left her without another word. Dollie was sorry, but not so grieved as she had been about Charlie; and she was right. Captain North would get over his rejection quickly, and find another woman who would make him a more suitable wife than Dollie could have done; but, all the same, he felt it very much as he leaned against the mantelpiece—an incarnation of sulky, handsome manhood, and thought of the little girl who had so unaccountably stolen into his heart. After a little while, he went back to Dollie, who still gazing miserably over the waters.

"Miss Dollie!"

She turned round quickly.

"Do be friends with me!" she pleaded, glancing wistfully up at him.

"That is what I came to ask you," he replied softly; "and also that you will keep the bracelet as a token of our friendship."

"Yes, I will."

Captain North stooped and kissed her hand.

"I am glad I have know you, dear; it will make me a better man in future."

Before he went to bed that night, he confided the news of his refusal to Sir Vivian, and announced his intention of leaving the following day; and, for the first time, Sir Vivian heard the story of Dollie's brave action in saving Captain North's life.

Late that night, Sir Vivian lay awake in his bed, thinking over the mistake into which his jealousy and impulsiveness had led him. One thing he was determined upon, that, come what might, he would break off his engagement with Lady Gladys. Twice she had betrayed him; once through covetousness, and now through vanity; but in this he had judged her hardly, for in his inmost heart he knew that she had sinned because she loved him.

"I could not trust my honor in her keeping; she shall not have the chance of deceiving me again," he thought bitterly. "I do not suppose Dollie will speak to me again after my brutal conduct to her about North. My little sweetheart! What shall I say to Lady Gladys to-morrow? What will she do?"

A vision of her face, as he had seen it on that moonlight night on the terrace, rose up before him; again he saw the dark eyes soft with love, the happy quivering mouth, and the bronzed wavy hair which had lain so trustingly on his breast. And now he was going to shatter all her happiness, shame her with the accusation of lying, and tell her in cold blood that he would never have her as his wife.

With this last weary thought, he fell asleep and dreamed that Lady Gladys was kneeling for pardon at his feet, with streaming eyes and clinging hands; that he refused it, and she had plunged a dagger into her heart and fallen dead on the ground.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE END.

After luncheon the next day, Sir Vivian and Lady Gladys were left alone in the drawing-room; the others were play-