

Love, the Magician.

IN TWO INSTALLMENTS.

CHAPTER III.—CONTINUED.

"We are all in trouble at the Vicarage," she said. "I suppose you have heard the news, Miss Fanshaw?"

Flo stooped somewhat. She was trying to open her pink silk parasol, and some of the delicate laces seemed to be entangled in its fastenings. At any rate she found some difficulty about it.

"No," she said carelessly; "I have heard nothing. I hope Mrs Mayfield's health is not worse."

"It is not that," Esme answered; "all things considered she keeps wonderfully well. It is about Mr Mayfield that we are concerned. He has decided to resign his living, and go as a missionary to Africa."

"Has he?"

"That was all Flo said. She still seemed to be entirely engrossed with her refractory parasol, and Esme felt indignant at her coldness."

She surely might display a little more interest, considering that, only a few days before, the Reverend Stephen had saved her life by the display of his unexpected heroism.

"It is very brave and good of him to go away like that," Esme said warmly; "but the worst of it is that he has never been strong, and the climate of the Gold Coast is almost sure to be more than he can bear. Mrs Mayfield is convinced that he will be going to his death, but nothing she can say seems to have power to turn him from his purpose."

An expression, more forcible than lady-like, broke from Flo's lips; but that could only have been connected with the parasol for suddenly the tangled lace gave way; there was a tearing sound, and Miss Fanshaw, in her anger, flung the whole affair from her with lavish disregard of its costliness, and she stood watching the silk and lace and ivory handle float forlornly away down the stream.

"Mr Mayfield must be a little mad," she said contemptuously, still seeming to be thinking most of all of her discarded parasol. "Tell him so from me, and say that I am quite angry with him, for if he goes off in a hurry to preach to black men in Africa, he will not be able to help the bishop at my wedding, as I meant to ask him to do."

Apparently she thought that was a final shot, for she turned away as the words were spoken and went back towards the Towers her handsome head held very erect. Esme looked after her with wondering troubled eyes.

"How handsome she is, and yet how heartless!" she thought. She does not realize poor Stephen's goodness in devoting his life to such a purpose, and cares nothing for the sorrow he will leave behind. O, surely Hugh was right—it he could suddenly become poor, she would set him free."

The reflection brought a fresh thought of what might have been to her mind, and she stood there dreaming, while the sun set, changing the silver of the stream to ruddy gold; and then the clanging of the dinner bell at the Towers came over the woodland to her ears.

She started at the sound, remembering that she had already stayed too long from her duties at the Vicarage, and turned away, meaning to run home will all possible speed.

She reached the end of the river path, and gained the short lane that led from it to the Vicarage garden.

As she did so she saw a stranger standing by the white gate, looking up at the house—a shabby-genteel man, with a red, dissipated face, and crumpled collar.

He seemed to be hesitating whether he should enter the garden and go boldly to the house or not, and Esme, from the distance, decided that his errand was to ask Stephen Mayfield for charity.

Even in that remote village they had many such visitors, for Stephen, in his generosity, gave unthinkingly, and was continually being made the dupe of some impostor or other.

But when this man saw the girl, he left the gate and came down the lane to meet her, still in the same furtive, stealthy manner.

As he approached he raised his hat with an air of exaggerated politeness that seemed grotesquely out of keeping with his shabby clothes.

"Pardon me," he said, smiling, "can you tell me if that house is Strathmore Vicarage?"

"Yes, it is," Esme answered, rather abruptly.

He was standing right before her in the narrow path, and she was anxious to regain her home.

"Perhaps, too, you can reply to some other questions," the stranger went on. "At least, you can let me know whether the present incumbent is young or old?"

It was certainly a strange question, and at any other time Esme might have been tempted to smile.

He is quite young," she said. "Mr Mayfield has only been in holy orders a few years."

He was evidently disappointed, for his face fell.

