

She Loves Me, She Loves Me Not.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER V. THE CHALLENGE.

Sir Stophord had been summoned from the club, and men had been sent out with wraps in every direction to find the strayed lamb, but without success.

The joy at their appearance, wet and cold, but otherwise safe, was great, and the explanation of the Lion Rock, the high tide, and the submerged bridge was accepted with a smile of sympathy.

Ruth was hurried off to her room by her aunt, whilst Sir Stophord ordered up brandy and water, of which he insisted on Captain Rutherford taking a double dose.

"I will call tomorrow and ask after Miss Ruth," the captain said, as he prepared to take his departure, "I hope to find her none the worse for the adventure."

"I will look after her presently," remarked the baronet, tapping the brandy bottle. "Beats all the doctor's stuff—one glass for her, two for you, and you'll both feel as lively as crickets tomorrow morning."

Ralph Rutherford could hear him chuckling to himself as he went down the stairs, but what between the exposure, the excitement, and the hot brandy, even his seasoned brain began to whirl, and he felt the necessity of food and rest.

Nevertheless, his pulse beat high, for had he not won the love of a girl who, perhaps was the greatest passion of his life?

Other women had loved before, and would love again, but in Ruth he awakened the sacred flame, and he knew, whatever the future might have in store, that till he met her, she had never loved.

The next morning, he went down to the hotel, and heard from Lady Vernale that her niece was better, and was only resting an hour or two longer in bed than usual.

"You must come and dine with us, to make up for our disappointment of last night," said kind Lady Vernale. "In a week or so we shall have Frank Gilbert here with us, and then you will have a man somewhere near your own age to talk with."

Ralph made some suitable reply, but the news was by no means pleasant.

"A week is not long," he muttered to himself as he lighted his cigar at the hotel door; "but I must press the attack all the more warmly. No woman loves a man half as well as when he is tempting her to do something she knows she ought not to do, and Ruth will prove no exception, I'm ready to bet. As for that Frank Gilbert, he had better look out for himself. We are not in England here, and, if he proves very objectionable, why, he must be suppressed; but, in any case, that must not happen till the last minute."

He strolled away, thinking over many future possible difficulties and combinations, but through it all he never quite lost sight of Ruth's sweet, innocent face—she who trusted him as she would have one of God's angels.

The week slowly slipped round, and gradually he persuaded Ruth, at first reluctantly, to listen, and, finally, to give her consent, to the Spanish plan.

Unknown to him, the strongest card in his hand was the expected arrival of Frank Gilbert.

The girl thought that she never could meet him she had wronged.

In her own eyes, the wrong done was greater than it was in fact, and it was this fear which backed up her love for Ralph, and, at length, gained her consent.

But a thunderclap was in store for her, poor child!

At breakfast on the fifth morning, Lord Vernale read a telegram—

"Shall be with you by the train arriving 1.30.—FRANK"

Oh, why, Ruth thought, had she resisted so long?

If she had only readily adopted Ralph's plan, they would have been married by this time, for not one moment's doubt of Ralph's honor ever entered her mind.

They waited lunch for Frank, and, about two o'clock, he made his appearance.

Ruth turned it possible, even paler than she had been all the morning, and her fingers felt cold and clumsy as Frank clasped them.

"Why, what has Ruth been doing with herself?" he asked, looking round to Lady Vernale. "Her hands are like ice and, I declare they tremble."

Lady Vernale smiled—a smile not without meaning.

In her heart, she had always relied upon a match between the two young people.

Frank was enormously rich, and Ruth had money of her own, so, in circumstances, as well as in age, they were well matched.

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"It's your arrival that must have agitated her, Frank," she asked. "I have never known Ruth look better than she has during the last three weeks."

"She has been getting about, I hope," Frank said, still holding the girl's hand and looking in her face. "Do you know many people here yet, Ruth?"

"Not very many," she answered, in a low voice. "But her aunt took up the question."

"Till the last week or so the place had been empty," she said. "I really do not know what we should have done, Ruth especially, without Captain Rutherford."

"That man here?" exclaimed Frank, frowning, "and intimate with you! Really Lady Vernale, you surprise me. People who know him here told me that there is little he shrinks from, and that he lives chiefly by his wits, being a mere soldier of fortune, i. e. the worst sense of the word."

Ruth's face had flushed scarlet, and she snatched her hand out of his.

"It is not true!" she exclaimed. "Captain Rutherford is a gentleman!"

"My dear Frank," Lady Vernale said, quietly, "you have been misinformed. I knew Ralph Rutherford when he first entered the service, and, though I lost sight of him whilst he was out of England, I must say that I find him much improved. You are the first person I have ever heard ill of him."

