

Beautiful Cynthia;

OR

Victory After Many Defeats.

CHAPTER X.
A FOOL.

"Very good indeed," assented Percy. "I always take a little soda water with mine. It's the fashion now." He pushed the siphon towards Sampson, whom he did not wish to get quite speechlessly drunk; and Sampson condescended to take some of the chastening soda.

"You are paying a visit to town for a little change, Mr. Burridge?" said Percy, in his silkiest and most ingratiating manner.

"Yes," said Sampson, with a knowing nod. "I'm up on a little spree, and I've earned it, too; for the governor keeps me pretty close. He doesn't believe in anything but work; likes to see a young fellow on the treadmill all the time. But all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, eh, mister?"

"I cannot imagine you dull at any time, Mr. Burridge," said Percy; and Sampson winked and nodded again. "You appear to be one of those men who are always capable of enjoying themselves."

"That's me," said Sampson, with immense self-satisfaction. "I'm on the spot all the time; everything comes easy to me—from dancing to cockfighting."

"I very much regret that your pleasure should have been temporarily spoiled to-night," said Percy sympathetically. "It was a most unpleasant incident, and, but for your wonderful self-restraint and command of your temper, it might have ended seriously."

Sampson's face grew redder, and he pushed his lips out angrily. "Yes, I'd have knocked his blessed head off if it hadn't been for ladies being present," he said. "Of course he did it on purpose. It was a distinct shove. And he knew me right enough. I saw it in his eye; but he pretended that he didn't."

Percy shook his head in reprehension of Darrel's conduct. "Mr. Frayne behaved very badly, I must admit," he said; "and I am not surprised at your resentment. I think you behaved admirably, Mr. Burridge. Let me see you and Mr. Frayne come

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from the same place, Summerleigh?" "Of course," assented Sampson thickly. "My governor manages the Court estate—but I thought you said you knew me?" he broke off, with a touch of suspicion.

"Quite so," said Percy smoothly. "And no doubt there is an old grievance between you and Mr. Frayne?"

Sampson jerked his head cavalierly. "Oh, we've never liked each other," he said; "we used to fight, as boys. He thinks a precious sight too much of himself; you might be dirt under his feet by the way he treats you. But I'll be even with him some day," he added threateningly.

"I am quite sure you will," said Percy, with an admiring smile. "I am quite sure you would prove a match for any one. I should not like to have you for an enemy, Mr. Burridge; no, indeed!"

Sampson, visibly swelling under his flattery, wagged his big head solemnly, as he peered under his heavy lids at the pale face, which was now beginning to float hazily in his vision. Percy saw that the man would soon be asleep, and he stealthily filled Sampson's glass with a very little champagne and a great deal of soda.

He must be quick, if he wanted to get anything definite out of the tipsy fool.

"I am rather a judge of character, Mr. Burridge, and I should say, from my knowledge of you, that you could bide your time and wait until you could strike home."

"That's me," said Sampson, banging his fist on the table and starting the timid waiter, who was dozing behind the screen at the other end of the room. "I can wait until the psycho-psycho—what d'you call it?—moment, and then come down a crasher and that's what I'm going to do with his royal highness, Mr. Darrel Frayne."

"Yes," said Percy, lowering his voice impressively. "I understand that you have him in the hollow of your hand, Mr. Burridge?"

"I have," said Sampson, opening his huge fist and closing it slowly with an air of malignant satisfaction.

"You know something?" Percy insinuated confidentially.

Sampson nodded and leaned forward. "Look here," he said, in a thick whisper and breathing heavily. "If my father liked, he could smash up the Fraynes, swallow 'em body and bones. They're rotten, rotten to the core; have been for years, and the funny thing is, that that old fool Sir Anson, don't know it. You see my father is one of the leary ones and he can keep his mouth shut. And so can I." He winked with an assumption of acuteness and discretion which would have amused the cynic. Percy if he had not been so intent on his purpose.

"Your father holds all the mortgages?" he said, in a still lower voice.

"He does," replied Sampson significantly. "He could come down upon 'em at any moment. I know, because I'm in the office." He stopped suddenly, smitten by a half-consciousness of his foolish communicativeness to a comparative stranger, yawned, stretched his arms and rose unsteadily. "I'm confounded sleepy somehow," he said. "I shall be all right if I have a five minutes' snooze."

He attempted to fill his glass, missed his aim, and poured some of the wine on the table. With a foolish laugh, he sank back on the seat, his head fell forward, and in a little less than a moment he was fast asleep.

With a gesture of disgust and loathing, Percy rose, and, seating himself in an armchair at some distance from his unpleasant companion, leaned back with closed eyes, his legs crossed, his hands folded on his knee.