"I am sorry to hear that," he said, "for I wanted to make inquiries about an event which happened here some years ago, and I hoped that the vicar would have been my informant. I wonder to whom

else I had better apply? I want to make enquiries about a lady—a stranger—who came here with a baby in her arms, and died while—"

He stopped in sheer surprise, for all Esme's indifference had vanished.

The girl suddenly laid her hand upon his shabby sleeve with an eager imploring gesture.

"You are speaking of my mother," she said brokenly tremblingly. "Oh! tell me—tell me all you know of her!"

"Your mother," he echoed, and then, as he looked down into her upraised face, on which the dying sunshine rested, her likeness to the dead seemed suddenly to strike him, and his doubts fled. "Yes," he said, "I ought not to have needed telling who you are."

"Come down this lane a little way; take me where I can speak to you without fear of being overheard. It is Fortune herself that has brought us face to face. Now I know that you are alive, I can make my own terms. I can drag Sir Gavin Strathmore and his son down to the very dust!"

CHAPTER IV.

A GREATER FEAR.

To Esme it seemed as though the utterance of those words had been but part of a troubled dream, so wild and fantastic did they appear to her.

Mechanically she had asked for some explanation, but her companion would give none at first.

He had gone past her down the path back to the river-side, and dreamily, still doubting her own senses, she followed him, thinking only of Hugh, wondering if indeed the threat which had been expressed by those words was true.

They reached the river side and stood facing each other, the girl with her hands clasped, and her eager eyes shining star-like from her white face.

"Tell me what you mean by those strange words?" she said. "You have bewildered me. I cannot understand."

"They do seem strange, I suppose," the man said, and his eyes wandered to the grey turrets of the stately mansion that rose above the trees. "It is a little difficult to believe that I, James Rutherford, who am standing here without a penny in my pocket, have the power to drag the owner of that great house to poverty and—what is worse to him—disgrace."

"You can do that!" she said brokenly, and her eyes wandered in the same direction.

But now it was only of Hugh that she thought—of Hugh, whom she loved so well, and over whose life this unguessed cloud was looming.

"It's the truth, upon my honor," Rutherford answered, and something in his tone removed all possibility of doubt from her mind. "What may be the name by which you are called now, I do not know; but in reality you are Coralis Strathmore, and every acre of the Strathmore land—every coin of their wealth—is yours."

She was stunned by the words.

It was all so wonderful that it seemed beyond belief.

She put out her hand and touched the bough of a willow that drooped near as though, without its slight support, she would have fallen.

She was dazed, stupefied, bewildered by the wonder of it all.

"While you have been living here you must have heard of Sir Gavin's elder brother, the other Hugh Strathmore," her companion went on. "He was the heir to the estate, but he died suddenly, just after his father. He was killed in a railway accident, I fancy, and so the secret of his life was never known. But by his father's will Hugh succeeded to everything; nothing of the property was entailed, and as he died intestate, all he possessed would pass to his child."

"But he never married," Esme exclaimed eagerly. "I have heard of his sad death, though it happened so long ago, and Sir Gavin succeeded as his brother's heir."

"Hugh Strathmore was married, for his wife was my half-sister," was the reply, "but because she was his inferior in birth, he was ashamed of her. He married her under a name not his own, and was careful to keep his identity concealed, not only from her, but from everyone else."

"In point of fact he led a double life, and, after the lapse of so many years, it would be impossible to prove that the John Moore who married my sister was the same man as Sir Hugh Strathmore of the Towers—impossible to prove it were not for these—"

He thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out a little bundle of faded letters, tied round with a piece of blue ribbon.

"These letters were written by him to his wife; they are dated from the Towers, and in them, though evidently he hardly intended that it should be so, are the proofs of his identity—the proofs which make you the heiress of the Towers. Now, do you understand?"

"Yes," she said slowly, but perhaps it was hardly the truth.

