

LOVE THE VICTOR.

CHAPTER XV.—(CONTINUED.)

"What have you heard?"

"That you were—in love—with her once. That is nothing"—haastily, and with a faint but expressive motion of the hand; "but that you are in love with her still,—that, if true, is terrible!"

Her voice falls as she finishes, but she holds her pretty, stately head erect as ever. "It is not true," says Clontarf, slowly. "I never have been, I never should be in love with her."

"She is very beautiful." Her voice is still low, and her eyes, though not altogether averted, are turned away from him to the fire.

"Very. You believe me, nevertheless?"

"Yes, I believe you." Then she turns her eyes away from the fire and back to him again. "I should believe anything you told me," she says, simply.

"Thank you." Her manner touches him. "Who tried to poison your mind with that unlikely tale?" he asks, regarding her keenly.

"You must not ask me that. I am glad to know it is untrue; I am glad for your sake. It would be so cruel for you. And yet—with a weary gesture—"it may happen any day. It is but putting it off from to-day to to-morrow, as it may be. They tell us all hearts must awake to love once in their lifetime: it is, therefore, but a question of time."

"It will not be worse for me than for you, at that rate," says Clontarf, with affected lightness, yet he is watching her narrowly. How sad she looks! What means that slow warm blush that is creeping upward, dyeing cheek and brow? Is she thinking of last night?—of Bouverie? He hates himself and her as he asks himself this question.

"It is an ugly thought: I am sorry I introduced it," she says, with some emotion. "Let us not discuss it. Tell me; this Mrs. Montague Smythe,—is she a widow?"

"No. Not exactly. Smythe is somewhere,—in Brazil, or Barbadoes, or the Feejee Islands; no one knows exactly where. But he is alive, beyond doubt."

"Why isn't she with him?"

"Traveling knocks her up so," says Clontarf, mildly. "And the sea, to her, means death." He is evidently repeating a speech made to him. "At least, so she says."

"I see: I suppose this kind of thing suits her."

"It may. But I think she makes a mistake all the same. A woman situated as she is—no widow, yet literally without a husband—is a wretched thing."

"One can hardly be sure. She looks very happy. I dare say one might find a woman—*with* a husband—more wretched than she is."

"Meaning yourself?" The words come from him impulsively, almost without his permission,—full of impetuous anger, not unmixed with scorn. A moment later he would have gladly recalled them, but it is then too late:

"He that hath misdeed, I dare well say, may by no way call his word again. Thing that is said is said, and forth it goeth. Though him repent, or be he ne'er so loath."

A deadly silence follows his question, and then—

"That is the last thing you should have said to me," murmurs she, haughtily, all trace of feeling gone from her face. With a superb gesture she sweeps past him, and leaves the room.

CHAPTER XVI

"If thou be poor, thy brother hateth thee. And all thy friends flee from thee also!"

"Brian!" calls Mrs. Desmond, eagerly, hearing his footstep pass her room door. Evidently her voice reaches him, because he stops, and, opening the door, comes in. The room is warm, and full of subtle fragrance that suggests violets, though Christmas is high at hand and those frail favorites are as yet hiding beneath their mother earth.

Monica is sitting before a roaring fire, clad in a charming dressing-gown of white cashmere and lace, that serves her beauty as a frame, looking the very picture of misery.

"What's the matter with my mouse now?" says Brian, in his fond fashion, kneeling at her feet, and taking her little woe-begone face into his hands. Her eyes are full of trouble, and her hair almost on end.

"Yes, I dare say it is untidy," she says, involuntarily lifting her hands to her fair frowny head, and sighing deeply. "I've been thinking so hard that I've rumpled my head against the cushions."

Her lips take a desolate curve, that is as effective with him now as in the old days when he went "a-wooling."

"Poor hair!" he says, stroking it tenderly. Then—"You're cold," he declares, and straightway breaks the lumps of coals into a blazing flame, that goes madly up the chimney. In truth, it is cold; a whole month has gone by since Kit whispered her last farewell to Brabazon, and now snow and ice lie upon the ground.

"It isn't the cold," says Monica. "No? Then tell me what it is. What is this new wrong?"

"This old wrong, you mean. She—she won't give him up."

"She is Kit, I suppose, and 'him' is Brabazon."

"Yes. She won't even look at the other in that way."

"The other being Mannering?"

"If you are going to be stupid, Brian, I hope you will go away," says Mrs. Desmond, severely.

