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Beautiful Cynthia;

Victory After Many Defeats.

CHAPTER XIV.
HER LADYSHIP'S RAGE.

Cynthia had scarcely dried her eyes before the Griffin came into the room. She looked round with an affectionate surprise.

"Lord Northam gone?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Cynthia, and there was something in her tone which caused the old lady to turn on her sharply.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"You seem upset about something. Has Lord Northam been saying anything to you?"

Cynthia had gone to the window to escape the Griffin's hawk-like eyes. There had been something in the interview with Northam, something unselfish and chivalrous on his part, which had touched Cynthia's heart, and she vaguely resented the intrusion of the old worldling.

"Something has happened. I can see by your manner, my dear child," said Lady Gwen invitingly. "Tell your old Aunt; do not keep me in suspense, my dear Cynthia. Or shall I guess?" she went on, as Cynthia still kept her face averted. "Lord Northam has proposed to you."

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trained and drilled out of Cynthia, and the spirit of independence which she had inherited from her father unconsciously asserted itself.

The grin died away from Lady Gwen's face; it grew hard and strained; her eyes narrowed until they became like steel.

"Let us be quite calm," she said, though the long claws which grasped her stick shook and her lips twitched. "You wish me to understand that you have actually refused Lord Northam? Will you permit me to ask you why you have done so foolish, so wicked a thing? I am really curious to know, and I think I have a right to know."

"Yes," said Cynthia, in a low voice. "Of course, I should tell you. Do not be angry with me, Aunt Gwen. I cannot help it. I do not love Lord Northam." The color rose to her face, and she looked away from the hard eyes glaring at her.

"You do not love Lord Northam," repeated Lady Gwen, with a short laugh which was like a bark. "And pray, who said you did? Who expected you to do so? You talk like a congenial idiot. Instead of a girl who has been sensibly brought up. You little fool, do you think that the fact of your loving him or not loving him has anything to do with it?"

"Aunt Gwen!" murmured Cynthia shakingly.

"Don't 'Aunt Gwen' me!" snarled the Griffin, the fury which she had been trying to keep in hand gradually getting the better of her. "And don't talk such utter rot! You've had the best offer of the season; you've only to stretch out your hand to take what all the other girls are mad to get; and you dare to tell me that you have refused the future Duke of Torbridge because you 'don't love him!' Give me leave to tell you that you ought to be ashamed of yourself for talking so—so indecently. And why can't you love him, as you call it? He's a gentleman as well as a nobleman—and that's not too common, my girl—and he's a decent and respectable young man—and that's not too common. Let me remind you also, that he's far too good for you. I suppose," she went on coarsely and with a sneer—for there is not very much difference between Lord Lady Westlake and the Marquis of Bethnal Green, when they are both in a fury—"you have been so pampered while you have been here, that you have forgotten what you were when I came across you and picked you out of the mud of a village."

She paused for breath, and at that moment the door opened and the footman announced Mr. Percy Standish. Percy, beautifully dressed as usual,

"Yes," admitted Cynthia, in a low voice, shrinking and blushing.

Lady Westlake struck the floor with her ebony stick; it was like the triumphant tap of a drum.

"My dear girl!" she exclaimed, her features stretched with so wide and self-satisfied a smile that the enamel, the rouge, and the powder were cracked in creases. "I knew he would; I could see he was epris with you. Trust these old eyes! My dear Cynthia, I congratulate you! He is the best match of the season, and you will be the Duchess of Torbridge. You have behaved very well, Cynthia, very well indeed; that quiet mousey way of yours has proved most effective. Men do not like to be run after, and Northam has been hunted ever since he left Eton. You might have confided in your loving old aunt—but I don't blame you, my child; after all, it is best to be discreet and hold one's tongue, and it is never wise to holla until one has secured one's fox. Come and kiss me, my dear. I am very proud of you. Now, see how wise it was of that eccentric father of yours to hand you over to me! As I told him, you would have married the village carpenter, or, worse, the local curate. Now—" She drew herself up and laughed, her small eyes glittering with triumph.

