

THE BEAUTIFUL LADY GLADYS.

CHAPTER IV.

Nearly all the skaters had gone home, the band had departed, and the lake lay cold and gray beneath the moon. Dollie and Captain North, after skating for a little, had sat down on the boat near which the bonfire had been kindled, and were chatting merrily in the ruddy blaze. Captain North was fast forsaking his allegiance to the languid beauty Lady Gladys, who received his love-speeches with such calm indifference, and was rapidly falling in love with his bright, merry little companion, who presented such a contrast to the late queen of his affections—the difference between a red carnation and a violet, he thought; and the comparison was not inapt. Lady Gladys would perhaps love more passionately, but Dollie's love would be more sweet, more unselfish—would shed a gentler light over her husband's home. When the bonfire had smouldered away to ashes, they got out of the boat with some difficulty, and Captain North cautiously clambered down the bank on to the ice. The moon had gone behind a cloud, and it was quite dark.

"Jump down, Miss Dollie; I'll catch you," he said, as she hesitated on the bank above him. "Daren't you trust yourself to me?"

But she still hovered above him remembering the little scene with Sir Vivian.

"I dare not. The bank is so high, and I shall come down with such force that I shall be sure to knock you down and hurt you. I will jump alone."

And, suiting the action to the word, she jumped down without further delay, and landed herself in a heap of snow.

"That is all right," cried Dollie laughing. "You see I have not hurt anybody."

"I should not have cared if you had," he replied, without laughing in the least. "Will you allow me to help you up?"

Dollie consented; and shaking herself like a Newfoundland, she skated off with him, inwardly grateful that the darkness covered her appearance from the eyes of her neat well-dressed companion. Suddenly the moon came from beyond a cloud, revealing to Dollie's horrified eyes the dark island with its waving trees and the board with its ghastly white letters in front of them.

"Come back!" whispered Dollie so frightened that she could not speak any louder.

The bonfire had been lighted at the limit of sound ice, and they had gone some distance past it, mistaking their way in the darkness. Before they could turn, the ice cracked with a sound which neither of them ever forgot, broke beneath them, and the next moment they had disappeared. Dollie rose first, and chilled and numbed, unable to think or to cry out; she was just being sucked under the ice when her dress was caught by a firm piece, and she swung by its resistance slowly round. With the instinct of self-preservation, she threw one arm round the ice, opened her eyes and gasped for breath. Captain North was drifting helplessly towards her, shouting loudly for help.

"Thank Heaven!" he said faintly, as he caught sight of Dollie. "Hold on: you will be saved. They are coming!"

He floated on without touching her, and had almost disappeared under the ice when Dollie, for the first time realising the state of the case, threw one arm round his neck as he passed by her side. The ice bent beneath the added weight, but held for a moment, during which Captain North attempted to disengage himself from her hand. But Dollie held on resolutely, feeling already half-dead with cold. A horrible buzzing sounded in her ears, which seemed to increase as the water eddied round them.

"I wonder how fishes live in the winter?" she thought stupidly. "It must be very cold for them. May Heaven forgive our sins if we die now!"

Then the wailing scream of a woman in great agony was echoed between the hills and died away in the darkness.

"Hold on, Dollie—hold on. I am coming!" shouted a man's voice; and a dark figure crept slowly towards them.

Dollie smiled faintly. He had come to save her; she would not die this time. Once again the ice gave way, and Dollie and Captain North sank together. At that moment Sir Vivian reached the spot. Plunging into the black eddying pool where they had disappeared, he succeeded in grasping Dollie. Even then he noted how her arm was twined round Captain North's neck. Without losing an instant, he fastened a rope round the Captain's waist, took Dollie in his arms, and, with all his strength, struck out for the surface, which he just reached, and was sinking back again, when Charlie Murdoch seized him by the collar and, with the help of one of the servants, drew the three carefully into the boat, which they had managed to get off the bank only just in time, for Sir Vivian was pretty well exhausted.

