

LOVE'S MAGIC CHARM.

(Continued.)

"About poor Aubrey's faults. I know now that he was guilty. Strange, solemn thoughts, strange revelations, come to us, are made to us in sickness. When we lie, where I have been lying, in the valley of the shadow of death, I know that he was guilty, and that he died in his sin. I know it now, Pauline."

Miss Darrell bent over her and kissed the white brow.

"Listen to me, dear," continued the weak voice. "Let this secret die with us—let there be a bond between us never to reveal it. You will never tell any one about it, will you, Pauline?"

"No," she replied, "Never." "I should never have told you but that I hoped to save you from a dreadful fate—and it would have been a dreadful fate for you to have married him; he would have broken your heart."

"It is broken now," she said gently. "Yet it comforts me to know that no reproach will be heaped on Aubrey's memory."

"You will get better," observed Pauline hopefully, "and then there will be happier days in store for you."

"There will be no happy days for me," returned Lady Darrell, sorrowfully. "You see, Pauline, I loved him very dearly—more dearly than I knew. I had never loved any one very much until I saw him. I could more easily have checked a raging fire than have restrained my love after I had once given it. My life had in some way passed into his, and now I do not care to live."

"But you have so much to live for," said Pauline.

"Not now. I do not care for aught about me. I have tried to remember Darrell Court, and all my wealth and grandeur, but they give me no pleasure—the shadow of death lies over all."

And it was all in vain that Pauline tried to rouse her; Lady Darrell, after her unhappy love, never cared to be roused again. Lady Hampton would not think seriously of her illness—it would pass away in time, she said; but Miss Hastings shook her head gravely, and feared the worst.

The time came when Pauline told some part of her story to the governess. She did not mention Aubrey's crime—that secret she kept until death—but she gave a sketch of what had passed between her and Lady Darrell.

"Did I do right?" she asked with that sweet humility which had vanquished all pride in her.

"You acted worthily," replied Miss Hastings, while she marveled at the transformation which love had wrought in that once proud, wilful girl.

Time passed on, and by the wish of Miss Hastings a celebrated physician was sent for from London, for Lady Darrell grew no better. His opinion sounded something like a death-warrant.

"She may recover sufficiently to quit her room and to linger on in life—how long is uncertain; but the shock to her nerves she will never fully recover from—while she lives she will be a victim to nervousness. But I do not think she will live long. Let her have as much cheerful society as possible, without fatigue; nothing more can be done for her."

And with that they were obliged to be content. Lady Hampton would not allow that the London physician was correct.

"Nerves are all nonsense," she said, brusquely. "How many nervous shocks have I been through, with husband dead and children dead? Elinor's only danger is her mother's complaint. She died of consumption quite young." It was found, however, despite Lady Hampton's disbelief, that the physician had spoken truthfully. Lady Darrell rose from her sick bed, but she was but the shadow of herself, and a victim to a terrible nervous disorder.

Miss Hastings watched over her with great anxiety, but Pauline was like a second self to the unhappy lady. They were speaking of her one day and Miss Hastings said:

"An illness like Lady Darrell's is so uncertain, Pauline; you must not occupy yourself with her so entirely, or you will lose your own health."

But Pauline looked up with a smile—perhaps the sweetest and most tender her face had ever worn.

"I shall never leave her," she returned.

"Never leave her?" questioned Miss Hastings.

"No. I shall stay with her to comfort her while life lasts, and that will be my atonement."

CHAPTER XLII.

LOVE AND SORROW.

The beautiful golden summer came around and Darrell Court looked picturesque and lovely with its richness of foliage and flush of flowers. The great magnolia trees were all in bloom—the air was full of their delicate, subtle perfume; the chestnuts were in bloom, the limes all in blossom. Sweet summer had scattered her treasures with no niggard hand; and Lady Darrell had lived to see the earth rejoice once more.

Under the limes, where the shadows of the graceful, tremulous, scented leaves fell on the grass—the limes that were never still but always responding to some half-hidden whisper of the wind—stood Pauline Darrell and her lover, Sir Vane St. Lawrence. They had met but once since their hurried parting at Omberleigh. Vane had been to Darrell Court—for their engagement was no secret now. They wrote to each other constantly.

On this fair June day Sir Vane had come to the Court with news that stirred the depths of the girl's heart as a fierce wind stirs the ripples on a lake.

