

The Gamekeeper's Valentine.

IN TWO INSTALLMENTS.

Lord Oscar resisted no longer; he only said in a voice of deep feeling—
"O, yes, this is very noble of you."
"No such thing; it is only common humanity. Now, if you feel well enough to be left here, I will go on to the Hall, and fetch assistance."

"For Heaven's sake don't leave me here alone!" entreated the other. "My right arm is useless, and what would become of me if those wretches were to return? I might be murdered. Don't leave me. Orton, stay with me till someone comes."
"It isn't very likely that anyone will pass along this road at such an hour. Do you think you could manage to walk if you were to lean on me?"

Lord Oscar attempted to rise but sank back with a groan of pain.
"It's no use," he said, "I must have sprained my ankle when I fell, for I can't stand. You'll have to leave me, Orton."
"No, I'll stay with you, though I can't be of much use."

"Take back your coat, then."
"Not so. You need it, I can do without," said Orton, decisively. "How did this happen? How came those scamps to attack you?" he asked, after a pause.

"They rushed out upon me from behind that tree, and demanded my money and my watch. Of course I resisted; and I had just knocked one down when the other stabbed me in the arm. I don't remember anything after that until I found you here."

There was silence again.
The gamekeeper leaned with folded arms against a tree, and Lord Oscar lay on the ground with his head resting on his hand.

and intently regarded him.
"Orton," he said, at last, "you must think me an ungrateful dog not to have thanked you; but, to tell you the honest truth, I feel so ashamed of myself, I don't know what to say."

"You certainly needn't trouble to say anything in the way of thanks. I don't know how I could have done less than I have done."

"You have had a grand opportunity of returning good for evil," went on Lord Oscar, "but I wonder whether you'd have done as much for me if you'd known what was my errand in the town to-night?"

"I should have done my duty, I hope," said the gamekeeper, briefly.
Orton, mine was an unworthy errand, and retribution has attended it. I owe it to you to tell you what that errand was. You were partly the cause of it."

"Yes, you. When you spoke to me about Miss Forrester, you roused all the evil in my nature—roused it all the more effectually because, in my heart I knew that ever word you said was true. When you left me I vowed that I would have my revenge. Can you guess what I intended doing?"

"Perhaps I could, but I don't choose to try," was the calm rejoinder.

"Well, then, I must tell you; I meant to strike at you through Miss Forrester. I guessed you loved her, and I determined to try to win her away from you. I remembered that tomorrow is Valentine's Day, and I sent her a present by way of a valentine. Don't reproach me, Orton—don't tell me I'm a scoundrel! I feel it strongly enough without you telling me."

"And you have sent this present?"
"Yes. It was a mean, cowardly action, and I repent it with all my heart. Will you forgive me, Orton?"

"Why should you ask me to forgive you?"

"Because the injury was directed against you. If it had not been for my rage against you, I should never have sent that present—should never have thought of deliberately trying to win the girl's affections. You saddened me and I wanted to make you suffer. But I hope there's some little decency left in me; and, if I never felt ashamed in my life before, I feel ashamed tonight."

"Tell me one thing," said John Orton, who had listened to this confession in grave and silence. "Do you love Miss For-

rester? Do you love her well enough to make her your wife?"
"I love her well enough, if that were all that were required; but you know very well, Orton, that it would never do to make old Grey's granddaughter the mistress of Shirley Hall."

"And yet such things have been, said John Orton, musingly.
He left his position by the tree and began to pace up and down the road in the moonlight.

Presently he stopped short before Lord Oscar.
"My lord, you say I have done you a service to-night. Will you do something for me?"

"Whatever you like to ask."
"Simply this; promise me, upon your honour, to give up all attempts to win the affections of Maude Forrester."

"I have already vowed that to my own heart," said Lord Oscar, very earnestly; "but I will gladly promise it to you as well."

"Thank you, my lord. You are right in thinking I love Maude Forrester; I love her better than my life, and I hold her honour as dear as my own. I love her so much that, were I a lord, I should still feel proud to marry her. As it is, I shall try with all my power to induce her to be my wife."

Lord Oscar regarded his late gamekeeper intently for a moment or two; then he half raised himself, and stretched out his hand.

Orton, you're a good fellow—the most true and generous I've ever known. Few people think me a haughty young fool, I dare say; but at any rate, I'm not too proud to think it an honor to be allowed to shake hands with a man like you. Will you take my hand, Orton, in token that you don't altogether despise me?"