Her eyes were fixed upon the gray walls still, as they rose above the trees, and she was thinking of Hugh, who had wished that by some turn of Fortune's wheel he might become poor, so that he would be free to wed her.

"My sister was the wife of John Moore, otherwise Hugh Strathmore, and you are

their only child," he continued after a pause. "When her husband died, my sister guessed the truth, though these letters, which would have proved her claim, had been mislaid, and could not be found. However, she brought you here, meaning to claim the property on your behalf, and here she died, as I suppose you have heard before her story could be told."

"A little while later, I saw Sir Gavin in London, and laid the whole facts before him. He listened quietly, and then laughed at me. He did not dispute that my sister was the wife of John Moore, he said, but he would not acknowledge that John Moore and his brother were the same; in fact, he defied me to prove my claim, and when I persisted in it, he paid men to hunt me down, to get me discharged from my situation, to ruin me, so that I should have no money to fight the case. It is a long, long reckoning that I have against him, but I mean to pay it now, and you shall help me to wreak my vengeance on him."

The hatred in his voice was terrible; there was murder in his eye, and, as he spoke, he raised his fist to shake it at the distant mansion, as though it had been a living thing, and could see and understand the menace.

But still Esme seemed unmoved; still she could only think of Hugh.

"It was only yesterday that in an old cupboard I discovered these letters," he said, "the letters that give me the clue I have sought so long. These prove beyond a doubt that you are Hugh Strathmore's daughter, and the heiress to his estates; the dates, the news they contain, the handwriting, will all be conclusive. Directly I discovered them I started here in search of you. Of course, if you were dead, I should have no power, for Sir Gavin would still be the master of the Towers; but now that I have found you, everything will go well. I shall put these letters in the hands of a lawyer, and in the end we are bound to gain the day."

She put out her hand with a stiff mechanical gesture.

Even to her own fancy she seemed dreaming still.

"Give me the letters," she said: "on your own showing, they must be mine. Let me read them."

"I don't mind letting you do that," he said, but he spoke rather reluctantly. "Of course, for your own sake, you will take care of them. I suppose you could not lend me five shillings, could you? If so, I'll go down to the village to have something to eat, and meet you here in about half-an-hour's time. That will be long enough for you to read the letters in, and come to understand them."

She put her hand into her pocket and gave him her purse, which he opened at once to count its contents.

They did not reach nearly the sum he had named, but there seemed sufficient for his present needs at the village hostelry, and, muttering again that he would return in half-an-hour, he slouched away, leaving Esme alone to realize the wonderful tidings he had brought her as best she could.

She did not try to read the letters that meant so much to her.

The man's manner had prevented the possibility of doubting his word; she knew that what he said was the truth.

This little bundle of faded papers that she held had the power to dispossess Sir Gavin from the Towers, and make her the ruler there in his stead.

And suddenly the stupor which had seized her passed away in a great delicious throb of joy.

It was not for the money that she cared; indeed the possibility of claiming it never crossed her mind; it was only that now her love seemed to reign triumphant, that now the barriers which before had surrounded it would fall away.

In her child-like innocence, it seemed to her that she had but to go to Hugh and tell him everything.

Then Flora would set him free from his engagement, and Sir Gavin would consent to his marriage with Esma, who would never claim the property, and only be mistress of Strathmore as Hugh's wife.

It was but a dream, a golden dream, yet in that moment she never doubted its absolute truth.

She started forward, her face glowing with hope and happy love, and the murmur of the river seemed the sweetest gladdest music she had ever heard.

The sunset light had faded; it was dark now, save for the faint shine of the crescent moon sailing in the deep purple ether to the night sky.

But of the flight of time she thought nothing—she did not even remember it.

Just as she was, in her brown holland gown, she would go to the great mansion; she would ask to see Hugh, and then would tell him this wonderful story by which he might, in honor, be set free from the bonds which bound his life.

Trembling and eager in her glad anticipations, she ran lightly along the darksome path beside the river.

