

Beautiful Cynthia;

Victory After Many Defeats.

CHAPTER XIII. "FOR LOVE'S SAKE."

"Dear Dad," he wrote impulsively, "you will know what I feel, for you have been in love yourself. She is not only beautiful, but the sweetest girl you can imagine. All London is raving about her. And she loves me. I am the luckiest fellow upon earth. Write me at once and wish me joy. I shall be quite happy until I hear from you."

Almost at the same time Cynthia was writing, in a somewhat similar strain, to her father. She, too, dilated upon her lover's worth and charm. He was everything that was handsome and good and noble; he was a prince among men, and he loved her! Wonderful, wasn't it! They had only one regret—that her dear, dear dad should be so far away and not able to share in their happiness.

Would he write or cable just a "Yes"? There was much more than this. It was a long letter in which she poured out something of the joy of her young heart, and her eyes filled with tears, happy tears, as she wrote her letter.

Strangely enough, she fell asleep directly her head touched the pillow, though she had meant to be awake for quite a long time and think of the "prince among men," who had condescended to love her.

She was rather pale when she came down the next morning, for, while Parsons had been dressing her, she had been picturing the interview between Darrel and Lady Westlake, and it had assumed a graver and more fearful import than it had borne on the preceding night with Darrel's arm round her to encourage her.

As Darrel had said, the Griffin had not regarded him with favor; and the Griffin could be very hard, and very stubborn, when she liked.

She moved about the house restlessly, like the dove of the ark, finding no place in which to rest her feet.

But, at any rate, she could think of Darrel, of his love-fraught words, of his dear eyes, warm with passion and adoration; and she thought of him all the time. Lady Westlake did not

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appear until lunch. She seemed in a particularly good humor, and nodded with a grim smile at Cynthia, and even chuckled her under the chin.

"You did very well last night, my dear," she said graciously. "You made quite a success of it—thanks to Madame Cerise. That dress of hers was really clever. Lord Northam admired it very much. By the way, he is coming to lunch. You had better"—she looked Cynthia up and down with a keen, critical scrutiny—"no, perhaps you had better keep on that morning dress. It's pretty and simple and suitable. I suppose your head is quite turned, eh?"

"Why should it be, Aunt Gwen?" said Cynthia. "Every one was kind to me; but it was because it was my first presentation, and everybody is kind on such an occasion, aren't they? And it was a very pretty frock you had made for me, and that lovely veil of yours—there was not another like it in the room!"

"Humph!" grunted the Griffin, but still graciously. "Frocks and veils are all very well, but—Good morning, Lord Northam," she broke off as Northam lounged in with his usual sang-froid. "We were just talking about last night. I was telling Cynthia this not to be vain."

"Good advice, but quite unnecessary," said Northam, in his slow, yet curt fashion. "Miss Drayle couldn't be vain if she tried."

"Oh, couldn't she?" retorted the Griffin, with a grin. "That's all you know! We women are vain in our cradles; but I'll admit that we're no less vain as men."

They went into lunch. The Griffin's good humor was still maintained. She did most of the talking. In a casual way she spoke of Torbridge the family place, and in a subtle fashion she managed to convey to Cynthia the splendor and importance of that magnificent seat of the ducal family. Northam said little, and enjoyed his lunch with his usual heartiness but every now and then he paused and looked at Cynthia, exactly as he had looked at her during the dinner at the Scovy.

When the far too elaborate lunch was over—Cynthia ate but little, and paid as little attention to her companions, for she was thinking of Darrel and wondering what time he would call—they went into the drawing-room.

"You can smoke if you like," said the Griffin amiably; "a cigarette, if her cigars—they make the curtains smell."

But Northam wouldn't smoke. He leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, and gazed above Cynthia's head. The Griffin hobbled about the room for a while; then she went out, muttering something about orders for the dinner, an excuse which appeared to Cynthia absolutely futile, for ordering the meals—in fact, the whole direction of the household—fell to the housekeeper.

Cynthia went to the window and drummed softly on the sill. Darrel might appear at any moment. She was aroused from her reverie by Northam's slow, half-sleepy voice.

"Great success last night, Miss Drayle," he said. "Come round now to congratulate you. Lots of people will be here presently, no doubt. Should like to speak to you while I have the chance."

"To speak to me?" said Cynthia, leaving the window and abandoning her hope of seeing Darrel approach.

She went back to her chair, seated herself, and leaned forward with her arms embracing her knees in a girlish fashion, and regarding him with an absent air.

