

LOVE THE VICTOR.

CHAPTER II.—CONTINUED.

The girl sitting next her—her sister, Kit Beresford—is a slender maiden of about seventeen. She is, according to Dicky Browne, "very much Mrs. Desmond, only more so." She is indeed more pronounced, and is possessed of a sprightliness one would look for in vain in her gentler sister; yet there is always something about her that suggests the milder Monica. Just now there is a touch of disappointment about her pretty face, and an air of weariness indescribable as she listens to the platitudes poured into her unwilling ears by Mr. Mantering.

As for the latter, he is scarcely worth a word; yet I suppose I had better say at once that he is a nuisance, a bore, and a worry. As you are likely, however, to meet him whenever you meet Kit Beresford, this explanation is necessary. He is an amateur artist (you have all, no doubt, met that awful thing, and a groveler at the feet of Kit, who treats him with a fine disdain that it does one's heart good to see. Just at this moment (having been engaged in a warlike contest with him, in which she has come off a glorious victor), she is leaning back in her seat, staring at the stage. The curtain has again risen.

"Just look at that man's legs," she says, suddenly.

This extraordinary remark, having had no vaster of any sort, so surprises Mr. Mantering that it reduces him to imbecility.

"Eh?" he says, vaguely.

"His legs!" repeats Miss Beresford, sturdily, and as though she scorns to explain.

"Whose legs?" asks he. "I don't see."

"Do you know it has often occurred to me that you ought to wear spectacles, you see so few things?" says Miss Beresford, mildly. She has been slowly turning her head in his direction while speaking, but now, having caught a full view of his face, her tone changes. "Good gracious!" she says, sharply, "where are you looking? At the stalls? Do you suppose I come to look at people I can see any night I like at a ball? Look at the boards, and you will see the legs I speak of." She nods her head lightly in the direction of a helplessly lanky man, clad as a peasant.

"Well, I don't see very much in his legs," he says, rather nettled by her tone.

"That's just it," returns she, with a low rippling laugh. "There's nothing in them. For once"—with a swift glance at him, that restores his self-love—"we find a point on which we can agree."

So elated by her smiles as to grow rash, he stoops forward and says, tenderly,—

"There is another point on which if we could only agree, I should be the hap—"

"Don't!" says Mrs. Beresford, so severely that he shuts up as if with a spring. "I hate 'other points'!"

This crushes him; but in a few minutes he is so far recovered as to be able to say, gloomily,—

"If you made me a point, I could understand you."

"I couldn't do that," says Kit, somewhat wearily. She has been looking at the door very frequently during the past half-hour, and now the faintest shadow of an appointment is curving her pretty lip.

"Why?" demands he, somewhat angrily.

"You aren't sharp enough," returns she with a little irrepressible laugh, in spite of her depression.

"Oh, I dare say I'm a fool in your eyes," says Mantering, in a miserable sort of way. He is indeed so honestly unhappy that she relents.

"No, no," she says, sweetly, almost caressingly. "In my eyes you are—yes. Do you know?" with a sudden startling change of tone, "I can't bear those nasty caustic people who think themselves clever that one meets at times—can you? They say such unpleasant things to one, and mean them, too!"

"Still, I don't know," says Mr. Mantering, despondently. "You are so bright yourself that there are many things you must hate—about certain people, who—"

"And many things I must love, too," interrupts Kit, who, it must be confessed, is fast *seu coquette*. "For instance—"

Exactly at this moment the door of their

box is opened, and Mr. Desmond enters, accompanied by a young man, about three years younger than himself,—that is twenty-five, or so.

He is a tall young man, of a very cheerful countenance and aristocratic bearing. Though by no means *pose* as a satisfactory model for the love-sick swain, there is still something about the new-comer that declares him Cupid's prey and a very earnest servant of the Court of Love.

There is in his eyes an expression at once dreamy, restless, yet ecstatic, that betrays him. These same dark eyes search hurriedly the box until they come to Kit, and there find rest. So great a gladness fills them as they fall on her that all the world might know that the slender maiden who is returning his glance in kind is "his life's lady, and his sovereign."

The marquis, feeling the box to be overcrowded, signs to Clontarf and Dicky Browne to make their adieux. Going up himself to Miss Costello, he bends over her:

"May I hope," he says, with his most courteous smile, "that if I call on you to-morrow I shall have a chance of seeing you?"

"I shall be at home to-morrow until five o'clock," says Doris, calmly.

"Ah! now I have something to which to look forward," says the marquis, gallantly. "May I bring my son with me? he is—with a presumably happy forgetfulness of all previous arrangements—"most desirous of turning this fortunate acquaintance with you into a lasting friendship."

