One in a Thousand,

BUT TRUE TO THE LAST

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNWELCOME GUEST.

We are once more at Idleminster, three weeks after Lasselles' funeral. Never shall I forget those ceremonies, nor Theo's calm, still bearing until the coffin was laid in the grave. Then she gave away to a fit of passionate weeping. Her grief was genuine, I know, but I cannot help remarking that she controls herself until Adrian lays a wreath upon the grave.

Immediately after the funeral we return to Idleminster, and take up our residence at the little house Adrian bought. It is very charming and pleasant. I am delighted with it, and Adrian takes pleasure in my delight.

One night at dinner I half reveal my knowledge that he was Arthur St. Clair. While he does not deny it directly, he seems never to grasp the fact that I thought he was Theo's first love. I am greatly puzzled by my husband.

So the weeks pass. I meet many of the officers and many of the ladies. I find a love affair between a Miss Edith Dare and a Capt. Cust, and I set my woman's genius at work to make a match.

Theo is anxious to come down to Loys' for a time, but I passively combat the idea. It does not seem right to do so, but I do.

One day I go into town to see Loys, and find Miss Dare with other callers. Just as I am about to leave, I manage to get beside the beautiful girl.

"Can you dine with us on Tuesday? Yes? I am going to ask you quietly, Miss Dare," I tell her; "for just yet we cannot have any large parties. I shall ask your aunt before we go."

"Oh, thank you!" she exclaims, brightly. "That is delightful!"

"I had a letter from Theo this morning," says Loys, in an undertone. "And so she is coming down to Idleminster, after all!"

If Mrs. Edward Vincent had suddenly plunged a dagger into me, I could not have experienced a greater shock than from the news that Theo is coming to Idleminster. I am positively too much astounded to speak at all.

"And she is going to leave both the children," says Loys; "I am not surprised at that."

"Whatever will you do with her?" I stammer, at last.

"!!" repeats Loys, blankly. "She is not coming to stay with us."

"Not coming to stay with you!" I say, stupidly.

"No; it is you, of course. She told us before we left town that Adrian had asked her." I wonder what Loys would say if she could see how terribly every word she says is torturing me? She is utterly ignorant of it, for her soft voice goes on: "The children are to go to Park Royal, and Lady Lasselles is going to take care of them for a few weeks."

"Oh, then, Theo intends remaining a few weeks?"

At this moment Mrs. Brancepeth approaches us, and Edith gives up her seat to her. She talks a good deal, but Loys has to supply most of the conversation, and I should fancy she must think me an uncommonly stupid young woman. I am very glad when Jenkins brings the carriage, for I want to be out of this noisy, laughing company. We go home alone, for the groom came down in plain clothes, and is now at liberty for the night. Adrian is very considerate and good to his servants.

When we are quite out of the town and are spinning along the quiet, country roads, I break the silence.

"Adrian," I say, tremulously, "you did not tell me that you had asked Theo to stay with us."

"I could not tell you so, my baby."

"Why?"

"Because I never asked her. You are the mistress of my house."

"But she is coming!" I almost wail. "She has written to tell Loys so; and she says you asked her."

His face clouds darkly; then he looks down into my troubled eyes, with a smile.

"Theo tells stories," he says, putting his left arm round me, for it is fast growing dark.

"I won't have her," I say, rebelliously. "She has no right to force herself into my house, whether I wish for her or not, and make me miserable."

"I hope that neither Theo nor any other woman on the face of the earth is able to do that," says Adrian, gravely; "because that implies that you doubt me."

I do not answer, and he draws me close to his side, and tries to look into my eyes.

"You don't doubt me, Audrey?" he says, softly; but still I do not say a single word.

"Have I ever given you any cause to do so? Because, if so, it has been purely unintentional; and, if you will tell me how, I will do all I can to make amends for it."

Why cannot I tell him all that has been troubling me during the past weary weeks? I try to speak, but my trembling lips refuse to frame the words; perhaps it is because I am a little ashamed to own my jealousy and my distrust.

