

The Interpreter.

CHAPTER XV.

(CONTINUED.)

The sun is streaming into a beautiful little breakfast room opening on a conservatory with flowers, and a fountain of cold fish, and all that a conservatory should have. The room itself is richly papered and ornamented, perhaps a little too profusely, with ivory and gilding. Two or three exquisite landscapes in water-colors adorn the walls; and rose-colored hangings shed a soft, warm light over the furniture and the inmates. The former is of a light and tasteful description—low, soft-cushioned fauteuils, thin cane chairs, bright colored ottomans footstools, Bohemian glass vases filled with flowers—everything gay, vivid, and luxurious; a good fire burning cheerfully on the hearth, and a breakfast-table, with its snowy cloth and bright silver belongings, give an air of homely comfort to the scene. The latter consist of four persons, who have met together at the morning meal every day now for several weeks. Constance Beverley sits at the head of the table making tea; Ropsley and Sir Harry, dressed in wondrous shooting apparel, are busily engaged with their breakfasts; and Mrs. Minum is relating to the world in general her sufferings from rheumatism and neuralgia, to which touching narrative nobody seems to think it necessary to pay much attention. Ropsley breaks in abruptly by asking Miss Beverley for another cup of tea. He treats her with studied politeness, but never takes his cold grey eye off her countenance. The girl feels that he is watching her, and it makes her shy and uncomfortable.

'Any news, Ropsley?' says Sir Harry, observing the pile of letters at his friend's elbow; 'no officials, I hope, to send you back to London.'

'None as yet, thank Heaven, Sir Harry,' replies his friend; 'and not much in the papers. We shall have war, I think.'

'Oh, don't say so, Mr. Ropsley,' observes Constance, with an anxious look. 'I trust we shall never see anything so horrid again.'

Miss Minum remarks that 'occasional wars are beneficial, nay, necessary for the welfare of the human race,' illustrating her position by the familiar metaphor of thunderstorms. &c.; but Ropsley, who has quite the upper-hand of Miss Minum, breaks in upon her ruthlessly, as he observes, 'The funds gone down a fraction, Sir Harry, I see. I think we ought to sell. By the bye, I've a capital letter from De Rohan, at Paris. You would like to hear what he is about, Miss Beverley, I am very sure.'

Constance winced and colored. It was Ropsley's game to assert a sort of matter-of-course tendresse on her part for my Hungarian friend, which he insisted on so gradually, but yet so successfully, as to give him the power of making her uneasy at the mention of De Rohan's name. He wished to establish an influence over her, and this was the only manner in which he could do so; but Ropsley was a man who only asked to insert the point of the wedge, he could trust himself to do the rest. Yet, with all his knowledge of human nature he made this one great mistake, he judged of women by the other half of mankind; so he looked pointedly at Constance as he added, 'I'll read you what he says, or, perhaps, Miss Beverley, you would like to see his letter?'

He had now driven her a little too far, and she turned round upon him.

'Really, Mr. Ropsley, I don't wish to interfere with your correspondence. I hate to read other people's letters; and Count De Rohan has become such a stranger now that I have almost forgotten him.'

She was angry with herself immediately she had spoken. It seemed so like the remark of a person who was piqued. Ropsley would be more than ever convinced now that she cared for him. Sir Harry, too, looked up from his plate, apparently astonished at his daughter's unusual vehemence. The girl bit her lips, and wished she had held her tongue. Ropsley saw he had marked up another point in the game.

'Very true,' said he, with his quiet, well-red smile, 'old playfellows and old school-fellows cannot be expected to last all one's life.

know perfectly well. He always was eccentric as a boy—he is more so than ever, I think, now, and I only meant that I feared any sudden shock or violent affliction might upset his nervous system, and, in short—may I ask you for a little more cream?—end in total derangement. 'The fact is,' he added, *solito voce*, to Sir Harry, 'he is as mad as Bedlam now.'

He saw the girl's lip quiver, and her hand shake as she gave him his cup; but he kept his cold grey eye fastened on her. He seemed to read her most secret thoughts, and she feared him now—actually feared him. Well, it was always something gained. He proceeded good-humoredly—

'Do we shoot on the island to day, Sir Harry?' he asked of his host. 'Perhaps Miss Beverley will come over to our luncheon in her boat. How pretty you have made that island, Sir Harry; and what a place for ducks about sundown!'

The island was a pet toy of Sir Harry's; he was pleased, as usual, with his friend's good taste.

'Yes, come over to luncheon, Constance,' said he. 'You can manage the boat quite well that short way.'

