

## She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

### CHAPTER I. THE QUESTION.

It was the fifteenth of September, and already the trees in Grovel Park were putting on their autumn dress of gold and scarlet.

The Lysters had had a large party down for the first, and though some of these had already left, others had taken their places, and still more were expected later on, for Sir Samuel's hospitality knew no bounds, and when he and Lady Lyster were in the country, their house was always full.

The gardens in the front of the mansion fell away down to a small lake, on the left the carriage drive swept down a long avenue to the lodge gates, whilst on the right was an old Elizabeth garden, with tall, close-clipped yew hedges, which threw into relief the white marble statues that here and there stood on moss-grown pedestals.

It was late in the afternoon, or rather early evening; the shooters had not yet returned, though the light was fast waning, and the place seemed well nigh deserted.

In the old-fashioned garden however, two young people were seated—Frank Gilbert and Ruth Vernale.

He was pleading his cause, telling her of his love, and she, shyly, timidly, was listening, for she was but eighteen, and this was the first time a man had spoken to her deeply of love.

He was tall and fair, the owner of a great estate, and but five-and-twenty; she somewhat pale, with hair the colour of ripe corn, and eyes more violet than blue in shade.

"But, Ruth, have you no answer to give me?" he asked, after a long pause. "No man can ever love you more than I do. We have known one another for years, and ever since we were but children my love for you had gone on growing and growing, and yet I waited, hoping to see the love-light dawn in your eyes, till I could wait no longer."

"Sometimes of late I have thought you loved me, at others I called myself a fool for hoping. Now the time has come when we must part again for a little while, and I can remain in suspense no longer. With your answer comes to me the happiness or the misery of a life. My friend I know you will always be, but I want more, Ruth—your love."

Again he waited her reply, and again in vain.

"There is no one else you love, Ruth?"

"Oh, no," she answered, quickly, a bright flush springing to her cheek.

"Then may I not hope? Perhaps I have spoken too soon; perhaps you would rather wait. Is it so?"

"I hardly know Frank," she answered, the long lashes still shading the tell-tale eyes. "I like you, of course, very, very much; but we have known one another so long—have we not?—that I hardly know whether whether I like you as you want me to."

His heart sank.

Surely a girl, even as young and innocent as Ruth, must know the secret of her own heart.

"Can't you love me, Ruth?" he urged, passionately. "Does your heart not speak for me, now you know all I feel for you?"

The colour slowly mounted to her cheek as she stole a glance at his sunburnt handsome face.

"What must I say?" she faltered. "I like you very, very much, Frank."

He seized her hands and tried to read the truth in her blushing face.

"You have said too much or too little, Ruth," he cried. "My darling, in one word will you be my wife, to love and to cherish all the days of my life? Oh! think before you answer, for it means everything in the world to me."

His voice shook, and the hands that clasped hers seemed to burn. She glanced at him again with something almost like terror in her eyes.

"It—if it would make you happy," she murmured.

He drew back.

"No, Ruth," he said, gently; "I do not want you to give your life to me, simply through friendship or pity. I want your heart dear; and it is from your heart that your answer must come."

The girl looked up in a bewildered sort of way.

"Frank, I don't know," she exclaimed, looking at him with violet eyes that swam in tears. "I only know I like you more—yes more than anyone else. But perhaps I don't know what love is. When you speak like you did just now you frighten me."

He sighed, and stroked her little hand. "Thank you, dear," he said, "for speaking out. You don't know yet what love means; but don't you think that you could learn to love me? I know your uncle and aunt would like to see us man and wife. My mother too, would like to see me married. You are too young and know too little of the world for me to urge that I am rich and can give you all that a woman can desire in this world; besides, I want to gain your heart, not buy it."

"You say you like me very, very much. Do you like me well enough to engage yourself to me, quietly—just between ourselves? It shall only be for a few months, till you learn to know and read your own heart. Next week you go with Sir Stopford and your aunt to Biarritz."

