

LOVE THE VICTOR.

CHAPTER XI.—(CONTINUED.)

"That big Guardsman ought to be presented with a gold medal," he says to himself, with a shrug: "he has actually persuaded her to smile."

"Well," says the "big Guardsman," enconced himself comfortably somewhere at her feet,—they are quite shaded from the inside of the room by curtains and a huge ottoman—"you didn't think to see me here to-night, did you?"

"Indeed, no. You were a thorough surprise. I know it couldn't have been from the skies,—you are not ethereal enough for that; but where did you drop from?"

"You are very unkind; but I shall pass that over. I came from Fifeshire, first, to some people of mine in Connemara; and then Lord Dundeady wrote to me about this affair, and I came here. I came to see you, you know."

"That of course," says Lady Clontarf modestly. Then she tries to shift her position a little and looks at him. "Do you know something is making me very uncomfortable?" she says: "is it you? I feel as if you were sitting on my dress. Are you?"

"Really!"—innocently,—"I believe I am," shifting his position, too, but very slightly, and rather more to her than from her.

"Well, who would have thought it? says Clontarf, who up to this has stood stricken to the earth by surprise. "If any fellow had told me she could—could positively—Oh, hang it, you know! It seems, then, that I am the only one to whom she cannot talk."

Honor compelling him, he walks away—most unwillingly, be it said to his greater credit—until he is beyond earshot.

"How lovely Mrs. Montague Smythe is looking to-night!" says Doris, presently, alluding to a married beauty within, who always takes her walks abroad with at least a dozen admirers at her heels, and whose convenient husband is in Japan.

"Is she? I couldn't see any but you. She's the woman with the queer eyes and the big mouth, isn't she? Clontarf's old flame, I mean." There is no premeditated malice in Bouverie's speech; it is merely idle. He is not in love with Doris, but the second nature he has acquired compels him to make laughing love to every pretty woman he meets. Indeed, what he has just now said barely touches Lady Clontarf's ears in passing, and affects her not at all.

"Was she so?" she says, smiling. "She is pretty enough to have been the old flame of many a one."

"She makes too much of it," says Bouverie, with a shrug. "A woman can have her little triumphs, but she needn't hang her scalp at her belt for all the world to see."

"You speak bitterly. Has she"—with an amused glance—"got your scalp?"

"Don't be hypocritical," says Bouverie, reproachfully. "You became the owner of that long since."

"Well, never mind: it has evidently grown again," says Doris, glancing expressively at the luxuriant crop of curly brown hair that races the top of his head.

At this they both laugh aloud, and Clontarf, who has gone beyond reach of their words, but not of their laughter, grinds his teeth a little. Be a man never so indifferent to his wife, still he will object to another man's faintest admiration.

"So you have been at Connemara," says Doris, presently. "I wonder they didn't murder you, knowing you to be a hated Sasannach."

"They were too busy murdering their landlords.—And so you went to Cannes, that month my heart broke?"

"For quite a little time. Lord Clontarf wanted to get back to his shooting."

"Senseless being! In his place I should have forgotten there was such a thing as a partridge."

"Would you? After all you are only a man. And what bluest lake or most golden sky could compare with a grouse or a partridge?"

"I shouldn't have wanted to stay because of the bluest lakes."

"For me, then? But, you see, you could bring me home with you, and have your grouse too."

"No, I couldn't," says Bouverie. "That is just what is breaking my peace."

Here they both laugh again; and Clontarf, who won't go away, tells himself savagely that he can't stand much more of this.

"Where do you usually stay when in town?" asks Bouverie.

"I stayed at the Langham last time."

"And next time?"

"I think Lord Dundeady has a house in Portland Square, or somewhere."

"You will go over next year, of course?"

"How can I say? Do you know you are a very severe cross-examiner? You should have gone to the bar."

"No! Am I? That is not being well-nannered, is it? I must cure myself of that."

"You don't consider things. You say just what you like."

"Do I? Well, if only to carry out the character you give me, and prove you in the right, I shall tell you now that I think you are looking very lovely to-night."

"That is hardly a compliment. It suggests a doubt as to whether I was lovely yesterday, or whether I shall be so to-morrow. A transient loveliness is not to be desired; it carries disappointment in its train."

"I think you lovely always," says Bouverie, tenderly.

"I am tired of you: go away," says Doris, lightly. "That is your favorite waltz just begun, and no doubt some fair one is pining for you. Go; I want to sit here and eat myself for a little while in silence."

Thus dismissed, he goes; and Doris, leaning back in her seat within the curtains, gazes thoughtfully upon the sleeping garden down below.