They rowed them in slowly to the bank, where Bell and Lady Gladys stood awaiting them in helpless terror. After lifting them out on the grass, the servant ran off to the house for assistance, and the living and the dead were left together in a silence only broken by the moaning wind and poor Bell's bitter sobs. The moon looked down serenely on the scene—the quiet lake, the waving trees, the boat, the broken ice, the black water; serenely calm, it threw its silvery light over the sad little group on the snowy bank, on weeping Bell bending over Dollie's peaceful face, with its closed eyes and the smile on her lips with which she had greeted Sir Vivian's approach; over beautiful Lady Gladys, as she laid her old lover's head upon her breast and kissed him with that remorseful love and sorrow—deep down in her heart feeling bitterly glad that at least now he was hers, and no woman had a right to take him from her arms. Charlie Murdoch stood by Dollie's side gazing sorrowfully down at her.

"Let me hold your sister," he said pleadingly to Bell, trying vainly to steady his voice.

Bell raised a tear-marred face to him, half inclined to refuse his request; but, meeting his eyes, guessed the great sorrow, so far exceeding hers, which he was enduring, and, womanlike, denied herself her right that his grief might be lessened.

"Yes."

Charlie looked at her gratefully through the great tears which dimmed his eyes, but could find no voice to thank her, as she laid the curly brown head against his knee. Then a cloud passed over the moon, darkening her cold unfeeling light, and he was alone with his dead love, the darkness covering them like a curtain.

"Oh, my darling," he whispered, bending over her in passionate grief, "Heaven knows how willingly I would have died for you, or with you, my little love!"—and he stifled a great choking sob in his throat as he took up the little hands lying so listlessly on the snow, placed them in her lap, and smoothed back the wet curls from her forehead.

He had never realized how much he had loved his merry little friend until he had seen her lying in the boat, cold, white and still, the pretty eyes closed, and the laughing mouth silent for ever. How pale she looked, how quiet! Who would think that ten minutes ago she was

glowing with life and health, and her merry laugh ringing from this very spot on which she was now lying cold and dead?

"Why was I not with her? Why did I not watch over her better?" he groaned, inwardly anathematising the jealous pride which had kept him from her side all that afternoon. "Oh, Dollie, my love my darling, what shall I do without you?"—and the hot bitter tears of a man's agony fell down upon her upturned, serene, lovely face, from which all the roses and dimples had disappeared.

He felt her pulse, but his own hands were so numb that they were almost devoid of feeling; he bent his face to the red mouth seeking for some sign of life; but no breath came from the placid lips. He sat there in speechless sorrow, until the litters came to bear them to the house, and then he placed her on one, tenderly placing her head on the soft rugs. Was it his fancy, or did her eyelids quiver? Presently her eyes opened, and gazed unseeingly into his.

"Thank Heaven," said Charlie solemnly, "she lives!"

Yes, they lived, all of them, after long anxious days, in which they fought with Death for their lives inch by inch, and conquered him at last through their healthy constitutions and the loving care of their nurses, Lady Gladys, Bell, Miss Maclaren, and Mrs. Vane, who had been telegraphed for on that first dreadful night, when Dollie had been so close to death that they thought, as they watched her, every faintly-drawn breath would have been her last. The doctor had pronounced them out of danger. Sir Vivian would probably be confined to his room longer than any of them, though at first Dollie's had been the most dangerous case.

Unconscious of this bud of love which was opening so sweetly for him to gather, Sir Vivian lay in an adjacent room, tortured with jealous thoughts and fancies; the time Dollie had stayed with Captain North on the lake, and the pretty blush with which she had always heard his name mentioned were ever rising up before him; and he determined that, once certain that Dollie cared for the handsome officer, he would not stand in the way of her happiness, whatever he might suffer himself. The knowledge of his unfortunate love should not dim her bright future. But he would be quite sure before he gave up all hope of winning the bright little maiden for his wife.

