

LOVE THE VICTOR.

CHAPTER VI.—CONTINUED.

"Ah," says Brian, lifting his brows; "then I suppose he means to sleep at his mother's. No doubt she will require his services during the night. Lock all the doors, Byrne, and go to bed. Something tells me Connor will not come home until morning."

"Very well, sir," says the sleepy Byrne. They all go into the library to retire to the Desmond any news of the Clontarf that may chance to interest him. He is wide awake but evidently tired and very glad to see them home in safety.

"Times are so bad," he says, rising and shaking himself like an old lion, "that really I began to conjecture all sorts of misfortunes as I saw the time slipping into the 'wee short hour ayont the twal.'"

"You conjectured wrongly, you see," says Brian, gayly.

"Monica looks pale," says the old man tenderly. "See, I had a fire made expressly for you. Come near to it, my beauty, and let me chafe your hands."

Monica, going up to him, kisses him fondly, with tears in her eyes.

They are all now laughing and talking to gether so light-heartedly that the fact of Kit's not being in the room goes on for a while unnoticed—by all, that is, except Mr. Mannering, who, keeping apart from the others, stands glowering at the door. He is a man of many thousands, and cannot bring himself yet to believe that he is thrown over by a mere little chit of a girl for the sake of a man utterly worthless. Some words bear several meanings. Worthless men in Mr. Mannering's dictionary mean men without money; and of such is Neil Brabazon. That a girl should dream of disposing of herself contrary to the wishes of her best friends—in fact, of those who had, or at least ought to have, control over her—would be a thing unheard of in any well regulated family. In time, of course, Kit will learn to listen to reason and—him. His absurd and groundless jealousy of Brabazon is a mere passing weakness that must be checked. Thus pines the worthy Mannering.

But, in the meantime, where is she? This question exercises the good man's brain to a considerable extent. He declines to believe she is still in the hall with Neil Brabazon, though that young man is also conspicuous by his absence. "Doubtless," says Mr. Mannering to himself, with an attempt at complacency that sits but uneasily upon him, "she has gone upstairs to take off her hat."

But she hasn't. Just at this moment she is standing in the empty hall, with Brabazon's arm around her. Something has lain heavily upon her mind all the way home, that she feels now must be got off it before she goes to bed, or sleep will refuse to visit her eyelids. She had cast a pathetic little glance at her lover, as they all went toward the library, a while since, that had made him execute several deep maneuvers, the result of which may be seen in the fact that they two were standing out here now, together, and—alone?

"What is it, darling?" he asks, anxiously.

"Oh, I can't get it off my mind," says Kit; "the thought of it frightens me even more than the revolver."

"But what, my own?" asks Neil, growing really concerned.

"Don't you know? Can't you guess?" reproachfully. "I don't believe I shall ever get over the shame of it."

"On earth, what has happened?" asks Mr. Brabazon, fairly distraught with anxiety.

"That man! He must have—have seen us!"

"Seen what? What man?"

"I think, Neil," says Miss Beresford, with eyes full of glistening tears, "you might show a little sympathy, even if you can't feel it."

"My darling girl, I am going out of my senses with sympathy, only I don't know where to bestow it," exclaims the unfortunate Neil, in despair. "Try to explain it to me. If I'm stupid it isn't my fault, indeed. What man?—saw what?"

"The revolver man; he was standing on the bank all that time! He must"—covering her face with her hands—"have seen us kissing each other! And he will be sure to

tell people of it! And—oh, dear! oh, dear!"

"He won't; he daren't," says Neil, who, having recovered from his suspense, is now struggling with a wild and (if it comes off) a most fatal desire for laughter. "And, even if he does speak of it, what matter? People know us too well to believe such a vile scandal of us. Like Caesar's wife, we are above suspicion."

"I'm afraid people might believe it," says Kit, timidly.

"Well, let them. What harm is there in a kiss?" says Mr. Brabazon, valiantly.

"Why, indeed, none, if one comes to think of it," says Kit, growing bolder too, though she still looks uncertain. "It is a thing done every day."

"I hope you'll remember that to-morrow," says Neil, laughing softly. "I think it should be done every evening too. Don't you?"

She evidently does. "And promise me," whispers Neil, tenderly, "that you won't worry your dear little head—it is mine now, remember, and I won't have it worried—about such an absurd trifle as that, any more. You will forget it."

"I'll try to," says Kit, obediently.

"There is, however," as Cockton says, "some mysterious virtue in a kiss, after all," because through the livelong night Kit's gentle dreams are haunted by the memory of her lover's first caress.

CHAPTER VII.

"And well I wot, as ye go by the way,
Ye shapen you to talken and to play."

