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CHAPTER XXXII.
WHEN THE HEART SPEAKS.

They come back to the room talking together, and Jeanne does her duty as hostess by hunting out the players. The count goes to a distant table, and is about to enter into a conversation with the members, when Jeanne drops her bouquet. It is so palpably a sign—for Jeanne is a bad conspirator—that the four watchers start and look at Clarence. But all they see for their pains is that admirably dressed youth approach the count, and lead him to a card-table.

"I'm an indifferent player, count," he says, before starting.

Now the count would rather play with an indifferent player, and seats himself, all smiles, and the companion finds herself also caught.

Jeanne looks around. If she could but get Vane to sing, her scheme would be complete. But Vane does not sing now; she has not asked him to sing since—since—

Thinking only of Hal, she goes across to Lady Lucille.

"Will you sing that duet from 'Martha' with Lord Ferndale, Lady Lucille?"

Lady Lucille looks up softly.

"Will Lord Ferndale sing?"

"If you ask him," says Jeanne, smiling.

Lady Ferndale wishes us to sing our duet. Lord Ferndale," says Lady Lucille, looking over her shoulder with a smile.

Vane bows, and without a word leads her to a piano.

Jeanne looks after them for a moment with a sudden pang; she has sacrificed herself, sister-like, and none can tell how bitter in her ears is the sound of that soft, silky voice mingling with her husband's.

She goes across to Hal, lurking behind the curtain, and taps him with her fan.

"Well," she says, "and you have been a good boy and not gone near her, although you have been eating her with your eyes all the evening."

"I did as you told me, though I don't see the good of it," says Hal, sullenly and ungratefully, of course.

"Stupid boy! Do you think the count or that woman would have let you say more than ten words to her? And if you go out into the hall and around to the further end of the room—out of sight of the count's table—I'll bring her to you, and you can talk for a quarter of an hour. There!"

"Jeanne, you—you are a brick," whispers poor Hal.

"Hush!" says Jeanne, "don't go just yet; they are watching us."

Then she wanders from one to another, new style; sunflowers and sage-green way, arrives at the princess, who is sitting talking to Mr. Bell like an old friend; most people learn, very quickly, to regard Bell as an old friend.

"Princess," says artful Jeanne, "are you an admirer of the fashionable art—needlework? There is a banner screen in the recess; come and look at it. Mr. Bell, I know you are an authority, will you come, too?"

Artful Jeanne! The two watches, all ears, hear her ask Bell, and their suspicions are allayed.

Quite as unsuspecting, Verona arises and takes Mr. Bell's arm; arrived at the recess, Jeanne displays her banner.

"What do you think of it? They tell me it is very admirable and quite in the new style; sunflowers and sage-green birds; I never saw a sage-green bird, excepting a linnet, but—oh, here's Hal!" she says, innocently, as that young gentleman appears at a door leading from the conservatory into the recess. "Hal knows more about birds and beasts, and fishes, too, than all of us put together, I'll be bound. Hal, come and tell us what you think of my new screen."

Hal comes forward, and stares at the screen.

"Oh, confounded ugly!" he says, candidly.

"Oh, I'm shocked!" says Jeanne, laughing. "So is Mr. Bell; in fact, we won't stop to hear such heresy. Can we, Mr. Bell?" and Bell, all unconscious, finds himself led away.

The princess looks after them, and is about to follow, when Hal, still staring at the screen, says:

"Do you admire this sort of thing, princess?"

"Not much," says Verona. "I like things that are natural, and these modern antique sunflowers and green birds are not, are they?"

"Come and see," says Hal, throwing open the glass door of the conservatory. "Here are some products of nature—ferns, and fish, and the birds of the air stuffed; they were alive once, and so are natural."

The princess looks around hurriedly.

"Where has your sister gone?"

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"Jeanne," says Hal. "She is close at hand. Are you afraid of me, princess?"

She looks at him with a sudden, confiding smile.

"Afraid—no!" she says, and she enters the conservatory. "How beautiful!" she adds, looking around, "and how musical is that fountain!"

"There is a seat there, let us sit down; it is too hot in that room, and the noise of the shuffle of the cards is maddening," says Hal, pushing his short curls from his forehead, and leaving the scar very plainly showing.

"It is because you are restless," says Verona, smiling up at him. "Do you know that I have not been so happy for a long time as I am tonight! Every one is so kind and—natural, free—unrestrained. And your sister, she is so kind to me!"

"Why shouldn't people be natural and kind?" says Hal, warmly. "You—you are a princess—a great lady! You ought to do as you like."

Verona looks down, and then up at him, with a smile at once sad and amused.

"I am not a great lady," she says, "and I have never done as I have liked."

"But you are going to do as you like now, aren't you?" says poor Hal, his lips quivering; "you are going to marry the count?"

"Yes," says Verona, looking away with drooped eyelids.

"And that's of your own free will?"

"Of my free will—yes," she says, almost inaudibly. "The count is an old friend of papa's, and he has associated with him in so many things. I have known him since—"

"Since you were in your cradle—I can just believe that," says Hal, between his teeth, "and he wasn't over-looking you. And when did you fall in love with him?" he asks, in his blunt fashion.

"In—love?" echoes the princess, looking around, pale and startled.

"When did the count fall in love with you first, then?" asks Hal.

"I—I do not know," says the princess, trembling.

