

# THE BEAUTIFUL LADY GLADYS.

## CHAPTER I.

"Oh, Bell, I am so frightened! I do not believe any one will dance with me!"

"Nonsense, child! Wait a minute," then, with a sweet smile as a gentleman bowed before her, "How do you do, Mr. Graham? This is an unexpected pleasure. I did not know you were to be here to-night."

"But I knew that you were coming," rejoined the young man, emphasising the "you" with a very admiring look at the blue-eyed, golden-haired girl before him. "May I be favoured with a dance?"

"Yes; I think I am disengaged for the fourth."

"Ah, Miss Vane, you are too cruel! That is a square. You will let me have a waltz later on to make up for it"—persuasively.

"Perhaps"—looking up at him coquetishly. "I will see."

The young man smiled, and, having written his name on her programme, made way for several men who were coming up to secure a dance with the pretty popular Isabella Vane.

The dancing had not yet begun, and for several minutes the girl stood laughing and jesting with the men around her, pointing her saucy remarks with flashes from the bluest eyes that ever made havoc with masculine hearts.

Dollie stood a little way behind, looking at the merry group with wistful, shy, dark eyes, wondering whether any one would dance with her that night.

"Who is your chaperon to-night, Miss Vane?" inquired an officer with a handsome dark face, at whose uniform Dollie gazed with admiring awe. "I see your aunt is not here."

"No; she is ill; so Mrs. Warner kindly volunteered to supply her place. Is Sir Vivian Bramhall coming to-night, do you know, Captain North?"

"Yes; he is here. I saw him pass us just now."

"Did you?" said Bell, the light fading from her bright face for a moment as they took their places for the first dance.

Dollie stood near them—a pretty little girl, with golden-brown hair curling all over her head in short soft ringlets, dark-blue velvety eyes, which changed to a deep purple when she was strongly moved—they were purple now—a delicate pink-and-white complexion, and a dimpled smiling red mouth. A wreath of violets was half hidden in her curls, whilst bunches of the same flowers nestled amid the lace at her bosom and looped up the folds of her white dress.

Dollie's mother had married a poor man against her parent's wishes. At their death they had left all their wealth to an unmarried daughter on condition that she should adopt one of her sister's children. Miss Maclaren's choice had fallen on the eldest girl, Bell, whom accordingly she had reared and educated from childhood.

Once a year Miss Maclaren allowed Bell to go and see her mother and sister in their quiet little home in Northumberland. This Christmas Bell had begged that Dollie might come and stay with them for a little while in Edinburgh. Miss Maclaren had consented; and Dollie had arrived the previous day, and for the first time in her life had become acquainted with the noise and bustle of a busy town.

And now this evening of the ball, Dollie was wishing herself at home very much, as, bewildered by the lights and the crowd, she mechanically followed Isabel and her tall cavalier through the ball-room and then took a seat by Mrs. Warner.

When the first dance was over, Bell came up with an elderly man, who engaged Dollie for the next dance.

They found a *vis-a-vis* in Captain North and his partner, who was, without ques-

tion the "belle" of the ball. She had a classical face, with a warmly coloured brown skin, bronze-coloured hair, divided over a low broad forehead, brought smoothly round a well-shaped head, and coiled low behind; sweeping dark eyebrows, almond-shaped blue eyes, a long straight nose, and a mouth which is only found in this Egyptian type of beauty, not too full or thin, but perfect, scarlet lines drooping ever so little at the corners, and telling their own story of sorrow, either past or present. She was a little above the middle height and graceful in all her movements. Her dress was ivory-coloured satin and showed every curve of her splendid figure, around which it fell in artistic folds.

"Who is that lady?" said Dollie, after a prolonged gaze of admiration. "How beautiful she is—like a queen!"

Her companion smiled at her enthusiasm as he replied—

"That is Lady Gladys, or rather Lady Warvin, one of the belles of London. I admire your taste, Miss Vane; she is very handsome, certainly."

