

'JUST ONE MORE TURN.'

It was just midnight, and the revelry was at its height. The balls at Knutsford House were always perfect, so far as London balls can be; they were not overcrowded, and you met the people you wanted to meet. Bored and bad dancers were inexorably excluded by Lady Knutsford; she gave them an entertainment of their own—an excellent arrangement, which cannot be too highly recommended.

This night was pre-eminently a success; the strains of "Wein, Wein, und Gesang" were commencing, and the scattered dancers were the first to feel the exciting rhythm of the waltz.

A few late comers were at that moment mounting the stairs, and were obliged to pause a few moments, a mark for all unoccupied eyes, ere the throng of intending waltzers melted through the doorway.

"Lady Frostden may well be proud of her daughter," remarked one critic to another, speaking of a beautiful girl who was standing with her mother at the top of the staircase.

"Hem! Well, I can't quite make up my mind about her. She is handsome, of course; but too marble, too statueque for my taste. Those perfect features seem cast in a perpetual sublime indifference to all surrounding people and things."

"Perhaps she feels sublimely indifferent to trifles; and well she may, being about to make the match of the season."

"Indeed! Lady May engaged at last, and to whom?"

"Why, it's not absolutely announced; but it is quite an understood thing that she will accept Lord Pilkington."

"You don't say so? Well, the Longleys are an ambitious set; but even they are satisfied at last, I should think. The old mother looks triumphant, doesn't she? She has married all her daughters well; but Lady May to £80,000 a year, and a dukedom in prospect, is a crowning stroke; and the girls themselves haven't a shilling."

"They have each £5,000 as they come of age."

"You here, Captain Rothsay? I thought you had sailed for India by this time—at least, I think somebody said so; but I am really not sure."

"Did you think so? And after a pause; you are very late. I have been for hours."

"Are we late?" she interrupted. "Yes, perhaps we are. So much the better; it's a great bore to be here at all."

"Will you give me a dance?" asked Captain Rothsay, in a low tone.

"Let me see; I hardly know whether I shall dance."

"May dearest," said Lady Frostden, touching her arm, "there is Lord Pilkington asking for this dance."

A big, florid young man was indeed muttering something in so low a tone, that he had been unheard.

Captain Rothsay eyed him curiously. He had not a bad, so much as a silly sheepish face; the nose was large, the forehead and chin retreated lamentably.

Lady May surrendered herself to him with her sweetest smile, and Rothsay drew back, hurt and angry.

"Lord Pilkington! Well, he's a pill which needs all possible gilding—he's a perfect fool."

At this moment the crowd began to drift on; and a man, who had made several ineffectual attempts to pass the two speakers, struggled to the front. Lady May turned her head, and saw him.

A strange, wavering expression flitted over her face, and left it again harder than ever. A soft rose-tint tinged her cheeks. There was a slight, almost imperceptible, droop of the eyelids and the haughtily carried head. Say what you would about ice and marble, she was an exquisite creature.

Of queenly height and figure, her sweeping white silks well became her. The masses of soft, dark hair were brushed into one of the wondrous coiled monstrosities with which women will adorn (?) themselves nowadays; but the delicately-chiselled features left exposed were perfect, as were the tiny ears, and the long, stately throat.

In a much shorter time than it has taken me to write these words, Lady May had iced herself again, and greeted the man, who had at last reached her side, with a faint smile and a raising of the eyebrows, which made her look just a little more weary and uninterested, if possible, than before.

"If it was for another sort of fellow," he thought; "but oh, my poor, poor child; what are you doing?"

He planted himself in the doorway, with his shoulders against the wall, and watched Lady May as she swam round.

Her partner was a bad dancer, and Rothsay felt savagely glad as he saw the excuse made to break off, and the couple retreated to a side bench, where Lady May played with her bouquet, and did not even make a pretense at listening to the clumsy compliments of her adorer. She dared not raise her eyes; she could feel those were watching her.

The little by-play before the dance had not passed unnoticed by the two before mentioned critics, General Arkwright and Sir Philip Payne by name.

"Did you see that, Payne?" said the General. "Terribly hard hit, that fellow. I suppose Lady May has bowled over a lot in her one season."

"Who is he?"

"That fellow? Rothsay—Hume Rothsay, of the—th Dragons. A capital headpiece he has—and a good looking one, too. It he and Pilkington could exchange worldly goods, my lord wouldn't stand the ghost of a chance with Lady May."

"Cela va sans dire. Do you know him?"

"Rothsay? Just a little. Met him down at Heatherly's place in October—at least, he left two days after I arrived. Lady Frostden and her daughter were there, and the fair May amused herself not a little with him. The old lady began to get fidgety, as I could see; suppose she knew she could depend on her daughter's coir d'acier, after all."

"He's no money, I suppose?"

"No—at least, not much; not enough to tempt a London belle. He's on sick leave

nominal, but doesn't look as if he ailed much."

The night wore on. Lady May trod many a measure with her titled swain, but they were all quadrilles. "She was too tired and bored to waltz," still Rothsay watched her, striving vainly to read what lay behind the icy outer mask.

"If I could only think she would be happy I would try to conquer myself," he thought, with mingled tenderness and rage. "But she won't, proud, false, cruel as she seems, she has the capability of love and suffering within her too surely to permit of her living a happy, because a negative, passionless life with that man. Yet look at her. She is smiling at him as she will not smile at me. I will not pity, but hate her, if I can. Perhaps, after all in those jolly days at Heatherly, when I was too young to think that I, and I only, was allowed to see her as she really was—that she showed to me that better side of her nature which was proudly hidden from the rest of the world—it may all have been a lie and a trickery, an affectation of the soft, pure womanliness which she knew was most seductive to me. I will speak. I will tell her what I think of her before we part."