"I, as you know, must go up to my place in Scotland, and entertain my friends for a little while, when I must take my poor mother to Casiro for the winter. I will then hurry to join you, and we will just as we always have been till Christmas day comes round, and then I will pray you for your answer, dear, and if you say, what I pray God you may, we will at once tell your uncle and aunt, and all can be arranged for us to be married in the spring. Shall it be so, Ruth?"

The girl's face had brightened whilst he spoke, and a shy smile hung on her sweet lips.

"Yes, Frank," she answered, softly; "I will try and learn to read my own heart, as you say, and I will think of you always."

"It is good and kind of you," she added, taking his broad hand in hers, "to give me time—to have spoken as you have. I do love you, Frank—that is, I think I do."

He drew her to him, and kissed her cheek.

"Then let it rest so, my pet," he said, with somewhat of sadness in his tone. "God forbid that I should press you to do anything which might endanger the happiness of your future life! We will wait, dear, and love will come with time, I pray. I might have waited longer before I spoke, but we were going to be parted for a little while, and I feared someone else might win the heart I long to call mine. Keep faith and trust with me, Ruth, as I shall do with you; and it is but a little while to Christmas, though it will seem long to me. Kiss me once, Ruth, as a pledge between us."

He took her blushing face in his hands, and lightly kissed her lips.

"My darling," he whispered, passionately, "remember, you are the light of my soul. Think of me often, and believe that each week will seem a year till I see your sweet face again."

The next morning Frank Gilbert left Grovel to go to his own place, Blockhurst Castle in Scotland; and Ruth, half proud, half frightened with the secret she held, remained with her people at the Park for still another week before they started for the South.

### CHAPTER II.

RALPH RUTHERFORD.

Much as Ruth liked—and, perhaps, a stronger word might be used, for the scene in the old garden had raised feelings in her heart unknown before—Frank, it was not without a sense almost of relief that she parted from him.

She wanted to be alone, to think over all he had said, and to try and realize what love, as he spoke of it, really meant.

The party now at the Park was small, and chiefly composed of elderly married men, who, after dinner, enjoyed their rubber with Sir Samuel, and who mostly seemed rather afraid of Ruth—their wives being present—or paid her outrageous compliments, which she hated.

However, fresh arrivals were expected, and that very day, at lunch, Lady Lyster announced that they might expect Captain Ralph Rutherford by dinner-time.

"His train does not get in till past seven," she said looking round the table, "and, as it is sure to be late, we had better say a quarter past eight for dinner. Lord Bradnock, you know Captain Rutherford, I think?"

"Oh, yes," replied my lord, a red-faced, jolly-looking peer. "Knew him when he joined the Life Guards. A mere boy. Pity he sent in his papers. He would have got his majority in another year or so."

"Oh! I like Captain Rutherford extremely," exclaimed a lady of uncertain age. "I have met him several times. It was only the other day that he told me he was thinking of going to Spain."

"Yes; it's the sort of thing Rutherford would do," remarked the peer. "They say the followers of Don Carlos are on the move, and there may be a revolution at any minute. He is just the fellow to go there, and get killed in some obscure action."

Ruth's cheeks went pale, she hardly knew why.

She had only met Captain Rutherford twice during the season just over—her first—but of course it was shocking to think of anyone one knew being shot; and Captain Rutherford, too, who danced so well, and who altogether was so nice.

Captain Rutherford was the last to enter the drawing room before dinner.

He shook hands with his host and hostess and some others he knew, but never

seemed to recognize his little partner, as how should he, who had danced with so many debutantes during the last season? But he chanced at dinner that he sat next her.

A portly old gentleman had taken her down, one who considered dinner the most important event of the day, and whose whole time was taken up by trying the quality and the seasoning of every dish.

Consequently, for some time Ruth was neglected, and had to sit without exchanging a word with anybody.

