

TWO SONNETS.

BY MAX.

We walk like men within a wood at night, Haunting and stumbling often on our way; Tho' faith is ours we choose to walk by sight, Preferring darkness to the perfect day. How prone we are to choose the darker side, Instead of turning to life's beautiful sun; How prone we are to be self-satisfied, Leaving the good around us all undone. When wintry clouds above the city loom, Draping in utter sadness all the sky, Then say we God's fair earth is full of gloom, Remembering not that joyous spring is nigh; When happy birds will thrill their glad refrain, And summer's odorous roses bloom again.

With soundless feet thro' time's immensity, The new year comes upon the sleeping earth; And angels' eyes look down from heaven and see

Our lives and notions when he wakes to birth. Surely we might cast out the gloom within, Surely we might do better if we would; And not, self-righteous, harbor up our sin, But exercise our love in doing good; And with the dawning year begin anew The noble work so long been left undone; Then shall we see life's skies in cloudless blue When in the eastern azure shines the sun, And blessed peace and blessed glory win, And with our souls behold the Heaven within.

LESTELLE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE ROSE AND STAMBOOK," ETC.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LESTELLE HUMBLER HERSELF.

The successful manager came to his prima donna brisk and smiling. He was still in his gay dressing-gown and slippers, but apologized courteously for a *déshabillé* he declared to be owing to his eagerness to behold her—an eagerness, by the bye, which had not prevented his stopping before his glass to see that his hair and those wrinkles which began to remind him of his age carefully smoothed away.

"You are an early visitor, *m'amie*," he said; "but a most welcome one. It is the first time you have honoured me with a call; may it be an augury of many pleasant hours to be spent together." He saw Lestelle wince, and changed the subject.

"Of course you will breakfast with me? My cook is an admirable one. What may I offer you, chocolate or coffee? Will you taste this ragout? But you look pale this morning. Dare I recommend a cup of tea, and one teaspoonful, carefully measured, of *ca-de-vie* in it? It is a marvelous restorative."

"Give me what you will, only spare me compliments, and let me despatch my business, and go," said Lestelle impatiently.

He placed a cup at her elbow, but seeing that she pushed aside the delicate viands with a look of disgust, he sat down to his own breakfast, which he began to discuss with evident relish.

"You can have nothing to say that will spoil my appetite," Mr. Paulton observed, when she had thirstily swallowed her tea. "You have brought me that definite answer I asked for some few days since, have you not?"

She nodded assent, for her lips seemed parched with inward fever, and her voice failed her.

After a minute or so, Paulton put down his knife and fork, and leant towards her.

"Well, little one, and what is it to be? Yes? I thought so!"

"Stay; you are assuming too much. I must first know how it is that, in direct violation of your word, you have commenced proceedings against the Glenshaughtons in my name, and yet without apprising me of what you are doing?"

"Suffer me to correct one or two errors in that little speech," he answered, deliberately. "I have not threatened any one with a suit but the Honorable Darcy Lesmore; neither have I broken my word in so doing. The promise you had from me related to the Earl, and not to his nephew. For the rest, I saw no good purpose to be gained in telling you my plans."

"I will not seek redress at the hands of the law!" cried Lestelle, vehemently. "I forbid you to proceed with this suit."

With the utmost ease of manner Mr. Paulton resumed his breakfast.

"You will not be of age for some months, my child; till then, I shall advance your interests in the manner I think best."

"Do you expect to make me believe that you can thrust birth and fortune upon me against my will?" was the indignant query.

Paulton smiled.

"It is the first time I ever heard a young lady take exception to a clear rental of fifteen thousand a year."

"Show me the proofs of my birth?" she exclaimed, without appearing to hear this last speech.

"He drew out his pocket-book.

"It has cost me no little trouble to collect them. I have been at considerable expense in

finding the witnesses to the marriage; their evidence is in the hands of our legal advisors, also a copy of the certificate of the nuptials; the original I shall have the pleasure of reading to you. Excuse me," he said, as she extended her hand for it. "I do not permit this valuable document to leave me for one moment."

He read the yellow, faded slip of paper, which certified that a marriage had been performed, at a little church amongst the Hampshire hills, between Esther Waverill and Arden Lesmore; and the hope Lestelle had been cherishing, that some deception had been practised upon her, was gone.

