

LOVE THE VICTOR.

CHAPTER XI.

"Now, look ye, is not this an high folly?
Who may not be a fool, if but he love?"

The music of the last new waltz is sobbing and sighing through the rooms; lightly hearts, as well as feet (and heads) are dancing. The marquis, bland, and a trifle more juvenile than ever, is still greeting his guests with all the fervor that distinguished him an hour ago. Lady Clontarf, standing beside him, is quite overshadowed by his magnanimous smile.

"Truly, he is a grand old man," says Mr. Browne, regarding him with unstinted admiration from afar. "Still,"—recollecting himself, and letting his ardent cool with a rapidity quite startling—"what is he when placed in comparison with our grand old woman? She" (Mrs. Costello, to wit) "is a poet's dream."

"A poet's nightmare, if you like," says Clontarf, with feeling.

"She's been on the champ all day," says Dicky. "I called over to Kilmaloda in the morning, and chanced to see her; such a happy chance!" All this he says to Mrs. Desmond, who, with her partner, Lord Clontarf, is standing near him. "Rather overcome at finding myself suddenly in so noble a presence, I confess I felt nervous, and a strange longing to cut and run almost overcame me. Odd, wasn't it? I rallied, however, sufficiently to address her by her illustrious title, and to pay her as neat a little compliment as any hurried young man ever produced before at a moment's notice. I suppose her mind was filled with worthier matters, because she declined to see it. In fact, she sort of told me—well—to get out," says Mr. Browne, with a burst of—no, not indignation—mirth!

The rooms are growing crowded, though not to the agony-pressure of a town crowd, and programmes have been brought to that stage that if not filled now they will never be filled.

Lady Clontarf, in pale-green satin literally covered with Brussels lace, and with diamonds on throat and head and arms, is looking lovely—and calm as lovely—but smileless. The marquis, regarding her critically though furtively, tells himself he would gladly see her more misshapen. "In spite of the herring, or the whisky, or whatever it was," he says to himself, "she might allow herself even a laugh. So few of them can! Nothing betrays them like a lapse into nature."

Mrs. Desmond is in maize; Miss Priscilla and Miss Penelope Blake, who came with her, in pearl-gray satin; Kit is in the highest spirits. I don't mean to insinuate by this that the mantle of "high jollity" that has fallen upon her is her only covering, because her gown has come straight from Worth, and is a marvel of its kind.

Vera is

"Clad all in white, that seems a virgin best;
So well it becoms that ye would woeen
Some angel she had been."

In truth, with her soft smile and rapt eyes, she seems almost angelic. She is standing beside an old and withered man, dressed artificially in youthful clothing with a view of deceiving the public into the belief that the allotted "treasure years and ten have not been yet attained by him. Vera, with her prettily head uplifted, is listening to his inane twaddle with a flattering attention. What sweeter thing can we behold than the delicate image of youth to age?

"Vera is very good to that old man—wonderfully good," says Mrs. Desmond, looking across at her. "I don't think I care about old men myself, but apparently he is not so dull as most of them; I dare say he is better than he looks."

"He is not. He is worse," says Clontarf, gloomily. "Once he starts a subject, nothing will stop him. We have all tried to do it—taking it in turns for the last week—but without success. He carries out his argument to its dreary end. He is a shocking old man. He has got a voice like a corn-crake."

"To malign the absent is an evil deed," says Dicky, solemnly. "I at least will not be a party to it. Sir Watkyn is not to be despised. A good old man, sir, he will be talking; as they say, when the age is in, the wit is out; but what of that? the age is in at all events. That is the principal thing. He has got the pull of us there: very few of us can date back to the Ark."

The music is growing fainter, sadder, fading, as it draws toward death. The drip, drip of many fountains is growing clearer. From conservatories and halls and passages comes the cooler air, laden with the perfumed breath of flowers.

In a tiny flowered nest (that in daylight to-morrow will probably be called an anteroom), Vera, who has permitted herself to be dragged away from Sir Watkyn's side, is sitting with Gerald Burke, idly tapping the programme in her hand against her dainty lips.

"You will give me every second dance to-night?" asks Gerald, in a tone that admits of small delay in the answering. His melancholy eyes, deep and dark and full of mournful possibilities, are burning into hers.

"Will Doris like that?" asks she, letting her pretty fragile fingers fall clasped into her lap, and raising questioning eyes to his. "If you will like it, that will be everything."