Presently she heard herself addressed by name, and she started and blushed a little, recognizing Captain Rutherford's voice.

"Surely I am in luck," he said. "Are you not Miss Vernale whom I had the pleasure of dancing with at Lady Brabazon's?"

Something in the tones of his voice brought that evening vividly back to her memory.

She seemed to hear again the very waltz they had danced to.

"Yes, Captain Rutherford," she answered a little shyly, "I was at Lady Brabazon's ball."

"Of course, I cannot hope to be remembered all this long time," he said, dropping his voice, "but I have remembered our dance you see. There are some things one never forgets."

Ruth made no answer.

She had not the experience to laugh at a pretty speech of it.

Only, she felt glad, somehow, that captain Rutherford had not forgotten.

"I remember, too, it was very hot that night," he went on. "How glad one is to get away from London! It was such a pleasant surprise, too, when I saw you in the drawing-room."

"Did you really recognize me?" she ventured to say.

"Oh! I have a very good memory, and faces like yours, Miss Vernale, it I may be permitted to say so, are not easily forgotten." Then he muttered to himself, but not so low but that she could not help hearing: "All the better for us sometimes if they were."

Nothing more was said for the moment, but there was a faint flush in the girl's cheek when the captain turned his head to address some remark to the lady on his right.

"Have you been enjoying yourself here?" he asked, presently, of Ruth. "Do you shoot? No? Then you accompany the guns sometimes, I hope?"

"I have not been out yet," she replied.

"Well, then, you must come to-morrow," he said, authoritatively. "Shooting isn't half shooting when ladies are absent. I suppose you are here with Sir Stopford and Lady Vernale? Has the good aunt put a veto on your going?"

"Oh, no," Ruth answered. "But she is too old to go herself, besides not being very strong; so I have no one to chaperon me."

"May I see to that? I am certain Mrs. Lenton, who is an old friend of mine, will take you under her wing if I ask her."

"I should like to go," the girl answered, timidly; "Only, I must ask aunt first."

"Of course. Perhaps I can do you a good turn there, too—that is, if you would really like to go. I have met Lady Vernale before today."

"I did not know she knew you," Ruth answered, looking up in surprise.

"Oh, yes; I met her several times—very often, I may say—a few years ago, when I was in the service. She was also very kind to me."

When Ruth went up, with the other ladies, to the drawing room, she was quite sure that dinner had been much less dull than usual.

How nice it was to meet someone one knew, and who could talk about something else besides horses, shooting and eating!

Lady Vernale, her aunt, began to question her about Captain Rutherford.

"I did not know that you had met him, dear," she said, sitting down beside Ruth; "and I was surprised to see him speak to you."

"I only met him twice, aunt—once at Lady Brabazon's ball, where he danced with me once—you were ill, you remember, and Mrs. Chapneys chaperoned me—and once when I was staying with Gracie Rich at Twickenham. They gave a garden-party, and he was there. I was quite surprised that he remembered me."

Lady Vernale smiled.

In one respect at least she agreed with Captain Rutherford—Ruth's face was one not easily forgotten.

"I used to know Ralph Rutherford," she went on; "that is, when he was in the Life Guards. He was quite a nice boy, though rather wild; but, since I have not been strong, nor able to go out as much as formerly, we have, somehow, never met. I must have a chat with him presently."

"He told me that you used to be very kind to him, auntie."

"Oh, yes, he was quite nice, and he came a good deal to our house. But that must be nearly ten years ago now. Captain Rutherford must be thirty-three or four, at least."

Ruth felt inclined to say "He does not look it," but thought better of it, and held her tongue.

When the gentlemen came up she still kept her seat by her aunt, and the captain crossed over to them to renew his acquaintance with Lady Vernale.

"So pleasant a surprise to see you here," he said. "It was not till after I had recognized Miss Vernale, whom I had the good fortune to meet once or twice last season, that I looked round the table and saw you. How has it been that we have not met during the summer?"

