

## Mrs. Harrington's Diamond Necklace.

BY DENZIL VANE.

## CHAPTER I.

Mrs. Harrington, of Harrington Hall, Grass-shire, should have known better, her friends told each other, than to throw a young, handsome, attractive, but penniless man, into company with a romantic girl of eighteen, who enjoyed the double privilege of being an heiress and a beauty. There was certainly no doubt about Gladys Harrington's claim to the latter title: she was tall, gracefully formed, elegant in all her movements, and she had the most radiant complexion, and the largest and softest brown eyes it is possible to imagine. As to her wealth, that also was beyond dispute. Though the Harrington estates were entailed on her half brother, a boy of ten years old, the young lady would inherit, on attaining her majority, a fortune of forty thousand pounds; for Squire Harrington had been not only a large landed proprietor, but the owner of extensive collieries in the north of England.

Left a widow soon after the birth of her son, Mrs. Harrington had lived a very retired life, devoting herself to the education of her children. Society in Grass-shire had for some years busied itself in discussing the probabilities as to the second marriage of the rich and still young widow. But now popular attention was turned to her step-daughter, Gladys; therefore, when it was noised about in the county that Mrs. Harrington had been so imprudent as to engage a tutor under thirty years old to educate the heir of all the Harringtons, instead of selecting some learned graybeard or solemn-faced M. A. on the wrong side of fifty, popular opinion was all against her.

"I should think a woman with any knowledge of the world and of human nature would have foreseen the inevitable consequences of bringing such a man as Mr. Ralph Cunningham into daily association with an impulsive, unsophisticated girl like dear Gladys," remarked Mrs. Lamprey of St. Kilda's Grange. She was the happy mother of six marriageable but unmarried daughters. Unmarried people smiled, and whispered to each other, that even a "detrimental" such as Mr. Ralph Cunningham would not have been an unacceptable suitor for the hand of any one of the Miss Lampreys, honest, square Lamprey being a comparatively poor man, and his daughters neither pretty nor attractive. Besides, eligible young men were scarce in Grass-shire.

"Yes, and dear Gladys is so—so very unconventional," added Mrs. Snubham, the Rector's wife, to whom the remark recorded above was addressed. "Perhaps it is the result of her singular bringing-up. She had lived too much alone, poor dear child; and her step-mother is not altogether the right sort of woman to have the care of a girl like Gladys. Mrs. Harrington is so—so unsympathetic. Do you know, dear Mrs. Lamprey, that sometimes I feel quite—quite uncomfortable when she looks at me with those curious bright gray eyes of hers?" finished the Rector's wife with an affected little shiver.

And so the busybodies of the neighbourhood talked, while even at Harrington Hall were slowly ripening to the climax which every one declared to be inevitable. Gladys and her little brother's tutor saw a great deal of each other, for the heiress had a taste for English literature, and Ralph Cunningham was always ready to assist her in her studies. Together they read Keats and Shelley, Tennyson and Browning, and selections from Rossetti and Swinburne. Now, when two young people of suitable age and of equal personal attractions discover that their tastes are identical; when a young man of six-and-twenty and a charming girl of eighteen bend day after day over volumes of beautiful poetry; when the aforementioned young man has the delightful task of pointing out favourite passages in his favourite poems to an appreciative and intensely sympathetic listener who has glorious eyes and a divinely responsive smile, it is not difficult to guess that admiration will speedily blossom into love.

Before Mr. Ralph Cunningham had been domiciled at Harrington Hall two months, the calamity predicted by the wiseheads of Grass-shire occurred. One day when Ralph was initiating his charming pupil into the beauties of the "Epicurichion," a glance was exchanged, a word or two was spoken, which changed the lives of both. Ralph, who was an honourable young fellow, had not intended to reveal his passion; but at six-and-twenty, one cannot be always on one's guard, and he had read something in Gladys' eyes which had, so to speak, drawn those daring words from his heart.

Gladys, with the enthusiasm and carelessness of the future characteristics of eighteen, had gone at once to her step-mother and declared her intention of marrying Mr. Ralph Cunningham.

Mrs. Harrington, who, for some reason known only to herself, had taken a violent dislike to the tutor, was, however, wise enough not to make a scene. She did not order Mr. Cunningham out of the house, or send Miss Gladys off in disgrace to school. She only darted one glance of contempt at the girl's glowing face, only folded her lips together in an expression that was not exactly pleasant, and then gravely said: "My dear Gladys, you are just eighteen, and Mr. Ralph Cunningham is the only really agreeable man you have ever met. Do you think you will admire him as much ten years hence as you do now?"

"I shall never, never care for any other man. I will marry him or be an old maid," cried Miss Gladys.

"Very well, my dear; you cannot marry without my consent for three years. I should fail in my duty if I gave it under the present circumstances. I do not approve of Mr. Cunningham as a suitor for your hand. I believe him to be entirely unworthy of your affection. When you are of age, you can please yourself, and bestow yourself and your fortune on any adventurer or fortune-hunter you please."

