

My Love Story.

CHAPTER V.

'By Jove!' exclaims Sir Harry Grammore in a tone of immense satisfaction, 'you don't say so! What a charming Phyllis she will make, to be sure; and, of course, you will allow me to play Corydon—excuse the metaphor; but it there's one thing more than another that I confess a secret banking after, it is amateur theatricals, and I assure you 'pon my honour, that I'm a very good hand at it, too. I've run through the gamut of all stock plays. My Charles Surface was very well spoken of in several leading papers last season. Where is Lady Curton? Who is stage manager?'

I sink helplessly back into the recesses of a huge armchair.

Truly I am in a pretty dilemma now, for which I can partly thank my own vanity and stupidity, and from which, at present, I see no way of extricating myself.

Sir Harry's words fall upon my ears like a thunderclap, and cause me to sink out of sight in dismay at the disagreeable prospect of having him for my stage lover.

It is too bad of him to persecute me like this, and tears of vexation fill my eyes.

It is too late for me to retreat, however, because a score of intimate acquaintances heard me consent to play the heroine's part, and it would only draw more attention to Sir Harry and myself if I repudiated the arrangement now.

'Pardon me,' murmurs a quietly sarcastic voice, close at my side, 'but I think—that is, did you not say something to me this morning, Lady Curton, about wishing me to undertake the part of Lovel, which is quite familiar to me, owing to my having played it before? I may be mistaken—'

'Why, yes; of course I did, Sir Anthony,' replies Lady Curton, quickly. 'It will suit you down to the ground; and you will look the part better than Sir Harry, especially as you know it; and there is another part I have picked out for him, which I am sure he will play admirably.'

'Nonsense!' cries Sir Harry, none too politely. 'I will play Lovel, or nothing; hang it all, I insist upon having that part. Come, Lady Curton, make a redistribution in my favor—Lovel, or nothing for me.'

Lady Curton's eyes flash with annoyance; she is the most good natured woman in the world, but is rather inclined to stand upon her dignity, and Sir Harry's free-and-easy manner of addressing her does not commend itself to her good taste.

'I am afraid that it will be 'nothing,' then Sir Harry,' he replies, rather coldly. 'I have given the part of Lovel to Sir Anthony Nigel, and, unless he resigns it I certainly shall not offer it to anyone else.'

My heart is beating wildly, furiously. If I was excited before, I am a hundred times more so now, since I have learned that Sir Anthony is to take part in the theatricals.

That means, of course, that I shall see him almost daily for several weeks, perhaps; and our parts may lie together.

I do not know the play at all, for I am still very ignorant in such matters; in fact, until tonight, I have never even heard of it, but its title, Lovel's Bride, is full of possibilities, and Sir Harry's extreme eagerness to have the part of Lovel given to him is sufficient in itself to warn me that it may be more sentimental than I should find pleasant.

But to have Sir Anthony as my stage sweetheart, to have to assume, even in jest the part of his bride, causes the blood to course rapidly through my veins, and makes my heart beat with pleasure.

I take very little interest in the rest of the discussion, beyond gathering that Sir Harry repents his rash speech, and asks, with more humility than I have seen him ever display before, for another part since he cannot have the one he most desires.

Lady Curton graciously complies with his request, and while he is going into details with Lancelot Curton, the stage-manager, I persuade Aunt Janette to slip away without Sir Harry seeing us leave.

She laughingly agrees, so we set off for home, where, after hurriedly making a change of toilette, and partaking of dinner, we go to the opera to hear Lohengrin.

Hardly are we seated in our box before Colonel Treherne and Sir Anthony stroll in, and I gather from what they say that Aunt Janette invited them to do so this afternoon.

Ere long Aunt Janette and the colonel—who, as I discovered long ago, is perhaps her greatest favorite—are deep in conversation together, paying very little attention to the music or plot.

Between the acts he escorts Aunt Janette to the crush room, where she expects to meet some friends, according to her usual habit, whilst I am left alone for a brief space with Sir Anthony Nigel.

'I have a confession and an apology to make to you,' he begins, directly the others have left, which accounts for my presence here this evening.'

'Surely that needs no apology,' I reply, in surprise, since it is a favourite practice with Aunt Janette to have her men friends attend her whenever she visits the opera. 'You know her box is always full of visitors.'