He looked as soundly asleep as Sampson, but his brain was hard at work.

Percy Standish was a clever young man and ambitious, and few clever and ambitious young men were so

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heavily handicapped. He was the son of a man with an evil reputation, a man who, but for his rank, would have been outlawed by society.

He and his father were hideously poor. They literally lived from hand to mouth, and they were always in debt. Lord Standish enjoyed quite a reputation among his boon companions for dodging writs and bailiffs.

Most young men in Percy's position received assistance from their fathers. Percy's was of no use to him; he must rely upon himself. In only one direction could he look for help, in the direction of Lady Westlake.

From early boyhood he had regarded himself as her heir, but Cynthia, the girl from Summerleigh, had come to Belgrave Square, and Percy knew that in all probability Lady Westlake would leave her large fortune to Cynthia, and that he might consider himself lucky if he were mentioned in her will.

If Cynthia were out of the way, if he could only oust her from Lady Westlake's favor, he would in all likelihood come in for the Griffin's money; for there was no one else to whom she could leave it. She was the last woman in the world to bequeath it to charities. He had at one time thought of marrying Cynthia himself. But he was astute enough to feel that his chances of doing so were small; for, with all her innocence and inexperience, Cynthia was quick-witted, and he knew, had instinctively taken his true measure. Besides, she was in love, or was going to be, with Darrel Frayne.

Percy had watched her that night, and had seen her eyes melt as she turned them on Darrel.

He had determined to prevent their marriage, by fair means or foul. The revelation of the parlous condition of the Fraynes' affairs, which this tipsy fool had made, rendering the breaking off of the proposed match quite easy. Percy had only to go to Lady Westlake and make her acquainted with all he had learned that night under the threatened engagement possible. He would go round to Belgrave Square to-morrow and put a spoke in Darrel Frayne's wheel.

He flung his cigarette in the grate, rose and took up his opera hat and overcoat; he had no intention of waking Mr. Sampson Burridge, had no sore need of him, and sincerely trusted that he would never have the misfortune to meet him again.

With scarcely a glance at the heaped-up form on the settee, he had reached the door, when suddenly there flashed across his mind one of

those ideas which come so frequently to clever men like Percy Standish. It had sent the blood to his face, his pale eyes gleamed, his thin lips drew together tightly. He went back to his chair and pondered, turning over the idea this way and that, enlarging, developing it.

When his little scheme was round-

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ed off and neatly completed, he rose, and approaching the snoring Sampson with a little shudder of disgust, clutched the huge shoulder and shook him roughly; then, as Sampson woke slowly with heavy writhings of his limbs, Percy slipped into the chair beside the table, as if he had not moved from it.

"Eh, what's the time?" yawned Sampson, stretching himself. "Oh, there you are, mister! I thought I was in bed. What were we talkin' about? Blessed if I didn't fall asleep!"

Percy saw that his snooze had partially sobered Sampson, and knew that he must be treated warily.

"It is getting late, Mr. Burridge," he said, not suavely now, but gravely. "I think we had better go to bed."

"Right you are!" said Sampson, with another yawn. He stretched out his hand toward the champagne bottle, but Percy drew it away from him.

"If I were you I wouldn't drink any more to-night, Mr. Burridge. If you will forgive me for saying so, you have an inconvenient and rather dangerous habit of talking too freely when you have taken too much wine."

"Eh, what?" demanded Sampson uncomfortably, as he noticed the change in the manner and tone of his companion. "What have I been sayin'?"

Percy shrugged his shoulders with an affectation of reluctance.

"Well, if you insist, Mr. Burridge—you have been talking rather openly of the affairs of Sir Anson Frayne."

Sampson's mottled face grew rather less red, he screwed up his eyes, pursed his thick lips, and peered suspiciously at Percy's now serious countenance.

He tried to remember what had happened, how it chanced that he should be hobnobbing in this familiar fashion with a stranger, and what he had said to him; but his slumber, short as it was, had acted as a sponge, and had wiped from his memory, at any rate, for the present, all but the faintest records of their conversation.

"You've forgotten, I see," said Percy, still gravely. "Mr. Frayne, who is a friend of mine, had an altercation with you outside the Savoy."

"I remember, curse him!" growled Sampson.

"Quite so. It might have ended seriously for you, for you were not quite yourself. Mr. Frayne is a friend of mine, and I got you away before the police came up. You asked me to come to your hotel here and insisted upon having some more wine. You had already had quite enough. And Mr. Burridge, wine, especially champagne, affects men in various ways. Some it renders secretive, it loosens the tongues of others. It loosened yours. Outside the Savoy you had said, or, rather, shouted several things relating to the private affairs of the Frayne family."

(To be Continued.)

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