"I can't stand late nights as well as I used

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to, Captain Rutherford, and, though I go out as much as I can for Ruth's sake, it is not very surprising that we have not met. You have been away some years, I understand."

"Yes; I saw a little service in Peru, and then crossed over to Japan, and lingered about in the East for some time. You have no idea what a charming existence one can lead out there."

And then he sat down by Lady Vernale and gave her a laughable account of the Chinese and their ways, and of his travels in the East in general.

Lady Vernale laughed, but it was at Ruth he glanced from time to time, to see if she was amused, for it was her he was trying to please and get on terms of friendship with.

It seemed to Ruth to be ridiculously early when she had to retire with her aunt, who was always amongst the first to go to bed, late hours, as she said, not agreeing with her.

When the gentlemen adjourned to the smoking room, Captain Rutherford recalled himself to Sir Stopford's remembrance, and, with Lord Bradnock, they sat late chatting over old times.

At last they dispersed to their different rooms.

Ralph Rutherford threw off his coat, and looked in the glass whilst he emptied his waistcoat pockets.

The glass reflected a dark, handsome face, close cropped black hair, and a moustache but a shade lighter.

A tall man, too, well over six feet, but thin drawn and muscular, from campaigning and Eastern travel.

"A real providential find," he said to himself, as he slowly undressed. "Fancy stumbling across a girl whose face has been haunting me this three months past, and here, of all places in the world; and then her turning out to be the niece of old Lady Vernale! It's not often in these days that one finds a girl so innocent as she is, and, by Jove! if I could afford it, I might be tempted into marriage. I wonder if she has money. I must find out from Sir Stopford."

And so, with the enjoyable thoughts of pleasure to come, the captain turned in and went to bed.

### CHAPTER III.

BIARRITZ.

Ralph Rutherford was as good as his word.

He prevailed on Lady Vernale to let her niece go out with the guns if Mrs. Lenton would take her under her charge, and Mrs. Lenton, also at the captain's request, expressed herself as only too happy to do so.

These two attached themselves to the fortunes of Captain Rutherford, and when the game was counted, had the satisfaction of knowing that their men had made the heaviest score.

There had been a charming luncheon brought out hot from the house.

Everybody enjoyed themselves, and Ruth quite forgot her usual shyness.

In fact, Ralph had the knack of getting quickly into the good graces of women he wanted to know.

It was with a sense of shame that, that night, on retiring to her room, it struck Ruth that she had not once thought of Frank Gilbert all day.

"How wicked I am," she thought, "and he loving me as he does! I must get into the habit of thinking of him differently now but, after being just like a cousin, if not a brother, all these years, it will take time, I suppose. I wish Frank was dark like Captain Rutherford; dark men look more manly, I think."

And so the last week of the Vernales' visit to the Lysters passed away—passed more quickly to Ruth than any previous week in her existence.

There was so much more to do, she told herself, for, it she was not out with the guns Captain Rutherford would come home early and teach her to play billiards.

And then, two or three more young men coming down, one night they had a dance; and Ruth felt very proud, because Captain Rutherford, who seemed to put every other man in the shade, danced with her more than with anybody else.

The day before she left he found an opportunity to speak with her when none else happened to be near.

"So sorry you are leaving us, Miss Vernale," he said; "but I hear from your aunt that you all go to Biarritz, so we shall doubtless meet again soon, for I am going into Spain directly the revolution breaks out; and now I know you will be there, Biarritz is the place I shall stay at, pending events. After all then, it will be only an revoir."

A sudden throb of Ruth's heart ought to have warned her of her peril, but she only thought how nice it would be for Captain Rutherford to be there to go about with them.

Biarriz, with its great brown rocks or little islands—whichever you like to call them—its long line of foaming breakers rushing continually in from the Atlantic, often when there is not a puff of wind,

charmed Ruth immensely on her first arrival at the French sea-resort.