Whilst these thoughts, tender, fond, furious, and all inconsistent, passed through his brain, the object of them almost brushed against his arm as she prepared to quit the room on Lord Pilkington's arm. Captain Rothsay started forward.

"Lady May," he said, "you were surprised I had not yet sailed for India. You only forsook your adieu a very short time. I shall leave town immediately on business, and have engaged my passage by the next mail. Probably this is the last time I shall have the pleasure of seeing you, so I will say farewell. By-the-by, will you give me this waltz?"

He looked into her eyes as he said it.

"Yes," she replied, relinquishing her late partner's arm.

"I thought—I fancied you said you did not wish to waltz. Lady May?" spluttered Lord Pilkington. But he was either unheard or unheeded. "But—but your mother is waiting; she told me to fetch you. What—what shall I tell her?"

"Anything you like," said Lady May, as she whirled away with her daring abductor to the intoxicating air of the "Acceleration."

And what a waltz that was! Rothsay felt these were the last minutes he could ever claim as completely his own with the woman he loved. After to-night their paths in life would lie very wide apart indeed. He was about to return to India, to put thousands of miles between them. If he ever heard of her again, it would be as Lady Pilkington; she would belong to that rich, despised fool. He should never see her again—in fact, he never would see her again. No; for the brief, fleeting present, she was still his, but for those moments only, and with a kind of madness, a fury of longing and despair, he strained her in his arms.

They glided around faster and faster—a little sigh now and then from Lady May; but she spoke not until, as his step became



quicker and quicker, she whispered piningly:

"Let us stop; I cannot go on."

"Have I tried you, darling?"

"It is not that only; but you must not call me that name, Captain Rothsay."

"No; I know that very well. You are Pilkington's darling now, and not mine; nevertheless, I shall say it."

She only looked at him.

"Come and sit down a few minutes. This waltz will soon be over, and then you will probably never see me again, or be troubled by me. May, for pity's sake let me have you to myself for this short time."

She passively allowed him to lead her to a seat; he bent over her, and gazed at the cold, lovely face. The beauty of it was, that you saw it could warm and glow, though it would not.

"You don't reproach me for my roughness and rudeness?" said Rothsay. "I know I am behaving like a brute; but I feel almost mad. Oh! why were you not always the haughty proud woman you seem at this moment? I could have resisted you then; and what was one heart more or less to you? But no; you must needs have your sport, and I was the victim nearest to hand. So, in those days at Heatherly when we walked and rode—in those long, happy hours when we talked in the firelight, you were a gentle, loving girl, whose thoughts, words, joys, and sorrows answered to mine. On that day when we were lost by the others, and wandered alone on the purple moor—do you remember it?—you gave me a sprig of heather, and fastened it in my coat with your own fingers. On that last evening, when we sat alone in the library while the others danced, we did not say much, to be sure; but you did not chide the few words I did speak, and your hand lay unresistingly in mine. And then—shall I go on?"

"Then I drew a ring from your finger, and vowed I would keep it, unless you desired it back, and still you said no word. Heaven! how happy I was that night! When I reached my own room, I sat for long, recalling your every word and tone and look. 'Ah! thought I, 'though we shall meet no more for many months, I can still my darling. Though she has said no certain words, she has allowed me to speak of my love, and to hope for hers. She has

promised to listen to me again when we next meet; and here is a heart too pure, too tender, too true to be capable of the wiles and deceits of others. She would never kill an honest man's honest love. Another girl I might doubt; but her—never; for she has shown me her inmost soul. And I kissed your ring, and huzz! its next my heart. It is there still. A m-mo-dram-tic proceeding, was it not? and probably you are laughing to yourself at this minute as I say it. When I came up to town a month ago, full of confidence and love, you know the change I found. The woman was transformed into a statue—to me, at least. The old days had passed away, and the new days were not for me. I quickly saw this; but I refused to realise the truth, until Lord Pilkington appeared upon the scene. Then, indeed, my chance was up. And when I contemplate the future before you, I wonder at my blindness and presumption in supposing for one moment that you could care for the share in my life which I dreamed of night and day of offering to you. A ring!—a sprig of heather!—handclasp!—what are such things to you, and women like you? The whole love of a life laid at your feet? Pshaw! tread it underfoot, and pass; never mind if the heart is left braided and blackened for life. Fool! it was brought upon yourself by your folly and presumption. Yes; when I remember all this, I feel that I have only to crave your pardon Lady May, for my stupidity, and I will bring my heroics to a close. Many thanks for your patient listening. You forgive me? The waltz is nearly over; and see! your mother and Lord Pilkington are making their way to us. My lady looks very indignant at having been kept waiting so long. Allow me to take you to her, and I to wish you good-bye!"

He had suddenly changed his voice of suppressed passion to a tone of light-hearted indifference, infinitely more sensible sounding, although, in truth, it was born of the concentration of despair.

Lady May looked up at last. Ah! she was no statue now. The tremendous scolding she had been receiving had not fallen upon insensible ears, and a human heart had been thumping and throbbing through its marble coating. The dark eyes gleamed through tears, a touch of carnation glowed in her cheeks and her frame trembled with an intensity of feeling.

She looked at her mother who haughtily indignant was within a few steps—at Lord Pilkington's blundering and glaring at her with his little eyes; then rose hastily and lifting her quivering face to Rothsay's said in a piteous tone:

"Just one more turn."

Captain Rothsay you may look triumphant. Those few words have shown you that the prize has surrendered just as you thought it out of range.

As they whirl round, Lady May pants out in broken sentences:

"Hume, forgive me, and take me if you will. I loved only you all the time but my hateful ambition made me blind and mad. Thought has shown me my own heart and that it cannot forget you, trust me once more, and you shall never repent it."

And he never did.

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