"What I say is true all the same. And to think of your letting Ruth associate with him! But I am here now, and can look after her myself."

"Thank you; but I think I am quite old enough to take care of myself, Frank," Ruth replied, warmly. "I have always found Captain Rutherford a gentleman, and I am not going to cut him, just because you have listened to some stupid club-gossip."

"Club men are not my only informants. I know other things for certain against Captain Rutherford. But they are things I will tell Lady Vernale when you are not present, Ruth."

"More underhand gossip, I suppose!" retorted the girl. "But if you want to talk to aunt without me, I will go at once."

And she made for the door.

"Come back, Ruth," exclaimed the young man. "I can tell Daddy Vernale what I consider it is my duty to, another time. But you forget that lunch is waiting; and here comes Sir Stophord—been to the club I suppose."

Sir Stophord arrived, a little out of breath, for he had hurried, and they all sat down to lunch.

The meal over, Ruth slipped away, and the baronet disposed himself for a nap.

Seeing this, Frank seated himself beside Lady Vernale.

"What I could not speak of before Ruth, was the scandal which Captain Rutherford has brought upon the name of more than one family. More than one woman has lost her reputation through him. And one girl I could give you the name of, a girl of good family and position, loved him only too well and he all the time a married man."

"What!" almost shrieked the lady. Ralph Rutherford married. I don't believe it, Frank. He would have told me if he was."

"The lady he married was a Portuguese. He met her in Peru, and, I suppose, married her for her wealth, which was very great. He sailed with her to the East and afterwards to India, where he squandered all her fortune, except some estates which he could find no purchaser for."

"The poor woman bore all this with scarce a murmur, but, finding him unfaithful to her—they were in Paris at the time—seized a knife and in a moment of intense rage and excitement, stabbed him. Believing she had killed him, she made her escape to England and at once took passage for Peru, where, on one of her estates, she now lives."

Lady Vernale's face had regained its serenity.

"I can quite understand now," she exclaimed, "why Ralph Rutherford did not mention his marriage! Poor fellow! that woman must have led him a dreadful life; and to end up by stabbing him—the wretch! As for spending some part of her money rather freely, even if true, there are lots of good people doing it every day."

"I perceive, Lady Vernale, that this man is a favorite of yours, and that you will not be warned against him. Still, for your own sake and Ruth's, you ought to know the truth about him. His conduct to Miss Swinton was most heartless. He met her in some country house to which he had the entree, gained her affection, and so won upon the girl's mother and father that he was invited down to their place. Here he became secretly engaged to the young lady, and induced her to elope with him. He never married her, and after some months left her in Berlin, to starve for aught he cared. Fortunately for her the shock he killed her father before he had time to change his will."

"The lawyers found her out, and told her that she had been left by her father sufficient capital to bring her in three hundred a year, and the reversion to the rest of his money at her mother's death. This only occurred a few months ago, and what's become of the girl I do not know."

"My dear Frank, I do not wish, for a moment, to disbelieve you," replied Lady Vernale, cool and unmoved; "but before I believe such a story of Ralph Rutherford, I must have further evidence."

Gilbert stamped his foot with impatience.

"The strongest proof I can give you," he exclaimed, "will be that the man himself

will not be able to deny the facts when I charge him with them. Till then you are perfectly free to retain your good opinion of him; but I will tear the mask from his face before this time to-morrow."

Lady Vernale, like a sensible woman held her tongue, and Frank, soothing down gradually, presently asked what had become of Ruth, and whether she would not like to go out for a stroll.

The bell was rung, and the aunt sent up word to Bath's room that Mr. Gilbert was waiting in the hopes of going out for a walk with her.

There was no answer, for the simple reason that Ruth had gone out by herself. Lady Vernale looked surprised and a little vexed.

"That comes of your unjust suspicions of Captain Rutherford," she broke out, directly the servant had withdrawn. "Ruth and he have got on very well together and of course, the girl feels your unkind remarks about him. She must have felt them extremely, or she would not have gone out alone without telling me."

"I will go and find her," said Frank, abruptly, and, after accepting an invitation to dinner, hurried to the room.

However, before he found Ruth, she had met Ralph, according to a previous appointment, and had breathlessly told him of Frank Gilbert's unexpected arrival.

"We must hurry our departure, my pet," remarked the captain. "This Mr. Gilbert is probably interested in you—Ruth's blush confirmed Ralph's suspicions—and he will be confoundedly in the way. You must fly with me to-morrow, Ruth."

"We will meet at the station at eleven o'clock, and so catch the train for Spain, which leaves at twenty minutes past. At the frontier we change trains, and we will journey right through to Madrid, where we can get married at the Consulate. Have you courage, dear to do this?"

"Yes," she answered, clinging tighter to his arm; "I shall not be afraid when with you. But supposing they won't let me go out alone?"