For a moment she bowed her head on her bosom, and fancy vividly pictured Darcy robbed of his high estate, and stung to the quick by the publicity given to his father's crime; of the congratulations that would be lavished upon her by those who would not dream of the pain they inflicted; of the sensational paragraphs that would fill the daily papers; and then she rose in uncontrollable agitation.

"It must not be! I cannot bear it! Spare Darcy Lesmore the shame and disgrace which now threatens him, and I will do whatever you ask."

Paulton frowned. "Is it wholly for this young man's sake that I find you so humble? Remember, I warned you not to permit his visits."

"True; I disobeyed you, and you have punished me for my folly. Is it not enough? Need you dwell on this subject any longer?" she queried, impatiently.

He pointed to the chair from which she had risen. "Sit down, Lestelle, and let us perfectly comprehend each other. You wish this suit against Mr. Lesmore quashed. If I consent, what do you give me in return?"

A hope that he would not care to wed a penniless bride thrilled through her.

"It is for you to make your demands, and for me to comply with them if I can. I have had a letter from the lessee of one of the New York theatres, offering me very handsome terms for a few night's performances. I could add a tolerable sum to your treasury if I accepted the offer, and I am willing to enter into any engagement you choose to propose."

"Bah! you talk nonsense," he answered, rudely. "Have I not already told you that nothing but your hand will satisfy me? Become my wife, and Darcy Lesmore may keep his estate if he chooses."

But Lestelle eyed him suspiciously. "You are strangely ready to relinquish the wealth you were a moment since so obstinate in pressing on me."

"Is no one capable of a disinterested act but yourself, little one?" he started. "If I cannot have you with a dowry, I must take you without one. So that I win my pretty bribes, I shall be content."

Still unconvinced, Lestelle retreated from him as he tried to take her hand.

"You are deceiving me! Your proofs are not as conclusive as you have represented them. Do your worst. I will await the issue. I will not fetter myself until I am sure that there is no other way of saving Darcy."

Wyett Paulton's smiles vanished, and pushing the table away, he came and stood before her.

"Lestelle, there is no other way; I swear to you that there is not! Whether this young man be dear to you as brother or lover, he must and shall lose all unless you become mine. I will not have the plans and hopes of years set aside for a girl's silly fancy."

She raised her clasped hands.

"Have pity on me, and upon him! Remember how I have always looked upon you as a stern task-master, and—the betrothed of another. How can I learn to love you? It would be an unholy union, and could only end in our mutual misery."

Wyett smiled grimly.

"I will run the risk. You shall not find me a bad husband. So that you are docile, and continue to avoid the attentions of the fools who flatter round you, I will ask no more. Nay, I will even promise to remove you from the stage ere long."

Lestelle glanced at his inflexible face, and veiled her eyes. She had always distrusted, but now she hated him; and, for a moment, she was disposed to start up, telling him this, and once more defying him. But a thought of Darcy—his name blighted, his prospects ruined—had power to restrain her.

"After all, it is only I who need be unhappy," she sighed to herself. "Darcy will marry his beautiful cousin, and forget that Lestelle, the actress, ever crossed his path. Ought I to think any sacrifice too great that is made for him?"

But even as she came to this conclusion, her hatred of the manager came back in full force.

"You are both ungenerous and unwise to force me into an union against which my soul revolts!" she told Wyett, passionately. "Nothing will ever compensate you for the burden of an unloving wife, who will be for ever beside you, yet neither friend nor companion. A little while, and you will loathe the sight of the woman you are now persecuting with such unscrupulous persistence."

"I will take my chance," he said, tranquilly. "I have outlived the season when we make love our master passion. And so it is decided. You will be my wife—but when? To-morrow?"

Lestelle shuddered.

"No, no! I must have time to accustom myself to the thought of the dreary life before me."

Paulton frowned.

"I do not like delays, neither will I submit to them; but I will give time for preparing your trousseau. What is to-day?—Friday. On Monday week, then, at St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, at ten o'clock. There must no wavering now, Lestelle—no attempts to recede from your promise. I will not be trifled with. Comprenez-vous?"

She bowed her head, and drawing the veil over her face to hide the despair depicted on it, turned to leave him. He saw her steps falter, he heard the sob she could not repress, and sprang forward just in time to prevent her falling heavily to the floor.