"Oh, mamma, how dare you imply that Ralph is a fortune-hunter!" Here a sudden burst of passionate weeping followed and Mrs. Harrington who hated scenes, calmly swept out of the room, leaving Gladys to brood indignantly over her words. There, an hour later, Ralph found her with flushed cheeks and eyes full of tears. He had very little difficulty in drawing from her all that had occurred.

"Gladys," said Ralph gravely, "I see but one course open to me. As a man of honour, I cannot remain here unless Mrs. Harrington—"

"Oh Ralph, what is to become of me, shut up here alone with mamma! If you go, this house will be like a prison. I shall die of wretchedness."

"Then, darling, marry me at once, and—"

"I cannot—at least not yet. When I am twenty-one I shall be my own mistress. Besides," she added with one of her brightest smiles, "I should forfeit my fortune if I married you now—and I want to give my money to you."

The simplicity of her manner was in such strange contrast to the wisdom which seemed almost worldly, that Ralph was fairly dumfounded. Gladys, like most of her sex, was at once impulsive and timid, simple and cunning—a mass of contradictions and yet was most lovable in spite of them all.

"You dear little wise woman," cried Ralph, clasping her in his arms, "I will be guided entirely by you. If you bid me stay here, I will stay. If you command it, I will wear my chain, and go on teaching Freddy his Latin grammar for three mortal years."

"And bear mamma's frowns too?"

"So long as you smile, dearest, all other women in the world may frown and I shall smile."

"That sounds almost like a quotation from one of our poets; is it?"

"No; it is all my own," retorted Ralph with a laugh. "Then," he went on in a more serious tone, "there is to be a sort of armed neutrality between Mrs. Harrington and myself—unless she dismisses me," he finished gloomily.

"She will not do that. Mamma is a very clever woman; she will not take any step which might drive me to—"

"Marriage?" suggested Ralph.

Gladys nodded, and then laughed with such evident enjoyment and glee, that Ralph was once more puzzled by the strange complexity of this mere child's character. And so matters went on at Harrington Hall for several weeks. Mrs. Harrington behaved with studied courtesy to the tutor, who, on his side, strove to look and act as if those momentous words had never been spoken between Gladys and her step-mother. To all appearance, he was only Freddy's paid instructor, and Miss Harrington's honorary Professor of Literature. The reading from the poets were continued; but master and pupil talked more than they read.

Sometimes, the curiously-still, malicious expression of Mrs. Harrington's eyes as they met his across the breakfast or dinner table woke an indefinable dread in Ralph's breast. He had an uncomfortable feeling that Mrs. Harrington would stick at nothing in order to sow dissension between him and Gladys. He dreaded he knew not what. It was like living on the slopes of a volcano;

any moment a torrent of lava might overwhelm the fair seeming of their lives.

One night, on retiring to his own room, Ralph saw something on the carpet that startled him almost as much as the footprint on the sands did Robinson Crusoe. It was only a tassel of jet and steel beads; but a cold shiver of apprehension stole over Ralph as he picked it up and placed it on the dressing-table. That evening at dinner Mrs. Harrington had worn a black satin gown ornamented with precisely similar tassels.

"What could have been her motive in coming to my room?" thought the tutor. "That she has done me the honour of paying me a domiciliary visit is, to my mind, conclusively proved by this small memento." Here he picked up the bunch of beads and examined it meditatively. "I daresay she has ransacked my possessions; but the question is—Why? Did she expect to find love-letters from Gladys? If so, I fear she was disappointed."

For quite half an hour Ralph stood holding the tassel in his hand, ruminating on the extraordinary circumstance that had brought it into his possession; then suddenly he thinking himself that, as it was not yet eleven o'clock, he might get a letter or two written before going to bed, he went to the writing table where stood his desk and opened it leisurely. "I may as well put this out of sight," he thought, smiling as he dropped the "memento" in the pen-tray inside the desk. "It would be rather good fun to return it to Mrs. Harrington in the morning. I wonder what she would say?"

Having written his letters, he still felt disinclined for bed. Old habits of night-study still survived from his college days. There was half-a-dozen or so of his favourite volumes in his portico; he determined to select one and read until he felt sleepy.

But in turning over the contents of the portico he made a second discovery that startled him a good deal more than the former one—a discovery which brought out cold beads of perspiration on his forehead. His worst forebodings had been realised. Sleep was out of the question for that night, and Ralph spent the long hours until the day dawned in meditation that was neither agreeable nor profitable, for he had found out the motive of the strange domiciliary visit on the part of Gladys' handsome step-mother. But the discovery brought him new food for thought for it opened up a prospect that filled him with dismay.

At breakfast the next morning, both Mrs. Harrington and Gladys seemed as calm and self-possessed as usual; they greeted the tutor with more than their customary graciousness, and though Ralph watched the elder lady narrowly, he could detect no change in that handsome impassive face of hers. "What a grand actress the woman would have made!" he thought. "Not the quiver of an eyelash betrays her!"

It needed a stronger effort on his part to talk naturally during the progress of the meal, and once or twice he caught Gladys' eyes fixed inquiringly on him. He resolved to take her into his confidence, for he felt that it would be impossible to hide his secret from her; for the intuition of love had enabled her to find out that something troubled the man she loved.