"Is he?" Since when? asks the girl, coldly, yet so softly and with so pretty a smile as takes the sting from her words. Still, though hidden, it is there, and Lord Dundeady is too clever a student of human nature to miss it.

"Since that moment when first he saw you from the opposite box," he says, readily, unmoved. "Then I may bring him?"

"He can come," says Miss Costello, briefly, though still with wonderful sweetness.

Clontarf, who has heard all, shrugs his shoulders slightly. Then he, too, bends over her hand, and with a last lingering glance at her emotionless features, bows himself out of the box.

Presently the piece comes to an end, and Mrs. Desmond's party make their way to their carriages. As Kit has elected to go home with Miss Costello, the Desmonds find themselves presently rolling swiftly along beneath the quiet stars *tele-a-tele*.

"What a tremendous time it seems now, Brian, since we were married!" says Mrs. Desmond, after a lengthened silence.

"To me," says Mr. Desmond, with a reproachful air, "it seems but yesterday. What a terribly dull time you must have put in, my poor child, during these past two years to make you speak in that feeling tone! With what patience and silent endurance you have been dragging out your miserable existence!"

"Oh, nonsense!" says Mrs. Desmond. Another profound silence; then—

"Brian?"

"If you are going to make a second unkind remark, I give you warning I shall cry," says Brian.

"Well, I won't. I was only going to say that I do think Doris Costello is the prettiest girl I know."

"She isn't the prettiest girl I know," says Brian, in a tone so satisfactory that Mrs. Desmond tucks herself evermore comfortably into his embrace and rubs her soft cheek against his.

"I won't have you looking up pretty girls," she says, whereupon he very properly tells her she is a hypocrite.

"I don't think Miss Costello is the prettiest girl Brabazon knows, either," says Mr. Desmond, with a little laugh, after a minute or two. Brabazon is the name of the tall young man whose dark eyes had told their tale to Kit an hour ago.

"It doesn't matter what Mr. Brabazon thinks," says Monica, in an appallingly stiff tone, for her.

"Eh? Why, I thought you quite liked him," says her husband. "I've asked him to Cork for the partridge-shooting."

"Oh? I hope not, dearest," says Monica, sitting quite upright, and regarding him with a distracted countenance.

"I'm afraid I have indeed, old mouse," says Brian, whose stock of names kept for his wife's sole use is of the rarest and most *recherche* kind. "And why not? He's the straightest shot in the country, and a fellow of good family, and—er—that—"

"And hasn't a farthing!" says Mrs. Desmond in despair.

"That's absurd. He must have a good many farthings. He goes everywhere, and his tailor is evidently all right, though Kit says it's his figure. I didn't think you would be the one to turn your back on a fellow just because his uncle had chosen to marry at seventy-five and leave him—well, considerably out of it."

"I'm not turning my back on any one," she says indignantly. "And as for poor young men, why, I actually prefer them. They are always ever so much nicer."

"Then why don't you prefer Brabazon? He's an old friend of mine, and—"

"Is in love with Kit," with a sigh that amounts to the dignity of a groan.

"Not at all; you take my word for it now: he just admires her a little, but it will blow over, and nothing will come of it. Don't be worrying your little brains—your very little brains—about him."

"This much has already come of it," says Mrs. Desmond, with the calmness of despair; "he proposed to her yesterday."

"No! you don't say so!" says Brian, as completely taken aback as even she can desire. "I assure you I never saw a bit of it."

"Oh, dear blind bat! when did you ever see anything?" says his wife. "But that is not all; there is still worse to come."

"I think I should prefer having it all together," says her husband, mildly, "but go on."

"Kit is in love with him!"

"But that's not worse," said the obtuse Brian. "It's the most natural thing that could happen. He is just the sort of fellow that women, as a rule, do fall in love with."

"Well, I shouldn't," says Mrs. Desmond, severely.

"Well, my dear, I devoutly hope not," returns her husband.

At this moment the carriage draws up at their hall door.

CHAPTER III.

"Thy birth and hers they be no thing egal."

There is a universal and friendly (if rather grasping) "uncle" of whom much is known; of Miss Costello's "aunt" (though she is almost as formidable a relative) as yet little is known. This seems hard on Miss Costello's aunt. I haste to correct the injustice.

Late in life a Mr. Michael Costello, brother to my heroine's father, took to wife a certain spinster about whose age at all events there wasn't the smallest uncertainty. He did not, naturally, long survive the union.

When he "was dead, and laid in the grave," and when his brother—the father of Doris—had also finally retired from business and entered that narrow house out of which not all his riches could avail to rescue him, Michael's wife declared her intention of looking up her nieces, "the Costello girls," as she called them.