"Yes," he said slowly, heavily, his eyes fixed on the coal scuttle beside her. "Fact is, I came on important business—well, important to me. I want to ask you a question."

"A question? What is it?" asked Cynthia, with a smile. She thought he was going to ask her to go for a

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drive with him and Lady Alicia in his four-in-hand, or to accompany them to the opera or a picnic.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, abstractedly. "Fact is, I wanted to ask you, Miss Drayle, if you thought you'd care to be my wife."

Cynthia's arms unlocked; she sat bolt upright; her eyes opened wide, and she stared at him with amazement.

"Sorry I've been so abrupt," he said penitently. "Hope you'll excuse me. I'm not much of a hand at this kind of thing, and it comes rather difficult sort of refuse my fence, don't you know? Should like to have broken it to you, led up to it with a good take-off; but it's always the way with nervous man—and I'm as nervous as a cat, though perhaps I don't look it. What I mean is, do you think you'd care enough for me to marry me?"

"No, I don't," gasped poor Cynthia, so alarmed to be anything but candid. "I—I like you very much; you have been very kind to me, you and Lady Alicia; but—I don't—I don't care for you as much as that."

Northam's heavy countenance did not change in the least. He looked round the room slowly, and his prominent blue eyes as slowly returned to her startled countenance.

"Oh," he said. "Like that, is it? I'm sorry. Suppose I ought to say 'Thank you, very sorry, and take my leave'—been a bit sudden, haven't I? That's the worst of me, I look such a con-founded—beg pardon, I mean silly fool—that people don't give me credit for being serious; but, give you my word, I'm serious enough now. I want to marry you very badly. I'm not such a bounder as to remind you that I've got things which some women might attach a value to. Shouldn't like you to marry me because I'm the next duke. No, not at all. No; should like to be cared for just for myself, as the novelists chaps say. But there you are—I'm asking you to marry me, not only because I love you, but because I know you'd make a first-rate duchess. Got to think of that, you know, because it's what my people expect. You'd fill the bill first-rate. But don't run away with the idea that I'm thinking of that only. No, I want to marry you because you—are you. Hope you understand?"

This was a tremendously long speech for Northam, and he got it out with great difficulty, and yet with an earnestness and sincerity which touched Cynthia, all absorbed and engrossed though she was by her love for Darrel. She turned red and white by turns; there was a suspicious moisture in her eyes.

She knew that, with all his heaviness, his seeming stupidity, the man who was asking her to be his wife was a good man and true; and, made hypersensitive by her own happiness,

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her own heart passion, she was tenderly sorry for him.

"I'm sorry!" she murmured rather brokenly. "I didn't know—I never guessed; but, Lord Northam, I must say 'No.' I—I couldn't care for you—I couldn't marry you. Besides," try as she would, a smile, a gleam of happiness would break from her face, beam from her eyes. "I—I am already engaged."

He nodded two or three times, his heavy chin sank on his breast.

"That so?" he said. "Well, I had guessed it would be. He's a deuced lucky chap. I fancy I can guess his name. Begins with an F, doesn't it?"

Cynthia blushed a hot crimson, her eyes glowed, and she nodded ecstatically.

"Thought so," said Northam, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Awfully decent fellow, Frayne; wish him joy—and you."

He rose slowly, as if his huge frame were an impediment, and held out his hand. With girlish impulsiveness Cynthia took the big hand in both her small ones.

"How good you are!" she said brokenly, and with tears in her eyes.

"Not a bit," he said, nodding at her. Frayne's a far better chap than I am in every way, and he deserves you. I thought there might be a chance for me, and I went for it. Look here, don't let this foolishness of mine make any difference between us. We can be friends, if we can't be husband and wife. Frayne's a pal of mine; and I don't want to lose both of you; understand?"

"Oh, I quite understand," responded Cynthia, a tear rolling down her cheek. "You must be a very kind and good man, Lord Northam—"

"No," he said slowly. "Ordinary kind of man; but I'm not such a fool as to want what I can't get, especially when another man's got it. I may be an ass. If I can't have you for a wife I would like to keep you for a friend. Frayne, too. Good-by. Here, say," he added, with his hand on the door, and a shrewd look came for a moment into his dull countenance, shouldn't let the old lady know what's passed between us. What, eh?"

He bestowed a knowing and significant nod on Cynthia and lurched heavily out of the room.

So, for love's sake, Cynthia had refused to become the future Duchess of Torbridge!

(To be Continued.)

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