CHAPTER XIX.

A QUARREL.

It seemed an unutterable relief to Lestelle, when she found herself once more in her own cool, darkened chamber, with the hateful face of Wyett Paulton no longer bonding over her, nor his voice, in its most modulated tones, uttering regrets for her indisposition. The knowledge that she was his bond-slave made his presence all the more intolerable; and when he would have touched her cheek with his lips she left her, she put out her hands, and thrust him from her with a look of abhorrence which he answered with a frown that menaced retaliation sooner or later.

Presently Miss Hill stole to the couch of the miserable girl, and wrapped her arms around her, "I hoped I should find you weeping, my poor child, for tears would relieve you. What has happened? Will you not tell me?"

"Alas, Leticia! why should I distress you, who could neither help nor comfort me?" was the desponding reply.

"Are you sure of that? Try me! Recollect the fable of the 'Lion and Mouse;' and at least give me credit for the sincerest sympathy in your troubles."

"But they concern Wyett Paulton."

"And you think that I cannot calmly bear fresh proofs of his villainy? Again I say, try me. If I cannot help you, dear Lestelle, I can grieve with you."

Though still reluctant to pain the gentle, generous woman, Lestelle told all.

"And as your marriage is now a decided thing," Miss Hill commented, her voice faltering a little, "perhaps you will learn to love Mr. Paulton by-and-by. He can be the most fascinating of men when he pleases."

"He has never cared to practise his fascinations on one who penetrated his true character long since," answered Lestelle, contemptuously.

Miss Hill took no notice of this, but began to question her so closely about Darcy Lesmore, and her own connection with the Glenshaughton family, that at last she grew tired of answering inquiries which brought back scenes and circumstances she longed to forget.

"Dear Leticia, why dwell on the past? You know that I left Mrs. Price's at the suggestion of Wyett, who had learned somehow that I was a daughter of the Glenshaughton family. Of the certificate of my mother's marriage he deprived me when he first brought me to London, to place me under your care. How he prevailed upon you to undertake such an onerous charge I cannot divine."

A flush crossed Miss Hill's face.

"Cannot you? And yet if you had loved him as devotedly as I did, you would have been as willing to further plans which were to be the stepping-stones to his—or, as he used to say then, our—future prosperity."

"When I grow older and braver," Lestelle musingly proceeded, "I asked him for the paper, but was put off with assurances that it was in safer keeping than my own, and that it would be positively true until I came of age. He would have kept me in ignorance of its purport, but this I learned as soon as I was able to read the letter he dropped when appropriating it. It had been written by my mother in her dying hours, when she felt that she had carried her self-sacrifice too far, and that she must assert the rights of the child who would soon be a friendless orphan. From that letter I learned that she was legally married to one of the sons of the late Lord Glenshaughton; and until last night, I believed myself to be the daughter of the present Earl."

"It does not seem probable that a man in his position would have committed two such mad acts as your story attributes to him," Miss Hill observed.

"Were they not equally culpable in his brother's?"

"Scarcely, for the Honorable Arden Lesmore was not the head of his family, and may have been as thoughtless and unprincipled as younger sons frequently are. The Earl is a man of a different stamp—dignified, reserved, and fully alive to the duties of his rank. If the illegitimacy of his nephew should be proved, it will be a great blow to him, and the Lady Ida, who is as proud as her father."

"Don't speak of it—I cannot bear it!" moaned Lestelle. "But they will be spared this sorrow. Paulton—base though I know him to be—dare not break his promise."

"He exacts a fearful price for his silence," sighed Miss Hill. "And the writhing girl bade her say no more, but leave her."

"Who should know this better than I do?" she demanded. "Let me strive to sleep, to forget how soon I shall be his wife—if I can!"

But not all Lestelle's fortitude would enable her to go through her part in a comic opera that night, even though Mr. Paulton sought to appraise her that Royally expected her presence. On the following evening, however, she appeared at

the theatre, a little paler than usual, and with a wistful look in her dark eyes which they had never worn before. Viscount Branceleigh stood at the wing when she came off, curtsying her acknowledgments of the rapturous applause that followed the finale; and, for a moment, she put her cold fingers into his palm, as if she needed the reassuring touch of a friend's hand.