'No, thank you, papa,' answered Constance, with a glance at Ropsley; 'the boat is out of repair, and I had rather not run the risk of an upset.'

'You used to be so fond of boating, Miss Beverley,' observed Ropsley, with his scarcely perceptible sneer. 'You and Egerton used to be always on the water. Perhaps you don't like it without a companion; pray don't think of coming on our account. I quite agree with you, it makes all the difference in a water-party.'

Constance began to talk very fast to her father.

'I'll come, papa, after all, I think,' said she; 'it is such a beautiful day! and the boat will do very well, I dare say—and I'm so fond of the water, papa; and—and I'll go and put my bonnet on now. I've got two or three things to do in the garden before I start.'

So she hurried from the room, but not till Ropsley had presented her with a sprig of geranium he had gathered in the conservatory, and thanked her in a sort of mock-heroic speech for her kindness in so readily acceding to his wishes.

Would he have been pleased or not, could he have seen her in the privacy of her own apartment, which she had no sooner reached than she dashed his gut upon the floor, stamping on it with her little foot as though she would crush it into atoms, while her bosom heaved, and her dark eyes filled with tears, shed she scarce knew why? She had a vague consciousness of humiliation, and an undefined feeling of alarm that she could not have accounted for even to herself, but which was very uncomfortable notwithstanding.

The gentlemen put on their belts and shooting apparatus; and Ropsley, with the sneer deepening on his well-cut features, whispered to himself, '*pour le coup, papillon, je te tiens.*'

Bold and I strolled leisurely along; the dog indulging in his usual vagaries on the way; his master brooding and thoughtful. Reflecting on the many times he had trod the same pathway when he was yet in ignorance of the fatal secret, and how it was all over now. My life was henceforth to be a blank. I began to speculate as I had never speculated before, on the objects and aims of existence. What had I done, I thought, that I should be doomed to be so miserable?—that I should have neither home nor relatives nor friends?—that, like the poor man whose rich neighbor had flocks and herds and vineyards, I should have but my one pet lamb, and even that should be taken from me? Then I thought of my father's career—how I had been used to look up to him as the impersonation of all that was admirable and enviable in man. With his personal beauty and his princely air and his popularity and talent, I used to think my father must be perfectly happy. And now to find that he too had been living with a worm at his heart! But then he had done wrong, and he suffered rightly, as he himself confessed, for the sins of his youth. And I tried to think myself unjustly treated; for of what crimes had I been guilty, that I should suffer too. My short life had been blameless, orderly, and dutiful. Little evil had I done; but even then my conscience whispered—Much good had I lost undone. I had lived for myself and my own affections; I had not trained

acquaintance, Mr. Barrells, and the applause of Sir Harry. Many a happy day had I spent there, in the enjoyment of scenery, air, exercise, and sport (not that I cared much for the latter); but, above all, with the prospect of Constance Beverley bringing us our luncheon, or, at the worst, the certainty of seeing her on our return to the Manor House. How my heart ached to think it was all gone and past now.

I watched the smoke from the sportsmen's guns as it curled up into the peaceful autumn sky. I heard the cheery voices of the boaters, and the tap of their sticks in the coxse; but I could not see a soul, and was myself completely unseen. I felt I was looking on what had so long been my paradise for the last time, and I lost the consciousness of my own identity in the dreamy abstraction with which I regarded all around. It seemed to me as if another had gone through the experiences of my past life, or rather as if I was no longer Vere Egerton, but one who had known him and pitied him, and would take some little interest in him for the future, but would probably see very little of him again. I know not whether other men experience such strange fancies, or whether it is but the natural effect of continued sorrow, which stuns the mental sense, even as continued pain numbs that of the body; but I have often felt myself retracing my own past or speculating on my own future, almost with the indifference of an uninterested spectator. Something soon recalled me to myself. Bold had the eye of a hawk, but I saw her before Bold did; long ere my dog erected his silken ears and stopped his panting breath, my beating heart and throbbing pulses made me feel too keenly that I was Vere Egerton again.

She seemed to walk more slowly than she used; the step was not so light; the head no longer carried so erect, so haughtily; she had lost the deer-like motion I admired so fondly; but oh! how much better I loved to see her like this. I watched as a man watches all he loves for the last time. I strove, so to speak, to print her image on my brain, there to be carried a life-long photograph. She walked slowly down towards the mere, her head drooping, her hands clasped before her, apparently deep, deep in her own thoughts. I would have given all I had in the world could I but have known what those thoughts were. She stopped at the very place where once before she had caressed Bold! she gathered a morsel of fern and placed it in her bosom; then she walked on faster, like one who wakes from a train of profound and not altogether happy reflections.