John Orton took that white, aristocratic hand in his own sun-browned one, and clasped it cordially.

"I don't despise you now, my lord," he said, "though I tell you frankly, I despised you enough, in all conscience, a few hours ago. But it isn't everyone in your rank of life who would confess his wrong-doing to one in mine, and I honor you with all my heart for the confession."

"Don't mention rank," exclaimed Lord Oscar, with energy. "As you rightly reminded me this afternoon, it would be a disgrace to me to remember it. You have saved my life tonight Orton. If it hadn't been for you I might have been murdered by those fellows or left there to freeze to death. You shall find me grateful."

"I won't ask you to return to your old position, for you are above it. I am not your master and never shall be again; but you shall find me your sincere friend."

Before Orton could reply, there was a sound of voices and approaching footsteps, and in a few minutes three young men from the town came in sight.

Willoughby enough they were to lend assistance, and in less than an hour Lord Oscar was safe in his own home.

"Where is Orton?" he asked, as his servants were assisting him upstairs.

The ex-gamekeeper emerged from the shadow of one of the doorways, and stepped up to him.

"Give me your hand again," said Lord Oscar, heartily. "Come to me tomorrow and I will try to thank you better than I can thank you now."

CHAPTER VI. ST. VALENTINE'S DAY.

St. Valentine's day dawned very brightly; the sky was blue and clear; the birds were singing merrily, almost deceived into the notion that spring had really come, and that it was therefore time for them to think about their own little love affairs.

Before the morning was half over, Orton was on his way to the Hall Farm, anxious and painfully anxious—to know what late his letter was likely to receive.

The thought of the present Lord Oscar had sent was making him feel that he could not endure suspense—that he must know whether there was any answering love to respond to that which he had himself confessed.

No wonder that his heart beat quickly as he approached the old farmhouse.

He entered the kitchen, where one of the maids was busy cooking.
"Master's out," she told him, "and Miss Forrester is upstairs. If you'll go into the sitting-room, I'll tell her you're here."

Into the sitting-room he went, feeling anxious and ill at ease now that the moment which would decide his fate was so near at hand.

But as minute after minute slipped by, he grew impatient, and man-like, he took up the poker, and gave vent to his impatience by poking the fire most vigorously.

As he did this a scrap of charred paper, the fragment of a letter, attracted his attention.

It was only a tiny scrap, but it was quite sufficient for John Orton—sufficient proof of the reception his wooing might expect, for he knew the paper which had been so ruthlessly committed to the flames was none other than the letter in which he had made his avowal of love.

"And so that is how she treats it—with rudeness and contempt," he muttered, very bitterly. "Ah! I was a fool to send it. I might have known!"

He drew himself up with a decided air of pride, and glanced round the room for something on which to write a line or two of farewell to the scornful beauty.

There was a sheet of folded note paper on the table, apparently unwritten upon. He took it up, when, lo! a crisp bank note—a bank note for fifty pounds—flashed on to the floor.

John Orton started back as though a serpent had stung him; then almost before he realized what he was doing, he had glanced at the letter—for it was a letter—in which the note had been enclosed.

Only one sentence he read—
"Accept this, then, my darling, as a token of my love—as an earnest of the wealth I mean to lavish on you soon."

Only that one sentence; then he remembered he had no right to read the letter, and he put it from him with a flushed cheek and a trembling hand.

"Ah! this, then, is the price he sets upon her. Does she think it high enough, I wonder?" he muttered, very bitterly.

While his hand was still on the letter, the door opened and Maude entered.

Her cheeks were lightly flushed, her step and air were full of pride.

John Orton noticed this, and thought he knew the cause.
A corresponding—nay, an even greater—pride awoke in his own heart, and his voice was supremely haughty, as well as frigidly cold, as uttered a formal salutation.

She returned his greeting, casting meanwhile, an anxious perturbed glance at the letter on the table.

He noticed this, and said, with quiet scorn—"I owe you a confession, Miss Forrester. You seem concerned about this letter—touching it contemptuously with his finger—and it is only fair to tell you that I, not dreaming of its importance, have presumed to look at it. I have seen its enclosure, and can guess from whom it came. May I, without adding very greatly to my presumption, say one word of warning?"

"Just this—return that bank-note, Miss Forrester."

"On the contrary, I shall keep it," she retorted, "and you will, perhaps, allow me to add that I am in no need of advice, and most certainly can dispense with yours."