"What is the matter, Lestelle?" he whispered. "I have only just heard that you have been ill, and your looks confirm the report."

She drew a long breath. "I am well again. Don't stop to question me; Mr. Paulton's eyes are upon us; but tell your cousin he need not fear any further annoyance. He will comprehend my meaning."

The next minute, Mr. Paulton had led her away, smiling blandly, and bowing to one and another as he did so; but when they were at the door of the young actress's dressing room, his face changed as he spoke in his sternest tones.

"Let this be the last time that I find you holding communication with either of these Glenshaughtons. If you were not a silly, credulous woman, you would see that they are only craftily plying you with flatteries, that they may learn all you can tell them of my plans."

Lestelle disengaged her arm from his, and would have passed on without replying, but he would not let her.

"You must promise before you leave me. Don't struggle and look angry. Some day, when you are wiser, you will thank me for my firmness."

"I shall always speak kindly to Percy Branceleigh—always!" she said deliberately. "You know why I have liked and pitied him. It was your own acts that brought us together."

"And now I think fit to separate you. I have never had any faith in this kind of friendships, and so remember that I bid you see him no more."

"Have I sold both soul and body to you?" she asked impetuously. "Take care! You are rousing all the evil in my nature! I may yet foil all your schemes, and make you repent that you ever embarked in them!"

Wyett Paulton grew ghastly pale, and caught hold of the door-frame for support. Yet it was in his usually ardent manner that he asked, "And how will you do this?"

Lestelle let her arms fall by her side. It had been the empty threat of a rebellious woman, who chafed against the chains that were closing around her.

He saw this, and recovered his own composure. For a moment, he had been afraid that he had gone too far, and that she might grow desperate and escape him. Now that his well-laid schemes were so near fruition, he must be cautious, and this recollection made him soften his voice into more conciliatory tones.

"We are foolish to quarrel, *m'amie*. I had forgotten, for the minute, that you have a fancy that this youth is dying. As soon as we are married, I will prove my confidence in you by removing this restriction, and myself inviting Viscount Branceleigh to visit us."

Lestelle made no answer, but finding that he no longer attempted to detain her, she passed swiftly into her dressing-room, and locked the door between them with a fierce haste, born of her increasing detestation of the man to whom the rest of her days were to be devoted.

Percy carried her message to his cousin, reporting to him as he sat in the Countess of Glenshaughton's boudoir, waiting for Lady Ida, who was going to ride with him. Darcy, however, did not appear overjoyed at the tidings.

"What does she mean? How has she prevented the prosecution of the claim? I had rather, much rather, have been permitted to examine the evidence on which it is founded, and decide for myself whether it be a just or unjust one."

"As far as you are concerned, it is an unfounded one, depend upon it!" said Percy. "Therefore, I would, if I were you, accept Lestelle's assurance, and let the affair die away."

"Now, I cannot do that," Darcy exclaimed, after a few minutes' thought. "If Lestelle is renouncing her own rights on my behalf, I should be selfish and ungenerous to suffer it. I must know more about the matter."

"Better not," said Percy, with a sigh. "Or, at least, consent to let it lie in abeyance until I am gone. If I were strong and able to cope with trouble, I'd not ask this; but I'm just a weak nervous invalid, yearning to be permitted to creep out of my mortal coil as peacefully as I can."

Neither of the speakers had heard Lady Ida enter, but now her voice pettishly interposed.

"How foolishly you talk, Percy. Dr. Dullman assures mamma that you take a very exaggerated view of your case, and that you are not in any danger. Exercise and moderate living will soon restore you to health."

"Dr. Dullman is very kind; I wish I could agree with him," her brother replied, as soon as he had mastered a fit of coughing.

"You seem to take a cruel pleasure in frightening us," Ida said, reproachfully. "You are always representing yourself as worse than you really are."

"Am I? Then I'll break myself of such a mean trick. I did not know you were in the room when I was speaking of my wishes."

"What has Darcy been proposing? May I not know?" his sister inquired, as she took the seat Darcy rose to give her.

"To be as high-minded as Lestelle, and refuse the sacrifice she offers to make," Percy answered. "She has interposed, it appears, to prevent the suit being carried on."

Ida carried her lip. "A sufficient proof that