CHAPTER XII.

"I write not what was adversity
Till I could flee full high under the sky."

"Alas! what wonder is it, though she wept?"

Clontarf, missing the drowsy hum of the two voices, glances quickly toward the open window where Doris sits, and sees even in this uncertain light that she is alone.

Shall he go and speak to her, and tell her what exquisite pleasure it has afforded him to see her so unlike herself to-night, so light and glad of heart? A moment's reflection, however, convincing him that sarcasm of this sort is not to be successfully delivered by men of his calibre, he determines on refraining from this style of oratory. But shall he speak to her nevertheless? He hasn't addressed her once all the evening. He has been then, beyond doubt, wanting in courtesy toward her.

Involuntarily he moves closer, until he finds himself standing just outside the open window, but hidden from her, partly by some heavy drooping creepers that hang in rank luxuriance from the walls, and partly by the fact of her head being turned directly away from him.

She seems so rapt in thought, to have so suddenly relapsed into all her old icy calm and impenetrable melancholy, that he hesitates about disturbing her.

His hesitation is still holding him silent, when two other voices break upon the air, and put an end forever to his half-formed design. They are close,—these voices,—directly inside the curtains, and soon claim his attention, and hers too. They are pretty, soft, low, feminine voices, pitched just now in the most approved key for gossiping purposes. Evidently the owners of them have taken their positions on the ottoman already mentioned that helps to screen Doris's resting-place from those within, and are now preparing to carry on with an unconsciousness that speaks for itself a conversation begun in some other cozy nook.

"I hear even her birth (putting aside altogether the fact of its being so deplorably low) isn't quite all it ought to be," says No. One, in a tone subdued, but rich in enjoyment.

"You mean," says No. Two, evidently leaning forward in hopeful anticipation of what is yet to come.

"That it lacked the sanction of the Church,—that there was, in fact, no ceremony."

"Ceremony?"

"Marriage ceremony!" somewhat impatiently. "They say that terrible old Costello forgot to take his wife to church."

"How absurd!" says No. Two, with an amused laugh, that suggests, as plainly as though they can see it, that the speaker is lifting her brows in deprecation of such a naughty matter, and is shrugging her dainty shoulders.

"It makes no difference to Lord Clontarf, however. The fortune is hers beyond a doubt. Self-made people, who don't know the meaning of property entailed, can always do justice in such cases. Clontarf took very good care to look to that, of course, before he married her."

With a badly-suppressed exclamation Clontarf comes suddenly forward into the full light of the moon and his wife's eyes. She has sprung to her feet, and now stands before him, motionless as one stabbed to the heart. Her face is ghastly pale, her eyes dark with anguish. As their glances meet, he instinctively puts out his hand to her, but with a passionate gesture she repulses him, and, moving quickly by him, runs down the steps and disappears into the cold shadows below.

His first movement is to follow her, but he checks it, and with a heavy frown upon his forehead tears aside the lace curtains, and stands pale and stern before the horrified slanderers.

"Pardon me, madam," he says, addressing her who is nearest to him, "if I interrupt your conversation for one moment. Fortunately, I was near enough just now to hear what you were saying about my wife. I am sure—with a bitter sneer—"I will give you inexpressible pleasure to know that whoever invented that false story of her birth—"

Without waiting for rejoinder from either of the guests, who indeed have too thoroughly collapsed to be capable of it, he once more steps on to the balcony, and, with his veins tugging and his blood on fire from shame and pity, hurries down the balcony steps in search of Doris.

At last he finds her. She is sitting on the marble edge of a fountain some distance from him, and is crying, not angrily or passionately, but with exceeding bitterness. As he draws nearer, grieved at heart for her, he can see the tears are running quickly down her cheeks through her clasped fingers, and that her attitude is heart-broken.

His coming step sounding upon her ear rouses her from her deep grief, and, rising with nervous haste, she makes a movement as though she would willingly escape; but seeing it is too late to do it effectually, she changes her mind, and instead comes impulsively toward him.

"It is not true," she says, with vehement passion, but in a low tone. "It was a lie! You must believe that. It can be proved—"

"Why will you speak to me like this?" says Clontarf, regretfully. "I want no proof. You spoke to me once of a possible friendship between us, but what has arisen instead? Almost an enmity, as it seems to me. Proof is unnecessary."

"It will be better," she says, still with great excitement. "I must have you satisfied on that point." She holds out her hands to him with a gesture of piteous appeal; her face is as pale as death; her eyes are full of a strange sad light; her lips are trembling. Suddenly—again as she looks at him—she breaks down. "It is not true, indeed, what those horrible women said!" she cries, in an anguish of shame, bursting into tears.