She gained the private grounds around the great house.

As she approached it, she saw that some carriages were before the door, and knew that lights were streaming gaily from every window.

Then she remembered that a dinner party was being given there that night, and as she did so she instinctively avoided the main entrance and paused uncertain how she was to proceed.

The light from one of the long windows near streamed upon her slender form, and as she looked down at the folds of her brown holland dress, she seemed suddenly to realize anew how very shabby it was and how utterly insignificant it made her look.

Absolutely she could not confront the tall liveried servants who she knew were waiting in the hall; though, even at her own fears she could have laughed aloud, remembering that in her breast, safely hidden, was the little bundle of letters that made her the mistress of houses, and grounds, and all the wealth of which they were the evidence.

Ah! how sweet, how delightful that thought was.

She was glad to remember her own power, simply because when the money and property were hers she could give it all back to Hugh.

She drew forth the letters from their hiding place as she thought thus, and held them in her hand.

Shy and trembling, a little afraid of her own happiness, she retreated still farther from the main entrance, and went round the angle of the house.

Here it was darker and more quiet; a mass of flowering shrubs grew close up to the gray walls; here, too, there was a stone balcony, such a one as that on which Juliet might have leant in fair Verona, when the sweetest of all lovers' words were said to her.

She paused irresolutely in the shadow, wondering what she should do, and as she did so she saw the crimson curtains that hung at a window opposite to her suddenly thrust apart, and through the draped arch thus formed, a tall, glittering form swept out on the balcony.

It was Flora, and if, a little while before, Esme had felt her own inferiority to her rival, this feeling was intensified now a thousand times.

She had never before seen Flora in evening dress, and no other costume suited Miss Fanshaw's stately, Junoesque form so well as the one she now was wearing.

She wore all white, but it was white velvet—heavy, rich, lustreless velvet, that fell in regal folds around her, leaving bare her neck and rounded arms, and showing to best advantage the glory of the crimson roses that made a spot of brilliant color at her breast.

Precious stones, as splendid and as radiant as a queen's diadem, were twined among the raven masses of her hair.

Beautiful she always was, yet she had never before been half so beautiful as then.

It was not her stately garments alone which had made the change, for a subtle alteration had come to her face as well.

There was a deeper flush upon her cheeks, her red lips quivered, and the bright, dark eyes that had generally shone so fearlessly and boldly were strangely softened now by a mist of unshed tears.

Esme looked at her as though fascinated, wondering at the change, and yet by woman's instinct understanding it.

For she knew that it was Love's own magic which had been at work; Love which had come with its enchantment to make Fanshaw all the more a woman, though she was none the less a queen.

A moment more, and Esme saw that Flora was not alone.

Another figure had come through the archway and was standing now close by her side upon the balcony.

It was that of Hugh Strathmore himself, looking very flushed and handsome in his evening dress, with a great glad light shining in his eloquent eyes.

"Flo," he whispered, as he joined her, and softly as the words were spoken they reached Esme's ears all too plainly. She knew that he had caught both the other girl's hands in his own clasp, and that Flora was standing with her proud head a little drooped, her bright eyes upon the ground, as though a new shyness prompted her to hide the love light glowing in their depths. "You are sure, you are quite sure, that you have told me the truth?"

She lifted her head with some touch of her old defiance in the gesture, but though she tried to laugh, there was a new softness in her tones, and tears did not seem very far from the brilliance of her flashing eyes.

"Have I ever told you anything but the truth?" she asked. "Whatever my faults may be, Hugh, I am not a coquette, and I should not deceive you in this."

A cry, inarticulate, but eloquent of a great gladness, broke from his lips, and suddenly he drew her closer towards him, and bending kissed the fair radiant face which was upturned to his.

"Heaven bless you, Flo!" he said; "I always knew you were a good, true woman at heart, but I never guessed how fond I really was of you until now. Do you know that you have made me the happiest man in all the wide wide world?"

