

# Violet's Lover

She was standing by his side, looking down on him with a light but far from happy smile. Never had this beautiful woman looked more beautiful than now, with her charming head bent over him, standing in the half-darkened room, like a vision of light. The crimson glow of the fire and the soft radiance from the lamp on the table fell over her. She wore a very handsome dress, which showed her lovely shoulders, her white neck and rounded arms—a dress that in the ruddy fire-light presented most marvellous hues. With a slight smile she looked at him, and her eyes shone in the golden hair.

There was something more than beauty in her face; he knew it the moment he raised his eyes and saw her. There was love-love such as had not shone there since she had bidden him farewell. The fire-light gleamed on her jeweled hands, on her marvelous face, on the golden hair that fell about her, all the pride and magnificence of her wealth and her loveliness, a vision such as rarely greets the eyes of men. And, as he looked at her, a light came into his eyes, a light that she had never seen before. He looked at her slowly, and then he bent her head before him.

"Lady Chevenix," he cried, "you must not do that. I cannot allow it."

She laid her hand on his arm—the hand on which shone her wedding ring.

"Listen to me, Felix," she said, and the sweet voice stirred unworldly his heart and soul. "I have waited impatiently for this hour. You are going away to-morrow, and I must speak to you to-night, Marian is in the ante-room there; I brought her with me. I told her I must speak to you to-night, and she came at once. Felix, will you listen?"

"How can I help but listen?" he replied. "What do you wish to say to me, Lady Chevenix?"

With a charming gesture of impatience she laid a finger on his lips.

"You must not call me 'Lady Chevenix,'" she said, "but 'Violet.' Say 'Violet,' and then I will tell you what I came for."

"Perhaps, if he had had time to prepare himself, to think matters over, to take some precautions, he would have known how to answer her. As it was, she seemed suddenly to have taken possession of him, of his whole nature."

"You make me say what you will, Violet," he said.

She clasped her hands, and laid them upon his arm.

"I want to tell you a story, Felix," she said, "give me your attention while I narrate it. You are ago there was a girl—very foolish, and, the world said, fair. She was vain, too, of her beauty, and expected to achieve great things with it. She loved with all her heart a young man who was more worthy of her love, and she promised to be his wife. But sorrow and misfortune came to him, while a wealthy wooer sought her—one who offered her wealth and title, houses and a carriage, and she was won. He was ashamed of her, Felix. She was vain, and much weaker than a woman; she was young, too, and not overwise. She had nobility enough, however, to see that she was known by her love of luxury and comfort—she was badly advised, wrongly influenced; and she, weaker, if I say so, than a woman, gave up her lover—the one man in the world whom she loved—and married the wealthy suitor. How she suffered no one knows, no one can tell. Her marriage turned out to be a very unhappy one. She had money, luxury of every kind, but she never had one moment of happiness—one moment of peace, of rest. She had outward gaiety, outward brilliancy, and pleasure, but inwardly she was a woman of lamentation and anxious sorrow. No one knew what she suffered; no one knew how she regretted the lost true, dear love who would have made her life a heaven on earth. After she was married, she met him again, and—well, he was always cold and distant to her. What she thought and what she suffered was known to herself. Then, after long years of humiliating servitude she was alone again and free. What do you think she did, Felix?"

"I cannot say," he replied, in a low, hoarse voice.

"I will tell you. After those long years she found that she still loved the dear companion of her youth. She said to herself that he had never married—perhaps he had not—and one night, when he was sitting alone, she went to him—as I have come to you—knelt by his side—as I kneel by yours—and prayed to him—as I pray to you—'Oh, my lost love, my dear love, forgive me, and take me to your heart again.' And the lovely head drooped until it lay upon his arm.

He made no answer just then. His whole soul was stirred within him—a few minutes she raised her face to his, and he saw tears upon it.

"Violet," he said, "I do not know what to say to you. You have taken me so completely by surprise. I am lost—bewildered. I cannot collect myself."

"I thought you would say 'Yes' to me at once," she said, smiling. "Oh, Felix, he you not forgive me? Tell me that first. Have you forgiven me?"

He looked at her thoughtfully, watching the fire-light gleaming in her golden hair and on her rich jewels.

"Yes; I have forgiven you, Violet—I forgive you long ago."

"Quite, or was it only a half forgiveness, Felix?"

"Quite," he replied. "I am sure of it. My heart was full of hot anger for many long months, but it died away; and then, when I saw that you were not angry, I forgave you."

"With all your heart, Felix?"

"With all my heart," he answered; and then there was silence for a few minutes between them.

"You forgave me? Then, Felix, why will you not take me into your heart again?"

His face grew deathly pale—his hands trembled. She saw such deep emotion in his face that her own grew pale.

"You see, but one side of the question," he said. "Now, listen to me. I loved a girl, Violet—ah, Heaven, how I loved her. She was the very light of my eyes! She was the pulse of my heart! She was the very soul of my life—my one priceless jewel. She loved me—her fair face brightened for me—her sweet eyes rained love and kisses on me—her voice made all my music! I had no life outside of her sweet life! Heaven forgive me, I worshipped her—no man ever worshipped a woman so madly, so blindly, or so well. If you were time my poor life would have served her, I would have given it. If at any time I could have died for her, I would have died. And she was kind to me. It drives me mad even now when I remember that she once placed her arms around my neck and promised to be my wife. Then over the heaven of my content what clouds came! I was working—as man seldom works—to make a home for my darling, and place her in it. I was seeking every picture, every ornament that I thought would beautify a home, for one who would herself adorn it most. What happened? A wealthier lover came—not, mind you, one who loved her more, not one whom she could love—a man, to say the least, of high, coarse of soul and hard of heart; he could not even appreciate the exquisite loveliness of my love. He led out his hands to her, and they were filled with gold; he offered her title, money, jewels—everything that women love. He laughed to scorn the notion that any tie to me bound her. 'Leave him, he said—'he is poor. Come to me—'What did she do? She took this love of mine, who held my heart in her hands?'"