"I know it," says Clontarf, deeply moved. Taking one of her hands, he holds it fast. "I know"—very earnestly—"it was a most shameful lie. So foolish a one, too, as to be unworthy of comment. Why will you think of it?"

"I would be too much to bear!" exclaims she, brokenly, all her usual self-possession forsaking her in her need. With surprise, Clontarf sees the cold, proud woman change into a sad, imploring girl, and feels that she is sweeter for the change. He has forgotten how he felt half angry with her a few minutes since, because she had seemed happy and light of heart with Bouverie; or, if he remembers it, it is only with a pang of regret that he could ever have grudged this hurt and wounded spirit its small touch of gaiety.

"You haven't got it to bear," he says, gently; "remember that. You are overwrought now, but to-morrow you will laugh at this folly. It is an ugly one, but still only a trifle after all."

"I cannot laugh at it," she says, releasing her hand from his, and pushing back the soft loose hair from her brow, with a little distracted air. "Everything is

wretched and miserable, and hopeless; but any doubt about—that, would be horrible! You married me, knowing me to be of low origin. I"—proudly—"do not shrink from that thought; but anything more,—such a shame—" Again her voice fails her.

"Even if this story were true," says Clontarf, deliberately, "it could make no difference to me at all. You are now and forever my wife."

"Ah! true," murmurs she, with mournful meaning; and, almost as if speaking to herself and unconscious of his presence, she goes on. "The money would still be mine!" she says, in a low tone.

Her voice, her words, the drooping dejection of her head, all pierce him to his very soul. He is bitterly offended. Turning away from her, he walks rapidly back to the house by the path by which he had come. But when a hundred yards lie between them, he stops short, hesitates, and finally returns to her.

She is evidently glad of his return, because she looks up as he gains her side, and, unsolicited, holds out to him the hand she had somewhat ungraciously withdrawn from his, a while ago.

"That cursed money!" he says, with some agitation. "It has been our undoing."

"It has indeed," returns she, almost inaudibly, with lowered eyes.

"I wish—" begins he impulsively, and then grows silent.

"That we had never met?"

"No; but that we had met under other circumstances," replies he, slowly.

A swift wave of color sweeps over her face. She draws her breath quickly, and looks as if she would willingly have spoken, but is—because of a long formed resolution—mute. Then she sighs, and throws up her head hurriedly, as one might if determinedly putting from one a forbidden hope. Her eyes are dry now, but her face is sadder than before. Clontarf, seeing this, comes to a wrong conclusion.

"I hope you are not going to distract yourself any further about that absurd bit of vulgar gossip," he says, kindly.

In the deeper thought that had sprung to life beneath his last words, she had for the moment forgotten the cruel slander to which she had been an unwilling listener. But now it returns to her with a pang of sharp pain.

"All the world, perhaps, believes it, or will believe it," she says, nervously.

"No one can believe it. It is the simplest thing in the world to ascertain."

"Those two women believe it."

"No; not now. I went to them. I told them—Well, I believe—I can assure you that they will never even hint at it again."

"You—you went to them!—you took my part!" says Doris, going nearer to him, and looking at him with profound surprise. Presently her eyes fill with tears. There is the most intense gratitude in every line of the beautiful countenance uplifted to his in the moonlight.

That she is beautiful occurs to Clontarf at this moment as a revelation. The delicate oval of her face, its pure expression, the quivering earnest lips, the large sad eyes, all cry aloud to him for admiration. It is a most fair face at any time, but fairer now than he has ever seen it.—now

"When that cloud of pride, which oft doth dark Her goodly light."

has been snatched from her by her sorrow and her tears.

The moonbeams, pale and languid (the dawn is close at hand), are lying sleepily upon the pale-green ground of her satin gown and are losing themselves amidst the tiny meshes of her lace. Her perfect arms, rounded and dimpled as a child's, are naked to the shoulder, and hung before her in a careless abandonment; her fingers are interlaced; her slight but poised figure is drawn up to its fullest height. Her eyes are fixed on his.

"It was nothing," he hurries, answering more her glance than her words. "Could I hear you so grossly—ligned, and stand by silent? Surely it was my right to speak. You are"—he colours slightly—"my wife."

"Ah! that is true," she says, her low plaintive voice sounding somewhat desolate. "It would have been a terrible thing for you to have—such a lie stand."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Do not consider any virtue trivial, and so neglect it, or any vice trivial, and so practice it.