"Looking up" meant bringing herself, her parrot, her lapdog, and her maid, to Fitzwilliam Square (where they then lived in Dublin), and declared to them her fixed intention of seeing to their interests and residing in their house for the future. There was no gainsaying her word. It was law. From that luckless hour until now, she had clung to them, and had constituted herself their guardian and their scourge.

Fortunately, there were but two girls, or she might have been even less bearable. Vera, the youngest, she had sent forthwith to an extremely select establishment in Switzerland, where only six young ladies were admitted, and where they were all treated as members of the family. They were, too, allowed "a certain freedom."

"So much the better," said Mrs. Costello when reading the advertisement. "I hate a misanthropic girl, or a prig; they never go off successfully."

So Vera was sent to Switzerland, and found the advertisement (unlike most others) strictly within the lines of truth. The freedom was decidedly "certain," and, if being treated as a member of the family meant doing just as you liked, nothing could have been more honest and above-board.

That Doris should marry early, and not-

ing less than a baronet, with her face and money, was her aunt's next decision. A baronet was her highest hope for the beautiful but low-born girl; therefore her joy (though secret) was unbounded when Lord Clontarf was put forward by his father as a possible suitor for her niece.

Doris, in her cold fashion, when the matter was laid before her, had consented to think of it. Indeed, the idea propounded so exactly jumped with her own inclinations that she saw small cause to combat it. An innate sense of breeding, and a desire for the beautiful, born with her, had raised her far above the class from which she had sprung; instinctively she hated and shrunk from her low surroundings; and, dwelling in a world of thought into which no one might enter, she daily taught herself that the first great good to be attained was an established place in society, and that love when compared with this was worthless, or at least a minor good.

To sell herself, therefore, to the highest bidder (when rank was in the field) was her earnest, if unexpressed, determination ever since she woke to a knowledge of the vulgarity of her associates and the power of money. Her father would not ignore those who had befriended him in the days of his struggling with blind fortune, but she was in those early days had refused to know or mix with them; so that, virtually, she lived a life of almost total seclusion until old Costello's death. Then came the aunt, Mrs. Costello, and several years of travel.

The clock had just chimed four: a frivolous cuckoo, that in the vanity of its heart has taken to pigments has darted from some mysterious unknown and clapped four times its carmined wings. Miss Costello, laying down her crewel-work, sighs quickly, involuntarily; whereupon her aunt lays down her work and regards her closely.

"You remind me of that idiotic person who used to sit in a damp house and wish that she was dead," she says, sharply. "You do the love-sick maiden to perfection; it is a pity you can't feel it. Are you so eager for a coronet that you must needs look at the clock twenty times a minute and sigh so loud that all the world might hear?"

"Did I sigh?" says Doris.

"Yes, like a furnace. He'll come fast enough without your sighs, if he wants your money, and he'll stay away if he doesn't. Your *deux yeux* have not the attraction for him that your guineas have. Like father like son; and that old man's mind is filled with a desire for riches, our riches. He'll come, I suppose,—the son, I mean,—and now that you have gained your old through me, I dare say you will want to get rid of me."

Her voice is sharp and exasperating, her expression sour in the extreme; but there is nothing about her that denotes ill-breeding, either in face or figure. She is spare, lean, meager, it is true; her shoulders stick out obtrusively, her bones seem to rattle as she moves, but her features are fine and regular, she might be even termed a pretty old woman did but a different soul dwell within her. Her eyes are dark and piercing as a hawk's, her nose is like a beak, her complexion yellow as a kite's claw; altogether, she painfully resembles a superannuated bird of prey.

"You know it is my desire that you should always live with me," says Doris, calmly.

"Oh, well, that's from the teeth out, I dare say. There is small love lost upon my by you. However," with an unreluctant sniff, "I am thankful to say I need be dependent upon nobody. Michael did me much good."

This is indeed true. Michael (thus she always alludes to her defunct husband) not as "my poor husband," as others might but sternly, uncompromisingly, by his Christian name, as though he were still in the flesh and the next room, Michael, having prospered in worldly matters only degrees less than his brother, had left her a residuary legatee to his large fortune.

"I dare say, no," she goes on, "the old man Dundeady thinks he will be able to hunt me when he makes you 'my lady.' I am sure such an idea never entered his head."

"It would be just like him, then."

"Why? He strikes me as being a particularly gentlemanly old man."

"An old scarecrow; with mincing manners and a fourteenth-century smile. He ought to wear a periwig, and a patch here and there; but he is so patched up already there wouldn't be room for another."

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