

DESMOND'S LOVE.

CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

"And have you ever had an *affaire de cour*, Miss Pallas?"

Another man might not have asked her such a question; he was privileged, and she answered truthfully:

"No; I have never cared for any man." "Then he who wins your love will win a treasure," and turning to the organ he struck into an opera air from the "Magic Flute," and she, without a word, followed him.

Her voice rang out in a flood of beautiful melody; it rippled like the notes of a nightingale, soaring up, up into the arched roof of the old room, as though it would fain break through and rise up to heaven; now tender and soft, now loud and clear, anon full of passion and power.

How she sang! Her very soul was in it, the essence of her being. A prize lay before—she longed to win, and the great gift she possessed was greater than ever that dusky chill afternoon, when she sang to Romilly Desmond to woo him back, as it were to life and happiness.

From one thing he went on to another, choosing what he would, and still she followed, and still the spell was on her, and her eyes shone, her cheeks flushed, and her bosom heaved, and when the twilight deepened, and fair Luna rose and threw her pale light over the snow-covered landscape, and the stars shone out, "each on its golden throne," she ceased and turned, and looking at her took in all the loveliness of her rare face and form.

"Are you vexed?" she asked in a low tone. "Will you forgive me for coming here? I had no right, only your splendid music tempted me."

"Forgive you!" he exclaimed, a new light in his dark eyes—"forgive you! I can only bless and thank you for the happiness you have given me."

"And may I come again?"

"If you will," he said almost pleadingly.

"If I will," she repeated. "It will give me so much pleasure, if I may. To sing to your playing is delightful."

"Then come when you will and can, and I will play for you."

"Thanks, Mr. Desmond. I shall avail myself very often of your permission."

"Do. You cannot come more often than I should wish you to."

And after that speech Vera Pallas went away feeling that her task was half accomplished through the great gift of her lovely voice; and when she told Mrs. Desmond the two women shed tears of joy together over the thought that once more Romilly might be induced to come back to life—to give up the living death he had endured for fifteen long and weary years.

"Vere," said Mrs. Desmond suddenly, looking at her through a mist of tears, "perhaps I have been wrong in asking your assistance in this matter."

"Wrong! Why?" asked the young lady.

"Have you counted the cost of your help?"

"I think so," she returned hesitatingly.

"Do you know what I mean?"

"Not quite. Tell me."

"Do you wish me to speak without reserve?"

"I do."

"Well, then, have you thought of this—Romilly may grow to love you?"

"Mrs. Desmond!" a crimson blush, painful in its intensity, swept over Vera's throat and face.

"Probably will," continued the other, not noticing the interruption; "and what is more, love you with an intensity, a devotion, very different from that felt for Leonora Cargill, deep though that was. He was little more than a boy then; he is a man now, and his happiness—nay, his very existence will depend upon whether you can return it. Have you thought of this?"

"No," she responded in a choked voice.

"Then do so, Vera, and—oh, tell me, can you, will you make my poor maimed boy happy if he grows to care for you, chain yourself to him, a cripple for life?"

"Do not—do not ask me," cried the girl distractedly, and wrenching her hands from her friend's detaining grasp, she fled away.

This conversation did not, however, prevent her from availing herself of Romilly's invitation to come to the music-room whenever she chose, and almost daily when she heard the strains of the organ thundering forth, she would repair there, wait until he expended some of his energy in grand tumultuous stormy themes, and then when he played familiar ballads, or operatic airs, she would sing, calming the restlessness of his soul, the weariness of body and brain.

"Thank you, child," he said one day when she had sung "The Lost Chord" perfectly; "that seems to breathe peace into my being."

"And you are not angry that I refused to sing that merry ballad you wished for?"

"I am never angry with you," he answered gently, taking the two little hands in his, and they looked like quivering snowflakes as they lay in his brown fingers.

"And you never will be?" she went on.

"And I never will be," he repeated.

"Why, child, do you know what you have done for me?" he asked suddenly, a strange

light blazing in his dark orbs, and playing over his face.

"What?" she asked timidly.

"Why, this. You have transformed me from a beast into a man again—have undone the work of that Circe who exercised her power so ruthlessly over me. I live again!"

"I am so glad," she whispered.

"I forget my crippled body as I listen to you heavenly notes; forget that I am old, weary, useless. Pain and sorrow seem to leave me—to drop away 'neath the magic of your voice. You are an enchantress! Be merciful," he added in a curious tone. "Use your power lightly, I pray."

"I shall never use it save for your good," she said softly.

"Ah, do not!" he implored.