'Yes, of course,' he replies, hesitatingly; 'but I came here to-night to speak with you—not her. Let me explain,' rather hurriedly, as if afraid lest I may miscon-

strue his words to mean more than he intends, 'it is about these theatricals, that I owe you an explanation.'

'Yes,' I remark, looking down, and with heightened colour; 'please go on.'

'You heard what I said to Lady Curton—that I knew the part, had played it before, and that it was already allotted to me before Sir Harry applied for it?'

'Yes,' I answer, 'I heard you say that, and—'

'Well,' he says slowly, while a crimson flush steals over his face, 'I certainly know the play from seeing it acted once before but I have never played in it myself. I am not familiar with the part as I pretended to be; and last of all, Lady Curton never mentioned the word 'theatricals' in my presence until this afternoon. It was all fiction, invented on the spur of the moment, to gain the part for myself, and I cannot rest until I have made confession to you and obtain absolution.'

'But why should you confess to me? How can I absolve you? I ask, in confusion. 'What have I to do with it?'

'Everything,' he replies, emphatically. 'The fact is, as I said before, I have seen the play [Lovel's Bride, acted by a company of amateurs, and it is a rather pretty but very sentimental piece indeed. I think, myself, that the Curtons made a mistake in selecting it; not that there is anything objectionable in it—on the contrary it is perfectly au regle; only—well—'

'—abruptly—with a man like Sir Harry as the hero, with you as the heroine, knowing as I do what a strong feeling he has for you, I thought you might find yourself rather awkwardly placed, unless—'

'—slowly—the feeling is mutual, when I certainly have made a mess of it.'

'How can I thank you sufficiently, Sir Anthony? I reply, unsteadily, for I can quite realize the effort it must have cost his proud spirit before he could stoop to utter a lie; 'you have saved me from unspeakable torture. I did not know the play—I did not dream for a moment that I should be cast to play with him—surely you cannot be in doubt as to my feelings towards him. He is the only person on the face of the earth whom I absolutely hate.'

All anxiety and sternness dies out of his face for a moment, and the smile that is one of his rare charms, flits across his features.

'That is all right he observes, gaily; I have been in an agony ever since the words passed my lips. I uttered them on the spur of the moment, when I saw tears in your eyes, or thought I did; and, seeing that no else appreciated the situation, or came to your relief, I threw myself into the breach. All's well that ends well, and Lady Curton is a real brick: a woman with tact like hers could rule a kingdom.'

The rest of the evening slips rapidly away, and, with Sir Anthony beside me, with a whispered word now and then, fanning me when I am hot, and wrapping my cloak round me when I am cold, I am really in Paradise.

Not that he ever indulges in compliments, or utters any remark but the very commonplaces regarding the scenery, the actors, or the music.

Not that he murmurs one word of love or sentiment in my ear, which I could possibly construe into affection or passion.

No; the whole world might hear all that passes between us, and yet, when I got over it all afterwards, in the seclusion of my own room, I tell myself that it has been the very happiest day I ever spent.

If his lips spoke no tender syllables, his eyes did, and the slightest touch of his hand seemed like a caress; whilst the joy I feel in thinking how circumvented Sir Harry is surely not without reason.

I feel that the events of to-day have drawn us together with a strong cord—that, when we next meet, we shall have passed all the ordinary outposts of friendship, and be wandering into the fairyland of love.

Aunt Janette teases me unmercifully in the morning about the events of the previous day.

'You are turning out a dreadful little flirt,' she declares. 'No matter who the individual may be, it is all the same to you so that it is man. How I laughed yesterday, to be sure to see one sweet little wild flower surrounded by so many clamorous bees. There was poor Bertie Elcourt, as grave and as silent as a judge—he who, only a few weeks back, hadn't a care in the world—and Lord Merton, who was so eager to obtain the part of Lovel that he stammered and stuttered so frightfully over the first syllables of his speech that Lady Curton does not know to this minute that he applied for it at all. Then Sir Harry blustering and imperious as usual, dying to have the opportunity of making open love to you, whilst Lady Curton has already given it away to, perhaps, the only man in her set who didn't want it.'

It really seems as if Aunt Janette were right, as time goes on, for Sir Anthony shows so little interest in his part, and rehearses so tamely, that Sir Harry commiserates with me on having such a stick to act with, and the stage-manager whispers 'Hang it, old fellow, don't ruin the show! The girl isn't made of spun glass; she wouldn't break if you were to touch her hand.'

On the evening of the performance, the guests begin to arrive early.