"Woman's wit may find a way to baffle woman's wit," he thought with a smile as he followed Gladys into the garden after breakfast. "Wise mother, wiser daughter—to paraphrase the oft-quoted Latin line."

Gladys' counsel seemed to dispel the cloud of anxiety and depression that had enveloped Ralph during the night. An hour later he passed into the study with a serene brow and devoted himself as usual to his tutorial duties.

The young master of Harrington Hall was a delicate and docile child, and Ralph, who had all a strong man's tenderness for those weaker, mentally or physically, than himself, kindness that bordered on indulgence. And the boy had attached himself to Ralph with an affection so strong that his mother's jealousy had been aroused, and so fuel was added to the fire that had been lighted by Gladys' avowed preference for the penniless tutor.

"Promise that you will never leave me, Mr. Cunningham," said Freddy, suddenly looking up from his Latin grammar with a wistful look in his big brown eyes. "I couldn't bear to learn of anybody else; and mamma says I needn't go to school until I grow big and strong like other boys."

"What put that into your head my boy?—I have no intention of leaving the Hall at present."

"Oh, I don't know—only mamma said something that made me anxious," replied the child flushing up; and—and I had a horrid dream about you last night."

"Come, my boy; surely you don't believe in dreams, you know the stuff they're made

of—to many sweets and too much cake," answered Ralph, trying to laugh.

But Freddy's little face was still grave, and a frightened expression came into his eyes. "I dreamt about mamma too," he whispered, looking round with a scared look, painful to see. "I don't think mamma likes you, Mr. Cunningham," he added; "and—sometimes her eyes frighten me—even when—when she kisses me and holds me so tight in her arms."

"I don't wonder," thought the tutor as he remembered a certain cold, malicious glitter that sometimes lighted Mrs. Harrington's fine eyes. But aloud he bade Freddy attend to his lessons and think no more of such an unimportant thing as a nightmare dream.

Tutor and pupil worked on steadily until nearly mid-day, when both received a most unexpected summons from Mrs. Harrington's own maid, a tall, slender, and very quietly but elegantly dressed woman or about thirty-five, who had long been in service at the Hall.

"My mistress wishes to see you in the saloon, sir, and she bade me tell you to bring Master Harrington with you," she said in her usual low and respectful tones.

"Certainly," replied the tutor, raising with a smile.—"Come, Freddy."

"The curtain is about to rise on the second act of the comedy," he said to himself as he took the child's hand and followed the maid to the saloon, a large and splendid room, that served as an inner hall, and into which most of the rooms on the ground floor opened. There he found not only Mrs. Harrington and Gladys, but every man and woman who lived under the roof-tree of Harrington Hall.

"I see that Madame contemplates a *comédie-théâtre*," he thought, rapidly exchanging glances with Gladys, who looked a trifle pale and anxious.

"The scene is well arranged; but I fear the 'great situation' she contemplates will not make the effect she aims at."

## CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Harrington's fine eyes had never looked more brilliant and more malicious than when they rested on the pale but composed countenance of the tutor as he quietly entered the saloon leading Freddy by the hand.

"Excuse my somewhat abrupt summons, Mr. Cunningham," she said, speaking very courteously, though there was a ring of covert triumph in her clear tones that warned Ralph that she meant mischief. "But a circumstance has occurred which renders it imperative that I should speak collectively to every member of this household."

Ralph bowed, but made no reply, though he could not repress the slightly sarcastic smile which played upon his lips as he noted the judicial formality of her manner.

"This morning—indeed, not more than an hour ago, I found that, probably during the night, I have been robbed of a very valuable diamond necklace. My maid, Morris, and I at once made a careful examination of the room where, as most of you know, I am in the habit of keeping my jewels. We found, much to our surprise, that the room had not been entered from the outside: the window was securely bolted, and there were no signs whatever of any evil-minded person having effected an entrance in that way. I am therefore forced to accept the other explanation of this extraordinary affair—namely, that my room was visited by some one from inside. Of course, it is just possible that the thief may have gained admittance to the house from some other part of the premises, and found his or her way to my apartments; you, Walters, will be better able to speak with authority on this point than I can. Will you tell us if you found any door or window open this morning?"

The old butler, who had served his mistress faithfully ever since her arrival at the Hall as a bride, twelve years ago, at once declared that he could solemnly swear that no signs of burglary had been visible when he went his rounds early that morning. A look of genuine concern was on his honest countenance as he met Mrs. Harrington's eye, and certainly the most suspicious woman on earth would have instantly acquitted him of having had anything to do with the disappearance of the necklace.

"Has anything else been missed? Is all the plate intact?" queried Mrs. Harrington.

"There is nothing missing, ma'am. If you will examine the strong-room—"

"I am quite ready to take your word," interrupted his mistress with a smile that strove to be kindly.

"My daughter tells me that she also has lost nothing," she continued.

"Mr. Cunningham, can you say the same?" Her cold bright gray eyes were suddenly flashed on the tutor.