"She does not look very happy," remarked Dollie, who was rather quick in guessing people's characters.

"You are right; she has not had a very happy life, I should imagine. I was in London when she came out, about three years ago, and I knew her when she was at the height of her beauty and everybody raved about her. She married, during her first season, Sir Robert Warvin, who was immensely rich and passionately fond of her. For about a year he was a most devoted husband; but, after that period, he seemed to grow tired of his beautiful plaything, and went away in his yacht for a tour round the world, leaving her to take care of herself. Six months afterwards his yacht was found on the South American coast, a mere wreck, without a soul on board, and was towed into Valparaiso by a passing steamer. Am I tiring you, Miss Vane?"

"Oh, no!" answered Dollie eagerly. "I am greatly interested in the story. Pray tell me how it ended."

"There is not much more to tell. Lady Warvin has lived in Scotland ever since her husband's death; and she is now coming out of her seclusion, and is on her way to London, a rich young widow of twenty-two."

"But how do you know her husband is dead?" questioned Dollie.

"Of course he is; there can be no doubt of that! There was not a soul picked up by the steamer; and, even had Sir Robert escaped in any way, surely he would have written to his wife!"

"Yes," assented Dollie; "of course he would."

And then they were silent for a while, Dollie watching the pair opposite and noticing how admiringly Captain North was regarding his stately companion, as if taking in every detail of her marvellous beauty.

After the quadrille was over and Dollie had been led back to her seat, she looked about for Bell, and saw her standing by the crimson curtains of the archway with her partner, talking to a gentleman she did not remember to have seen before. He was not so handsome as Captain North, she thought, but he was tall and well-made, with rather a haughty carriage of his head. She saw him write his name on her sister's card; and then Bell was led off by a curly-haired young subaltern. The gentleman stood where they had left him, leaning against the wall, with a rather bored expression on upon his face.

By-and-by Lady Warvin came slowly through the archway close to him, a crowd of men following in her train, foremost among whom was Captain North, carrying

her bouquet; and, to judge from the envious glances cast at him by the others, he seemed to be, for the time, her most favoured admirer. The gentleman by the archway turned his head as Lady Warvin passed by and looked her straight in the face. Her colour deepened, and with a little smile she half stopped and held out her hand; but he remained unmoved and appeared not to have seen the outstretched hand. She passed on, with an almost imperceptible shrug of her round brown shoulders, to a seat on a dais, where she remained for the rest of the evening, fanning herself languidly while the men stood and sat around her on the steps of the dais, doing homage to her beauty with worshipping eyes and lips.

The ball went on merrily. Dollie sat out two or three dances beside a red-haired lady in pink.

"This is your first ball, is it not?" she began in a piercing shrill voice. "How dreadfully that girl does flirt—that one over there in blue and silver! It is really monstrous!"

Dollie looked across at the place indicated and saw pretty Bell laughing and talking with the little subaltern, all bright eyes, white teeth, and dimples. Bell was a born coquette—it was her nature—she could not help it; she could not resist the temptation of trying to make men like her for the mere pleasure and womanly desire for admiration, without thinking of the pain she might heedlessly inflict on some unsuspecting victim.

"That is my sister," replied loyal Dollie; "she doesn't flirt!"

"I beg your pardon, dear; I am sure I had not the least idea that she was any relative of yours," said the other. She hurriedly turned the conversation. "Don't you think Captain North is very good-looking?"

"Yes. Who is he?"

"He is in the —th Hussars. They are stationed here, you know. He is a great admirer of your sister, or at least he—"

She stopped suddenly, glancing at him where he sat by Lady Warvin's side, fanning her in a very devoted way.

Dollie looked too, and sighed a little, she hardly knew why, at seeing his dark head in such close proximity to Lady Warvin's; and her loquacious companion continued—

"I never saw the rooms so full as this before. I should think there are about three hundred people present. Do you see that gentleman standing by the archway looking so tired? That is Sir Vivian Bramhall, one of the nicest men about here. He is extremely rich, and has a nice place outside Edinburgh. He succeeded to the title unexpectedly about two years ago, and has been considered the great catch ever since; but nobody ever seems to make much impression on him. They say he was jilted when he was only a younger son, and has never quite got over it. But I don't believe that myself; he is much too nice and agreeable for any one to refuse him."