"Another day is added to the mass of buried ages;" another morning dawns; a most fair and sweet "morrowing"—true child of sunny yesterday.

Again a sultry sweetness as of summer fills the air; again the sun comes forth in all his glory. The roses bloom afresh, and that "Epicurean of June," the drowsy bee, forgetting the month of its birth, floats thoughtlessly as ever through the balmy air.

"Seeing only what is fair,
Shining only what is sweet,
Yellow-breasted philosopher"

About two o'clock all the people from Kilmalooda drop into Cooles and luncheon, and, when that general meal is at an end, rise and sally forth again, their forces strengthened by the addition of the members of the household wherein they find themselves, to visit en masse Monica's aunts, the two old ladies of Moyne House, Miss Priscilla and Miss Penelope Blake.

"They'll be frightened, I shouldn't wonder," says Dicky Browne. "A visit from a private individual is one thing; a visit from a regiment another."

"What are the Misses Blake like?" asks Vera, in her soft voice. She is dressed in white again to-day, but her sash is different. It is of a deep claret color, and in her large white hat is an immense bunch of carnations of the same hue. Her *Suede* gloves are claret color too, and reach far above her elbows. At present Mr. Burke is engaged in the arduous task of buttoning them. Judging by the expressions of his face, one might safely conclude that "arduous tasks" of this sort are to him an ir-speakable joy.

"Tell me about them," says Vera, looking calmly round her. "Doris knows them, and so does Mr. Browne," glancing at that gentleman, who is lost in admiration of her youthful charms.

"Dicky to you," he says tenderly, forgetful, or purposely disregarding, of the fact that he is "Dicky" to all his world.

"Dicky, then," says Miss Costello, lightly; she looks at him, and bursts out laughing. "I wonder if you know how funny you are," she says, with her pretty red lips parted and her blue eyes gleaming; "does he know, Donat?" She is already great friends with her brother-in-law.

"Do you, Dicky?" asks Lord Clontarf.

"Well, I have always felt I was rather an acquisition to society than otherwise," says Mr. Browne, modestly.

"Monica, won't you bring Moses?" asks Kit, hesitating on the hall door steps. She is alluding to her nephew, the heir of the house of Desmond, whose real name is

George; but Kit has given him a second christening, by which he is known as Moses, in consideration of his cradle being made of some things she insists are bulrushes, and because, as he never cries, he must be meek.

"Oh, no," says Monica.

"What a pity he can't come!" says Vera, who had been making a very pretty picture of herself with the child just after luncheon.

"I'll carry him to Moyne for you, if you can't get on without him," says Dicky, gallantly.

"May he, Mrs. Desmond?" asks the pretty new-comer, turning her large blue eyes entreatingly upon Monica.

"Dicky," says Monica, in horror at the very thought; "why, I don't believe he could carry a cat in safety." As she says this, however, she is conscious of feeling regret at being obliged to refuse the pleading of those wonderful blue eyes. It seems to her as though she were making one baby happy at the expense of another. "She is certainly very young," says Monica to herself; "much younger than Kit. I suppose she hardly knows what a lover means yet. How I wish"—with a sigh—"Kit didn't!"

Then aloud to Vera, "You shall have baby when you come back here by and by, all to yourself, for half an hour," she says, gently; "but he is asleep now."

"Ah! thank you," says Vera, with a pretty show of subduing herself gracefully to the decrees of fate.

The sun has grown almost fierce by this time; armed with huge white umbrellas, they go down the road to Moyne, falling into such order as fancy dictates to them.

Though the afternoon is fair as early summer, and warm almost to a fault, there is still a suspicion of coming dissolution on all around. These last three or four radiant days are only, as it were, the change before death. The leaves are all turning into warmer shades,—reds, crimsons, and russets,—making gay the shadows of the woods on either hand. From branch to branch the birds fly lightly,—

"With wings that seem as they'd soul within them. They beat their owners with such sweet enchantment—
Their rapturous trilling fills the air with softest melody."

"Who can speak of summer as gone," says Kit, dreamily, "with such music sounding in our ears?" She is walking by Neil Brabazon's side in a state of deep content, to Monica's everlasting discomfiture, who cannot keep from sighing over Mr. Mannering's satisfactory thousands.

"Kit," she says, suddenly, looking across the road at her refractory sister, "your companion will be ruined if you persist in walking in the full glare of the sun. Come here, into the shade."

Mr. Mannering is in the shade,—indeed, "very much in the shade," as Dicky Browne remarks, in a low but feeling tone.

"I would," says Kit, nicely, "but I am afraid on that side of the road the briars would tear my umbrella."

"They don't tear mine," says Monica, meaningly.

"Yours is a little smaller than mine, I think," returns Kit, sweetly.