She laughed aloud then—a joyous, ringing laugh that pierced poor Esme's aching heart; and it was with those glad tones ringing in her ears that the girl turned and fled—fled through the shadows of the night, with the ache of dead hopes and ruined dreams lying heavy in her breast, not daring to look back to where her rival stood, with the diamonds gleaming in her raven hair and Hugh Strathmore triumphant and happy by her side.

CHAPTER V.

FOR HIS DEAR SAKE.

Back through the grounds, back to the river-side, Esme went, her heart dully throbbing, her brain dazed.

Everything was confused to her except that it seemed clear that through it all she had deceived herself, or had been deceived.

For Hugh Strathmore had had no love to lavish upon her; his love was given where his troth was plighted, to the radiant, handsome girl who was his promised wife.

He had been false, since the protestations which had seemed so real to her could



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have been but the words of an empty flirtation after all.

There was untold bitterness in the thought, even though she tried to make excuses for him to herself.

She tried to think it was not he who was to blame.

Flora was beautiful, so stately, it was no wonder that he loved her and not a poor little insignificant girl who had no friends or money, hardly even a name which she might call her own.

"No, no, he is not to blame," she thought and then, in spite of all her self control, she beat her hand together as a passionate cry broke from her lips against her will. "Yet I loved him—I loved him. I could bear anything but this; and surely now my heart is broken."

She went on mechanically along the riverside, and then saw that she must have been away longer than she had thought, for the man, James Rutherford, was at their trying place, awaiting her return with evident impatience.

"I am glad you have come at last," he said. "I feared that something had happened to you when I saw you were not here. So much depends upon those letters."

She put her hand into the folds of her dress and drew them from their hiding-place, to which she had restored them ere fleeing from the Strathmore grounds.

"I had forgotten them," she said, and he stared at her in wonder as he heard the words. "You are sure, quite sure, that if their contents were made known they would prove that I was Miss Strathmore, the heiress of the Towers?"

"Quite sure," he answered; "I'll swear it if you like. You have only to think for a few moments, and you must understand exactly how the case stands."

She was but human, and for one moment her hand closed convulsively over the little packet as she thought of the revenge that was thus within her grasp.

She could prove herself more than Hugh's equal; she could claim for herself the wealth that he now thought was his, and, more than that, she could see his proud old father convicted of a mean and cowardly action and dispossessed of all he thought his own.

And then, even as the triumph thrilled through every vein, a new and nobler thought came.

If Hugh scorned her love, she would still be true to him, she would, at any cost to herself, insure his happiness with the woman he loved, though he would never know of the sacrifice she made.

"Tell me again," she said slowly; "if these letters were destroyed I should never be able to prove my claim, should I? Then Sir Gavin and—and his son would be undisputed masters of the Towers?"

"Of course," he answered, somewhat surly, as if his recent meal had not improved his temper. "Come, give the letters back to me if you have read them. They'll be safer in my keeping, and I know a lawyer who will manage the affair for us. You won't forget me altogether when you are a lady of property, will you?"

He stretched out his hand with a trembling, eager gesture, his long, thin fingers working with eerie eagerness to grasp his treasure again, and as Esme looked into his flushed face and bloodshot eyes she saw that he had been drinking.

Here, then, was another peril.

This man wanted to make her rich in order that he, by right of his distant relationship, might share her wealth.

He would not let her quixotically throw away her inheritance if he had the power to prevent it.

This thought flashed through her mind with lightning speed, and as she looked at him there came upon her a thrill of fear so great that it almost conquered the ache of her heart.

She was tempted to give the little packet into the greedy hand that was outstretched to grasp it.

But the thought of Hugh—of Hugh, to whom it would bring ruin—restrained her, and instead she took a step back.

"What are you waiting for?" Rutherford asked roughly. "Come! the letters, I say. Give them back to me."

"They are mine," she said, speaking in a

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