He gasped at the proud, beautiful face in silence.

Many emotions were contending in his breast, and reflecting on his face something of that inward conflict.

Love, anger, jealousy, and disappointment—these were the passions felt by John Orton as he stood there in silence.

At length he took up his hat, saying—
"Good morning, Miss Forrester. I don't suppose you and I will ever meet again, but I shall always remember you as a proof how great a fool a man may be made by a woman's beauty."

And with this bitter speech, he bowed, and quitted the room.

"He is jealous!" thought Maude, as she stood by the window and watched him striding firmly down the garden. "He is jealous, and no wonder, poor fellow!"

She smiled a little sadly and took up the letter.

"He was too honest to read it, I suppose; but I wonder whom he thinks it came from?"

"A gamekeeper," she resumed, with a half sigh; "only a gamekeeper. And yet I almost wish he had been bold enough to try to win me a month ago, a week ago, or even a day ago, so that I had been before I knew what I know now. But it is too late—yes; it is too late!"

CHAPTER VII.

LORD OSCAR AND FARMER GREY.

Lord Oscar had passed a restless night. Pain was a new sensation to him, and his sprained ankle and wounded arm had brought him into a state of feverishness which the bent of his thoughts did not tend to suppress.

As he lay on a couch and sipped a cup of cocoa, he was reflecting very seriously on the events of the preceding evening, thinking of his own selfishness, and contrasting it with the nobly generous conduct of his late gamekeeper.

A flash of shame crossed his cheek, and, frankly enough, he owned his own unworthiness.

His musings were broken in upon by a tap at the door, followed by the entrance of a servant, who announced, with some hesitation—
"If you please, my lord, there's Mr. Grey."

—Farmer Grey of the Hall Farm—downstairs, and he wants to know if you will see him. I told him your lordship was ill; but he kept on saying he must see you—that his business was most important. What shall I say to him if you please, my lord?"

A hot flush mantled Lord Oscar's cheek, and he looked into the fire for a moment or

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two without replying.

Then he said, with sudden decision—
"Show Farmer Grey up; I will see him." The servant departed, wondering not a little, and Lord Oscar turned uneasily on his couch.

"Lying it! I won't be a coward, even though I have come very near being a scoundrel," he muttered. "He has a right to see me, and I won't shrink him. He'll be a tough customer though."

"Farmer Grey," he announced the servant, as he softly opened the door, and Lord Oscar looked up, to find his "tough customer" beside him.

There was certainly something rather awe inspiring in the stern countenance of the old farmer as he fixed his eyes on the young lord—fixed them sternly upon his face first, and then, rather contemptuously, on his splendid dressing gown.

Lord Oscar stirred uneasily beneath that gaze.

"It was a relief to him when the farmer broke the silence, by saying—
"A guilty conscience needs no accuser," my lord, so I suppose you can guess my errand here this morning?"

"Yes, I think I can," broke forth Lord Oscar, impetuously. "You've come to tell me that I'm a false-hearted scoundrel, to deserve nothing better from you than a horse whipping. Say it out, farmer; you can't say a word that's too bad for me."

Farmer Grey was somewhat taken aback by this most unexpected repudiation; his face relaxed slightly, but hardened again in a moment, as he said, coldly—
"Keep your protestations for those who will believe them; no doubt they have some base purpose to serve; I have not come to call you names, Lord Oscar, for I don't think it worth while to use such language as your conduct deserves. I have simply come to bring you back the gewgaw you sent my granddaughter."

He laid a sealed package on the table as he spoke.
"Grey!" exclaimed Lord Oscar, very earnestly, "I suppose you won't believe me, I can't expect that you should—but all through the night I've been reproaching myself for my folly, and impudence, and wickedness, in having dared to send that bracelet to Miss Forrester. I've felt as though I would have given my right hand almost to have been able to recall it. Believe me or believe me not, I never meant any serious harm by it. I sent it in a moment of pique, because, well, because someone had annoyed me; but I never thought of it doing any real harm. I am ashamed at myself for having dared do such a thing at all, but I swear it was not meant in the way of temptation."

"Temptation!" repeated the farmer, with a half angry, half-scornful look. "I hope you didn't imagine my girl could be tempted by such trumpery as this?" he touched the packet contemptuously. "As a matter of fact, she has not seen it—has no suspicion of your having sent it."
"Had she seen it, her feelings would have been like mine—nothing deeper than contempt. No, my lord; Maude comes of a stock as famous for its women's virtue as for the honesty of its men. No man, least of all a Shirley, concluded the old man, proudly, and without a touch of emotion, "could ever say a word against the Greys of the Hall Farm. And this reminds me of the rest of my errand here. I have come to give you notice to quit."