"I couldn't be that, my dear, if I tried," returns her husband, mildly. "And so she won't give him up, eh?—Mannering I mean; no, by the bye, it is Brabazon I mean."

"Any one can see that she won't. She gets a letter from him every morning, and shuts herself up in her room to answer it every afternoon. It is so obstinate of her, so provoking; and yet she is the dearest girl in the world. There is no one like her. It is a terrible thing to see her so bent on throwing herself away, and Mr. Mannering is all that one could desire."

"Not exactly all, perhaps."

"Yes, he is. He is young, kind-hearted, domesticated, and sincere."

"He isn't half the man that Brabazon is."

"He has fifteen thousand pounds a year," says Mrs. Desmond, solemnly. "That ought to make him a very good man indeed. Why, he is even a better match than you were."

"If you expect me to agree with you there," says Mr. Desmond, with dignity, "you will find yourself mistaken. In my opinion, there isn't my match in the United Kingdom."

"Oh, you know what I mean," says Monica, patting his cheek in an absent fashion. "But isn't it a pity she should have preferred Neil?"

"I don't see how she could have helped it. You prefer him, don't you?"

"I?"

"Yes,"—stoutly. "You think him worth a dozen of that dull Englishman, only you won't say so."

"It is true," says Monica, despairingly. "I believe he is worth a dozen of most young men; but one can't live on worth."

"One might live on something worse."

"Yes, and go naked. It is my belief, Brian," says his wife, indignantly, "that in private, behind my back, you encourage Kit in her folly."

"I certainly think Brabazon is the better fellow of the two," says Desmond, slowly, refusing to lower his colors. "His face alone would carry the day with a woman. Now, think of Mannering's voice, and that perpetual cold in his head—"

"It is not perpetual. He is not insured to our climate yet," says Monica, refusing to give in. "Because Neil Brabazon is as handsome as a Greek god is no reason why Mr. Mannering should be placed outside the pale of every woman's fancy. And just show me the person who has not had a cold in the head at one period or another."

"I dare say it may be that," says Desmond, amiably. "But I hate a fellow who can't shoot."

"What has shooting got to do with choosing a husband? That is so like a man! Does one marry such and such a person just because he can bring down more birds to his gun than the rest of his fellows?"

"I should, if I were a girl."

"Well, I shouldn't. I should positively dislike a man who distinguished himself in that way."

"Good gracious! what is to become of me, then?" asks Mr. Desmond, with deep

emotion. "They tell me my eye is unerring."

"Pluck it out," says Monica; whereupon they both break into laughter. "But, really, I wish you would be reasonable about this," she says, presently, sighing again.

"I think I am the most reasonable fellow alive. It is a pity she won't prefer Mannering, but, as she doesn't, I don't see what is to be done. The locking up and bread-and-water diet system has rather gone out of fashion of late years, and no one can be dragged to the altar by an incensed father and her back hair in these degenerate days. So perforce one comes to a stand-still."

"I can see you are not on my side," says Monica, with reproachful melancholy.

"Well, it can't be helped."

"That I should have an opinion of my own can't be helped indeed, and is no reason why I should be looked upon askance and scolded by a cross little wife. After all, was there ever such an ass as that Mannering? He can't shoot, he can't ride, he can't talk. Hang it," says Mr. Desmond, with a burst of comic disgust, "he can't even laugh like another fellow."

"He is an honorable and well-meaning man," says Monica.

"I dare say. It is easy for you to support him, but you don't bear the brunt of the battle as I do. I've suffered far more over all this affair than you have. I'm bored to death by him. Of course I am bound to let him sit in the smoking-room at night, but I swear to you there are many moments when with difficulty I restrain myself from flinging something at him with a view to altering the self-satisfied smirk on his long countenance. And, after all, for what am I enduring this? Does he really mean to propose to Kit or not?"

"Perhaps he doesn't, you know."

"Certainly he does."

"Well, he is hanging fire an uncommon long time."

"How can you speak like that, Brian? You know"—reproachfully—"that he adores her. The least encouragement would do it."

"If he is waiting for that, I am afraid it will never be done."

"He has told me a thousand times that the dearest wish of his heart is to call her his wife. What more can he do?"

"He could tell her that. That would be considerably more to the purpose, to my mind."

"It is very hard of a man to speak when a girl won't listen. But he means to speak. That I know. Surely he has hinted as much as that to you."