Everyone wants to be made up at once, and the professional dresser who has been engaged for the same evening is in despair. The whole place is in a state of chaos.

When I meet Sir Anthony behind the scenes, I utter a little cry of wondering delight.

He looks superbly handsome in his white satin costume, trimmed profusely with gold lace, and the white wig tied at the back with a piece of black ribbon.

I do not know what he thinks of my appearance, but every one else tells me I look charming.

Lancelot Curton comes up, and begs him to throw as much animation into his part as possible.

Sir Harry, in the background, remarks, sotto voce, but quite audible, to a girl he is talking to, and with whom he has been carrying on a desperate flirtation during the last fortnight, no doubt to pique me—

'Pon my honor, the fellow is next door to a fool. I said all along, he wasn't up to the part; only no one would pay any attention to what I said. It wanted a man to play Lovel, a real live flesh and blood man, not a dressed up prig made of wood'

I do not catch the remainder of his sentence but I see a change come over Sir Anthony's features; his eyes glow with passion, and even the powder on his face does not conceal the deep red flush that suffuses it.

'You hear what they are saying of me he says, abruptly; 'that I cannot act, am a fool, and that I am spoiling your part as well as my own. What do you advise me to do?'

'I think you might certainly put more spirit into your part,' I reply, rather coldly, for I am naturally mortified at his apparent sulkiness, 'or you had better not have undertaken it all. You take things too seriously, Sir Anthony. After all it is only acting—'

'Is it?' he asks, quietly, and I feel myself change color, and grow hot all over as he continues: 'So be it—the decision is against me; only, don't blame afterwards Barbara.'

It is the first time he has ever called me by my christian name; but I have no time to think of that.

The curtain is rung up, and soon I am pushed onto the stage, where I find Daisy Curton just finishing her first long speech and gave me my cue.

I dare not look at the sea of faces in the front, but rush into my part; and presently Lovel comes on, and I see at a glance that a startling change has come over him during the last few minutes.

He is absorbed in the part—it is not Sir Anthony, it is Lovel himself who has come to woo me, and a storm of applause greets the close of every speech.

I have never seen acting like this—it carries all before it and imbues me with a frantic desire to act up to it.

I, too, forget that I am Barbara Courtaine; I forget that I am only portraying a fancy part for the amusement of Lady Curton and her guests.

For the nonce I am really Dorothy Trueheart, soon to be Lovel's bride.

I laugh, dance, sing, play. I am a coquette and a prude by turns to suit my capricious fancy.

I exert every latent charm and power to bring my stage-lover to my feet, and succeed beyond all hope.

Again and again we are called before the curtain at the close, and it really seems as if the applause will never cease.

'I've seen Robson and Sothern, and every actor of any note within the last fifty years,' remarks one old gentleman, solemnly, 'but not one of them could touch the Lovel of to-night. He is a genius—a wonder! It's quite a pity that his position precludes the idea of adopting the stage as his profession. As for the young lady, she is a born coquette, and some day will have all the world at her feet.'

'That's the Prime Minister who is speaking,' murmurs Daisy Curton in my ear. 'Praise from such a man is praise indeed.'

The performance over, we go down to supper, I with Sir Anthony as my escort; and we return to the drawing-room, an hour later, to find it cleared for a dance.

Sir Anthony claims my hand for the first waltz, and then another, and another.

He is still Lovel—ardent, tender, passionate.

He holds me closely in his arms, and bends his face near to mine, as we glide round the room together.

Sir Anthony, with his cool, careless languor and 'platonian' manner, has vanished, and left not a trace behind.

I feel that I love and am loved; I tread upon air, and am in the realms of Paradise. He follows me about the whole night; he is jealous if I linger with another partner one second longer than is absolutely necessary.

He begs the flowers at my breast, a knot of ribbon from my hair; he steals my

handkerchief, and vows that he will part with them only at his death.

Then Aunt Janette comes up and breaks our tete-a-tete.

'Child,' she says, with a yawn, 'do you know it is four o'clock? I am dead with sleep; we really must go home now or we shall both be ill together. Ah, Sir Anthony, what an actor you would make, to be sure! Why, you can make your audience laugh or cry at your will.'

He attends us to our carriage, and requests permission to see us safely home; he kisses my hand at parting, and as I take off the garb of Dorothy Trueheart and prepare for bed, I kiss each garment separately, and say—

'I was wearing you at the time I discovered that he loved me.'