"Look up, and tell me that nothing will ever make you doubt me," he says, passionately. "Tell me that you love me well enough to trust me anywhere with anyone."

He raises my face with his hand, and I look into his eyes, and tell him a lie. I tell him with my lips that I trust him, and in my heart I not only doubt—I tell myself I am certain I do not.

"As to Theo," he says, presently, "it won't make much difference to us, if she wants to come. I dare say she wants a change; and, really, Audrey, I think she felt Lasselles' death a great deal more than you would allow."

"Then she is to come?" I say, desperately.

"Oh, yes, poor girl, let her come! I don't see, really, how we can refuse her."

For answer I bend my head down and burst into passionate, hysterical tears. For a moment Adrian holds me closer; evidently his first thought is how to comfort me, but then he takes his arm away, and leaves me to myself.

"Why are you crying, Audrey?" he says, coldly.

I do not answer, but feel blindly for my pocket handkerchief, whereat he laughs and gives me his. I take it meekly and dry my eyes, for, in spite of the laugh, I think he is angry. I dare not look at him, for he will either laugh at me or look disagreeable, and I wish Theo were in New Zealand. To my relief, he puts his arm back, and kisses me—not once, nor twice, but many times; and I lean against him, neither objecting to nor returning his caresses, but quite passive, in the calm which invariably succeeds a storm.

"My baby," says he, gravely, "you are making yourself and me very unhappy and miserable about nothing. There is not a human being in the whole world who can come between us two—it is impossible. My darling, I would trust you anywhere, for any length of time, and with anybody; but, upon my honor, I judge you by myself! When we were in town, you talked some nonsense about Theo taking me away from you. It was really very absurd, for it is simply impossible; but, if you allow these jealous fancies to take hold of you, there is no knowing where they may end."

"If I did not care so much——" I begin.

"Yes, yes—I know. But now you are quite satisfied, are you not? And remember, dearest, if ever I seem to—to—well, what shall I call it?—be crusty, or disagreeable, just tell me, and I'll try to mend myself."

So what I get is a lecture, and Theo is coming, after all.

"I don't really see how we can refuse her," he continues; "in her present state of mind, she would think us so very unkind." And so it is settled that she is to come. Adrian evidently finds the subject unpleasant, for he dismisses it abruptly. "Did you notice that Edith Dare had Cust's ring on to-day? I declare, if we go on at the rate we have done during the last two years, we shan't have an unmarried officer left. There'll only be the colonel. What a joke it would be if he had the mess room to himself every night, with nobody but the orderly officer to keep him company!"

"Yes; and what a nuisance for the orderly officer!" I answer. I may as well make myself agreeable while I can; I shall not have to trouble when Theo comes.

"Yes, poor beggar; it isn't very pleasant, I can tell you. I dined three nights running with Green when he was major, and he talked nothing but Red Book the whole time."

"Why didn't you get up and go away?" I ask.

"Couldn't leave the table before the major," Adrian replies. "So I had to sit and say, 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir.' Oh, it was terrible work; I hope Cust's affair will come to something this time."

"So do I. She seems a nice girl."

"Oh, yes, very!" Then, going back to the subject of the colonel, he says: "Ah, it will be a joke worth seeing when the chief's the only one left."

"Perhaps he'll get married himself," I suggest.

"Never!" he answers, emphatically. "When I get a colonelcy in the Horse Marines he may, but certainly not before. He'd be a good match for any woman, though. Ah, here we are! Mind the branch of that tree—I'll have it fastened back tomorrow; it might blind you."

We dined directly we get in; and, when we are comfortably established in the drawing room, Adrian draws his chair close up to the fire.

"I like these long, quiet Sunday evenings," says Adrian, presently, lying back in his chair with lazy luxuriousness. "After all the bore of church parade and full dress and going the rounds, and then that 'cram' at the cathedral and a noisy afternoon tea, to come home and be quite quiet is simply superb."

I wonder if he remembers that probably next Sunday evening Theo will be here.

(To be Continued.)

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