The beautiful head drooped lower and lower.

"Have pity on me, Felix," she cried—"have pity!"

"I do not mean to be hard; I am only telling the truth. This is my version of the story, Violet. What did she do? Did the first noble instincts of true womanhood come to her? Did she turn with fidelity to me? No. She flung my love back in my face, she trampled my life under her feet, and she crushed my heart in her hand—she jilted me! Nay, do not shrink from the word, Violet; it is the only one. She jilted me—left me to be the subject of men's laughter and women's jeers—left me to a burning fire of anguish that nothing could slacken or cool—left me with my life ruined."

Again she raised her hands to him, and cried:

"Have pity on me! You are terribly hard."

"Nay, I am but just, Violet. And then this woman who had left me to laughter and ruin came to me—oh, heaven, that woman can be so light!—she came to me with a man and me to take her into my heart again. The past, which had been one long agony to me, was to be conduced by a smile, the torture of years to be soothed by a few kind words! He stopped; the passion of his own words mastered him.

"You said you had forgiven me, dear," and Violet's hands touched his clustering hair.

"Yes, I have forgiven you. Listen to me, Violet. She came to me again, this woman who had betrayed me with the dead man's spoils in her hand. She came to me bright with jewels, radiant with the magnificence of her wealth, and she offered me the wealth for which she left me. She held out her hands to me laden with her treasures; she brought to me the spoils her perflous and falsehood had won for her. I should be less than a man if I shared those spoils with her—should I not, Violet? When you left me, and men laughed because you had left me for money, my very sorrow had a dignity to it. What should I do now, even in your eyes, if I took you back to my heart with the same money that your falsehood had won? I should be less than a man."

"I can not understand you," she said, piteously.

In his passion he seemed to rise to a height which that weak soul could not reach; but the pitiful pleading voice touched him, and made him gentle again. He looked down into the lovely face.

"Violet, you will understand this. Suppose that when you loved me most I had left you and had married a rich woman—a woman whom I did not love, but married solely because she was rich—that she died after a few years, and I came back to you, with her money in my hands, and asked you to share it—would you do it?"

"Yes, I think I should, Felix."

"Perhaps I might have expected such an answer from you. I would not act in such a fashion. I should be less than a man now, to take dead Sir Owen's gold, and with it you."

She looked at him with a half-bewildered air, yet still seemed to feel that she could persuade and soften him by sweet words.

"I have been so unhappy without you, Felix," she murmured. "You do not know it all; it seemed to me as though I had lost the half of my soul, when I lost you. It is not wrong to say so to you now. I was very unhappy, Felix. I found out soon afterward that I could never be happy without you."

He made no answer, and she took courage. She laid her face on his arm. The waves of golden hair fell over his face.

"Do forgive me, Felix," she said. "I was so young and so thoughtless. I did not understand."

So she knelt, while the fire-light played over her, and the face of Felix Lonsdale was turned from her.

"I am so sorry for it all, Felix," the sweet voice went on—"so very sorry. You see, dear, there were great excuses for me, though they do not seem great to you. You were very vain—every one flattered me and praised me, and I was led away. I thought my beauty was great enough to merit any station. Then, Felix, I was so young—oh, dear, forgive me. I was so young—and foolish! I have repented of it ever since I love you now just as much as when we stood in the moonlight together. He raised her face and looked into it. It was beautiful enough to tempt any man to forego honor. He looked into the depths of the violet eyes.

"You are sorry for it, Violet," he said—"really and truly sorry?"

"Yes; I am indeed, Felix," and her hands were clasped round his own. "I am, dear—my life has been all regret."

"Answer me truly—if the time came over again, would you act in the same manner?"

The soft eyes wavered half a moment, and then fell.

"I cannot tell; it was not over again; that is a strange question. Answer me one—truly, Felix. Do you love me?"

She saw the sudden gleam of passion light in his face and deepen in his eyes.

"Do I love you? Yes. Heaven help me, I do! If I did not love you, I should not suffer."

"You are not quite sure that you have not met any one since whom you liked even ever so little, Felix?"

"No," he answered; "when a man has loved a woman like you, Violet, it is not easy to forget her."

"Then, Felix, if you love me and I love you, why should we not be happy? What stands between us?"

"My own honor," he replied—"my dignity as a man, my pride as a gentleman. If you were penniless, Violet, I would kneel to you, I would pray you to be my wife."

"What stands between us?" she asked again.

"Your dead husband's gold—the gold for which you broke your plighted troth and left me. You say, Violet, that you were young and thoughtless when you sinned, that you hardly realized what you were doing. I believe that. Suppose now I believe in you, and again let myself drift upon the golden sea of hope and love. Some wealthier suitor might come—an earl, this time, and you would leave me once more."

"No, never again," he cried, clinging to him—"never again!"

His face softened into deepest tenderness as he looked at her. The old love she long trampled down and repregressed seemed to leap into new and vigorous life.

"Never again!" he repeated. "I love you—and I would be true to you."

"Then give me a proof. I hate this wealth for which you forsook me! I hate this splendor and magnificence for which you bartered your truth and fidelity! I would rather fit by them. They robbed me of you, they destroyed the best part of my life—I will have none of them! No man shall say to me that I pledged my word to a woman, and then you would leave me once more."

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