They were standing facing each other; he had released her hands, and she stood with them lightly clasped on the back of an old carved *pride-dieu* chair. She was quite motionless. Her long ruby-velvet robe fell about her in graceful classic lines its rich hue showing up the fair purity of her skin; the firelight glowed on her golden hair and perfect figure. She was a picture—the mobile lips closed in a serene curve, the dark lashes resting on the softly-tinted cheeks, the wonderful purple eyes full of a dreamy meekness.

"Give me one of those."

He touched a knot of Christmas-roses at her breast as he spoke.

"Take them all," she said eagerly, detaching and offering them to him.

"May I?"

His eyes sought hers questioningly.

"Of course. Who else should I give them to?"

She hated herself the moment she made this speech, and an angry flush rose to her cheek. What would he think of such an unmaidenly speech? What had possessed her? It might ruin all.

"You favor me," he said coldly. "Perhaps you offer the flowers to me as you would to one dead—as a tributary gift on the tomb. You pity me?"

"Mr. Desmond!" she faltered.

"It see it; I understand," he went on almost savagely. "I am not as other men and you let me know it, by speaking to me and acting towards me as you would not towards another."

"How cruel!" she murmured, her lovely eyes suffused with tears.

"Forgive me!" he exclaimed, approaching her, all his anger melting at the sight of her tears. "I am a brute to speak to you like that. Only it is so hard for me to be pitied; it wounds me—causes me unutterable pain, especially from you. Will you pardon me?"

He approached nearer still; looking into the purple orbs all his pulses quickened, his heart beating rapidly, he took her hand tenderly in his, and then—the door opened and Clarence entered, came in with easy gait and lordly air, his handsome face aglow with recent exercise.

"Ah, Romilly!" he exclaimed, in his usual confident, careless, winning way; "I shall have to call you to account."

"Why?" asked the elder brother, a black frown on his brow as he let go the little hand he held, and smothered an angry oath at this unwelcome intrusion.

"Because you are taking up a large portion of Miss Pallas's time. Your music draws her here."

"She comes of her own free will," rejoined the master of Desmond Chase moodily.

"No doubt; and your talent fascinates her, keeps her a prisoner here. Do you remember," he went on, turning to her, "that you promised to skate with me this afternoon?"

"I had forgotten," she acknowledged frankly; "but if it is not too late we can go now," she added eagerly, wishing to get away from Romilly, after making the speech which she saw had wounded him, and which seemed to her now forward and bold.

"It is not too late," returned Clarence quickly, a happy look illumining his face like sunshine. "We have still a clear hour of daylight, and if we need it we can have hour of daylight, and if we need it we can have torches brought to the lake."

"Of course that will be delightful," she agreed, and laughing and talking gaily they passed out, she holding the knot of Christmas roses, he looking at her with a very undisguised admiration in his blue eyes. And Romilly stood where they left him, his forehead drawn with the old look of pain, his soul rent with bitterness and useless regret.

"Fool—fool!" he murmured, "to think that there is any happiness in the world for me—to think a woman would care for such as I. Will it help me in time to know that I have made an idiot of myself to-day, and gained—her pity? Oh, Heaven!" and the strong man flung himself on a couch and wept in the bitterness and agony of spirit tears wrung from his heart's despair.

CHAPTER V.

For a while after that Romilly and Miss Pallas did not meet.

He only visited the music-room in a fitful fashion, and he never saw her there, though he heard her singing nightly, and the longing to gaze into her eyes, to touch her hand, grew so intense that one evening he appeared in the music-room when Mrs. Desmond and her guests were assembled there, to his mother's and every body else's great and unbounded astonishment.

Many were the curious glances cast at him, for he was known only to a few of those who were enjoying his hospitality, and it was an ordeal for him to go through; still he had made up his mind, and bore the glances without flinching.

Miss Richmond was very kind in her attentions, trying thereby to make Clarence, who had neglected her shamefully, jealous—an effort in which he failed signally.

Many of the other ladies were more than civil to this handsome, well-born, rich man, whom they were quite ready to make much of, though he was a cripple.

Miss Pallas held aloof.

She still felt full of shame at the thought of the offer of flowers, and did not care to meet the impassioned gaze of his eyes; still she sang time after time his favorite songs, in her sweetest tones, and seemed untrusting in her efforts to give him pleasure in that way.

But he was hurt, and though after that he resumed the place he ought to hold, and that was his right in the household—that of master—and appeared daily amongst his guests, and headed the table at dinner every evening, still he never went to the music-room alone, though she often went there in the afternoon secretly hoping to meet him, to hear his soft rich voice pleading with her for another song, praising her singing; and she was miserable feeling that she had offended him, and at a loss how to act.

In truth he was jealous.

For the second time in his life he loved—madly, devotedly; his whole soul was bound up in Vera Pallas, and yet he felt that it was useless.

Clarence paid her such marked attention, they were excellent friends.

What chance had he, a poor maimed wretch, against a handsome fellow like his younger brother?