"Oh, that!" she says. Her lips part in a heavenly smile, she moves her graceful childish figure in a nestling fashion a degree closer to him, and looks at him again, still smiling, and lays her golden head, half coarseningly, half laughingly, against his arm. "I should like it,—yes,—and for the sake of it would risk even Doris's anger. But—" She hesitates nervously, and looks at him again with brows uplifted and foreboding. "But would it be kind of me? She said to me, just before we came, that I was not to make myself remarkable with anybody, because people are always unkind, and might say I was—was flirting. They might say—Innocently—"I was flirting with you, perhaps."

"No," says Burke, frowningly; then his mood changes, and the most grovelling dejection takes the place of his short-lived anger. "If they did, it would not be true, would it?" he says, closing his fingers over hers, and gazing at her as if he would read her very soul.

"Dear Gerald, what a question!" A wistful expression desolates her lovely eyes. She sighs, and turns a little away from him. "Must you ask me that?" she says, reproachfully. "Oh, no! do not think it! But why make Doris unhappy? Should I not give up even the greatest joy I know to save her a moment's uneasiness?"

"You are an angel," says Burke, with emotion.

"I'm not. I haven't any wings," replies she, childishly shaking her pretty head until all her short loose yellow curls seem to laugh with her.

"I think you are. See how good you are to that old man, Sir Watkyn Wylde. Who would listen to his twaddle so sweetly as you?"

"He is very good to me," says Vera, opening her large eyes to their fullest, and trifling absently with her fan.

"That, of course. But your manner to him"—with loving appreciation of its gentleness—"is the prettiest thing I ever saw. It is more than kind of you."

"What is?" asks Vera, vaguely.

"To spend so much time humoring the vagaries of an uninteresting old man."

"Is he so old?"

"Can't you see it?"—laughing.

"No," says Vera. As she says it she laughs, however, but more as one misad through sympathy with the mirth of another than from any appreciation of the joke itself.

Some people entering the room at this moment, Burke rises and gives his arm to Vera. "The balcony is cooler than this," he says to her, in a low tone, leading her thither.

As they step on to it, both, looking back, see Doris in the doorway beyond, talking to Lord Frederick Grayle.

"How very pretty your sister is looking to-night!" says Burke, involuntarily.

"I always think it is saying so little to say Doris is pretty," says Vera. "To my mind she is as beautiful in form as she is at heart, and what more can be said?"

Surprised by a sort of passion in her tone hitherto unheard, Burke glances at her hastily. Her eyes are fixed upon Lady Clontarf, who, calm, and stately in the distant door-way, is listening with polite

interest to the usual complaints about the non-payment of rents.

Vera's face is full of a wondering tenderness. It occurs to the young man watching her that whether she be "bond or free" to Cupid, there lies within her a depth of love for this elder sister that few other affections could equal.

They are standing out in the light now, with the gardens below them, and the roaring of the distant ocean sounding sadly in their ears. Undaunted by its greater majesty, a little stream near by crones loudly as it tumbles over its rocks and stones. Above them the "wandering moon" is sitting in silent state, with all her twinkling satellites around her. A baby wind, sweet with cool delights, is rushing gayly hither and thither, now reveling in the tremulous greetings of the leafy shrubs, now playing amorously with the riotous yellow locks on Vera's dainty head.

Burke, with his dark melancholy eyes fastened upon her face, is blind to the beauty of all around him. Of late one great overmastering passion has filled his soul to the exclusion of all lesser emotions. To this childish thing standing beside him he has given himself with a terrible absoluteness, to have and to hold at her good pleasure.

"To his eyes
There is but one beloved face on earth."

She is his very life, his best beloved, his all! Into the little hands now resting clasped before her in a pretty languorous attitude, he has given the richest treasures of his heart, to be expended how? All the intense passion of which his passionate nature is capable is hers, to do with as she will.

"She was his life,
The ocean to the river of his thoughts
Which terminated all."

And, yet, does she love him? This is the thought that at times paralyzes all his hopes. The intensity of his affection is in a direct ratio to the intensity of his doubt. She smiles upon him; there is no reason why he should believe her anything but happy when alone with her; as now, her fingers have lain in his, and shown no desire for freedom, many a time and oft, and yet "the old, old pain of earth" is tormenting him now: so keen is its torture that involuntarily he stretches out his hands to her, as though beseeching grace.

"My darling," he says, brokenly, "make me sure: give me life."

"Of what shall I make you sure?" asks she, with a smile that makes all her white teeth gleam in the moonlight. The tender glow that a moment since had beautified her face as she looked at Doris is gone. She is now again the seemingly thoughtless, loveable, misanthropic child.

"Of your love," says he, with a touching earnestness.

"In truth, I do not think I know what love means," returns she, with an enchanting little grimace. "What is it, then, this love? A fever?—an unrest? So they tell me, those unfortunates who have given in to it. But I feel no fever. At night I sleep like a very dormouse. No; ask me something else."