Meanwhile I had the greatest difficulty to restrain my dog. Good, faithful Bold was all anxiety to scour off at first sight of her, and greet his old. He whined piteously when I forbade him. I thought she must have heard him; but no, she walked quietly on towards the water, loosed her little skiff from its moorings, got into it, and pushed off on the smooth surface of the mere.

She spread the tiny sail, and the boat rippled its way slowly through the water. The little skiff was a favorite toy of Constance, and I had taught her to manage it very dexterously. At the most it would hold but two people; and many an hour of ecstasy had I passed on the mere in 'The Queen Mab,' as we sportively named it, drinking in every look and tone of my idolized companion: poison was in the draught, I knew it well, and yet I drank it to the dregs. Now I watched till my eyes watered, for I should never steer 'The Queen Mab' again.

A shout from the shore of the island diverted my attention. Sir Harry had evidently espied her, and was welcoming his daughter. I made out his figure, and that of Barrells, at the water's edge; whilst the report of a gun, and a thin column of white smoke curling upwards from the coxse, betokened the presence of Ropsley among the boaters in the covert. When I glanced again at 'The Queen Mab,' it struck me she had made but little way, though her gossamer-looking sail was filled by the light breeze. She could not now be more than a hundred and fifty yards from her moorings, whilst I was myself perhaps twice that distance from the brink of the mere. Constance rises from her seat, and waves her hand above her head. Is that her voice? Bold hears it too, and starts up to listen. The white sail leans over. God in heaven! it is down! Vivid like lightning the ghastly truth flashes through my brain; the boat is waterlogged—she is sinking—my heart's

the very edge. A root I caught at gave way. My overtaxed muscles refused to second me. It was hard to fail at the last. I could have saved myself had I abandoned my hold. It was delicious to know this, and then to wind my arm tighter round her waist, and to think we should sleep together for ever down there; but honest Bold grasped her once more in those vigorous jaws—she bore the marks of his teeth on her white neck for many a day. The relief thus afforded enabled me to make one desperate effort, and we were saved.

She fainted away when when she was fairly on the bank; and I was so exhausted I could but lie gasping at her side. Bold gave himself a vigorous shake and licked her face. Assistance, however, was near at hand; the accident had been witnessed from the island; Sir Harry and the keeper had shoved off immediately in their boat, and pulled vigorously for the spot. It was a heavy, lumbering craft, and they must have been too late. Oh, selfish heart! I felt that had I not succeeded in saving her, I had rather we had both remained under those peaceful waters; but selfish though it may have been, was it not ecstasy to think that I had reasoned her—Constance Beverley, my own Constance—from death? I, the ungainly, unattractive man, for whom I used to think no woman could ever care; and she had called me 'her brave Vere.' Hers! She could not unsay that; come what would, nothing could rob me of that. 'Fortune, do thy worst;' I thought, in my thrill of delight, as I recalled those words, 'I am happy for evermore.' Blind! blind! *Quem Deus vult perdere prius dementat.*

CHAPTER XVI.

PRINCESS VOCQSAL.

It was an accommodating *menage*, that of Prince and Princess Vocqsal, and was carried on upon the same system, whether they were immured, as Madame la Princesse called it, in the old chateau near *Siebenburgen*, or disporting themselves as now, in the sunshine and gaiety of her dear Paris, as the same volatile lady was pleased to term that very lively resort of the gay, the idle, and the good-for nothing. It was the sort of *menage* people do not understand in England quite so thoroughly as abroad; the system was simple enough—'live and let live' being in effect the motto of an ill-matched pair, who had better never have come together, but who having done so, resolved to make the best of that which each found to be a bad bargain, and to see less of each other than they could possibly have done had they remained as formerly, simply an old cousin and a young one, instead of as now, husband and wife.

