

LOVE'S MAGIC CHARM.

(Continued.)

"My dearest Elinor," she said, "what are you doing? What beautiful confusion!"

Lady Darrell raised her fair face, with a delicate flush and a half shy glance.

"Look, aunt," she said, "I am really overwhelmed."

"What does it mean?" asked Lady Hampton.

"It means that Sir Oswald is too generous. These large boxes have just arrived from Paris; he told me they were a surprise for me—a present from him. Look at the contents—dresses of all kinds, lace, ornaments, fans, slippers, gloves, and such articles de luxe as can be bought only in Paris. I am really ashamed."

"Sir Oswald is indeed generous," said Lady Hampton, then she looked around the room to see if they were quite alone.

The maid had disappeared.

"Ah, Elinor," remarked Lady Hampton, "you are indeed a fortunate woman; your lines have fallen in pleasant places. You might have looked all England over and not have found such a husband. I am quite sure of one thing—you have everything a woman's heart can desire."

"I make no complaint," said Lady Darrell.

"My dear child, I should imagine not; there are few women in England whose position equals yours."

"I know it," was the calm reply.

"And you may really thank me for it; I certainly worked hard for you, Elinor. I believe that if I had not interfered you would have thrown yourself away on that Captain Langton."

"Captain Langton never gave me the chance, aunt; so I will not discuss the question."

"It is a very good thing for you that he never did," remarked her ladyship. "Mrs. Bretherton was saying to me the other day what a very fortunate girl you were—how few of us have our heart's desire."

"You forget one thing, aunt. Even if I have everything I want, still my heart is empty," said the girl, wearily.

Lady Hampton smiled.

"You must have your little bit of sentiment, Elinor, but you are too sensible to let it interfere with your happiness. How are you getting on with that terrible Pauline? I do dislike that girl from the very depths of my heart."

Lady Darrell shrugged her delicate shoulders.

"There is a kind of armed neutrality between us at present," she said. "Of course, I have nothing to fear from her, but I cannot help feeling a little in dread of her, aunt."

"How is that?" asked Lady Hampton, contemptuously. "She is a girl I should really delight to thwart and contradict; but, as for being afraid of her, I consider Hampton, the butler, a far more formidable person. Why do you say that, Elinor?"

"She has a way with her—I cannot describe it—of making every one else feel small. I cannot tell how she does it, but she makes me very uncomfortable."

"You have more influence over Sir Oswald than any one else in the world, if she troubles you, why not persuade him to send her away?"

"I dare not," said Lady Darrell, besides, I do not think he would ever care to do that."

"Then you should be mistress of her, Elinor—keep her in her place."

Lady Darrell laughed aloud.

"I do not think even your skill could avail here, aunt. She is not one of those girls you can extinguish with a frown."

"How does she treat you, Elinor? Tell me honestly," said Lady Hampton.

"I can hardly describe it. She is never rude or insolent; if she were, appeal to Sir Oswald would be very easy. She has a grand, lofty way with her—an imperious carriage and bearing that I really think I admire. She ignores me, overlooks me, and there is a scornful gleam in her eyes at times, when she does look at me, which says more plainly than words, 'You are not fit for me.'"

"And you did a very sensible thing, too, my dear. I wish, I only wish I had the management of Miss Darrell, I would break her spirit, if it is to be broken."

"I do not think it is," said Lady Darrell, rising as though she were weary of the discussion. "There is nothing in her conduct that any one could find fault with, yet she is my *bête noire*."

"Wait a while," returned Lady Hampton, "her turn will come."

And from that day the worthy lady tried her best to prejudice Sir Oswald against his proud, beautiful, wayward niece.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A PUZZLING QUESTION.

"Does Miss Darrell ever show any signs of disappointment?" inquired Lady Hampton one day of Miss Hastings.

Miss Hastings, although she noticed a hundred faults in the girl which she would fain have corrected, had nevertheless a true, strong, and warm affection for her pupil; she was not one therefore to play into the enemy's hand; and, when Lady Darrell fixed her eyes upon her, full of eagerness and brightened with curiosity, Miss Hastings quietly resolved not to gratify her.

"Disappointment about what?" she asked. "I do not understand you, Lady Hampton."

"About the property," explained Lady Hampton, impatiently. "She made so very sure of it. I shall never forget her insolent confidence. Do tell me, is she not greatly annoyed and disappointed?"