He was intensely wretched.

It would have been far better had he remained in the solitude of his sombre rooms; but like the silly moth he could not keep away from the light that attracted him, and singled himself sorely.

Vera was anxious to put matters on a different footing, but found it a difficult matter.

Clarence was ever at her side, ever paying her, unmistakable attentions, and Romilly felt passionately resentful against his brother, who had won what he longed for, and forestalled him.

Miss Pallas was more than anxious to dismiss this, to her, unwelcome wooer—unwelcome because she more than suspected that his attentions belonged to Miss Richmond, and her suspicions were verified one afternoon.

She was sitting in the deep embrasure of the library window, hidden by the heavy curtains, when she heard people enter the room, and before she could disclose her presence, a conversation ensued between young Desmond and Miss Richmond that made her feel she must keep quiet and not betray that she had heard a word.

The lady upbraided her recreant lover most bitterly, and he coolly acknowledged to having transferred his affection. He was most heartless and callous of the poor girl's sufferings; it was therefore with a feeling akin to horror that Miss Pallas listened to him the same evening as he pleaded for her hand.

"I have never loved any woman save you," he declared ardently, as he attempted to take her hand.

"To how many women have you said that?" she asked coldly.

"To one—yourself," he answered audaciously.

"Your memory must be very short," she rejoined with a little sarcastic laugh.

"Why?"

"You must have said the same thing to at least a dozen."

"Miss Pallas, do you doubt my affection?" he asked reproachfully.

"Most certainly I do," she said decidedly.

"I simply adore you."

"Nonsense!"

"If you refuse me, you blight my life. I can never care for any other woman."

"I am afraid you will have to do so if you want a wife."

"Do you mean to refuse me, really?" he questioned, in such utter dismay and astonishment that his companion laughed outright.

"Most certainly I do," he declared.

"You must believe it."

"Supposing I won't?" he demanded insolently, piqued by her manner and tone.

"You will have to," she replied icily as she rose to her feet, drawing up her slender figure to its full height. "Your attentions are exceedingly disagreeable to me, and I beg for the future you will refrain from annoying me;" and she swept out of the conservatory without deigning to listen to another word.

After that Clarence kept his distance a little, and began seriously to think of starting afresh with Miss Richmond, who had a snug little fortune that would supplement his younger son's portion nicely.

A marriage with Vera would be a mere matter of sentiment, for her income was barely a hundred a year.

So he was not quite so attentive, and as he gave way Romilly took his place as far as he could.

Of course, he told himself bitterly, this coolness was only caused by a lover's tiff

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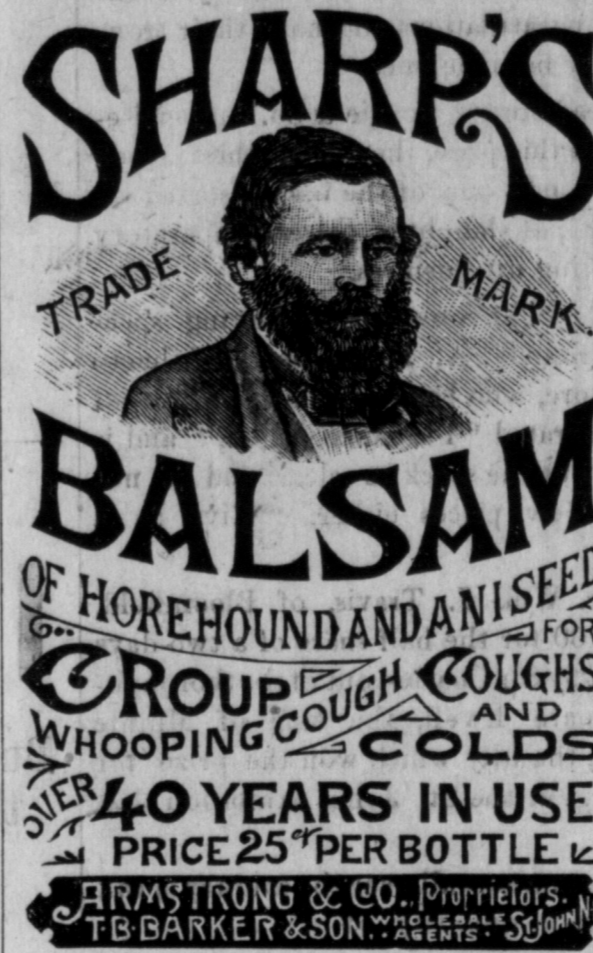
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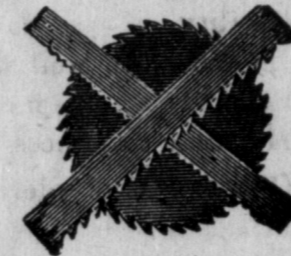
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