Prince Vocqsal was the best of fellows; and the most sporting of Hungarians. Time was, before the Revolution, *mon cher*—a good while before it, he might have added—that the Prince was the handsomest man of his day, and not indisposed to use his personal advantages for the captivation of the opposite sex. His conquests, as he called them, in France, Spain, Italy, not to mention the fatherland, were, by his own account, second only to Don Juan in the charming opera which bears the name of that libertine; but his greatest triumph was to detail, in strict confidence, of course, how he had met with *un grand succes* amongst *ces belles blondes Anglaises*, whose characters he was good enough to take away with a sweeping liberality calculated to alter a Briton's preconceived notions as to the propriety of those praiseworthy whom he had hitherto been proud to call his countrywomen. I cannot say I consider myself bound to believe all an old gentleman, or a young one either, has to say on that score. Men are given to lying, and woman is an enigma better let alone. The Prince, however, clung stoutly to his fascinations, long after time, good living, and field sports had changed him from a slim, romantic swain, to a jolly, roundabout old gentleman. He dyed his moustaches and whiskers, wore a belt patented to check corpulence, and made up for the ravages of decay by the artifices of the toilet. He could ride extremely well (for a foreigner), not in the break-neck style which hunting men in England call 'going,' and which none except an Englishman ever succeeds in attaining; but gracefully, and like a gentleman. He could shoot with the rifle or the smooth bore

had a little tarnished the freshness of her youthful beauty; but what she had lost in bloom she had gained in experience. Nobody had such a figure, so round, so shapely, of such exquisite proportions; nobody knew so well how to dress that figure to the greatest advantage. Her gloves were a study; and as for her feet and ankles, their perfection was only equalled by the generosity in which they were displayed. Then what accomplishments, what talents! She could sing, she could ride, she could waltz; she could play billiards, smoke cigarettes, drive four horses, shoot with a pistol, and talk sentiment from the depths of a low *fauteuil*, like a very Sappho. Her lovers had compared her at different times to nearly all the heroines of antiquity, except Diana. She had been painted in every costume, flattered in every language, and slandered in every boudoir throughout Europe for a good many years; and still she was bright, and fresh, and sparkling, as if Old Time too could not resist her fascinations, but, like any other elderly gentleman, gave her her own way, and waited patiently for his turn. Thrice happy Princess Vocqsal!—can it be possible that you, too, are bored?

She sits in her own magnificent salon, where once every week she 'receives' all the most distinguished people in Paris. How blooming she looks with her back to the light, and her little feet crossed upon that low footstool. Last night she had 'a reception,' and it was gayer and more crowded than usual. Why did she feel a little dull to-day? Pooh! it was only a *migraine*, or the last French novel was so insufferably stupid; or—no, it was the want of excitement. She could not live without that stimulus—excitement she must and would have. She had tried politics, but the strong immovable will at the head of the Government had given her a hint that she must put a stop to that; and she knew his inflexible character too well to venture on trifling with him. She was tired of all her lovers, too; she began to think, if her husband were only thirty years younger, and less good-humored, he would be worth a dozen of these modern adorers. That Count de Rohan, to be sure, was a good-looking boy, and seemed utterly fancy free. By-the-bye, he was not at the 'reception' last night, though she asked him herself the previous evening at 'the Tuilleries.' That was very rude; positively she must teach him better manners. A countryman, too; it was a duty to be civil to him. And a fresh character to study, it would be good sport to subjugate him. Probably he would call to-day to apologise for being so remiss. And she rose and looked in the glass at those eyes whose power need not to be enhanced by the dexterous touch of a rogue; at that long, glossy hair, and shapely neck and bosom, as a sportsman examined the locks and barrels of the weapon on which he depends for his success in the chase. The review was satisfactory, and Princess Vocqsal did not look at all bored now. She had hardly settled herself once more in a becoming attitude, ere Monsieur le Comte de Rohan was announced, and marched in, hat in hand, with all the grace of his natural demeanor, and the frank, happy air that seldom survives boyhood. Victor was handsomer than ever, brimful of life and spirit, utterly devoid of all conceit or affectation, and moreover, since his father's death, one of the first noblemen of Hungary. It was a conquest worth making.

'I thought you would not go back without wishing me good-bye,' said the Princess, with her sweetest smile, and a blush through her rouge that she could summon at command—indeed, this weapon had done more execution than all the rest of her artillery put together. 'I missed you last night at my reception. Why did you not come?'

Victor blushed too. How could he explain that a little supper-party at which some very fascinating ladies who were not of the Princess's acquaintance assisted, prevented him? He stammered out some excuse about leaving Paris immediately, and having to make preparations for departure.

'And you are really going,' said she, in melancholy, pleading tone of voice—'going back to my dear Hungary. How I wish I could accompany you.'

'Nothing could be easier,' answered Victor, laughing gaily; 'if madame would but condescend to accept my escort, I would wait her convenience. Say, Princess, when shall it be?'

'Ah, you are now joking,' she said, looking at him from under her long eyelashes; 'you