CHAPTER VI.

'There is someone else,' cries Aunt Janette, suddenly turning round and giving me a piercing glance as if she would read my soul.

'No girl of your age and inexperience could reject a suitor like Sir Harry in such a cool, firm way unless she had already given her heart to another man. Barbara, you have behaved badly to me. What have I done that you should withhold your confidence from me? I am deeply hurt, for I have not deserved it of you after all I've done to win your affection.'

I flush scarlet from brow to chin; I turn hot and cold all over.

I try to deny that I care for any man, but my tongue cleaves to the roof of my mouth, and my lips refuse to utter the words I wish to say.

I have succeeded in staving off a positive offer of marriage from Sir Harry until now—at least, until last night, when he plunged boldly into the subject before I realized his intention.

He absolutely refused to be refused, if I may express it that way, and called upon my aunt early this morning to urge her to use all her influence to induce me to accept him as my future husband.

'This I shall never do, not only because I dislike him personally, but also because, as Aunt Janette has guessed, I care for another man.'

Slowly, but surely, during these last three months I have given my heart to Sir Anthony Nigel.

Sometimes I think he stole it right away when he first met, and I despise myself for having done the very thing for which I reproved poor Bertie Dalcourt—namely fallen in love at first sight; whilst at other times I think that I have deliberately walked into it day by day and hour by hour.

I look upon him as my good angel, even as I regard Sir Harry as my bad one, for, as chance will have it, Sir Anthony is always at hand when I want a friend.

He seems to see right into my soul and understand my secret wishes.

Numberless times during the last few months has he saved me from an embarrassing tete-a-tete with my bete-noire, until I feel quite blank and lost when I have not him to turn to—as last night, for instance, when, at a small dance given by Lady Somers—Sir Harry's married sister—Sir Harry contrived to propose to me, which I am convinced he never would have succeeded in doing had Sir Anthony been present.

When Aunt Janette reproaches me for withholding my confidence from her, I feel terribly guilty, for she is only speaking the truth, and yet what have I to tell? Nothing, just nothing at all, which I could put into plain words, and yet sufficient to fill my daydreams with a sweet radiance.

I do care for another man.

I love him with all my heart.

I could tell his footstep amongst a thousand.

The sound of his rich baritone voice fills me with unspeakable joy.

A look from his eyes seems to steal into my brain, and yet—and yet I have nothing at all to tell.

He has never uttered one word of love, never tried to convey to me, by word or deed, that he cares a straw about me save and except upon that one occasion.

I have met him at a score of balls since that first one at Lady Curton's, but he has never danced with me twice, except that once, and never, since then, ever sat out a dance with me.

On all ordinary occasions, in fact, he seems to avoid me; only, instinct tells me that his indifference is but assumed, and that, sooner or later, he will tell me he loves me.

Meanwhile, I must possess my soul in patience, and still guard my secret not only from Aunt Janette but from all the world besides.

How it has escaped notice I cannot tell, but I congratulate myself many a time and oft that it has done so.

The only person I really fear has guessed something of it is Sir Harry Grammore, although we both seem more guarded than usual towards one another in his presence; now that he has openly asked Aunt Janette's consent to pay his addresses to me, the difficulties of my position are increased tenfold, more especially as her vexation at my lack of confidence in her does not evaporate as quickly as I have hoped, and the estrangement between us hurts me deeply.

She is never unkind to me, but merely cold and silent, and hardly addresses me at all, in spite of my efforts towards a reconciliation.

Consequently Sir Harry, who does not seem to understand a rebuff, is rarely absent from my side.

To make matters worse I have noticed a subtle change in Sir Anthony's manner towards myself of late—instead of our intimacy making any progress as time passes on, we seem to be drifting apart.

Days go by without my seeing him at all and when we do meet he makes no effort to talk to me.

Some of the brightness seems to have gone out of my life; I am beginning to taste the Dead Sea fruits of life.

Society falls upon me, and yet, with a wild restlessness, for which I cannot ac-

count, I long for excitement; I cannot stand being alone with my own thoughts.

I dare not trust myself to think of him and yet I tire out even Aunt Janette in my wild, mad endeavors to see him, to speak to him, to try and break down the barrier which has risen between us.