"Well, yes, I believe he has," acknowledges Desmond, truthfully. "At least he made some elephantine attempts in that direction. A greater fool at hinting,—indeed," correcting himself with consummate care, "a greater fool at *everything*—it has seldom been my lot to meet."

"You are hard on him, I think. He would make an unexceptionable husband."

"He'll never make one at all, if he doesn't hurry. What does he mean by dangle after her for months? Why doesn't he come to the point, if he wants her, and say what is expected of him? That is what girls like."

"How do you know?" says Mrs. Desmond, very justly incensed by this remark.

"Through you, of course. I came to the point in double-quick time, and you liked it, didn't you?"

"But you are so different from everybody else," says Monica, in a soft tone, bending toward him. Here a few courtesies are interchanged, which need not be gone into; I despise the persons who would seek to pry into the sanctities of married life.

"Then you think he ought to propose to her in form?" asks Monica, presently.

"Well, so do I. A *bona fide* declaration goes a long way with most women. And she certainly doesn't dislike him. That is a great matter. She has indeed been very nice to him ever since Neil's departure: don't you think so?"

"It is always difficult to be sure; but if running away from him, round every corner, the moment she sees him coming, is a sign of it, I am positive she is nicer to him than she is to most people."

"If you mean," says Mrs. Desmond, severely, "that Kit avoids him, I don't believe it."

"I seldom mean anything," says Mr. Desmond, with a wisdom beyond his years. "But I think the sooner this affair is brought

to a definite conclusion the better for all of us: you just tip him the wink, and—"

"You mean—" interrupts Monica, with carefully wrinkled brows of utter perplexity, being scarcely in the humor to appreciate slang.

"Well, you just give him to understand that 'faint heart never won fair lady,' and—trust for the rest," says Brian, airily. It can do no harm, you know, and may wait him to England."

"You are hoping she will refuse him," says his wife, reproachfully.

"I am hoping for nothing, just now, but my dinner. I say,"—looking at his watch,— "we have barely ten minutes to get into our things."

CHAPTER XVII.

"Madame, upon my pains's smart
For with a word ye may me slay or save."
"Have mercy, sweet, or you will do me day!"

Whether Monica gave the desired hint or not, who shall say?

Certainly, neither she nor Mr. Mannering ever confessed to it; but about half-past ten to-night, when they all chance to be together in the billiard-room, Monica, by some special device, carries off The Desmond, her husband, and Dicky Brown, on some impossible voyage of discovery, leaving by this maneuver Kit and Mannering alone. She chooses the moment for her exit when Kit is deep in a game of billiards with Mannering, so that, if even inclined to do so, Kit could not follow her without a seeming rudeness to her adversary. But, to confess the truth, Kit is so wrapped in her game that she fails to notice Monica's absence until it comes to an end.

"Why, where have they all gone?" she asks then, with an accent of surprise.

"I don't know. Mrs. Desmond said something about the gun-room, but I didn't quite follow her."

"Well, do so now," says Kit, gayly, moving toward the door.

"Presently, as you wish it; but first,"—coming nearer to her and looking very solemn,— "first, Miss Beresford, I must beg that you will grant me a few minutes: I have something to say to you."

"To-morrow,—any time to-morrow," says Kit, with nervous generosity. A wild desire to run is overpowering her, with which is conflicting the certainty that her knees are bending under her. Oh, where is Monica? where is Brian? where—where is Dicky Browne?

"Now,—if I may venture to press the point," says Mannering, formally. Poor man! he doesn't mean to be formal; his knees too are giving way, but his dignity demands that an outward show of calm self-possession must be kept up.

"Oh, certainly," says Kit, faintly.

"You have doubtless," begins he, slowly, "for a long time been aware of—"

"I haven't," says Kit, in agony. "I haven't, indeed. I assure you, I haven't been aware of anything!" (Good gracious! why doesn't even the footman come in?)

"I think you must have had some slight foreshadowing of what I am about to say," persists the Englishman, with gentle correction. His tone is stiff—so stiff that, as if by magic, Kit's mood changes, and her fright vanishes in an irrepressible desire for laughter. It is a sort of reaction, and, being so, is difficult to control. How ridiculous he looks, and with that important expression on his stolid face!

"If you are going to tell me a story," she says, with an affectation of gayety, "I hope it will be a funny one."—"That ought to check him," she says to herself. But it doesn't. Mr. Mannering, being wound up, is bound to go.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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