"When you were in your cradle, perhaps," says Hal, bitterly. "And—do you think you will be happy when you have married the count?" he adds, bending forward and clasping her hands tightly, for the simple reason that if he does not he feels he must throw them around the small, graceful, yielding figure; "do you think you will be happy?"

Verona looks at him with a half-frightened glance.

"Happy?" she says; "no. I do not think—I try not to—what is the use? But why do you talk to me so?" and she looks up at him—his face is standing now—with an anxious, sorrowful expression in her dark eyes. "What can I do? What can I say? I have never thought of all this—until—until lately. Do not let me speak of it."

"But," says Hal, his broad chest heaving, "I must! Princess, we look at this sort of thing in England, although too much of it goes on there, with different eyes—I am looking at the future—at your future. It is no business of mine, you might say, but it is business of mine because—because I am your friend!"

"My friend! Yes!" says poor Verona, catching at it like a drowning man at a straw. "You are my friend!"

Hal turns away, and wipes the perspiration from his forehead.

"Not," he says, "that word won't do. A friend means some one who looks on while you are in the greatest danger, while you are dying, and says: 'What a pity! I am not a friend in that sense, princess. I don't speak to you, and I know I ought not, that I have no right to do so! But how can I help it? Princess—Verona—I am the most miserable of fellows! I am obliged to stand by and see you at—at all this, and am powerless to stop it, though I know, which you don't—what it all means. Verona—and he puts one brown paw on the seat behind her, and bends over her—"I must say it or I shall go mad! I love you."

Hal bursts out with his confession so rapidly that it leaves him pale and panting.

White and panting also, Verona looks up at him; for a moment a light shines in her dark eyes, brightens all her exquisitely lovely face, and she half-turns toward him, as if he had called her, and she could not resist.

Then with a sudden thrill, she shrinks away from him.

"Princess—Verona!" says Hal, kneeling on the seat and leaning over her. "Don't—don't shrink from me! It is true I ought not to have said it, but it is true, and I couldn't help it. And I do love you—yes, I love you wretched, miserable, mad, when I think of how much I divide us. I am so poor, and you are a princess, and going to marry this count—old enough to be your father. And I can see—any one can see—you are not happy. How should you be?—and how can I help speaking? And, princess—Verona, dear Verona—don't shrink away like this—I know it is wrong, and that I ought not to have said it; but how could I help it? You are so beautiful, and I love you so! Look at me—only look at me. Don't turn your head away! I'll go away at once, forever, if you say the word—I will indeed! I will never come near you again; I'll go to England—I'll go to the dev—! I mean I'll do anything, say anything, if you will only look around and forgive me!"

Hal is only a boy—knows no more of the art of eloquent speaking than a crow; but not the most soul-stirring oration could move the girl, trembling under his passionate voice, than do the blunt, honest words move Verona.

She trembles under every word, every letter vibrates with a sudden, ecstatic joy. If she were to die the next moment—she has lived, she has loved.

Pale and quivering, she turns her eyes—Italian eyes, full of yearning, wistful love—on his.

"I am so sorry—so sorry!" she says. Then she catches his hands and grasps them, feels them lovingly, lingeringly. "Oh, why did I ever see you; why did you ever speak to me, if it was all to end in this? I am sorry—sorry—sorry!"

"Hush, for Heaven's sake, hush!" says Hal, brokenly, as she covers her face with her hands, and sobs. "Don't think of it—forget it—I'm nobody. Oh, Heaven! don't cry or I shall go mad. There, I'll go—" and he moves two inches away; but her small hands stay him.

"Verona," he murmurs, "I can't un-say what I have said. It is true, I love you, I love you! But I won't persecute you, and make you unhappy. Say the word 'Go,' and I will go; and—try and forget you! I shan't do that, I know! But I will go if you send me away."

The little hands close on his strong arm.

"Or," he says, "I will stay and—save you. I can't know I can do it, for anything is possible to such love as mine. Only say—no, I will not ask you—yes, I will! Only say, 'Hal, I love you!' Say that. Never mind what happens afterward; say that. Oh, my darling say that!"

She looks around at him, and, bending like an over-weighted passion-flower, droops on his broad breast.

"I—love you!" she murmurs.

Hal catches her to him in an embrace which hurts her, and which is all the more delightful on that account and presses his lips to her hair, her eyes, her lips themselves.

"Verona! My darling! And I love you—oh, I love you with all my heart! And—don't tremble—I'll find a way to make you my own. How beautiful you are! And you love me—me, such a rough, uncultured wretch, not fit to be named in the same breath with such a delicate, pure, lovely flower as you are! Oh, my darling, my darling!—ah!"

He breaks off suddenly, for a shadow falls across them as they stand closely embraced, and the short, erect figure of the count appears among the ferns.

Hal starts upright as a dart as Verona springs away from him and sinks into a chair; upright as a dart, and quite ready to seize the count by the throat, and throttle him there and then, to pick him out on the terrace, whichever his excellency might prefer.

But the count comes forward, his yellow face wrinkled with the sweetest and most courteous of smiles.

"Ah!" he says, amiably, "I thought I should find your highness among the ferns. You, too, Mr. Bertram. You admire nature; I also am a worshiper at her shrine. Nothing charms me so much as her manifold marvels. A delightful conservatory, truly! Princess, if you are quite ready, the carriage is announced."

And with a bow which is as polished as a Chesterfield's, he takes her upon his arm, and carries her off.

(To be continued.)

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