"Not in the way you mean, Lady Hampton. She has never spoken of such a thing."

Her ladyship felt piqued, she would have preferred to hear that Pauline did feel her loss, and was grieving over it. In that case she would have been kind to her, would have relented; but the reflection that her pride was still unbending annoyed her, and she mentally resolved to try if she could not force the girl into some expression of her feelings. It was not an amiable resolve, but Lady Hampton was not naturally an amiable woman.

Fortune favored her. That very day, as she was leaving the Court, she saw Pauline standing listlessly by the lake-side feeding the graceful swans. She went up to her with a malicious smile, only half-veiled by her pretended friendly greeting.

"How do you do, Miss Darrell? You are looking very melancholy. There is nothing the matter, I hope?"

For any one to attempt to humiliate Pauline was simply a waste of time; the girl's natural character was so dignified that all attempts of the kind fell through or told most upon her assailants. She answered Lady Hampton with quiet politeness, her dark eyes hardly resting for a moment upon her.

"You do not seem to find much occupation for your leisure hours," continued Lady Hampton. "You are making the round of the grounds, I suppose? They are very beautiful. I am afraid that you must feel keenly how much my niece has deprived you of."

It was not a lady-like speech; but Lady Hampton felt irresistibly impelled to make it—the proud, defiant, beautiful face provoked her. Pauline merely smiled; she had self-control that would have done honor to one much older and more experienced.

"Your niece has deprived me of nothing, Lady Hampton," she returned, with a curl of the lip, for which the elder lady could have shaken her. "I possess one great advantage of which no one living can deprive me—that is, the Darrell blood runs in my veins."

And, with a bow, she walked away leaving her ladyship more angry than she would have cared to own. So Pauline met all her enemies. Whatever she might suffer, they should not triumph over her. Even Sir Oswald felt compelled to yield to her an admiration that he had never given before.

He was walking one evening on the terrace. The western sunbeams, lingering on the grand old building, brightened it into beauty. Flowers, trees, and shrubs were all in their fullest loveliness. Presently Sir Oswald, leaning over the balustrade of the terrace, saw Pauline sketching in the grounds below. He went to her, and looked over her shoulder. She was just completing a sketch of the great western tower of the Court; and he was struck with the vivid beauty of the drawing.

"You love Darrell Court, Pauline?" he said, gently.

She raised her face to his for a minute; the feud between them was forgotten. She only remembered that he was a Darrell, and she his nearest of kin.

"I do love it, uncle," she said, "as pilgrims love their favorite shrine. It is the home of beauty, of romance, the cradle of heroes: every stone is consecrated by a legend. Love is a weak word for what I feel."

He looked at the glowing face, and for a few moments a doubt assailed him as to whether he had done right in depriving this true Darrell of her inheritance.

"But, Pauline," he said, slowly, "you would never have—"

She sprang from her seat with a quickness that almost startled him. She had forgotten all that had happened; but now it all returned to her with a bitter pang that could not be controlled.

"Hush, Sir Oswald!" she cried, interrupting him, "it is too late for us to talk about Darrell Court now. Pray do not misunderstand me; I was only expressing my belief."

She bent down to take up her drawing materials.

"I do not misunderstand you, child," he said, sadly. "You love it because it is the home of a race you love, and not for its mere worth in money."

Her dark eyes seemed to flash with fire, the glorious face had never softened so before.

"You speak truly," she said, "that is exactly what I mean."

Then she went away, liking Sir Oswald better than she had ever liked him in her life before. He looked after her half-sadly.

"A glorious girl," he said to himself, "a true Darrell: I hope I have not made a mistake."

Lady Darrell made no complaint to her husband of Pauline, the girl gave her no tangible cause of complaint. She could not complain to Sir Oswald that Pauline's eyes always rested on her with a scornful glance, half-humorous, half-mocking. She could not complain of that strange power Miss Darrell exercised of making her always "feel so small." She would gladly have made friends with Miss Darrell; she had no idea of keeping up any species of warfare, but Pauline resisted all her advances. Lady Darrell had a strange kind of half-fear, which made her ever anxious to conciliate.

She remarked to herself how firm and steadfast Pauline was. There was no weakness, no cowardice in her character, she was strong, self-reliant, and, discerning that, Lady Darrell asked herself often, "What will Pauline's vengeance be?"

The question puzzled her far more than she would have cared to own. What shape would her vengeance assume? What could she do to avoid it? When would it overtake her?