As the sunlight fell through the green leaves and rested on her, the change in her was wonderful to see. The beautiful, noble face had lost

all its pride, all its defiance; the play of the lips was tremulous, sensitive, and gentle—the light in the dark eyes was of love and kindness. Time had added to her loveliness; the grand, statuesque figure had developed more perfectly; the graceful attitudes, the unconscious harmony, the indefinable grace and fascination were more apparent than ever. But she no longer carried her grand beauty as a protest, but made it rather the crown of a pure and perfect womanhood.

Something dimmed the brightness of her face, for Sir Vane had come to her with strange news and a strange prayer. His arm was clasped round her as they walked under the shadow of the limes where lovers' footsteps had so often strayed.

"Yes, Pauline, it has come so unexpectedly at last," spoke Sir Vane.

"Ever since Graveton has been in office, my dear mother has been unwearied in asking for an appointment for me. You know the story of our impoverished fortunes, and how anxious my dear mother is to retrieve them."

Her hand seemed to tighten its clasp on his, as she answered:

"Yes, I know."

"Now an opportunity has come. Graveton, in answer to my mother's continued requests, has found for me a most lucrative office; but, alas, my love, it is in India, and I must shortly set out."

"In India!" repeated Pauline; "and you must set out shortly, Vane? How soon?"

"In a fortnight from now," he answered.

"It is an office that requires filling up at once, Pauline."

I have come to ask if you will accompany me? Will you pardon the short notice, and let me take my wife with me to that far-off land? Do not let me go alone into exile—come with me, darling."

The color and light died out of her beautiful face, her lips quivered, and her eyes grew dim as with unshed tears.

"I cannot," she replied; and there was a silence between them that seemed full of pain.

"You cannot, Pauline!" he cried, and the sadness and disappointment in his voice made her lips quiver again. "Surely you will not allow any feminine nonsense about dress and preparations, any scruple about the shortness of time, to come between us? My mother bade me say that if you would consent she will busy herself night and day to help us to prepare. She bade me add her prayer to mine. Oh, Pauline, why do you say you cannot accompany me?"

The first shock had passed for her, and she raised her noble face to his.

"From no nonsense, Vane," she said. "You should know me better, dear, than that. Nothing can part us but one thing. Were it not for that, I would go with you to the very end of the world—I would work for you and with you."

"But what is it, Pauline?" he asked. "What is it, my darling?"

She clung to him more closely still.

"I cannot leave her, Vane—I cannot leave Lady Darrell. She is dying slowly—hour by hour, day by day—and I cannot leave her."

"But, my darling Pauline, there are others besides you to attend to the lady—Lady Hampton and Miss Hastings. Why should you give up your life thus?"

"Why?" she repeated. "You know why, Vane. It is the only atonement I can offer her. Heaven knows how gladly, how happily I would this moment place my hand in yours and accompany you; my heart longs to do so. You are all I have in the world, and how I love you you know, Vane. But it seems to me that I owe Lady Darrell this reparation, and at the price of my whole life's happiness I must make it."

He drew her nearer to him, and kissed the trembling lips.

"She has suffered so much, Vane, through me—all through me. If I had but foregone my cruel vengeance, and when she came to me with doubt in her heart if I had but spoken one word, the chances are that by this time she would have been Lady Aynsley, and I would have been free to accompany you, my beloved; but I must suffer for my sin. I ought to suffer, and I ought to atone to her."

"Your life, my darling," he said, "your beautiful bright life, your love, your happiness, will all be sacrificed."

"They must be. You see, Vane, she clings to me in her sorrow. His name—Aubrey Langton's name—never passes her lips to any one else but me. She talks of him the night and the day through—it is the only comfort she has; and when she likes me to be with her, to talk to her, and soothe her, and she tires so soon of any one else. I cannot leave her, Vane—it would shorten her life, I am sure."

He made no answer. She looked up at him with tearful eyes.

"Speak to me, Vane. It is hard, I know—but tell me that I am right."

"You are cruelly right," he replied. "Oh, my darling, it is very hard! Yet you make her a noble atonement for the wrong you have done—a noble reparation. My darling, is this how your vow of vengeance has ended?—in the greatest sacrifice a woman could make."

"Your love has saved me," she said, gently—"has shown me what is right and what is wrong—has cleared the mist from my eyes. But for that—oh, Vane, I hate to think what I should have been!"

"I wish it were possible to give up the appointment," he remarked, musingly.

"I would not have you do it, Vane. Think of Lady St. Lawrence—how she has worked for it. Remember, it is your only chance of ever being what she wishes to see you. You must not give it up."

"But how can I leave you, Pauline?"

"If you remain in England, it will make but little difference," she said.

"I can never leave Lady Darrell while she lives."

"But Pauline, it may be four, five, or six years before I return, and all that time I shall never see you."