

The Web;

OR,

TRUE LOVE'S PASSION.

CHAPTER VIII.
A Strange Welcome.

"I see, it's very kind of you," said Cyril. "Your room smells quite like a chemist's shop."

Guildford Berton glanced up at him. "You noticed it?" he said. "Let us go into another room," and he rose. "I very seldom sit here myself."

He led the way across the small hall into another room, which was not quite so gloomy, and much more comfortably furnished. There were some books and a few pictures, and Cyril was rather glad to miss the peculiar odor which pervaded the other room.

His host turned up the lamp, and got some spirits and glasses from a sideboard.

"I have only one servant, the old woman whom you saw, so you must excuse the absence of ceremony, Mr. Burne," he said.

"I am too accustomed to waiting upon myself to require many servants," responded Cyril.

"You've emptied the carafe, I see," said Guildford Berton, when he had fetched it from the other room, and he went to the fireplace and touched an electric bell.

The old woman entered, and Berton pointed to the carafe and made signs to her on his fingers in the deaf and dumb language.

"Your housekeeper is greatly afflicted," remarked Cyril, looking at her compassionately, and thinking at the same time that it was the finishing touch to the gloomy little place, and what a cheerful kind of person Mr. Guildford Berton must be to live under such conditions.

He was evidently of a melancholy disposition, was subject to fits, and lived in a sunless house, surrounded by a high wall, and quite alone, excepting for an old woman who was deaf and dumb!

"Yes," said Guildford Berton, carelessly. "She isn't quite deaf, however, though she's as dumb as this table," and he struck it. "But I thought it easier to teach her the deaf and dumb language than to be continuously yelling at her. I dislike all noises."

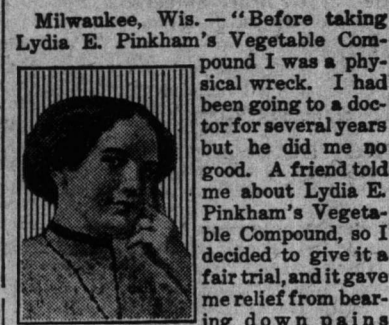
"Much more convenient," said Cyril. "But—I'm afraid you'll think me rather impertinent—I'm surprised at your choosing such a person for your housekeeper."

Guildford Berton shrugged his shoulders.

"The best kind of servants to have," he responded; "they can't din the life out of you with their tongues, and they don't carry tales. Besides, a younger woman would be always gadding about, and give me no end of trouble looking after her. Help yourself, will you, and try those cigars. They—and the liquor—are good," he

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added, with the shadow of a smile, "for they come from the Court. The earl is good enough to keep me supplied."

He raised his eyes and glanced at his guest, to see what effect, if any, his words would produce, but Cyril merely nodded as he said:

"Yes, it's a capital cigar, and I am sure the whisky is all right."

"I suppose you are rather surprised that the Earl of Arrowdale should be so intimate with so humble a person as myself?" said Guildford Berton, leaning back in his chair, but looking not one-half so much at ease as his visitor, who, though in the most comfortable attitude, had that peculiarly graceful air which is born with some men.

"I don't know why I should," responded Cyril, wondering whether his strange host was going to be confidential.

"You don't know, I suppose, that I am the son of the earl's late steward?" went on Guildford Berton, his eyes fixed on the ground.

"No," said Cyril, "I did not know it." "I am, which makes it all the more extraordinary that the earl should acknowledge me as his friend. It is very condescending, don't you think?"

It was a question which it was only possible to answer in one way.

"Not at all," Cyril replied.

"You don't? I fancy most people do, and they let me see that they do." His pale face grew dusky red for a moment. "But it is easily explained. I have been of some service to the earl, Mr. Burne, and as I have always refused to accept any remuneration, he has paid me in another fashion." "I understand," said Cyril, still won-

dering why Mr. Guildford Berton, who had looked ready to eat him in the morning, should be so communicative in the evening.

"Had you ever seen the earl before this morning?" asked Berton, carelessly.

"No," replied Cyril. "You were very much struck with him, I suppose?"