"There is nothing else. Your love is my all. The lesser things have fallen from me. I have only my choice of life or death."

"One would think you were on your trial for murder," says Vera, idly. "Is my glove a 'leaser' thing? If so, I am afraid I shouldn't dare ask you to button this top button for me. But it will come undone."

She has drawn quite close to him, and has laid her bare arm within his hand to get the glove arranged. She is smiling up into his face with a witchery all her own. His hand tightens on the snowy flesh.

"Vera, answer me," he says, in a low tone that vibrates with emotion.

The small room outside is now deserted; they are virtually alone beneath the silent stars.

"What am I to say?"

"Say at least that I am more to you than any one else."

"I don't know how much you are to any one else." There is nothing in her gently puzzled face to show whether she has willfully misunderstood him, or whether her mistake is genuine.

"Are other men less to you than I am?" asks Burke, at last.

"Oh, that!" she says. Then she laughs.

"What a silly question! But you are very silly, you know: you are almost as silly as I am."

"That is no answer."

"No! Isn't it? Well, yes, then; of

course you are more to me than other men. No one is so kind as you. But then"—thoughtfully—"I know so few. Sir Watkyn might be; but he is so old. It isn't good to be old, is it?"

"Give me proof that you like me best."

"Proof!" She shakes her head, and looks vaguely all round her as if seeking for inspiration to satisfy this difficult demand. Then at last her eyes come back to his. "Will this do?" she says, softly. "You may kiss my hand!"

She holds out to him one of those pretty members as she says this, drawing herself, however, a little away from him as she does so.

With quick delight he stoops his head, and kisses not only the little hand he holds, but the soft naked arm above the glove. A hundred times he kisses it, nor even seems to have enough.

Laying her hand upon his bent head, she pushes him gently back from her.

"Don't eat me," she says, in a soft, coquettish whisper. "I have given my proof: are you not satisfied?"

"No,"—boldly. "Many a one—that simpering old idiot inside, Sir Watkyn—might dare to kiss your hand; I would be more blessed than they. Darling, until you tell me you love me I cannot be happy."

"Be happy, then. I do love you," says Vera, calmly. "Why should I not? Are you not my friend?"

"No, that! Your lover! Friendship is a word too poor for the expression of my thoughts toward you. My beloved! my sweet sweetheart! what language could convey to you the full meaning of the love that burns within me for you?"—drawing her nearer to him, and trying vainly to read her charming ingenuous face,—"you will learn to love me in return, will you not?"

"I love you now. Have I not said it?" she murmurs, equally. "And you are my friend, no matter what you say. That is what I feel you are to me; that is what I feel I am to you." There is perhaps the faintest possible stress upon the latter assertion. "But we have been here a long time, have we not? Come," slipping her fingers with childish grace into his,—"take me back to—Doris."

The first slow bars of a square dance are coming to them slowly through the open window.

"Not yet," says Gerald, detaining her. "Grant me one little moment yet, before I resign you to those within. Vera, do not leave me thus coldly. I have laid bare my very soul to you: does that count for nothing?"

With a movement as gentle as it is tender, he suddenly takes her into the warm shelter of his arms and holds her fondly to his beating heart.

"Some day I know I shall win you," he says, glad certainty in his voice. "Say you think so too."

"At your command?" asks she, with a pretty archness. She whispers her question softly, slowly, with her face dangerously close to his. Her voice is at all times full of music, low and thrilling; but now there is a suspicion of tenderness in it that enhances its charm a hundred-fold. We are told

"The devil hath not, in all his quiver's choice,
An arrow for the heart like a sweet voice."

And certainly Vera's is tipped with subtle poison. "At your command?" she asks again, seeing he does not answer, her manner meaning so much, her words when sifted so little.

"At your command, then," asserts he, feeling a strange delight in even this mock mastery over so priceless a possession.

"Very well; then I say 'I think so, too,'" murmurs she, playfully. "And now—come."

"Before you go, Vera, kiss me once," says Burke, detaining her by ever so slight an effort, and growing deadly pale beneath the tell tale rays of the moon.

For a moment she hesitates; then, carried away perhaps by the eloquence of his look and tone, she yields.

"If it will make you happier, my friend," she says, tranquilly.

"Happier!"

Lifting her arms, he lays them round his neck, and then he kisses her. Perhaps his heaven is then! Who can tell? It is at least, I think, the dearest approach to it he ever knows.

And yet what is it, after all, this trivial action, that has suddenly transmitted his spirit to the glorious heights of Olympus?

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