"You must get out, somehow," he replied. "At the worst you must can plead a headache and go and lie down; then when the coast is clear walk gently out of the hotel. Wear your jewellery. As for clothes, we can buy them in Madrid."

A little more conversation, and then, suddenly they encountered, in the secluded path they had chosen, Frank Gilbert in person.

Ruth turned deadly faint, and, for a moment, everything swam before her eyes; but Frank's voice recalled her to herself.

"Ruth," he was saying, "I have come to find you. Your aunt requests you to return to her at once."

"I will go to her—go at once!" the girl exclaimed; then, in some confusion, added: "Frank, I do not think you know Captain Rutherford. May I introduce you to one another? Captain Rutherford—Mr. Gilbert, a very old friend of ours."

The two gentlemen bowed.

"I will be back here in ten minutes, Captain Rutherford," Frank said, quietly. "I will just see Miss Vernale as far as the hotel, and then return and have a chat with you. You will wait?"

"Certainly," replied Ralph. "I will smoke a cigar, and wait here till it is finished."

He drew out his cigar-case as he spoke, and chose the largest cigar it contained.

"What are you going to say to Captain Rutherford?" Ruth asked, anxiously, as she walked quickly in the direction of the hotel by Frank's side.

"Nothing very much, Ruth; but I want to judge for myself whether the reports I have heard about him are likely to be true or not."

"You won't quarrel?"

"Gentlemen don't quarrel since duelling has gone out," he answered, with a smile. "You have nothing to fret about, Ruth. I will tell you after dinner anything that happens."

She gave a little sigh of relief.

Frank was behaving much better than she had expected.

"What did aunt want me for?" she asked, as they arrived close to the hotel.

"I believe she did not care for your going out alone. At all events, I came out expressly to find you."

She gave him her hand at parting—anything to allay his suspicion till after the morrow.

In her blind love for Ralph, she felt ready to deceive all the world.

He pressed her hand tenderly, turned, and walked back to meet his rival.

"Poor Frank!" thought the girl, as she hastened to her aunt's sitting-room. "I

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feel dreadfully guilty towards him. But how could I help loving Ralph? I think I must have done so—only I did not know—from the very first time we met at Lady Arabazon's ball. How long that seems ago now!

Meanwhile, Frank Gilbert was striding back to meet Captain Rutherford, his mouth firm set, and a fixed purpose visible in his every gesture.

The captain had decided on his course during the few minutes he had been left alone, for he had looked forward to the possibility of his obnoxious young Gilbert turning up unexpectedly, and was not unprepared.

It was only the minor details that wanted arranging in his mind.

At a turning in the path, they met face to face.

"Captain Rutherford!" exclaimed Frank, "I have something to say to you. Something unpleasant, both for me to say and you to hear; therefore, I had better say it in as few words as possible."

"It is imperative that you break off your intimacy with the Vernales. As I do not want to cause any trouble or unpleasantness, you can raise your hat to them; but speak to any one of them—except Sir Stophord, who is, of course, his own master you shall not. I know your past history, sir, and, in saying that, I have explained myself enough."

The other never winced, but his swarthy skin seemed to darken.

"You are prepared to answer for this insult, of course?" he said.

"I certainly decline to fight a duel with you," Frank rejoined.

"A disappointed lover ought to be the more ready to fight, having so little to lose," sneered the ex-captain of the Life Guards. The color flushed hotly into Gilbert's cheek.

"You must keep a bridle on your tongue sir," he exclaimed, angrily.

"It is, perhaps, unfortunate—at all events, from your point of view—that Ruth—"

"How dare you mention that young lady's name, sir?" burst from Frank's lips. "That's my affair," retorted the other. "If the lady does not object, I shall hold your objections very lightly."

"If you dare call her by her Christian name in my presence, I shall chastise you," cried Frank, threateningly. "A fellow like you, who could in cold blood desert a young lady who had confided herself to your honor, deserves the contempt of everybody. As for your wife—"

Ralph Rutherford took a step forward, and, with his open hand, struck his rival smartly on the face.

The blow was instantly returned, but guarded off, and for a moment the two men stood glaring into one another's eyes.

"After that, even a craven like you will fight, I suppose," said the captain, at length.

"Yes, for I very well see that, unless I kill you, you will pursue with your attentions the young lady I hope some day to marry," Frank replied. "Otherwise I would see her and who was the better man; but exchange shots with such a black-guard as you—never!"

"I can afford to let you snarl," retorted the other. "Have you anybody in Biarritz who will act for you as second? It would be better. As for myself, any officer in the garrison over at Bayonne will see a comrade through an affair of honor."