'Why, Barbara,' she exclaims, one very hot day when, after a drive in the park, an hour's shopping, a luncheon-party, an afternoon garden party, and a theatre at night, I urge her to drop in at Lady Curton's reception for an hour before going home, 'why, Barbara, you are tireless, insatiable; not one night this week have you touched our pillows before daylight. You will ruin your complexion; you are losing all your exquisite color. I really do think we had better go home tonight and get some rest.'

'Just for an hour, Aunt Janette,' I plead, feverishly, 'just to have a look round. She expects us. We need not stay, you know.'

'Only long enough to see who is there, I suppose,' she replies, quietly. 'Dear Barbara, what has come to you? Who is it that has wrought such a woeful change in my Woodland flower?'

It is midnight when we arrive there, and the crush is simply frightful.

We see dozens of familiar faces in the first few minutes.

Colonel Treherne meets us at the entrance of the drawing-room.

I see a sudden light leap into my aunt's eyes and die quickly away again, as he turns and addresses me with a smile.

Then I see Sir Anthony's stern, handsome face at our side, and I forget everything.

'Ah! Sir Anthony,' cries my aunt, with a smile. 'How are you? We caught a glimpse of you in the stalls tonight but, you did not come round to our box. May I leave Barbara in your charge for a few minutes? I am going down to supper with Colonel Treherne.'

In another instant she has gone, and we are alone together.

I can feel my hand tremble as I lay it on his arm.

For once Fate has favored me.

Now surely, if ever, I shall learn how I have offended him, and make my peace.

Almost mechanically he commences to walk towards the window recess in the corridor, where we seat ourselves in silence, as we did once before—centuries ago now, as it seems to me.

'We hardly ever seem to meet you now, Sir Anthony,' I begin slowly, for want of something better to say. 'It was quite a pleasant surprise to see you here tonight.'

'It is by the merest chance that I am here,' he replies, with averted eyes. 'Lady Curton is an old family friend of ours, and she seemed to think that I have neglected late. She was very anxious for me to take part in her private theatricals next month, which I was obliged to refuse, as I am leaving town for a time. I was anxious to make my peace before going, therefore ran in for an hour tonight.'

'You are leaving town?' I repeat, mechanically, not taking in the full sense of the words all at once. 'How long for—where are you going to—when do you start and how soon shall you return?'

'I start to-morrow,' he replies, briefly. 'The date of my return is in the remote future. My destination is Africa, where I have arranged to join a party of friends on a shooting expedition.'

'Africa?' I echo, startled out of all assumed indifference, as I realize what his indefinite absence will mean to me. 'No time fixed for your return—it is horrible to think of. You must be joking, Sir Anthony!'

There is an agony in my voice that my utmost efforts seem to subdue—my words are wildly incoherent.

I tremble from head to foot, and I feel as if I am losing hold of everything I care for—as if life, reason, and Heaven itself were slipping away from me.

'Why should I be joking?' he replies, carelessly. 'No; I assure you, Miss Courtaine, that I am in real earnest. I spent some months there once before, and it did me an incalculable amount of good. You see, a man wants something more in his life than to hang about drawing-rooms all day. I am fond of an outdoor life—sport and exercise. I am tired to death of the kind of existence I have been leading lately. What shall I send you from foreign parts?'

His light jesting tone seems to cut my heart like a knife.

I am conscious that, for my pride's sake, for the honor of womanhood, I ought to pull myself together, and return some commonplace answer.

But I cannot; I am not accustomed to feel one thing and feign another.

Everything seems to fade away out of my life, save the knowledge that I love this man with all my soul—all my nature—and that he cares for me so little that he can go away without one word of regret.

'You were going away without saying good-bye!' I whisper, almost inaudibly. 'What have I done—how have I offended you? You would hardly leave an ordinary acquaintance without saying good-bye.'

'I left my card at Mrs. Dashwood's this afternoon,' he replies in an odd voice; and, looking up into his face, I see that it is pale as death.

Is it the effect of the dim light, or is it that he is ill? Or can it be that he is not so indifferent to me as he wishes to appear?'

'You must not go,' I cry, wildly. 'You are my only real friend. What shall I do without you about—about Sir Harry?'

'I hope that you will not marry him,' he said, quietly. 'I should—I should be very pleased to hear of your marriage to any one who is worthy of you, but—well, I am going away, and will speak plainly to you. My knowledge of Sir Harry Grammore goes back some years, and I am only speaking the truth when I tell you that he is a very bad man. His wife will be a miserable woman. Promise me that you will be firm.'

'I shall never marry Sir Harry,' I reply, (CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE)

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