"Larger, if anything, I fancy," says Monica, with the utmost mildness. "I am really afraid, dearest, that if you stay so long in the sun you will get one of your horrid headaches."

"I'll come over to you if you like," says Kit, in a tone of the deepest resignation; "but, if I do, I know I shall get my tooth-ache back again. Heat is the only cure I know for it."

Toothache versus headache! Need it be said?—Kit carries the day, and Monica wisely refrains from further persuasion.

"Oh! that if!" says Mr. Browne, regarding Miss Beresford with intense admiration. "Truly Shakespeare was a great man when he discovered there was 'much virtue in it.'"

"Mrs. Desmond is evidently not on our side," says Brabazon, regretfully, to Kit, coloring a little.

"Monica is mercenary," says Kit, disdainfully, "that is, mercenary for me. If she were in my place now, just catch her marrying a Mr. Mannering! Look at him now! Do look at his nose against the sky!"

It is certainly a goodly nose, so far as length goes.

"I am afraid she won't hear of it," says Mr. Brabazon, not even consoled by this unkind criticism.

"I'm afraid she will," says Miss Beresford; "and a great deal of it too. Why should I not speak? It is most absurd the

way she is going on. She says it is *sins* of me to wilfully refuse a good offer, because I have no fortune of my own; yet I am positive she would have married Brian had he been even poorer than you." Thus she looks at him reflectively. "Why can she aren't you rich?" she says, reproachfully.

"Why, indeed? It is all the fault of that wretched old uncle of mine! What can a man want to get married for at seventy-five? He ought to be preparing for heaven then! Who could have thought of such a thing?"

CHAPTER VII.—CONTINUED.

"No one, I hope,—sovereignly; 'it's too disgraceful a thought to enter into the mind of any respectable person. To tell the world you were his heir for twenty years, and then to get married! There ought to be a law to forbid such things.'"

"And to a girl of nineteen, too!" says Brabazon, piling up the agony. "Why,"—with a sort of grim mirth,—"my aunt is younger than me by six years."

"Bad as Sir Michael has proved himself, she must be far worse," says Kit.

"She—she's very pretty," says Mr. Brabazon, reluctantly.

"That only makes her more contemptible in my eyes. She must have a most unenviable mind."

"She seems a good-natured little thing"—with a stern regard for truth.

"If you mean to tell me, Neil," exclaims Miss Beresford, turning upon him indignantly, "that a woman who could deliberately sell herself for money is an angel, both in face and mind, of course there is nothing more to be said."

"Perhaps she was persuaded into it by her people," says Neil, with a last effort at maintaining his cause.

"Oh, very well," says his beloved, with awful calm; "when I am persuaded by my people into marrying Mr. Mannering, I hope you will call me an angel too! That's all!"

"Darling, how can you say such dreadful things to me!" says Brabazon, in a voice so dejected that her heart smites her.

"Then you mustn't call other people angels," she says, lowering her eyes.

"I don't think I did," meekly.

"Well, it was all the same," says Kit, after which peace is restored.

Vera, who is a little in advance of them, is conversing merrily with Gerald Burke, dropping a word every now and then to Doris, who is singularly silent, even for her, and responds to Brian's or Dicky Browne's sallies with only an occasional meagre smile. She is very pale, and the dark rings round her eyes are suggestive of either tears or sleeplessness last night.

"You don't look well," says Monica, gently. "Tired?"

"No."

"She was crying, I think," says Vera, in her clear sweet voice, glancing at her over her shoulder.

Lady Clontarf's pale cheeks grow crimson.

"No, Vera, I was not," she says, very gently, but with decision. Only a clever student of character would have noticed the touch of agonized fear that underlies her tone. Involuntarily as she says this she glances at Clontarf, to find that he is attentively regarding her, with a curious smile. In her present mood, this smile maddens her: for an instant her great eyes blaze with suppressed anger. Then the laughing look returns to them, and she turns contemptuously away.

"But indeed I think, Dicky—" begins Vera.

"Think of something more interesting than me," interrupts her sister, with soft hate. "I could not sleep,"—turning to Monica,—"I often can't. It is a common trick of mine to lie sometimes for half the night with my eyes open."

"A very foolish trick," says Clontarf, unsympathetically, who, without seeming to pay any attention to her words, is evidently aware of everything she says.

For the second time she looks at him steadily from under her heavily-fringed lids, but again says nothing.

"What a pretty field!" says Vera at this moment, pointing at one on her left hand.

"I should like to run across it."

"I'll take you," says Mr. Burke, with remarkable readiness. By this time it has become apparent to everybody that Mr. Burke has neither eyes, nor ears, nor wit for any one but the little pretty childlike "thing of beauty" beside him.

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