"There is a Major Spinney living here whom I know, and who will doubtless act for me, and we shall be in no difficulty in finding another. Your men will arrange with Major Spinney about the time and place."

"Agreed!" exclaimed Ralph. "And now I will set the affair in motion at once. To-morrow morning, at not too early an hour, will suit you, I have little doubt."

"To-morrow, by all means. The place and time are both indifferent to me."

Each turned on his heel, and without another word being interchanged, they parted.

"I will write a letter to Ruth to be given her if I fall," muttered Frank, as he walked moodily back to the hotel. "She shall know the character of the villain, anyway. She may prefer him to me; but if she persists in her folly, it shall be with her eyes open, and the knowledge that my blood is on his hands."

Major Spinney, after some demur, consented to act for his young friend, and guaranteed to find someone to assist him.

"We must have a doctor, too," he exclaimed, "in case of accidents, and Doctor Sanfoin is the very man for us. I will see him, too. Now, Gilbert, you go and have a quiet evening. Call here at about ten o'clock, and I will tell you of the arrangements settled upon."

CHAPTER VI.

THE DUEL AND ITS SEQUEL.

The next day was dull and grey, but no rain fell; neither was there much wind. Frank rose and breakfasted rather late, as the hour was not fixed till half-past ten, and the place chosen—a small ravine, fringed with gorse-bushes and broom—

not more than half-an-hour's quick drive, and he hoped to get away without seeing the Vernales.

At a little before ten he lit a cigar, and strolled up to the Major, who had an open carriage ready.

"Jump in," cried the little man. "First, allow me to introduce you to Monsieur De S. Simon de Longorac, who has kindly offered his assistance in the matter. Dr. Sanfoin—Mr. Frank Gilbert."

The three gentlemen bowed to each other.

Then all entered the carriage, which was driven quietly away.

At half past ten they reached the rendez-vous, and found themselves first on the ground.

However, five minutes later the other party drove up, and the preliminaries were at once set about.

It was arranged that they should fight a la barriere—that is, that they should stand at forty paces distance, that a white handkerchief should be placed midway, and that, at the word of command, they should advance toward one another at a slow step.

Either could fire when he liked; but in case he missed, or only slightly wounded, his adversary, that adversary might walk up to the white handkerchief and shoot his man from there, even if but a few yards, or even feet, divided them.

Both the principals were cool, and, pistol in hand, waited for the word of command. It was given.

Both advanced about half-way towards one another, when Frank, seeing Ralph Rutherford stop and raise his pistol, also halted, determining to reserve his fire, as at that distance he could not make sure of hitting.

The captain had more confidence in his skill. He raised his pistol quickly, glanced along the barrel for an instant, and pressed the trigger.

As the smoke curled upwards, Frank tottered, and then fell flat on his face on the grass.

In a moment the doctor was by his side, the others crowding round.

Captain Rutherford slowly walked up. "Will he live?" he asked of the doctor, who had hastily torn open the wounded man's coat, vest, and shirt.

"Not if he is mortal, I am afraid," replied the surgeon, trying to staunch the blood which welled from a little blue hole just beside the heart. "The blood must be stanchied or he will die where he lies. You had better get across the Spanish frontier without delay."

It was with difficulty that Ralph could hide a smile.

Everything had turned out as he had calculated on, and, at this very moment, Ruth must be close to the station.

After exchanging a few words [with his seconds, all three mounted into their trap, and, urged on by the promise of a magnificent pourboire, the jehu whipped up his horses, and urged them, directly they got on the road, into a gallop.

The station clock pointed to the quarter past as Ralph sprang out, and shook the two officers by the hand.

The next moment he was in the station, and there, in the quietest corner she could find, stood Ruth.

He pressed her hand to reassure her, and hurried away to see to getting the tickets.

Almost punctual to a minute, the train steamed in, and an empty compartment was found.

"How late you are, Ralph!" Ruth said, as soon as the express was in motion again. "I thought I should have died of fear. Everybody seemed to stare at me so, and I feared to see Frank's face every moment."

The captain drew her to him and kissed away the tears that hung like dewdrops from her long lashes.

"Frank won't trouble you," he said. "I heard this morning that he had met with a slight accident. Kiss me, sweet, and remember that from this instant our new life begins."

From Biarritz to the Spanish frontier, where trains are changed, is little more than half-an-hour's journey.

Long before the duel had reached the ears of the police, Ralph and Ruth stood on Spanish ground.

A lady, tall and light, came slowly along the Spanish train, looking into every window.

Captain Rutherford, who had brought a few travelling comforts, was arranging them, when a quick, sharp exclamation made him turn towards the window.

It was the face of a girl of three or four-and-twenty that he saw.

A beautiful face, with olive cheeks, and hair as black as the raven's black, whilst

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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