However, the winter season had hardly commenced, and few English families had yet come into residence, so it turned out that the Vernales found no acquaintances there, and therefore were thrown on one another for amusement.

Sir Stopford was perhaps the best off, as he was able to have his whisk at the club.

Lady Vernale found the place rather too hilly for her to walk much about in, and therefore Ruth had to take her walks mostly alone.

During these walks, she took herself severely to task for having treated Frank Gilbert very badly, and set to work to remedy the fault as soon as possible by writing to him.

She did not deceive him wilfully, but there was a good deal about aunt and uncle, and descriptive matter about the place, and very little about the billiards and the dancing and shooting at Grovel Park after he—Frank—had left it.

"He loves me so much he says," thought Ruth, "that he is jealous of my very shadow. Poor dear Frank, he is so foolish, and he will get jealous and miserable about nothing, if I write and tell him about every little thing which happens. There was that Major Sportwell who paid me such ridiculous compliments; I am sure I don't care for him in the very least, and yet if I put all the nonsense he talked to me in my letters, Frank would be simply furious."

So, somehow, Captain Rutherford was mentioned very casually, thrown in as it were, with a half a dozen nonentities, and Frank, reading the letter, never heeded the name of the man he was destined most to hate of all the men in the world.

It was not more than ten days after the Vernales' arrival that Captain Rutherford made his appearance.

It was Ruth who first came across him in the little High Street, and he turned to accompany her to the hotel, to call on her aunt, Lady Vernale.

However, they took the wrong turn and wandered up to the Cote de Basque, and even some little way along the cliff.

There was little said which even Frank might not have heard with equanimity.

But when they got back to the hotel, Ralph had made a great stride in his acquaintance with Ruth, for he had assumed all the privileges of an old friend and had not been rebuked.

In fact, the girl was too happy to mark the subtle change in his manner, and when he was received very graciously by her aunt and Sir Stopford, who happened to be in, everything to Ruth seemed rosy and bright, and she went to bed wondering what the morrow would bring forth.

Now a good deal of gaiety goes on at Biarritz in summer, and in a decorous way in the winter also, but in the beginning of October, season season was over, and the other had not commenced, so there was little to do but to take walks or rides, of which there are a good number around Biarritz.

Good natured Lady Vernale had quite taken up Ralph Rutherford again, and seemed to see no difference between the reckless soldier of fortune and the young cornet of horse in the days gone by.

Sir Stopford liked him, too, so that three or four evenings a week found him dining with the Vernales, and the evenings he did not come were voted dull.

To Ruth, the evenings they were alone seemed long and wearisome.

Her feelings might be compared to one accustomed to be habitually in a brilliantly lighted room, who found himself suddenly left to get along as best he could with no other light than a kitchen candle.

And yet, so far, it had never entered her head that Captain Rutherford was anything more to her than a very congenial, amusing companion.

The first glimpse—and it was but the faintest glimmer—of light which she obtained of the change which was going with in her inner self came quite as a surprise.

The English post was in, and Lady Vernale, as usual, had the larger proportion of letters.

When Ruth came in from a game of tennis, in which Captain Rutherford had been her partner, her aunt held out a letter towards her.

"It is from Maud Gilbert," she said. "Frank is about to take her to Eg, pt, where he will leave her, so we may expect him here in some three weeks, I should think; at all events, under the month."

A sudden faintness seized the girl, and for a moment, she groped wildly, as in the dark, for the letter her aunt held out to her.

"My dear, what is the matter?" exclaimed Lady Vernale, anxiously. "I declare you have no more color in your face than a sheet of paper; and why don't you take the letter? Are you feeling ill, dear?"

But the few moments had restored Ruth to herself.

"I can't think, aunt, what it was; but all of a sudden I turned giddy. Pray, don't make a fuss; there is nothing the matter

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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