"What makes him so fascinating?" inquired Dollie, amused in spite of herself.

"He is such a favourite with the people; he seems to be able to get on with every one—gentlemen and ladies alike. I don't know him myself, but everybody says he is wonderfully pleasant. He has been staring at me for ever so long. Yes, and now he has gone to get a steward to introduce me"—excitedly craning her neck round to look in the glass behind.

Dollie reassured her, and then she sat still, with a bewitching unconscious smile upon her face, fanning herself gracefully as Sir Vivian and a steward slowly made their way through the crowd of dancers to where she sat. Dollie blamed herself inwardly for feeling selfishly sorry that her only friend was going to leave her. Then she heard a voice.

"Will you allow me to introduce Sir Vivian Bramhall? Sir Vivian Bramhall—Miss Vane."

Dollie, hardly believing her ears, look-

ed up then with such astonishment that both the gentlemen smiled.

"May I have the honor of this waltz if you are not engaged?"

"Thank you," and Dollie rose and took the Baronet's proffered arm, without daring to look at the discomfited lady in pink.

Sir Vivian, still smiling a little under his moustache, watched her covertly, taking in every detail of her fresh youthful beauty—the silky shining hair, the innocent childlike eyes, the blushing varying face, and the smiling red mouth.

"I am afraid you are surprised at my presumption in obtaining an introduction to you, Miss Vane?"

"Oh, no!" replied Dollie frankly. "It was not that. Only I thought you were going—"

Here she stopped in some confusion. She would not let him know that they had been talking about him.

"Well," he said, "what did you think?"

"Oh, please don't ask me!"—looking up at him appealingly.

They were passing by the dais, where Lady Warvin was enthroned with her courtiers round her, and they heard her say to Captain North—

"Who is that little bread-and-butter school-girl in white?"

Sir Vivian muttered something in a low tone, and cast a scornful look at her as he and Dollie walked on. Captain North, aroused from his contemplation of Lady Warvin's perfect profile, turned his head to see to whom she was alluding.

"By Jove," he said, "that is little Miss Dollie Vane! How in the world did she get introduced to Bramhall?"

Meanwhile Sir Vivian had led his partner to an ante-room, which they found deserted. The two sat down on a couch, and Sir Vivian prepared to console his little partner.

"I hope you did not mind what she said; it is not worth a second thought."

"What have I done to her?" cried Dollie indignantly; and he could see that two angry tears were swimming in her eyes, which were kept from falling with great difficulty. "Why should she say such horrid things of me? And she looks so beautiful too—like an angel—and—and I liked her so!"

Sir Vivian looked at her compassionately. Was this the first time she had been disappointed in people's looks? he wondered. She would soon grow accustomed to that, poor little thing; but meanwhile—

"Oh, don't mind what she said! She did not mean it unkindly!"—and he bent down and looked straight into her dark eyes.

She was so taken by surprise that the two tears welled over and rolled down the pretty flushed cheeks.

"Ah," cried Dollie pathetically, overwhelmed with shame, "no wonder she thinks me a schoolgirl! I am so silly; nobody likes me here. I wish I had stayed at home with my mother."

"I am quite certain other people like you besides your mother," answered Sir Vivian softly. "I don't see how any one could help it who knew you."

"Do you really think so?"—brightening. "I am afraid you only say it out of kindness."

"You may be quite sure I mean it," he affirmed.

"Then," said Dollie in a relieved tone, "perhaps, if she knew me, she would not have said that."

He did not reply; and there was a little pause, during which Dollie wondered if he did not want to take her back to her seat.

"Will you give me another dance?" he said suddenly. "This one is nearly over."

"If you like," she replied, handing him a fair white card.

"How is this?"—gazing at the blank