Cyril hesitated a moment.

"I thought him extremely courteous and—well, 'highly polished.'"

A smile, cynical and not altogether pleasant, curled Guildford Berton's lips.

"Yes, he is admirably veneered. Don't they say that if you scratch the Russian you find the Tartar underneath?"

Cyril nodded.

"Well, that applies to the earl. He is smooth enough until you scratch him, then—"

He paused and shrugged his shoulders. "Did you ever hear of his nephew?" he asked, suddenly raising his eyes and looking at Cyril.

"Who is he?" asked Cyril.

"The Viscount Santleigh."

"Oh, yes, I've heard of him," replied Cyril.

Guildford Berton leaned forward, then fell back, as if he desired to suppress any sign of curiosity.

"What sort of man is he?" he asked.

"Don't you know, I'm scarcely capable of describing him," said Cyril.

"We unknown artists don't have very close acquaintance with viscounts, but from what I have heard I should say that he is considered something of a fool by most people."

Guildford Berton seemed to turn the answer over in his mind for a second or two, then he nodded.

"I understand. Do you know where he is now?" he asked.

"When he was last heard of he was going abroad, I believe," said Cyril.

"He must be a fool," remarked Guildford Berton.

"Why do you say that?" asked Cyril, rather languidly, as if the subject did not particularly interest him.

"Because, though he is a poor man, he has refused a large sum of money," said Berton. "He has run through what property he held in his own right, and though the earl offered him a large sum to cut off the entail, and so enable the earl to leave the estate to whom he pleased, Lord Santleigh refused it."

"That sounds foolish," said Cyril.

"Yes," assented Guildford Berton; "he forgets that the earl may marry again, or that he—the young viscount, I mean—might die before the earl. Life is uncertain, and money—"

Cyril fancied that a sudden gleam flashed in the sombre eyes—"money is tangible." "Perhaps Lord Santleigh doesn't care about money," suggested Cyril.

Guildford Berton looked at him incredulously.

"Even he can't be such a fool as that would make him," he remarked.

"It seems scarcely likely, I'll admit," said Cyril.

There was a pause, during which the two men sat and smoked, Guildford Berton with his eyes fixed on the carpet, Cyril looking at his host with some curiosity.

Then suddenly Berton said: "Do you admire Lady Norah?" Cyril's handsome face flushed, and a feeling of resentment tingled through him. There was no great harm in the question, and yet Cyril found the greatest difficulty in answering it.

"I think Lady Norah is very beautiful, yes," he replied, coldly.

Guildford Berton glanced up at him. "Yes," he said, "I suppose she is. I don't profess to be a judge. I am a little of a woman-hater. You know she only arrived last night."

Cyril nodded rather curtly. He felt the strongest disinclination to discuss Lady Norah with Mr. Guildford Berton. But if that gentleman observed that disinclination, he persisted, for some reason or other, in continuing the topic.

"I wonder how long will she remain at the Court?" he said, reflecting.



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"Excepting with me—yes," he said. "He is sure to quarrel, he always does with all his relations; he quarreled with his wife. Which is a pity, for Lady Norah's sake."

"Why?" asked Cyril, reluctantly. "Because," said Guildford Berton, slowly, as if he wished to impress every word upon him, "there was no settlement when she and the earl were married, and the quarrel and separation prevented any being made afterward, consequently Lady Norah is entirely at the mercy of her father. If they should quarrel he would leave her penniless."

Cyril stared at him. "I don't see how this can interest either you or me, Mr. Berton," he said, and at his tone Guildford Berton's face grew red.

"I didn't know whether you might not regard her in the light of a wealthy heiress," he said, "and I merely mentioned the matter in the course of conversation."

"I don't think I can discuss the earl's private affairs, Mr. Berton," said Cyril, coldly, "and I am sure I have no desire to learn anything concerning Lady Norah's."

"Of course not, of course not," assented Guildford Berton, with an upward glance. "As you say, it is no business of ours."

"I didn't say so quite so plainly," said Cyril, "but I certainly think so. None whatever."

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