Her aunt had spoken so rapidly that Cynthia, overwhelmed, had had no opportunity of interrupting her; but at this point she turned with a gesture of dismay, her face pale, her brows knit.

"But—but I have refused Lord Northam," she faltered.

The Griffin moved as if she had been struck across the face, which went white under its mass of paint; she was incapable of speech for a moment or two, and glared at Cynthia, her lips writhing. At last she exclaimed shrilly:

"What do you say? You have refused Lord Northam! You can't know what you are saying; you must be mad!"

Cynthia shook her head.

"Come, come!" said Lady Westlake, with a ghastly grin, and in the tone of one who is compelled to humor an idiot. "You don't know what you are talking about my dear. Of course, you are a little taken aback, overwhelmed. Only natural, only natural! Any girl would be. What you mean is that you haven't given Lord Northam a decided answer; that he is coming again, to-morrow, perhaps this evening?"

"No," said Cynthia, "he will not come again; I mean, ask me again. He quite understands that I cannot marry him." She was still pale, but there was a touch of dignity, a maidenly reserve in her voice and her manner. The old nature had not been

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with his usual smile, came in softly and bowed to them. Then he stopped short and looked from one to the other with a little air of deprecation.

"I am afraid I am intruding," he murmured.

Lady Westlake turned upon him, as if she were glad of a second person upon whom she could vent her rage.

"Who told you that I was at home, sir?" she snarled. "You walk in as if the house belonged to you; it belongs to me—and to no one else," she added significantly.

"A thousand pardons, my dear aunt," he said penitently. "It was my fault; do not blame James—I will go at once."

"No!" snapped her ladyship sharply. "You can stay, now you are here. You are always pleased to see people quarrelling; you can enjoy yourself this afternoon. This girl, Cynthia, and I are having a row," she went on grimly; "a serious row for her, let me tell her—"

"I will go," murmured Cynthia, moving toward the door; but Lady Westlake held up her gnarled hand.

"Stop where you are!" she said sharply. "You think I am unreasonable in calling you a fool. Wait and hear what Percy thinks of it. He is a man of the world and a sensible one." She turned to Percy, her head bobbing furiously. "Cynthia—you'll scarcely believe it—has refused Lord Northam!"

Percy's head was slightly bent, his lids were lowered deprecatingly. Neither the raging woman nor the agitated girl could see the gleam of satisfaction which for one instant shone in his pale eyes. He raised his lids and looked from one to the other, with a gentle, appealing glance.

"I—I am surprised," he said, in a low voice. "I thought—" he paused, as if confused.

Lady Gwen sprang at him, so to speak. "You thought she had been making for him?" she said. "So did I. Of course, she encouraged him. He wouldn't have spoken if she hadn't done so; he's too shy. Oh, yes, she has encouraged him; and now, for some fool's reason, she throws him over. Don't you think she is mad, Percy?"

Percy put up his white hands with a suggestion of reproach.

"Are you not a little hard upon Cynthia, dear aunt?" he murmured. "She may have some reason, good reason—"

Lady Gwen glared at him. "Don't you talk like a fool, please!" she adjured him wrathfully. "What reason can there be? Oh, I forgot," with a sneer, "she has just been good enough to inform me that she doesn't love him!"

Cynthia winced at the diabolical mockery in the hard, harsh voice. Percy nodded his head once or twice.

"Surely that is a reason, dear aunt—" he began, in a tone which he knew would act as fuel to the fire of the Griffin's rage.

She glared from one to the other. "So you abet her!" she gasped hoarsely, as if she were astounded by his temerity.

"Dear aunt!" he murmured softly; "surely love must count, especially with a girl so young, so innocent, so unworried, as Cynthia!"

"So rubbish and fiddlesticks!" retorted her ladyship, almost stuttering. "Forgive me," he said gently, "but may I suggest," he glanced at Cynthia apologetically, "there may be someone else. I only suggest."

"Someone else!" echoed the Griffin, as if she were almost incapable of speech. "Rubbish! How could there be, when Lord Northam comes forward?"

(To be Continued.)

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