

One in a Thousand, BUT TRUE TO THE LAST

CHAPTER X.
LOVE'S BEST FRIEND.

"Because I shall smash any of their heads who fall in love with you; and, really, how can they help it?"

"Oh, you foolish, old thing!" I say. "As if everybody else had as little taste as you have!"

"Sort of taste you like, though," says he, as I reach the door.

I do not give equal satisfaction to Theo, who is alone in the drawing room when we go in. She eyes me over, and would, I feel, if it were not for Adrian's presence, say something disagreeable. She has her opportunity after dinner, when we go up to her room to put on our wraps. "How do you like my dress?" she says, surveying herself in the long glass, with no small amount of admiration in her eyes.

"I think it is lovely," I say, honestly; and so I do, for it is of white, profusely trimmed with lace and marabout feathers, and suits her admirably.

"It isn't too young, is it?" "Young? Oh, no! Why, Theo you are only twenty! You can wear white for fifteen years yet."

"I have a horror of dressing unsuitably," she says, indifferently. "Now, I call your dress too old."

"Adrian likes it," I say, contentedly.

"Oh, I dare say! Probably he doesn't know the difference between one dress from another; and, after all, it is very absurd to dress to please your husband."

"Is it? I suppose you speak from experience, Theo? If Lasselles doesn't know one dress from another and doesn't care what you wear, why you are quite tight to please yourself; but, you see, Adrian does know and does care, and so I dress to please him."

"We had better go down; the carriage will be waiting," she says, ignoring what I say, altogether.

I wonder if she always speaks to Lasselles in that way? If so, it is a blessed thing for him that he is not so thin-skinned, mentally speaking as some of his neighbors.

The opera is "Faust," and, strange enough, I have never seen it before. I sit on the side nearest to the stage. Lasselles sits between Theo and me. Adrian prefers standing, just behind Theo. But, we do not remain so long, for Lasselles, who is entirely unable to follow the passionate story, says he shall go outside for a smoke, and come back after a time. He invites Adrian to go, too, but without avail. Relieved from the tedium of my brother-in-law's conversation, I give my whole attention to the stage; but presently I hear, with infinite surprise, that the other two are talking. I am quite pleased, for I



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was afraid that Theo had taken a dislike to my husband; and, although she herself has changed so much and become so cold and sarcastic, I want every one of my family to admire and like the man of my choice. So I turn resolutely to the stage, and for a time lose myself in Marguerite's happiness—perhaps a little more readily because Faust bears a slight resemblance to Adrian. I forget completely where I am, until, during a pause of the music, I hear what brings me with startling rapidity back to reality.

"I see you wear that ring yet?" "Oh, what is this crushing my brain and tearing at my heart? Was that Adrian, or was it part of the play? The whole house fades from my sight, the music dies away, the voices beside me grow indistinct, and everything becomes dark. Yet, he, one of those strange fatalities which sometimes happen, I do not faint. No; I am destined to hear the whole of their conversation; for, when I come to myself, I am still holding the opera glass to my eyes, and evidently they have neither of them noticed that there is anything unusual about me. I have missed a good deal, for Adrian is saying:

"I thought you fitted me."

"It" says Theo. "No, I went, and you were not there, and I waited and waited, and then they found me; and oh, the shame of it! Sometimes I think it will kill me!"

"Well? Ah, can that be Adrian speaking? Is that my husband usin that eager tone to another woman and that woman my sister?"

"Well, I married Lasselles—that I all—and you married Audrey," breaking off with a sob in her voice.

"And did it never occur to you why I did not come—why I failed to keep my appointment?"

"They said you had played a joke upon me—that, most probably, I was done for a wager."

"And you believed them?" "What else could I do? You never came, and I had been all day alone, when they found me. I would have believed anything."

"My poor child," says Adrian, with intense pity in his voice. "I have every intention of coming to you when I awake that morning. As told you I should do, I went over to Eastwood by the last train after had seen you. I made every arrangement for your comfort and reception even to ordering a carriage to take you from the station to the hotel. Well, on the way to meet you, we came to grief, and in the general smash I got my head broken. I was

picked up and taken to the hospital, close at hand; and, when I awoke, three days after, they would not let me stir. I made friends with the house surgeon, who went up to the station, but could hear nothing; then he went over and tried to find out if anything unusual had taken place at Mrs. — I forget the name of the schoolmistress—but without success. When I was well enough to travel, I found you had gone abroad with your father, and the next thing I heard was that you had married Lasselles."

"Yes?" questions Theo, softly. It is the old Theo speaking now.

"Till I heard that I had not given up hope of finding you; but I thought you had fitted me; and, oh, Heaven forgive me for it, how I did hate you!"