"Quit the farm?" exclaimed Lord Oscar, in dismay. "Why, Grey, it's been in your family for centuries."
"Yes, my lord, I know that, and I'd hoped the old stock might continue there as long as ever the bricks and mortar held together. But the Hall Farm is no place for me now. I've known the Shirleys, father and son, and grandson, and honored and respected them all; but when a Shirley comes sending diamond bracelets to my granddaughter, there's an end to all respect or kindly feeling. So I'd better leave the farm, my lord, for I tell you plainly I don't choose to pay rent to, or till the ground for a man that I can neither respect nor forgive."

"Forgive me our trespasses," said Lord Oscar, in a low, earnest voice; "that's what you repeat in church every Sunday. Grey, won't you forgive me mine?"
Farmer Grey was amazed, dumfounded almost, by this appeal.
He himself was a religious man, although a somewhat stern one; but he had not expected this humble appeal for pardon from the gay young nobleman, whom, if the truth must be told, he had been disposed to regard as a graceless and hardened

sinner.

"Grey, only listen for a moment," went on Lord Oscar, "and I'll try and make you believe me. I won't attempt to excuse my impudence in sending that trinket to Miss Forrester; I must have been mad, as well as wicked, when I thought of such a thing. I was mad, but I've come to my senses now. The injury to my foot and arm came on me as a judgment, I verily believe, and the man who saved my life almost at the risk of his own, and all this in spite of the fact that I had both insulted and injured him, who returned me good for evil, until I felt ready to sink into the earth with shame—this man, Grey, made me see my own meanness as I had never seen it before."

"And who is he?" questioned the farmer, curiously.
"A young fellow who recently entered my service as under gamekeeper. His name is Orton."

"Orton!"
A sudden cloud, a shade of disappointment, of confusion even, rose to the farmer's brow but he made no comment.

"Yes, Grey; and I swore to him I would never go a step further in my folly, even should Miss Forrester accept my gift. Nay I had almost made up my mind to send for you, and tell you what a stupid fool I'd been, and to ask your pardon as well as Miss Forrester's. I suppose it hard for you to believe this; but I swear it's true by everything a man can hold good and holy."

The farmer looked keenly at his young landlord for a moment or two.

Apparently there was something in those bright blue eyes which inspired him confidence, for his own face lost its look of sternness, and he said briefly—
"Lord Oscar, I believe you."

"And forgive me—say that, too, farmer," urged the young man.

"Ay, and forgive you."
"Give me your hand upon it then. And Grey, just one thing more, and you'll set my mind at rest. Promise me you won't leave the farm."

"Not I, for I love it too well, my lord. And now I'll tell you something that I'm glad I didn't tell you till I'd seen for myself if you weren't the man I thought you. It will surprise you not a little, and not a soul in this place knows it but Maude and myself."

"What on earth is it?"
"Why my lord, my granddaughter is the daughter of a baronet—her father is Sir Alfred Forrester."

"What!" exclaimed Lord Oscar, in amazement. "Is this true, Grey?"

"As true as the gospel, my lord. I've never talked much about Maude's father, or let her talk much about him, either; but of course, I knew he was a gentleman, and highly connected, though very poor. His cousin was Sir William Forrester; but it was never thought he would come in for the estates. However, Sir William was drowned a few weeks ago, and his son died last Friday, as I daresay you know; and Maude's father is the heir."

"He came over from America as soon as he heard of Sir William's death and he would be down here now if he were well enough; but he is confined to his house in London by a severe cold. However, I have seen him, and I brought back with me last night a fifty pound note for Maude by way of a valentine."

"And so now, Lord Oscar, you will understand why I thought it my duty to intercept your valentine to her this morning. It was not that I feared its effects on her, but I wished to hand her over to her father with a mind perfectly free from even romantic fancies. She has been the very apple of my eye for all these years, and no lord's daughter could have been more carefully guarded from harm."

"I'm sure of that, Grey. And now promise me one thing more. Never let Miss Forrester know of my folly in sending her that valentine."

"She shall never know from me, my lord."

At this moment the doctor was announced, and Farmer Grey took his departure, leaving his landlord to muse on the

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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