Captain North was the first to recover. Very gratefully he thought of the little hand which had been stretched forth to save him from certain death; and he felt more in love with Dollie than ever he had been before.

Charlie Murdoch and Frank Travers had been constantly at the Hall since the accident; and Bell had grown to look forward to the loving sympathy and tender words of Frank during the anxious days when Dollie hung between life and death. And the next time he pressed his suit upon her, she, hiding her face upon his shoulder, told him falteringly that she would have accepted his offer only she thought he cared for some one else better.

"And does he care for you?" asked Frank, with a bitter pain in his heart, trying to speak quietly.

Bell, still hiding her face, blushed scarlet with shame, and was silent. Frank looked down at half a crimson cheek and a little scarlet ear, which was all that was visible.

"My darling," he said hurriedly, "the state of the case breaking in on him, 'do not distress yourself so much. I honor you for what you have told me more than I can say. I love you dearly for your sincerity; and'"—lifting up the blushing face between his two brown hands and looking lovingly at the downcast eyes—

"Dear, will you let me try to make you love me?"

"Don't, Frank," answered Bell, averting her crimson face.

He let her go, and she hid her face again on his shoulder.

"I shall never be able to look at you again!"—piteously.

"You may stay there as long as you like," he replied obligingly, stealthily caressing the golden head. "Promise me that you will wait a little before finally deciding; and believe me"—earnestly—"whatever happens, I shall always be your friend."

"How kind you always are to me, Frank! I will never forget it," she whispered shyly.

"I hope not. I will come every day to see you and refresh your memory. Good-bye, dear! I must go now; it is getting late."

In another moment he was gone; and she watched him from the window ride away down the avenue. Had she promised him that she would wait? She could not tell. Anyhow, he had taken it for granted; and Bell ran up to Dollie's room with a light heart.

Captain North was the first to be brought down and be deposited carefully in the little warm drawing-room which had been especially prepared for the invalids. Bell was up-stairs in Dollie's room with her mother and aunt. Sir Vivian was asleep. So the care of the of the convalescent patient devolved upon Lady Gladys. She was not at all displeased by the change in his affections, and was quite content to be his *confidante* encouraging him to talk about Dollie and her many charms in a maternal way which became her wonderfully.

"Yes, it was very brave of her," she said, in answer to a warm eulogium on Dollie's courage; "but still, you know, I do not believe she would do it for every one."

"What do you mean?" he asked faintly—he was still rather weak after his illness.

"I mean that she must have liked you, or she would not have done it."

"Do you think that she really likes me—that she is not flirting?"

"I thought you were so fond of flirting"—maliciously.

"I am not"—smiling—"but is Miss Vane, do you think?"

"No, she is too young and too innocent yet. I dare say she will acquire the habit in time."

"I hope not," he rejoined earnestly. "After all, what a contemptible way of passing the time it is—pretending to adore a person about whom you do not care a straw!"

Lady Gladys laughed at his vehemence. It was certainly a new doctrine from his lips.

"I am glad you have at last awakened to the error of your ways. I wish you as much success in true love affairs as in flirting. But you are exciting yourself. I cannot have you talking so much. I will read to you for a while."

Selecting a volume of Browning's works, she sat down in an easy-chair by his side and began to read aloud "Beautiful Evelyn Hope"—her favorite poem.

Captain North watched her beautiful face with pleased drowsy eyes. Though he did not love her, it was pleasant to be nursed by such a woman. She read on until she came to the lines, "He creates the love to reward the love. I claim you still for my own sake;" and she paused a little.

"Is that true?" he wondered half asleep. "If I love Dollie, will she be obliged to like me. 'But to be loved makes not to be loved again.' Where is that from, I wonder? They can't both be right, anyhow. I will ask her soon and see which is right;" and lulled by the warmth and the sweet scent of the purple and white hyacinths in the window he fell asleep peacefully.