I feel a faint, chill sickness creeping over me; but I nerve myself to the end. I must—I will—hear it all!

"Well, I went abroad, and tried to find peace, and couldn't." Adrian's voice continues, "so I went back to the regiment, and gradually I got over it, though I hadn't much faith in woman, and then—"

"And then you married Audrey," says Theo, sadly. "Why did you?"

"I married her because she was so like you; but—"

Ah, an iron hand clutches at my heart, and I know no more!

CHAPTER XI. A CONSUMMATE ACTOR!

I lie on the sofa, on the morning following my visit to the opera, and try in vain to drink the tea Adrian pours out and brings me. It is useless; I cannot do it.

"Come, now, baby," he says, coaxingly, "do try to drink it, and eat a slice of toast. You know, you promised to go with Theo to see the Kensington Museum."

"I don't want any tea, thank you," say, with freezing politeness; "and you and Theo can do very well without me."

"Utterly absurd!" he comments. "I cannot imagine anything more so entirely ridiculous than Theo and myself mooning about that place together."

"But I can," I retort, dryly; "that is, Theo and Lasselles in the same position."

Adrian looks astonished.

"Why, he is her husband," he begins, when I cut him short.

"And she hates him."

"Poor Theo!" he says, gently. "It is time for you to go," I say, dancing at the clock. "Come, don't be stubborn about it."

"Don't you think you could manage?" he says, doubtfully.

"I am perfectly certain I cannot," answer. "I shall very likely faint again if you persist in making me go; and, really, I don't see why you should be so anxious about it, for we are company, you know, and three is none."

"Yes; that's all very well, if it applied to you and me; but, with any other woman, it makes all the difference."

"But it isn't any other woman," I urge; "it is Theo."

"Well, little woman, you seem very anxious to get me out of the way, so I suppose you won't be satisfied unless I go," and, to my astonishment—although I have been pressing so strongly, I expect he will stay—he goes.

The door closes gently behind him, and I feel absolutely powerless to move. I put my hands up to my eyes, and realize that Adrian has gone away and left me alone—has gone to meet his old love—my sister! I lie quite still—I don't cry out, or write in this, the greatest agony I have ever endured—no; I lie quite still. This is the same sofa on which he lay yesterday morning and slept while I bathed his forehead; the room looks the same; there is the half-eaten breakfast, and there is the same sickly, March sunshine streaming in through the window. Yet, oh, how changed everything is. Yesterday it was Adrian who lay here, while I stayed beside him; to-day it is my turn, but Adrian has gone to meet Theo.

I try to think. Theo and "Arthur St. Clair" have met at last, and "Arthur St. Clair" is my husband—Adrian Charteris. I go over all the story—the story which was so inexplicable

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to Theo and me until last night. What a strange chain of events there has been in the last four years. I remember Theo's love story, and her words on that last night at Frampton: "I would die for him; and I shall cease to love him when I die."

She loves him yet; ah, the pang which wrings my heart as I acknowledge it! She loves him yet! How dare she love him—my husband! Then I shiver as I remember that she loved him first. Yes, it is she who has most right to him, and she knows it. Did I not hear him say last night "I married her because she was so like you, but—"

How would that sentence have ended—but she will never be to me what you would have been? I suppose that is it. I shall never be to him what Theo would have been! And yet, having once loved him, I would not, from sheer spite, have taken Lasselles; no, I would have been truer than that.

So Rose Lasselles' prophecy has come true, after all! I have married a soldier, with lots of money, who has the passion card between him and a near relative of mine. Rose was quite right. My unbelief could not prevent the cards from telling the truth. All my past life comes crowding into my brain as I lie back on my sofa. I think of what Lois said, "But when you don't love a person, every trifling action worries and annoys you; things which in a person you love, would only please you."

That is what Adrian has done; he has married a woman "he does not love—my smallest movements vexes him. How that little scene of yesterday comes back to my memory—"

"Audrey, I wish you would not tease me so!" If it had been Theo, he would not have said that.

While I am thinking over my troubles, a hand under the window strikes up "Auld Lang Syne," and the old, familiar tune brings the tears to my eyes. Oh, how, in the days gone by, he seemed to love me! Could it all be acting?

Presently a servant comes to clear the table, and, so long have the breakfast things remained, he lays the cloth for luncheon at the same time. I scan the two covers accurately. Adrian will lunch with Theo, of course. But, to my astonishment, he does nothing of the kind. As the clock chimes the half hour after one, he comes running upstairs, and takes me bodily up into his arms.

"You may be thankful you didn't go," he says, laughingly, "for Theo was as cross as two sticks."

"That's nothing unusual," I return, tartly, trying to free myself from his embrace.

(To be continued.)

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